

*Encountering Scripture in Overlapping Cultures:
Early Jewish, Christian and Muslim Strategies of Reading and Their Contemporary Implications*

An IAS Research Group Directed by Mordechai Z. Cohen and Meir M. Bar-Asher
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Contemporary critical theory, which highlights the creative dimension of the reading process, is increasingly reorienting the study of the history of scriptural interpretation, situating it within the flux of literary and cultural movements at large. This international research group, convened at the Institute for Advanced Studies (IAS) at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, brought together fourteen of the most distinguished scholars of Jewish, Christian and Muslim interpretation, as well as related fields such as literature, literary theory and legal hermeneutics, in order to conduct a close comparative analysis of shifting encounters with Scripture in three overlapping cultures. Drawing upon diverse yet complementary perspectives, the participants in this group opened fresh investigations of five fundamental subjects:

- a. the critical role that interpretation played in very formation of Sacred Scripture;
- b. changing conceptions of the literal sense of Jewish, Christian and Muslim Scripture, and its importance vis-à-vis other senses (spiritual, midrashic, etc.);
- c. the ways in which classical rhetoric and poetics informed—or were resisted in—Jewish, Christian and Muslim interpretation;
- d. responses within Judaism, Christianity and Islam to tensions created by the desire or need to transplant Scripture into new linguistic media, and the concomitant cultural transformations implied by its translation;
- e. the ways in which the Bible has been reconfigured—in literature, art and scholarship—from antiquity to modernity to adapt to new cultural and intellectual contexts.

Addressing these five broad issues, our group opened new interdisciplinary approaches to the history of scriptural interpretation.

The core academic activities of our group consisted of weekly seminar meetings and an intensive four-day conference (3-6 January 2011). The group was comprised of eight full-semester fellows (four from Israel and four from abroad), as well as six additional visiting scholars from abroad who joined us for shorter periods (from one week to three months) and thereby enriched the project's intellectual scope.

The following is a full list of the group's participants:

Meir M. Bar-Asher, Max Schloessinger Professor of Islamic Studies, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem (mainly Shi'i); Muslim sectarianism (mainly Nusayrism); interaction between Judaism and Islam.

Adele Berlin, Robert H. Smith Professor of Hebrew Bible, Department of English and Jewish Studies Program, University of Maryland. Literary study of the Bible, inner-biblical and ancient Jewish interpretation, modern interpretive strategies.

Piero Boitani, Professor of Comparative Literature, Head of Department of Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures, University of Rome, "La Sapienza." The Bible and its re-writings in medieval, early modern European literature and art. Dante, Boccaccio, Chaucer; 13th and 14th century English narrative.

Mordechai Z. Cohen, Professor of Bible and Associate Dean of the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Jewish Studies, Yeshiva University. Medieval Jewish biblical exegesis and its connections with Arabic poetics and logic, and Muslim legal hermeneutics; theories of metaphor and its interpretation the Hebrew Bible; transformations of the concept of *peshat*.

Rita Copeland, Kahn Endowed Term Professor, Classical Studies, English, and Comparative Literature, University of Pennsylvania. Medieval literary history, rhetoric, hermeneutics as applied to Bible and literary culture. Latin reception of Greek, Arabic learning. Scriptural interpretation in heretical groups (Wycliffites / Lollards) and vernacular versions.

Robert Gleave, Professor of Arabic Studies, University of Exeter. Islamic Law and legal theory (*usūl al-fiqh*). Muslim theories of interpretation. Shi'ite legal, political and hermeneutical theory. Medieval Arabic literature and literary theory.

Sidney H. Griffith, Ordinary Professor of Semitic Languages, The Catholic University of America. Syriac Christian Bible interpretation and early translations of the Bible into Arabic, and their influences on the Qur'an and its interpretation.

Wolfhart P. Heinrichs, James Richard Jewett Professor of Arabic, Harvard University. Medieval Arabic literary theory, Islamic legal hermeneutics and theory. The notion of *majâz* ("figurative speech") in Arabic poetics, qur'anic hermeneutics. Neo-Aramaic.

