

## Biblical Interpretation in Its Late Antique Context

During the rabbinic period, and as late as the Middle Ages, Jews and Christians fought a relentless battle over the question, What is the true and correct interpretation of Scripture?

To the casual onlooker, the controversy between Jews and Christians in the first centuries C.E. appeared quite preposterous. The Jews had not yet recovered from the harsh defeats they had suffered in the wars of 70 and 132 C.E., and they were forced to contend with the painful humiliation of a pagan temple on the site of their Temple in Jerusalem. The Christians were perceived by the Romans as subversive, nothing less than the enemies of humanity. They were often persecuted and put to death merely because they confessed to being Christians. The pretension of both Christians and Jews to be God's chosen evoked derision in the pagan listener,<sup>1</sup> for whom the supremacy of the empire irrefutably proved that disputes between Jews and Christians were a ludicrous farce played out by self-deluding losers.

Celsus, the second-century pagan philosopher, claimed that one could compare

the race of Jews and Christians to a cluster of bats or ants coming out of a nest, or frogs holding council round a marsh, or worms assembling in some filthy corner, disagreeing with one another about which of them are the worse sinners. They say: "God shows and proclaims everything to us beforehand, and He has even deserted the whole world and the motion of the heavens, and disregarded the vast earth to give attention to us alone.... There is God first, and we are next after Him in rank since He has made us entirely like God, and all things have been put under us, earth, water, air, and stars; and all

things exist for our benefit, and have been appointed to serve us.... All these assertions would be more tolerable coming from worms and frogs than from Jews and Christians disagreeing with one another.<sup>2</sup>

These unflattering remarks are faithfully echoed in the words of Christianity's greatest foe, the Roman emperor Julian, who wrote an entire treatise attacking Christianity entitled *Against the Galilaeans*. Julian, whom Christians call "The Apostate," writes in the year 362:<sup>3</sup>

Therefore it is fair to ask of Paul why God, if He was not the God of the Jews only but also of the Gentiles, sent the blessed gift of prophecy to the Jews in abundance and gave them Moses and the oil of anointing, and the prophets and the law and the incredible and monstrous elements in their myths?... but unto us no prophet, no oil of anointing, no teacher, no herald to announce his love for man which should one day, though late, reach even unto us also. Nay, he even looked on for myriads, or if you prefer, for thousands of years, while men in extreme ignorance served idols, as you call them, from where the sun rises to where he sets, yes and from North to South, save only that little tribe which less than two thousand years before had settled in one part of Palestine...

These pagan attacks against Christians and Jews have survived only because Church dignitaries saw fit to disprove them in works specifically written for this purpose. Our knowledge of Julian's and Celsus' arguments is thus secondhand, coming from Christian works devoted to the refutation of pagan claims.

We must note that the Jewish and Christian battle for supremacy, for the right to be called *Israel*, for the ownership of Scripture and its true interpretation, was not waged in isolation. Pagans attacked both religions for their pretense that only one of them was privy to the authentic revelation. Pagan thinkers were appalled by the insolence of both Jewish and Christian claims to ascendancy and closeness to God, when their real-life situation, at least in political terms, was at its lowest ebb.

G. Stroumsa has recently noted that the end of the second century, when Celsus' work was published, is also the time when

decisions were being made about the canon of the New Testament on the one hand, and the Oral Law on the other.<sup>4</sup> According to this thesis, both religions attempted to cast their doctrines in clear, defined terms. If we follow this line of thought, we might say that the need of both religions to define themselves, vis-à-vis the competitor as well as vis-à-vis the external pagan threat, gave special impetus to the creation of written and oral collections of their sacred teachings.

