Jewish Bible Interpretation (The Biblical World)

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The practice of commentary and interpretation in a faith community implies at the very least the acceptance of writings which have become normative in some way for the life and beliefs of that community even before a final canonization as 'Holy Scripture'. Interpreters were influenced by a variety of factors, such as the need to explain the Scriptures to later generations unfamiliar with the language or attitudes of the original works, and the desire to harmonize both apparent discrepancies between Scripture and contemporary custom or teaching, and also inconsistencies within Scripture itself.

INNER-BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

In the case of Judaism, this practice of interpretation goes back a long way, even into the Hebrew Bible itself, and is sometimes termed *Inner-biblical Interpretation*. For instance, the writer responsible for the book of Chronicles ('the Chronicler') based his work on material found in what we know as the books of Samuel and Kings. He emphasized certain aspects of these accounts while diminishing others, in accordance with his own particular aims. One example would be the much greater focus of Chronicles on the Temple in Jerusalem, the cult, and the Davidic monarchy, but no mention of David's gradual rise to kingship over Israel and Judah, Absalom's revolt, or the less creditable episodes of David's life such as his adultery with Bathsheba and his part in Uriah's death. It is hard to be certain of the date of the Chronicler, but the fourth century BCE is likely. The book of Chronicles was eventually accepted as part of Scripture, though in

Jewish tradition it is considered part of the 'Writings' (*Kethuvim*), and does not appear among the Former Prophets with the other historical books that it parallels.

REWRITTEN BIBLE

As the various books of Jewish scripture became more widely known and authoritative among Jews, the stories could be reinterpreted in different ways, from a variety of perspectives. This genre is often known as 'Rewritten Bible' (a term suggested by Geza Vermes in 1961) or more recently 'Rewritten Scripture', though both terms have been disputed in recent years on the ground that the concept of authoritative 'scripture', and certainly of a 'Bible' may be anachronistic for the period in which these works were written. However, many examples of such rewriting of older, ancestral, narratives can be found in the early period (up to the end of the first century CE) especially among the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books, various Pseudepigrapha, and the Dead Sea Scrolls found at Qumran. However, in the last case some texts are so fragmentary that it is difficult to say much about their treatment of Scripture. Flavius Josephus and Philo Judaeus are also notable exponents of the genre.

Jubilees

The book of *Jubilees* survives in its entirety only in Ethiopic, but Hebrew fragments of the work have been found at Qumran and Masada, and small portions are known in Greek and Latin translation. *Jubilees* is a version of Genesis ch. 1–Exodus ch. 20 dictated at God's command by an angel (*Jub*. I.27) to Moses on Mount Sinai. Its treatment of the biblical story includes folkloric additions

such as the young Abraham's defiance of his father's idolatry; the eternal character of the Mosaic Law, which the ancients observed even before its actual promulgation at Sinai; and most notably, a great interest in calendars and chronology. *Jubilees* promotes the idea of the year consisting of 364 days, so that religious festivals will always fall on the same day of the week, and it also divides world history into periods of forty nine years, each equal to one 'jubilee'. Presenting this book as if it were a kind of second revelation of the Law from Sinai is an obvious attempt to promote the views of the writer and the group to which he belonged. From the interest in the festivals and calendar, it is thought that he was a priest, and that the work dates from the mid-second century BCE. Despite its non-canonical status the work was popular with Christian scholars of the patristic era for its provision of chronological details and 'back-stories' of some characters such as Abraham. Its influence on certain motifs can also be seen in the Qur'an.

