

The Exegetical Imagination
On Jewish Thought
and Theology

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Introduction

Rabbinic thought and theology are quintessentially Bible-based—whether they are explanations, interpretations, or allegories of their scriptural source. Through such means and methods, the written words of Hebrew Scripture have been extended since antiquity and given new voices for new times. For the latter-day interpreter of interpreters, it is precisely these modes of re-voicing that must be studied in order to understand how a second-order discourse derives from the first. This involves close attention to the texture of Scripture and to all the verbal conditions and nuances that elicit the exegetical imagination. Any jot or tittle may provide the occasion, just as any sound or image in the text may engage the inventive mind. The results follow their cause: the new “biblical” teachings are not abstract propositions, but forms of concrete discourse inspired by the shapes of Scripture. Change the citation and you change the exegesis; exchange the exegesis and new theology is the result. In another context, Thomas Mann spoke of *zeithaftes Leben*, of a textualized existence. The notion is applicable to Jewish exegetical thought as well. It too lives among the quotations.

As the ensuing discussions explore in detail, the exegetical imagination in Judaism rises and falls to the cadence of citations. For a given speaker, the words from one context call to mind like-sounding words from another, and new meanings are generated through their intertextual association. Another teacher may recontextualize the same words in an entirely different way. Exegetical locution is therefore locative from beginning to end, marking ever new tracings in the space of the text.

Culture calls these traces tradition and inhabits them as its latent or living mind.

There are many ways to approach the practical imagination of Jewish exegesis. For present purposes I wish to highlight the notion of *poesis* and the principle of similarity. The two are intertwined and constitutive elements of the exegetical theology to be examined in this book. By using the term *poesis* I mean to emphasize the fact that rabbinic exegesis is always "made," that every exegetical act is a conscious construction of meaning through the verbal conditions of Scripture. Indeed, for rabbinic culture, the sense of Scripture is never predetermined; rather, everything depends on creative readings of its inherent, God-given possibilities. Perceiving in this process the profound core of their own sacred universe, Jewish mystics in medieval times rightly said that interpretation creates a new heaven and a new earth for human habitation—again and again. The old masters of Midrash would agree; for them, too, the prolongation of scriptural speech through the exegetical imagination renews the world and gives it divine meaning. With this attitude Judaism elevates the creative act of interpretation to a type of *imitatio dei*.

The principle of similarity or equivalence is different, being a specific feature of the exegetical constructions themselves. Taking their stand within Scripture, separate acts of biblical interpretation are completed when one thing (be it a word or a phrase) is explained by means of another. This is the fundamental equation of exegetical procedure. At the micro-level of lexical sense, the guiding formula of equivalence is often stated explicitly: "this is (like) that"; but even on higher and more complex levels of textual interpretation, the goal remains the same. When one phrase is explained by another, despite all apparent differences at the verbal surface, the concluding proof-text is introduced by the words "this is what Scripture says," or their formulaic variations. Similarly, when a pentateuchal homily "opens" (as the texts say) with a particular passage from the Writings (the book of Psalms, for example, or Proverbs), the apparent remoteness or difference of this passage from the target verse in the Torah only teases the listener to anticipate a closure of this gap through mediating rhetorical strategies. This sense of expectation is one of the many pleasures of Midrash.

At the macro-level of interpretation, then, intertextual dissimilarities are adduced in order to reveal deeper scriptural correlations. Similar letters in different words serve as the outer signs of more profound links;

verbal tones elicit unexpected puns and semantic possibilities; numerical patterns and anagrammatical features yield surprising connections; and metaphors used for human purposes may be transmuted into concrete images of divine affect or action. In all, a vast network of convergences allows parts to explain wholes, and vice versa. Significance is thus omnipresent in the textual signs, and only awaits attentive discovery (or recovery) for older teachings to be renewed or altered. By these means Scripture interprets Scripture, as the sages said; and a related dictum in the Jerusalem Talmud follows the principle that words poor in possibility in one place may be enriched by others from other places. The intertextual linkage between all parts of the canon is an essential truth for the rabbis, and they show it again and again through endless chains of equivalents.

Similarity is also the constitutive feature of such rhetorical genres as the parable or the example. Woven into an exegetical discourse, these analogical forms function to explain something in Scripture (whether the text itself or its interpretation) by a fictive episode that is said to "resemble" it. The rhetorical question, "to what does this matter compare?" opens up a hermeneutical space in which similarity is imagined. It does not matter that the elements compared may be on fundamentally dissimilar planes of existence—as when divine acts are compared to those of a human king, or divine pathos is expressed through even more humble life forms. Rather, a dynamic correlation is established between the analogy and the text that not only bridges the space between them but allows features of the earthly episode to penetrate the realm of theology. In this way the emotional or dramatic realism of the parable affects the meaning of Scripture in unexpected ways. The significance of a simile is thus that life serves to explain the text, and it gives a concreteness or directness to the text which it might otherwise not have. In a parable on parables found in the Midrash, analogies are said to be like ropes that lower a bucket into a well: without explanatory images the interpreter would often be stymied by the text, and the waters of Torah would be inaccessible. The strategy of likeness thus serves to explicate Scripture—and even to draw a connection between its truths and those of everyday reality.

