

# Midrashic Hermeneutics and Scriptural Inspiration

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This article addresses one of the key elements concerning the nature of Scripture as a sacred text: how it is inspired. To state its rather simple, yet indubitably challenging, thesis right at the beginning: our claim is that the “doctrine of Inspiration” is dependent upon a prior theory of hermeneutics which regards “Holy Writ” as a holy - or wholly - written text, no more and no less. The inspiration of Scripture is further bound up with the interlinked ideas of authority and canon: what constitutes “Scripture” because it (whatever that “it” is) is recognized as authoritative for those who accept its jurisdiction. The issue at stake is precisely what the composure of this “it” is that at one and the same time and token is inspired, sacred, and authoritative.

The inspiration of Scripture has become a thorny issue over the years. The different challenges posed to religion as a whole by the process of secularization in the modern period - the historical-critical exegesis of the Bible, the move towards the subjective experiential nature of religion, the translation of ecclesiastical authority into individual responsibility and so forth - each produced their own impact on the understanding of scriptural inspiration, as well as producing a fundamentalist counter-reaction. In re-examining the idea of scriptural inspiration we therefore need to identify precisely what we have in mind when we use the term.

Our query is first of all an internal one. We are not engaged in an apologetic defense of Scripture before those who detract from its inspiration or authority altogether. Our quarrel is primarily with those within the community of believers who accept scriptural inspiration but understand and apply it in such a way as to, in our opinion, misread and diminish its proper character. To specifically “name names” in identifying particular positions: we wish to raise questions not only concerning the (mostly outmoded) idea of literal and/or “mechanical” inspiration, according to which God “dictated” every word of His Word to man, but also about the more generally accepted notions of scriptural authority which perceive inspiration and authority alike as statically constrained by the bounds of the canon. We wish to suggest that a proper biblical understanding of scriptural “inspiration” should be grounded on a dynamic theory of exegesis or textual interpretation.

Two introductory comments may serve to further clarify this claim. In this article, we shall link the difference between static and a dynamic view of inspiration to the mode of “midrash.” Midrash is a complex term which covers a specific body of Jewish literature (the “midrashim”); a set of exegetical or interpretative rules; and a mode of reading based on these exegetical principles. Although all three aspects of midrash are normally associated with a specifically Jewish form of interpretation, one of the basic presuppositions of this article (presumed but not elaborated on here) is that the New Testament is a Jewish text. One of its fundamental characteristics consists in its being a commentary on the Tanakh (the “Old Testament”). If this is true, the very nature of Scripture calls for an ongoing form of exegesis. This necessarily includes an understanding of scriptural inspiration. In conjunction with this fact, the principles of midrash are

themselves based on a dynamic exegesis within a closed text. Midrash thus presents itself as an excellent way in which to “read” scriptural inspiration - while it also emphasizes the nature of the New Testament as a Jewish text.

Midrash as a literary genre is a rich source of multifaceted dimensions. In order indeed to keep the bounds of this article as intelligible as may be, we shall consider only those aspects of midrash which are directly relevant to the issue of scriptural inspiration. This means specifically that we shall concentrate on midrash as a literary form, or as a form of literature, which is governed by certain exegetical constraints. The major feature of midrash as literature is that it regards its activity as the textual commentary and exposition of the biblical text. Its primary assumption is that this text is a unitary and seamless web of interwoven texts; it thus considers the Tanakh to possess the characteristic of what in contemporary literary theory is frequently referred to as “intertextuality.” This much-(ab)used term relates to the text (all texts) as “always already” composed of a mosaic of conscious or unconscious citation of prior discourses, presented in a manner which questions its own right to exist or existence in writing.

In the climate of modern interdisciplinary scholarship, “all things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small” are increasingly coming under the shadow of the literary premises of this theory, whose basic drive is to undermine the foundations of meaning itself. Since meaning is a primary attribute of hermeneutics, traditionally defined as the “science of interpretation,” this literary theory is questioning the meaning of meaning. In its extreme form, popularly known as “deconstructionism,” it clearly exhibits both the line along which it has developed and against which it makes its stand. In a field littered with slogans, two particular terms denote what precisely it is that deconstructionism sets out to “deconstruct”: a fierce and abiding opposition to “logocentrism,” and a corresponding move away from presence to absence manifested in a privileging of “writing” (écriture) over speech.

Deconstructionism’s critique of “logocentrism” strikes at the very roots of Western intellectual history. It is literally a literary blow against the whole line of thinking upon which Western thought has built its structure: the figure which best describes its presuppositions is Humpty Dumpty, who not only represents the arbitrary nature of language-based meaning, but who also, despite all the king’s men, could not be put together again. The “king” in this scenario is manifestly identifiable with the Logos as the “Word of God” - who had a great fall. Deconstructionism did not itself occasion this fall, but it arose out of the attempted epistemological “reconstruction” of knowledge fashioned by philosophical metaphysics. Deconstructionism correctly adduces that the epistemological under-pinnings of Western thought were grounded ‘in Theology, the medieval “Queen of the sciences.” The Logos formed the axis or centre of (God’s) “presence” upon which knowledge was made available to man and according to which Truth was structured.

