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JEWISH SCRIBAL METHODS OF INTERPRETATION

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Introduction¹

There is much debate among the revelation and inspiration of scripture. There are different understandings and definitions of the exact meaning of revelation and interpretation. Both revelation and inspiration play a huge part in the interpretation of scripture, and the methods used to find the divine meaning of scripture. Much of the time interpreters will use texts to fulfill their interests or aims². Because of this, often the authors intended meaning is very different than the interpretive purpose. In McKnight's book, *Post-Modern use of the Bible*, he tells us, "Interpretive aims dictate interpretive methods. These methods in turn influence the way in which interpreters perceive and use the data of the text³." Depending on the motives of the author and the motives of the interpreters, a text may have a different meaning, to different readers, at different times. Amongst all the views of scripture, we will examine the Jewish perspective on how to interpret scripture. We will explore the Jewish scribal methods of interpretation, the key contributors to the development of Jewish methods, and an application of the methodology to the exegesis of the New Testament scripture text. A main objective is to explore the history of the scribal methods used, and the impact these have on understanding the New Testament text.



¹ I was unable to get the StyleEase software to allow me to start numbering on page two. Some minor editing has been done in order to bring the format closer to the Turabian guidelines (Dr. Cranford).

² Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation; An Integrated Approach* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc, 1997), 195.

³ Edgar V. McKnight, *Post-Modern Use of the Bible: The Emergence of Reader-Oriented Criticism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 58.

JEWISH SCRIBAL METHODS OF INTERPRETATION

In order for us to explore the Jewish scribal methods of interpretation, we must first understand the role of the scribe in the New Testament. Before the Babylonian Exile, the term scribe was used mainly in a political context, and the Hebrew term means “to count.” But the term “scribe” takes on a completely different connotation after the Exile, carrying a decisively religious context referring to those responsible for preserving, transmitting, and interpreting the Torah. This was the basic meaning used in the New Testament. *Mercer’s Dictionary of the Bible* tells us, “Gradually, as the significance of the Law increases in the estimation of the people, its study and interpretation (activities originally belonging to the priestly class) become more and more the concern of lay Israelites as well⁴.” The Greek term used most frequently in the New Testament for scribe is ‘cepher,’ meaning scripture expert, or “one who possess an expert understanding of the Mosaic Law and of the sacred writings⁵.” Another Greek word used for scribe is *grammateus*⁶. The New Testament scribes are closely associated with Pharisees, and are sometimes referred to as ‘lawyers’ (Luke 7:30), and ‘teachers of the law’ (Luke 5:17; Acts 5:34). Scribes in the Gospels are displayed and viewed with an extremely negative character, and they

⁴ T. J. Mashburn III, "Scribe in the New Testament," in *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*, Macon: Mercer University Press. 1991. 800.

⁵ T. J. Mashburn III, "Scribe in the New Testament," 801.

⁶ Blue Letter Bible, “Dictionary and Word Search for ‘grammateus’ (Strong’s 1122)”, Blue Letter Bible, 1996-2002. 8 February 2004.
<http://www.blueletterbible.org/tmp_dir/words/1/1076297311-1387.html>.

are some of the main persecutors of Jesus. The scribes main function according to Mashburn was, “teaching and interpreting the Law in order to establish an overall legal system for governing the people⁷.” We must come to an understanding that there were different approaches taken by the scribes to interpret the law, from very strict to very liberal views⁸.

The Jewish view of Jesus played a very significant role in the Jewish scribal ways of interpreting Scripture. Almost all Jewish scholars focus their concentration on the Jesus of the Jews, or the historical Jesus, rather than the Jesus of Christianity. Modern scholars are beginning to appreciate the Jewish concept of portraying Jesus, even though they put no emphasis on the divinity and personal identity of Jesus. Donald Hagner explains to us in the opening lines of his book, *The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus*, the importance of the knowledge of Jewish background in the interpretation process by saying, “Biblical scholarship has continued to demonstrate that the roots of the New Testament are deepest in the soil of Judaism and that a thorough knowledge of the Jewish background is indispensable to any adequate interpretation of the New Testament⁹.” Different Jewish interpretations of Scripture are even causing controversy in today’s society. The new movie entitled “The Passion of the Christ,” by Mel Gibson, portrays the last twelve hours of Jesus, before his crucifixion. This movie is said to be one of the most controversial movies of all time. The Jews are highly upset at the portrayal of the Jewish community, because they feel they are portrayed as the ones completely responsible for Jesus’ crucifixion. However, we can see that the different views of interpretation of Jesus can cause different views

⁷ T. J. Mashburn III, "Scribe in the New Testament," 801.

