

Kahana Piska 4.3, *Tanḥuma Hakah* 5, Midrash Eccl. Rabbah 7.19 on Eccl. 7:23, and Midrash Num. Rabbah 19.3 on Num. 19:2, where both the terms *b'nei kedem* and *b'nei ha-mizrah* are used. For example, Eccl. Rabbah, discussing 1 Kings 5:10, says: "What was the wisdom of the Easterners (*b'nei kedem*)? They knew astrology and augury with birds and were experts in divination." Then R. Simon b. Gamaliel praises Easterners (*anim shabeah et b'nei ha-mizrah*) for three practical customs—kissing on the hand instead of the mouth, cutting food with a knife, and taking counsel in an open field (to maintain privacy).

- 7 One example with a contemporary twist appears in Part 3, ch. 19, of the often-reprinted *Avodat Ha-Kodesh* (late eighteenth century) by Hayyim Yosef David Azulai. "The wisdom of all the Easterners," according to Azulai, is a superficial, analytical, and self-contradictory rationalism harnessed to "the stubbornness of the heart," attacking faith and undermining the deeper Inner Wisdom of Kabbalah.

- 8 *Parshat Vayetze*—See Arthur Green, trans., in *Upright Practices, the Light of the Eyes* (NY: Paulist Press, 1982), pp. 236-39. For his translation of Nahum's homily on *Parshat Noah*, see pp. 89-102.

- 9 *Perush Ha-Torah* (Venice, 1542), comments, "These are the generations of the sons of Noah" (Gen. 11:19), 58b.

- 10 Note that I translate *Hokhmah* here as "science," based on the new context of Abravanel's thought, whereas in earlier passages in this essay I translated it as "wisdom."

- 11 See Richard Cavendish, *A History of Magic* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), pp. 83-107, and D. P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975).

- 12 "Investigation is proper for man as such in order to prepare his reason to emerge from a potential to an actual state, but that association with God which was manifest on Mount Sinai, and especially prophecy, was not given to man as such, but to man as higher than man, as similar to the first separate intelligence or to the uppermost sphere" *Yeshu'ot Meshiho*, 73b, quoted by Benzion Netanyahu, *Abravanel, Statesman and Philosopher* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1953), p. 291.

- 13 Could Menasseh have been influenced by Guillaume Postel's interpretation of Gen. 25:6, a century earlier in *De Originibus*, according to which Abraham sent his sons to India with knowledge of astrology, founding the Brahmins whose very name reflects their Abrahamic origin? See William Bouwsma, *Concordia Mundi: the Career and Thought of Guillaume Postel*, (Harvard Press, 1957): p. 61. Since Menasseh, who tends to gather as many sources as possible for authority, does not cite Postel, we might doubt a direct borrowing. And was Menasseh aware of Nachmanides' identification, in the mid-thirteenth century, of *kedmet eden*, "east of

ABRAHAM, THE EASTERNERS, AND INDIA: JEWISH INTERPRETATIONS OF GENESIS 25:6

“But to the sons of the concubines whom Abraham had, Abraham gave gifts and sent them away from his son Isaac while he still lived, eastward to the east country.”

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This is the verse from Genesis that I heard quoted several times by Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem when I asked them about the relationship between Judaism and Asian religions. They meant the verse to explain that Hinduism and Buddhism derive from gifts of knowledge which Abraham gave to children whom he sent east, and “east” means India. Two Torah commentaries currently on the Internet make similar allusions. Rabbi Kalman Packouz, writing from Miami Beach, states that Abraham sent his sons east “with the knowledge of mysticism,” and Yaakov Fogelman, an American-born resident of Jerusalem, thinks that Abraham sent his sons to India, but that the influence worked in the opposite direction: “He sent all his kids from concubines east...These Easterners may later have influenced Jewish mysticism—e.g., the belief in reincarnation and haircuts for three year olds!”¹

In its biblical context and Aramaic translations, Gen. 25:6 speaks of neither knowledge nor India. Nor do all medieval Jewish commentators define the gifts as knowledge. Rashi (Rabbi Shelomo Yishaki), the influential eleventh century commentator, cites an interpretation that has Abraham giving his sons the gifts which he himself received when he married Sarah. Abraham ibn Ezra (twelfth century), another commentator, thought Abraham had given gifts of money and sent his sons somewhere vaguely east of the Land of Israel. Then how did the verse become an Orthodox statement about the relation of Jewish to Indian wisdom? Was there a logic to this development? What do such interpretations show us about traditional Jewish views of “foreign wisdom?” What are the implications for interreligious dialogue?