The well-known “death of God” crisis merely shifted the royal responsibility from God’s shoulders to those of man (the king’s men). Philosophy and metaphysics, in an epistemological sense, counterfeited (and counter-fated) the theological grounds of Truth by transferring Transcendent and Absolute Truth to human Reason, Knowledge, and History, thus retaining the pattern from which they were moulded. When the “crisis of humanism” erupted following Heidegger, however, these “doubles” suffered the same fate as God himself, so that the human qualities of Reason, Knowledge, History and so forth were made subject to the same humiliations as the divine attributes. In this light, deconstructionism is merely a statement of the “facts”: that the grounds of logic have collapsed into the realm of language, out of which there is no

recourse since the lack of any “centre” also entails the absence of referentiality. According to its detractors - and the puns have only just been kept under lock and key until now - all that deconstructionist doctrine leaves undevastated is the possibility of languaging in the prison-house of “intertextuality,” denuded of transcendence, truth, and meaning. According to its celebrators, of (dis)course, the absence of presence which liberates language from mirroring reality frees the text to make any meaning of itself that it may through a proliferation of textual puns, predicates, and pluralisms.

Despite appearances up until now, we are not here engaged upon an exposition of contemporary literary theory. Our prime concern is with the internal principles of scriptural inspiration. Simultaneously, our main claim is that these principles must be governed - in order to be consistent with the nature of Scripture itself - by the inclusion of midrashic methodology within their ranks. Or to put it reversely, since midrash is endemic to the nature of Scripture, the “doctrine” of scriptural inspiration must account for (and to) the principles of midrash. This is the point at which the internal and external factors of inspiration and contemporary literary theory meet, since the similarities between deconstructionist thought and rabbinic midrash are openly acknowledged by the latter. Modern literary theory moreover also draws some of its basic premises, however, (at least according to one circle of its proponents) from what we shall argue to be the rightful internal principles for a proper doctrine of inspiration.

We shall thus attempt to follow the delicate membrane of difference, yet another of the deconstructionist logos, which negates the dichotomy of binary oppositions (black and white, inside and outside, speech and writing, etc.) by merging them at the point where they meet. In this light, the complications of this section - which covers the history of Western intellectual thought - can hopefully be perceived and understood as a relevant prelude to the following discussion of inspiration and midrash. This article will, therefore, if we can keep it within intelligible bounds, briefly review: a) the nature of midrash; b) its inherency in Scripture; and c) and the ramifications of this for a biblically accurate description of scriptural (or canonical) inspiration.

What is most important to the midrashic authors (commentators) is the written text as it stands. History is made subject to the textual artifact - the written word. The typical midrashic art is produced through the creative interpretation of the biblical text by itself. What is most sacred - Scripture itself - is therefore both static and dynamic. Although the text stands on its own, that “own” also includes its own interpretation. One of the most well-known examples of this midrashic assumption, to give an illustration, is the encoding of the Song of Songs (Canticles) as a description of God’s revelation - either at Mount Sinai or at the Red Sea.

This “either/or” of Sinai or the Red Sea is in itself a midrashic creation based on a midrashic reinforcement of the biblical text. The lack in the biblical record of any explicit theophany at the crossing of the Sea is countered by the description in the “Song of the Sea” of God’s praise: “This is my God and I will glorify Him” (Ex. 15:2). The word “this” in midrashic literature is always a concrete pointing to with one’s finger - Look, here! Thus a text in the Mekilta on Exodus 15:2 openly declares:

“Whence can you say that a maidservant saw at the sea what Isaiah and Ezekiel and all the prophets never saw? It says about them: “And by the ministry of the prophets have I used similitudes” (Hos. 12:11). And it is also written: “The heavens were opened and I saw visions of God” (Ezek. 1:1). To give a parable for this, to what is it like? To the following: A king of flesh and blood enters a province surrounded by a circle of guards; his heroes stand to the right of him and to the left of him; his soldiers are before and behind

him. And all the people ask, saying: "Which one is the king?" Because he is of flesh and blood like those who surround him. But, when the Holy One, blessed be He, revealed Himself at the sea, no one had to ask: "Which one is the king?" But as soon as they saw Him they recognised Him, and they all opened their mouths and said: "This is my God and I will glorify Him." (Mekilta, Shirata 3)

The midrashic author interprets the verse in Exodus through two prophetic texts on the basis of one word, "this". Strikingly, the passage in Ezekiel is part of a body of esoteric literature known as Ma'asei Merkhavah or the Work of the Chariot. In the hands of the midrash it here paradoxically becomes a lesser form of "vision which is simultaneously used to prove that God directly revealed Himself at the Red Sea, an experience not even granted to the prophets.

The use of the demonstrative ("this") is a favorite method of midrashic interpretative creativity. It reflects one of the principal forms of exegetical principles in midrashic literature, which in turn points to an underlying assumption of midrash: the text uses itself to encode certain premises, and one of the basic ways in which to understand the text (therefore) is through the gaps and ambiguities by which it is structured. Midrash thus establishes theological principles through filling in the text with other texts. The pertinent traits of the sense of the demonstrative in the text at hand are thematised by midrash, and from this process the author infers a reference which is independent of the context. As the demonstrative pronoun (or adjective) normally serves to designate a proximate and concrete object in the environment of the speaker, the mere fact of its occurrence in the text, prior to any signifying relationship, generates a concrete application of the biblical section, characterized by recognition and singularity - as well as, in a general way.