

INTRODUCTION

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Recent discussion of traditional Jewish forms of text interpretation has emphasized the parallels between valued forms of open-ended literary interpretation and Midrash Aggadah as exemplified in the Talmud. It is worthwhile, in this context, to insist again on the distinction between principled resistance to closure and covenantal hermeneutics. The attempt to describe this difference has been central to the work of Harold Fisch. The openness of interpretation discovered by various post-new critical structuralisms rests on the model of the grammatical contract, and derives from features of natural language grammars which are not necessarily features of the covenant that Fisch understands to govern biblical interpretation. Crucially, while aspects of the grammar of natural languages are innate and universal, a literary hermeneutic is more like a grammar of fashion or of telephone etiquette. Although it is largely tacit and is internalized by all members of a culture, it is neither innate nor universal. Furthermore, because the grammar of a language is detachable from the function or the intentionality of any speaker of the language, there is an infinity of possible recombinations among the subsystems of the language grammar and between the language and its changing functions. Any citation can always be reinscribed with a new meaning in a new context.

The covenant which installed the Jewish tradition of Talmud Torah (the learning of the law by interpretation), is considered to have been revealed at a specific and never to be repeated time in history. That revelation, accompanied by blasts of thunder and lightning and the blast of the shofar, was just about as far from tacit as could be. The text of Exodus records that the covenant was

explicitly and intentionally accepted by a specific population. Furthermore, its acceptance entailed the permanent and unnatural sign of its acceptance—the circumcision of all male children. The crucial difference between a contract that is a grammar and the contract that is the covenant becomes clear as the two are differently understood in relation to the texts to which they give meaning.

Meaning in a literary contract may derive from (be satisfied by) narrative closure, often in the form of genre conventions. The beginning predicts the end, as Frank Kermode described it in *The Sense of an Ending*. In this understanding, of course, the reader finds closure in the identification of authorial intention and authority. When that authority has been deconstructed, then openness is a result of the detachability of speech act from intention. The covenantal contract, however, is satisfied by an openness which does not deny the authority of the founding intentionality of the text; in fact, it acts within an ongoing responsibility toward it. Closure is neither implied nor enforced by the authority of the code itself nor by the intentionality of the text. That intentionality, in fact, insists on the open-endedness of the interpretive activity, and doesn't promise satisfaction.

Harold Fisch, in the opening paper in this volume, aims to enrich his description of the particular interpretive engagement he calls covenantal hermeneutics and to distinguish it from other kinds of open interpretation. He constructs the boundaries of post-rabbinic midrash as a genre of interpretive activity on a subtle distinction between two poems by John Milton. As the poet of *Paradise Lost*, Milton qualifies as a covenantal poet; his *Samson Agonistes*, however, fails as midrash. The project of describing Jewish interpretive forms is far enough advanced, not only in Fisch's own considerable scholarship on the subject, but also in the work of Boyarin (1990), Bruns (1987), Handelman (1982), Hartman and Budick (1986), Kugel (1981), Rojzman (1986), Stern (1986), and Sternberg (1985), so as to make two of its conditions uncontroversial. First, although the original covenantal hermeneuticists were rabbis, both Renaissance poets and twentieth-century readers may qualify as midrashists as well. The midrashist—and this is the second necessary condition—displays a talent and a taste for interpretation that is sufficiently open to

allow not only multiple, but even contradictory interpretations to stand together as equally valid.

Fisch claims further (and here is the source of his insistence on the adjective “covenantal” as a descriptor of the midrashist), that an appreciation of openness and multiplicity does not entail the rejection of the authority of the prior text. On the contrary, covenantal hermeneutics is not inconsistent with, but rather requires, the greatest respect for the authority of the text under interpretation: this is the primary condition distinguishing it from other kinds of open-ended reading. With this authority, the respondent makes a covenant; toward this authority the reader undertakes a moral responsibility. Following from this undertaking, that is, because the authority of the author is recognized, covenantal openness exposes the reader to great risks. One can make a wrong choice, even a fatally wrong choice. It is the riskiness of covenantal hermeneutics, Fisch suggests, that separates it from the kind of historicizing rereading that Bruns (1987) calls “midrash” and that Bloomfield (1972) had called allegory. If one misreads Biblical texts, chooses wrong, the result is specified as nothing less than the fate of the soul.