The aims of this study are both historical and theological: to discover and understand the history of this verse’s interpretation by Jews, and to learn whether the verse, with its specific history of allusions, can serve as a foundation for dialogue with other religions, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism. Hence, we shall not examine the history of Jewish thinking about India, a much broader topic, but focus upon the history of this one verse, which gained an association with India only in the last several hundred years.

Let us first note the function of the verse in its biblical context: it differentiates Abraham's relationship with Isaac from that with the children he begot through Keturah, the woman he married after Sarah's death (Gen. 25:1) and the "concubine" of Gen. 25:6.² In the previous verse Abraham had given "all that he had" to Isaac, the son of Sarah; in this verse he gives merely "gifts" to the sons of Keturah. The verse also establishes a spatial distinction: Isaac remains in the land promised to Abraham, whereas the later children live "east" of it. "East" signifies the lower importance and locale where the rejected relatives, the black sheep, live.³

But the verse simultaneously maintains Abraham's relationship with them. Though lower in worth, they remain his relatives and have received his gifts. Because of this particular function, Jews, viewing the world through Torah, employed this verse of Torah to explain the presence of valid knowledge or of real power among foreigners. (Gen. 25:6 has never been applied to Christianity or Islam.)

The verse has a fascinating history of interpretation, winding through worlds of menace, suspicion, impurity, evil powers, mysterious Easterners with their own ancient scriptures, and Jews searching for hidden sparks of Torah among foreigners. But the man who explicitly connected the verse to India, Menasseh ben Israel, chose to ignore earlier interpretations and took the verse in a new direction reflecting the great European explorations of his time, for a new purpose fitting his polemical needs in the seventeenth century. His interpretation reappears in two Orthodox books written recently in Jerusalem.⁴

This history began with the Babylonian Talmud, where "the children of Keturah" appear as sly competitors for ownership of the Land of Israel (b.Sanh. 91a) and as a taunting name for ignorant Jews (b.Zevah. 62a-b). When the question arises of what Abraham gave to Keturah's sons, Rabbi Jeremiah bar Abba, apparently on the basis of the faulty way in which *matanot*, "gifts," is spelled in the biblical text, and to belittle this inheritance, infers that the gifts were faulty. "This teaches," he said, "that he passed to them a name of impurity (*shem tum'ah*)," which Rashi later explains as a name to be used for "sorcery and [dealings with] demons" (b.Sanh. 91a). This interpretation then becomes the major current of meaning surrounding Gen. 25:6.

Two medieval commentators take up the theme, concerned particularly with the issue of ritual impurity. Hezekiah ben Manoah, writing in the mid-thirteenth century, asks in his *Hizzekuni* how such a saint as Abraham could transmit a holy name to "wicked ones" (as these sons are now called). He replies, reading the talmudic phrase as "a name in impurity," *shem b'tum'ah*, that he gave them merely a profane name to conjure demons through the powers set over them (rather than God), even when the sons were in an impure bodily state. Hezekiah identifies the "east" of the verse as the land of Aram, related to Uz where Job lived among "the Easterners" (Job 1:3). The *Tosafot* (thirteenth and fourteenth centuries) express similar views.

1. *The Zohar and Me'or Eynayim*

The Zohar (thirteenth century, Spain) moves the interpretation to another stage by connecting the children of Keturah in Gen. 25:6 with the "wisdom of all the Easterners" (literally, "Children of the East," *benei kedem*) mentioned in 1 Kings 5:10—"And Solomon's wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the Easterners and all the wisdom of Egypt." Three passages in the Zohar employ Gen. 25:6 to prove that these "Easterners" inherited their knowledge ultimately from Abraham.