Genesis Apocryphon

The Genesis Apocryphon found in Cave 1 at Qumran (1QapGen, = 1Q20) is another interpretation of the Genesis narrative, this time in a more popular style. Though fragmentary, we have enough of the text to see that it renders the patriarchal narratives of the Bible into a literary Aramaic better understood by Palestinian Jews than the original classical Hebrew of Genesis. The work probably dates from sometime in the first century BCE. The writer introduces new elements: for instance, Noah's birth is out of the ordinary and therefore Noah's father suspects his wife of infidelity with one of the angels; Pharaoh's messengers are given a speech in which they praise Sarah's beauty at length. The

Genesis Apocryphon omits some of the original details in the book of Genesis, and conflates episodes such as the abductions of Sarah by a king in Genesis 12 and 20. Harmonizing chapters 12 and 20 also serves to remove any dubious behaviour on the part of Abraham: in the biblical account of Genesis 12 he is open to charges of greed and cowardice for letting Sarah be taken away in return for cattle and slaves (Gen 12.15–16). In the *Genesis Apocryphon*, however, Sarah is forcifully abducted, and Abraham is given an anguished prayer in which he begs God for justice and asks him to prevent Sarah's defilement. God sends an evil spirit upon Pharaoh's household, and it is only when Abraham has prayed for Pharaoh to be healed and Sarah is restored to her husband that Abraham is enriched. Pharaoh gives Sarah gold, silver, and fine clothes in reparation for his abduction of her, a detail reflecting Genesis 20 rather than chapter 12.

First Enoch

The composite pseudepigraphical work known as *1 Enoch* is preserved in its entirety only in Ethiopic, though fragments of five Aramaic copies have been found at Qumran. Within it *1 Enoch* 6–11 appears to be a separate document that develops and expands Genesis 6–9. Genesis 6 briefly presents a myth concerning a descent of the sons of God to the daughters of men, the Nephilim who result from these unions, and the Lord's determination to bring the Flood in order to blot out humans and their wickedness. *1 Enoch* 6–11 interprets the sons of God as 'angels, the sons of heaven', giving them names, and describing how they teach the women magic. Their offspring are giants who ravage the earth, while the angels teach humans astrology and how to make weapons, jewellery, cosmetics, and dye. This leads to all kinds of corruption in the world. The souls of the dead

cry out for justice, and the archangels respond by petitioning the Lord, who decrees a flood to cleanse the earth but promises peace and eternity for the future. The aim of *1 Enoch* 6–11 appears to be the explanation of a difficult biblical passage and a justification of God's action in sending the Flood by emphasizing the enormity of the corruption that preceded it. Thus an ancient legend in the Hebrew Genesis has been converted into a critique of contemporary civilization and a promise of resolution by divine judgment in the end times.

Pseudo-Philo

The *Biblical Antiquities* of Pseudo-Philo, written around the turn of the first millennium, reinterprets the history of Israel from Adam to David in a selective manner. Genesis chs. 1–3 and Leviticus are omitted, yet the very minor character Kenaz (known only as brother of Caleb and father of Othniel in Judg 3.9, 11) has chapters 25–28 of the *Biblical Antiquities* devoted to him as the first judge of Israel. Some traditions reappear later in rabbinic interpretations, for instance that Job married Jacob's daughter Dinah. The theology is that of the book of Deuteronomy, that is, sin has led to punishment, but God will one day bring restoration. The original work must have been composed in Hebrew and then translated into Greek, but the only version to survive is in Latin.

Other Works

Those writings that rework biblical passages with a legal or juridical content arguably belong to a separate genre from those in the category of 'Rewritten Bible'/'Rewritten Scripture'. However, often they too reflect an accommodation

of Scripture to the beliefs of a particular group. For instance, at Qumran, the *Temple Scroll* (11Q19 and 11Q20) uses Deuteronomy as its base but brings in many other biblical texts to support the authority of the teachings presented. The style has been described as a mosaic, but this ignores the care taken with the structure of the Temple Scroll, and some prefer the term 'anthological', which emphasizes the careful coordination of the different verses used to justify a new legal approach to problems of, say, kingship or festival laws. The methodology of reconciling different texts is similar to later rabbinic techniques of interpretation. It is noteworthy that the laws in the *Temple Scroll* are uttered directly by God in the first person, not relayed through Moses. As with *Jubilees*, the contents are presented as direct revelation to Israel at Sinai, not as interpretation of Scripture.

