
Slowly taking shape is a community of postcritical interpreters for whom returning to the biblical text embodies, beyond all scholarship, a living relationship with God and humankind.

Peter Ochs

Returning to Scripture: Trends in Postcritical Interpretation

"And Thou, O Lord, how long? How long, Lord; wilt thou be angry forever? Remember not our former iniquities." For I felt that I was still bound by them....Such things I said, weeping in the most bitter sorrow of my heart. And suddenly I heard a voice from some nearby house, a boy's voice or a girl's voice, I do not know: but it was a sort of sing-song, repeated again and again. "Take and read, take and read." I ceased weeping and immediately began to search my mind most carefully as to whether children were accustomed to chant these words in any kind of game, and I could not remember that I had ever heard any such thing. Damming back the flood of my tears I arose, interpreting the incident as quite certainly a divine command to open my book of Scripture and read the passage at which I should open...I snatched [the Apostle's book] up, opened it and in silence read the passage upon which my eyes first fell: "Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and impurities, not in contention and envy, but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ and make not provision for the flesh in its concupiscences" [Rom. xiii, 13]. I had no wish to read further, and no need. For in that instant, with the very ending of the sentence, it was as though a light of utter confidence shone in all my heart, and all the darkness of uncertainty vanished away.

— From Augustine's account of his conversion, in the *Confessions*.¹

Rosenstock's affirmation of religious faith led him to renounce his ancestral Judaism and convert to Christianity...Rosenzweig, however, hesitated. He explained that he wanted to enter the church as a conscious Jew such as Saul of Tarsus. Thus, in preparation for his conversion, he attended that autumn the Jewish High Holiday services, finding his

PETER OCHS is Wallerstein Associate Professor and Director of Jewish Studies at Drew University in Madison, N.J. The themes of this essay are further developed and illustrated in the collection he has recently edited, *The Return to Scripture in Judaism and Christianity, Essays in Postcritical Scriptural Interpretation* (Paulist Press, 1993).

way for the Day of Atonement to a traditional synagogue in Berlin. At the conclusion of the day of fasting, prayer, and repentance, he wrote his cousin Rudolf Ehrenberg: “after prolonged, and I believe thorough, self-examination, I have reversed my decision. It no longer seems necessary to me, and therefore, being what I am, no longer possible. I will remain a Jew.”² Having witnessed a traditional Day of Atonement, Rosenzweig concluded that Judaism was not spiritually moribund as he and his friends had assumed.

Having made this decision, Rosenzweig set out with his characteristic attention to nuance and diligence to appropriate the spiritual and religious heritage of the Synagogue, a heritage that had been neglected in his parental home of self-conscious assimilation.

Rosenzweig became the focus and, indeed, fulcrum of a dramatic and cultural renaissance of German Jewry in the Weimar period. He taught this generation of post-World War I Jews how to read the sources of Jewish tradition, to encounter these sources without surrendering one’s intellectual integrity, and to engage them as religious texts that speak to one’s soul. He also taught them that in order to reclaim the spiritual reality of Jewish tradition one had to know it from within, that is, as he once put it, to know it “hymnically.”

— from Paul Mendes-Flohr’s account of the return to Judaism of Franz Rosenzweig, author of *The Star of Redemption* and colleague of Martin Buber, with whom he translated the Hebrew Bible into a living, vibrant German.³

Prologue: On Returning

Augustine and Rosenzweig present two great, poignant stories of religious return (*teshuvah*) or repentance in Western history — Christian and Jewish, ancient and modern. The reason so many of us remember these thinkers has to do with their return, but not because of its biographical poignancy. It is not because two men, even two very smart men, needed something more in their lives and found it in a biblical religion. We remember them because, before the return, they had submitted their considerable intellects to the regnant philosophies of the day — the Manicheans, Gnostics and Platonists for Augustine, the Kantians, Hegelians and idealists for Rosenzweig. Then, because these philosophies proved inadequate, they returned, despite their capacities to illuminate all sorts of questions about the technologies of everyday existence, the philosophical attempts to answer ultimate questions of value and meaning devolved into interminable debates between irreconcilable positions. When Rosenzweig and Augustine returned, however, they did not simply abandon their old philosophies, as if they had literally been born anew and had no reason to remember their pasts. Instead, they brought their philosophies along with them, bathing

them, you might say, in the transforming waters of *mikveh* or Baptism. Thus the philosophies were transformed along with them, contributing to their newly refound religions not only new persons, but also new theologies: neoplatonic or Hegelian philosophy revised and transformed into engines of scriptural inquiry and scriptural faith. In these new theologies, the old, exhausting debates of the philosophers were transformed into life-giving dialogues.