Another element affecting the development of both religions in this period was Gnosis (Greek for knowledge). Gnostics claimed that the God of Scripture was a bad God—jealous, vengeful, and begrudging. He was the demiurge, the god that created the universe and chose Israel, but not the true, good God. The good God, the true Master of the Universe, was unknown except through revelation, and could be approached only by the gnostic, who possesses the necessary knowledge. Up to fifty years ago, our knowledge of Gnosticism relied on the writings of the Church Fathers who had attempted to refute it. A few years before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, however, gnostic texts were discovered in Egypt written on 1500-year-old papyri. This discovery at Nag Hammadi has greatly enriched our knowledge of gnostic exegesis. This selection from the gnostic interpretation of the story of paradise appears in a text entitled *The Hypostasis of the Archons* (that is, the nature or source of rulers<sup>5</sup>) apparently written in the third century: "Their chief [the archons'] is blind; [because of his] Power and his ignorance [and his] arrogance he said with his [Power] 'It is I who am God; there is none [apart from me].' When he said this he sinned against [the Entirety]. And this speech got to Incorruptibility; then there was a voice that came forth from Incorruptibility, saying, 'You are mistaken, Samael'—which is 'god of the blind.'"<sup>6</sup> We are then told that Samael descends into the chaos and the abyss, his mother, while the "incorruptible" looks down and his image is reflected in the water. The forces of darkness fall in love with this image and decide—"let us make man." But the archons, who rule over the forces of darkness, could neither move nor raise this creature, until the Master of the Universe, in his great mercy according to one version, took pity and breathed into it the breath of life. The archons then placed man in paradise and, as we

know, commanded him not to eat from the tree of knowledge (although the father, the Master of the Universe, did want him to know good and evil). After the sin, the chief archon came and asked man, "Man, where art thou?" because he did not understand what had happened.

Let us summarize the principles of the Gnostic approach as they emerge from this exegesis of the story of the Creation and paradise, even if many colorful details have been deleted. We should not allow the odd and exotic to dull the power of the gnostic exegesis of this story, as well as the dangers it posed in its day. The serpent, according to Gnosis, speaks the truth; god the creator is jealous of his creatures and does not wish them to attain knowledge, the more so because his own knowledge is limited. Irrefutable proof of god's limitations is the very question, "Man, where art thou?" Man's expulsion from paradise on the suspicion that "the man is become like one of us, knowing good and evil: and now, what if he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eating, live for ever" (Genesis 3:22) shows this is an evil god, jealous of his creatures. The good God, the Master of the Universe, is in hiding and can be reached only through wisdom and knowledge.

The rabbis sensed the problematic entailed by the phrase *Where art thou?* [*ayeka?*], and explain its derivation from the root *ekh* (how). According to this homily, the Holy One, blessed be He, turns to man and asks him "How [*ekh*] has this happened to you? Yesterday thou wast ruled by my will, and now by the will of the serpent..." (*Genesis Rabbah* 19,9).<sup>7</sup> Further on, this midrash expounds *ekh* as *ekha*, which is the word that opens the Book of Lamentations, and creates a remarkable parallel between Adam and the people of Israel: "just as I led Adam into the garden of Eden and commanded him, and he transgressed My commandments, whereupon I punished him by dismissal and expulsion, and bewailed him with *ekhah*...so also did I bring his descendants into Eretz Yisrael and commanded them, and they transgressed My commandment, and I punished them by sending them away and expelling them, and I bewailed them with *ekhah!*" (*Genesis Rabbah*, 19,9). This homily, which plays with the vocalization of the word *ayeka*, exposes a theological infrastructure crucial to the

understanding of Scripture, whereby Adam's action is a lesson to his children, the people of Israel. The story of paradise is an archetype that anticipates the story of Israel in their land, and their expulsion from it. This is a fine example of free, even fanciful exegesis, which might, in a broad stroke, reveal hidden but "intended" meanings in the Bible.