Two of them connect the Easterners with sorcery and evil, their main characteristic in the Zohar. The first (Zohar 1:133b) asserts that Abraham gave Isaac the doctrine of high faith, *m'hemnuta 'al'ah* (that is, insight into the mystery of the Sefirot), whereas he gave the sons of Keturah "names of the sides of the unclean spirit" and sent them east. The writer then infers, because *kedem*, "east," appears also in 1 Kings 5:10, that this latter verse shows that "the descendants of the children of Abraham's concubine are the Easterners, who inhabit the 'mountains of the East,' where they instruct human beings in sorcery (*harshin*)." Here another scriptural verse has been adduced, to connect the menacing "Balaam the Wicked" (a talmudic phrase) with these Easterners: "Balak, the king of Moab, has brought me [Balaam] from Aram, out of the mountains of the East (*me-hararei kedem*)" (Num. 23:7). Since Balaam worked an evil magic and came from the mountains of the East, the writer infers that *ereš kedem*, the east country, is a place of "unclean sorcerers" and that "the wisdom of all the Easterners" (1 Kings 5:10) consisted of unclean magic. This also expands upon the talmudic interpretation of Gen. 25:6.

A second passage (1:223a-b) fashions the Easterners into archetypal practitioners of evil detached from any sense of real geographical location. It interprets Abraham's gifts as two types of wisdom—a "higher wisdom" for Isaac, attained through knowing the holy name of God, and a much lower wisdom for the sons of Keturah, based on "knowledge of the lower crowns," that is, the emanations of the *sitra aḥra*, "the Other Side." This is the domain of dark and demonic powers and the source of the "unclean spirit," mentioned in the previous passage, which bring temptation and destruction upon the world. The Zohar speaks elsewhere of ten crowns of sorcery and uncleanness below, calling them "wisdoms," which correspond to the ten holy sefirot above (3:70a). Abraham's gift to Keturah's sons thus consists of demonic knowledge enabling them to practice sorcery.⁵

A third and much longer passage employing Gen. 25:6 (99b-100b), however, offers a different view of the Easterners and their wisdom, related perhaps to a more favorable image of Easterners found in rabbinic midrash.⁶ In it Rabbi Abba, one of the main teachers appearing in the Zohar, speaks approvingly of teachings he personally heard from them.

Once I happened to be in a town of the descendants of the Easterners, and they told me some of their ancient wisdom.

They also possessed books of their wisdom, and they brought me one book in which it was written that, according to the goal that a human being intends in this world, so there is drawn to him a spirit (*ruah*) from on high. If he intends a high and holy object, he draws that thing to himself from above, and if he cleaves to the *sitra ahra*, he brings down that thing upon himself. They said that it essentially depends on the words, deeds, and intention to which one attaches oneself, for the side to which one attaches oneself is drawn down from above... It is the same for one who wants to attach himself to the Holy Spirit (*ruah kodsha*) on high.

Rabbi Abba approves also of what the Easterners teach about the afterlife: "In accord with that which a human being seeks in this world, so he will be further drawn after he leaves this world. In that to which he attaches himself in this world, so will he be drawn in the other world: if holy, holy, and if unclean, unclean (*'i b'kodsha b'kodsha, 'i bimsa'aba bimsa'aba*)." Hence, if a person cleaves to holiness in this life, she or he will minister to God among the angels, and if a person clings to evil and impurity, the *sitra ahra*, then she or he will join the unclean spirits in Gehinom. The writer is thus presenting his Jewish readers with doctrines which he has Rabbi Abba later call "close (*k'riba*) to the words of the Torah." These Easterners understand the difference between holy and impure and how these categories structure the world, know a law of consequences operating in the universe and how the cosmos works to respond in kind to human thought and action, and they believe in an afterlife with reward and punishment. Like Jews, they possess an ancient wisdom written in books.