The book of Ben Sira (Sirach) and the work known as the *Wisdom of Solomon* both recount episodes and characters from the biblical account. The choice of 'famous men' in Israelite history in Sirach chs. 44–49 shows which biblical figures and their deeds Ben Sira considered significant, and his treatment of them is effectively an interpretation and retelling of the narratives. *Wisdom* chs. 10–12 similarly retells in brief stories from Genesis to Joshua, while chs. 16–19 constantly allude to the Exodus story in an anonymized form (no proper names from Scripture are ever mentioned). The passage focuses on the theological lessons to be learned by both the people of God and their ungodly enemies, and may reflect a period of difficulties for Jews living in Egypt in the period of Roman domination.

Josephus

A later example of the genre of 'Rewritten Bible/Scripture' is the work known as the *Jewish Antiquities* by Flavius Josephus, a Jewish writer living in Rome in c. 90 CE. Josephus's motive is mainly apologetic, and the work is primarily addressed to non-Jews with the intention of combating Graeco-Roman anti-Semitism, especially in the wake of the Jewish struggle against Rome in 66–70 CE, which had ended in the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. As in the case of the *Genesis Apocryphon*, Josephus renders the narrative of the Hebrew Bible into the literary language of his audience, Greek. He also Hellenizes the Jewish Bible by making it part of a twenty-volume historical work on the Jews, deriving the last books from non-biblical historical sources. The model is evidently the *Roman Antiquities* of Dionysius of Halicarnassus. In this way Josephus provides his people with a national history like that of the Greeks and Romans. He also demonstrates the antiquity and rationality of Jewish religious customs and thus their legitimacy.

Josephus's Hellenizing treatment extends to many details, such as the description of major characters who take on the qualities of Greek heroes and heroines, such as good birth, wisdom, piety, courage, beauty, hospitality, generosity, justice. Episodes that do not reflect well on Israel and its leaders (e.g. involving idolatry or immorality) tend to be omitted by Josephus; for instance the Golden Calf (Exodus ch. 32) and the Brazen Serpent (Num 21.4–9), and Tamar's seduction of her father-in-law Judah (Genesis ch. 38). Other stories are retained but excused in some way, such as when Abram sends the pregnant Hagar away in Genesis 16: her banishment is said to be the will of God (*J.Ant*. I.217). Further Hellenistic features are the introduction of speeches and the

heightening of dramatic or erotic elements, such as the description of Potiphar's wife's passion for Joseph (*J.Ant*. II. 41–59).

On the other hand, Josephus plays down the role of the magical and miraculous in his account, perhaps in view of his sophisticated audience. However, sometimes he tries to provide rational explanations, as in *J.Ant*. I.107–8 when he says that the patriarchs' enormous lifespans were attributable to their good diet, religious merit, and the need to be able to observe the movements of the heavenly bodies over a long period in order to develop the sciences of astronomy and geometry for posterity. A combination of personal and Hellenistic misogyny is probably responsible for Josephus's lack of interest in the prominent women of the Hebrew Bible, such as Moses' mother in Exodus chs. 1–2 (*J.Ant*. II.210–23), almost completely eclipsed by her husband (who is hardly mentioned in the biblical account), and also Ruth the Moabite, the ancestress of King David. Josephus has no interest in Ruth's personality, or even in her exemplary fidelity to her widowed mother-in-law, and tells her story only to draw the lesson that God can raise up ordinary folk to greatness (*J.Ant*. V.318–37).