Andrew B. Kraebel, doctoral candidate, Yale University. Medieval literary productions in Latin and the vernacular; developing ideas of grammar, poetry, literary criticism and biblical exegesis from the Carolingian era to the Late Middle Ages.

James L. Kugel, Professor of Bible, Bar-Ilan University; Director, Institute for the History of the Jewish Bible, Bar Ilan University. The "interpreted" Bible, as reflected in the Dead Sea Scrolls, rabbinic literature, New Testament, Qur'an. Liturgical uses of Scripture. Biblical poetry and the notion of parallelism as interpreted from ancient to modern times.

Alastair J. Minnis, Douglas Tracy Smith Professor of English, Yale University. Medieval literary theory and notions of authorship; medieval study of the Bible and classical literature; conceptions of Scripture's multiple senses; scholasticism and its vernacular intersections.

Meira Polliack, Associate Professor of Biblical Studies, Tel-Aviv University. Medieval Bible exegesis and translation, Karaism, Judaeo-Arabic Literature and Judaeo-Arabic sources in the Cairo Genizah. Reception history and interpretation of the Bible as a central feature of the cultural history of the Jews of the medieval Islamic world.

Stephen Prickett, Regius Professor Emeritus of English Language and Literature, University of Glasgow; Honorary Professor of the University of Kent, at Canterbury. Literature, theology and history of biblical interpretation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; special emphasis on Romantic appropriations of Scripture.

Jon D. Whitman, Senior Lecturer, Department of English and Director, Center for Literary Studies, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Interpretive and literary allegory. Christian conceptions of the "literal" sense. Medieval literary approaches to history and time. Figurations of the Jew in medieval Christian thought. Literary theory from antiquity to the modern period.

All group fellows and many of the visiting scholars presented two or three substantial papers—often on quite different subjects—during their stay in Jerusalem. From among these, the following selection illustrates some of the major aspects of the group’s collaborative work.

a. Interpretation as an Aspect of the Formation of Sacred Scripture

Although it would ultimately take on an independent character, interpretation was, from the outset, integrally linked with the very formation of the text of Sacred Scripture. In this spirit, ADELE BERLIN gave a seminar on the methodological assumptions underlying the notion of “inner-biblical” interpretation. As she illustrated, differences between biblical accounts of the same narrative once taken as manifestations of variant textual traditions are now perceived from a literary perspective as reinterpretations of earlier narratives. Accordingly, she analyzed Psalm 105 as a late biblical reinterpretation of the Exodus narrative intended to bolster the faith of the exiles returning to Judea during the Persian period. In his seminar, JAMES KUGEL discussed the interpretative moves made by the author of the Book of Jubilees in his adaptation of the Genesis stories. He noted that this author—living in the intertestamental period—still did not have the option to compose a separate commentary and instead rewrote the biblical text. Despite this formal difference, Kugel identified in this intertestamental literature the roots of interpretive principles and motifs that would later be applied explicitly in early Christian and rabbinic interpretation. In his seminar, SIDNEY GRIFFITH explored the manifestations of the Hebrew and Christian Bibles in the Qur’an. As he pointed out, biblical characters and stories are referred to throughout the Qur’an as though they were part of a common knowledge base—perhaps reflecting oral translations of the Bible into Arabic in seventh-century Arabia. But, as Griffith demonstrated, these biblical stories are reinterpreted and refashioned in the Qur’an to support a new theory of prophetology to support the new theological claims of Islam.

b. Changing Concepts of the Literal Sense

The medieval period witnessed new interest in the “plain sense” of Scripture—manifested in Judaism (*peshat*), Christianity (*sensus litteralis*) and Islam (*zāhir, haqīqa*). While once assumed

