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978-0-521-88191-3 - The Psalms of Lament in Mark's Passion: Jesus' Davidic Suffering

Stephen P. Ahearne-Kroll

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus the Messiah dies a horribly painful and shameful death at the hands of the soldiers who serve Pontius Pilate, only after he suffers through the abandonment of his disciples, a trial before the Jewish authorities where he is mocked and beaten, and a second trial before Pilate where he is rejected by his people and mocked and beaten again by Pilate's soldiers. Yet Mark tells the story of these terrible events at the end of Jesus' days with copious references to his scriptures. Jesus goes "as it is written of him," even though he goes in such a horrific way. Upon close examination of one subset of the scripture passages evoked, namely, the Psalms of Individual Lament (hereafter, PssLam), the reader begins to question what it might mean for Jesus the Messiah to die "as it is written of him."

Although the use of scripture in the Gospel of Mark has been treated many times in the past, there have been relatively few full-length studies that exclusively deal with how Mark uses scripture in his narrative, and there have been none that have dealt solely with the PssLam in Mark. This study will examine the interaction between the Gospel of Mark's passion narrative, which I take as Mark 14:1–16:8, and the PssLam referred to in the Markan passion narrative with an eye towards exploring the question of what it might mean for Jesus the Messiah to die "as it is written of him." In this study, I will not claim to discover the hermeneutical key to Mark or make a definitive statement about Markan theology, Christology or soteriology. Scholarship over the past fifty years has shown that there is no one hermeneutical key to Mark, as well as the fact that Markan theology is not univocal or simply expressed in the narrative. My main goal in this study is to foreground the voice of the suffering David in the four PssLam evoked in Mark's passion narrative and read it through the lens of these four psalms, not as source material for the narrative but as an integral part of the multifaceted characterization of Jesus and Markan theological concerns.

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This first chapter will introduce some of the important issues involved in the study. Instead of producing the traditional history of scholarship to begin the discussion,¹ I will introduce and discuss relevant scholars' work as a way of describing the major methodological issues I see as important to account for in a work such as the present one. In the course of this discussion, the reader should get a clear sense of where this study falls with respect to other studies on the use of scripture in the Gospels, in general, and in the Gospel of Mark, in particular.

At the outset, I would like to make explicit the overarching methodological assumptions that inform the entire study and that undergird its conclusions. Although I recognize and appreciate that the text of Mark as we know it has a pre-history that includes the adoption and adaptation of stories and traditions received by the author, I wish to examine the Gospel as a narrative in its final form. In this respect, I will read the narrative of Mark in light of Paul Ricoeur's narrative theory, namely, that narratives are configurations of human time, and, through the process of reading, human time and experience are re-figured or transformed. In the case of the Gospel of Mark, I will attempt to read this narrative as one that addresses the issue of the suffering and death of Jesus the Messiah.

By reading Mark's passion narrative through the lens of the PssLam, I nuance Ricoeur's general narrative theory by foregrounding these psalms in the passion narrative and giving them detailed treatment in relation to the overall plot that unfolds in the passion narrative. As we will see, attention to these PssLam in the overall plot of Mark's passion narrative makes Mark's narrative more complex in its presentation of Jesus' suffering and death and problematizes the issue in unexpected ways. Even if I do not mention Ricoeur's work again in detail, these methodological assumptions drive everything hereafter.² All other methodological issues that I will raise in the first and second chapters should be considered subservient to these general assumptions, in that they will act as mere tools that I will use to articulate my interpretation of Mark's emplotment of Jesus' suffering and death. This is especially the case with my detailed treatment of the interaction between the PssLam and the particular places in Mark's passion narrative where they are evoked.

¹ For an excellent review of scholarship on the issue of the use of scripture in the Gospel of Mark, see Thomas R. Hatina, *In Search of a Context: The Function of Scripture in Mark's Narrative* (JSNTSS 232; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).

² See Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* (trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984), I:3–87.