Minor Hellenistic Jewish writers

Josephus's retelling of the Bible from a historical and literary perspective was not the first attempt to present Jewish Scripture in a Hellenistic guise. He was preceded by several Jewish writers, including the historians Demetrius, Artapanus, and Eupolemus, and the poets Ezekiel the Tragedian and Philo the Epic Poet. Their work has been preserved only in excerpts in early Christian writers such as Clement of Rome and Eusebius of Caesarea. Nevertheless we

have enough material to see that all presented apologetic views of Jewish history and Scripture that glorified the great figures of Israel's past and tried to combat contemporary anti-Jewish sentiment, though the relationship of their works to the text of Scripture is often tenuous. Artapanus in particular is so syncretistic in his outlook (he attributes the origins of the Egyptian worship of animals to Moses) that some have doubted his Jewishness. Ezekiel the Tragedian rewrote the Exodus story as a Hellenistic drama, called the *Exagoge*, the 'leading out'. It is not known whether it was ever performed as a play. Certain aspects of the original Exodus account could have given non-Jews the wrong impression, and so Ezekiel modified them. Zipporah, Moses' wife in Exodus ch. 4, is identified in the *Exagoge* with the Ethiopian woman that he marries in Num 12.1, probably to avoid the suggestion that Moses was polygamous. Exod 3.22, 11.2–3, 12.35–6 says that the Israelites borrowed Egyptian property and then took it away with them at the Exodus: thus they 'plundered the the Egyptians', according to the biblical text. In common with later interpreters, Ezekiel says that this property was given as payment for the Israelites' work, and was not stolen from the Egyptians (*Exag.* 165–66, cf. Philo Judaeus, *Life of Moses* I.141).

Philo

Another major but very different Hellenistic Jewish interpreter of the Bible is Josephus's older contemporary Philo Judaeus, more commonly known as Philo of Alexandria. Philo, a member of the Alexandrian Jewish community, was strongly influenced by Stoicism, Pythagoreanism and Platonism while remaining an observant Jew. He probably knew no Hebrew and depended on the Greek translation of Scripture, which he regarded as equally inspired. There are

apologetic aspects to his interpretation of Scripture, and he also tried to show that the Jewish Law revealed in the Pentateuch was absolute and perfect Truth in a philosophical sense.

Philo's biblical interpretation can be divided into three categories:

1. In the *Allegorical Commentaries* he explains Scripture on two levels, the plain meaning and the more elaborate allegorical sense pointing to the eternal reality behind the words. For instance, though he seems to regard the major figures of the Bible as historical personalities, he is much more interested in the spiritual types they represent: typically, in Philo's treatise *Preliminary Studies (de Congressu)*, Sarah is 'virtue'. while Hagar is 'education'. He portrays Mosaic Law as philosophy rather than lawcode, though he is at pains to stress that the allegorical intepretation never invalidates the full observance of Jewish Law.

2. His systematic presentation of Jewish Law and his biographies of major biblical figures are given in free paraphrase in his *Exposition of the Law*, and so can be considered as belonging to the genre of 'Rewritten Bible'. However, his retelling of Scripture is less dramatic than that of Josephus, and he adds fewer speeches. For example, his version of Genesis 22 in *Life of Abraham* 167–77 has fewer additions to the story. The two levels of interpretation appear in this group of works as well: there is the 'natural' meaning for the 'multitude', and the 'hidden' meaning for the 'few' (e.g. *Life of Abraham* 147).

3. The third genre Philo employs is that of 'Question and Answer', a running commentary in biblical sequence, giving the relevant text of Scripture and supplying an explanation. For instance, 'Why does God say "I will send fear to go before you"? The literal meaning is clear, for a strong force to terrify the

enemy is fear ... But as for the deeper meaning, there are two reasons why men honour the Deity, love and fear...' (*Questions and Answers* on Exodus II *21). Thus the answers cover both plain and allegorical senses.

Philo's striking use of allegory, seen throughout his works, is heavily indebted to the methods of the Homeric allegorists developed in his home city of Alexandria. These scholars regarded Homer as the perfect poet and philosopher, and, to overcome the problem of the unedifying behaviour of gods and men, they employed allegorical explanations. Such methods seem strange to modern eyes, but were very popular in the early and medieval Church, which preserved Philo's works when they fell out of favour among Jews.

Philo's interpretations presuppose a widely known standard text form of Scripture in Greek, which he quotes frequently, and the actual wording is important for his exegesis, in contrast to the approach of Josephus, who, though thoroughly conversant with the text of Scripture in Hebrew, Greek and possibly Aramaic, converts the wording into literary Greek.