What Milton shares with the Rabbis, thus, is a commitment to what they all acknowledge as a moral responsibility to divine law. The interpretation of the biblical text is bound (covenanted) to respect the “authorial intention” of the law. What the author intends, however, is not a single meaning, but a commitment to interpretation. For Fisch, the question of moral authority does not arise in connection with the interpretation of a non-biblical source text. Openness, there, as it were, is what the Renaissance called wit, and it is risk free.

Fisch goes on to suggest that the double requirement of covenantal hermeneutics—the simultaneous necessity for openness and respect for an earlier text’s authority—puts serious strains on the genre aspirations of the later poet/reader, and complicates the judgments about genre that an experienced reader and would-be midrashist depends on. Genre is a master, or at least a master code, and the God of the covenant is a jealous God. An interpreter (e.g., the author of *Samson Agonistes*), might be seduced into producing an interpretation which, by its own generic closure denies the continuing openness of the prior text.

Issues of genre, then, are crucially involved in covenanted interpretation. Thus, Fisch claims that although the theological exploration of *Samson Agonistes* appears similar to that in *Paradise Lost*, especially when one looks at single lines or incidents, *Samson Agonistes* is finally disqualified as midrash by its global aspiration to the closure of tragedy and its flirtation with the beauty of pastoral. Successful midrash cannot ultimately allow itself to serve the generic archetypes of western culture.

In his earlier study of *Hamlet* (1971), Fisch discussed and exemplified another aspect of covenantal interpretation. There, Fisch identified the struggle for a moral reading—both Shakespeare's struggle and his own, as a struggle against the power of the genres inherited from Greek and Roman literature. In *Hamlet*, of course, the issue is the revenge motif, which has seemed to so many critics either pagan or, worse—"Old Testament" or "Mosaic." Suggesting that "the Hebraic component of [Shakespeare's] work . . . may be as important as the Senecan-Stoic or medieval-Christian components," (p. 10) Fisch himself was the covenantal hermeneuticist there, rereading the revenge demanded by the ghost as informed not by a primitive Greek natural law "visiting punishment on those who have offended the gods," but rather as a "Biblical sense of a law justifiable to man, accessible to his reason and his sense of right and wrong" (p. 6). This "Biblical" law is "patently less abstract and otherworldly" than the Christianity of some of its critics (p. 2).

The larger issue here, following directly from the this-worldliness of the Hebraic concerns, is one of the mutuality of responsibilities between God and the humans He created. Fisch declares the moral substance of Shakespeare's drama to be asking these questions:

How is human destiny viewed? to what sort of task is Man summoned? and in what form is that summons issued? In the experience of Biblical man the key to these matters lies in the covenant, a transforming encounter between man and God, from which many mutual obligations flow, but also trials, disaster, and salvation as well. . . . The covenant involves a choice of paths. To choose aright is a matter of immense responsibility, the sort of responsibility from which a hero such as Orestes or Oedipus is exempt, since in their case the path is . . . determined before they are born. In the covenant type of choice there is, as we have said,

human freedom, but there is also a sense of a commanding voice. Once that voice is heard, its commandments live all alone within the book and volume of our brain. (1971:9)

In *A Remembered Future: A Study in Literary Mythology* (1984) Fisch argues that historical archetypes (as opposed to the mythical ones described by Northrop Frye) carry within them the potential for change, indeed demand it. "Biblical history is covenant history," he writes. "This is a dynamic, not a static form, not a pattern given but a pattern unfolded through trial and error. The essence of the covenant is dramatic, the memory of an encounter in which responsibilities are undertaken and promises exchanged by both parties." (p. 11) More recently, in *Poetry with a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation* (1988), Fisch argues again that biblical poetry is materially and functionally different from other poetry in that it assumes responsibility for the future. The texts from the past are witnesses for the present. "They do not simply echo, they invade us, they demand attention. Moreover, they point outwards beyond themselves; they remind us of duties, perils, that, likewise, invade the poem. Words and world bear witness to each other" (p. 67). For Fisch, the difficulties and risks of interpretation can never sanction the evasion of responsibility for acting in the world.