⁸ T. J. Mashburn III, "Scribe in the New Testament," 801.

⁹ Donald A. Hagner, *The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 21.

on the interpretation of Scripture, and visa versa. Seeing the different ways that the Jews view ‘the nature of Jesus’ helps us to examine the Jewish scribal methods of interpreting the Scriptures.

There are hundreds of interpretive texts throughout the Jewish circle. They include the *Mishnah* (late second-century CE Jewish law code), the *Talmuds* (the commentaries on the Mishnah, the *targums* (translations of Hebrew scriptures into vernacular Aramaic with accompanying commentaries, an activity known as exegesis). The Essene community that lived by the Dead Sea, and whose scrolls were discovered in the middle of the twentieth century, developed *pesharim* (true commentaries in which a biblical passage is quoted and then followed by symbolic interpretation)¹⁰. Judaism's rabbinical tradition of interpretation, where rabbis commented on commentary from previous rabbis, left interpretation open¹¹.

The Jews were presented with the problem of adapting the facts of the sacred text to the needs of the people, and making it accessible to them at a practical level. Gerald Bray tells us, “Biblical interpretation in its initial phase was almost exclusively a Jewish enterprise, and the variations which it contained including those put forward by Christian writers, must be understood in the context of contemporary Judaism¹².” This period of Jewish interpretation was brought to an end after the destruction of Jerusalem and the split of the main body of Judaism

¹⁰ Thomas L. Long, *The Bible: A History of Composition and Interpretation*, 11 August 2003, < <http://www.tncc.vccs.edu/faculty/longt/REL200/intro-comp-interp.htm> > (9 February 2004).

¹¹ Thomas L. Long, *The Bible: A History of Composition and Interpretation*.

¹² Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 49.

from the church, by the Diaspora¹³. New patterns of interpretation began to emerge after the church left its Jewish ways of origin.

There were many key contributors to the development of the scribal methods throughout history. One key area we need to focus our attention on is the ‘schools of thought¹⁴’ linked to the development of the movements in Judaism. The most significant of these groups were the Pharisees. Bray tells us the Pharisees were the “main upholders of what is now known as the ‘scribal’ tradition, and their arch-rivals, the Sadducees¹⁵.” The rabbinic traditions of Biblical interpretation are mainly connected with the Pharisees.

Traditionally the history of Jewish scribal exegesis has been divided into the Tannaim phase (first century B.C. to A.D. 200), and the Amoraim phase (200 to the fifth century)¹⁶. There are many differences in opinion on the dating of the Tannaim period. However, there were two rival schools of thought among the rabbis during this period. Shammai was the leader of the more conservative of these schools, and Hillel was the leader of the more liberal school¹⁷. It was Hillel’s school, which left its mark of superiority on later Jewish exegesis. During the time of Jesus, the most common form of rabbinical exegesis was the nomological approach, or the expression of rules of reasoning. The rival between these two schools of Shammai and Hillel must be understood within this context¹⁸. Bray also tells us, “It is against that background that

¹³ Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*, 48.

¹⁴ Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*, 49.

¹⁵ Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*, 49.

¹⁶ Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*, 50.

¹⁷ Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*, 50.

¹⁸ Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*, 58.

we must read the criticisms of Pharisaic legalism which we find in the pages of the New Testament¹⁹.” The Sadducees were the only group to differ in opinion, and Bray tells us they were the only ones “who adhered to what would later be called a strictly *peshat* form of exegesis, and who may have used Hellenistic techniques of logical argument to back up their interpretation²⁰.” The Amoraic period began about AD 200, and Bray tells us that during this time, “The large body of oral (and partly written) traditions of earlier times was codified, to form the basis of modern Judaism. This material is divided into the *halakah*, or ‘proper way,’ which covers matters of behavior and conduct, and *haggadah*, which is meant to illustrate scriptural texts and edify the reader²¹.” Farrar tells us the haggadah was a nobler and more human development of teaching, even though it had its own absurdities, and feebleness²². Bray gives us a brief history of the *halakah*, which is said to be “used to express the accepted conclusion arrived at after discussion, and to be followed in practice as a supplement to the provisions of the Written Law²³,” in the following:

Halakah was first codified by Rabbi Judah Ha-Nasi (‘the Prince’), who is supposed to have been born in AD 135. This was the Mishnah, which contains both exegetical and non-exegetical material. To the Mishnah was later added the Tosephta (‘addition’), which is ascribed to Rabbi Hiyya, a disciple of Judah Ha-Nasi. Later on there appeared the Gemaras (‘teachings’), which seek to relate the pronouncement of the Mishnah to Scripture²⁴.

¹⁹ Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*, 58.

²⁰ Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*, 58.

²¹ Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*, 50.

²² Frederic W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1961), 89.

²³ Frederic W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, 84.

²⁴ Bray 51.

In Manlio Simonetti's book, "*Biblical interpretation in the Early Church*," he explores the two foundational ways interpretation could take. He says, "The first was of a legislative nature, aimed particularly at responding to questions arising from the practical application of the sacred text to everyday life (halakhah)²⁵." The rabbinical schools were where this study was especially practiced. The second road of interpretation Simonetti takes us through, the (haggadah), had a more diverse scope. He says, "It particularly concerned the edification of the faithful and had its most important application in the homily, which formed part of the worship of the synagogue²⁶."

In Simonetti's exploration he explores how the rabbinical method to approaching the interpretation of the sacred text monitored the accuracy of the text in question. He says, "It would explain grammatical characteristics, and would cover every detail²⁷." The interpretation of any scripture was made with different procedures at hand. This was done by linking passages of scripture that were related, in order to compare them.

The scribal concept of Midrash ('interpretation') was the most popular form of Biblical interpretation during this period. The Midrash was a study of the content and purpose of the text. Bray tells us, "The rabbis who practiced Midrash believed that Scripture must be totally consistent with itself and inerrant. One part of the text could therefore be interpreted in the light of any other part and harmonized with it, and any contradictions were apparent, not real²⁸." Throughout

²⁵ Manlio Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 2.

²⁶ Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*, 2.

²⁷ Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*, 2.

²⁸ Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*, 57.

the period of scribal interpretation they began to believe in dual meaning of single passages. They believed one passage could hold several different meanings. However, before AD 70 this theory of dualistic meaning was not supported, but clear-cut, accepting that Scripture was essentially a legal document²⁹. The meaning the scribes took to be the obvious meaning could sometimes be totally different from what a scholar today would see as the original purpose of the writer³⁰.

In the Amoraic period, a distinction grew between the *peshat* and the *derash*. In Jewish hermeneutics, the *peshat* was the obvious or literal meaning of a biblical text. In the interpretation of the Halakah, the *peshat* was preferred. Bray tells us, “This distinction was not recognized in the Tannaitic period, when the rabbis claimed that their Midrashim merely explained the true meaning of the literal sense of the text³¹.” What kind of progress did the Jewish scribes accomplish in their search for a deeper meaning of the content and purpose of the Scriptures? The Midrash method was very prepared in order to accept different methods of interpretation, which occurred because interpreters were persistent attempts to explain the obscurities and difficulties, and apply the text to contemporary situations. By doing this it allowed them to go “far beyond what the text actually said but which they still believed were doing no more than bringing out its ‘plain meaning’.”³² They reached these results because they did read Scripture as a legal document, in which Scripture could have been twisted contextually and applied in ways which are

²⁹ Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*, 57.

³⁰ Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*, 57.

³¹ Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*, 57.

³² Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*, 57.

completely irrelevant to the purpose the writer was trying to convey, and what the text actually says³³.

The devotion to Midrash is the most characteristic feature in rabbinic interpretation. Bray says, “The main aim behind Midrash was the desire to produce new religious laws (*halakot*) and broaden the application of those already in existence³⁴.” Through this process there grew many principles of interpretations. These interpretations were known as *middot* (canons)³⁵. Just like any other forms of biblical interpretation they went through their own history of development. We are told by Bray, that they evolve from the seven rules of Hillel, to the thirteen rules of Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha, and to the thirty-two rules of Rabbi Eliezer ben Jose ha-Galili³⁶. Bray tells us that Hillel’s basic seven rules will give us a good taste of rabbinical exegesis in general³⁷.