PESHER

Unlike the genre of 'Rewritten Bible', which does not necessarily depend on a standard form of Scripture, biblical interpretation in the form of commentary does assume an accepted (if not fully standardized) text. The genre of *commentary*, which is a very familiar form of biblical interpretation today, is found at Qumran as *Pesher* (plural 'pesharim'), literally 'interpretation'. Pesharim on the prophetic books of Hosea, Nahum, Micah, and Habakkuk and also on Psalm 37 take the form of lemma (quotation of a verse or phrase from the Bible)

plus comment, and they proceed in biblical order. They are products of the sectarian milieu, however, and use scripture to legitimate the authority of the community's founder, the Teacher of Righteousness, to find allusions in the text of Scripture to contemporary events concerning the sect, and (especially) to predict what will happen in the end times. So the emphasis is on Scripture as proof text for present doctrine, rather than on interpretation *per se*. An example would be the comment on Hab 2.8b ('Because of the blood of men and the violence done to the land, to the city, and to all its inhabitants'), which runs, "The interpretation of it concerns the Wicked Priest, whom God delivered into the hand of his enemies because of the iniquity committed against the Teacher of Righteousness and the men of his council, that he might be humbled by means of a destroying scourge, in bitterness of soul, because he had done wickedly to his elect' (1QpHab 9.8–12). The author has connected the biblical verse with the struggle between the High Priest and the sect's founder, the so-called 'Teacher of Righteousness'.

TRANSLATION

Biblical interpretation can also take the form of *translation*. Like commentary, it presupposes some sort of standard text.

Septuagint

The earliest rendering of the Hebrew Bible was of the Pentateuch, i.e. the Torah consisting of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, central to Jewish life. It was probably produced in Alexandria in the mid-third century BCE for the benefit of the large Greek-speaking Jewish community there. Legend

attributes it to the work of seventy or seventy-two Palestinian Jewish translators (hence the name Septuagint, 'seventy', given to it by early Christian writers), though the evidence of the text itself suggests that each book of the Pentateuch had its own single translator. Greek translations of other books followed, to which the name Septuagint (LXX) was also attached in the later period. On the whole, the interpretative element of LXX is minimal since the translators attempted to produce a fairly literal rendering in order to be faithful to the Hebrew text, especially in its cultic and legal sections. However, the poetic books, e.g. Psalms, Proverbs, Job, the Prophets, diverge more from the plain meaning of the Hebrew largely because the nature of the language was difficult to understand. Translators fell back on their own intuition and no doubt also on traditional interpretations of those texts, and thus tended to introduce the theology of their own time and place. However, scholars debate the extent to which this happened, most notably in the case of messianic thought within the Septuagint.

Later revisions of the LXX, for instance those of the 'Kaige' recension (a movement dating between the later first century BCE and first century CE) and then that of Aquila (c.130 CE), attempted to bring the Greek translation closer to the Hebrew text form that was becoming standardized in Palestine. The more literal these revisions were, the less room there was for apparent interpretation, although a particular line of thinking can often be found in a single word. The Greek revision of Symmachus at the end of the second century CE is less literal and reflects contemporary Jewish interpretations of the Hebrew text that are often also found in rabbinic literature of a slightly later period.

Targum

The loss of the knowledge of classical Hebrew among many Jews of Palestine and Babylonian was addressed in a similar manner as in Alexandria. It is not known at what stage the Aramaic translations known as Targumim (sing. Targum) emerged. Although fragments of Aramic translations of the books of Job and Leviticus were discovered at Qumran and are often referred to as Targumim, it seems that synagogue readings from the Hebrew Scripture (Torah and Haftorah) were rendered orally into Aramaic for some time, and were not written down until much later. Presumably the reluctance to give the Targumim a literary form relates to the desire to maintain the primacy and authority of the Hebrew text, which had already been superseded by the LXX in Greek-speaking communities. But in contrast to the LXX, which rendered the Hebrew quite closely, many Targumim are paraphrastic and incorporate a good deal of interpretation, though every word of the Hebrew is represented in translation. Consigning the Targumim to writing may have been a way of controlling the content of interpretative renderings as well as providing a crib or study tool for the Hebrew text. Common features of the many and varied Targumim would include a dislike of anthropomorphism (i.e. descriptions of God using human terms, such as his having hands or eyes) and an avoidance of ambiguity (for instance, rhetorical questions are converted into statements). The Targumim also develop themes already present in parts of the Bible, for instance that sin has led to exile and Diaspora, that observing the Torah will lead to national and religious restoration, and that the Lord will one day send his Messiah to reign over his people.