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1 Scholarly approaches to the study of the use of scripture in the New Testament with special attention to the PssLam

In this section, I will introduce four major works on the use of scripture in the New Testament that include the PssLam as sub-topics. Doing so will allow for a brief sketch of the landscape of scholarship in the field and will also be useful for the analysis of approaches to the field that will follow in the second section.

1.1 Major works that include the PssLam

C. H. Dodd's and Barnabas Lindars' works on the use of scripture in the New Testament are foundational, in that they are well-respected attempts to reconstruct the origins and developmental history of early Christian theological speculation about Jesus with respect to the Jewish scriptures. Donald Juel's and Joel Marcus' works are more recent. Juel's work is also reconstructive of the origins of the use of scripture in the New Testament, but his focus is on the process by which certain biblical texts that are not obviously open to a messianic reading came to be read as such by early followers of Jesus. He also makes many interesting points with regard to the narrative presentation of Jesus' death as a king in Mark. Marcus' work is the most recent full-length treatment of the use of scripture in Mark that also deals with the PssLam.³ I will give a brief summary of the relevant arguments of each scholar and then will discuss each treatment of the PssLam in particular.

C. H. Dodd's classic work *According to the Scriptures: The Sub-structure of New Testament Theology* attempts to discover the earliest point of the formation of the central tradition that eventually developed

³ Hatina's recent study on the use of scripture in Mark is mainly a methodological study and does not address the passages in which Mark evokes the PssLam. He argues that the significance of Mark's references to scripture should not be searched for in contexts outside of Mark such as in the texts themselves, literary conventions contemporary to Mark, or in the historical context of Mark. Instead, he argues that the narrative context of Mark should be the context that determines the meaning of a particular use of scripture. See *In Search of a Context*, especially chapter 2. I agree with his basic argument that the narrative of Mark should play an important role in determining the meaning of a scriptural reference within the text. But I think there should be more of an interaction of contexts, that of Mark's narrative and that of the text evoked by Mark's narrative. Once an evocation or citation of scripture is noticed by a member of the audience, he or she is free to investigate the evocation or citation as far as possible. Each evocation should be considered on a case-by-case basis in order to determine how much of the context makes most sense for the meaning of Mark's narrative. In light of this, I think that any study of the overarching use of scripture in Mark does not account for the complexity of the narrative's evocation of scripture in particular places within the narrative.

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into the New Testament. He argues for the inherent connection between this earliest *kerygma* and the Old Testament. "The Church was committed, by the very terms of its *kerygma*, to a formidable task of biblical research, primarily for the purpose of clarifying its own understanding of the momentous events out of which it had emerged, and also for the purpose of making its Gospel intelligible to the outside public."⁴ In his investigation of the commonly used passages of the Old Testament in the New Testament, he concludes, "very diverse scriptures are brought together so that they interpret one another in hitherto unsuspected ways."⁵

Primary among these diverse scriptures that belong to a common stock of "testimonia" are the "psalms of the righteous sufferer," our PssLam, which, along with the servant passages of Deutero-Isaiah, offer a "plot" that is key for construing the early way in which the death and resurrection of Jesus are justified theologically by means of the scriptures. Within this schema, Dodd claims that, even though only bits and pieces of these texts are referred to in the New Testament, the whole of the "plot" of these texts was in mind for early Christian writers and thinkers. They served as a model for understanding Jesus' ministry, life, and death, almost as an abstracted mythic plot that the particular passages evoked when referred to by New Testament writers. As Donald Juel points out, Dodd's position has to be defended with evidence that a plot of typical suffering had already been worked out in Jewish tradition before the frequently cited texts were evoked in narratives. There is no such evidence, and "if there existed no mythic construct such as an apocalyptic Son of Man or a Suffering Servant or a Righteous Sufferer, but only the scriptural potential for the construction of such figures, what appear to us as coherent interpretive traditions may well be the product of our imaginations." Juel goes on to point out that the so-called plots of Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53 may not be the starting-point of theological speculation about Jesus for early Christians, but the endpoint or result of their exegetical usage of these texts.⁶ In other words, the mythic plot does not precede interpretation of these texts, but rather proceeds from repeated use of these texts by early believers in Jesus.

