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Introduction

Intersecting encounters with scriptures in three faiths

Mordechai Z. Cohen

This volume stands at the junction of the study of sacred scriptures – the Jewish Bible, the Christian Bible, and the Qur'an. The interpretation of these scriptures, which are foundational in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, is increasingly being situated in the flux of literary and cultural movements at large. This book illustrates how such interpretation developed in distinct but intersecting cultures.

In discussing these developments, the study treats interpretation as more than commentary on specific passages and books. Informed by the emphasis in contemporary theory on reading as a dynamic transaction between interpreter and text, it explores the conditions of mind and spirit by which interpreters encounter and engage the writings sacred to them. Recent scholarship has suggested ways in which approaches to scriptural signification fluctuate amid developments in other spheres of learning, such as theology, philosophy, science, politics, law, and literature. Drawing upon such scholarship, this volume investigates Jewish, Christian, and Muslim reading strategies in order to describe the distinctive ways in which each interpretive community shapes its identity.

The encounters with scriptures presented in this volume extend even beyond an investigation of those modulating approaches to scriptural texts. For in each of the three faiths, such texts are not merely objects of interpretation; the scriptures themselves help to shape the idioms and conceptions of the very communities that engage them. In this sense, the process of encountering scriptures is a two-directional movement in which readers and texts are in a constant interplay with each other.

The argument advanced in this study is that awareness of parallel trajectories is crucial to understanding the unique turns made within Jewish, Christian, and Muslim interpretation of scripture, over and above revealing commonalities and, at times, mutual influence among them. Apart from this introduction, the study consists of fifteen chapters that together form a comparative investigation of diverse strategies of reading

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sacred texts, from antiquity to modernity, in their respective cultural and intellectual contexts. By concentrating on points of overlap and intersection, the study brings to light aspects of methods and approaches in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam that remain hidden until set in relation to one another. It shows how the distinct turns taken by one tradition come into sharper relief when seen in the light of those taken in others.

This volume is the outgrowth of an intense semester-long study and dialog among an international group of fourteen scholars from September 2010 to February 2011 at the Israel Institute for Advanced Studies in Jerusalem. During those months, the group explored not only the interpretation of scripture itself, but also related fields such as literary theory and legal hermeneutics. Developing out of our collaborative project, this volume provides an in-depth investigation of the nexus of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim encounters with scripture.

These three interpretive traditions are usually studied in isolation from one another, and important advances in understanding each tradition have been made in modern scholarship – some by authors of the current volume. In recent years, a number of valuable studies have opened a new vista by juxtaposing investigations of scriptural interpretation in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.[1] Building upon all of these advances, this volume emphasizes the overlap among the inquiries that emerge from encounters with scriptures in the three faith traditions, and explores how issues addressed in one tradition manifest themselves similarly or differently in others. Through its array of fifteen interrelated chapters, *Interpreting Scriptures in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Overlapping Inquiries* aims to answer the question: How does the comparative study of these encounters with scriptures prove mutually illuminating?

[1] Among the important recently published studies in this field are (1) *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry D. Walfish, and Joseph W. Goering based on a conference in Toronto in 1997. While not specifically designed as a comparative study, since its twenty-nine chapters are grouped by faith rather than thematically, that volume's juxtaposition of the three interpretive traditions invites the reader to draw comparative conclusions. See Fishbane, "*Reverence*." (2) *Jewish Biblical Interpretation and Cultural Exchange: Comparative Exegesis in Context,* edited by Natalie B. Dohrmann and David Stern, based on a year-long seminar at the Center for Advanced Judaic Studies at the University of Pennsylvania in 2001/2. Its twelve chronologically arranged chapters juxtapose studies of Jewish, Christian and Muslim interpretation; most focus on antiquity, with some on the medieval period and one on the Renaissance. (3) The monumental reference work *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*, edited by Magne Sæbø, Menahem Haran and Chris Brekelmans. Its three volumes represent the collaborative work of dozens of scholars, and offer a comprehensive survey of Jewish and Christian (but not Muslim) interpretation of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament from antiquity to the modern period.

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To answer this question, the chapters of this volume are arranged in three rubrics that highlight overlapping and intersecting lines of inquiry.

I *Scriptural Texts in Changing Contexts:* the ways in which the scriptural texts foundational in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were transformed – from the very beginnings of their interpretation in antiquity – to adapt to changing cultural and religious contexts;
II *Conceptions of the Literal Sense:* changing conceptions of the literal sense of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scripture and its importance vis-à-vis non-literal senses (figurative, spiritual, midrashic, etc.);
III *Rhetoric and the Poetics of Reading*: the ways in which classical and later models of rhetoric and poetics informed – or were resisted in – Jewish, Christian, and Muslim interpretation.