1. *Qal wa-homer*: what applies in less important cases will apply in more important ones as well.
2. *Gezerah shawah*: the use of the same word in different contexts means that the same considerations apply to each context.
3. *Binyan ab mikathup ‘ehad*: repetition of a phrase means that ideas associated with it are applicable in all contexts.
4. *Binyan ab mishene kethubim*: a principle can be established by relating two texts to each other; that principle can then be applied to other texts.
5. *Kelal upherat*: in certain cases, a general principle may be restricted in its application by certain qualifications placed upon it, and conversely, particular rules may be generalized for similar reasons.

³³ Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*, 57.

³⁴ Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*, 58.

³⁵ Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*, 58.

³⁶ Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*, 58-59.

³⁷ Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*, 59.

6. *Kayoze bo bemaqom 'aher*: a difficulty in one text may be resolved by comparing it with another similar passage, though verbal correspondences are not required.

7. *Dabar halamed me 'inyano*: a meaning may be established by the context.

Today New Testament scholars and readers would agree with the last two with almost no reservations. All of these seem more legitimate as you get deeper down into the list. Bray explains that the difficulty arises with the first three, “especially in the generalization implied in the formulation of these rules. To modern readers, with certain restrictions, the fourth and fifth rules might also be somewhat acceptable today.

The rabbi’s main objective was to make the Word of God relevant to their lives in their current situations, which is the same objective we have as we interpret the Scriptures even today. They began by meditating on the Bible, to apply these principles, and then began to consider all the homiletical and liturgical contexts in which the text was found³⁸. In order for the rabbis to clear up misconceptions in the meaning, they took each text and did a detailed analysis of it. Then Bray tells us, “They tried to discover either the basic legal principles lying behind the texts with the intention of applying them to their own situation (*halakah*), or the true meaning of events described in the texts (*haggadah*)³⁹.”

The *mashal* was another method common in Midrash interpretation. *Mashal* means ‘comparison,’ or ‘parable’⁴⁰. Many times in interpretation and explanation of a story preachers use a fictional situation to illustrate a real-life lesson. Jesus did this in his parables that he taught, and this was the purpose of the *mashal*.

³⁸ Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*, 59.

³⁹ Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*, 59.

⁴⁰ Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*, 59.

There were also many influential individuals that made a great contribution to the Jewish scribal methodology of interpretation. Origen and Jerome expounded on New Testament passages by applying the expertise passed down from Jewish consultants and teachers. Geza Vermes, writer of *Jesus in His Jewish Context*, tells us, apart from Origen and Jerome, “It was not until the seventeenth century that the technical issue of interpretation with the help of Judaic sources was confronted⁴¹.” John Lightfoot wrote a book called, *Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae*, and in the preface to his section of the Gospel of Matthew, he wrote these amazing words about the relationship of the Jewish way of thinking to the study of interpretation of Scripture:

I have also concluded without the slightest doubt that the best and most genuine method to unravel the obscure passages of the New Testament (of which there are many) is through research into the significance of the phrases and sayings in question according to the ordinary dialect and way of thinking of that (Jewish) nation, those who uttered them as well as those who listened to the speakers. For it is of no consequence what we can make of those locations with the help of the anvil of our expressions, but what they meant to them in their common speech. And this can only be investigated by consulting the authors of the Talmud, who both employ the common idiom of the Jews and treat and open up all things Jewish⁴².

Misinterpretation happens even in today’s society. Misinterpretation of Scripture even happens among church leaders, including pastors. This is why studying the context and intent of the author is so important to Biblical interpretation. Words were taken completely out of context during this time of interpretation, just as they are today. An example of this type of misinterpretation comes in Exodus 24:12. Bray tells us that through this passage, “The proof for the existence of an oral as well as a written Torah was derived...by artificially separating the words

⁴¹ Geza Vermes, *Jesus in His Jewish Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 68.

⁴² John Lightfoot, *Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae in Quatuor Evangelistas, Libria MDCLXXV*, with a preface by John Lightfoot, (in Evangelium Matthaei), 173-174.