THE ROLE OF TEXT AND CANON;

RABBINIC MIDRASH

The practice of biblical interpretation takes on a new dimension when Hebrew Scripture is fully canonized. This means that a particular list (canon) of holy books gradually became normative for the Jewish community, and exclusive in that no other writings carried the same religious authority. The text itself became fixed, with a standard consonantal text circulating by the second century CE, and an authoritative reading of vowels was established in rabbinic circles, leading to a fully vocalized text by the eighth century. This process of canonization and standardization, which was well under way by the first century CE, was given further impetus by the destruction of Temple and its aftermath. The loss of the sacrificial cult and the end of the authority of the priests and political leaders meant that the study of Scripture and religious tradition became more central in Jewish life, under the leadership of the nascent rabbinic movement. Interpretation became less concerned with rewriting the narratives or translating the Hebrew. Instead, the focus for rabbinic interpretation was the fixed Hebrew text in all its details: at times, even apparently minor features of syntax guide a particular interpretation, especially for legal guidance.

The term most generally used of biblical interpretation by the rabbis is *midrash*, which loosely translated means 'investigation'. However, there is much debate concerning the exact definition and scope of midrash. It is clear, however, that the Hebrew text is the foundation and focus of the exegetical activity: there is no rewriting, only exposition and reconciliation where necessary. It is also generally agreed that midrash can be divided into two main types: a) *haggadic midrash*, which concerns narrative material and often involves folkloric

expansions of the text that develop the story in some way, link different episodes, or reconcile differences; b) *halakhic midrash*, which seeks either to extrapolate principles from biblical examples or to justify existing practice from the biblical text. Halakhic interpretations can also explain apparent contradictions between different rulings or between ancient and current practice. Some freedom is possible with haggadic midrash, since different versions of a story do not affect religious observance. But in the case of halakhic midrash there is much less flexibility and the details of the Hebrew text assume great importance, as with any modern legal document, since the interpretations would provide guidance and authority for everyday life. In fact, the rabbis often had differences of opinion over legal interpretation, recorded in the literature, but it was important to demonstrate that the correct methodology had been used to arrive at any ruling.

The corpus of literature containing rabbinic interpretation of Scripture is vast, partly because it underpinned almost everything they discussed. So although there are *midrashim* (effectively commentaries) to most of the biblical books, with material dating from the second century CE onwards, interpretations of scripture are also found scattered throughout the texts that encode rabbinic legal discussions: the Mishnah, the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds, and the Tosefta.

The earliest midrashim naturally cover the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, the Torah or Pentateuch, which are fundamental to Judaism. They vary in content according to the nature of the contents of each scriptural book. *Bereshith Rabbah* is a haggadic commentary on Genesis, the *Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael* and the *Mekhilta of Rabbi Simon bar Yochai* are a mixture of haggadah and halakhah on

most of Exodus, while *Sifra Leviticus* and *Sifre Numbers*, *Sifre Zutta* (literally, 'small Sifre', on Numbers), and *Sifre Deuteronomy* are halakhic. It should be stressed that all these works have the nature of compendiums of interpretations, ordered according to biblical sequence. Later, commentaries were produced for other books of the Bible. There are also the homiletic midrashim, such as *Pesikta of Rab Kahana* and *Pesikta Rabbati*, which are collections of discourses on the Scriptural readings for the Sabbaths and festivals. In the midrashim, though individual opinions may be attributed to particular rabbis, they are not necessarily the origin of those ideas, which are often traceable to earlier sources. But the transmission of an older tradition by a famous rabbi demonstrated its authority.

