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## Addresses

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# Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Responses to the Hebrew Bible\*

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The Hebrew Bible remains one of the most universally acknowledged cornerstones of Western civilization, a situation that is popularly understood to reflect its importance in both Judaism and Christianity, and, to a lesser extent, in Islam. In what follows I will attempt to examine some aspects of this seemingly unassailable fact, including some aspects of its significance to these three faiths.

Of course, the attempt to deal with such an emotionally charged text as the Hebrew Bible and such a potentially controversial issue as the reactions of three great monotheistic religions to it is fraught with scholarly, political, and theological difficulties. Not only must one generalize about broad attitudes from many specific situations, ultimately one can discuss only a tiny fraction of the available data. Thus, a few infelicitous choices or minor errors in emphasis may contribute to major misrepresentations. I ask my readers to please bear with me; while I may trouble a few of you all the time, and all of you some of the time, before we are finished I hope to have convinced everyone that the history of Bible interpretation—including the Jewish, Christian and Muslim contributions to it—is one of the most interesting subjects you will ever encounter.<sup>1</sup>

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## On the Bible as a Whole

The many events and themes from the Hebrew Bible that have been incorporated into the Qur'an and later Muslim literature affirm the importance of the Bible for Islam and require anyone interested in the history of Bible study to take into account Muslim reactions and interpretations. Muhammad's often cited designation of the Jews (and others) as *ahl 'al-kitab*, "the people of the book," reflected great respect for Jews and their scriptures, but also suggested some personal distance from those scriptures, which he understood to be theirs. Even so, the early Muslim need to confirm Muhammad's prophetic authority through proof-texts from the Hebrew Bible—and also from the New Testament—speaks for itself.

Christians, on the other hand, have incorporated a translated version of the Hebrew Bible into their own scriptures, which suggests a much higher level of commitment to it than one finds in Islam. Jews have sanctified the Hebrew Bible as their scriptures, preserved its original languages, and transmitted it in its most authentic form, suggesting even greater devotion to it and the right to claim it as their own.

But further reflection reveals a significantly more complex situation than these simple observations suggest. Perhaps one should argue—as many Jews would—that Christianity and Islam treat the Bible as a source of their own scriptures but not as the definitive one and therefore do not demonstrate the high level of theoretical commitment to its contents found in Judaism. Or one could claim, as some Christians do, that Judaism and Christianity are sister religions, largely Greco-Roman in origin, that both were constructed on an ancient Israelite base, and that both are strongly committed to the Hebrew Bible. According to this reasoning, the two should be grouped together, while Islam, which has incorporated into the Qur'an and into later treatments of ancient history some biblical materials but not the Bible text *per se*, remains essentially very different. Though the Qur'an has relied on the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament for some of its teachings, various passages indicate that Islam essentially believes its scripture to have superseded these earlier ones, which effectively rejects the Hebrew Bible or at least minimizes its importance.

But if the Qur'an's superseding the Hebrew Bible is the single criterion that suggests Islam cannot be strongly committed to it, the same argument might be applied to Christianity because, in the minds of most Christian thinkers, the New Testament has superseded

the Old. This suggests the propriety of grouping Christianity and Islam on one side and Judaism on the other, which would leave Judaism as the strongest and perhaps only consistent supporter of the Hebrew Bible—a position many Muslims and Christians, the latter perhaps hesitantly, would be forced to acknowledge.

Such a line of thinking applies to the totality of the Bible text, but not to all sections of it and not to all treatments of it. One who moves beyond consideration of the biblical canon as a whole and examines the realms of the Bible's interpretation and application, and the sometimes amorphous issue of its impact and influence, particularly the impact and influence of specific passages, finds in all three faiths numerous, highly diversified and richly textured responses that defy any simple description.

Furthermore, one may rightly ask if Judaism itself does not have a second canonical literature, the Babylonian Talmud, which controls the interpretation and application of the Bible and, as the sacred literatures of Christianity and Islam have done in their own ways, has essentially superseded it. A positive response to this question would suggest that, in regard to its responses to the Hebrew Bible, at least some of the time, Judaism actually differs little from Christianity, and perhaps it differs from Islam less than first appeared to be the case. If so, it would be quite reasonable to ask if any known religious group—or at least any mainstream Jewish or Christian group—really identifies strongly with the Hebrew Bible.

So, let me pose this seemingly impossible question, "Does anyone really identify strongly with the Hebrew Bible?" Islam is really not a consideration here, but we will return to it later. For now, let us begin with some Christian responses and then look at some Jewish ones.

One of Christianity's great, long-standing dilemma's is how to understand its continuity with and discontinuity from the Hebrew Bible. In the second century, Marcion (d. 160), whose teachings are available only from the reports of his detractors—far from an ideal way to be known—taught a highly negative and gnostic reading of the text. He reportedly claimed, among other things, that the God of the Old Testament was evil and not identical to any divine figure of the New Testament and that the law had to be separated strictly and consistently from the gospel. He also insisted the Hebrew Bible be expunged from Christian scripture. Marcion's position did not become standard church doctrine; in fact, he is generally regarded as a heretic, though probably not because of his thinking about the Old

Testament, which was repeated in slightly different form by respected writers in subsequent centuries.

This encounter contributed to the consensus that the Old Testament was to remain part of the canon, and so it was saved for Christianity, but its preferred manner of interpretation remained in question. In various passages, the New Testament exhibits many different strategies for reading the Old: literal, historical, homiletical, typological, allegorical, and midrashic, to name a few. Exegetically speaking, Marcion attempted to be a literalist, though reports of his ideas reflect a broader approach to interpretation than most of us would define that way. Even so, his teachings were rejected and denounced.

The accepted alternative method of reading relied on a complex and highly subjective interpretative strategy that understood the ancient Israelite writings as if they contained extensive, detailed allusions to notions that were articulated only later in the New Testament. In the process, the literal meaning of the Old Testament was largely supplanted by non-literal meanings derived from later Christian writings.

Methodologically speaking, this approach differed little from the midrashic reading of the rabbis. Midrash, as I understand it, is a corpus of teachings about the Bible that is attributed to the rabbis of the talmudic period—roughly 1st–6th centuries CE—and its goals included expounding, augmenting, applying, and glorifying the Bible according to definable rules of rabbinic hermeneutics. In being midrashic, the rabbis found or created a vast system of associations between their sacred teachings and the Bible text. Early Christian writers did likewise, but the theological contents of their teachings often differed radically from those of their rabbinic contemporaries.

The Hebrew Bible had been the sacred scripture of New Testament times, but its status was in flux. Ultimately, it was saved from Marcion and his ilk, but its fate as a second-class Christian literature was more or less sealed permanently by its having to bear the burden of being the “Old” Testament, understood to be the outdated covenant, the formerly important and now replaced one, contrasted with the New Testament, the correct one, the bearer of the Christian truth.

The designation of Hebrew Scripture as the Old Testament has fallen from favour in many scholarly circles, because it reflects this Christian bias. But “Old Testament” remains a legitimate label for Christians, should they wish to use it. (Some of my Christian colleagues have suggested that “Older Testament” or “First

Testament" might be preferable, but this designation seems not to have garnered much support, at least not yet.) Whether the Old Testament label allows or requires these books to be subjected to christological interpretation, I leave to those for whom this remains a consideration; suffice it to note the existence of significant disagreement on this point.

Whatever position was, is, or will be adopted, over the centuries this discussion contributed to the devaluation of much of the Hebrew Bible or to the focusing of its contents on those notions believed to be found in the New Testament. To be sure, the devaluation did not apply immediately or uniformly in early Christian times or later. It is often claimed that the legal requirements found in the books of the Pentateuch were largely dismissed, but that Genesis, the Ten Commandments, Psalms, Isaiah, and Daniel retained much of their appeal. This has been true throughout most of Christian history, from patristic times to at least Martin Luther's, probably to today. But discussions about the calendar and holidays, the Christian sabbath, usury, ethics, consanguinity, family life, and many other issues, even modern discussions of surrogate motherhood and homosexuality, constantly revisited the relevant Old Testament passages. How many thousands of sermons preached in the southern United States supported the divinely ordained right to enslave blacks through reference to the story of Noah and the curse of Canaan? The use of these ancient Israelite books to reinforce notions found in the New Testament is a fascinating interpretative process that permeates almost all Christian writing about them. Preaching, teaching, exegesis, and artistic reconstruction all conveyed the message, as the following examples demonstrate.

Chapter 15 of the book of Exodus describes how Moses sweetened the bitter waters of Marrah by casting a piece of wood into them. To many Christian readers, this wood recalled the cross. Indeed, most references to wood seem to have stimulated a like response, as did Noah's ark, Moses staff, various trees, and so forth. In some later presentations, the wood with which Moses treated the bitter water was assumed identical to that used to construct Jesus' cross.

Later Christianity continued this process. To choose another medium of interpretation, Merian's *Iconum Biblicarum*, published in Frankfurt, beginning in 1625, contains many interesting depictions of biblical narratives. The picture of Samson dismembering a lion with his bare hands is accompanied by the caption, "Precedent For the Death Struggle and Victory of Christ." That of Aaron dressed in his

priestly garb is labeled, "The Sacraments of Christ." That of Noah's ark reads, "Precedent for Baptism and God's Church in Poor Times." Many of the illustrations in this volume depict the literal meanings of the stories, and the fact that some of these events were understood as "precedents" of later times may soften the impact of Christian interpretation, but ultimately this presentation allows the stories neither to reflect their original contexts as ancient Israelite literature nor to be perceived without reliance on classical Christian typology.

One important response to this type of interpretation was provided by modern scholarship, which, in some forms, reinforced the text's literal meaning and the search for its correct historical contexts. Archaeology, comparative linguistics, and history have all contributed to a better understanding of the text, but some modern scholars merely superimposed a more sophisticated system of Christian attitudes on the Hebrew Bible and continued to divest it of its ancient Israelite values. There is good reason to argue, as Professor Jon Levenson of Harvard often has, that virtually the entire field known as Old Testament Theology is largely a front for a Christian reading of the Hebrew Bible. Of course, given its name, this should really cause no great surprise.

### On Scholarship

Despite ancient and medieval precursors to historical and philological Bible study, the modern historical-critical approach may have left some devout Christians feeling uneasy, because it effectively weakened much of the link between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, though the Old Testament's relative unimportance minimized much of the trauma. Modern scholarship did accomplish other things, though, like disassociating from the Bible many previously linked, post-biblical Jewish notions. Even so, one can only wonder about a system of research that zealously works to link to the Bible any available Sumerian or Akkadian document, in some cases originating 1500 or more years before the Bible text in question, but finds it difficult to consider similar connections with Jewish traditions of far closer chronological and geographic—not to mention cultural—proximity. How many Bible scholars are trained to use the code of Hammurabi as a tool for understanding biblical laws? How many, by contrast, are taught to use the Talmud?

Modern historical-criticism has been embraced by some Jews, particularly those who are less committed to rabbinic interpretation or who see no inherent difficulty in synthesizing both approaches,

and even by Muslims. Recent years have seen the appearance of a series of volumes on Jordanian history and archaeology published under the sponsorship of Jordan's King Hussein. Many of the chapters deal with what some would call "biblical archaeology" (a term that receives little use—and even less respect—from most archaeologists). While not openly polemical, the volumes offer many alternative positions to what other Western and Israeli scholars are writing. Most interesting, though, is the tone, which is totally different from most of the books generally read on this continent.

