

Unit 7

Jewish Interpretation

Jews and Christians relate partly to a similar set of texts as their Holy Scriptures. Although what the Jews call Tanakh and the Christians call the Old Testament or the Hebrew Scriptures are not identical there is a wide range of traditions cherished by both religions. It is nevertheless not surprising that Jews and Christians and therefore Jewish and Christian biblical scholars read the Tanakh/Hebrew Scriptures differently, as they are rooted in traditions which have developed in divergent ways over centuries. Rabbinic insights are the traditions from which Jewish scholars most likely are drawing whereas Christian scholars are more informed by New Testament texts as well as later doctrinal traditions. This is not to deny that in each tradition there is a growing knowledge of the others' rich traditions and history. It is more and more recognized that these differences rather than being a source of acrimony can contribute to respect and understanding as well as to stimulating a creative and continuous discussion among scholars as well as believers. Most Jewish interpretive approaches are related to the tradition of Rabbinic interpretation. Although the Rabbinic 'movement' proved to be the decisive force in the consolidation process of Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple these interpretive traditions are rooted in earlier methods and ways of living with the Scriptures. As evidenced in Rabbinic literature (Talmud and Midrash) Jewish Sages developed a way of preserving tradition (the written Torah) in conjunction with interpretive flexibility. Scripture is interpreted via Scripture and thus related to issues of the contemporary life of the community (Oral Torah). The nature of the Oral Torah is viewed differently by different Jewish traditions as David Weiss Halivni notes 'The *maximalist* position claims that God revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai the entire oral Torah consisting of all the legitimate arguments for, and all the legitimate solutions to, every issue that may arise, including 'the comments that an astute student will someday make in the presence of his teacher'. Humanity merely needs to uncover them....The *intermediary* position claims that God revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai all the legitimate arguments of every issue that may arise but not their solutions. The solutions were left for human beings to offer, and whatever they offer becomes part of 'the words of the living God.'.....Contradictions are thus built into revelation. Revelation was formulated within the framework of contradiction in the form of argumentation pro and con.....The *minimalistic* position claims that God revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai directions for humanity to follow and principles to implement, but not detailed stipulations.....(it) presents humanity with the opportunity, and authority, for the fleshing out of halakhic arguments and details from directorial principles.' ('Plain Sense and Applied Meaning' in P.Ochs (ed.), *The Return to Scripture in Judaism and Christianity: Essays in Postcritical Scriptural Interpretation*. New York: Paulist Press 1993, p.120-21).

In as much as Jewish interpretation differs from Christian approaches the two traditions did not develop entirely separately at all times and in all places. The close relationship of what developed eventually into two separate religions can be demonstrated within the New Testament itself and in later times by interactions between people from both traditions (at certain times and places joined by Islamic textual interpretation). This is not the place to enter into a detailed outline and

discussion of these interpretive conversations but it is important to pay attention to their role and significance in any history of biblical interpretation. More recently in addition to the traditional Rabbinic approaches to interpretation Jewish scholars have embraced methods of critical interpretation to the Scriptures. This has led to another field of scholarly conversation over interpretation. The application of the same methods by members of different faith communities demonstrates the significance of reflecting on hermeneutical presuppositions and the social location of interpretation in a fundamentally new way.

Thus to acquire knowledge of Jewish approaches to the Scriptures is an important aspect in learning about Biblical Interpretation in the 21st century.

Essential Readings:

- **Michael Fishbane**

From 'Introduction' in *The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1998, pp. 1-5.
- **Jon D. Levenson**

'Why Jews Are Not Interested in Biblical Theology' in Jon D. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox 1993, pp. 33-61.
- ** Marc Zvi Brettler**

'Biblical History and Jewish Biblical Theology' in *The Journal of Religion*, Vol 77/4 (1997) pp. 563-83.
- **Tikva Frymer-Kensky**

'The Emergence of Jewish Biblical Theologies' In *Jews, Christians, and the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures*. Alice Ogden Bellis, Joel S. Kaminisky eds. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature 2000, pp. 109-121.
- **Emmanuel Levinas**

'On the Jewish Reading of Scriptures', In *Levinas and Biblical Studies*. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, et.al. eds Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature 2003, pp. 17-31.
- **David Weiss Halivni**

'Overcoming Maculation' in *Revelation Restored: Divine Word and Critical Responses*. London: SCM Press 2001, pp. 47-74.
- **Deena Copeland Klepper**

'First in Knowledge of Divine Law: The Jews and the Old Law in Nicholas of Lyra's Romans Commentary' in W.S. Campbell, P.S. Hawkins, B.D. Schildgen (eds.) *Medieval Readings of Romans*. London, New York: T&T Clark 2007, pp. 167-81.

Stefan C.Reif

Aspects of the Jewish Contribution to Biblical Interpretation
In Barton J. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998, pp143-159

Further Readings:

Kathy Ehrensperger

'First-Century Jewish Interpretation of Scriptures' in *That We May Be Mutually Encouraged: Feminism and the New Perspective in Pauline Studies*. London, New York: T&T Clark 2004, pp.65-92.

Jon D. Levenson

The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox 1993.

Michael Fishbane

The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1998.

Marc Zvi Brettler

How to Read the Jewish Bible. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006.

Alice Ogden Bellis,
Joel S. Kaminisky eds

Jews, Christians, and the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature 2000.