by scholars to denote “what Scripture itself says” (as opposed, e.g., to its reinterpretations by the Rabbis of the Midrash and the Church Fathers), recent scholarship reveals that these Hebrew, Latin and Arabic terms represent constructions of complex reading strategies within culturally determined parameters. In his wide-ranging seminar, JON WHITMAN showed how Christian conceptions of the literal sense underwent radical change from antiquity to the modern period. Ancient and early medieval thinkers tend to align the “letter” of Christian Scripture with the “surface” of the text. But by the thirteenth century the “literal” sense comes to be associated with a realm beneath or beyond the textual surface: the intention of the author. This shift gradually aligns the “letter” of Christian Scripture with the “spirit” of the text—the meaning intended by its divine author. Previously relegated to the circumference, the “literal” sense in its newly expansive capacity increasingly occupies the center of scriptural meaning in late medieval and early modern Christian commentary. But the transfiguration of the literal sense eventually passes far beyond the interpretation of Christian Scripture itself. By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the notion of spiritualizing the “letter” deeply informs the emerging theory of the “symbol” and the modern aesthetics of literature at large. ALASTAIR MINNIS focused his seminar on late medieval developments within the Latin tradition influenced by the new Aristotelian learning that privileged the literal sense as logically compelling and “immediate,” whereas the “mediate” mystical senses were deemed subjective. The increasing prestige of the literal sense generated the notion of the “double literal sense,” which encompassed readings previously classified as “spiritual.” ROBERT GLEAVE, moving to Muslim hermeneutics, explored the notions of *zāhir* (roughly, “the literal sense”) and *haqīqa* (literal sense; language spoken literally; lit. the truth). Citing examples from Muslim jurisprudence and Qur’an interpretation, he discerned three definitions of these concepts: (1) the understanding of the original speakers of Arabic, (2) grammatical analysis by linguistic experts, (3) the meaning that was “obvious” to an ordinary speaker of the Arabic language—a combination of (1) and (2) that eventually dominated Muslim hermeneutics. MORDECHAI COHEN challenged the traditionally static view of the Jewish notion of *peshat* (often rendered simply “the literal sense”) by demonstrating the different trajectories of this key term—related in various ways to corresponding Arabic and Latin ones—within the medieval Jewish exegetical tradition, which was, in fact, multifaceted. Cohen outlined how Judeo-Arabic models of *peshat* capitalized on newly acquired knowledge of Arabic learning, (qur’anic hermeneutics, Arabic linguistics and poetics, and Muslim jurisprudence), whereas in

northern France, the new focus on *peshat* in the school of Rashi is best understood in terms of contemporaneous trends in Latin conceptions of Bible exegesis from the late eleventh century and onwards (trends discussed by Andrew Kraebel, as noted below).

c. Rhetoric and the Poetics of Reading

Since almost immediately after the formation of the Christian Bible, a tension has existed between the pagan classical tradition and Sacred Scripture. In her conference seminar, RITA COPELAND identified a subtradition in medieval Christian hermeneutics: the application of the precepts of rhetorical argumentation to scriptural exposition. She considered how exegetes recruited the inner and most technical elements of rhetorical theory to hermeneutical purposes, and how the program of technical rhetoric (inventional theory) actually fared as an expository template, surveying texts from late antiquity (Augustine and Cassiodorus) to the high and late Middle Ages (Rupert of Deutz, Thomas of Chobham, and the Prologue to the Wycliffite Bible). ANDREW KRAEBEL, in his seminar paper, explored the development of a method for reading the Psalms as poems, a technique formed in the cathedral school of Rheims in the late-ninth and late-eleventh centuries. Teaching both classical poetry and biblical exegesis, Remigius of Auxerre, active at Rheims from c. 883-900, brought the interpretive priorities of the liberal arts to bear on the Psalter, and his approach was elaborated further by late-eleventh-century Rémois masters, including Bruno le Chartreux, John of Rheims, and Roscellinus of Compiègne. Kraebel focused on these later writers' indebtedness to both Remigius and to their own reading of classical poetry, especially the works of Virgil, in the creation of what he argues is a distinct, poetic hermeneutic for the reading of the Psalms. In classical rhetoric—and its application to the Christian Bible—much attention was devoted to figures and tropes, i.e., language that diverges from its usual meaning, grammatical formation, or syntactic arrangement. In his conference seminar, WOLFHART HEINRICHS explored the analogous Arabic notion of *majāz* in Qur'anic hermeneutics and Muslim jurisprudence (which includes legal interpretation of the Qur'an), discussing the ways in which it was defined in the medieval Arabic tradition. Heinrichs also discussed how it was related to *haqīqa* (discussed by Gleave), the reasons given for its usage, and the rationale of those who denied the very existence of *majāz* in the Qur'an. In his conference

