

Rabbinic Biblical Exegesis and its importance for Christians and Jewish-Christian Relations

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The destruction of the first Temple by the Babylonians in the year 586 BCE and the subsequent captivity, confronted the exiles with a literally existential crisis. The challenge was compounded by the fact that the northern kingdom of Israel had been overrun a century and a half earlier, its people exiled and ultimately lost (the “ten lost tribes”) to their brethren in Judea. The crisis/challenge for the exiles in Babylon was thus how to maintain their identity (in the hope of their eventual return to Judea) while in “an alien land “(see Psalm 137:4)

While we do not have precise data in this regard, we can glean significant insights from the prophet Ezekiel who reports on gatherings of elders in his home where they set in motion what may be described as the very “secret” of Jewish survival. No longer could the people rely on the priestly leadership in the absence of the central religious shrine and its unifying order of service. Away from the land and without its national institutions, it was essential to ensure that the people became the personal possessors of religious knowledge – the religious history and the way of life that the Jewish people believed had been Divinely revealed to them. From the book of Ezekiel and other sources it appears that the synagogue emerged in the Babylonian exile as a place of congregation (as its name suggests) where the Judean exiles not only socialized and prayed for their return to Zion and its restoration, but above all where they received religious instruction (the meaning of the Hebrew word *Torah*) from priests and elders, setting in motion the meritocratic educational revolution that reached a zenith in the Talmudic period and which guaranteed Jewish posterity .

Without getting into the complex question of what Scriptures were known exactly when, and at what point a canon was established; the knowledge of Scripture was at the heart of this process.

However, the ultimate purpose of this knowledge for the Jewish people, was to know how to live their lives in accordance with the Divine Will. The commandments in the Pentateuch addressed this cardinal question, but their meaning and application was not always clear. Moreover, changing circumstances raised new situations and questions that had to be addressed accordingly.

The teachers of this Torah, became known as *sopherim* , i.e. scribes ; foremost among them being the person of Ezra, who arrived back in the Judea in the second wave of returnees with a mandate from King Artaxerxes of Persia to re-establish Jewish life in the Land (Ezra 7:14.)

The Hebrew verb describing this exposition of Torah is the word "*darash*", from which comes the original name for Jewish Scriptural exegesis, the noun "*midrash*". The word denotes "to investigate," "to seek," and, in connection with the Bible, meant, therefore, to examine the text and to search into its meaning. This is the term used in the well-known reference to Ezra (Ezra 7:10) that he "set his heart to seek the Torah of the Lord and to perform it and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments."

The synagogue, replanted in the Land of Israel, continued to be a place of prayer and learning, but in due course this educational process led to the establishment of academies of learning known as *batei midrash* (singular, *beth midrash*.) In harmony with the origin of the synagogue and the character of these two institutions, exegesis became a matter of oral instruction and oral tradition.

In addition, as the Hebrew language became less accessible for the masses in various communities both in the Diaspora and in the Land of Israel where Aramaic became the predominant language, the need to provide a translation of Scripture became increasingly necessary.

The first translation ("*targum*") of the Hebrew Bible was the Septuagint in Greek in the 3rd century BCE. Two centuries later, Philo, the great representative of Alexandrian exegesis, provided both a comprehensive and explanatory paraphrases of the stories and ordinances of the Pentateuch, as well as a running allegorical commentary on the Bible text (seeking to prove by means of Biblical exegesis that Greek philosophy underlay the superficial meaning of the words of the Bible.) However, his work was not embraced by rabbinic tradition.

The Targum of Onkelos (Aquila) in the early second century CE and the Targum Yonatan (probably authored later that century, but attributed to earlier origin) provide Aramaic translations and expositions of Biblical text, and are considered authoritative by rabbinic tradition

Thus, in the educational endeavors in the academies and synagogues during the centuries before the destruction of the Temple and subsequently, the Oral Tradition explaining and expounding the Written Tradition, i.e. Scripture, was seen as part and parcel of the former, similarly having authority from Sinai. The study of both the Written and Oral Torah was seen as an expression of religious devotion in and of itself; with the purpose of orientating and enriching the religious life of the Jewish community.

While contested by certain sects within the Jewish community, with the destruction of the Temple Jerusalem in 70 C.E. this process filled the religious vacuum for the vast majority of the people both remaining in the Land of Israel and in the increasingly prominent Diaspora.