‘written’ and ‘for their instruction’ (an oral activity) in the phrase, ‘the commandment which I have written for their instruction’⁴³.”

How do the Jewish methods of interpretation effect the application to the understanding of the New Testament Scripture texts? One example issue we will face is the problem of divorce in intertestamental Judaism. The grounds and criteria for divorce are laid out very vaguely, which leaves much question in the interpretation of the Scriptural meaning that the author intended. First century Judaism interpreted the rules of divorce very loosely. Vermes tells us, “Josephus, describing the Jewish law for Gentile readers speaks of divorce ‘for whatever cause,’ adding that with mortals many such may arise. Alluding to his own marital difficulties, he remarks casually that he dismissed his wife because he was ‘displeased with her behavior’⁴⁴.” Hillel’s school argued with agreement that one had reason enough to sever the marriage bond because of even a spoiled dinner⁴⁵. However, Vermes tells us that the more demanding rival school of Shammai, permitted divorce “only if the husband found ‘unchastity’ in his wife⁴⁶.” Jesus was faced with the question of divorce in Matthew 19:3, when the Pharisees came to test him. The Pharisees asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason⁴⁷?” Jesus explains that it is not lawful, except under the circumstances of marital unfaithfulness. The answer from Jesus coincides with the terms of Shammai. However, in the tenth chapter of Mark,

⁴³ Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*, 57-58.

⁴⁴ Vermes, *Jesus in His Jewish Context*, 64.

⁴⁵ Vermes, *Jesus in His Jewish Context*, 64.

⁴⁶ Vermes, *Jesus in His Jewish Context*, 64.

⁴⁷ "Matthew 19:3," in *Life Application Study Bible; New International Version*, (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 1991).

Jesus gives no exception for divorce. In searching to reconcile this problem Vermes says, “Thus the proper formulation of the conflict between the Jesus of Matthew and the Jesus of Mark, and the possible resolution of the problem of historicity, are more likely to arise from a reconstruction of the entire puzzle in which Matthew and Mark represent two small pieces, rather than the other way round⁴⁸.”

Another example I want to explore in the application of Jewish methods of New Testament interpretation is the phrase, ‘son of God.’ This phrase could mean many things to many people. To a Greek speaker long ago it could have brought thoughts such as an offspring of an Olympian god, or an offspring of a prominent king or emperor. But to a Jew, the corresponding Hebrew or Aramaic phrase carried a completely different connotation with it. We could find that the phrase, ‘son of God,’ to a Jew could mean many different things. Vermes tells us, “It could refer, in an ascending order, to any of the children of Israel; or to a good Jew; or to a charismatic holy Jew; or to the king of Israel; or in particular the royal Messiah; and finally, in a different sense, to an angelic or heavenly being⁴⁹.” Among Jewish circles, the phrase, ‘son of God,’ was understood metaphorically. We are also told, “In Jewish sources, its use never implies participation by the person so-named in the divine nature.”

⁴⁸ Vermes, *Jesus in His Jewish Context*, 65.

⁴⁹ Vermes, *Jesus in His Jewish Context*, 66.

Conclusion

Throughout history there have been many different time periods of interpretation, and many different methods of interpretation as well. As a reader, and as a student of the New Testament, we can conclude that that to understand the biblical text with its full implications and clarity, we must place the text into the wide spectrum of literature history, culture, and methods of interpretation. Vermes summed it up by saying, “The New Testament in a larger canvas provides it with added clarity and fuller meaning. It is a critically sound method, and to my mind the only acceptable one⁵⁰.” As one studies the New Testament and its interpretation, he needs to strive to stay aware of the much larger structure he is exploring. This large structure not only includes Jewish, but all other cultures as well. Good New Testament scholars will pursue questions, and research to find beneficial information to New Testament interpretation study. One must understand that exploring the history of the scribal methods used, helps us gather a better grasp on the intended understanding of the Scriptural text. It is from our understanding and interpretation of the Scriptural text that defines our biblical theology, and it is from our biblical theology that defines who Jesus is. This is the ultimate reason why the interpretation of Scripture is extremely important to understand.

⁵⁰ Vermes, *Jesus in His Jewish Context*, 65.

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