As with Christianity, one can point to important medieval Jewish anticipations of modern scholarly attitudes toward the text, and these have served as guides for some committed contemporary Jews, but the vast majority still takes no stock of biblical criticism. What the Bible says may be accepted, rejected, or ignored; except for the secularly well educated, most scholarly reconstructions are deemed of little value.

Ironically, at least from an historical-critical perspective, it would seem that, over much of the past two thousand years, the relative security of the Old Testament in the Christian Bible was directly proportional to the extent to which it was misunderstood. As long as it was seen to teach Christianity, its place was secure; as that position weakened, so did its claims to importance.

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), the brilliant nineteenth-century theologian, felt that Christianity's relationships to ancient paganism and to the teachings of the Hebrew Bible were quite similar, and that the latter would be best treated if published as an appendix to the New Testament. Luther had not gone quite that far, but he did suggest that the inappropriate message of the book of Esther required its removal from the Bible, because it judaized too much, as did Ezra and Nehemiah. Today, how many Christians regularly use a book entitled "New Testament and Psalms," which allows only the Psalter, a standard liturgical text, an honoured place next to the New Testament and ignores the rest of the Old Testament?

Some Christian theologians strongly criticized the teachings found in the Hebrew Bible, wished them to be disassociated from Christian doctrine, or deemed them insignificant. In Roman Catholic circles, Bible study was often reserved for the clergy. Some Protestant writers actually recommended dropping Old Testament study from the curricula of Christian theological schools, a position that, if adopted, would clearly demonstrate once and for all the impossibility of claiming that the Hebrew Bible was important to Christianity.

## The Bible in the Yeshiva

Before accepting this conclusion and surrendering the Hebrew Bible to the Jews, one must examine, as well, the place of this small, sacred library in the curricula of institutions that train rabbis and demonstrate that the opposite is true, namely that the Hebrew Bible plays a major role in the training of Jewish clergy, and that they use this education in the exercise of their rabbinic responsibilities; few things could be more difficult.

In fact, the Talmud and its own extensive interpretative literature traditionally were and remain the primary documents studied in yeshivot, Orthodox rabbinic training institutions. Even the halakhic codes, so essential to the proper conduct of Jewish religious life, were only minor curricular considerations in most pre-World War II European yeshivot, and despite increased interest since then, globally the Talmud remains the premier text. This is not true of non-Orthodox seminaries, where Bible study is allocated a far greater percentage of curricular time, but whatever the demographers tell us about the denominational affiliations of contemporary Jews, there is absolutely no doubt that the number of students being trained in Orthodox institutions renders their non-Orthodox counterparts numerically insignificant.

It may seem impossible, but Bible study is rarely a formal part of the curricula in such Orthodox institutions. A few noted exceptions do exist but, under most situations, the Bible in these schools for males is relegated to private study in leisure hours or to women; often when it is taught to men, it is not taught seriously. Most Orthodox rabbis never take a course in the Bible as a part of their formal rabbinic training, and the many preparatory years are often totally devoid of it, as well. In many cases, the biblical part of their formal education ends during elementary or secondary school; at the latest, upon the latter's completion. In most Orthodox Jewish contexts, Bible study is actually considered inappropriate for men and a recommended subject for children and for women. It should come as no surprise, then, that throughout the latter half of this century the most important Jewish Bible teacher in the world has been a woman and that some of the most serious and interesting contemporary Orthodox Bible study is done in schools for women.

Nehama Leibowitz, the charming and witty Jerusalemit sage who probably did more to further the teaching of the Bible among Jews than any other person in the last thousand years, once told me about an encounter with a group of South American yeshiva students who

came to study in Israel in order to become rabbis and to return home to serve their communities. Somewhere along the line, they were sent to learn her method of Bible study, but she marveled at the difference between their extensive knowledge of the Talmud and their total innocence of the non-pentateuchal parts of the Bible.

She asked them what they knew about King David. Relevant quotations from the daily prayers and the Talmud filled their responses, as did some midrashic information. Nehama deemed impossible but repeatedly affirmed their total ignorance of the existence of the biblical books of Samuel and Kings—not to mention Chronicles—which contain the primary sources about the life of this and so many other important biblical kings. Incidentally, one should not imagine that she had a great deal of time to correct these misunderstandings. Shortly after her first meeting with them, the students were forbidden to return, because she refused to teach them from behind a curtain.

Lest one conclude that these students' attitudes about the Bible are possible only among the rightist communities but not the centrist or Modern Orthodox, let me point out that, as an undergraduate student at Yeshiva University in the 1960's, I was unable to enroll as a Bible major. This did not result from a shortage of Bible courses; in fact, far more than the minimum number needed to create a major were available, and one cannot underestimate the significance of this simple fact when comparing the educational philosophies of Yeshiva University and other yeshivot. Students could not be Bible majors because, as a matter of policy, the institution denied that the Bible could be studied as an independent subject. One interested in such matters could declare a major in Jewish Studies or in Hebrew literature.

Moreover, during my entire rabbinic training in Yeshiva University's Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, I never once attended a single class on the Bible, much less a course devoted to it. I studied much Talmud, rabbinic codes, and some practical rabbinics—how to give a sermon, conduct a wedding or funeral, and the like. Despite the institution's being called a "Theological Seminary"—a title adopted, no doubt, in imitation of minimally analogous Christian institutions—in the many courses I took over a period of four years, I studied no theology, no philosophy, and most assuredly, no Bible.

Theoretically, Bible courses were offered in the graduate school of Jewish Studies, but registration there was not required, and most of the available courses were in related subjects, not Bible proper. One

could study Syriac, Aramaic Bible translations, Nahmanides's Torah commentary, biblical Aramaic, or the like. In the five years I attended classes in that school, only Psalms was taught and, as far as I recall, only once. Effectively, Bible was treated as an undergraduate subject, perceived to be part of one's religious education, not his academic experience. It was to be taught somewhat more critically in graduate school, but in reality it was not taught there at all.

Lest this seem exceptional, I should point out that, for many years, Bible courses at the Jewish Theological Seminary, the home of Conservative Judaism, were limited largely to Prophets and Hagiographa, because the critical principles of Bible scholarship could not be employed openly in the study of the Pentateuch; a similar limitation existed at Bar Ilan University in Israel, which is Orthodox.

What I have said does not apply to all non-Orthodox rabbinical seminaries, where Bible study has proceeded on an ongoing basis and produced quite different results. With all due respect to my Orthodox, Reform, Hasidic, and Reconstructionist colleagues, I think it self-evident that the only significant and ongoing group contribution to modern Bible study in North America that benefits from Jewish learning and contributes to the scientific study of the Bible is being made by scholars who are graduates or former affiliates of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. But almost all of the people I would include in this observation are in the twilight of their careers. It remains to be seen if a similar claim will be possible for the next generation of their colleagues.

### Back to the Theme

In any case, if one chooses to argue that the Hebrew Bible has been detached from Christianity because of the decision by some Christian seminaries to downplay it or even to reject its study, one must say the same for yeshivot and therefore for Orthodox Judaism. Yeshiva students may know the Hebrew language better than ministerial students (though that is far from a confirmed fact), and in all likelihood they are exposed to much more exacting studies of the details of biblical law than their Christian counterparts. But I am quite confident that, in most cases, the curricular priorities for the Hebrew Bible in Christian schools surpass in quantity those in most yeshivot, unless in both cases there is literally none.

Whatever Christians say or do with or about the Hebrew Bible, it is obvious that they prefer the New Testament, and the reason is

clear. But what is the source of this seemingly similar anti-Bible bias among Jews? While it is not impossible that it reflects some Christian influence, in all likelihood, it is an inherently Jewish notion held over from pre-Christian and early rabbinic times.

### The Mishnah and The World to Come

More than 2000 years ago, the Pentateuch was the premier religious text throughout the region at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. Many varied groups identified with it, and much ideological debate centred on the proper way to interpret and apply it. Among those who shared in this debate were the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes, the Samaritans, the early Christians, the gnostics, and various well known individuals like Philo (c.25 BCE–40 CE) and Josephus (c.38–c.100). The Mishnah, a rabbinic legal text written around 1800 years ago, contains two passages that together list eleven examples of people who have no share in the world to come. Whatever that world was perceived to be, people in the first list who were denied access to it included those who (1) desecrate sacred things; (2) violate the holidays; (3) seriously embarrass their friends; (4) void the covenant of Abraham by failing to perform circumcision or attempting, by surgical means, to reverse it; and (5) explain the Torah inappropriately. The Mishnah specifically mentions that this exclusion from the world to come will be enforced, even though the person is learned in Torah and conducts himself properly. In other words, this is not only a matter of education or practice but something more serious.

The second passage adds (6) those who deny the resurrection of the dead, or in some manuscripts, the belief that the resurrection of the dead is mentioned in the Torah; (7) those who deny that the Torah is from heaven; (8) an Apikorus or Epicurean, i.e., a heretic; (9) one who reads, probably for religious edification but all reading may be intended, “external books,” generally taken to mean those not canonized in the Bible; (10) one who recites Exodus 15:26 over a wound; (11) and one who pronounces the Tetragrammaton—the four letter name of God—as it is written rather than as it is traditionally pronounced, as a form of the Hebrew word for master, *adon*.

Except for the person who embarrasses his friend, which does not fit the pattern of the others and is absent from many manuscripts of the Mishnah and medieval commentaries on it, the ten other cases can be shown to reflect the debates about the Torah conducted in ancient times.

1. Failure to acknowledge the pentateuchal proof for resurrection is associated with the Sadducees.

2. Reading external books would have allowed works like Jubilees and the Temple Scroll to compete with the Torah as the authoritative Bible text. Jubilees, a fascinating retelling of the 70 or so chapters of narrative from the beginning of Genesis to the events at Sinai, claims to be the authentic revelation itself. In like manner, the Temple Scroll, a huge manuscript discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls, retells the subsequent laws. Often it does so by speaking as God, in the first person, thus claiming the authority of the Torah for its reformulations and interpretations. This seems to have been the kind of book whose reading was opposed.

3. The Mishnah's comments about circumcision are easily related to Paul's interpretative ingenuity that claimed, following other uses of the Hebrew term for foreskin, that laws of circumcision were to be taken metaphorically.

4. Many ancient disputes about the scheduling of various holidays, particularly Shavuot, were closely tied to sectarian debates about the proper way to interpret the Torah texts that determined the times of their observance; and so forth.

Each of these ten cases is about an issue of Torah transmission or interpretation, not just general doctrine or practice. Moreover, each is a documented sectarian issue that was of some moment in Greco-Roman times. In other words, these two texts demonstrate extensive awareness of the rabbis' competitors' or opponents' efforts to interpret the Torah, and they simultaneously deny access to the world to come to those who disagreed with the rabbis' interpretations. This excommunication is not based on behavior, as might be expected in a Jewish sectarian dispute, but on beliefs about the proper method and content of Torah interpretation and ultimately on the authority of the rabbis to interpret the text and to apply it.