Chrysostom, a fourth century Church Father known for his antipathy toward and rivalry with the Jews of Antioch, invests enormous efforts in an attempt to present the story of paradise as actually indicating God's love for humanity (*philanthropia*): God enters into a dialogue with humankind, "Adam, where art thou" (according to the Septuagint version which adds the word *Adam*), and attempts to cure the disease immediately, before it spreads. Incidentally, it is of note that Chrysostom uses the same homily we quoted from *Genesis Rabbah*—"How has this happened to you?"—which I believe he learned from Jewish sources.<sup>8</sup>

On the one hand, rabbinic midrashim and Christian exegeses both fought the pagan enemy, the outsider, who denied the legitimacy of their own interpretations and saw them merely as myths and fabrications. On the other hand, both religions were threatened by the well-developed mythological structure of Gnosis, which interpreted Scripture and even some of the Christian works as speaking of an evil demiurge—the God of Israel.

Jewish or Christian sages expounding Scripture in the first few centuries C.E. thus had to contend with three external factors challenging their exegetic approach, as well as their conclusions and theology. Questions may be raised about the literary reality of the period. Were the homilists of the time aware of their ideological rivals? Perhaps the rabbinic and Christian texts that have reached us were meant for their communities alone? Maybe they ignored disputing views and expounded Scripture without any polemical concerns?

Before attempting to answer I would like to clarify that I am only interested in the literary creations of the two religions. Does this literature attest to any awareness of exegetic rivals outside Judaism or Christianity? Indeed, awareness of other exegetic trends and of the challenges posed by their rivals is pervasive in both rabbinic and Christian literature. Let me offer some examples.

No event is more important to the rabbis than the revelation at Sinai. Scripture describes the occasion when the Holy One, blessed be He, was revealed before the whole people and gave them the Torah. Scripture does not explicitly state why, of all nations on earth, the Torah was given to this particular people on this unique occasion. The rabbis were troubled by this problem and offered a variety of answers, which cannot be exhausted within the scope of the present work. I will cite two bearing directly on our concerns—the rabbis' consideration for their rivals and for their arguments.

We read in the *Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael*, a Palestinian commentary on Exodus edited in the middle of the third century: "Why was the Torah not given in the land of Israel? In order that the nations of the world should have no excuse for saying: Because it was given in Israel's land, therefore we have not accepted it... To three things the Torah is likened: To the desert, to fire and to water. This is to tell you that just as these three things are free to all who come into the world, so also are the words of the Torah free to all who come into the world."<sup>9</sup> A bit earlier we find the famous legend claiming that the Holy One, blessed be He, offered the Torah to all the nations and they refused; only Israel took on the yoke of the commandments. In the words of the *Mekhilta*, "And the nations of the world were asked to accept the Torah in order that they should have no excuse for saying, Had we been asked we would have accepted it..."<sup>10</sup> These texts show that the rabbis not only took into account the claims of their rivals in antiquity, but also quoted them in their name—"the nations of the world." This is one instance of a trend that was quite prominent in the rabbinic exegesis of the Sinai theophany. The rabbis dealt with the question that the nations' writers insisted on asking: Why does the Creator bestow all His grace on one nation while neglecting all the others? Not only do the homilies in the *Mekhilta* contend with this question, but the Midrash identifies the rival by name "in order that the nations of the world should have no excuse."

This is also true of the gnostic and Christian threats. In some cases, explicit mention is made of Jesus ("son of Pantera") and his disciples.<sup>11</sup> The most famous example is found in the *Tosefta*, that cardinal tannaitic work which parallels and complements the *Mishnah* and was codified a generation after it (in the middle of the

third century C.E.): "R. Eliezer was arrested for heresy and brought to judgment. The *hegemon* said to him, 'Should an old man like you get involved in such things?' Said he [R. Eliezer]: 'I rely on the Judge...' He [the *hegemon*] said to him: 'Since you have deemed me reliable...dismissed—you are pardoned' (*Tosefta Hullin* 2:24)."