The importance of these two thinkers to so many people lies, I believe, in the fact that, by their example, they have had the power, in an earlier century or in this one, to draw two sides of us together. On the one hand, they serve as models of what we really feel about religious faith: that the reality of God is simply a fact of common sense, that this God is as near to us as a touch, that all the "high falutin" philosophies of the best minds of the day cannot change that fact, and that when these philosophies lose sight of this fact, they begin to fail, as well, at their own various enterprises. From this perspective, Rosenzweig's and Augustine's returns are from misleading abstraction back to reality. On the other hand, the uncommon grandeur of these thinkers' intellectual achievements gives us pause, as well, for an unexpected wonderment: is it possible, in this sad century, even more tumultuous than Augustine's, that we could regain not only our religious faiths, but also some faith in the power of reason? Not the kind of reason that those two found inadequate — the "official" philosophy of the day — but the kind they gained after their returns: the very best reasoning of their times resubmitted as an engine of common faith? Augustine and Rosenzweig tell us that, yes, this is possible, and that is why they have returned to study Scripture: the Bible speaks to them not merely of a simple faith, separated from the industries of this world, but also of a faith that can enlist the most powerful philosophies of this age in its service.

"Imagine this, then. What if, moved by such arguments, you turn from exclusive fascination with the philosophies of the day to the study of Scripture, but then find that the prevailing school of Bible scholars seems to teach you, by way of your scriptural study itself, to return to some version of the philosophies you've just left — not resubmitted as engines of scriptural faith but, to the contrary, reclaimed as rules for measuring the meaning and worth of Scripture?! This is what disciples of Rosenzweig or Augustine will experience today if they study Bible with the regnant leaders in the academic fields of biblical studies. They will not get classical or modern philosophy, per se, but they

will get what remains the regnant philosophy of academic inquiry: the historical-critical study of scriptural texts.

On the following pages, after briefly illustrating the philosophy of historical-critical study, I want to introduce you to an emerging family of Jewish and Christian scholars who were raised in that philosophy, but found it inadequate. They have not sought simply to abandon their scholarly heritage, however. Instead, reminiscent in this sense of Augustine and Rosenzweig, they have *brought their historical-critical methods of scriptural study themselves back to the scriptural texts*. The result is not to bring any new persons to Judaism or Christianity — for these scholars were already active members of their religious communities — but to contribute a means of rediscovering within the disciplines of academic study themselves the reasons that Augustine or Rosenzweig or any of us would want to study Scripture in the first place.

The Historical-Critical Method of Scriptural Study

While not its only architect, Benedict De Spinoza (1632–1677) offered the strongest early statement of the historical-critical method:

...the method of interpreting Scripture does not differ from the method of interpreting nature....For as the interpretation of nature consists in drawing up a history [=a systematic account of the data] of nature and therefrom inferring definitions of natural phenomena, so Scriptural interpretation necessarily proceeds by drawing up a true history of Scripture and from it...to infer correctly the intentions of the authors of Scripture....Everyone will advance without danger of error...if they admit no principles for interpreting Scripture...save such as they find in Scripture itself.⁴

As Moshe Greenberg notes, “this program promised a universe of discourse transcending partisanship by adopting for Scripture-interpretation the universally accepted canons of natural science.”⁵ In other words, scholars should study the Bible the way they study any other book, and they should study any book the way they study any natural phenomenon. They should, in sum, divide the Bible into what appear to be its natural elements or units and offer theories about how the elements were brought together, for what purpose, and by whom.

Now, this method was introduced for a good reason. According to Greenberg, it came in reaction to the theological axiom of medieval Christianity: “without insight gained from faith in the divine origin of Scripture, its message cannot be understood. Faith is rewarded by grace, whose light illumines the meaning of Scripture. A modern Catholic states the axiom as follows:

... The Church has always maintained ... that ... all natural knowledge ... will never succeed in understanding the Word of God as it should be understood. ... The vitally essential ... content of the divine message can be ... more clearly perceived by a simple and upright soul responding to God's call ... than by a very erudite and, humanly speaking, very acute scholar who is impervious to the things of God.⁶