But in the end these books hold a serious danger to Jews. For Rabbi Abba also found written in them "rites for the worship of stars and constellations." His full response to Eastern wisdom takes the following form:

My children, this is close to the words of the Torah, but you should keep far away from these books lest your hearts stray after their rites and all those sides (*sitrin*) just mentioned. Be on your guard lest, God forbid, you turn aside from the rites of the Holy and Blessed One, for all these books lead human beings astray.

Rabbi Abba then explains this wisdom as ultimately Jewish wisdom gone bad: "For the Easterners possessed a wisdom which they inherited from Abraham, who transmitted it to the sons of the concubine, as it is written (in Gen. 25:6). But later they were drawn in that wisdom in many [wrong] directions." Isaac, in contrast, received "all" that Abraham possessed (Gen. 25:5), meaning a "holy heritage of faith," which, presumably because it was a fuller inheritance (Abraham's "all"), prevented Isaac's descendants, the Jews, from distorting it. Finally, Psalm 24 is cited to suggest that the Easterners worship man-made

images, turn their hearts to the *sitra ahra*, and defile their bodies with their own hands.

This interpretation of Gen. 25:6 offers a more complex view of the Easterners than the passages connecting them with sorcery. Easterners are portrayed here with valid doctrines and commendable ethics, founded in a kabbalistic theory of correspondence and reciprocity and the distinction between holy and profane forces in the world. Their "wisdom" derives from the same source as Jewish wisdom. Yet their religion is judged wrong because it does not worship the God of Israel and so stands ultimately aligned with the *sitra ahra*. Its wisdom, lacking the revealed faith of the Torah, wanders away from its inherited truths. Indeed, its sharpest danger consists of its hidden mixture of truth and falsehood, since the truth in its confused teachings works an attraction upon the innocent soul.

Easterners appear in many later kabbalistic writings, mainly in association with Gen. 29:1 and 1 Kings 5:10, and usually in the image of sorcerers.⁷ We turn now to one more interpretation of Gen. 25:6, also mentioning Easterners, found in the still-popular Hasidic work, *Me'or Eynayim* by Menahem Nahum ben Evi of Chernobyl (1730-1787), published in 1798 and frequently reprinted. In the book's homily on *Parshat Noah*, Nahum develops the concept of a fallen Torah hidden in the languages of all the non-Jewish nations—scattered fragments of Hebrew, the original language spoken by all humankind before separate languages emerged at the time of the Tower of Babel: "There remained in all the tongues something from the Holy Tongue, certain combinations written in the Torah, and from this is their existence." That is, the nations survive through these incomplete elements of Torah found in their languages, just as everything that exists does so only through the presence of God: "There is no place empty of him, for his life and his divinity are everywhere...so that all the worlds and all the nations have life only through the Torah." Holding on to its holiness, the nations "enslave the Torah that fell from the Torah." Nahum turns to Gen. 25:6 as another example of this phenomenon. When the Talmud says that Abraham gave the children of Keturah an impure name, *shem tum'ah*, this means that "they contaminate the holy combinations among the nations of the world, for the Torah is called *shem* (name) for the entire Torah consists of the names of God." That is, the children of Keturah took the holy Torah of their father and mixed it into the cultures of other nations, so that in a sense, it is no longer pure and whole.

Nahum assigns Jews the important task of reclaiming this fallen Torah: "The offspring of Isaac would have the power to sift out and purify it," just as Jacob, in heading "to the land of the Easterners" (Gen. 29:1), the location to which Abraham had sent the sons of Keturah (proved by Gen. 25:6), descended to their low rung of existence in order to raise the fallen sparks of Torah back to their roots in the Torah. "For this purpose was Israel exiled among the nations: to sift out the holy letters from the Torah mixed up among the nations,

doing this by means of their dealings and speech with them." Nahum describes the process of "lifting up" in several ways:

The principle is that one must draw everything near to the Torah... And this occurs by means of engaging in Torah for its own sake, for the sake of showing a path to observe and practice it ...The sage understands that the engaging in Torah spoken of here, takes place in all things, and also when one converses with the Gentiles, so long as one remains directed to the proper intention.