One might assume that the issue here was the relative importance of the literal interpretation, which was supported by the rabbis, over a series of non-literal ones, accepted by their opponents. This seems not to be so. One well-worked talmudic passage suggests that anyone appointed to the Sanhedrin, the ancient supreme court, as it were, was required, as the text says, *le-taher sheretz min ha-torah*, to demonstrate, contrary to clear and unequivocal statements in the Torah, that physical contact with certain lower forms of animal life does not cause a state of ritual impurity. This hardly propounds or defends a system of literal interpretation.

In fact, the opposite may be true. While Jewish interests often relied upon and defended the literal meanings of verses, the Pharisees and early rabbis were great supporters of non-literal reading; and the gospels' criticisms of them as *hypokrites*, as famous as they are biting, may confirm this fact. Many New Testament comments that for centuries were understood to equate Pharisaism and insincerity, may actually relate to issues of Bible interpretation, and the correct meaning of the Greek word may differ radically from its traditional rendering. According to Mann and Albright, authors of the Anchor Bible on Matthew, *hypokrisis*, *hypokrites*, and the like actually refer to being hyper-critical, overly concerned with details, not hypocritical in the sense of insincere or two-faced. It therefore appears probable that, in at least some of the negative passages, the Pharisees were being accused of inappropriate Bible interpretation, a hyper-critical or hyper-literal type of reading.

What is hyper-literal reading? Deuteronomy speaks of a stubborn and rebellious son who refused to obey his father and his mother and ultimately was to be executed. The instructions require that the parents take hold of him, lead him to the elders at the city gate, declare him a drunkard and glutton, and that all then stone him.

The rabbis read this text very carefully. Deuteronomy describes the perpetrator as a *ben*, taken in its most restricted sense as "son," not "child," so they concluded the law did not apply to girls. Since the verse speaks of a minor, it does not apply to adults, but, in general, children remain outside the law, so only adolescents were deemed included, and only for a very brief time. The verse says that both parents must take hold of the son and make the declaration; if one parent is unavailable or refuses, the boy cannot be executed. The text requires that the parents lay hold of him, walk him to the gate, and make the declaration; if either has no hands, cannot walk, or cannot talk, the requirements cannot be fulfilled; and so on.

Reading the text this way effectively eliminates virtually every possible situation from consideration and leads to the talmudic observation that such a stubborn and rebellious son could never exist. Such an interpretative strategy was used by the rabbis quite frequently, in this case, in a very liberal-sounding way, because it effectively exonerates many boys whose family situations may have been abnormal and the source of negative influences. It is a position, if not a process, with which many moderns can identify. The opposition would take it and similar applications of this hyper-literal or hyper-critical method as wrongful distortion; a circumvention of the Bible text's spirit, if not its self-evident intention.

## The Rabbinic Emphasis on the Torah, to the Exclusion of the Prophets and Hagiographa

It is fairly easy to demonstrate that the Bible interpretations offered by subsequent generations of rabbis did not remain as closed and controlled as the mishnaic texts mentioned above might suggest, and that all creative interpreters were not excommunicated; but some were. I cannot digress to discuss this now, but the fact that the mishnaic concern centres exclusively around the Torah and ignores the rest of the Bible requires another look.

Whatever dating one accepts for the completion of the Torah, it is generally agreed that it was considered sacred scripture before most of the rest of the Bible. The Samaritans, who set out on a separate path before the completion of the Jewish Bible canon, reflect this situation; to this day, they recognize only the Torah as sacred scripture.

Many ideological and exegetical issues related to the Torah were clarified and developed before many other books achieved canonical status. One concrete result of this evolutionary process is that many later discussions, even those demonstratively later than the date of the Bible's final closure, prioritize the Torah over all other biblical texts. Philo's extensive allegorical interpretations of the Bible, to take one well documented example from the first century, are all but devoid of attention to the post-pentateuchal books. This attitude also permeates the Babylonian Talmud, whose compilation was completed some five centuries later.

The rabbis attributed the Torah's relative importance to the fact that Moses possessed a higher prophetic status than other prophets and to the Torah's being a more direct form of divine revelation. Despite attempts by some talmudic and medieval individuals to claim that the entire Bible and all subsequent rabbinic teachings were also revealed to Moses on Sinai, most would have agreed that a major difference existed among the books, and the emphasis on the Torah remained permanent. Though it constitutes the first of the three major units in the Jewish Bible, together with the Prophets and Hagiographa, in fact it contains only one-fourth of the Bible text. The prophetic corpus, traditionally subdivided into historical books and oracular ones, contains a full one-half of the Bible. The third section, the Hagiographa, a term usually assumed to be the equivalent of the Hebrew *kitvei ha-qodesh*, but mistranslated as "holy writings," when both it and the Greek should probably be understood as "writings of the sanctuary," is the final one-fourth.

When we examine statistically the extent of the Talmud's attention to the Bible, we find that approximately 60% of its Bible citations are from this one-quarter of the Bible called the Torah. Only 7% are from the historical prophets, while about 14% are from the oracular prophets. The final quarter of the Bible, the Hagiographa, receives about 19% percent of the attention, most of which is devoted to Psalms.

This situation correlates closely with the talmudic notion that the mandate of the biblical prophets was to teach, preach, and reinforce the contents of Moses' Torah. This may seem historically improbable but, according to the rabbis, the prophets were not empowered to make innovations. In many ways, the ancient rabbis clearly perceived their own rabbinic teachings to be more essential than those of the prophets.

These rabbis often spoke of two *torot* that were revealed to Moses on Sinai, a written one and an oral one. The latter, which subsequently was equated with the Talmud and its cognate texts and teachings, almost totally controlled the interpretation and application of the former. Surely it placed the prophetic texts in a secondary place, far below the Torah and the accompanying rabbinic teachings; indeed, it is quite regular for the Talmud to define the power and authority of the prophets quite like that of the rabbis themselves. That this three-quarters of the Bible is still largely ignored in rabbinic circles should not surprise us; neither should a system of rabbinic education that follows suit.

The greatest exception to all this is the Torah itself, which is studied in minute detail. It is read in sequence, publicly in synagogues, on a weekly basis and completed annually, though in ancient times a triennial reading cycle also was followed. In theory, Torah reading should be no less glorious an activity than the public recitation of the Qur'an, a truly serious, lofty, and highly respected exercise; reality suggests that most public readers and listeners have much to learn from their Muslim counterparts.

A second exception is encountered in most contemporary Jewish day schools, where great amounts of time and effort are devoted to studying the historical books of the prophets. A dear friend of mine has long argued that the emphasis on war and the questionable behavior of many of the heroes makes these books far more troubling and far less essential than most curriculum planners think. Perhaps we see here some sort of Zionist influence, designed to exploit Bible texts for the study of the Hebrew language and to highlight the time when the land of Israel was ruled by the biblical kings. European

monarchies often used accounts of biblical kings for their own political purposes, but it is unlikely that such practices had any impact on contemporary Jewish attention to these books. Whatever the reason, this remains a radical departure from ancient patterns of study.

Some 60 additional chapters of the Prophets are also read publicly, one each Sabbath and holiday. Jonah and the five scrolls—Song of Songs, Esther, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, and Ruth—are read on various holidays, and many Psalms have found their way into the liturgy. These readings have kept these dozen or so books in the public eye, but the vast majority of the chapters of the prophets, as well as Job, Proverbs, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles, serve no clearly defined liturgical function and are all but unknown to most synagogue goers.

The weekly Torah reading in synagogues forms the starting point for many a Sabbath sermon, but mostly it is treated as a source for timely proof-texts supporting pre-determined homiletical notions, rather than as a subject for extensive independent study and consideration. To this day, the Torah reigns supreme, so much so that all study of religious texts and issues is often called “Torah study.” The Torah text itself is studied and taught, but not in most yeshivot. It is revered; it is deemed to contain all wisdom, encoded somehow in its approximately 300,000 letters. This reflects a long-standing rabbinic tradition, but an equally long one relegates it to a status that is secondary to the Talmud, especially when the Tanakh—Torah, Prophets, and Hagiographa—is treated as one unit.

The Talmud teaches that one-third of one’s study time should be devoted to the Bible. Despite the obvious fact that ancient rabbis had committed much or all of the Bible to memory, it also strongly disparages Bible study in favour of Talmud study. Over the centuries, the rabbinic responses to this contradiction frequently favoured the second position or offered a series of compromises. Those who strongly supported the first position were largely Sephardi Jews, joined by a small minority of Ashkenazi ones. In fact, the first position was honoured mostly in the breach.

### Statistics on the Christian Treatment of the Bible

What appears from a similar statistical analysis of the early Christian literature? In the early patristic literature—that composed through the third century—the Torah remains the single largest focus of attention, but at about 43% of the total it is significantly lower than

the Babylonian Talmud's 60%. Including the Christian literature of the next several centuries lowers the number to 36%. Christian treatment of the historical prophets remains remarkably consistent at the 7% level seen in the Babylonian Talmud. Initially, the oracular prophets and the Hagiographa were about equal, the former at 24% and the latter 26%, but as time marched on, attention to the Hagiographa continually increased, to where some writers devoted over half their attention to it, giving it an overall average of 36%, equal to the treatment of the Torah.

Some of the shift seen in this Christian literature derives from a reduced interest in legal matters and increased attention to Isaiah and Psalms, but even in the Talmud these two books stand out as receiving far more than average amounts of treatment, which suggests other possible explanations for the distribution. Whatever the message being read into or out of these texts, and aside from what must be described as consistent Jewish and Christian disinterest in the historical prophets, the patristic literature and not the Babylonian Talmud demonstrates the more balanced interest in all parts of the Hebrew Bible. The rabbinic position reflects much greater theoretical commitment to the Torah and a much slower evolution from earlier times, in which the Torah was the sole or almost the sole canonical document.

Expanding the survey provides similar results in other contexts and perhaps suggests the existence of a pre-Christian canon within a canon, surely the existence of a consistent list of scriptural favourites. Philo's first century writings on the Bible are almost completely devoted to the Torah, but Isaiah and Psalms stand out as the most popular of the virtually uncited Prophetic and Hagiographic texts. If we move from Philo's Greek writings produced in Egypt to the Hebrew Dead Sea Scrolls, produced presumably in Israel, a remarkably similar situation emerges. Of about 190 Hebrew Bible manuscripts discovered, 76 (40%) are of part of the Torah; 8 (4%) are of the Former Prophets; at least 40 (21%) are of the oracular prophets, of which more than half are of Isaiah; and 63 (33%) are of the Hagiographa, of which more than half are of Psalms. The New Testament actually refers to the Hebrew Bible as "the Law of Moses, Prophets, and Psalms," which may once have been a more accurate reflection of reality than many people are inclined to think, especially if "Prophets" means "Isaiah et al."

In pre-Christian times, the Middle East witnessed almost universal interest in the Torah and far less in what we now call the rest of the Hebrew Bible. Rabbinic Jews continue that tradition to

today; Christians followed suit but gradually reduced their emphasis on the Torah and offered all parts of the Bible, except for the historical prophets, a more balanced share of attention, and they ultimately shifted their attention and devotion to the New Testament. The reasons for this are closely related to the dynamics of interpretation, the second part of my presentation, to which I now turn.