Noteworthy in Dodd's attempt to reconstruct the pre-New Testament interpretive practices of early Christians is his willingness to consider the whole of particular biblical texts. Where he falls short is in his

⁴ C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures: The Sub-structure of New Testament Theology* (London: Nesbet & Co., 1952), 14.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁶ Donald H. Juel, *Messianic Exegesis: Christological Interpretation of the Old Testament in Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 22.

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unwillingness to allow each of these texts to offer something unique to the discussion. Instead, he groups all the texts of a particular type together in a monolithic way and assumes that all the “psalms of the righteous sufferer” function the same way and contribute the same “plot” to the understanding of Jesus.

Barnabas Lindars' *New Testament Apologetic*⁷ owes much to Dodd, in that he tries to discover the doctrinal keys to early Christian thinking about Jesus by focusing on the quotations of the Old Testament found in the New Testament. He uses Dodd as a guide, but he also uses the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) *Habakkuk Commentary* to draw an analogy between the interpretive focus of that work and that of early Christianity: “the events of redemption are the regulative factor, and provide the key to the meaning of scripture.”⁸ His study proceeds with the assumption that he can get behind the writings of the New Testament to the actual origins of doctrinal formulation among early Christian thinkers through the use of certain biblical passages.

Lindars does admit that when a text is quoted, it is not always used in the same way in different places in the New Testament. His solution to this problem, based on Dodd's work, is to discount the possibility of a parallel reality of diverse understandings.⁹ Instead, he arranges these interpretations in a developmental schema so as to discover stages of interpretation that correspond to the developing thought of the church.¹⁰ The most primitive thought relates to the apologetic purposes of the early church in refuting objections to the primitive *kerygma* and in arguing for the gospel. When he arrives at the PssLam, which he calls Passion Psalms, he argues that they function similarly to Isaiah 53 in that they show that Jesus' death was not the result of divine displeasure. These psalms also answered the many questions and objections that arose in light of Jesus' death by grounding it in the prophecy of scripture – how his death is consistent with the claim that he is Messiah, why he included a traitor among his closest companions, why he suffered a criminal's death, and so forth.¹¹

Like Dodd, Lindars considers the whole of each PssLam, but he is more careful to distinguish among their various functions. However, he does not attend to the New Testament narrative context of each quotation with as much care as he should have, since his purpose is more general than that. Instead, he discusses the use of the group of PssLam by referring

⁷ Barnabas Lindars, *New Testament Apologetic: The Doctrinal Significance of the Old Testament Quotations* (London: SCM Press, 1961).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 17. ⁹ *Ibid.*, 19. ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 17–19. ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 88.

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to any place a PsLam is evoked in the New Testament. In doing so, he can paint his developmental picture of the growth of the doctrine of early Christianity.

Donald Juel's work¹² is of a very different kind from Lindars' and Dodd's. Instead of using theological or doctrinal questions as the overarching structure of his work, he attempts to reconstruct the actual exegetical ways that certain biblical texts were linked together to form the early collection of Old Testament texts commonly used by early Christians to understand Jesus' messiahship. Following his teacher, Nils Alstrup Dahl, Juel stresses the idea that early Christian exegesis centered on the attempt to *understand* the gospel. In light of this, he also argues, "the major focus of that scriptural interpretation was Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah."¹³ So, Jesus' messiahship was the starting-point *from which* an early Christian would turn to the scriptures, not the point *to which* an early Christian would argue starting from the scriptures, having such scriptural notions as a Suffering Servant, the Son of Man, the eschatological prophet, Wisdom, or the Righteous Sufferer as pre-conceived abstractions already formulated for use in his or her apologetic argumentations, as Lindars argues.¹⁴