This exposition may be divided into two categories. *Midrash Halachah*, refers to the focus on Jewish jurisprudence, understanding interpreting and applying the commandments of Torah; and Midrash *Aggadah* (or *Haggadah*) refers to scriptural commentaries, homiletical expositions and lore, embellishing and expanding upon the written text. The *Mishnah* (written c. 200 C.E.) was the first written compilation of the former. The Talmud incorporates the discussion on the *Mishnah* over the following three centuries in the academies (especially in Babylon) introducing material not included in the Mishnah, together with Aggadic material. Over the course of subsequent centuries, the name *midrash* came to be used specifically to Aggadic material and subsequent homiletical exposition.

Accordingly, side by side with a straightforward Bible exegesis, the traditional literature contains an even larger mass of expositions often far removed from the actual meaning of the text. In the Halachic and especially in the Aggadic exegesis, the expounder endeavored not so much to seek the original meaning of the text as to find authority in Biblical text for the concepts and ideas, rules of conduct and teachings, of Tradition. To this were added, on the one hand, the belief that the words of the Bible had many meanings, and on the other, the importance attached to the smallest portion, the slightest peculiarity of the text. Hence the exegesis of the Midrash often departed significantly from a simple understanding of the text.

All this was because Midrashic exegesis was largely in the nature of homiletics, expounding the Bible not so much in order to investigate its literal meaning and to understand the documents of the past, but in order to find religious edification and moral instruction, to understand the Divine Will and teleology of the Divine revealed word.

Accordingly rabbinic exegesis sought not only to resolve possible inconsistencies if not contradictions in the text; but sometimes both took phrases out of context even interpreting them in conflict with the simpler meaning, in order to be in consonance with what the rabbis saw at the teleology of Scripture.

Allow me to briefly illustrate such moralistic rabbinic exposition with some examples.

Exodus 21:24 declares that in the realm of torts one should apply the principle of “an eye for an eye” etc. However, the rabbis noted that Numbers 35:31 contains the prohibition against allowing a murderer to avoid capital punishment through providing financial compensation for his heinous act. They thus concluded that for all other damages, it *is* possible to offer financial compensation. Accordingly, they read the text to mean “an eye’s **worth** for an eye’s damage”

Another example of a moral challenge posed by Scripture was the idea in the Decalogue of the Almighty “visiting the guilt of the fathers upon the children, upon the third and fourth generations (Exodus 20:5)”. However, aside from the moral problem in and of itself, a literal understanding of this phrase would appear to conflict (at the very least, in spirit) with the verse in Deuteronomy (24:16) that insists that “fathers shall not be put to death for the sins of children , nor children for the sins of fathers” etc. Accordingly, they read the word that follows the above phrase in the Decalogue “of those who hate me “, to mean that the sins were **only** visited upon the children if they continued the hateful actions of their fathers ; and even to mean that a righteous person who was brought up by an evildoing father is especially loved and cherished by God.

The sages faced the same problem regarding the Thirteen Divine Attributes referred to in Exodus 34: 6,7, which in addition to describing Divine compassion and forgiveness, also refer to Divine retribution with the words “and he shall surely not clear (the iniquitous) but visits the iniquity of the fathers upon children and children’s children, upon the third and fourth generation.” In addition, as the sages saw in the Thirteen Attributes the quintessential and obligatory Scriptural text to recite when seeking Divine forgiveness, it seemed to them inappropriate to refer to Divine retribution. Accordingly, they formulated the prayer so that it ends without the negative form of the phrase, thus reading “and he **shall** clear (the iniquitous.)” , and as mentioned above, also interpreted the “visitation” upon the children to mean to the advantage of one who had the misfortune to be brought up in an immoral environment . (However, it is puzzling that they did not simply read the same words with the meaning that they are given in Jeremiah 30:11 that God shall not utterly wipe out the sinner/s.)

An example of expounding the text morally in a manner not evidently intended by the text, is the comment on the passage that describes Jacob’s apparent deception of Isaac into giving him the blessing for the firstborn. When Esau discovers what has happened “he cried out a great and bitter cry” (Genesis 27:34). One of the sages declares that this cry received its resonance in Shushan (in Persia, when, as recorded in the Book of Esther, when Mordechai discovers Haman’s genocidal plans against the Jews, goes into the midst of the city,) “and he cried out a great and bitter cry” (Esther 4:1) .

This rabbinic comment uses the copy of the Hebrew phrase in the book of Esther to criticize Jacob’s actions, indicating that not only must ends be righteous, but means have to be moral as well. If they are not, it is suggested, a cycle of resentment is generated that reverberates down the generations.

In the same vein, when Jacob returns home from his years in Padan Aram and learns that his brother Esau is approaching him with an army, it is written “and he feared greatly and was distressed” (32:8).

As the second verb seems to be superfluous, the sages explain the meaning to be that “he feared greatly lest he be killed, and he was distressed lest he have to kill”.