The methodology used by the rabbis in biblical interpretation is rarely explicit and different techniques are often used by different rabbis on the same verse. Some methods and traditions go back centuries and can be seen at work in some of the texts mentioned earlier, such as the pesharim and Pseudepigrapha. Certainly there are similarities between Philo's literal and allegorical interpretations, and the plain (*peshat*) and metaphorical (*derash*) meanings given by the rabbis. Peshat involved an examination of the general context of the word or verse, its philology, and similar uses elsewhere in Scripture. Thus R. Berekiah in *Genesis Rabbah* II.1 connects Gen 1.2 'the earth was a formless void' with the very similar wording of Jer 4.23 to illustrate its meaning. But shortly after the same Hebrew words are interpreted symbolically (i.e. as *derash*), as referring to the 'nothingness' of Adam and of Cain (*Gen Rabbah* II.3–4). *Derash* could be used even when the literal interpretation seems obvious. Thus the biblical law on retribution in Exodus 21.24, 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth', is not

understood literally but metaphorically, as referring to the worth of the eye or tooth, and therefore to monetary compensation (*Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael*, *Nezikin* 8). However, the same passage in the *Mekhilta* brings in other parallels to support this legal principle. One suspects that because payment for physical injury had become the current custom, the rabbis needed to justify this contemporary practice that appeared to contradict the plain sense of a particular verse. To do this they employed accepted methods of interpretation in order to show that the principle was in harmony with Scripture.

Allegory was also employed where the literal meaning of Scripture seemed too commonplace, as in Ecclesiastes 9.8, 'let your garments always be white': R. Jochanan ben Zakkai in *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* understood this to mean that one should always be 'clothed' with good deeds. Metaphor also avoided the difficulties of literal interpretation as with Song of Songs, the canonicity of which was debated because of its apparent lack of interest in religion and its highly erotic content. In this case the entire book was read as an allegory of God's love for Israel. However, the rabbis did not use typology as Philo had, such as identifying biblical characters with spiritual types. To them Abraham, Moses, David, and so on, were fully historical figures, heroes and exemplars to contemporary Jews.

One of the most basic principles of their interpretation was that Scripture was God-given, eternally valid, and could not contain contradictions or redundancies. So conflicting statements were reconciled, and every detail was significant, including grammatical particles, such as 'also', 'this', 'with', 'only'. Unusual words are explained by turning their consonants into acronyms, a technique known as *notarikon*: for instance the word *lāšād* used to describe the

flavour of manna in Num 11.8 is understood as a combination of dough (*layiš*), oil (*šemen*) and honey (*dĕḇaš*) (*Sifre Num* 89). Since in antiquity Hebrew letters were used to represent numbers, each had a numerical value, and by totalling up the numbers of the individual letters in a word it was possible to arrive at interesting interpretations. This was called *gematria.* A notable example of this occurs in a widespread interpretation of Gen 14.14, where 318 servants are said to accompany Abraham in his pursuit of his nephew's captors. Since Abraham had a servant named Eliezer, the letters of whose name add up to 318, it was understood that Abraham was accompanied by Eliezer alone (*Gen Rabbah* 43.2). This makes the success of Abraham's mission all the more miraculous. As with 'Rewritten Bible', midrash could extend and update scriptural principles. In this way the biblical prohibition of the cult of the god Molech (Lev 18.21), no longer practised in rabbinic times, was taken to cover all idolatry (*Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael*, *Bahodesh* 6, on Exod 20.3). It is hard to do justice to the wealth and variety of rabbinic midrash. Though it has a clear practical function in clarifying Scripture and making it relevant, at times the rabbis appear to be merely demonstrating their skill in applying the complex techniques of midrashic interpretation, to produce some surprising or entertaining results.

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