

New Testament Scriptural Interpretation in its Early Jewish Context

Reflections on the Status Quaestionis and Future Directions

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Abstract

This paper places New Testament scriptural interpretation within its early Jewish context, highlighting the most significant ways in which understanding of this subject is enhanced by comparison with texts such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Pseudepigrapha and the rabbinic midrashim. Four critical issues are addressed: text form; exegetical genres; interpretative traditions; and exegetical techniques. The applicability to the New Testament of some innovative current research in the field of Jewish Studies is demonstrated. Consideration is then given to the major challenges which a close engagement with the Jewish exegetical literature poses for the methodology of future New Testament scholarship.

Keywords

use of the Old Testament in the New Testament – Second Temple Judaism – Qumran – rewritten scripture – rabbinic scriptural interpretation – Septuagint

* This paper is a revised version of a public lecture given on the occasion of the retirement of Maarten Menken as Professor of New Testament Exegesis in the School of Catholic Theology at the Universities of Utrecht and Tilburg (22nd March 2013). It is a pleasure to dedicate it to a scholar whose work has always reflected a careful attention to the relationship between early Jewish and early Christian scriptural interpretation. It is most fitting that it should be published in *Novum Testamentum*, the journal which he has served as a member of the editorial board for over two decades.

1 Introduction: The Early Jewish Context of New Testament Scriptural Interpretation

The underlying premise of this paper is that an appreciation of the Jewish context of early Christianity is essential to an understanding of the New Testament. This is because the first followers of Jesus belonged to a movement within the Judaism of the late Second Temple period, so that the books of the New Testament were written by Jews for an audience who thought of themselves as Jews, or at least saw themselves as being in some way connected to the religion of Israel. This is hardly a controversial view within contemporary mainstream biblical studies, which has moved on very considerably from a period of at least fourteen centuries in which an unfortunate emphasis was too often placed on the attempt to demonstrate a fundamental opposition between Judaism and Christianity. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947, and the subsequent publication and study of these texts, has been an important factor in re-focusing the attention of biblical scholars and, indeed, of the wider public, towards the Jewish background of the New Testament, and has helpfully served to generate a renewed interest in other surviving writings from the Second Temple period, such as the Pseudepigrapha. A re-evaluation in the last two decades of the timing and nature of the so-called “parting of the ways” between “Judaism” and “Christianity” has also contributed to a shift in thinking about the Jewish influences on the development of the Jesus movement. The current consensus envisages a gradual and fluid process of breaking apart over four centuries rather than a final, definitive rupture in the late first or early second century CE as had previously been proposed.¹ Some commentators even argue that there has never been a total and complete separation between Judaism and Christianity,² and, even if that position cannot be fully supported, it certainly does have to be recognised that groups of “Christian Jews” or “Jewish Christians” persisted in some geographical regions for several centuries, eating kosher meat, or celebrating both Saturday and Sunday as

1 See e.g. P.S. Alexander, “‘The Parting of the Ways’ From the Perspective of Rabbinic Judaism,” in *Jews and Christians: The Parting of the Ways A.D. 70 to 135* (ed. J.D.G. Dunn; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992) 1–25; D. Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); and W. Horbury, *Jews and Christians in Contact and Controversy* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998).

2 See, for example, some of the contributions in A.H. Becker and A. Y. Reed, eds., *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003).

holy days.³ It is also significant that the writings of the church fathers attest to a profound engagement by early Christian scriptural interpreters with the rabbinic exegetical tradition throughout the patristic period. James Dunn is by no means alone amongst New Testament scholars today, therefore, in urging a clear recognition of the fact that: "... the beginnings of Christianity cannot be understood without reference to Jewish documents and traditions from the late Second Temple period ..."⁴

This paper is concerned with one particular aspect of this Jewish context of early Christianity, namely the interpretation of the scriptures by the New Testament authors. Its first purpose is to provide an overview of the *status quaestionis*, by illustrating the most significant ways in which the extant early Jewish literature is informing current discussion of the use of the Old Testament in the New.⁵ Its second intention is to highlight the challenges which the ongoing research into these texts raises for the methodology and future direction of New Testament scholarship. These aims will be approached through an investigation of four key critical issues: text form; exegetical genres; interpretative traditions; and exegetical techniques. Three major corpora of texts will be considered in order to provide a wide overview of early Jewish exegesis: the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Pseudepigrapha and the rabbinic midrashim.

2 Critical Issues: Text Form

It has long been recognised that the books which now make up the Hebrew bible existed in more than one form before the adoption of the Masoretic Text as the standard version by the late first or early second century CE. Other known text forms include the Samaritan Pentateuch and the Septuagint, and

3 For these and other examples, see D. Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999).

4 J.D.G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways Between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (London: SCM, 1991) 251. Dunn also urges Jewish scholars to take the New Testament writings seriously as Jewish documents, and early witnesses to the nature of Second Temple Judaism.