### On Interpretation

For those interested in issues of interpretation, Psalm 62:12 (61:11 in many Christian Bibles) may be one of the most important verses in what is universally agreed to be one of the Bible's most inspiring books. In Hebrew, this passage reads: *'ahat dibber 'elohim, shetayim zu shama`ti, ki `oz le-lohim.*

Some doubt exists about the precise wording of this brief passage. The divine name used in the first clause sometimes is cited as the Tetragrammaton, not *'elohim*, and scholars often assume this to be the original form. As well, *shama`ti*, "I heard," sometimes appears in texts or citations as the plural form, *shama`nu*, "we heard." However important for the theoretical accuracy of the Bible text, these details will not detain us now.

More noteworthy is the fact that this passage follows a well-known rule of Hebrew prosody that, like the poetry of Ugaritic—that ancient pre-Mosaic, Canaanite language so close to biblical Hebrew—regularly uses subsequent single digits in synonymous parallelism. For numbers under ten, this rule has been expressed as the formula "x is parallel to x + 1." Thus, under normal circumstances, 4 is parallel to 5; 7, to 8. Therefore 1 should be parallel to 2, as it is in our verse. This formulaic use of 1 and 2 offers nothing exceptional; 2 almost had to appear parallel to 1, but how it was used in context remained the particular contribution of the psalmist, and it is to this aspect of the verse that we must turn.

The Septuagint, a pre-Christian, Jewish, Greek translation, renders the Hebrew word *'ahat* as *hapax*, "one time," which suggested a problem to some ancient interpreters who relied on it rather than on the Hebrew. Thus, probably in the early fourth century, Augustine listed a long series of places in which Scripture reported God's speaking, and he therefore questioned the unique occasion that seemed to be referred to here.

Jewish interpreters, on the other hand, often understood *'ahat* as "one thing," not "one time," and took the verse to mean something

like "The Lord said one thing; I heard two." Some readers took the following line and the subsequent verse to be the two things learned, namely that God is powerful and will reward people according to their deeds, but for now, let us focus on the first part: "The Lord said one thing; I heard two."

The context to which this verse should be applied remains unclear. Some readers saw it as a general statement about God's activities and responses to human behavior; many classical Jewish interpreters took it as a description of the revelation at Sinai. Some used the verse to highlight the polyvalent nature of biblical Hebrew, the extent to which any statement could carry more than one meaning. Let us examine two brief examples.

1) The word *'etz* means "tree" or "wood." Deuteronomy 19:5 speaks of a man who went into a forest to chop wood. The iron ax-head flew off the *'etz* and killed an innocent bystander. The context is concerned only with the punishment for involuntary manslaughter, but what actually happened? Did the ax-head slip off the *'etz* of the handle or off the *'etz* being chopped? Or, as several ingenious medieval rabbis suggested, did the ax cause a splinter to fly off the wood and kill the innocent bystander? We cannot tell; the text is hopelessly ambiguous.

2) When Joseph received his brothers in Egypt, he accused them of being spies and incarcerated them for three days. He then set them free, saying *'et ha'-elohim 'ani yare'*, "I fear *'elohim*." As we saw above, the word *'elohim* can mean God, but it also can denote gods. When Joseph said he feared *ha'-elohim*, was he identifying himself as a co-religionist; was he suggesting that he really believed in the Egyptian deities; or was he deliberately misleading his brothers into thinking he worshipped them? Or did he mean merely that he was a fair individual by the standards of any deity? Again, the text is ambiguous; several mutually exclusive interpretations are possible; ultimately we cannot be certain which meaning was intended.

These two passages contain lexical ambiguities, but, as with other languages, Hebrew ambiguities can also be grammatical, syntactic, or contextual. The Bible is full of such ambiguities; in fact one can identify at least two meanings—sometimes far more—for each grammatical form and phrase in which many of the approximately 305,000 words in the Hebrew Bible are inflected (the number varies depending on who is counting and which text is used). Moreover, simple shifts in emphasis create untold numbers of possible interpretations. By stressing, in turn, each word in the simple sentence, "I am going to the store," one can create at least six

different meanings. Substitution of a question mark for the period at the end of the sentence will double the number. Applying these observations and interpretative strategies to the Bible creates a staggering number of ambiguities or possible interpretations, but one additional factor increases it even further.

Ancient Hebrew contained few if any vowel indicators. The Hebrew letter combination Resh-Daleth can mean only one thing, the masculine singular imperative form of the verb “descend.” Were English written the same way, these two letters could stand for “erode, read, red, raid, radio, ride, rode, rodeo, rid, arid” and the like. Even though the level of confusion in Hebrew, which was intended to be comprehensible without vowels, is far less than would appear in this unvoweled English example, absence of Hebrew vowel indicators substantially increases the number of potential ambiguities in every text.

It is very possible that the introduction of vowel signs into the text over 1200 years ago had as one major goal the elimination of confusion over the interpretation of the text and the substantial reduction in the number of its possible meanings but, as anyone familiar with the earlier and later treatments of the Bible text will readily admit, those interested in multiplying the possible number of interpretations overcame any obstacle posed by the vowel signs. Mystical Jewish teachings popularized in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries placed the theoretical number of interpretations of every text at 600 000, one for each male over the age of twenty counted in the census of Israelites who left Egypt. Some estimates went even higher, claiming this number for each of the four accepted methods of interpretation popularized in medieval times—literal, midrashic, philosophical-allegoric, and kabbalistic—thus claiming a theoretical minimum of 2.4 million interpretations for each word.

The medieval Karaites conducted their weekly synagogue readings from codices, book shaped manuscripts that contained fully voweled Torah texts, not from the unvocalized scrolls still used in most synagogues. The rabbis forcefully rejected their practice, sometimes arguing that the voweled text was too limited in meaning. Without vowels, more possible interpretations of the Bible could be sustained. Broadening the range of interpretation was seen as a highly praiseworthy activity.

## The Impact of Culture on Interpretation

A look at how Judaism, Christian, and Islam responded to the contents of the Bible suggests the existence of an almost infinite number of interpretations, but further reflection recognizes that the number is, to some extent, limited by three things: the potential of the text to be read in different ways, the creativity of the interpreter, and the number of cultural and intellectual climates in which the interpretations were produced. One cannot minimize the significance of any of the three, but the last is extremely important and often overlooked.

Thus, to borrow an example from the realm of art history, the portraits and sculptures of Jesus produced in Italy, Scandinavia, Japan, India, and Africa bear more than a little resemblance to the people who lived in Italy, Scandinavia, Japan, India, and Africa during the lives of the painters or sculptors. Each race or national group recreated Jesus in its own racial and cultural image and usually dressed him in their clothes, placed their thoughts into his head, and imagined that the issues of his life strongly resembled their own. This phenomenon is not limited to artists, to Christians, or to the treatment of Jesus. To some extent—sometimes to a very great extent—every reconstruction of every historical event suffers from such cultural projection; no reconstruction of a biblical event can claim to be fully accurate or free of this type of error.

## Predictive Prophetic Interpretation

The virtually infinite numbers of interpretations some rabbis attributed to the Bible text include many about the future. On occasion, they found in the Torah's narratives allusions to Samson, David, Esther and later Jewish national history. They understood the cryptic predictions in Daniel as indications of the precise date the messiah would arrive, and they read the symbolic descriptions in that and other books as detailed forecasts of the future. These readings reflected the unfolding of the international history to which the Jewish world was witness, and they incorporated details of all its periods, ancient, medieval, and modern. In this way, Bible texts were taken as references to the rise of Rome, to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by Titus in 70 CE, to the re-establishment of the Jewish state in modern Israel and, most curiously, to the rise of Christianity and of Islam.

This same interpretative process was exploited by seventeenth-century messianists to support their belief in the mission of Shabbetai Tzvi. In 1967, it allowed the popularization of a biblical description of God as a smasher of boulders, because the Hebrew word for boulders, *selā`im*, is composed of the first letters of the Hebrew names of Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, and Egypt. It is how, during the gulf war of 1991 and scud attacks on Tel Aviv, Bratzlover Hasidim justified equating Saddam Hussein with Haman, the villain of the book of Esther, set in Persia and read on the holiday of Purim, which was observed that year right after the end of the war. Even fore-knowledge of Yitzhak Rabin's assassination was supposedly confirmed by the posthumous discovery of an encoded message in the Torah reading of that week. This process continues and shows no signs of abating. In fact, more than a few sermons I have heard over the years have managed to find Saturday morning's headlines in the Torah portion read in the synagogue that day. I think it far from an exaggeration to suggest that one measure of a preacher's success is the ability to make such timely associations seem authentic and natural.

Some chuckle at such interpretations and see them as pious play, but the suggestion that all of human history was already foretold in biblical texts—a process whose unpacking was given the impressive label of “predictive prophetic interpretation” by Professor Harry Wolfson—may give strength and reassurance to pious readers. Of course the implications of such procedures for discussions of pre-determination, free will, theodicy, and the like are quite far-reaching, but these issues seem to trouble followers of such interpretations far less than might seem necessary to the more philosophically inclined.

### Jewish Acknowledgment of Christian Interpretation?

If Jewish interpreters believed that the rise of Christianity was somehow foretold in the Bible, and if they also believed that the Bible contains a virtually infinite number of interpretations, did they also grant some degree of legitimacy to christological interpretation? Several passages in early rabbinic literature acknowledge that the Bible was made accessible to non-Jews. In them, God is described as revealing the written Bible to everyone but keeping the oral traditions for Moses and his followers. He, in turn, passed them down from one generation of Jews to another in order to ensure their accuracy and to keep them in the family, as it were. These teachings

suggest that the masters of the oral tradition possessed God's intended meaning of the text, while the rest of the world was given only the expressed meaning. Left to their own devices, they produced a wonder of interpretative richness, which often was the subject of intense polemics.

1. Abraham and His Visitors. Genesis 18 begins by stating that God appeared to Abraham, who was sitting at the opening of his tent. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. The story then describes Abraham's reactions to them and various conversations that took place prior to their leaving, recorded at the end of the chapter. Many of the words in the chapter refer to God and/or the visitors with singular or plural adjectives—an impossibility in modern English—which makes the Hebrew somewhat less ambiguous than most English translations, but one interesting problem remains, and that is the relationship between God and the three visitors.

Did Abraham receive God, and then, as some early rabbis understood the passage, leave in order to greet his three other guests? This suggests to us the presence of four distinct visitors in the story. Or was God represented in the story by the three? This would limit the maximum number of guests to three and also suggest that at no time both God and the three were present. To some extent, the solution depends on the identity of the individual Abraham addressed with singular verbs and pronouns, and some interpreters have suggested that one of the three, possibly the leader, was intended.

However one understands the details in both this and the subsequent chapter, a close relationship between God and the three cannot be dismissed. Early Christians often assumed that verse 1 spoke of God and verse 2 of Jesus and two angels, but others, particularly later, found here a substantial support for their trinitarian teachings. Some Jewish writers also equated God and the three guests, and one can well imagine that many who did not explain it in this way chose to interpret the text as they did in order to avoid offering support to the well known Christian position. Some writers were less subtle. The author of *Sefer Nitzahon Vetus*, for example, a strongly polemical medieval treatise whose goal was to refute a lengthy series of christological readings of the Hebrew Bible, left no doubt about the rationale behind his interpretation.