This volume does not aim to survey comprehensively the history of scriptural interpretation in the three faiths. Designed to be suggestive rather than exhaustive, it presents a sharply focused juxtaposition of selected studies across linguistic, confessional, geographic and chronological boundaries, from antiquity to modernity, with the bulk of essays dealing with the medieval period – in which formative interpretive theories emerged. In identifying and addressing the three issues listed above, this volume contributes to the study of the stream of interpretation in each faith community and also opens new interdisciplinary approaches to the history of scriptural interpretation.

While only some chapters in this volume explicitly engage with all three faith traditions, each of its three parts juxtaposes comparable investigations that highlight areas of overlap and intersection among them. Accordingly, the overview that follows serves two functions. First, it offers a brief summary of each chapter. Second, and more important, it provides the framework to illuminate the areas of overlap and intersection that emerge from the juxtaposition of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim approaches to scripture. This introductory overview is a guide that suggests how these studies contribute to an integrated comparative vision of scriptural interpretation.

Part I Scriptural texts in changing contexts

While the volume is not arranged in a strictly chronological fashion, this first part begins with early interpretive encounters with scripture, and then moves to related developments in the medieval and modern periods. The common theme of this part is how the three faith traditions responded to

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the challenges posed by the need to transplant and resituate sacred scriptures from their original contexts into new ones that were distinct and distant, historically, culturally, religiously, and/or linguistically. Over the centuries, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam met these challenges in a variety of ways, at times by transforming the scriptural texts to yield new meanings and realms of signification, and at others by resisting such reshaping of scripture.

The roots of scriptural interpretation can be found in the Bible itself, or, more correctly, what would come to be the Hebrew Bible.[2] Within many biblical books are later insertions, clarifications, and interpretations of earlier material; and later books at times re-write or re-interpret parts of earlier books. As time passed, the text of the sacred writings became less malleable, but their interpretation continued unabated, although in a different form. It was to be found not in changes made to the texts themselves, but in a body of new interpretive works. Chapter 1, by James Kugel, examines this continuum of interpretation as attested in writings from the third century BCE to the first century CE – including the Apocrypha, the New Testament, the Hellenistic Jewish writings, and the Dead Sea Scrolls – during which time the very notion of the Hebrew Bible as "scripture" was developing. Among these works are re-writings or re-tellings of parts of the biblical story, commentaries on specific lemmas of the sacred text, and discursive works that contain elements of interpretation. Kugel reveals to us the world of ancient biblical interpretation, its operative assumptions, and the strategies it used to resolve exegetical and theological difficulties the sacred text presents. This is the interpretive world that Christianity and rabbinic Judaism inherited and initially shared, even as their paths diverged throughout late antiquity.

Kugel traces how themes from the earliest forms of Bible interpretation are developed in the writings of the church fathers and by the rabbis in the Talmud. Notwithstanding obvious theological differences between them, Kugel shows how the two interpretive communities engaged the text in analogous ways. The most fundamental assumption of this early interpretation was that the biblical text is cryptic, with its true meaning lying beneath the surface. A closely related assumption is that everything in sacred scripture is relevant and offers guidance to the present situation – "written down for our instruction," as Paul says (1 Cor 10:11). To extract the hidden meaning of the Bible and the "instruction" it conveys, a variety of techniques were developed. Within Judaism, techniques known

[2] See Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*; Stemberger, "Inner-biblical Interpretation."

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collectively as midrash were applied to mine the text of the Bible for clues regarding behavior, beliefs, and – most importantly – the all-encompassing and detailed religious law (*halakhah*) that characterizes rabbinic Judaism, as eventually codified in the Mishnah and Talmud. These rabbinic teachings were not regarded as innovations; rather, they were collectively cast as the "Oral Law," described as an accompaniment to the "Written Law" given originally at Sinai, and having equal, if not greater, authority.

The need to find the Hebrew Bible applicable to the new Christian community gave birth to programmatic, comprehensive "christological" modes of reading, which Sidney Griffith discusses in Chapter 2. The ability of Christianity to embrace the Hebrew Bible, seemingly about an ancient people no longer relevant to its own salvation narrative, depended on reinterpreting it allegorically and typologically. The "letter" or "literal sense" of what came to be the Old Testament, relating the laws and histories of the Jews, was transformed or "fulfilled" by its "spiritual sense" – the new faith and history of the Church. Griffith focuses on the distinctive typological interpretive approach devised in the early Syriac (Eastern Christian) tradition, which seeks to decipher the "mysterious symbols" (*râzê*) in the Old Testament. Using the Gospels as a hermeneutical lens, the Syrian Fathers thus reinterpret its details as a foreshadowing of Christian salvation history. Ephraem the Syrian (c. 306–73) imagines Christ raising in his two hands the Old and New Testaments, with his body as the hinge between them, a perspective that is applied by Jacob of Serūg (c. 451–521) in his detailed reading of the binding of Isaac as a prefiguration of the crucifixion of Christ.