Furthermore, the way that early Christians dealt with scripture to try to understand Jesus' messiahship "was determined largely by the

¹² Juel, *Messianic Exegesis*.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1. Jesus' messiahship is also the starting-point for Lindars in constructing the way early believers in Jesus may have appealed to scripture to defend the gospel to outsiders. However, the main difference between Juel and Lindars is the motivation for appealing to scripture. For Lindars, early believers appealed to scripture to convince others of the messiahship of Jesus. For Juel, early believers appealed to scripture to understand their own belief in the messiahship of Jesus.

¹⁴ It is very difficult to argue with absolute certainty for pre-conceived notions of abstracted figures in Second Temple Judaism. John J. Collins (*Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel* [Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993], 79–84) has argued that, although it is uncertain that there was a "Son of Man" concept during this time, "anyone in the late first century [B.C.E.] who spoke of one in human form riding on the clouds, appearing with an Ancient of Days, or in any terms reminiscent of Daniel 7 would evoke a figure with distinct traits that go beyond what was explicit in the text of Daniel's vision" (*ibid.*, 84). For a more detailed examination of the issue, see John J. Collins, "The Son of Man in First Century Judaism," *NTS* 38 (1992): 448–66. Even if there was no set pre-conceived abstraction of Wisdom during this time, one could make a strong case for there being significant similarities in the various ways that personified Wisdom is portrayed in Jewish literature. When early believers appealed to similar thoughts with respect to Jesus, they undoubtedly used a basic philosophical matrix to conceive of Christ's pre-existence, role in creation, closeness to God, and effect on humanity. However, it is not as simple as having an abstracted model into which early believers could simply insert Jesus. This is shown by the variety of literary expressions in the New Testament about Christ from the perspective of Wisdom (e.g., John 1:1–18; Col 1:15–20; and Heb 1:3).

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interpretive world of which the first believers were a part,"¹⁵ namely, the interpretive traditions of early Judaism. So Juel spends a great deal of time trying to reconstruct how certain texts were grouped together in order to determine how these texts helped early Christians understand Jesus' messiahship. He weaves an exploration of exegetical methods with an exploration of the content of the texts that he brings together. The result is a disciplined and imaginative reconstruction of the origins of the use of scripture by early followers of Jesus.

The PssLam, of course, figure prominently in his investigation because they were some of the key texts that helped early Christians understand who Jesus was as Messiah. Like Dodd and Lindars before him, Juel concluded that the PssLam primarily deal with the passion of Jesus, from early believers' perspectives, and so play a key role in the construction of the story of Jesus' suffering and death. Since there is no precedent for reading PssLam messianically, he calls the logic behind the messianic use of certain PssLam (namely, Psalms 22, 31, 69) "midrashic."¹⁶ Therefore, "precedent for reading these psalms as describing Jesus' death must . . . be sought not in traditions about righteous sufferers but in the logic of messianic exegesis."¹⁷ He goes on to argue for midrashic links to other texts, for example Psalm 89, to show how early Christians most likely incorporated these PssLam in their speculation about Jesus as Messiah. He spends several pages on the use of the Psalms in Mark's Gospel (mainly the passion narrative), and we will have recourse to his insights later in this study. For now, I will simply mention that he resists conclusions like Dodd's that try to bring in the whole of a particular psalm to justify Jesus' death and vindication theologically. Instead, Juel argues, "the point is that words and phrases from the psalms were used to construct a framework within which to make sense of Jesus' death – and to offer testimony that his death was 'in accordance with the scriptures,'"¹⁸ echoing Paul's statement in 1 Cor 15:3–7 and reminding his readers of the central thesis of his work.

I now turn to Joel Marcus' *The Way of the Lord* as the final work I will discuss in this section. This work is an attempt to describe the Christology of Mark by looking at the way that the text "exegetes" the Old Testament. The study has five main features, summarized well by the following statement from the introduction:

¹⁵ Juel, *Messianic Exegesis*, 29.