Historically, *the product of this axiom has usually been an exegesis that puts into Scripture what ought to be believed rather than attending to what it says.*"⁷ The acute problem, according to rabbinic scholar Yosef Faur, is that those who held political as well as religious authority could take it upon themselves to determine, for their own reasons, just "what ought to be believed." Consider, he says, the *converso* Jews (Marranos) of the sixteenth century, whose families had suffered so much under the Spanish Inquisition. Many of them recognized that their Christian oppressors justified their oppressive rule on the basis of authoritarian readings of Scripture: "for the ecclesiastical leaders of medieval Christianity, religious authority derived from divine revelation and from authoritative interpretation of scripture. Those who sought to undermine ecclesiastical authority therefore began by questioning the authority of the biblical text and of its traditional interpretation."⁸ The *converso* thinkers (such as Francisco Sánchez, 1550–1623) were foremost among these questioners, and Spinoza was one of their descendents. To remove a potential source of political oppression, he sought to separate the realm of textual interpretation from the realm of political and ecclesial authority. The latter, he argued, is the realm only of *subjective opinion*; stripped of its political uses, the former may be accepted into the realm of objective inquiry. For an eighteenth-century thinker, this meant inquiry into nature, as the only realm free of human subjectivity.

For historical-critical scholars today, the model is no longer nature per se, but, rather, human history and the historical development of human literatures, studied from any one of several theoretical perspectives. Since the work of Graf and Wellhausen in the late nineteenth century, the dominant perspective has been documentary, or source criticism: the theory that the biblical text is a collection of different documents, each showing characteristic uses of words, style of composition, and theology, and each emerging from some particular historical context. Thus, for example, the creation stories show the hands of both the "Priestly" documents (Gen. 1:1–2:4) and the "Yahwist" (Gen. 2:4–24) documents; the latter offer us Ex. 19 and 33–34, but the "Elohist" documents provide part of Ex. 19 and also 20–24. In more recent

decades, source criticism has been refined through such perspectives as "form criticism" and "tradition history." Working out of folklore studies, form critics follow Hermann Gunkel in tracing different versions of the same story or law to different authors, identified by the characteristic forms of their versions.⁹ Tradition historians see the influences of different biblical traditions displayed within single episodes.¹⁰ Social historians, including Marxist interpreters, offer plausible theories about socio-economic interests that are displayed in the various traditions.¹¹ In general, these and several other historical-critical approaches share one interest: to read the biblical text as a composition whose various elements are witnesses to the intentions of a variety of authors working out of different historical contexts.

In the last two decades, historical-critical scholars have been challenged by a broad group of *literary* scholars who ask something like this: "Even if we were able — which we are not — to offer reliable theories about the *provenance* of various elements of the Bible, how would that help us appreciate the meaning or the force of the Bible *as it was redacted together*? Those who brought the various elements together, as well as those who canonized the product as a whole, sacralized the whole *in its very multiplicity of voices, styles and moods*. How are we to make sense out of that whole?" Joined by some tradition historians and "canonical critics," and stimulated early on by the "New Criticism," these literary scholars advocate, in response, their own practice of examining the Bible as a literary document in its own right, apart from its historical antecedents. Among them, for example, Robert Polzin argues that "it is worthwhile to remember that, whatever the historical process that gave rise to the present text, the compositional technique used to analyze these texts should be judged and evaluated primarily by the results it achieves."¹² In this way, all the arts and sciences of literary scholarship may now be applied to the Bible: examining rhetorical style, compositional technique, poetics, forms of narration, motifs, moods, and even innerbiblical hermeneutics — or the way that certain biblical texts present themselves as interpretations of other biblical texts.

As you may expect, the historians have a lot to say in response: above all, that historical study, alone, gives us evidence for choosing any one of a number of literary *hypotheses* about the biblical text over another. The literary critics reply that what the historians call "evidence" is just another way of *reading*, comparable to a literary theory except thinner in its textual grounding. The historians reply that the literary folks

are promoting a brand of relativism that renders all reading unreliable. Then the literary folk answer back, and so on.

Overhearing the debate, our Rosenzweigs or Augustines might protest, in so many words: "But these scholars are simply replaying the interminable arguments into which classical or modern philosophy devolved — between objectivists and subjectivists, rationalists and empiricists, conservatives and liberals. We returned to the study of Scripture to receive *answers to ultimate questions*, not to hear our questions played back to us!" There are folks of faith today who might interpret our friends' dilemma as evidence that the entire critical enterprise may be at best beside the point, at worst sacrilegious, and that Rosenzweig and Augustine should do their Bible learning strictly outside the academy, within communities of Jewish or Christian believers. This is, however, not the interpretation offered by the postcritical scholars I am about to introduce. For them, these various biblical sciences do honor to the divine word. The only question at hand is to what degree they may also obstruct additional ways of doing honor — including ways that reveal elements of the divine word that remain concealed in the dominant readings offered by the academy.