2. The *Shema`*. Rabbinic practice has established three paragraphs from Numbers and Deuteronomy as a quintessential daily prayer. More a declaration of beliefs than a request or an expression of thanksgiving, this prayer is known by its first word as the *Shema`*.

In its first and most important line, it stresses the unity of God: *Shema` Yisra'el, Adonai Elohenu Adonai 'ehad*. Nothing could be clearer to Jews than this emphasis on unity. Some Christians are quick to point out that this verse, which stresses God's unity, uses three names and thus supports trinitarian assumptions! Such a reading violates the syntax, one name is repeated, and, in fact, the subsequent verse uses only two names, but such is the nature of the search for scriptural supports of pre-established beliefs.

3. Jacob's Blessing. Before Jacob died, he blessed Joseph's two sons in a special ceremony and, believing that the blessings for Joseph's younger and older sons should be reversed, he crossed his hands from one child's head to the other's, thereby redirecting his blessings. Some understood this as a perfectly natural act that tended to suggest only a transfer of the primary blessing from one son to the other; others took this crossing of the hands as suggesting Jesus' cross and placed a prominent cross in their illustrations of Jacob's arms and in their interpretations.

4. Moses' Raised Hands. Shortly after the exodus from Egypt, the Israelites were attacked by the relatively unknown Amaleqites, and Moses reportedly led the battle against them by holding his hands aloft, presumably in a position of prayer. As long as his hands were high, the Israelites were victorious; as he tired and lowered them, the tide of the battle turned. In response, two of his assistants held his arms up, and the Bible reports that this ensured the Israelite victory.

Once again, Christian interpreters—Justin Martyr in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, for example—easily discovered the cross, formed by the standing Moses with arms outstretched to the sides, but in this case the Jewish response was somewhat different. The Mishnah and the Mekhilta, both composed around the third century, asked whether the raising and lowering of Moses' arms could really affect the course of the battle. Of course not, they opined; it was really only the fact that Moses stood on a hill and that by looking up at him the Israelites were also looking up at heaven, thus praying to God, who answered their prayers by ensuring their victory. Though one cannot be sure, this rabbinic interpretation may actually be a response to the Christian one, for it tried to avoid giving attention to the possible cross-like shape of Moses' arms by totally altering the scene and denying that the position of Moses' hands was of any significance.

5. The Sale of Joseph. The story of Joseph provides many opportunities to test reactions to the sale of Joseph by his brothers. The *Genesis* narrative manages to downplay some of the horror inherent in the sale through the ongoing reports of Joseph's successes

in Egypt, through constant references to the guilt suffered by the brothers, and finally through Joseph's own pronouncement that all this was in keeping with the divine will. As with other seemingly improper events in Genesis—two patriarchs' allowing their wives to be taken into a foreign harem a total of three times and Judah's dalliance with Tamar along the road come to mind—the otherwise indefensible sale of Joseph has been rationalized after the fact, because it produced positive results.

But some later readers of this passage were far less inclined to such leniency. The second century saw many Jewish leaders martyred during the Hadrianic persecutions and, as the number was perceived to reach ten, one pious rationalization for it was found in the unpunished crime of Joseph's ten brothers. Thus later it was taught that ten martyrs were executed by the Roman authorities to compensate for the capital offense of which Joseph's ten brothers were guilty—kidnapping and selling him. The martyrdoms were real, but not in any sense related to the biblical account, and surely not conducted because of it. The martyrologies that played on this association reflected a Jewish reading of the event, not a Roman one.

Jewish law would never permit the execution of later descendants for the crime of an ancestor, even if Jewish folklore would attribute such thinking to the Romans. The Torah—in contrast to the Code of Hammurabi, which did allow for this alternative legal procedure—stated specifically that neither a parent nor a child could be executed for the sins of the other. This principle was put to good use in the book of Kings, where it was cited as the basis of the treatment afforded the children of a group of rebels against the King—they were executed, not their children—but rabbinic interpretation limited application of this verse to the conduct of a human court. According to the Talmud, this verse bans acceptance of testimony of relatives, as if it said “Parents should not be killed through the testimony of their children...” God, on the other hand, was assumed to have the right to consider both positive and negative acts of earlier generations in the judgments of later ones, claimed in no less prominent a place than the Ten Commandments.

In Christianity, the sale of Joseph was often taken as pre-figuring of the betrayal of Jesus by Judas. And what of the Muslim reaction? The Qur'an gives much attention to Joseph, which ensured his popularity in later Islam, but one element in the story often overlooked by those who accept the leniency inherent in Joseph's claim that it all happened for the best has been captured by Muslim readers, who are able to see the story from another perspective.

Genesis 37 describes the sale of Joseph somewhat imprecisely; in different verses he is sold by the Midianites, the Ishmaelites, and the Medanites (whom some have equated with the Midianites and others, supported by genealogies in Genesis, have identified as a distinct group). A clever syntactic ambiguity allowed the text to avoid actually listing the brothers as Joseph's sellers, but regardless of the confusion and its resolution—some suggest these terms are used interchangeably and others that Joseph was sold many times—it is the Ishmaelites or one of these other groups of non-Jewish Semites, antecedents of the later Arabs, some would say, who recognized Joseph, took charge of him, and actually saved him from his brothers and the evil fate they had devised for him. Indeed, Mirkhwand's sixteenth-century *Garden of Purity* has depicted a highly honoured Joseph sitting in a tent surrounded by the respectful Arab listeners who purchased him. They appreciated his value and honoured him accordingly, thus reflecting the appropriate response to the plight and value of this sacred individual.

Despite the fact that the dynamics that produced christological interpretations differ very little from the strategies of rabbinic midrash, it is highly unlikely that the ancient rabbis somehow intended to legitimate the christological interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, even if they did acknowledge that God gave Christians full access to the text and that the rise of Christianity was somehow foreshadowed in their scriptures. This is not to say that Jewish interpreters ignored all Bible interpretation done by non-Jews. Nor does it in any sense suggest that non-Jews remained disinterested in or unmoved by Jewish interpretative efforts.

### Examples

1. **Isaac was Sacrificed and Restored.** Contrary to the biblical version, some medieval Jewish presentations of this event describe the sacrifice of Isaac as a *fait accompli*. To be sure, he was brought back to life afterwards, but I can imagine no clearer example of the influence of a New Testament story on the Jewish interpretation of a passage from the Hebrew Bible.

2. **Katherine of Cleves's Book of Hours.** In the mid-fifteenth century, Katherine of Cleves, like many other wealthy Christians, prayed from an exquisite book of hours. The small volume, long divided into two separate parts but now reconstructed and reproduced for popular examination, contains several hundred beautiful miniatures depicting scenes from the entire range of

Christian scripture and liturgy. While the choice of illuminations in these volumes was, to some extent, governed by artistic convention, no such tradition seems to have influenced one particular illustration. The picture purports to represent the Israelites eating the Paschal meal before ending two centuries of enslavement in Egypt. It depicts four men in differing garb standing around a small round table holding or eating or foods mentioned in Exodus 12, the Bible text that describes the event.

Some artistic details ring true to the text it purports to present, such as the presence of a small animal—the paschal offering—and the loaves of bread, obviously intended to be unleavened, which appear similar to Eucharist wafers in other illuminations. The character on the right has staff and belt, again representing the text quite accurately. In short, the picture offers a reasonable (if typically anachronistic) reconstruction of Exodus 12.

Even so, it is difficult to explain the presence of only four characters at this pre-exodus meal, why they appear so different in dress and demeanor, and why they are all male. It seems that this Christian presentation of the pre-exodus meal has been influenced by a Jewish artistic tradition associated not with the Bible but with a passage from the Passover Haggadah. Based on various 1800-year old rabbinic discussions of several pentateuchal passages, the Haggadah describes four *banim*, which, despite some modern egalitarian interpretations, meant “sons” to two millennia of readers.

Manuscripts and printed editions of Haggadot contain many varying depictions of these sons, but always there are four, though some early midrashim actually identify fewer. Their dress and their facial expressions often reinforce the individual status of each as wise, wicked, simple, and unable to ask a question. To be sure, some details in Katherine’s Book of Hours do not sustain this interpretation, and others are ambiguous, but centuries of illuminated Haggadot depict these four sons as four different male figures, usually around a table.

I believe that an artistic tradition of the four sons has been conflated with another or with an original attempt to portray the pre-exodus meal described in the Bible, and thus Jewish representations of the Passover Seder have come to have an impact on the artistic interpretation of Exodus 12 that we now find in Katherine of Cleves’s Book of Hours.

3. Christian Influence on the Development of the Rabbinic Bibles. An interesting example of Christian influence on Jewish Bible study is evident in the publishing phenomenon known in English as

Rabbinic Bibles and in Hebrew as *Miqra'ot Gedolot*. These two terms are far from synonymous, but are used interchangeably, often in a very confusing manner. Rabbinic Bible should refer to any complete Hebrew Bible printed with rabbinic commentaries. *Miqra'ot Gedolot* actually evolved from the grammatically inconsistent Hebrew term, *Miqra' Gedolah*, which is the literal translation—even to the use of the feminine form—of the Latin, *Magna Biblia*. It referred to large, folio editions of the Bible. The early Rabbinic Bibles also qualified as *Miqra'ot Gedolot*, but all *Miqra'ot Gedolot* are not Rabbinic Bibles.

The size of the later Rabbinic Bibles has been reduced so substantially in all editions published since the latter part of the nineteenth century that *gedolot magna* is no longer an appropriate designation, but anyone who opens one of these tomes will immediately recognize their Hebrew content and their rabbinic focus, and will therefore assume their Jewish character. Indeed, many generations of rabbis and Jewish students of the Bible have been trained to consult these works and the commentaries they contain in order to understand scripture according to the most prominent Jewish interpreters.

Assumptions about the Jewish qualities of these volumes are correct when applied to the texts, but every aspect of their character was not exclusively Jewish. Despite the role played by Jews in the writing of the commentaries included in these volumes and, in some cases, in their preparation for publication, like most other books printed in sixteenth-century Italy, all early Rabbinic Bibles were published by Christians. Some copies of the first Rabbinic Bible, published in 1517, contain a Latin dedication to Pope Leo X.

More to the point is the Christian impact on the editing of commentaries, which saw the removal of passages deemed ideologically insensitive to Christian beliefs, and it seems that, in some cases, even the choice of entire commentaries for inclusion or exclusion may have been more responsive to Christian than to Jewish interests. We are probably closer to the truth when we understand the substitution of Abraham Ibn Ezra's Psalms commentary in the 1524 edition for David Kimhi's, which had appeared in the 1517 one, as a response to the latter's forceful rejection of christological interpretations of certain passages in Psalms, not to a preference for Ibn Ezra's style of exegesis.

Reformation interests in the *Hebraica Veritas* and in philologically sound rabbinic interpretation of it, not only in the business generated by Jewish purchasers of such volumes, encouraged the publication of Rabbinic Bibles under Christian auspices. Daniel Bomberg, a

Christian despite his Jewish-sounding name, invested a huge fortune in the rights to publish such works and in their production.