By the beginning of the Middle Ages (6th–10th century), the scholars of Babylon and the Land of Israel known as Masoretes (from the Hebrew word *masorah* meaning a handed down tradition) had fixed in writing, by points and annotation, the traditional pronunciation and punctuation of the text. Inevitably to some extent this involved further interpretation of the Biblical text.

The rise of the Karaite sect (8th century) who rejected rabbinic tradition and appealed to Scripture alone, stimulated exegetical study generally. Leading the rabbinic polemical debate against the Karaites in the tenth century was Sa’adia Ga’on, head of the academy in Sura, Babylon. Among his prolific output was the first translation of the Pentateuch and other books of the Bible into Judaeo-Arabic. His approach to Scripture was guided by rational thought, and accordingly he insisted that the exposition of the text must contain nothing that is obscure or that contradicts logic. Saadia's rationalism, which became the standard for the following centuries of rabbinic commentary, accorded with his belief in the Divine origin of the Bible and accordingly also in Biblical miracles. But he portrayed these as only witnesses to the veracity of the Prophets and of Scripture. Furthermore, he sought to harmonize the anthropomorphic figures of speech employed in Scriptural passages referring to God and His actions, with philosophic speculation. Saadia’s approach became the pattern for later exegetes

The French Jewish biblical and Talmudic scholar Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki of Troyes, 1040–1105), the most popular of all Jewish commentators, similarly paid careful heed to the language of the text. But while he also involved midrash in his commentary, he rejected those midrashic traditions that he saw as inconsistent with the plain meaning of the text.

The exegesis of the great philosopher and codifier Maimonides (1135–1204) followed very much along the path of Saadia. Among his many works, his *Guide of the Perplexed* sought to help readers bewildered by apparent contradictions between the biblical text and the findings of reason. Like his younger contemporary Rabbi David Kimḥi, Maimonides classified some biblical narratives as visionary accounts.

One of the most popular exegetes who disseminated Jewish Biblical commentary to a wider audience was Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra. The vast majority of mediaeval Jewish commentary had taken place within the Muslim world and overwhelmingly written in Arabic. Leaving his native in Spain, for almost three decades (1140-67) Ibn Ezra lived in different cities of Italy, Provence, northern France, and England; in all these places, as he put it, "writing books and revealing the secrets of knowledge." The chief products of his multi-faceted activity are his exegetic works. His commentaries, although written faraway from Spain, are a particularly important product of the golden age of Spanish Judaism, not only on account of his own insights and exposition, but also because they include the opinions of many representatives of this period which are cited and disseminated.

Far removed from the rational exegesis of these scholars was the esoteric tradition known as Kabbalah, which expanded upon an earlier classic Jewish mysticism —involving reflection on Ezekiel's inaugural chariot vision— and included inter alia, the Neoplatonic doctrine of emanations and the use of the numerical values of Hebrew letters and words (*gematria*). The chief monument of kabbalistic exegesis is the 13th-century work the Zohar ("Book of Splendor") by Moses de Leon, which was written in the form of a midrashic commentary on the Pentateuch. In the Zohar, the *peshat* (literal meaning of the text) and *derash* (nonliteral exposition) are accompanied by *remez* ("allusion") including typology and allegory, and *sod* ("secret") an esoteric mystical sense. The acrostic of these four were arranged to render the word PaRDeS (i.e. Orchard or Paradise) in which the esoteric was seen as the highest form of knowledge leading through love to ecstasy and the beatific vision of the Divine.

Jews and Christians are of course uniquely united by a common Scripture, the Hebrew Bible. However paradoxically, precisely that which what unites us also divides us. On the one hand Marcion's effort to detach Christianity from its Hebrew Biblical roots was rejected. Nevertheless, the Jews were seen as veiled in blindness not having recognized the Christian dispensation; and thus, Christianity claimed to be the New Israel, the True Israel, as the Divinely blessed continuation and inheritor of the Hebrew Bible's promises. In addition to the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in light of the Christian experience and affirmation; this "teaching of contempt" towards the Jews (to use the phrase coined by Jules Isaac) led to the increasing separation between Church and Synagogue and ultimately the demonization of the latter and more often than not, a derision of rabbinic exegesis.

Notwithstanding , knowledge of both the philology and traditional interpretation of the Hebrew Biblical text was naturally of great importance for Christian scholars who often sought out Jewish scholars accordingly. Notable in this regard was Jerome who endeavored to establish the "Hebrew truth" in his Latin version of the Bible, on the basis of oral instruction he received from Jewish exegetes in the Land of Israel

During the medieval period with the flourishing of Jewish biblical exegesis in the varied Jewish Diaspora, there were extensive interactions with Christianity. This resulted in internal and external disputes, which also helped ensure Judaism's dynamic development as new horizons were opened for understanding specific biblical passages, theological themes, and exegetical methods.