Lieberman has already explained this story in light of the procedures of Roman law at the time.<sup>12</sup> R. Eliezer was suspected of "heresy" here to be interpreted as association with Christianity, an illicit religion according to the Romans.<sup>13</sup> A double entendre saves R. Eliezer, but he is tormented by the notion that suspicions could have been cast on him at all. R. Akiva, his disciple, attempts to comfort him: "He said to him [R. Akiva to R. Eliezer], 'Perhaps one of the heretics told you some words of heresy which pleased you?' He [R. Eliezer] said 'By Heaven! You remind me. Once I was strolling in the street of Sepphoris and met Jacob of Kefar Sikhnin, and he told me a teaching of heresy in the name of Jesus son of Panteri,<sup>14</sup> and it pleased me, and so I was arrested on account of heresy.'"

A later midrash, as well as the Babylonian Talmud, claim to preserve the very same homily Jacob told R. Eliezer in the name of Jesus. In the *Tosefta* rendition, R. Eliezer admits that he had listened to and derived pleasure from the words of "Torah" delivered in Jesus' name. The purpose of this story seems clear. It is to deter observant Jews from conducting a dialogue with Christians, especially concerning Scripture. Who, after all, is greater than R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus, and even he was arrested by the Roman authorities on suspicion of heresy, because he lent his ear to one of their exegeses? Stories of this kind were probably used to warn Jews against developing contacts or engaging in confrontations with Christians regarding Scripture.<sup>15</sup>

This story from the *Tosefta* is the exception however. Much more often, rabbinic literature deals with the threat posed by heretics [*minim*]. Although the identification of these heretics is not always certain, in many instances they unquestionably stand for Christians or gnostics.<sup>16</sup> In the same discussion, when considering the giving of the Torah and the practice of reading the Ten Commandments, the rabbis contend with the heretics' claims: "R. Nathan says, From here is a refutation to the heretics who say:

There are two powers. For when the Holy One, blessed be he, stood up and said: 'I am the Lord your God,' was there anyone who stood up to protest against Him? If you should say that it was done in secret, it has already been said: 'I have not spoken in secret...'" (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, *ibid.*).<sup>17</sup> It is the gnostics who speak of two powers. The gnostic myth on paradise quoted previously now takes on new brilliance. As soon as the archon Samael claims exclusivity and says "It is I who am God," a voice immediately answers back from Heaven: "You are mistaken, Samael." The author of the gnostic text seems to have heard R. Nathan's question—"Was there anyone who stood up to protest against Him?"—and responded that the hidden incorruptible God did stand up to the God of Israel and showed He was mistaken.

The rabbis were not only concerned with answering their rivals' questions regarding theoretical issues and scriptural exegeses, but also present themselves as enacting legal (halakhic) rulings in response to the threat posed by the heretics. Urbach discusses the tradition of the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds, which reports that the daily reading of the Ten Commandments was abolished due to "the imputation of the heretics, that they should not say that only these [the Ten Commandments] were given to Moses at Sinai."<sup>18</sup> In other words, Palestinian *amoraim* claimed that the practice of reading the Ten Commandments (Deuteronomy 5) along with *Keri'at Shema* (Deuteronomy 6), which is already mentioned in the *Mishnah* (Tamid 5:1), was abolished because of the heretics. For our purposes, whether this is indeed the true reason for canceling this practice is irrelevant. Suffice it to say that, in the consciousness of Palestinian as well as Babylonian *amoraim*, contending with heretics demanded not only theoretical answers but also practical measures.