Postcritical Criticisms of Historical-Critical Study

Moshe Greenberg's objections to the historical-critical method typify the postcritical approach, as does his "holistic" alternative:

Standard critical procedure yields an analysis of the text that points up its tensions — according to history-oriented canons. The tension is resolved by separating the material into kernels and accretions whose combination allegedly produced the tension. But it is never demonstrated (it cannot be) that the tension was not there from the start, so that tension-less reconstruction may be an answer to a modern critical, but no proven ancient, canon of composition.¹³

As an alternative, he proposes

...a holistic interpretation, "emphasizing the organic or functional relation between parts and wholes"(Webster). As the religious person approaches the text open to God's call, so must the interpreter come "all ears" to hear what the text is saying. He [or she] must subjugate his habits of thought and expression to the words before him and become actively passive — full of initiatives to heighten his receptivity. For an axiom, he has the working hypothesis that the text as he has it has been designed to convey a message, a meaning. For if it does have design and meaning, they will be discovered only by effort expended to justify such an assumption. Readiness to find evidence of design and significance is the exegete's analogue to openness to hear God's word on the part of the faithful reader.¹⁴

The late Christian theologian, Hans Frei, offers an argument comparable to Greenberg's. In *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, he criticizes historical-critical scholars for attempting to locate some higher science of history and reason that can mediate disputes between those who dogmatically affirm the fact and character of biblical revelation and those who dogmatically deny our capacity to have any positive knowledge of such a thing.¹⁵ Such scholars, he argues, arrogate to themselves the authority to separate the language of the Bible from the facts — of history and moral truth — to which that language ultimately refers. In this way, the scholars tend ultimately to make their higher sciences higher than the Bible — higher sources, that is, for evaluating what the Bible says, what it says to do, and what it means. Frei's alternative, like Greenberg's, is to relocate the Bible's meaning within the biblical text itself. Following Erich Auerbach,¹⁶ he seeks to recover the premodern practice of reading the biblical text as "realistic narrative." The Bible is to be read as a collection of stories that are "history-like," not because they point outside themselves to some events more important than the Bible itself, but because they function for the community of biblical interpreters as history does, narrating the community's literary and religious inheritance and, thereby, shaping the way community members live their lives today.

A question Greenberg puts to his own holistic method, however, may also be put to Frei's notion of realistic narrative: "How can such an approach be guarded against uncritical acceptance of things as they are, and against reading in *ad hoc* explanations or making fanciful connections?"¹⁷ Greenberg's response is to "appropriate something of the historical [approach itself]" — namely, the attempt to infer from the text itself rules for how to interpret it.¹⁸ His method, thereby, includes historical reading, but as part of a more expansive enterprise to consider all the plausible meanings the words of the biblical text could have carried in what may most likely have been its literary, historical, and environmental settings, and *then* to ask, as well, what significance these meanings would have for *him*, as interpreter. He must be engaged, that is, as person as well as historical-textual scholar.

What lures him into this double jeopardy? The chance that he may discover the cause of the initial veneration of the Scriptures that he may experience the editor-canonizer as fellow intelligence. He requires more than a theoretical cause before discounting and disintegrating [the products of the ancient biblical author-editors and their transmitters]. He sees himself not so different from them as to be unable to appreciate what they did in terms at once native to them and meaningful to him.

The holistic interpreter is prepared to risk failure in order to establish the claim of his cultural heritage on its heirs.¹⁹

Frei's response is, similarly, to locate the meaning of a biblical text in the living relation between the text, read in its intrabiblical context, and what he considers its community of authoritative interpreters — scholars of the text, that is, who also participate in the church as a transhistorical community of believers.

Both Greenberg and Frei thus offer a means of return: from adopting patterns of reading borrowed from other literatures to finding patterns of reading that emerge from the biblical text itself. Scholars from the various schools of biblical study are bound to contest the claim, however, that postcritical inquiry somehow has more power than theirs to return them "to the text itself." One of the most significant challenges posed to postmodern scholarship is therefore to illustrate what this "return to the text" is all about. Michael Fishbane's work on what he calls "innerbiblical exegesis" responds powerfully to this challenge.