5 For previous useful studies comparing early Jewish and early Christian scriptural interpretation, see e.g. P.S. Alexander, "Midrash and the Gospels," in *Synoptic Studies* (ed. C.M. Tuckett; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984) 1-50; and "The Bible in Qumran and Early Judaism," in *Text in Context* (ed. A.D.H. Mayes; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 35-62; J.A. Fitzmyer, "The Use of Explicit Old Testament Quotations in Qumran Literature and in the New Testament," *NTS* 7 (1960-61) 297-333; T.H. Lim, *Holy Scripture in the Qumran Commentaries and Pauline Letters* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997).

these are sometimes reflected in the scriptural citations and allusions in the Pseudepigrapha. The discovery at Qumran of over two hundred copies of scriptural books,⁶ however, has resulted in a new appreciation of the extent of textual fluidity in the Second Temple period. These manuscripts have enormous significance as the earliest extant witnesses to the scriptural texts, and they provide evidence for the use of all three of the major text-types previously available to scholars, plus a variety of others. It is now beyond dispute, then, that the scriptures were circulating in several different forms, in both Hebrew and Greek, in the first century CE. This situation has very important implications for future New Testament scholarship, since it will no longer be possible for commentators to be satisfied, as a previous generation might have been, with comparing the form of a scriptural citation in the New Testament only with the standard Septuagint reading. This methodological approach now appears far too simplistic, because it has become necessary to consult all the available scriptural forms, including the Dead Sea Scrolls, before drawing any conclusions about the accuracy with which a New Testament citation is reproducing its *Vorlage*. This is likely to result in a greater degree of caution in claiming that an author has deliberately altered his source for theological reasons, because the possibility that a genuine textual variant is being employed needs to be taken very seriously. Such judgements are best made after due consideration of the way in which passages from different parts of scripture are cited in each individual New Testament writing. In the case of the Book of Revelation, for instance, Steve Moyise argues that: "... there is no reason to assume that John used the same text-type for all his allusions..."⁷ Maarten Menken, Gert Steyn and Timothy McLay are amongst those leading the way in successfully embracing this new challenge,⁸ but a recognition of the ramifications of this

6 For the numbers and further statistics on the Qumran biblical manuscripts, see J.C. Vanderkam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2012) 1-6.

7 S. Moyise, "The Language of the Psalms in the Book of Revelation," *Neot* 37 (2003) 246-261, p. 249.

8 See e.g. M.J.J. Menken, *Old Testament Quotations in the Fourth Gospel: Studies in Textual Form* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996); G.J. Steyn, "A Quest for the *Vorlage* of the 'Song of Moses' (Deut 32) Quotations in Hebrews," *Neot* 34 (2000) 263-272; "Psalm 2 in Hebrews," *Neot* 37 (2003) 262-282; "The *Vorlage* of Psalm 45:6-7 (44:7-8) in Hebrews 1:8-9," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 60 (2004) 1085-1103; and "The Occurrence of Ps 118(117):6 in Heb 13:6: Possible Liturgical Origins," *Neot* 40 (2006) 119-134; R.T. McLay, *The Use of the Septuagint in New Testament Research* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2003); and "Biblical Texts and the Scriptures for the New Testament Church," in *Hearing the Old Testament in the New Testament* (ed. S.E. Porter; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2006) 37-58. See also M. Karrer, *Der Brief an die Hebräer*

new evidence for textual plurality has yet to become fully embedded in New Testament Studies.

The variety of text forms employed in the early Jewish literature raises a further question about the scriptural citations in the New Testament, one which is perhaps not always given the consideration it deserves. The possibility now has to be entertained that an author was making a deliberate selection, for theological or other reasons, of one form of the text over a range of slightly different versions with which he was familiar. There is certainly evidence from Qumran to suggest that even where an interpreter cited a verse in one form, he was aware of an alternative reading. In the most obvious case of this phenomenon, for example, the quotation from Hab 2:6 in 1QpHab XI, 9-13 includes the verb “stagger” (הרעל), in agreement with the Septuagint, but against the Masoretic Text; the explanation, however, depends on a knowledge of the Hebrew version “be uncircumcised” (הערל).⁹ The scriptural extracts gathered together in the *Testimonia* collection (4Q175) similarly reflect a variety of different text types. This has been widely noted by commentators, including Crawford, who regards it as evidence that all the forms of the scriptures in circulation were widely accepted as equally authoritative.¹⁰ An interesting example of something like this practice in operation within the New Testament may be found in the discussion in the Epistle to the Hebrews of Abraham’s encounter with Melchizedek. A verse from Genesis is cited stating that, following his success in defeating the King of Sodom and his allies in a battle, Abraham apportioned a tenth of everything to Melchizedek (Heb 7:2; Gen 14:20); the Greek verb used here is ἐμέρισεν, “he apportioned,” but the Septuagint reads: “. . . and he gave (ἔδωκεν) to him a tenth of everything. . . .” The choice of the word ἐμέρισεν allows the author of Hebrews to link the Genesis text more effectively to his ensuing comments on the system of priestly tithing, but when he repeats this verse a few lines later (Heb 7:4), he uses ἔδωκεν. This suggests that he is familiar with the standard Septuagint reading, and indeed is concerned to render it accurately, but wishes to imply the formal connotation

(2 vols.; ÖTBK; Würzburg: Gütersloher, 2002 and 2008); “LXX Psalm 39:7-10 in Hebrews 10:5-7,” in *Psalms and Hebrews: Studies in Reception* (ed. D.J. Human and G.J. Steyn; New York/London: T&T Clark, 2010) 126-146.

9 This and other examples are discussed in T.H. Lim, *Pesharim* (London: Sheffield Academic Press/Continuum, 2002) 54-63.