Nahum then interprets Ps. 106:35 as King David urging Jews to "fashion teaching and Torah through their deeds, and engage with the nations." In relation to the fallen Torah, this means that "what was swallowed among the seventy languages from the Torah is given to Israel to draw near to the great source [the higher Torah] by means of the good which they will do by their deeds."

A later homily in *Me'or Eynayim* offers an example of what Nahum means by "engaging with the nations." There he says that Israel was scattered among them "so that through dealing with them in such matters as business and in conversation with them, we would be able to bring forth the sparks garbed in those things." Business must be conducted in absolute honesty, and God gains greater joy from acts of raising the holy sparks through honest business dealings and other lowly things than even the direct study of Torah, for after all, Torah exists in all things.⁸

This homily marks the first time that Gen. 25:6 appears in a kabbalistic passage urging Jews to approach, rather than ignore or reject, the people who inherited Abraham's gifts to Keturah's sons. On the one hand, the nations contaminate the pure higher Torah and by holding onto it, prevent the coming of the Messiah and an end to Jewish suffering. Yet on the other hand, Jews should struggle against them in the paradoxical manner of serving them—conversing, absolute honesty in business transactions, doing good deeds, teaching Torah through their conduct. Only this will release the sparks of Torah entangled among the nations. Yet we should also notice that the nations remain the realm of the impure, having no valuable wisdom or holiness of their own, but only sparks of Torah hidden in their culture.

2. *Isaac Abravanel and Menasseh ben Israel*

The exegetical history of Gen. 25:6 now changes abruptly. The meanings which Isaac Abravanel and Menasseh ben Israel found in the verse reflect not the Zohar but Classical and Christian literature and a new sense of geographical and historical realism.

Writing his *Commentary on the Torah (Perush Ha-Torah)* in Venice around 1505, Abravanel shows particular interest in the origin of mathematics and the natural sciences when he discusses the descendants of the three sons of

Noah.⁹ The nations that descended from Ham, he writes, lack political life and the ability to reason, whereas the descendants of Yafet, namely, Greece and Rome, are beautiful in their manners, bravery, and political life. "But among the sons of Shem...are to be found the investigative sciences (*he-hokhmot ha-mekariyot*) in their entirety, for the Hindus, Babylonians, and Assyrians are founders of mathematics (*he-hokhmot ha-lamudiyot*), people who first investigated the natural and divine sciences."¹⁰ Then Abravanel explains how the knowledge of Shem, having reached Abraham, was transmitted to the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans:

And from Abraham to the children of Ishmael and the children of Keturah came the science of magic (*hokhmat ha-kishuf*) and the hidden elements and astrology and the rest of the investigative sciences. They are the ones who brought these sciences to Egypt. According to the sages, "Abraham gave gifts to the children of the concubines" (Gen. 25:6) means that he passed to them a name in impurity, for by means of these names they wanted to acquire all the science and knowledge which will not come through the paths of divine prophecy pure from every dross and error. Yet the children of Esau were the ones who brought the sciences to the Romans and Greeks, the children of Yafet.

In contrast to the other writings we have examined, Abravanel's commentary sees nothing evil in the magic obtained by the children of Keturah; it is clearly as valid as "the investigative sciences" and astrology. This attitude may reflect the respect for "high magic" and the occult held by many European intellectuals of the late Renaissance.¹¹ Abravanel also ignores the negative moral connotation of "impurity" intended by the exegesis of Gen. 25:6 which he quotes from the Talmud.

Yet he does consider the knowledge of the children of Keturah, and indeed all the sciences, contaminated with the impurity of "dross and error" and thus inferior to the knowledge which Jews have received through divine prophecy.

And over all of them, like the height of the heavens over the earth, the wisdom of the children of Israel was raised high. And the glory of God shone on them and in its light they saw the light of the sciences and their attainments, and they (Israel) were all holy descendants praising God [from Isa. 6:13, 44:13].

The knowledge achieved by the descendants of Shem, such as the Hindus and sons of Keturah, and of people who inherited this tradition, such as the Greeks and Romans, is knowledge gained by human investigation and therefore inherently fallible, whereas the knowledge held by the Jews, including "the sciences and their attainments," derives from prophetic