A Postcritical Reading

For Fishbane, the inadequacies of historical-critical reading illustrate more generally what he considers the dislocations of the modern reader. After Martin Buber, he calls this reader "the monologic self" — meaning a self left alone, after its break with traditional literatures, with nothing but its autonomy. Able to offer claims, but not to listen and hear, this isolated self tends to launch itself into perpetually one-sided inquiries that are bound to conflict, unproductively, with the "other side" that they have not yet considered. The perennial debates that define modern scholarship are a case in point: displaying the conflicting interests of inquiries that are either overly subjectivistic or objectivistic, either fideistic and personal or philosophical and impersonal. There is no mediation possible here, and no way out without a general cultural renewal. A return to Scripture offers a means of cultural renewal, however, because Scripture always remains an unspoken element of this modern culture, and because cultural renewal always remains an implicit dimension of the scriptural word. So, Fishbane offers a return to the scriptural word — not as a mere text to be invaded with this or that instrument, but as a living dialogue to reenter, gently, but with one's whole being. The literal words of Scripture are the means of entry — what, in the language of the kabbalah, Fishbane calls the "outer garments" of Torah.

Rabbi Simeon said: If a man looks upon the Torah as merely a book presenting narratives and everyday matters, alas for him! The Torah, in all of its worlds, holds supernal truths and sublime secrets. The tales related in the Torah are simply her outer garments, and woe to the man who regards that outer garb as the Torah itself, for such a man will be deprived of his portion in the next world.²⁰

If the words of Torah are outer garments, the modern reader should look within the garments to find the living dialogue.

Fishbane's means of laying bare the garments is to study the various ways in which the Bible interprets itself — the way one text explicitly interprets another. These ways — these patterns of innerbiblical exegesis — display to the modern reader patterns of the Bible's inner life. To enter that life, modern exegetes may first study the various patterns and then seek to imitate them as rules for their own, postmodern exegesis. According to the way I am reading this approach into Fishbane's work, this "imitation" is not literal: it means learning from the various patterns that were displayed in the biblical context comparable ways of rereading Scripture in *this* contemporary context.

In *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, Fishbane catalogues the various patterns as "scribal," "legal," "aggadic," and "mantological" — illustrated in a variety of interpretive techniques and strategies for which there is no single, overarching rule.²¹ The most overt cases of reinterpretation concern different versions of a single story or of legal codes (compare the permissions to eat meat in Gen. 9:1–7 with their absence in Gen. 1:24–26, the decalogue of Deuteronomy with that of Exodus, and so on). Against the backdrop of the modern themes of dislocation and loss, however, Fishbane's descriptions of *aggadic* (homiletical) responses to Israel's major cultural crises are particularly *a propos*. In order, in Fishbane's words, "to bridge the dislocations of the Israelite exiles," Jeremiah often emphasizes "the radical newness" of Israel's transhistorical process of transmission over against the obsolescence of those specific traditions that have now been lost.²² For example, in Jer. 3:16, the prophet dramatizes the absence of the Ark of the Covenant of the pentateuchal narratives, as if to anticipate its absence in Israel's exile: "And when you increase and are fertile in the land, in those days — declares the Lord — men shall no longer speak of the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord, nor shall it come to mind."²³ On other occasions, Jeremiah employs a different strategy emphasizing the continuity between old and new "as the sure link between memory and hope."²⁴ "Assuredly, a time is coming — de-

clares the Lord — when it shall no more be said, ‘As the Lord lives who brought the Israelites out of the land of Egypt,’ but rather, ‘As the Lord lives who brought the Israelites out of the northland, and out of all the lands to which He had banished them’” (Jer. 16:14–15). Here, the Egyptian exile of Exodus has become a type for all exiles, implying that the *redemption* from Egypt will become such a type as well.

While there is no one overarching rule of innerbiblical exegesis, there is a family of vaguely defined principles of conduct, which a given interpreter could see displayed through the various patterns of exegesis. I believe this “seeing” is the way readers may come to “imitate” the patterns in a modern context: to suppose that, if a given group of vaguely defined principles appears in *that* way in the Bible, then they might appear in *this* way here. Now each reader may tend to “see” the principles of biblical interpretation in a different way. On the one hand, this relativity is appropriate, since each reader is burdened with some particular concern and needs to apply the principles in a way that speaks to this concern. On the other hand, as Greenberg warned, readers also need some assurance that their reading is not merely subjective and thus, potentially, a misreading of what the Bible has to teach. Fishbane’s practice of reading illustrates a means of gaining assurance. In his case, as a Jewish scholar, it is to reread the vast corpus of classical rabbinic writings as a collection of exemplary practices of interpretation. (The Christian analogue, I trust, would be located in patristic or comparably instructive literatures, for example, the writings of Luther and Calvin.) In other words, Scripture displays the principles of interpretation; the rabbinic writings (Talmud and the various collections of *midrash*, or rabbinic scriptural interpretation) teach, by example, how to imitate the principles in one’s own interpretive context. Here is one lovely illustration of Fishbane’s studying the midrash in this way.