Judaism and Christianity thus both manifested a dual model of scripture: Written/Oral Law, Old/New Testament. These two dual models were each part of dynamic interpretive movements to "resituate" the ancient texts of the Hebrew Bible within new religious contexts – rabbinic Judaism and the Christian faith – centuries after the biblical books had been written. The interpretive process that led to these dual models was well underway, as shown in Chapter 1, long before the canon of the Hebrew Bible was finalized at the beginning of the Common Era. Indeed, biblical books do not announce themselves as divine scripture. The notion that the Hebrew Bible in its entirety is divinely inspired, even the word of God Himself, seems to have taken root firmly only around the beginning of the Common Era, and goes hand in hand with the canonization of the Hebrew Bible.

The gradual development whereby scripture came to be perceived as the word of God is absent in the case of the Qur'an, which was introduced

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from the outset as divine revelation. The biblical narrative would be subject to a radical transformation in the Qur'an, where it is cited selectively, reworked, and resituated within a Muslim framework. A literary product of cultural and religious forces in seventh-century Arabia, the Qur'an incorporates recollections of the patriarchs and prophets into a new conception of "prophetology" that culminates in Muhammad. It advances "a new paradigm for the reading . . . of . . . scriptural narratives in an Arabic-speaking milieu, offering a new construal of a familiar salvation history."[3]

Composed in a cultural-intellectual context that included well-formed Jewish and Christian notions of scriptural authority, the Qur'an appropriates this conception to stake its claim as an authoritative text advancing a new faith.[4] Muslim scripture is thus uniquely "self-referential," announcing itself clearly and forcefully as sacred scripture, that is, the word of God.[5] Qur'anic interpretation, unlike the interpretation of the Bible, is normally seen as following its canonization, not as preceding it. Moreover, in contrast to ancient interpreters, who assumed that the Bible was cryptic and its meaning not always apparent, a plethora of qur'anic statements attest that it is written in clear, plain (*mubīn*) language, for example, "These are the *ayāt* (verses) of the Book, and a clear (*mubīn*) Qur'an" (Q. 15:1). In this vein, Q. 3:7, taken by Muslims as a hermeneutical directive, indicates that the Qur'an's "unambiguous" (i.e., clear) verses (*muḥkamāt*) are its essence, since they express God's will directly, whereas the "ambiguous" (*mutashābihāt*) verses are subject to interpretation (*ta'wīl*[6]) – and favored by "those in whose hearts is dissention."[7] Judaism and Christianity most typically welcomed the potential for expansive, new interpretations; but in Islam clarity and directness were more often sought to determine God's will as expressed in scripture.

While allegorical interpretation of the Qur'an would certainly emerge in Islam,[8] it is not a defining feature of Muslim scriptural interpretation. We must keep in mind that Christianity and rabbinic Judaism inherited an

[3] See Griffith, *Bible in Arabic*, 54–96 (citation from p. 54). See also Neuwirth et al., *Qur'ān in Context*; Reynolds, *Qur'an and Biblical Subtext*.
[4] See Madigan, *Self Image*; Sinai, "Qur'anic Self-Referentiality," 103–4.
[5] See Wild, *Self-Referentiality*.
[6] The term *ta'wīl*, which, at its base, means simply *interpretation*, was at times used to connote *reinterpretation* or, more specifically, *figurative, or otherwise non-literal interpretation*. See Poonawala, "*Ta'wīl*."
[7] See Wild, "Sura 3:7."
[8] This is especially true of Shi'ite and Sufi interpretation. See Bar-Asher, *Scripture and Exegesis*; idem, "Outlines"; Goldziher, *Schools*, 116–66.

