Admitting We Don't Know

Parashat Lech L'cha

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Parashat *Lech L'cha* opens with God's command to Abram (as Abraham is then called) to leave his father's house and his birthplace and go to the land that God will show him, which Abram does in the first couple verses of our parasha. But one verse in particular stands out for its (in)famous difficulty:

וַיַּעֲבֹ֤ר אַבְרָם֙ בָּאָ֔רֶץ עַ֚ד מְק֣וֹם שְׁכֶ֔ם עַ֖ד אֵל֣וֹן מוֹרֶ֑ה וְהַֽכְּנַעֲנִ֖י אָ֥ז בָּאָֽרֶץ׃

> Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, at the terebinth of Moreh. The Canaanites were then in the land. (Gen. 12:6, Revised JPS translation)

The last three words of this verse—*ve-ha-k'na'ani az ba-aretz*—are vexing. Obviously the Canaanites were in the land at the time Abram appeared on the scene. Why does the Torah need to tell us this?

The modern commentator Umberto Cassuto observes that there are two main schools of thought regarding this verse. One, the majority view of modern scholarship, is to read the word *az* as meaning "then", or "at that time", with the sense of "still". In this reading, the words seem to convey the sense of some temporal distance between the narrator and the events being narrated. The implication is that the presence or absence of Canaanites was some kind of dividing line between eras. In essence, the narrator is saying, "This happened when the land was full of Canaanites, which is not the case today"—whenever "today" happens to be.

The other view, as propounded by Rashi and others, is to read the word *az* as meaning "already". Rashi and others try to square the apparent anachronism by suggesting that before Abraham arrived, the Canaanites came to conquer the land from the (other) descendants of Noah's son Shem, but the text itself does not contain any narrative details or hints of this supposed pre-Abrahamic conquest.

(Cassuto's own solution, incidentally, is to read the word *az* as solely emphasizing that the land was not empty and Abraham wouldn't immediately become its possessor. I'm not sure I entirely buy this interpretation; it seems to want to have his cake and eat it too, as it were, by not invoking an otherwise unattested Canaanite conquest and yet maintaining the traditional view of Mosaic authorship.)

So when is the narrator located in time? Even in the time of Joshua, the conquest of the land of Canaan by the Israelites was not fully complete, and Canaanites still remained in the land. Our narrator in Genesis seems to be located chronologically after the narrative of Joshua, which of course conflicts with the traditional view that the first five books of the Torah were written by Moses.

Cassuto correctly notes that the divide is not purely along the lines of medieval versus modern scholarship. The commentator Ibn Ezra notices the anachronism in this verse too, and proposes a similar solution, but ends his comment to this verse on an astonishing note:

> וְהַכְּנַעֲנִי אָז בָּאָרֶץ — יִתָּכֵן שֶׁאֶרֶץ כְּנַעַן תָּפְשָׂה כְּנַעַן מִיַּד אַחֵר, וְאִם אֵינֶנּוּ כֵּן יֵשׁ לוֹ סוֹד, וְהַמַּשְׂכִּיל יִדֹּם׃

> "And the Canaanites were then in the land" — It is possible that the Canaanites conquered the land of Canaan from someone else, and if this is not so, [the text] has a secret [meaning], and let the one who understands it keep silent. (Ibn Ezra on Gen. 12:6, my translation)

Ibn Ezra says three fascinating things here. First, he freely admits the possibility that his interpretation could be wrong. Second, he admits that it is possible that the text has a meaning that is secret, or possibly unknowable. And third, he implores the hypothetical person who has figured out that meaning not to discuss it.

Ibn Ezra is tapping into a strain of Jewish thought that encourages humility when one does not know what position to take. Pirkei Avot (5:7) says that one of the characteristics that distinguish a wise person from an ignoramus (in Hebrew, a *golem*, literally a "clod") is that the wise person answers truthfully if they don't have the answer to a question: the Mishnah says of such a person, *al mah she-lo shama omer lo shamati*, "regarding what he has not heard, he says 'I have not heard' ".

It would be tempting to read Ibn Ezra as a medieval version of the person who in Pirkei Avot says "I have not heard"—but that's too simple. The Mishnah's wise person uses plain language; Ibn Ezra doesn't. "It has a secret" can mean "I don't know"; it could just as easily mean that there is some mystical interpretation here, or literally secret knowledge. It's impossible to determine from Ibn Ezra's language whether he himself thinks he has a handle on what the secret might be or not, but in either case, he leaves it to the reader to decide, and then somewhat confoundingly implores the person who does understand it not to reveal it. This is his version of having his cake and eating it too, but this cake, as it were, is a very different one from Cassuto's.

Cassuto keeps the tradition intact by closing the question; Ibn Ezra keeps it by leaving the question open and putting a label on the gap. He marks exactly where his knowledge ends, in the vocabulary his world lets him use for that. Compare that to how Cassuto dismisses both readings (my translation):

> According to the plain meaning of the text neither of these two interpretations is correct: the word *az* means neither 'still' nor 'already'. Its intention, as I pointed out in 1926 in my aforementioned essay "Studi" (p. 233), is to emphasize that then (*az*), in the days of Abraham's arrival, the Canaanites were in the land,

> to emphasize that the land was not empty, and therefore Abraham could not immediately come to possess it.

Cassuto dismisses Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and the scholarly consensus in a single clause. His appeal is to the *p'shat*, the "the plain meaning of the text", which is one of the strongest claims available to a commentator: by framing it in this way, he isn't offering a reading; he's stating that he has found the text's meaning, and a reading that disagrees is a misreading.

Now, Cassuto was a far greater scholar than I could ever hope to be, but the certainty with which he frames this is still very jarring to me—and, I think, something of a misstep. Each of us has to find a vocabulary for "I might not be right". That vocabulary is not neutral: it can make the admission plain, or it can let us make it, while sounding as though we hadn't. Ibn Ezra defers to a *sod*, a secret meaning he can't open. Cassuto cites himself and appeals to what he sees as the plain meaning of the text as the authority. Ibn Ezra doesn't leave us with the question of whether to live with the ambiguity, but with a deeper question: do the words we choose carry the admission or hide it?

It takes a lot of courage to say "I might not be right". For myself, I am prepared to let go of the traditional claim of Mosaic authorship of the entire Torah—and I think I am on solid ground when I do so, both from academic and Jewish perspectives. But I am prepared also to admit that some things are beyond my understanding. Reams of scholarship have been devoted to puzzles in the text like "the Canaanites were then in the land". My challenge to all of us is to become comfortable with this ambiguity, to let ourselves be okay with living in the uncertainty of not knowing, and then not to be ashamed to admit that to the world.