Displaying his concern to “bridge dislocations,” Fishbane is particularly alert to the rabbis’ attentiveness to prophetic teachings about suffering. He seems to suggest that prototypical acts of innerbiblical, as well as extrabiblical, exegesis are stimulated, above all, by suffering. In the essay, “Extra-Biblical Exegesis: The Sense of Not Reading in Rabbinic Midrash,” he describes how the rabbis’ own “mythopoetic” theological concerns — stimulated by the Bible’s inner life — guide their technique of reading various hidden meanings into the Bible’s garments or literal words. To illustrate the rabbinic theology of divine pathos, Fishbane notes how the homilist of *Exodus Rabbah* (XXX.24) rereads Isa.

56 1, "Thus said the Lord Observe what is right and do what is just, for soon My salvation shall come (*ki qeroba yeshu'ati lavo*) "

[The homilist] begins with a philologist's observation, "Scripture does not say '*your* salvation' (second person plural) but '*My* salvation ' ' And he adds 'May His name be blessed' For were it not [so] written [in Scripture], one could not say it " [the *derashah* continues] 'If you [Israel] do not have merit, I shall perform [the salvation] for My *own* sake (*bishvili*), for *kivyakhol* [as it were], as long as you are in trouble, I am with you, as it says [in Scripture]" I am with him (Israel) in trouble (*imo anokhi be-tzarah*) (Ps 91 15) ²⁵

God is with Israel in suffering, which means that God is with Israel *sufferingly*! "That is," says Fishbane, "in shared pathos" (28) The rabbinic technique of reading a scriptural passage "as it were" enables the homilist to read the Torah's inner message behind its explicit words God is with Israel sufferingly and *saved* with Israel's salvation A remarkable message for God's dialogue partner to hear in its time of crisis and dislocation — like today! And, should the message seem extra-biblical in its apparently inverting the literal sense of a given prophetic passage, we need only recall Jeremiah's own rereading of the literal sense of Israel's exile God will be here as God was there, in Egypt

For Fishbane, in sum, the rabbinic pattern of rereading is stimulated by Scripture's own patterns of rereading, and it, in turn, stimulates Fishbane's own rereading of the rabbis In Fishbane's postcritical interpretation, it is by rereading Scripture that the modern Jew (or Christian, we may add) will "observe what is right" and thus bring "My salvation " For the modern Jew's state of dislocation is that state of exile in which "I am with (Israel) sufferingly" — with Israel, literally, through the presence of this Scripture that remains in Israel's midst, that suffers in the absence of Israel's not-reading, and that is saved, as Israel is saved, when it is read again and thus reread

The modern Jew, or Christian, we have said, is one who reads Scripture only through the instruments of historical-critical inquiry As illustrated in Fishbane's reading, postcritical interpretation does not abandon modernity It does not therefore ignore historical-critical reading, nor its practice of dis-integrating the scriptural text into its purported elements Instead, it transforms this reading into patterns for uncovering the garments of Torah In Fishbane's case, this means to rediscover the patterns of innerbiblical exegesis through which these textual elements are seen to comment one on the other and thus to be inter-related, after all, as parts of a greater whole The reintroduction of the elements to one another is a return from exile, both for the ele-

ments and for the reader who is thereby returned not only to the Bible as a whole but also to him- or herself as an agent of active interpretation *and* to the community of readers in which that interpretation finds its antecedents, guides, and meaning.