¹⁶ Juel does not give a definition of "midrashic," although he has a long discussion describing it as thoroughly as possible, with examples. See his chapter, "Rules of the Game," *ibid.*, 31–58, for this discussion.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

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This study, then, will combine attention to the Old Testament texts themselves, a reconstruction of Mark's role in transmitting them, an examination of the way in which he expresses similar themes elsewhere in his Gospel, glances at the interpretation of the same texts elsewhere in his world, and an appraisal of the message they convey to a community living in the crisis-filled atmosphere created by the Jewish War.¹⁹

Unlike Dodd, Lindars, and Juel, Marcus is not primarily interested in the origins or development of the thought or the exegetical and interpretive practices in the New Testament, although these come into play throughout his study. He is more interested in performing a Christological study of Mark through the lens of the Gospel's usage of the Old Testament and the social situation of believers in Palestine during the Jewish War. Throughout the work, he consistently argues for the depiction of Mark's Jesus as a warrior king who, instead of bringing political liberation to Israel, offers a future-oriented, apocalyptic alternative to those false messiahs in Palestine who act in the image of David the warrior king for political liberation (Mark 13:21–2). Jesus as the true Messiah is the warrior king, but his victory comes through suffering and will only be fully consummated in his second coming at the end of the ages. Marcus' treatment of the Old Testament consistently bolsters this main thesis.

Much like Dodd and Lindars, Marcus argues for the use of the PssLam (which he calls Psalms of the Righteous Sufferer) in more than an atomistic way. He constructs an extensive list of allusions to the Psalms of the Righteous Sufferer and argues that certain ones be read²⁰ as a whole when thinking of Jesus' suffering and death; this is especially the case with Psalm 22 and, to a certain extent, with Psalm 41. He then combines his reading of these two psalms with the "trajectory" of interpretation given to these psalms in post-biblical Judaism.²¹ When one does so, one can discover the eschatological model that the Psalms of the Righteous Sufferer offer for Jesus' situation. Although Jesus suffers a great deal at the end of his ministry, he dies as a warrior king on the cusp of vindication in the image of the Suffering Righteous One depicted in the Psalms,

¹⁹ Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord: Christological Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 11.

²⁰ Here, Marcus seems to mean that certain psalms should be considered as a whole by the modern interpreter because Mark intended it that way.

²¹ It is important for Marcus to consider all of pre-modern, post-biblical Judaism and not just the Second Temple period, because this allows him to consider later rabbinic texts in constructing trajectories of interpretation. I will discuss the problems with this approach in section 1.2.3 of this chapter.

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especially as prophesied in Psalm 22, or at least in Marcus' reading of Psalm 22.²² While I applaud Marcus' desire to include more than the specific expressions cited or evoked in Psalms 22 and 41, reading the texts as a whole is not the only exercise needed when considering an evoked text. There also needs to be a thorough rhetorical analysis of the Greek or Hebrew version of the psalm in order to understand the dynamics of the psalm in question and to understand the way that the evoked expression functions in the overall rhetoric of the psalm. This can help in discerning the possible function of the evoked text in Mark. Marcus never offers such an analysis anywhere in his treatment of the use of the PssLam in Mark. I will return to Marcus' reading of the PssLam many times later in this study, since his work is focused on the Gospel of Mark.

1.2 Ways of studying the New Testament's use of scripture

The four important studies I just discussed raise key issues for how to approach the topic of the use of scripture in the New Testament. Since no one author exclusively follows one approach, I will discuss the three most important and common issues of method (explicit and implicit in each work) and critique them in dialogue with the authors of these four works and several others.