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ancient text from an earlier context. The Christian community could not embrace the Hebrew Bible without positing that its true meaning is something "other" than that what it seems to say, calling for its christological reinterpretation.[9] Within rabbinic Judaism, likewise, by the beginning of the Common Era the Hebrew Bible could no longer serve as a self-standing theological and religious guide, and was mediated through a midrashic re-writing that brought the ancient text in line with contemporary norms of Judaism.[10] But the formation of the Qur'an was roughly coterminous with the birth of Islam, and was directly relevant to the message of the new religion constructed around it.[11] Islam, at the outset, thus did not have the same need to "resituate" its scripture.[12]

Yet as the centuries passed, Islam likewise introduced the Qur'an into new contexts, and pressures mounted to adapt it accordingly. Chapter 3, by Meir Bar-Asher, explores a manifestation of this challenge by comparing Muslim views on the permissibility of translating the Qur'an with Christian and Jewish views regarding Bible translation. While calls to translate the Qur'an into other tongues became acute in modern times, this issue is an old one in Islam, where the prevailing view has long been that the original Arabic formulation of the Qur'an is essential to its status as a sacred text. To be sure, concerns over the accuracy of scriptural translation were expressed in all three faith communities. But a unique argument was made within Islam. Whereas Christianity (and Judaism, albeit to a lesser extent) was comfortable engaging with the Bible in translation, Muslim thinkers asserted that the Qur'an's sanctity was inextricably tied to its very language, which was said to be miraculously sublime and inimitable, as expressed in the Muslim doctrine of *i'jāz al-qur'ān* ("inimitability of the Qur'an"). This dimension of the Qur'an cannot be adequately represented in translation – even one that expresses its content accurately. Bar-Asher follows the Muslim discussion into the modern period, when new cultural pressures led some religious scholars to

[9] Indeed, there were Christians – most notably the followers of Marcion in the second century – who understood the Hebrew Bible literally, and therefore rejected it entirely as incompatible with Christianity. It was in opposition to this sort of understanding that Marcion's opponents (in what became "Orthodox" Christianity) maintained that the Jews, together with Marcion, did not discern the Hebrew Bible's true "spiritual" meaning. See Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 203–12.

[10] See Kugel, *Bible as it Was*.

[11] To be sure, modern scholarship challenges the traditional narrative of the Qur'an's revelation and its dating, offering a range of alternative views regarding its formation as a literary text. Nonetheless, the Qur'an is generally regarded as a product of the religious culture during the period, broadly speaking, in which Islam emerged. See Neuwirth et al., *Qur'ān in Context*, 2–24.

[12] Although the Qur'an does "resituate" biblical motifs within a Muslim framework, as discussed above (at Note 3).

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officially endorse its translation into other languages – with the caveat that these do not truly reproduce the power of the original text, but merely approximate its message.

The concerns about scriptural translation raised sharply in Islam shed light on some of those addressed over the centuries in Judaism and Christianity. Ambivalence over the Bible's translation into Greek in antiquity is reflected in the Talmud. Yet, in practice, Judaism accepted the necessity of Bible translation, for example, into Aramaic, Greek, and later Arabic. Though the Catholic Church long opposed vernacular translations, the version it advocated was Jerome's Vulgate – itself a translation. More importantly, the very process of biblical translation is essential to the Christian mission to convey the gospel ("good news") to all of humanity – in their disparate languages.[13] While Islam, likewise, aims to spread the word of God expressed in the Qur'an universally, it generally insists that this must be done in the original Arabic. Even when resituated into other cultural and linguistic contexts, it must remain a pure "Arabic Qur'an" (Q. 12:3).

Chapter 4, by Piero Boitani, returns to the realm of Christian interpretation – through literary and artistic representation. This study is predicated on the Christian endorsement of the transformation of scripture, not only through allegorical and typological reading but also through translation. Notwithstanding the controversies they sparked at times, endeavors to translate Christian scripture reflect an underlying desire by its interpreters to mine the Bible for additional meanings that are revealed when it is transplanted into new contexts and conveyed through new media. If Islam, at least in the view of many commentators, was wary of ambiguity, Christianity more typically celebrates the "multivalence" that enriches the potential meanings of scripture. To be sure, critical voices were raised against the dangers of this interpretive openness. Abuses of scriptural authority prompted the reproach – most common during the Reformation, but voiced already in the medieval period – that in the hands of some religious leaders "scripture is like a nose of wax that . . . can be fashioned this way and that way" as the interpreter chooses.[14] This was one of the concerns that led late-medieval Christian interpreters to privilege the literal sense, a matter discussed in Chapter 7. Yet the critique highlights the fact that Christian interpretation, by its nature, depends on the Christian Bible's susceptibility to new readings and even transfiguration.

[13] Compare the account in Acts 2:1–4, 7–11, of the Galileans "speaking in other tongues" to declare the wonders of God.
[14] See Porter, "Nose of Wax."