### More Examples of Jewish and Non-Jewish Sharing

This example may surprise some users of these books, but Christian interest in Jewish thinking about the Bible and Jewish interest in Christian thinking about it are far from limited to this single if extensive phenomenon.

1. Philo, the first-century Alexandrian allegorist and author of extensive Greek writings on the laws and narratives in the Torah, was adopted by some Christian writers as an honorary church father. Even many Christian writers who knew of his Jewish origins relied on his interpretations, in some cases, precisely because he was Jewish. Indeed, it is to Christian interest that we owe the preservation of most Hellenistic Jewish works of Bible interpretation: Philo and Josephus, as well as almost all of what we know of the apocryphal and pseudepigraphical literatures.

2. Rashi (1040–1104) was the best known and most influential early European rabbinic Bible commentator, and his impact on later Christian interpreters is well known; his contribution to the interpretative efforts of Nicholaus De Lyra is almost legendary. But earlier efforts bespeak long-standing Christian interest in Rashi. *Secundo Solomonem* is the title of a recently published scholarly edition of a medieval Latin work on Song of Songs that is derived in large measure from Rashi's interpretation of that book.

3. Hai Gaon, eleventh-century leader of Babylonian and world Jewry, when unable to explain the meaning of a word in the Bible, sent one of his students to consult the local catholicos. When one student refused to go, the rabbi responded that such consultation on philological matters was normal and routine. In like fashion, virtually every early Jewish commentator on the Bible who lived in the Arabic-speaking world used the Arabic language and literature—often including Qur'an and Hadith—to help explain Hebrew words or constructions.

4. In the introduction to his Torah commentary, Nahmanides (1194–1270) cited the Aramaic book entitled *Hokhmeta De-Shelomo*, The Wisdom of Solomon. Since this is one of very few medieval Jewish references to an Aramaic version of this apocryphal composition, it is usually assumed that Nahmanides read a Syriac copy of the book.

5. Isaac Abarbanel (1420–94), a leader of the Jewish community in Spain during the expulsion of 1492, often used the works of his Christian predecessors. His many references to the Vulgate have been discussed for years, but recent research has demonstrated very close use of the writings of the Christian theologian, Alfonso Tostado.

6. Medieval Jewish thought often used a four-part interpretive scheme known through as PaRDeS, standing for four literatures of interpretation: *Peshat*, the philological; *Remez*, philosophical allegory; *Derash*, the rabbinic-midrashic; and *Sod*, the mystical. Despite its Jewish content, many historians have seen in it a reflection of the many similar Christian schemes of interpretation that identify from three to seven literal, historical, spiritual, allegorical, and anagogical approaches to the text.

### Muslim Reactions to the Hebrew Bible

And what of Muslim reaction to Bible texts? Comparisons between the world of the Bible and that of the Arabian desert are at least as old as the Talmud, and they became quite important four centuries ago, when scholars decided that much could be learned about the biblical characters from contemporary Bedouins. There are advantages and disadvantages to this assumption, but the worst thing one can do in beginning to consider Muslim reaction to the Hebrew Bible is to project contemporary political discord between Israel and the Palestinians onto the history of Muslim interest in the Bible or, for that matter, onto the history of the relationships between Judaism and Islam. To be sure, things were not always rosy, and one can identify politically motivated works that deal with the Bible, one of which I will discuss in a few minutes, but the intellectual concerns and seriousness of inquiry about Jews and the Bible in classical Arabic literature differ radically from the impression one might glean from a steady diet of contemporary newspapers.

In evaluating the Christian reaction to the Hebrew Bible, one can deal with the Bible as a unit and with the reactions to it—total acceptance, partial acceptance, total rejection, radical reinterpretation, and so on. Because the Qur'an contains many lengthy discussions of biblical characters, but not the Bible itself, analysis of its responses is much more varied and complex. In effect, each related passage and the history of its interpretation requires separate consideration. The Qur'an recognized the Hebrew Bible as an authoritative scripture, and it also integrated many elements of it and related rabbinic midrashim into its presentations. To be sure, it also

interpreted and presented the stories in its own ways and sometimes did so in what appear to be direct challenges to the biblical accounts.

Many different religious groups that include Jews and Muslims but are not limited to them identified with specific biblical characters. Especially where pairs of characters are presented—e.g., Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob—one gets a quick read on the politics of interpretation by seeing who identifies with whom. Changes in the stories about individual characters are also significant. Perhaps the best example of this phenomenon is the treatment of Abraham, recognized as both Jewish and Muslim patriarch. Genesis described Abraham's life in some detail and leaves the reader with the impression that Sarah and Isaac were his primary wife and son, while Hagar was only a concubine, originally provided to Abraham by Sarah, enabling her—Sarah—to have a child, Ishmael, through the servant.

Abraham seems to have been quite accepting of Hagar's son, but Ishmael's role as the genetic link between Abraham and Muhammad gave him much greater importance to Muslims than he could possibly have had to Jews, who identified with Isaac, his younger competitor. Hagar actually received more attention in the Bible than in the Qur'an, but later Muslim legends compensated for this shortfall. According to Muslim teachings, Abraham travelled with Hagar into the wilderness, built or rebuilt the Ka'ba, and arranged for her and Ishmael to live in its proximity. These traditions empathized with her situation and, centuries before feminist exegesis recognized her as a victim, made hers a *cause célèbre*. Other stories praised her faith, her ability to overcome temptation and misfortune, and her devotion to her son. Qur'anic interpreters sometimes suggested that Ishmael, not Isaac, was the son intended for Abraham's sacrifice. Differences among commentators often debated whether the biblical account or Muslim interests should be followed in reading the ambiguous surah that describes the event.

The Queen of Sheba is another biblical character who received much attention from both classical interpreters and modern scholars; numerous books on her have appeared in recent years, all of them exploring the extensive Jewish and Muslim folklore that amplifies and supplements the biblical account. This is quite natural, as the queen came from an Arab land, but the extensive attention to her is impressive, nonetheless.

In other cases, Qur'anic accounts apparently have telescoped or interchanged biblical materials. Haman, advisor to Ahashueros in post-exilic Persia, appears as advisor to Pharaoh in pre-exodus Egypt.

The story of Gideon's testing his 300 soldiers has been transferred to King Saul; that of Moses' marriage to Jethro's daughter seems to have been influenced by the account of Jacob's marriage to Laban's.

The Qur'an's reactions to biblical law are also edifying. Muhammad rejected the Sabbath, arguing that its strictures were intended to be temporary (some early Christians had actually claimed they were intended as a punishment). The fast of Ramadan, it has been argued by some, bears the influence of Christian Lent, but far older Greco-Roman and even Mesopotamian calendrical traditions may lie behind both, as well as the Jewish equivalent, *Sefirah*, observed between Passover and Shavuot.

While debates on the Bible's theoretical role in Qur'anic exegesis occupied many writers, Qur'anic interpreters and later Islamic historians took the biblical and post-biblical sources very seriously. Early Jewish converts to Islam recorded and taught these traditions, and subsequent generations of Muslim scholars studied, analyzed, augmented, and criticized them.

The 'Isawiyya, an observant Jewish group that has been subjected to much recent scholarly analysis, recognized the prophetic character of both Jesus and Muhammad. Able to pass, depending on circumstances, as both Jews and Muslims, they had access to both sides and were uniquely placed to share in these discussions and disseminations. In his *Eshkol HaKofer* (41b) the Karaite, Yehudah Hadassi, refers to them as *kat pesher dat*, "the sect of the interpretation of the law."

### The Bible Came from Arabia?

The next example is of a very different order. In 1985, Kamal Salibi, of the University of Beirut, published a volume called *The Bible Came from Arabia*, whose thesis can be summarized succinctly as "the Land of Israel is in the wrong place." Salibi claims that the ancient Israelites left Egypt, traveled east, crossed the Red Sea, and settled in northern Yemen. Local place names similar to many in the Bible confirm his theory. Migrations led the Israelites westward, but only after the exile to Babylonia did they settle in large numbers on the western edge of Asia. Obviously they should return whence they came.

Clever though it may be, the politics behind this theory are much more evident than its scholarship. Similarity of place names in two different Semitic countries, especially those that refer to local wells or mountains, is far from definitive evidence, and the discoveries in

Israel of Hebrew texts from pre-exilic times suggests an altogether different situation.

Most curious, though, is why the author chose to ignore the numerous ancient Akkadian documents that chronicle the forays of many eastern kings into the West. In the eighth century BCE, Sennacherib traveled westward from Assyria and then besieged, in rapid succession, Sidon, Byblos, Ashdod, Moab, Edom, Ashkelon, Joppa, Banai Barqa, and Ekron, before attempting unsuccessfully to conquer Jerusalem. Such texts demonstrate quite convincingly that, in those days, Jerusalem and other biblical cities were right where they are today. Similar lists appear in the Akkadian records of Shalmanezer III, Tiglat-Pileser III, Sargon II, Eserhaddon, and many others. None of these texts was discussed in Salibi's book, which seems to have received little attention itself, other than in Canadian Jewish News, which reviewed it quite neutrally when it appeared.

To return to a more positive note. Early interfaith meetings among Jews and Muslims have become a darling of contemporary scholars, many of whom have included comparative scriptural studies among the subjects discussed there. It is in these contexts that Jewish characters like Daud al-Muqammis and Hivi al-Balkhi, normally vilified by rabbinic writers, are praised for their openness. Steven Wasserstrom has gone so far as to describe their activities as Comparative Exegesis. Apparently earlier times called forth great harmony and levels of cooperation, at least in some circles.

### The Sharing of Interpretative Methodologies

Borrowing the interpretations of passages from a shared scripture is only one small piece of the picture. Even more so, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have also shared the methodologies used to interpret their own distinctive scriptures.

A detailed comparison of treatment of miracles by all three groups of interpreters offers an interesting example of how every logical way to grapple with the sacred texts has been explored, including unchallenging acceptance, scientific rationalization, faithful equation of human reason and divine revelation, and radical allegorization. Representatives of all three groups suggested that miracles were either violations of natural law that demonstrated God's power and proved His existence; or that miracles were decidedly not violations of natural law; or that miracles were built into natural law at the time of creation and therefore no violation of it; or even that miracles essentially undermined claims for God's

omnipotence because they necessitated changes in the divinely ordained natural order and therefore attributed weaknesses to the deity.

The same claim can be made regarding the processes by which one can or should deduce a proper lifestyle from sacred narratives; the ways in which one interprets and applies scriptural laws; and how one understands the nature of divine revelation, validates the challenges of human reason to scripture, acknowledges the relative authority of ancient sages as interpreters of scripture, and so on and so forth.

If I have made it sound like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are identical, please forgive me, for they are quite different. But all these similarities, not to mention the shared elements of belief and practice, do demand an explanation, and now I am not referring to the contents derived from common Jewish or biblical sources.