I have so far tried to show that rabbinic literature mentions its ideological rivals in antiquity and openly contends with their claims. The "later" midrash mentioned earlier is *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* (redacted c. seventh century), where we read explicitly of a *tanna* with whom "the heretics used to have dealings. They would ask him questions and he would answer, ask him and he would answer" (1:8), very much in the model of medieval disputations. And even the Church Fathers, for their part, attest to discussions



with the Jews. Origen, who lived in Caesarea in the thirties and forties of the third century, discusses the meaning of the word *Pesah*: "Should anyone of us, when meeting the Jews, hastily say that the Passover is thus named after the suffering of the Savior, they laugh at him as one who does not understand the meaning of the word, when they believe that, as Jews, they interpret the name correctly."<sup>19</sup> Origen tried to ensure that Christians would not be ridiculed in dialogue with Jews because they were using unreliable translations of the Hebrew text of Scripture. In this instance, Christians identified the sacrifice of Passover with the "sacrifice" of Jesus, who was crucified on or just before Passover according to the different traditions. Christians saw incontrovertible evidence for this in the fact that the Hebrew word *pesah* itself hints to their Saviour's pain, since its Greek homophone means suffering (*Paschein*). Origen pointed out that, in Hebrew, *pesah* means "passage" and relied on the literal meaning of the Hebrew word in his own Greek homily. On the other hand, Origen also directs his barbs against those Jews who think that they have interpreted this verse correctly. In his eyes, the Jews understand only the bare words but completely miss their import. The Christians understand the message but only through their reading of the Septuagint.

Evidence indicates that Church Fathers were sensitive to the educational needs of Christians who were involved in disputes with Jews. The *Tosefta*, edited close to Origen's times, makes patently clear that Jews and Christians met around Scripture.

Christians had to defend themselves against gnostics and pagans, while at the same time contending with Jewish views. The titles of many Christian writings dating from the end of the second through the fifth centuries show that they were directed against gnostics. At the end of the second century, Irenaeus of Lyon writes an extensive treatise against heretics, and his contemporary, Tertullian of Carthage, writes a five-volume work against Marcion, a leading figure in Gnosis. The great Christian directory of heresies in late antiquity was composed by the fourth century bishop Epiphanius, born in Eleutheropolis, Palestine. Epiphanius brings together in one volume an account of all heretical sects, classifies them, and confutes their views. His work, entitled *Panarion* [The Medicine Chest], is meant to serve as a remedy against heretical

fallacies. Epiphanius counts eighty heresies—as the number of Solomon’s mistresses in the Song of Songs.<sup>20</sup>

The literary phenomenon I have just described brings to the fore a clear distinction between Christianity and Judaism. Both religions claimed to engage in the true interpretation of Scripture and devoted enormous efforts to developing creative exegeses. The Church, however, did not confine itself to scriptural commentaries and conducted a full-scale war, in the shape of whole tracts dedicated to refuting gnostic exegeses and blackening the gnostics’ reputation. Christians wrote in Greek and Latin and using genres from their native Greco-Roman culture to support their claims. These genres included dialogues, such as the *Dialogue with Trypho*; attacks against rivals, such as the works by Tertullian and Irenaeus mentioned previously, and apologia, monographs defending their religion. This difference between the literature of Judaism and that of Christianity seems to be one of the central reasons for Christianity’s acceptance among Roman citizens, which eventually led to it becoming the official religion of the Roman empire at the end of the fourth century. The way to this ascendancy was paved by many Christian writings addressed to an educated public, offering ways to understand Scripture together with systematic arguments, elegantly styled, endorsing their own views and rejecting rival doctrines. Some historians have claimed, and I support this view, that Jews during this period also succeeded in attracting many proselytes from among the surrounding nations.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, we have no evidence of any rabbinic attempt to compose special texts, such as the monographs of Christian authors, attacking their rivals or sustaining their own claims. The rabbis remained within the literary framework they had fixed for themselves and formulated their arguments as well as their principles of faith mainly as scriptural exegeses.