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Boitani investigates how shifting Christian interpretations of Genesis are conveyed in imaginative literary and artistic renderings of the biblical creation narrative from late antiquity to the Renaissance in Western Europe. The subjects of the literary and artistic renderings of scripture are too vast to be covered here.[15] But this chapter provides a useful example of Christian openness to the transformations of the Bible through poetry, painting and sculpture, which, one might argue, lead to interpretive alterations more drastic than translation does. Boitani focuses on the various ways in which the phrase "the spirit of God was hovering over the face of the deep" (Gen 1:2) has been represented poetically and visually within Christianity. Aristotle's definition of God as "the unmoved mover" was embraced by the early church fathers, and is reflected, for example, in the *Consolation of Philosophy* by Boethius (480–524). Consequently, Boitani shows, God is represented as motionless in artistic renditions of this verse and in the creation story in late antiquity and the early medieval period. Eventually a new conception of divine motion directing creation began to emerge in Christianity, as attested dramatically in the *Divine Comedy* of Dante (1265–1321), and reflected in paintings by Giovanni di Paolo (1395–1482) and Michelangelo (1475–1564) that portray God as being "supremely mobile."

Chapter 5, by Meira Polliack, traces how Jewish thinkers in the Islamicate world reframed their conception of the Hebrew Bible in light of the Muslim model of scripture. It focuses on the development of Karaism, a branch of Judaism that rejected the authority of the "Oral Law" and advocated a model of a singular scripture – the "Written Law." As the Karaites saw it, the rabbis of late antiquity distorted the message of God stated clearly in the Bible. Yet the irony, noted by Polliack, is that the newly constructed "purist" Karaite model of Hebrew scripture seems to have been prompted by Muslim claims regarding the Qur'an.

The chapter takes as its starting point the intensive movement among Jews in Muslim lands to render the Bible in Arabic. Within the Rabbanite world, the translation by Saadia Gaon (882–942) became so dominant that it precluded further Arabic translations. Saadia incorporated midrashic traditions into his Arabic version of the Bible. But among the Karaites, who rejected Saadia's dominion, a number of authors – especially in the tenth-century Jerusalem school – composed Arabic Bible translations, often accompanied by commentaries (also in Arabic) that interpreted the Bible independently of midrashic tradition.

[15] On these subjects, see Prickett, *Bible and the Arts*, and further references there.

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Polliack argues that the vibrant engagement of Karaite authors with Arabic language and culture prompted them to re-think their conception of sacred scripture. Scholars have long pointed to Muslim influence to explain the rise of Karaism. Whereas the "dual Torah" concept would have been natural within a Christian milieu (that embraced the sanctity of two "Testaments"),[16] it is not surprising that it would be called into question in a Muslim one. Polliack argues more specifically that the Karaites sought to create a Jewish version of the Muslim foundational narrative of scriptural transmission that guarantees its authenticity. Being a young religion with a recently revealed scripture, Islam confidently asserted that the Qur'an in its known form is a faithful replica of the original scripture penned by the Prophet, whereas the Hebrew Bible had been altered by the Jews through the millennia of its transmission.[17] This accusation of *taḥrīf* ("distortion"), according to Polliack, prompted the Karaites to formulate a new robust Jewish narrative of scriptural transmission. Drawing upon the Muslim notion of *tawātur* ("recurrence"), that is, the agreement of multiple sources that confirm the authenticity of a tradition, the Karaites could point to the virtual unanimity of the text attested in all copies of the Hebrew Bible as evidence for its faithful transmission. But the "Oral Law" features numerous debates that call its reliability into question. The Karaites therefore jettisoned the "dual Torah" doctrine in favor of a singular scriptural model. The Karaite Hebrew Bible thus donned Arabic garb not only linguistically but also conceptually, as it integrated key features of the Muslim notion of sacred scripture.

Part II Conceptions of the literal sense

In the medieval period, the dominance of Christian allegorical and typological interpretation began to give way to, or at least to share the stage with, newly emerging conceptions of the "literal sense" of scripture. Within Islam, where the "clarity" of scripture was prized, literal interpretation was privileged from the outset. And yet, there emerged within Muslim interpretation a parallel investigation into the nature of the literal sense, not to justify its primacy, but rather to define its parameters precisely. Within medieval Jewish Bible interpretation, likewise, the literal

[16] See Yuval, "Orality of Jewish Oral Law."

[17] Again, the early Shi'ites are exceptional in this respect, as some of their scholars argued that the text of the Qur'an was deliberately altered to expunge references to Shi'ite doctrines. See Bar-Asher, *Scripture and Exegesis*, 90–1, 101–3; Kohlberg and Amir-Moezzi, *Revelation and Falsification*, 24–30.

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