Many of the similarities I have mentioned reflect similarities of strategy in coping with questions or challenges. These may result from the universal human quality known as the interpretative enterprise or from the cultural contexts from which both the questions and the possible answers emanate. In other words, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—and other religions, too, I suspect, but I leave this exploration to those more qualified to discuss these things—confront sacred texts and related problems, analyze them, and negotiate them in almost identical ways. And when one confronts the wide range of alternative solutions to specific problems offered by learned representatives of each of these three religions, almost every possible position on every issue can find some supporter. In short, there is really no distinctively Jewish or Christian or Muslim way to think. Applying these common methodological strategies to different texts in the contexts of different belief systems is what produces such different results. These three religions differ radically, not in how they deal with scripture, but in what they call scripture, and in how they relate to their own prized teachings and to scriptures not their own. All three offer a wide range of options in treating almost every issue.

### Textual Accuracy

Over the centuries, claims about the accuracy of the Hebrew Bible text remained one of the most contentious issues of inter-faith debate. Again and again, Christians and Muslims accused the Jews of changing, corrupting, failing to preserve accurately, and outright falsifying the Bible text. Some of these charges derived from

differences in the contents of the scriptures used by the three groups. The Qur'an recounts events from biblical times in words that are quite different from those in the Bible, and on occasion, the Septuagint, the New Testament, and the church fathers all cited texts of the Old Testament that differed from those in the Hebrew Bible. In calmer times and contexts, many of these differences could be ignored, but more confrontational postures were sometimes adopted.

Occasionally, rabbinic traditions about the preservation and transmission of the Bible text were added to the arsenal of evidence. Particularly popular were several passages in the traditional literature that speak about a phenomenon called *Tiqqunei Soferim*, often translated as "corrections of the scribes." These corrections seem to be a list of places where ancient Scribes, perhaps the same group mentioned in a series of New Testament passages, changed minor elements in the Bible text, in most cases to eliminate some possible indiscretion toward God. Such changes are quite common in the ancient Aramaic translations of the Bible and seem to have been a normal part of the popularization and presentation of the text. These "corrections of the scribes" are similar in intention but, according to these rabbinic sources, found in the Bible text itself.

Depending on the source, the corrections range up to eighteen in number and are mostly about minor differences in the pronominal elements in specific words. Three are located in the Torah, and the rest are in the remaining three-fourths of the Bible. Modern scholars are divided over whether they represent a real list of emendations or textual variants, or are merely another in a long list of midrashic strategies for playing with the text. In other words, in most cases the text makes sense both ways, there is no reason to suspect the presence of an emendation, and the rabbinic interpretation, which notes that the Bible says x but could have said y, may reflect merely a midrashic, imaginary change, not a real one. Ibn Ezra (1089–1164), in my opinion the best medieval Jewish Bible interpreter (if one can speak in such terms) consistently said about these passages, "There is no need for a correction of the scribes," which denies any support for the entire list of alleged changes.

I am inclined to prefer his reaction, but one can readily see how the alternative one would have been advanced by those hostile to Judaism, particularly in polemical contexts. Medieval rabbis who were confronted by these attacks often responded by arguing that one does not falsify a text and then publish a list of the falsifications, so some other process must be at work. Despite the logic of this argument, the counter-claims were pressed and ultimately extended to all

differences between Jewish and non-Jewish versions of the text and also to differences among Jewish versions.

Halakhah, Jewish religious law, requires that a Torah scroll be written very carefully and precisely. Indeed, the detailed regulations covering all Torah-related scribal activities have as a primary goal the avoidance of errors and textual confusions and the elimination of any that are discovered.

The intention is that the Bible text, particularly the Torah text, should be letter-perfect, and the belief that this is a reality was and remains both widespread and strongly supported. Nahmanides, the thirteenth-century author of one of the greatest medieval Torah commentaries, mentioned a tradition to the effect that the entire Torah consists of the name of God. The mystical implications of this teaching aside, for him and his followers, any intentional or unintentional variation in the text would be a sacrilege.

This position has come to dominate the popular perception of the Torah text and has led to the use and defense of all sorts of interpretative strategies that defy the literal meaning of the text in the name of some higher good, but little popular attention has been given to the truth or falsehood behind the claim. If we can grant for the moment that the early scribes and rabbis did not intentionally falsify the Bible, can we also agree that their successors preserved it in a letter-perfect form?

An examination of the manuscript traditions of the writings of Galen or Euclid, for example, reveals a typically wide range of recensional variations. Similar situations exist with many of the other works transmitted to us since antiquity, and such evidence is available from the Hebrew Dead Sea Scrolls, which both confirm the general Bible text and offer new and sometimes very interesting variants. These previously unknown texts and the variants preserved by the Samaritans, the Septuagint, and other pre-rabbinic texts are important, but the issue right now is the accuracy of the rabbinic transmission of the text during the past 2000 years or so, not the state of the text in pre-rabbinic times. Given these qualifications, it is probably fair to describe the Torah as the most accurate ancient text anyone has actively transmitted for two millennia, but that does not make it letter-perfect.

In point of fact, rabbinic literature contains thousands of discussions of inconsistencies among Torah scrolls, codices, early rabbinic citations, talmudic and midrashic interpretations, masoretic notations, scribal traditions, halakhic rulings, and other authoritative witnesses to the spelling of the text; and, later on, among printed

texts. Most of the variations are of no greater significance than whether we spell "colour" with or without the u, but as a theoretical issue, even this level of disagreement is significant. Many medieval rabbis were called upon to prioritize these sources, so that scribes could produce accurate Torah scrolls for synagogue use.

Recognition of the need to work on the text is at least as old as the pre-Christian Letter of Aristeas, which purports to describe the production of the Septuagint translation.

O King, if you approve, a letter will be written to the high priest in Jerusalem, that he should send elder men who have lived noble lives and who are expert in matters of their law, six from each tribe, so that, when we have examined *that agreed by the majority and have obtained an accurate translation*, we can preserve it in a place and in a manner worthy of both the contents and your purpose.

The letter is one of the outside books whose reading is perhaps prohibited by the passage from the Mishnah I cited earlier. Spelling differences are not relevant here, but they were to later rabbis, whose goal was the production of the perfect Torah scroll.

One such person was Rabbi Meir Halevi Abulafia (c.1170–1244), a leader of the Jewish community of Spain in the thirteenth century. His credentials as a halakhic authority and traditionalist cannot be challenged, but when he set out to examine the Torah's textual situation on his own, he was appalled at what he found:

And we have come to rely on the corrected scrolls that we possess, even they contain many disagreements. And were it not for the Masorah texts...a man would be unable to find his hands and feet because of the disagreements [i.e., among the scrolls]. Even the Masorah texts were not spared the occurrence of disagreements, for disagreements are found in many places even among them, but not like the large number of disagreements among the scrolls. And if someone would intend to write a Torah scroll correctly, it would be imperfect regarding defective and plene spellings; and he would find himself groping like a blind man in the darkness of disagreements...

And I...hurried to search for scrolls that are corrected and accurate and for accurate Masorah texts, and to deal with their disagreements; and to abandon the new scrolls that have come from near, and to follow the trustworthy old ones, and, with respect to them, to follow the majority, as is the method prescribed in the Torah in all cases of disagreement.

Applying the principle of majority testimony does not necessarily produce the truth, but it was a rabbinically sanctioned process. Many rabbinic authorities have attempted to use it as a defense of the letter-perfect Torah text; others have admitted that such procedures produce *de jure* but not *de facto* accuracy.

Rabbenu Tam (1100–71) was one of the greatest medieval Ashkenazi rabbinic writers. His take on this issue had a profound impact on his Ashkenazi successors, but is rarely discussed in public today. Faced, on the one hand, with many detailed scribal traditions about the Torah text and, on the other, with all sorts of minor inconsistencies, he acknowledged that no one was able to produce a letter-perfect text.

And now, pay attention to the scribal details and to the shapes of the letters, because we are not expert in all the details, as Rav Joseph said in the Gemara of the first chapter of *Qiddushin* [30a]: “They are expert in the defective and plene spellings, but we are not expert.” And [it is now] “a time to act on behalf of God, they have violated your Torah” (Ps. 119:126), therefore [we rule that] our [Torah scrolls] are also ritually proper.

Jacob ben Hayyim, editor of the Rabbinic Bible published in 1524–25, wrote the following in his introduction: “And after I looked at the books of the Masorah and studied them, I saw that they were utterly confused and corrupt...” His description of the types of confusion he found and how he dealt with them need not detain us now. Suffice it to note that not long afterward, Yedidiah Solomon Norzi (1560–1616) undertook the effort anew; he observed,

And it came to pass...not only did the Torah become like two *torot*, it was more like an infinite number of *torot*, because of the many variants that are found in the texts, that are in our regions, both new and old—Torah, Prophets, and Hagiographa—there is no saying and no words that do not contain confusions filled with errors in defective and plene spellings...

Rabbis often debated whether to replace a Torah scroll being read publicly if it was found to contain a minor spelling deviation—again, like the *u* in “colour.” Rabbi Yehezkel Landau (1713–93) said no, because any scroll used for this purpose could be presumed to have a similar error elsewhere. The author of the rabbinic work *Sha`agat Aryeh* openly declared it impossible to fulfill the requirement of writing a Torah scroll, because no one really knew how. Rabbi Moses

Sofer, the hero of anti-Reform in nineteenth-century Hungary, based the practice of not reciting a blessing before beginning to write a Torah scroll on the collective uncertainty about how to spell certain words in it.

In a strange and often debated statement, Maimonides (1135-1204), who lived centuries before most of these rabbis, claimed that the entire Torah was from God through Moses and that any claim to the contrary was heresy. Rabbi Yaakov Weinberg, Head of the Ner Israel Yeshiva of Baltimore, has commented that although the Torah instructs Jews to follow the majority in making decisions, after many such occurrences, these decisions are not going to produce totally accurate reproductions of the original Sinaitic text. The Talmud admitted that Jews are no longer experts in the exact spelling of many words, and so Maimonides's statement that the entire Torah in our possession today was that given to Moses cannot be taken literally. This is an incredible concession, but it is not taken seriously by most Orthodox Jews.

I think it quite evident that those rabbinic writers who were seriously engaged with the question of the Torah's accuracy, at least as it applied to its rabbinic treatment, acknowledged the extent and seriousness of the situation. They debated the evidence, offered potential corrections and did what they could. Some feared non-Jewish attacks against inconsistent spellings in the Torah scrolls and worked to eliminate them but, in the end, many conceded defeat. Simultaneously, some continued to play with the spellings of letters and to build their interpretations on the assumption of a letter-perfect text.

The general Jewish ignorance of these issues, even among well educated people, suggests that, in recent times, issues of textual fidelity have changed their status from exoteric to esoteric. In earlier ages, the situation was slightly different. Despite all possible efforts to confront the problem, insiders could be privy to the sincere doubts some rabbis expressed on the subject of the letter perfect text. Outsiders, however, received a much more definitive claim about the text's accuracy. Rabbis did not want to subject themselves to the criticism of failing to live up to this virtually impossible standard. In Muslim countries, they may also have felt the need to match equally unrealistic but still popular claims about a letter-perfect Qur'an text.