10 S.W. Crawford, *Rewriting Scripture in Second Temple Times* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2008) 35.

of “apportioning” in his initial reference to the incident.¹¹ No extant witnesses support the reading ἐμέρισεν here, so it cannot be definitely concluded that this is an example of a conscious selection of a textual variant. Nevertheless, the appearance of slightly different forms in the citation and its interpretation is noteworthy as a possible parallel to 1QpHab XI, 9-13.

Hab 2:4 is also quoted in the New Testament more than once, in forms which differ in small but significant ways from both the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint:

MT:	the righteous one will live by <i>his</i> faith צדק באמונתו יחיה
Standard LXX (B):	ὁ δὲ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεώς μου ζήσεται The righteous one will live by <i>my</i> faith
Alternative LXX: (A and C)	ὁ δὲ δίκαιός μου ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται <i>my</i> righteous one will live by faith
Heb 10:38:	ὁ δὲ δίκαιός μου ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται <i>my</i> righteous one will live by faith
Rom 1:17/Gal 3:11:	ὁ δὲ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται the righteous one will live by faith or the one who is righteous through faith will live

The manuscript evidence therefore indicates a certain degree of fluidity in the text of Habakkuk at this point, although the alternative Septuagint readings which agree with the forms given in the New Testament could have been influenced by it. However, the placing of the pronoun “my” is important to the interpretation of this verse in Hebrews, so may have affected the author’s choice of version, whereas it seems to suit Paul’s argument in Romans and Galatians to omit the pronoun “my” or “his” altogether. It is not possible to be certain whether Paul is citing his *Vorlage* here with intentional minor amendments or is faithfully reproducing a variant text, but the latter option cannot be discounted, nor can the possibility that he deliberately selected this form above others available to him. In short, then, the early Jewish writings serve as invaluable sources of information about the development of the scriptural text, but they also challenge New Testament scholars to take more seriously the fact of textual variety in the first century CE, and to evaluate the likelihood of the purposeful selection by an interpreter of a particular reading. This may

11 For a more detailed treatment of this passage of Hebrews, see S.E. Docherty, “Genesis in Hebrews”, in *Genesis in the New Testament* (ed. S. Moyise and M.J.J. Menken; London: T&T Clark, 2012) 124-148.

be a more painstaking and less straightforward methodological approach than was feasible in the past, but it will surely lead to more secure conclusions about the citation of scripture in the New Testament.

3 Critical Issues: Exegetical Genres

The second way in which the Qumran discoveries in particular have impacted on discussion of early Christian scriptural interpretation is by revealing the existence of previously unknown literary genres. These include the community rules, a type of writing not attested elsewhere in early Jewish sources, but which may be reflected in later Christian “church orders,” such as the *Didache* and *Didascalia Apostolorum*. A specifically exegetical new genre, apparently unique to the Qumran sect, has also emerged, in the *pesharim* on some of the prophetic books and the Psalms. These are the earliest extant examples of running commentaries, a form of interpretation which has come to be widely practised in Judaism and Christianity, from the rabbis and church fathers through to modern times. The *pesharists* seem to have approached the task of exegesis by looking for a direct link between a scriptural verse and their own situation, or some event in their community history, as in this example, in which the words of Hab 1:13 are taken as an unambiguous reference to the group’s early leader, the Teacher of Righteousness, and to a specific dispute he had with the priestly leaders of his time: “Why do you stare, traitors, and remain silent when a wicked person consumes someone more upright than himself? . . . Its interpretation concerns the house of Absalom and the members of their council, who kept silent when the Teacher of Righteousness was rebuked, and did not help him against the man of the lie . . . who rejected the law in the midst of their whole council . . .” (1QpHab V, 8-12).¹² *Peshar* interpretation is also characterised by a belief that the scriptures are ultimately prophecies about the last days, and that this time is close at hand. The fact that three fragmentary *pesharim* on the Psalms (1Q16, 4Q171, 4Q173) have survived is therefore significant as an indicator that it was also regarded as a prophetic book by the members of the community. The Qumran *Psalms Scroll*, for instance, includes the claim that: “All these (songs) he (David) spoke through prophecy which was given from before the Most High. . . .” (11QPs^a, XXVII, 11-12). This understanding of the Psalms was not confined to the Dead Sea sect, as it is reflected also in the New Testament, where David is called a prophet (e.g. at Acts 2:30), and verses

12 Translations of the Qumran texts throughout follow F. Garcia Martinez and E.J.C. Tigchelaar, eds., *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Study Edition* (2 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1997-1998).

from the Psalms, of which he was the presumed author, are interpreted as foretelling aspects of the life of the early church, such as the replacement of Judas as one of the twelve with another disciple (at Acts 1:15-22).¹³