Seen in terms of the principle of similarity, the work of exegesis may be said to create strategies of intertextual conversion. But a higher conversion remains: the exegetical construction of reality and the transforma-

tion of the culture into the images produced by that exegesis. Thus, beyond the strategies of law and legal practice, interpretation redefines the theological values of Scripture and orders them as ideals for life. Love and death and joy are not just aspects of one's natural being, but values to be enacted in idealized ways. The shapes in which one may imagine death and regard it as a goal or value are therefore constructed by the exegetical imagination; in a similar way, the ideals of joy are articulated and transmitted through theological interpretation. Consequently, the world of the text serves as the basis for the textualization of the world—and its meaning. Through exegesis new forms arise, and the content varies from one teacher to another. What remains constant is the attempt to textualize existence by having the ideals of (interpreted) Scripture embodied in everyday life. This process of world-making is the ultimate poesis of the exegetical imagination, even as the conversion of the biblical text into life is the culmination of the principle of similarity.

There is one further point to be addressed here, and that is the attempt to retrieve past acts of exegetical imagination by later interpreters. Several paragraphs earlier I referred to the need for attentiveness—attentiveness to the texture of the text the exegetes interpret, along with its patterns and forms, so as to understand the exegetical imagination at work. This involves a two-tiered notion of *Verstehen*, or understanding of the text. At the first level, the modern interpreter of interpreters must let the discourse being analyzed determine his understanding of its sense. The poesis of the older exegetes must be the guide here. To by-pass this process is to ignore the patterns of exegetical thinking preserved in the text, and thus, possibly, to misconstrue its emphases or degrees of literalness. The task for the interpreter is therefore to examine carefully the exegetical reasoning manifest in the text at hand—in the thickness of its citations and expression—and re-imagine the earlier exegete's habit of mind. Only thus will a truly historical theology be retrieved.

I emphasize the imaginative aspect of the scholarly task because the modern interpreter is already engaged in a third-order discourse. This is the other aspect of *Verstehen* that needs to be specified. The new voice of the contemporary scholar is no more the voice of the old interpreters than theirs was the primary voice of Hebrew Scripture. Like its predecessors, this new voice is also engaged in prolonging the words of the ancient text—despite the new language and contexts in which it speaks. Scholarly discourse may therefore rightly be seen as a kind of super-

commentary, analyzing texts with the ideas and methods of one's own historical situation, and integrating them into new orders of significance. Accordingly, the ideal may be to approximate an authentic double-voicedness: to speak about the text with an intimacy and understanding achieved through philological persistence, but in a voice that is also shaped by the conceptions and concerns of one's own time and place. I do not believe that the older interpreters did any less, in their own way. It is therefore a renewal of their double-voicedness that I have tried to achieve in this book, and in so doing, to prolong the voices of Scripture through my own exegetical imagination.

The chapters of this book follow a double course. Broadly speaking, the first part (Chapters 1–6) offers a series of studies in ancient Jewish speculative theology, which takes its form through midrashic exegesis and mythopoetic images. Both are concrete features of this textual thinking. They arise from the texts and speak between them. Without this guideline, so to speak, the teachers would not speak authentically and their teachings would not be biblical. For that is the pivotal paradox: the sages produce Jewish theology as the meaning of Scripture. This rabbinization of Torah is thus one side of a double mirror; the other is the biblicalization of Judaism. Accordingly, it seemed right to open with a chapter dealing directly with the hermeneutics of Midrash and how meaning is made in Scripture. Subsequent chapters give examples of how ancient rabbinic theology is generated and justified by exegesis. Each chapter is typical of the concerns of the rabbis and takes up a selected topic: divine pathos for Israel (Chapter 2); divine dramas at the beginning and end of time (Chapter 3); speculations on the status of Israel and the mystery of God (Chapter 4); and theologies of messianic pathos (Chapter 5). As many of these essays reveal different layers of mythic theology, dramatizing divine concern and action in concrete ways, this part concludes with a more conceptual discussion of the stages of mythmaking in Jewish thought and its textual assumptions (Chapter 6). This discussion also serves as a bridge to the chapters that follow, where diverse layers of exegetical theology are taken up in a different way.

While the separate discussions of this first Part may be read independently, they are nevertheless integrated at several levels. First and foremost, these chapters demonstrate the thick texture of ancient Jewish