seminar, MORDECHAI COHEN outlined two different manifestations of rhetoric and poetics within Jewish Bible interpretation. As he noted, the Andalusian Hebrew poet Moses Ibn Ezra represents a Judeo-Arabic orientation that views rhetorical and poetic form (including *majāz*) in Scripture as a “false” imaginative garb incidental to its inner philosophical “truth” (*ḥaqīqa*), which later exegetes in that tradition identified with *peshat*. By contrast, Rashi’s school in northern France, unaware of classical rhetoric and poetics, defined *peshat* as the external literary form of Scripture, which was secondary to its true inner sense which was identified with Midrash—a hierarchy resembling that of the literal and spiritual senses in Christian interpretation.

d. Sacred Authority and the Idioms of the Text

The transplantation of sacred Scripture from its original geographic and cultural contexts often generated controversies over its re-adaptation in a new idiom. MEIRA POLLIACK delivered a seminar paper exploring how the Hebrew Bible was transplanted into the Arabic idiom, both in its translation and interpretation. She juxtaposed two Jewish responses to the Islamic scriptural model, one conservative (Saadia Gaon), the other radical (the Karaites). Saadia, working in the multicultural milieu of tenth-century Baghdad, maintained a traditional balance between the Bible and the authoritative teachings of the Rabbis, whereas his Karaite contemporaries in Iraq and Palestine fundamentally reframed the Bible’s centrality within their conception of Judaism. These two paradigms illustrate how Jews in Muslim lands—representing a minority culture engaging with a more powerful host culture—reacted to the Qur’an and its wider place within Arabic and Islamic literature, an encounter that awakened them to new issues such as literacy, the book, and the application of philosophical logic to Scripture. In his conference seminar, MEIR BAR-ASHER addressed the thorny question in Islam over the permissibility of translating the Qur’an, as attested from the Middle Ages until the present day. His discussion reveals the great hesitation over this endeavor, largely as a result of the Muslim notion of *i’jāz al-qur’an*, usually rendered as the “inimitability of the Qur’an,” a stylistic superiority that cannot be adequately represented in any language but Arabic. At stake is the nature of relationship of the content of the divine word and its aesthetic dimensions—an issue closely connected with ones addressed by Gleave, Heinrichs (in Islam) and Cohen (in Judaism) in their seminars. Seeking to illustrate the

diametrically opposed Christian view that sacred Scripture must be translatable—and translated—into all human languages, STEPHEN PRICKETT explored the multifaceted implications of the work of Robert Lowth and his aesthetic appreciation of the Bible. As Prickett demonstrated, Lowth’s discovery of biblical parallelism as the fundamental poetic principle of the Hebrew Bible allows for a new appreciation of its sublimity that is fully translatable since it is not dependent on the meter and rhythm of the original Hebrew.

e. Reconfiguring the Biblical Narrative

Beyond translation, cultural adaptation often required more radical “rewritings” of Scripture based on new cultural, theological and intellectual contexts. In his seminar, SIDNEY GRIFFITH explored the special mode of typological interpretation employed by the Syriac Christian Fathers to read the Old Testament in light of later Christian realities, a unique mode of reading with its own terminology and logic that, as Griffith argues, must be distinguished from the more well-known Latin mode of allegorical interpretation. PIERO BOITANI dedicated his conference seminar to the exploration of how the biblical account of Creation was adapted and rendered in Christian art over the centuries of the Middle Ages into the Renaissance. He coordinated an array of artistic renditions of God the Creator—at times “the unmoved mover,” at times moving Himself—with different Christian translations and interpretations of Gen 1:2. Bringing this study into the contemporary era, ADELE BERLIN dedicated her conference seminar to showing how the Hebrew Bible is situated in yet a new cultural and intellectual context by modern literary scholarship. As Berlin outlined, an array of methodologies developed in the twentieth century to analyze secular literature have been applied productively to seek meaning in the biblical text. Yet, as she observed, every such analysis is ultimately dependent on particular theoretical premises, and therefore, as is the case for pre-modern biblical interpretation, reveals as much about the interpretive context as it does about the Bible.