The publication of the first *pesharim* prompted an enthusiastic search for parallels between this newly discovered exegetical genre and the New Testament.¹⁴ Paul's letters proved a particularly fertile hunting ground for this endeavour, and other texts frequently put forward as examples of *pesh*-interpretation include Matt 21:42-44; Acts 2:17-36; and Heb 3:7-19.¹⁵ A closer investigation, however, suggests that this categorisation may be misplaced. The passage which most closely resembles the *pesh* model is probably Rom 10:6-8, commenting on Deut 30:12-14 (phrases taken from Deuteronomy are reproduced here in italics): "But the righteousness that comes from faith says, 'Do not say in your heart, "*Who will ascend into heaven?*" (that is, to bring Christ down) or "*Who will descend into the abyss?*" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? '*The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart*' (that is, the word of faith which we preach); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."¹⁶ Even in this case, however, there is a much less clear distinction between the citation and its exegesis than is usual in the Qumran commentaries; only parts of the Deuteronomy text are in view; and it is surely significant that the distinctive word *pesh* ("interpretation") is never used to introduce the explanation. Paul is also not offering a running commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy, as he employs only these selected verses from it here, and he goes on to weave into his explanation of them citations from other scriptural books, such as Isaiah and Joel (Isa 28:16; Joel 2:32 at Rom 10:12-13), something which is not common in the *pesharim*, although it can occur.

Other purported examples of *pesh* in the New Testament look even more different from the Qumran form, such as Matt 21:42-44: "Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures: "The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner; this was the Lord's doing, and

13 See J.C. Vanderkam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2010) 64.

14 See e.g. E.E. Ellis, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1957); R. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1975).

15 See e.g. S. Kistemaker, *The Psalm Citations in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Amsterdam: van Soest, 1961) 86. He claims, in fact, that: "...nearly every chapter of Hebrews reveals the peculiar features of the *Midrash pesh*. ..." (p. 75).

16 Translations of biblical texts throughout are taken from the NRSV.

it is marvellous in our eyes”? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it.’” Again, this passage does not include the word *peshet*, nor pick up on any specific words or phrases from the scriptural verses cited (Ps 118:22-23). It does, however, imply that the Psalm will be fulfilled in the future through something which occurs in the life of Jesus or his disciples, in a manner reminiscent of Qumran interpretation. This is significant in locating the New Testament in the wider context of Second Temple Judaism, but it is evidence of a shared exegetical presupposition, not necessarily a common hermeneutical method. These illustrations, therefore, encapsulate both the immense value of the Dead Sea Scrolls for a deeper understanding of the New Testament and at the same time the potential danger they pose for scholarly methodology if they lead to an uncritical “parallelomania” or an inaccurate use of terms. Terminology is always most helpful when it is used with precision and consistency, and the over-application of the label “peshet” (or similarly “midrash”) can lead to a failure to accurately explain the use of scripture in the New Testament, or to fully recognise the differences between it and Qumranic or rabbinic interpretation.¹⁷

A second genre represented at Qumran which has perhaps attracted less attention than the *pesharim* but which is also of value for understanding New Testament scriptural interpretation is the florilegia or testimonia collection (4QFlor, 4QTest, 4QCatena^a; cf. also 4QTanḥumim). In these texts, a number of short extracts from different sections of scripture are grouped together, presumably on the basis of a common theme; 4QTestimonia, for example, is often described as a messianic anthology.¹⁸ Their discovery has re-opened the question of whether the New Testament authors may have drawn on similar kinds of “testimony books” when composing their writings. This proposal was originally put forward almost one hundred years ago by James Rendel Harris,¹⁹ who pointed to the difficulties attaching to accessing cumbersome and expensive scriptural scrolls in the first century CE; to the citation of the same Old Testament passages in several early Christian sources; and to the use of

17 Examples of the possibly unhelpful use of this terminology include: Ellis, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament*; and D.F. Leschert, *Hermeneutical Foundations of Hebrews: A Study in the Validity of the Epistle's Interpretation of Some Core Citations from the Psalms* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1994).

18 See e.g. the title given to this text in G. Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (London: Penguin, 1997) 495; cf. D. Dimant, “Qumran Sectarian Literature,” in *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period* (ed. M.E. Stone; Assen: Van Gorcum/Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 483-550, p. 518.

19 J. Rendel Harris and V. Burch, *Testimonies* (2 vols.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1916 and 1920).

composite or wrongly attributed quotations, such as Matt 27:9-10, where a text referring to thirty pieces of silver is ascribed to Jeremiah, when it is actually taken largely from Zech 11:12-13, with echoes of other verses from Jeremiah and Exodus. Rendel Harris' ideas were not widely taken up, mainly because there was no evidence for the existence of anthologies of scriptural excerpts before the patristic period, when they are clearly attested. Although his hypothesis is unproven and remains problematic in some respects, the fact that it can now be stated with certainty that at least one Jewish group did produce lists of citations on a particular theme before the New Testament era clearly adds useful new information to this debate. His work has been revisited more recently in the light of both the Dead Sea Scrolls and Graeco-Roman literature by Martin Albl, who concludes that: "The burden of proof now lies with those who would deny that Christians used written scriptural collections beginning in New Testament times."²⁰ At the very least, this Qumran material should inform discussion of passages like Heb 1:5-13, where seven scriptural citations are presented in quick succession, with very little intervening exposition.²¹ It also serves to further reinforce the need for commentators to be acutely aware of the variety of forms in which scriptural texts may have been available to the New Testament authors, including in such extract collections.