This inconsistent situation continued for centuries, but recent times have witnessed almost the total suppression of this information. Jacob ben Hayyim's introduction to the Rabbinic Bibles was dropped from later editions; Norzi's textual commentary was ignored. For

years the introduction that contained this information lay in manuscript, and even when finally printed it quickly became unavailable. It is still hard to find, despite the modern reprinting of tens of thousands of other rabbinic compositions. David Kimhi's introduction to his commentary on Joshua suffered the same fate; it was removed from many reprinted Rabbinic Bibles because it acknowledged the existence of ancient variants in the Bible text. Until now, this discussion has been about manuscripts and early printed books. Welcome to the computer age.

### Computer-Assisted Decoding

The ability to record the Bible text on computer, to count numbers of letters, to reconfigure the text in columns of any number of letters, and the like, has led numerous people to manipulate the text in search of notions seemingly encoded in it. Pick any letter, count forward or backward any number of letters you prefer and try to create a word. Hebrew has no vowels, so almost any three-letter combination can be meaningful; often longer ones are. If the word somehow fits the context, even if you must read it backwards, you supposedly have found an encoded message.

The past decade has seen the publication of dozens of books and pamphlets that demonstrate the use and significance of this procedure. An inexpensive data-base containing the Torah text and program for doing these things have been on the market for several years. And a group of self-appointed Jewish missionaries travels around the world giving high school and university students seminars, in which the presence of such encoded secrets is used to demonstrate the divine origin of the Torah and the need to follow its and all other religious requirements.

This practice assumes and reinforces belief in a letter-perfect text. It also suggests, at least to advocates of the practice, that all post-biblical history was known to God when the Bible was composed and that the text is divine. According to these people, references to the French Revolution, Napoleon, AIDS, World War II, Berlin, Germany, Hitler, Eichmann, and Auschwitz, all appear in the Bible.

This type of procedure is far from new. In fact, it has been practiced continuously since ancient times, but it is now much more complex and detailed because it is computerized. I have no problem with religious observance, even with trying to spread it, if that is one's goal, but is all of this—or any of it—valid? And if not, what will

happen to a generation of students who have been sold a form of religious commitment based on a hoax?

Ibn Ezra said of the medieval version of this practice that it was appropriate for children and analogous to counting the letters in a book of medical recipes instead of following the directions. A few contemporary mathematicians have tried to marshal scientific arguments that claim that such correlations can have virtually no mathematical possibility of being coincidences. For them, this is quite serious and significant.

I claim no competence as a mathematician, but given what I do know about the range and extent of spelling variations in rabbinic versions of the Bible text, I do not see how any of this can make sense. And if it works statistically—and here comes the great heresy of the evening—the time has come to re-evaluate our reliance on what mathematicians can really teach us.

Such textual manipulations raise serious problems for theologians and philosophers and, as Ibn Ezra anticipated in the eleventh century, they will lead to the proliferation of further attempts to refine the Bible text. Why not emend the spelling of the text elsewhere, if such changes add new and equally pleasing interpretations of this kind?

In addition to these books, a new one has appeared. Building on these successes, it suggests the following: Take the word ‘*e’eseh*, “I will make,” in Gen. 2:18. Start from the letter Ayyin and count 138 letters from left to right three times—remember, Hebrew is read from right to left. This spells out Yod-Shin-Waw-Ayyin, the Hebrew name of Jesus. Begin with the word ‘*almah*’ in Is. 7:14. In Hebrew ‘*almah*’ means a young woman, but Christian interpreters have long taken it to mean virgin and, particularly in this passage, to refer to Mary. Start with the letter Mem and count seventeen letters from right to left three times. This spells out Mem-Shin-Yod-Het, *Mashiah*, “messiah,” taken, to sure, as a christological reference, not a Lubovitch one.

Until someone comes up with a pre-determined rationale for the number of letters to be counted and the direction in which they should be counted, all of this—whether about Jewish or Christian teachings—strikes me as so much fun and games and nothing more. I do not know how seriously Christians respond to this, but I can report that many Jews, including all too many McGill students, are truly taken by it.

## Conclusion

After all this discussion and analysis, my earlier concern about the extent to which Judaism, Christianity, and Islam do or do not identify strongly with the Hebrew Bible now seems somewhat misplaced; things cannot be as negative as I made them seem, can they?

This situation calls to mind a scene from “Fiddler on the Roof.” In it, Tevye asks his wife, Goldi, if she loves him. At first she asks in return, “Do I love you?,” which prompts him to repeat the question. When pressed, she answers by listing the many things she has done for him: for twenty-five years she washed his clothes, cooked his meals, shared his bed, and so on. “If that’s not love,” she asks in response, “what is?” After so many centuries of interaction, can all the attention the Hebrew Bible has attracted from Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—even when that attention has been openly critical—be described as anything but love?

Another story used in several Jewish works of about 1000 years ago compared rabbinic and non-rabbinic treatments of the Bible through the following parable. A king gave two servants identical gifts, some flax and a bag of grain. One dutifully stored them safely away; the other made a placemat from the flax and bread from the grain. The king visited the first and was shown the carefully preserved gifts. In the second house, he was seated at the table and served the bread on the new placemat.

This story was used by rabbanite interpreters to counter the literalist claims of the Karaites and to defend the creative rabbinic treatment of the Bible text. Unlike so many others that claimed all rabbinic teachings were handed down at Sinai, or at least that the potential to generate them was, this story openly acknowledged and even praised subsequent rabbinic contributions, even if it conceded that they changed things somewhat.

Karaites are perhaps the only Jewish group that can be considered more committed to the Bible than the rabbanites. Karaites are strongly religious but rebelled against rabbinic Judaism, which earned them a heretical label and a great deal of bad press over the past thousand years. The Karaites still exist; their anti-rabbanite ideology has softened somewhat, but they are still regarded as outsiders by many Jews. One individual who tried to approach the Bible independently of the rabbinic tradition was Spinoza. His critiques of Maimonides’s subjective interpretations are deservedly famous, as is his status as an excommunicated heretic.

Christianity exhibits a similar situation. In fact, treatment of the Bible remains a major component in the isolation of many individual Jewish and Christian movements as heretical. One of the few mass movements in support of the Bible that actually succeeded was the Reformation, and often it, too, was perceived as heretical. Despite good intentions, its reaction to the Hebrew Bible was mixed, to say the least. The same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, for Islam. Many Muslims who took the Hebrew Bible too seriously were also branded as judaizers, i.e., heretics.

Contemporary fundamentalists, evangelicals, and the like, who maintain a very strong commitment to the Bible, are also noteworthy in this context. My impression is that the ideologies of most of these groups are a constant annoyance to other Christian groups, who consider themselves better informed. As far as I can tell, few fundamentalists are considered heretics, but their dogmatic support of the inerrancy of what they see as the correct but not necessarily the literal meaning of the Bible has not won the approval of most of their religious confrères, and sometimes it engenders strongly negative reactions.

In other words, all three religions rely on the Hebrew Bible, Judaism perhaps more than the others, but none, at least in its mainstream manifestations, considers itself bound only by the Bible or only by its literal meaning. Each of the three religions approached Hebrew scripture with its own agenda, and though it did not ask only its own questions of the text, it provided what would seem to be its own unique and internal answers, created its own kind of bread and placemat, to continue the metaphor. Even so, one must exercise the utmost care in generalizing about the history of reactions to the Hebrew Bible by representatives of these three faiths, because their responses are so varied.

In point of fact, all three religions have taken measures both to accept and to limit the influence of the Hebrew Bible, but this simple observation also fails to acknowledge the range of ways they did this. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam continually evolved. The dates of some of their authoritative speakers differ by millennia, and their individual, representative thinkers offered highly varied reactions to most challenges, issues, and beliefs. But collectively, their responses to cultural situations and to intellectual challenges often covered much the same ground.

Just as one cannot imagine one definitive Jewish, Christian, or Muslim response to the many external cultural challenges these faiths faced, or speculate about one single Jewish, Christian, or Muslim

reaction to any theological question, it is incorrect to imagine that each faith developed one uniform reaction to the Hebrew Bible. Through its various sub-groups, each of the three experimented with different reactions. And when considered and compared, they offer a rich and often surprising range of positions that overlap and intersect in exciting and often unanticipated ways. But when all is said and done, commitment to the Bible has its limitations, and numerous individuals and groups who were overly committed to the Bible and under committed to other things were deemed heretics.

## Symbols

Jewish writers described the Torah symbolically as, among other things, a tree, a well of water, a light, and a nut. In order to concretize what I have said thus far, I suggest we consider it as a lump of clay. In a sense, each individual sculptor of the clay has received the potential to create something new along with the clay itself. Each has molded it into a virtually unlimited number of shapes, but the process can continue only to the extent that the clay is kept moist and continually worked. If allowed to sit unattended and to harden, it will retain one particular shape and ultimately be worshipped as an idol or be broken and discarded, as often happens to any old and relatively useless piece of china.

Tacked onto what, in all likelihood, once was the end of the mishnaic tractate *Avot* is a brief Aramaic sentence about the Torah, attributed to an otherwise unknown Ben Bag Bag. It says *hafokh bah ve-happekh bah de-kulah bah*, “turn it over and over for everything is in it.” The text further suggests examining this material, growing old and worn out with it, and never leaving it, for there is no more worthy activity.

This is the form in which the statement is best known, but manuscripts of this passage offer several variant readings. One has *hafokh bah ve-happekh bah de-kulah bah, we-kulakh bah*, “turn it over and over for everything is in it, and you are entirely in it.” This is perhaps the ideal accepted by several thousand years of pious Bible readers who tried valiantly to see themselves in the text and to find there the answers to their problems. But the Kaufmann manuscript of the Mishnah, the most prized copy in the world, offers a third reading: *hafokh bah ve-happekh bah de-kulah bakh, we-kulakh bah*, “turn it over and over for all of it is in you, and you are entirely in it.” This version of the saying, which effectively equates the reader with the Bible text,

sounds incredibly postmodern, but may be the best way to understand why the Hebrew Bible succeeded as it has.

In part, this success is based on the Bible's ongoing combination of historical truths and non-historical myths; its human and divine images; its ability to inform, to challenge, and to console; its recognition that people are simultaneously no better than beasts of the field and one step lower than angels; that despite all the human misery, the possibility of salvation ever beckons. In short, it is the Bible's ability to address people wherever and whenever they are that is so appealing, so timeless, and so challenging.

But another reason for the success derives from the Bible's natural flexibility, its contradictions that demand resolutions, its inconsistencies and irregularities that require explanations, its claims about how things were or will be that seem so contrary to our understanding of how they really are or how we want them to be. In short, the Bible's success in due largely to its ability to engage and stimulate its readers, not for the moment but for a lifetime, not only individuals but entire nations.

The record of the responses to these challenges and stimuli, the intellectual histories of entire civilizations mirrored against the inner claims and dynamics of the Bible, has ensured its perpetual attraction, whether one identifies with what momentarily may seem to be its messages, or one does not.

## **Endnotes**

1. I cannot, of course, treat fully all three religions' responses to the Hebrew Bible or even exhaust the discussion of only one of the three. Nor would the present limitations of my research into Christianity and Islam allow me even to make such an attempt. However, I am sure other scholars visiting in the Faculty of Religious Studies will return to this subject in the coming years and will continue the discussion from their own perspectives and in their own areas of specialization. This article serves as a introduction to their work.