1.2.1 *Exegesis, exegetical techniques, and biblical interpretation of Second Temple Judaism*

Some New Testament commentators have chosen to focus on the methods that writers in Second Temple Judaism used to interpret or exegete the Jewish scriptures. They do this as the sole focus of their studies or as a starting-point in order to situate a particular text within the interpretive context of Second Temple Judaism. The basic idea is to get a feel for the trends that were present in roughly the same time period of a particular writer in order to draw some conclusions about the techniques of exegesis or interpretation of that writer.²³ The techniques are usually summarized and categorized, and at times over-determined, in that the categories do not allow for overlap or innovation. The following examples will illustrate this tendency.

²² "[Mark] is . . . the heir of an interpretive tradition that takes these psalms as prophecies of eschatological tribulation and of the establishment of the kingdom of God, which includes the resurrection of the dead. Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection thus become, in his interpretation, eschatological events prophesied in the scriptures" (ibid., 186).

²³ Juel does this more thoroughly than Marcus, Dodd, or Lindars.

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A series of essays in a recent collection in honor of Barnabas Lindars exemplifies this type of analysis. In three of these essays, the following ancient exegetical techniques are discussed: the genre "rewritten Bible,"²⁴ explicit commentary on the text (the *peshtarim* of the DSS, allegorical interpretation as exemplified by Philo of Alexandria, and the *Mekilta* of early rabbinic writings),²⁵ and the various ways of citing or referring to scripture in the midst of texts not directly commenting on scripture.²⁶ In the last essay, Andrew Chester also mentions several exegetical techniques used by ancient Jewish biblical interpreters in reading and interpreting biblical texts – *gezera shawa*, *paronomasia*, *notarikon*, *al-tiqre*, and *asmakta*.²⁷ Chester also discusses the thematic usage of evocations and scripture citations in many Second Temple documents such as Judith, Tobit, 1–2 Maccabees, Ben Sira, and Wisdom of Solomon.

This sort of study is helpful in understanding the scope of interpretive techniques and the imaginative diversity with which Jews and early followers of Jesus read scripture. In other words, as a descriptive exercise that helps a modern reader understand *how* ancient writers dealt with their sacred writings, this is a useful tool. It becomes problematic when the description of the interpretive techniques spills over into the description

²⁴ Philip S. Alexander, "Retelling the Old Testament," in *It is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture: Essays in Honour of Barnabas Lindars* (ed. D. A. Carson and H. G. M. Williamson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 101–21. "Rewritten Bible" is the term used by Alexander.

²⁵ Bruce D. Chilton, "Commenting on the Old Testament (with Particular Reference to the *Pesharim*, Philo, and the *Mekilta*)," in *It is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture*, 122–40.

²⁶ Andrew Chester, "Citing the Old Testament," in *It is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture*, 141–69.

²⁷ The term *gezera shawa* means finding the meaning of a word or phrase by verbal analogy or appealing to another text to clarify the meaning of the text at hand. See Chester, "Citing the Old Testament," 143; see also Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Hermeneia Series; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 24; and H. L. Strack and G. Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 21. The term *paronomasia* means play on words or cognate roots. For example, in CD 7:9–8:2, "the proper names of Amos 5:26, *Sikkut* and *Kiyyun*, are interpreted by *sukkat* ('booth', itself taken up . . . by the 'booth of David' of Amos 9:11) and *kiyyun* ('pedestal')," Chester, "Citing the Old Testament," 143. See also Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 32. The term *notarikon* means the "dividing of a word and using the parts of a word as abbreviations of other words" (Chester, "Citing the Old Testament," 143); see also Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 33. The term *al-tiqre* refers to a text-critical method that changes the spelling of a word in the MT to make more sense in the context of the sentence. However, "the *al-tiqre* interpretation in rabbinic literature by no means always serves textual criticism" (*ibid.*, 259). The term *asmakta* means providing scriptural support for a particular interpretation. See Chester, "Citing the Old Testament," 145, and Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to Talmud and Midrash*, 259. See *ibid.*, 17–34, for an extensive discussion of rabbinical exegetical techniques where all the major terms are discussed.