4 Critical Issues: Interpretative Traditions

The third area in which the Jewish sources impact on New Testament Studies lies in the information they provide about exegetical traditions current in the late Second Temple period. It is now widely accepted that the early Christians did not approach the scriptures in a vacuum, but rather that their understanding of them was shaped by a long history of Jewish interpretation.²² This shared exegetical tradition is in evidence, firstly, in the identification of key passages and themes. There is, for instance, a significant overlap between the scriptural

20 M.C. Albl, *"And Scripture Cannot be Broken": The Form and Function of the Early Christian Testimonia Collections* (Leiden: Brill, 1999) 287.

21 See further the discussion of Hebrews chapter 1 in S.E. Docherty, *The Use of the Old Testament in Hebrews* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009) 144-179.

22 This Jewish exegetical tradition has been the subject of a number of important studies; see e.g.: M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985); J. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998); G. Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism: Haggadic Studies* (2nd ed.; Leiden: Brill, 1983).

books referred to most often in the New Testament and those which were apparently most popular or regarded as particularly authoritative at Qumran, according to indications such as the number of copies found in the caves and the frequency of reference to them in sectarian writings. Thus Genesis, Deuteronomy, Isaiah and the Psalms seem to have formed for both groups a kind of “canon within the canon,” to use an anachronistic term.²³ Furthermore, many of the specific texts selected for citation in the New Testament had clearly raised questions for earlier interpreters, as they are discussed elsewhere in the extant Jewish literature. The Dead Sea Scrolls, for example, reveal that the Qumran community applied to themselves scriptural verses which the followers of Jesus would later claim were fulfilled in them, such as Jeremiah’s promise of a new covenant (Jer 31:31-34; CD VI, 19; VIII, 20-21; XIX, 33-34; Heb 8:7-13; 10:15-18; cf. also *Jub* 1:18), or, as discussed above, Habakkuk’s words about the righteous person living by faith (1QpHab VII, 17-VIII, 3; Hab 2:4; Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11; Heb 10:38). They also understood their decision to separate themselves to some extent from society and spend their time in study of the law as “preparing the way of the Lord in the wilderness”, a description based on exactly the phrase from Isaiah (Isa 40:3) which is used of John the Baptist in the gospels (1QS VIII, 12-16; Matt 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4). This evidence suggests that the interest of the New Testament authors in particular scriptural passages may have been prompted not only—or not always—by their suitability for appropriation as proof-texts, but also by a real difficulty or ambiguity within the text itself which similarly exercised other Jewish readers. Early Christian use of the scriptures should, therefore, be regarded as genuine exegesis and not simply as an exercise in christological reading. This recognition challenges contemporary commentators to look hard for something *within* a scriptural text cited in the New Testament which might have provoked an exegetical question, or led to the specific interpretation given. Some examples of how this approach might work in practice are included below in section 5. Significantly, current research in the field of Jewish Studies stresses that rabbinic and targumic interpretation is likewise rooted in a close engagement with the scriptural text.²⁴

23 See e.g. the discussion by G.J. Brooke, “‘The Canon Within the Canon’ at Qumran and in the New Testament”, in *The Scrolls and the Scriptures: Qumran Fifty Years After* (ed. S.E. Porter and C.A. Evans; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997) 242-266.

24 See e.g. D. Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990); A. Samely, *The Interpretation of Speech in the Pentateuch Targums: A Study of Method and Presentation in Targumic Exegesis* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992); and A. Samely, *Rabbinic Interpretation of Scripture in the Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Secondly, the Jewish exegetical tradition is influential in shaping the reading offered in the New Testament of scriptural figures. To take a particularly clear example, the exalted depiction in 11Q13 of Melchizedek, a rather shadowy character within the scriptures themselves, helps to explain the background of thought to passages like Hebrews chapter 7.²⁵ There are also some interesting correspondences between the infancy narratives in the early chapters of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke and the accounts of the births of significant figures like Moses and Samson given in the work of rewritten scripture known as the *Biblical Antiquities* of Pseudo-Philo. In this narrative, an angel is sent by God to Samson's mother, for instance, to tell her that she will conceive a child even though she was thought to be barren (*LAB* 42:1-3), and the birth of Moses and his future role as saviour of his people is announced beforehand in a dream to his sister Miriam (*LAB* 9:10). These parallels demonstrate a developing interest in tracing the greatness of scriptural heroes back to the very beginning of their lives, and they illustrate the wider Jewish context of the New Testament presentation of Jesus as a new Moses, and of John the Baptist as an Elijah-like or prophetic figure. Thirdly, the literary forms employed by the first Christians have also been influenced by previous exegetical literature. Since prayers, blessings and speeches are often created for leading characters in the genre of rewritten scripture, it is hardly surprising that these should occur also in the gospels and Acts. It is instructive to compare, for example, the reworking of Hannah's prayer in response to the birth of her son Samuel in the *Biblical Antiquities* (51:3-6) with the treatment of this same scriptural passage in Mary's song of praise, the Magnificat (Luke 2:46-55). A detailed analysis of the literary structures present in a large corpus of early Jewish texts has recently been undertaken in a significant research project led by Alexander Samely.²⁶

25 This Melchizedek tradition has been the subject of several influential studies, such as: J.A. Fitzmyer, "Further Light on Melchizedek From Qumran Cave 11," *JBL* 86 (1967) 25-41; F.L. Horton, *The Melchizedek Tradition: A Critical Examination of the Sources to the Fifth Century A.D. and in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); M. de Jonge and A.S. van der Woude, "11QMelchizedek and the New Testament," *NTS* 12 (1966) 301-326; and P.J. Kobelski, *Melchizedek and Melchiresa'* (Washington: CBA of America Press, 1981).

