

Lecture Twelve

Interpretation within Judaism

Scope: Jewish life and biblical interpretation in the medieval period centered on the study and practice of God's Law as revealed through Moses and as interpreted, developed, and codified through what was called the Second Torah (or Oral Torah) in the Mishnah (c. 200 C.E.) and the Babylonian Talmud (c. 450 C.E.), regarded as the authoritative expression of Jewish life for more than a millennium. But the direct interpretation of the biblical text also continued in the work of great medieval scholars, such as Rashi. This lecture will touch on the several aspects and levels of Jewish interpretation during this long period.

Outline

- I. Jewish interpretation of the Bible through the medieval period was shaped by the conditions of diaspora existence in a Christian world.
 - A. Marginalization within the larger society helped form strong community bonds.
 1. Jews were not allowed participation in economic or political life and had no public religious role.
 2. From the time of the First Crusade (1095), Jews lived in danger of persecution from Christians and, throughout the period, needed to respond to aggressive Christian polemics.
 3. The formation of strong communities was partly a matter of self-protection, but it also encouraged a strong tradition of worship and study centered in God's Word.
 - B. The reading of the Bible took place within the context of a lively intellectual life and the practice of the commandments.
 1. Since the destruction of the Temple in the 1st century, the ideals of the Pharisees with respect to the Oral Torah, as made concrete in the Talmud, dominated life in the synagogue.
 2. Jewish interpretation needed always to bear in view the supersessionist tendencies of Christian biblical interpretation.
 3. Internally, Judaism needed to negotiate tensions caused by movements to reject the Talmudic ethos (Karaimism), to reduce

religion to philosophy, or to slight the literal in favor of the mystical.

- II. Not unlike the medieval Christian monastery, the synagogue provided the social setting of worship and study based in Torah.
 - A. On the basis of the *Seder Rav Amran Gaon* (9th century), we know that there were three times of formal worship daily in the synagogue: morning (*ha shaharith*), afternoon (*mincha*), and evening (*maariv*).
 - B. The morning service was the most elaborate and shows the central role played by Scripture:
 - 1. The service opens with a benediction, followed by passages of song taken from the Psalms, leading to the *kaddish*, or doxology.
 - 2. There follow three long *berakoth* (benedictions) praising God for creation, for the gift of Torah, and for faithfulness; these come before and after the great profession of faith (the *shema*) drawn from Scripture.
 - 3. Then are the *tefilla*, or prayers, beginning with the *shemoneh esre* (“18 benedictions”), also known as the *amidah* because recited while standing; these are followed by individual petitions (*tahanun*).
 - 4. From earliest times, there were readings from Torah and the Prophets (*haftorah*), followed by preaching.
 - 5. The service closes with assorted prayers and psalm passages.
 - C. Because of the availability of scrolls, the synagogue building also served as the *beth ha midrash*, where rabbis and students could carry out the life of the mind in the study of language and Scripture, as well as the great Talmudic treatises.
 - D. Many synagogues had an attached chamber called a *geniza*, which was used to store manuscripts that were no longer fit to be used in worship, as well as other (even theologically questionable) writing.
- III. Biblical interpretation in the medieval period grounded itself in the close reading of the Hebrew text and sought both to ground practice and to provide wisdom.
 - A. The mainstream of biblical interpretation stayed within the Talmudic framework and affirmed both the literal sense (*peshat*) and the applied or moral sense (*darash*).

1. Saadia Gaon (c. 880–942) emphasized the need for sound lexical and grammatical knowledge of Hebrew for biblical study, translated the Bible into Arabic, wrote an Arabic commentary on many books, and emphasized the theological and moral senses of Torah (*darash*).
2. Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (1040–1105), known by the acronym Rashi, is regarded as the greatest medieval commentator both on the entire Bible and on the Babylonian Talmud. His insistence on *peshat* was especially important as a way of countering Christian messianic claims.
3. Abraham Ibn Ezra (d. 1167) is, in contrast to Rashi, terse, allusive, and difficult in his commentaries on the Pentateuch and many other biblical books, but his works show a keen critical intelligence.
4. David Kimhi (1160–1235) continued the tradition of Abraham Ibn Ezra and placed particular emphasis on the countering of Christian readings.

B. Another sort of approach is represented by Moses ben Maimon (Moses Maimonides, or Rambam, 1135–1204). A fierce defender of Judaism during a time of persecution, he seriously engaged Islamic scholars and sought, in his *Guide for the Perplexed*, to provide a reading of the tradition that was consonant with Aristotle. He advanced *sekhel*, or a philosophical reading of the Bible.

IV. Some Jewish interpreters sought a deeper meaning to Scripture (*sod*) as the basis for a mystical way of life and speculation.

- A.** Already at the heart of the rabbinic tradition—as early as the 2nd century C.E.—there was a form of mysticism based in speculation concerning the *mekavah* (“heavenly throne chariot”) described by Ezechiel, a mysticism that spawned a Jewish-Gnostic literature based in ascent to the *hekaloth* (“heavenly palaces”).
- B.** A form of Jewish mysticism flourished in Germany (1150–1250), based on the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, and spread to Spain, where it influenced Moses ben Nachman (Nachmanides, 1195–1270) in his commentary on the Pentateuch.
- C.** In the late 13th century, a mysterious book called the Zohar (“Book of Splendor”) was distributed by Moses ben Shemtov de Leon,

which became the foundational text of Jewish *kabbalah* (“tradition”), a way of reading Torah in mystical terms.

Essential Reading:

J. R. Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World: A Source-Book*.

Supplementary Reading:

B. W. Holtz, ed., *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Discuss how the physical constraints of medieval Jewish life encouraged a rich and adventurous life of the spirit.
2. How is the notion that there are many levels of meaning in Torah connected to convictions of divine inspiration?