

Reason or Revelation?

A Mishna concerning Rabbi Eliezer, retold by Stephen Orchard

The rabbis were disputing whether a clay oven made of separate pieces was a single utensil or not. As a whole single item it would be subject to the law of uncleanness; as separate parts it would avoid the law. Rabbi Eliezer argued against all the others that as each portion was not itself a utensil the oven itself was not subject to the laws of cleanliness. However ingenious his argument the other rabbis did not accept it.

In desperation he said, 'If I am right, let this carob tree prove it.' As he finished speaking the carob tree was torn out of the ground by invisible forces and flung a great distance. 'You cannot prove anything with a carob tree,' said the other rabbis.

'Very well,' said Rabbi Eliezer, if I am right let the stream prove it.' Then the stream began to flow backwards. 'You cannot prove anything with a stream,' said the rabbis.

'All right,' said Rabbi Eliezer, 'If I am right let the walls of the schoolhouse prove it.' It looked as if the schoolhouse walls were going to fall over, when Rabbi Joshua shouted to the walls, 'What business is it of yours when scholars are engaged in a dispute?' and the walls did not fall, out of respect for Rabbi Eliezer, so they did not stand back upright but simply leaned at an angle.

Finally Rabbi Eliezer said, 'If I am right let it be proved by Heaven,' and they heard a voice from heaven crying, 'Why do you dispute with Rabbi Eliezer since he is always right in these matters?' Rabbi Joshua stood up and said, 'It is not in Heaven' (see Deuteronomy 30:12). They all wondered what he meant. Rabbi Jeremiah said, 'The Torah has already been given at Mount Sinai. We pay no attention to a heavenly voice because we reason our way to our decisions in the light of the Torah.' (see Exodus 23:2).

Elijah then appeared to Rabbi Natham, who asked him, 'What did the Holy One, blessed be he do then?' He laughed,' said Elijah, 'saying, "My sons have defeated me, My sons have defeated me".'

(A possible meaning of the story is that even God recognises that reason is that even God recognises that reason is superior to revelation.)

Stephen Orchard