26 The project is called "The Typology of Anonymous and Pseudepigraphic Jewish Literature in Antiquity" and was conducted from 2007-2011 by Alexander Samely, in collaboration with Philip Alexander, Rocco Bernasconi and Robert Hayward. Further information can be found on the project website: <http://www.llc.manchester.ac.uk/research/projects/ancientjewishliterature/>, and a detailed account of the project's methodology and key findings is to be found in: A. Samely et al. *Profiling Jewish Literature in Antiquity: An Inventory From Second Temple Texts to the Talmud* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

The results of this innovative methodology demonstrate the potential for further investigation of the literary features characteristic of the New Testament and of their relationship to those employed in other Jewish writings.

Finally, the development of theological ideas from the Hebrew Bible to the New Testament period is often illuminated by close study of the Jewish sources. It is, for instance, possible that the early Christian understanding of the significance of Jesus' death was coloured by the interpretative tradition which grew up around the events of the *aqedah*, or binding of Isaac. Abraham's offering of his son apparently came to be regarded as having atoning value, even though no blood was actually shed, because of a growing emphasis on Isaac's willing acceptance of a sacrificial death: "... because he (Isaac) did not refuse, his offering was acceptable before me (God), and on account of his blood I chose them (the people of Israel) ..." (*LAB* 18:5; cf. 32:3; 40:2; cf. Josephus *Ant.* 1.13.2-4; Targum Jonathan on Gen 22:12; *b.Yoma* 5a; *Mekilta d'R. Shimon* 4).²⁷ The apocalyptic writing *4 Ezra* similarly demonstrates that Paul was not the only Jewish interpreter in the first century CE to speculate about the effects of Adam's sin on his descendants: "... for the first Adam, burdened with an evil heart, transgressed and was overcome, as were also all who were descended from him. ..." (*4 Ezra* 3:21; cf. Rom 5:12-14). The Qumran Messianic Apocalypse (4Q521) also offers a very interesting insight into the diversity of messianic expectation which characterised Second Temple Judaism.²⁸ This text combines exactly the same passages from Isaiah in its reflections on the role of the messiah as are found in the discussion of this question between Jesus and the disciples of John the Baptist recorded in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke: "... (for the heavens and the earth will listen to his anointed one ... For he will honour the pious upon the throne of an eternal kingdom, freeing prisoners, giving sight to the blind, straightening out the twisted) ... And the Lord will perform marvellous acts such as have not existed, just as he said (for) he will heal the badly wounded and will make the dead live, he will proclaim the good news to the poor ..." (4Q521 II, 7-12; cf. Matt 11:2-6; Luke 7:18-23; cf. Isa 29:18; 35:5-6; 61:1). Even more telling than the juxtaposition of identical scriptural verses is, however, the fact that the gospels and the Qumran text both envisage God's

27 This theme has been the subject of a recent study by L.A. Huizenga, *The New Isaac: Tradition and Intertextuality in the Gospel of Matthew* (Leiden: Brill, 2009); cf. J. Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac: A Study of the Epistle to the Hebrews in the Light of the Aqedah* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1981).

28 See e.g. J. Neusner, W.S. Green and E.S. Frerichs, eds., *Judaisms and Their Messiahs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); J.J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2010).

anointed one “raising the dead to life,” although this activity is not referred to at all in the underlying sections of Isaiah. As James Vanderkam concludes: “The two lists appear to be offering the same kind of reading and supplement to the Isaiah texts.”²⁹

A multitude of other examples could be offered to further demonstrate the extent of the influence of Jewish exegetical traditions on early Christianity. This point is widely accepted in scholarship today, leading to a much richer understanding of the New Testament writings, but its full implications are still not always appreciated. It should, however, remove any notion that early Christian interpretation was unique or derived *de novo*, and also transform attitudes to the widely-used term “christological exegesis.” Although the followers of Jesus certainly did come to their scriptures with a determination to find in them support for their faith in him, this designation is no longer sufficient to describe their use of the texts. It is now clear that this christological focus is only part of the picture, and that their exegesis is in equal measure a product of their rootedness in a long tradition of Jewish interpretation. As Maarten Menken has reminded us repeatedly in his work: “... Jesus’ followers ... read (the scriptures) as Jews around the turn of the era used to read them ...”³⁰ The commentators of the future, therefore, may wish to become engaged in studying the development in the Second Temple period of the scriptural themes reflected in the New Testament. Even more significantly, perhaps, they will also need to adjust their methodology in order to take seriously the challenge highlighted here to search for a reason *within* the scriptural passages cited themselves for the interpretation they receive.

5 Critical Issues: Exegetical Techniques

This challenge is further reinforced by an analysis of the specific exegetical techniques employed in the early Christian writings, which overlap in very considerable and interesting ways with those found in all the Jewish sources. Parallels with the rabbinic midrashim may, however, prove the most interesting for the future direction of New Testament Studies. The rabbinic literature has been dismissed in some strands of previous scholarship as late and representative of a very different kind of Judaism from that from which Christianity emerged. This view is beginning to soften in the light of the

29 See Vanderkam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Bible*, 129-130, where further relevant bibliography is to be found.