Part 1 of this collection brings together the theoretical essays on the subject of covenant. Elata-Alster and Salmon begin by sorting out the ways in which the covenant is and isn't a speech act like others, thereby opening the discussion of what consequences derive from the unnaturalness, as it were, of the covenant. Handelman sees the covenant as requiring an ethical relation between people, learning from the philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig and Emmanuel Levinas, and from the rhetorical theory of Chaim Perelman, the priority and thus the responsibility of recognizing the autonomy of the other partner to the dialogue. In this connection, Statman asks whether it is possible to make an argument that people have a moral duty to maintain the covenant, and concludes that there is not. From a religiously orthodox position, both a yes and a no to this question can be justified, but arguing as he does within the traditional of metaphysics which Levinas explicitly rejected, it is not surprising that Statman arrives at the point Levinas would have predicted—with no moral basis for following the covenant.

Menachem Fisch's essay argues that what he calls the covenant of learning in the Talmud, unlikely as it may at first seem, turns out to be cognitively parallel to the way the contemporary historian of science, Karl Popper, understands scientific learning to proceed. Learning in the Talmud and learning in science are parallel, then, because there really is only one way people learn, although the laminates of cultural variation may obscure these universals. The covenant of learning, according to Menachem Fisch, is not only natural, it's all there is.

Betty Rojzman's paper begins with the acknowledgement of asymmetry. There can be no question of mutuality, here, as there is in other contractual relationships. Because God's grace in offering the covenant is so much larger than anything humans can offer or respond with, because of what Rojzman calls the gratuitousness of the covenantal promises, God is asked (by Noah, first) to give a sign to guarantee what He has offered. God obliges Noah but then God requires answering signs, and the exchange of signs, both overt and hidden, is thus instituted as the essence of the covenantal relationship.

The essays in part 2 display some of the possibilities of a practice of reading which is at once bound and open. This set of explorations of non-biblical texts, when taken together, test the boundaries of hermeneutic or midrashic interpretation. Betsy Halpern-Amaru's essay brings to our attention the pseudepigraphic text, *The Testament of Moses*, in which the author attempts to renegotiate the interpretation of covenantal responsibility by rewriting the biblical text itself. Although the rewrite could be called midrashic for its interpretive swerve, it is, according to Halpern-Amaru's reading, an attempt to close or even compel a particular understanding of a difficult historical situation.

Elizabeth Freund reads the Shakespearean scenes of interpretation in *The Merchant of Venice* as analogical extensions of the play's thematization of bonds. She discusses Shakespeare's use of citation within the play as a way of both responding to authority and of questioning that authority by relocating the language in a new context. Citation or tradition, that is, that which is passed on, though it is authoritative, must also be renegotiated in its new location, as, according to Fisch, the covenant must be.

The significance of Boyarin's essay to the discussion here lies in its recognition that the covenanted status of the texts (including, of course, the traditional interpretations surrounding them) require a revised and historically appropriate understanding of the genre categories of those texts. Citing the inadequacy of the modern distinction between history and fiction to describe biblical texts, Boyarin begins the project of understanding the functional genres of these texts by describing the concept of "reading" in ancient Israel.

Three of the essays here expand the discussion of covenanted interpretation to texts in American literature which are double bound, as it they show, by both God's covenant and America's. Budick illustrates, in the texts of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Stanley Cavell, the American incarnations of the insistence on "uncompromised autonomy" of reader and text within the covenantal bonds which Fisch and Handelman have also argued to be crucial to Jewish hermeneutics. Girgus also finds that Jewish-American writers' sense of covenanted responsibility has roots in both the biblical and the American traditions. Baris's study of a troubling short story by Bernard Malamud, asks whether even so powerful a tradition as the American covenantal heritage can offer the possibility of a national "social security" in the shadow of the holocaust. How can one respond, or be responsible to another?

Together, these essays, by raising the issue of the relationship between grammars, literary and legal codes, and divine covenants, raise the ante of literary discussion by their insistence on the unnatural and the non-reciprocal aspects of covenant. Their importance lies not so much in their illustrating, once again, the naiveté of the structuralist understanding of codes, as in their challenge to the poststructuralist, even where the latter acknowledge the inevitable swerve of ideology and power. Covenantal hermeneutics challenges us to admit that if holding an ideology is to mean anything more than the happenstance of having been born into one cultural milieu rather than another, it means having to make choices, and having to own up to them. Poststructuralists may find this position uncomfortable, but we already inhabit it as soon as we claim that social change is desirable and that criticism should work toward it.

Fisch describes this aspect of covenant precisely as a historical process: "The covenant is a condition of our existence in time,

rather than an end foreseen. We cooperate with its purposes never quite knowing where it will take us, for "the readiness is all" (1984:11).

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