Yet the common use of the Bible by Jews and Christians was not only unable to bring about any agreement, but rather sharpened the conflicts between them. Jewish scholars polemicized against Christian Christological and allegorical interpretations, and rejected their tendency to use biblical verses against the Jews. Similarly, though they applied Islamic interpretive methods to the Hebrew Bible, they also disputed with Muslims. Thus, in addition to self-defense against detractors of Judaism, many Jewish scholars boldly criticized key articles of Christian and Islamic belief, often in the face of extreme persecutions.

Nevertheless, as Professor Isaac Kalimi of Johannes Gutenberg-Universität in Mainz has noted, "as much as this history of fighting over the Bible contributed to disastrous conflicts and prejudices between different groups of Jews, Christians and Muslims; it also reflected ongoing engagement. Even at their most harsh, these conflicts forced each side to carefully consider their own theological and interpretive positions, improve their study methods, and return to the text again and again to search for new insights and better arguments. This back and forth prevented traditions from stagnating, and pushed them to continue developing".

These interactions had their ups and downs over the centuries, but the new era of Jewish-Christian reconciliation ushered in by the Second Vatican Council and the promulgation of the document *Nostra Aetate*, led to a very different approach, eschewing past polemics and exploring paths of enrichment.

Nostra Aetate section 4 uses the language of Paul (Romans 9:4,5) to affirm the ongoing validity of the Covenant between God and the Children of Israel, and refers to the Hebrew Bible as the shared great spiritual patrimony of Jews and Christians. It declares inter alia that “since the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is thus so great, this sacred synod wants to foster and recommend that mutual understanding and respect, which is the fruit above all of biblical and theological studies as well as of fraternal dialogues.”

In 1982 Pope John Paul II instructed delegates of Episcopal Conferences meeting in Rome to study relations between the Church and Judaism, stating that “Catholic teaching ...and catechesis must present Jews and Judaism not only in an honest and objective manner free from prejudice and without offenses , but also with full awareness of the heritage common” to Jews and Christians.

He continued that “awareness of the faith and the religious life of the Jewish people as they are professed and practiced still today can greatly help us to understand better certain aspects of the life of the Church.”

In 1985 the Holy See’s Commission for Religious Relations with Jewry published a document entitled *Notes on the correct way to present the Jews and Judaism in preaching and catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church* ,which inter alia affirms the importance of “Christians profiting from the tradition of the Jewish reading (of Scripture)” (section II:6), and concludes with the words ‘religious teaching, catechesis and preaching should be a preparation not only for objectivity justice and tolerance, but also for understanding and dialogue. Our two traditions are so related that they cannot ignore each other. Mutual knowledge must be encouraged at every level.”

In 2001, the Pontifical Biblical Commission published its study on *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* with an introduction by its then President, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. Notable is its affirmation that Christians must accept that “the Jewish reading of the Bible is a possible one, in continuity with the Jewish Scriptures of the Second Temple period, a reading analogous to the Christian reading, which developed in parallel fashion” ; and the document added that “Christians can learn a great deal from a Jewish exegesis practiced for more than 2000 years.”

In Pope Francis’ 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (249) he declares that “God continues to work among the people of the Old Covenant and to bring forth treasures of wisdom which flow from their encounter with his word.”

He adds that “there exists as well, a rich complementarity which allows us to read the texts of the Hebrew Scriptures together and to help one another to mine the riches of God’s word.”

In recent decades we have seen a flourishing of Jewish-Catholic studies and collaboration especially in the United States where the Jewish community as well as the Christian communities, are large enough and integrated enough into the wider society to facilitate serious and substantive interaction and productivity . There is a Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations which incorporates some thirty institutions laboring in this vineyard – the vast majority of them being institutes for Jewish-Christian studies emanating from Catholic communities and institutions in North America.

Probably we can only note three or four similar institutes in the rest of the world. This reflects the significant challenge for Christian communities in places where there are no Jewish communities or only weak ones, or where they are in politically inhospitable environments such as in most of the Arab world. Nevertheless, the new era of a positive Christian attitude towards Rabbinic exegesis in its various forms, offers Christians the possibility of understanding, discovering, interpreting, and being enriched by “our common patrimony” as never before. Indeed, this new era of collaboration offers great potential to all, Jews as well as Christians.

In the words of Martin Buber, the book that Christians and Jews share is “the place where we can dwell together; and together listen to the voice that speaks here. That means that we can work together to evoke the buried speech of that voice; together we can redeem the imprisoned living word” (*The two foci of the Jewish Soul*.)