30 Menken, *Old Testament Quotations in the Fourth Gospel*, 11.

changing perceptions about the gradual nature of the “parting of the ways” alluded to above. It is generally accepted that, although in their current written form the rabbinic texts date from well after the New Testament period, they include a wealth of older exegetical material which was initially passed on orally and which therefore reaches back into the first century CE and beyond. Even so, many commentators still fail to appreciate the full extent of the signs of the Jewish heritage which are present throughout the New Testament, noting no shared exegetical features beyond *gezera shawa*, for instance. This attitude would surely be radically altered by serious engagement with the highly sophisticated research which has been undertaken in the last two decades into the midrashim and also the targumim. Within the field of Jewish Studies, contemporary scholars such as Alexander Samely³¹ are making use of aspects of the discipline of linguistics in seeking to identify and describe the full range of exegetical operations employed in rabbinic and targumic texts. Much which is of real relevance to students of the New Testament can be learned from both the results of their analyses, and from the methodological precision which they bring to their task. The potential application of their approach will be illustrated here by some examples relating to the scriptural citations in Hebrews.

Hebrews is one of several New Testament writings in which the words of scriptural texts are attributed to, or referred to, Christ. Samely has demonstrated that this practice of allocating a new speaker or referent to a scriptural passage is widespread in rabbinic interpretation, and involves the specification of the speaker, or addressee, or time of utterance of words which appear ambiguous or undetermined in their original context, especially where they contain first person direct speech. This exegetical method is paralleled in the works of rewritten bible, where a speech from one part of scripture can be put into the mouth of a figure from a different period, illustrating an underlying axiom of scriptural coherence and inter-connectedness. Jeremiah's protest at the time of his call, for instance, that he is too young to be a prophet (Jer 1:6) is ascribed in the *Biblical Antiquities* to Saul when he is chosen by Samuel as Israel's king (*LAB* 56:6). There is, then, considerable scope to extend Samely's methodology to an investigation of the scriptural interpretation in

31 See especially Samely, *Interpretation of Speech in the Pentateuch Targums and Rabbinic Interpretation*. Samely is himself influenced by the work of the German rabbinic scholar, Arnold Goldberg; for an introduction to his approach, see: A. Goldberg, “The Rabbinic View of Scripture,” in *A Tribute to Geza Vermes: Essays on Jewish and Christian Literature and History* (ed. P.R. Davies and R.T. White; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990) 153-166; and M. Schlüter and P. Schäfer, eds., *Rabbinische Texte als Gegenstand der Auslegung. Gesammelte Schriften II* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999).

non-rabbinic texts, including the books of the New Testament. For example, the words of Deut 32:43 seem to be a general call to praise God when read on their own, but in Heb 1:6 they are given a specific new context and said to have been spoken by God "... when he brought the first-born into the world . . .," so that they ultimately relate to Jesus. In Heb 8:5, too, it is stated that God's instructions about furnishing the tabernacle were given at the point when Moses was about to erect it, although the underlying Exodus narrative (Exod 25:1-40) does not give any indication of how long a gap elapsed between the reception of these directions and their execution. The allocation of this precise new time of speaking, however, enables the author of Hebrews to suggest that from the very moment of its inception, the tabernacle was understood as something imperfect, because it was only a copy of the heavenly sanctuary.

Another exegetical operation identified by Samely as occurring frequently in the midrashim is the interpretation of a scriptural word narrowly in only one of its possible senses.³² This technique is present also in Hebrews, where, for example, the scriptural term "rest" (Ps 95:11) is interpreted precisely as "sabbath rest" in Heb 4:9. This specific meaning for a word is often reinforced by surrounding it with new co-text. In Heb 13:15, for instance, there is an allusion to Ps 50:14, which calls on worshippers to offer God "a sacrifice of praise." This kind of "sacrifice" is equated in the next verse with "doing good and sharing what you have" (Heb 3:16). The subtle blend of allusion and the author's own words creates the impression that scripture itself provides the definition of "sacrifices" which is given. This emphasis on individual words from a citation is very characteristic of early Jewish hermeneutics, in which every letter of scripture is regarded as true and significant. It is reflected also in the way in which terms and phrases are often understood in a very literal sense. A law may be interpreted as applying only to children, not to adult males or women, for example, if the scriptural verse used to support it refers to "sons": "A stubborn and rebellious son"—From when can he be deemed a 'stubborn and rebellious son'? From the time that he produces two hairs until he grows a beard, the lower one and not the upper one . . . for it is said, 'If a man have a son'—a son and not a daughter, a son and not a man . . ." (*mSan* 8:1; cf. Deut 21:18).³³ This exegetical method is termed an "opposition resource" by Samely, and it may be employed in Hebrews also. Jeremiah's promise of a "new" covenant is read as implying the passing away of its opposite, the "old" covenant (Heb 8:13), for instance, and the scriptural description of Moses as God's "servant" is explicitly

32 See Samely, *Rabbinic Interpretation*, 359-391.

33 This example is taken from Samely, *Rabbinic Interpretation*, 288.

contrasted with Jesus' position as something other than a servant, that is a "son" (Heb 3:1-6; cf. 1:1-4).