In order to present the insights generated by the special interdisciplinary nexus of our group to the wider academic community, we intend to publish an edited volume of collected studies from each of the fourteen scholars who participated in our project. The collective scholarship of our group reflects a bold new step in the academic study of Jewish, Christian and Muslim scriptural interpretation. All three of these fields have witnessed substantial advances in the last generation. Yet, with rare exceptions, scholarship in each is typically insulated, dealing with developments exclusively within one faith community. The argument advanced by our project is that awareness of parallel trajectories is crucial to understanding the unique turns made within Jewish, Christian and Muslim interpretation of Scripture, apart from revealing commonalities and, at times, mutual influence among them. And, indeed, the substantial overlap among Jewish, Christian and Muslim approaches to Scriptural interpretation discovered in the exchanges of our group yielded fruitful and illuminating comparisons, across linguistic, confessional, geographic and chronological boundaries, enabling us to situate the study of scriptural interpretation in the polemics and poetics of overlapping civilizations.

In addition to the core academic activities of the group, its interactions were enriched by other, more socially-oriented activities that led to lively and often profound intellectual exchanges. A group trip to the north of Israel included a discussion led by James Kugel about Elijah's struggle with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel, a talk by Sidney Griffith near the shore of the Sea of Galilee about Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and a presentation by Jon Whitman at Karnei Hittin on the crushing defeat of the Crusaders by Saladin at the historic Battle of Hattin in 1187. A warm, intimate dinner hosted by MEIR AND RUTH BAR-ASHER at their home featured an illuminating lecture by REUVEN AMITAI (Dean of the Humanities, Hebrew University) on the Arabic inscription at Qal'at Namrud, which our group visited on its trip to the North. A subsequent trip to Qumran and Masada inspired discussions among the group about the nature of early biblical interpretation and its relation to the origins of Christianity. At the conclusion of our

conference, the group was treated to an in-depth presentation on the Ardon Windows at the National Library of Israel by AHUVA PASSOW-WHITMAN, former Senior Curator of Art of the Hebrew University. In addition to these special events, our daily interaction as a group at lunchtime provided opportunities to discuss a wide range of issues related to our various fields of study. RITA COPELAND gave an illuminating lunch talk about medieval Latin education of young boys and the particular literary texts it enlisted. Most often, though, lunch discussions were informal extensions of our weekly seminars, each of which was augmented by scholars from Israel and visiting scholars from abroad. The wide-ranging list of guest scholars who attended our seminars and lunches included: Camilla Adang (Tel-Aviv University), Haggai Ben-Shammai (Hebrew University), Lawrence Besserman (Hebrew University), Bruria Biton-Ashkelony (Hebrew University), Edward Breuer (Hebrew University), Michael V. Fox (University of Wisconsin), Simon Hopkins (Hebrew University), Aryeh Kofsky (University of Haifa), Etan Kohlberg (Hebrew University), Eric Lawee (York University), Serge Ruzer (Hebrew University), Baruch J. Schwartz (Hebrew University), Marc Sheridan, OSB (Pontifical University of St. Anselm, Rome), Joseph Yahalom (Hebrew University), and Marzena Zawadowska (Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin and the University of Warsaw). At the initiative of Sidney Griffith, a special guest lecture—attended by the members of the group and a large number of guest scholars—on the place of the Qur’an in the literature of Late Antiquity was given by ANGELIKA NEUWIRTH (Freie Universität Berlin), a world-renowned expert on the Qur’an.

Beyond giving seminars at the IAS, members of our group shared their scholarship with the academic community at large by giving guest lectures at various Israeli academic institutions, including Bar-Ilan University, University of Haifa, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, The National Library of Israel and Tel-Aviv University. At the IAS itself, a special “Outreach Lecture” open to the public was given by MORDECHAI COHEN, with an introduction by RICHARD JOEL (President of Yeshiva University, New York) presenting our research group’s findings to a packed audience of 150 people, highlighting the relevance of our subject to a diverse cross-section of the broader Israeli community.