Epilogue: Postcritical Reading as Return

We are informed that already in 1910, three years before the crucial year [of return] 1913, Rosenzweig rebelled against an over-emphasis on history as the sphere in which God reveals himself. . . . The law of Israel is not power and expansion, but the anticipation of eternity within life.²⁶

According to this observation of Nahum Glatzer's, Rosenzweig's return may correspond directly to the postcritical scholars' return from overstated historicism: in this case, attempts to reduce the Bible reader's relationship with God to discrete acts of observing how God's word may have spoken to particular communities at particular times. If so, to suggest that each side is offering simply a different way of explaining what given scriptural passages mean, as if these were simply two different, finite *instruments* for deciphering the scriptural code, is to misrepresent the postcritical debate with historical-critical scholarship. As the excerpt from Fishbane's work may illustrate, the postcritical scholar's return "to the text itself" is *not merely to that composition of letters you could see with your eyes on those parchments*. It is more helpful to say that the scholar has returned to participate in some relationship that is already ongoing among that composition *and* some community/tradition of interpreter/practitioners *and* the Author of that composition as a whole. According to the composition as a whole, this Author is "the Lord God," who speaks to the community/tradition of Israel by way of the words of this composition.²⁷ The return to the text is, in this sense, a means of participating once again in a tripartite relation among God, word, and community of interpretation (the three parts may be described in other ways as well). From this perspective, historical criticism, and other comparable sciences, offer appropriate information about one member of the relation — the word as it appears in the text of words on parchment. They may also offer information, at most, about aspects of two members — particular words in relation to particular communities. They offer their claims apart from this kind of three-part relation, however, which is the only relation that can warrant claims about "the meaning of the Bible" — or what some words of the Bible ultimately tell some community of persons to do or to believe. These sciences can therefore not answer the ultimate questions of

meaning and action that thinkers like Augustine and Rosenzweig ask. Scholars mislead people, or err, when they offer these sciences, alone, as means of answering such questions: it is like offering finite responses to infinite needs. The result is, at first, to launch one-sided inquiries that are bound to conflict with their “other sides” and, ultimately, to overstretch the finite to its breaking point — pushing any given study to its point of self-contradiction.

Phlegmatic folks may suggest that ultimate questions simply aren’t the kinds of question we should ask. There are, indeed, phlegmatic traditions to accommodate these folks. Biblical traditions are only very rarely numbered among these, however. Perhaps this is because biblical passages often have something to say about suffering and, if it goes far enough, suffering tends to raise ultimate questions — on behalf of both the sufferers and those who care for them. “What am I to do?” is one such question, which seems to become ultimate once the accustomed answers do not seem to work. Then the accustomed answers — for example, the philosophies of the day — get over-stretched, and, when they break, those who have stretched them may begin to look for answers elsewhere. When they look, however, no wholly new answers will be convincing enough to warrant ultimate trust, and the only alternatives may seem to be either despair, or else acquiring some wholly new way of looking. This is a way of relooking at the accustomed answers and asking, not what they ultimately say, but what they may ultimately conceal. Now, my reasoning is about to show its circularity, since to *disclose* what they conceal is to do so in the context of some relationship among text (here, the answers), author, and a particular community of interpreters, and I say this only out of the context of a community of *biblical interpreters* — and not just any community, but a community of *post-critical* interpreters. From out of that community, I learn to say that the accustomed answers conceal what we previously called a *fact of common sense*: that the God spoken of in Scripture is as near to us as a touch and that, since this God says “I am with you in suffering” (I read “you” in), then God is here with us behind this failed answer, and the answer is not just failed, but also an opening to the answer we seek. It may be, in fact, that many people from many traditions of interpretation will find this God behind their accustomed answers, when the answers fail: this need not be a “truth” available only to Bible readers. The point is, that it is only for this one community of readers that I can claim, for sure, that they will find God concealed in this way. For them, the Bible *interprets* failed answers that way.

If you ask, finally, what evidence I have that these readers will find God this way, I will in reply offer a version of my earlier narrative. This is a narrative about the experiences of two thinkers whose return to Scripture I have come to read as their means of rereading certain failed answers as the outer garments of an inner story about a redeemer God concealed behind sufferings. I have learned to read this way in light of the work of postcritical scholars of Scripture. In light of the experiences of Augustine and Rosenzweig, I have come, as well, to reread the post-critical response to the historical-critical method as a comparable way of returning to a concealed redeemer. In this reading, the "return to the text" is a more embodied return to the living relationship that binds God, text, and people.