These parallels between midrashic and New Testament use of scripture add weight to the argument made in the previous section of this paper that it is not sufficient to describe early Christian interpretation only as "christological" in its focus and approach. The influence of the Jewish tradition is evident in the exegetical methods employed by the first followers of Jesus, as well as in the readings offered of particular scriptural verses, and there are clear cases of the author of Hebrews being prompted by the same kind of textual difficulties as those which exercised other Jewish interpreters. For example, his definition of "rest" as specifically "sabbath rest" may have been motivated partly by the desire to resolve an apparent contradiction in scripture by explaining that the term means something other than entry into the promised land. This is because the Psalm text states that "...they shall never enter my rest..." (Ps 95:11; Heb 3:11), yet according to the Book of Numbers, some of the wilderness generation, namely Caleb and Joshua, were allowed to set foot in Canaan (Num 14:24, 30).³⁴ Similarly, the Hebrew underlying the citation from the Septuagint of Ps 2:7 in Heb 1:5 may have been the subject of earlier exegetical interest: the Greek word γεννηκα, translated as "begotten" in most English versions, represents a *qal* form of the Hebrew verb ילד. This stem is generally reserved in Hebrew for a woman giving birth to a child, and only rarely used in the sense of a male "begetting" offspring, which is normally described by means of the *hiphil* stem of ילד.³⁵ Previous discussion about the unusual choice of verb form in this verse may, then, have made possible the view of the author of Hebrews that it pointed to a unique father/son relationship between God and Jesus.

There is thus no doubt that the midrashim offer a valuable source of information about both the tradition of interpretation and the resource-pool of hermeneutical techniques which the early Christian authors inherited, thereby serving to explain important aspects of the argument of many New Testament writings. The methodology which is currently being developed to investigate the rabbinic literature also offers an important challenge to biblical scholars to adopt an approach which is similarly precise, text-focused, and able to accurately describe the individual exegetical operations employed in the

34 For further explanation of this passage in Hebrews, see S.E. Docherty, "Moses in Hebrews," in *Portraits of Moses* (ed. G.J. Steyn and D.J. Human; New York/London: T&T Clark, forthcoming).

35 F. Brown, S.R. Driver and C.A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (reprinted ed.; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996) 408.

New Testament. Careful study of rabbinic interpretative methods is also very useful in highlighting more clearly any unique aspects of early Christian exegesis. So, for instance, the way in which the author of Hebrews employs allusions from a range of scriptural passages to introduce his citations, as at Heb 1:1-4 or 3:1-6, is not a feature of the rabbinic literature, nor is his tendency to repeatedly quote and allude to the same scriptural text, such as Ps 110:1, 4 or Jer 31:31-34.

6 Conclusions and Future Directions

The significance of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Pseudepigrapha and the rabbinic literature for illuminating the use of scripture in the New Testament is not in doubt, as these sources unquestionably provide invaluable information about the long tradition of interpretation which the early Christians inherited, and about the forms of the scriptural text in circulation in the first century CE. Concrete examples have been offered here of the use in the New Testament and early Jewish writings of common exegetical techniques, conclusions and genres. Such shared features include some overlap in the passages selected for citation, in the presentation of scriptural figures such as Melchizedek, and in the understanding of prophetic texts. In particular, this paper has argued for the application to the New Testament of a sophisticated and rigorous approach to analysing hermeneutical methods of the kind currently being developed by researchers in the field of Jewish Studies. This has resulted in the identification of some of the exegetical techniques employed in the Epistle to the Hebrews, such as the specification of a new speaker, addressee or time of utterance for a text, and the placing of narrow limits on the meaning of a scriptural word. This kind of precise and deep investigation will inevitably lead to a fuller understanding of how the New Testament authors went about their interpretation of scripture, and to a greater degree of clarity about the parallels and differences between early Jewish and early Christian exegesis.

Equally importantly, this paper has sought to go beyond an up-to-date account of the *status quaestionis* to prompt a consideration of the challenges which a close engagement with the early Jewish literature raises for the methodology and future direction of New Testament scholarship. Its main conclusion in this area is that the implications for New Testament study of the evidence of the Jewish texts need to be taken far more seriously. The new appreciation of the extent of textual fluidity in the Second Temple period which has been confirmed by the Dead Sea Scrolls, for instance, should lead to a transformation in attitude to any differences between the form of a scriptural citation in the New Testament and the standard Septuagint version. Not only does the strong

likelihood of the availability of variant readings have to be recognised in these cases, but the possibility has also seriously to be entertained that an author's first interpretative move may lie in the deliberate selection of one form of the text over others. This study has further demonstrated that terms like "pesher" and "midrash" should be used with precision, and not applied indiscriminately to sections of early Christian writings in which, on close analysis, scriptural citations are not being treated in exactly the same way as in the Qumran material or rabbinic literature. Of particular importance is the claim made here that New Testament scriptural interpretation, like other forms of early Jewish exegesis, was in large part a response to perceived difficulties within the text, which challenges commentators to regard it as something more than purely "christological" exegesis. New Testament scriptural interpretation is best understood then, within the wider context of early Judaism, as the first followers of Jesus commented on the same texts as other first century Jews, reading them in the light of the same interpretative tradition, and applying to them many of the same exegetical techniques, as they engaged in essentially the same task of making God's word as spoken in the scriptures relevant and meaningful to the communities for whom they wrote.