The third type of Christian writings mentioned, the apologia, gave their name to the second-century Church Fathers, known as the *apologists*. During the second and the beginning of the third centuries, Christianity was a persecuted, illegal religion in the Roman empire. Justin Martyr, born in Shechem, Palestine, in the second century, was sentenced to death in Rome according to Christian tradition, hence his name *Martyr*, meaning “witness” in

Greek. He wrote two apologies and the famous *Dialogue with Trypho*. As Plato had defended Socrates 500 years earlier, so did Justin attempt to justify his belief as a Christian and, like Socrates, failed to save his life. The thrust of Justin's argument, both in his apologies and in the *Dialogue*, is that the Bible proves Christianity right and sensible readers should realize that the prophets of Israel foretold the coming of Jesus. Justin's writings contain many biblical exegeses and attempt to show that Jewish traditions predated Greek ones. The first apology offers several examples. In a discussion of free will, Justin quotes the following teaching: "And the holy Spirit of prophecy taught us this, telling us by Moses that spoke thus to the man first created: 'Behold, before thy face are good and evil: choose the good'" (Chapter 44). Further on, Justin claims that when Plato argues in *The Republic*, Book X, that "the blame is his who chooses and God is blameless," he is merely imitating Moses, who lived long before him. Note, however, that the passage Justin presumes to quote is not from the Bible at all. The closest biblical text, to which Justin's annotators point, is Deuteronomy 30:15–19: "See, I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil...therefore choose life." Justin, however, claimed that this was God's command to the "man first created," whereas the Bible offers no evidence of such a command to Adam. Where did Justin find this command? I believe we can view this as a classic anti-gnostic exegesis. Justin claims that God commanded His first creature to choose the good, as this God sought to help Adam and direct him on the right path.

The timing of divine revelation was a major challenge to both Christianity and Judaism. Pagans argued it was inconceivable that God, the Creator of the Universe, would bestow His grace on one nation alone. Why, in the words of Julian the Apostate, "he even looked on for myriads, or if you prefer, for thousands of years" (*Against the Galilaeans*, 106d p. 343). Justin's response to this kind of an attack was not late in coming. Justin emphasizes that, because Christ was the first creature, the *logos*, all those who lived before his revelation but acted rationally, following the *logos*, are considered Christians. R. Simeon b. Yohai's homily, mentioned earlier, is now worth considering in its entirety: "The Holy One, blessed be He, measured all the nations and found none worthy of receiving

the Torah except Israel, and the Holy One, blessed be He, measured all the generations and found none worthy of receiving the Torah except the generation of the desert" (*Leviticus Rabbah* 13:2).

Justin and his contemporary R. Simeon b. Yohai contend with the question of the timing of revelation. Justin claims that revelation was delayed, but the generations preceding it suffered no loss and were able to share in the divine essence of the first creature. R. Simeon's answer is more assertive: he holds that the Holy One, blessed be He, chose the only appropriate timing, with wisdom and understanding. One should not question the virtues and decisions of the Creator, according to R. Simeon, and this question can only be answered at the level of pure faith.

Justin and the Church attempted to appropriate the Torah of the Jews for several reasons. First, the Church believed itself to be the only body capable of decoding the biblical message accurately. According to the Christians, the Jews were unable to understand their own Torah. Rather, the Torah and the Prophets were important to Christianity to prove that the coming of Christ was the fulfillment of age-old prophecies. At the same time, the Church relied on the Bible and its Jewish origins to ward off the Roman claim that Christians worship "new gods that came newly up"—a new invention of people who hate humanity (*misanthropic*). On grounds of politics as well as faith, then, the Church attempted to appropriate Jewish Scripture in its entirety, while engaged in a stubborn struggle with both Jews and gnostics over its interpretation.

Neither Judaism nor Christianity, then, attempted to hide the views of their rivals. Instead, they contested them, and their controversies have been preserved in the Midrash, the Talmuds, as well as in many Christian works. Both religions fought strenuously against the gnostic threat, while arguing with one another. Insufficient awareness of the pagan claims against Christianity and Judaism may make the deeper layers of these two religious traditions inaccessible. Furthermore, insensitivity to the gnostic menace threatening both religions may obscure the true intention of a homily, as I tried to show regarding R. Nathan. Only when biblical exegesis is considered within a broader literary context will the rabbis' beliefs, as well as those of their opponents, emerge clearly.