Notes

1 Augustine, *The Confessions of St Augustine*, Book Eight, trans F J Sheed (New York Sheed & Ward, 1943), 178–79

2 Rosenzweig to Rudolf Ehrenberg, October 31, 1913, cited in Nahum Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig, His Life and Thought* (New York Schocken, 1953), 28

3 "Introduction," *The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig*, ed Paul Mendes-Flohr (Hanover and London University Press of New England for Brandeis University, 1988), 6–7

4 *Theological-Political Tractate*, first printing (1670), trans Elwes (New York, Dover, 1951), 99, adjusted to the translation of Wirzubski (Hebrew, Jerusalem Magnes, 1961), 79, cited in and with parenthetical note from Moshe Greenberg, "The Vision of Jerusalem in Ezekiel 8–11 A Holistic Interpretation," in *The Divine Helmsman Lou H Silberman Festschrift*, eds J L Crenshaw and S Sandmel (New York KTAV, 1980), 143–43 Among other early critics who anticipated Spinoza were the Jewish commentators Abraham Ibn Ezra (1152/3) and Joseph Albo (1350–1444), and the Christian Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) He was followed in this direction by de la Peyrère, Astruc, De Wette, Graf, and Wellhausen, among others

5 Greenberg, "Vision," 144

6 J Levie, *The Bible, Word of God in Words of Men*, trans from French by S H Treman (New York P J Kenedy, n d , imprimatur, 1961) 130f

7 Greenberg, "Vision," 143

8 "Sánchez' Critique of *Authoritas* Converso Skepticism and the Emergence of Radical Hermeneutics," in Peter Ochs, ed , *The Return to Scripture in Judaism and Christianity, Essays in Postcritical Scriptural Interpretation* (Mahwah, NJ Paulist Press, 1993), 268

9 Thus Gunkel asks out of what *Sitz im Leben* each of two different versions of the Jacob story could have been written the one in Gen 27, where Jacob flees home out of fear of his brother Esau, and the one in Gen 26, where Jacob leaves home at his mother's behest to find a suitable wife from among his kinfolk

10 As an example of this approach, Samuel Sandmel cites claims "that the Sinai episode comes from a body of tradition quite different from the Exodus experience" In *The Hebrew Scriptures* (New York Oxford, 1978), xi

11 See, for example, Norman Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible, A Socio-literary Introduction* (Philadelphia Fortress, 1985)

12 *Moses and the Deuteronomist* (New York The Seabury Press, 1980), 17

- 13 Greenberg, "Visions," 145
- 14 Ibid, 145–46
- 15 Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative, A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven and London Yale University Press, 1974) 60ff
- 16 Frei cites Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Princeton Princeton University Press, 1968)
- 17 "Vision," 146
- 18 Ibid
- 19 Ibid, 149
- 20 Zohar III 152 Translation from Zohar — *The Book of Splendor Basic Readings from the Kabbalah*, ed Gershom Scholem (New York Schocken Books, 1963), 121f Cited in Michael Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah* (Bloomington Indiana University Press, 1989), 34
- 21 Oxford Oxford University Press, 1985
- 22 *Biblical Interpretation*, 412
- 23 Fishbane labels the specific exegetical technique displayed here "correlation of polarities," since what is attributed to "those days" displaces what was said previous to those days Another technique is "interpolation," in which new values are read into older traditions for example, 2 Chron 15 3 reads the "ideal of Torah observance" (Fishbane, 423) into the monarchical narratives of Samuel-Kings "Israel has gone many days without the true God, without a priest to give instruction and without Teaching, but in distress it returned to the Lord"
- 24 *Biblical Interpretation*, 412
- 25 *Garments*, 27–28
- 26 Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig*, xxi
- 27 On one level, this capital-A "Author" may also be identified as the composition's Redactor, or the one who puts all the parts of the text together to mean what it means On another level, this Redactor may be identified with nothing less than a community/tradition of redaction, since redaction of the whole composition is inseparable from transmission of the whole and thus of the life of receiving/selecting/anticipating transmitting that animates that community/tradition On yet another level, this community/tradition of redaction must be reidentified with the God whose words it redacts, for it redacts these words only in response to the urging of what we may call some "rule" of redaction, and to speak of a rule that urges something is to speak of a rule-giver, which the composition calls God One alternative would be to say that there is no rule if so, however, there is also no composition as a whole, and we have only a collection of elements, to be studied, variously, by such sciences as historical criticism, literary criticism, and so on Another alternative would be to say that the community/tradition offers the rule, but this gets us into an infinite regress, since we then have to say that it offers the rule according to the urging of another rule, and so on So far, the alternatives are offered only according to the kind of set-theory that numbers members of sets as members of potentially infinite series, such as the series of rules of rules There are, to be sure, other theories of mathematical logic to use, but we should not be surprised if these offer more and not less support to the claim we are considering Cf Peter Ochs, "Scriptural Logic Diagrams for a Postcritical Mathematics," in *Modern Theology* (1993/4)

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