



THE
BIBLE
AS IT WAS

James L. Kugel

THE BELKNAP PRESS OF
HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS
LONDON, ENGLAND • 1997



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BS
1225.2
.K84
1997

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Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kugel, James L.
The Bible as it was / James L. Kugel.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-674-06940-4 (alk. paper)

1. Bible. O.T. Pentateuch—Criticism, interpretation, etc.—

History. I. Title.

BS1225.2.K84 1997

222'.106'09—dc21

97-3299

I

The World of Ancient Biblical Interpreters

THE OLDEST PARTS of the Hebrew Bible go back very far into ancient times, some to before 1,000 B.C.E. These ancient texts may have been transmitted orally for a time, but soon enough they were committed to writing. Since the materials on which they were written were perishable, the texts eventually crumbled or wore out and had to be recopied. The stories, psalms, laws, and prophecies that have reached us today as part of the Bible must therefore have been copied many, many times even within the biblical period itself. (There were doubtless other texts, such as the “Book of Yashar” or the “Book of the Wars of the Lord” mentioned in the Bible itself,¹ which did not survive; for one reason or another, they ceased to be copied and so have been lost.)

The scribes who did the work of copying were not mindless duplicating machines, nor did they likely execute their copies so that the texts might then be put into some kind of “cold storage.” If these texts were repeatedly copied within the biblical period itself, it was because they were *used*; they played some part in daily life. Some texts, especially the history of past events and of ancient heroes, were doubtless used in the royal court, perhaps for purposes of literacy instruction, royal propaganda, or simply record keeping. Other texts were just as certainly associated with temples and sanctuaries—songs and prayers and priestly instructions and the like. Still others—ancient statutes, prophecies, speeches, proverbs, and so forth—may have likewise had their place in court or temple, or they may have belonged to yet some other site. But wherever they were preserved, the very fact that they were attests to the role that these texts must have played somewhere in ancient Israelite society. No one would go to the trouble of copying texts for no purpose.

To say only this is virtually to assert that, from a very early period, the texts that make up the Hebrew Bible were *interpreted* texts. For, judges who seek to enforce written statutes have to do more than simply read the texts involved; they have to apply the law’s general prescriptions to specific situations and, sometimes, adapt fixed formulations to new circumstances. (This is especially true with the laws contained in the Bible, which often function by describing

Note on Transcriptions

In transcribing Hebrew words and names, I have chosen not to confuse nonspecialists with the use of unnecessary diacritical marks and the like. Thus, biblical figures and places are generally rendered by their standard English equivalents (Joshua, Bethlehem); the same is true of the names of texts cited in this book (the Mishnah, *Yalqut Shimoni*) and certain other, fairly common, transcriptions (*halakhah*, the Shema). When a particular point has required more exact transcription, I have relied on that in current use in most scholarly journals.

1. 2 Sam. 1:18, Num. 21:14. On this subject generally: Leiman, *Canonization of Scripture*.

a specific case while leaving to others the job of deriving from that case principles that might apply elsewhere.) The same applies to priests seeking to follow an established procedure for temple sacrifices or trying to diagnose a disease from a specific set of symptoms. Teachers, royal counselors, propagandists, or others who might make use of historical records doubtless did more than simply read them aloud: however much the records might have seemed to speak for themselves, even the clearest point in a text must sometimes be driven home to an audience through restatement, elaboration, and the like. And not all texts are clear. Writers often leave ambiguities in what they write, so that *all* the figures mentioned—judges, priests, teachers, and so forth—were of necessity also interpreters because of the simple fact that their work involved using texts.

Thus, it is probably safe to say that, at least in these ways, the interpretation of the Bible goes back virtually as far as the oldest texts within it. Indeed, evidence of this process is to be found within the Hebrew Bible itself. Later biblical books frequently mention or allude to things found in earlier books, and in so doing they often modify or change—sometimes radically—the apparent sense of the earlier text. The book of Daniel, for example, specifically interprets a prophecy of Jeremiah (Jer. 25:11–12, 29:10), in which Jeremiah's reference to “seventy years” is asserted to mean in reality 490 years (Dan. 9:2, 24). In somewhat less dramatic fashion, the entire book of Chronicles may be seen as a kind of commentary on (especially) the biblical books of Samuel and Kings, with numerous additions or modifications of the earlier material, plus a few blatant omissions.² Daniel and Chronicles are relatively late books in the biblical canon, but there is evidence of such interpretive activity far earlier, well before that “great divide” in biblical history, the point at which the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and sent the Jews into exile (586 B.C.E.). Such ancient bits of interpretation, while generally less striking than later examples, nonetheless bear ample witness to the work of interpreters from very early times.

The Age of Interpretation

And yet, it would be wrong to conclude that interpretation proceeded at pretty much the same pace throughout the biblical period. On the contrary, the Babylonian conquest just mentioned seems to mark the dawn of a new age

2. See on this Seligmann, “Voraussetzung der Midraschexegeese”; idem, “The Beginnings of Midrash in the Book of Chronicles”; Willi, *Der Chronik als Auslegung*; Japhet, *Ideology of the Book of Chronicles*.

with regard to Scripture and its interpretation. The Jews, exiled from their homeland for half a century, were suddenly informed in 532 B.C.E. that they were free to return home; this right was granted to them by an edict of the Persian king Cyrus following his stunning victory over mighty Babylon. Many Jews did indeed return home, and the society that they established in Judea was one in which—for reasons to be examined presently—the interpretation of ancient Scripture came to play a central role. As a result, a distinctive approach to interpretation began to develop, and in the ensuing centuries individual interpretations of biblical laws and stories and prophecies slowly accumulated and coalesced into a great body of lore that came to be known widely throughout Israel.

Some of the first fruits of this activity may be found among the latest books of the Hebrew Bible, but the great mass of ancient biblical interpretation appears in books that, for one reason or another, did not end up being included in the Jewish canon. These books—expansive retellings of biblical stories, first-person narratives put in the mouths of biblical heroes, pseudonymous apocalypses, the sayings and proverbs of ancient sages, plus actual biblical commentaries, sermons, and the like—were composed from, roughly, the third century B.C.E. through the first century C.E., although some of the interpretations of the Bible found in them doubtless go back still earlier. These old texts allow us to reconstruct in some detail how the Bible was read and understood during this crucial period. They are the focus of the present study.

The Need for Interpreters

As mentioned, almost any written text contains potential ambiguities. Normally, we ordinary readers deal with such ambiguities ourselves, so that there is no need for a special class of text interpreters. Perhaps it was so, for a time, in ancient Israel as well—although the job of being a judge, a priest, or a teacher certainly could imply some skill in interpreting texts. But the post-exilic period marked (among other things) a time in which this interpretive function became a thing unto itself and in which, therefore, the interpreter of Scripture emerged as a figure in his own right.

Part of the reason for this figure's emergence had to do with the passage of time itself. For, however much *all* texts contain ambiguities, such ambiguities—and even out-and-out incomprehensibility—tend to increase with old texts, for the simple reason that language and culture are always in the process of changing. A word whose meaning may have been clear two or three hundred years ago may no longer be clear now; indeed, it may now mean something else entirely. Few speakers of English nowadays would understand

that to call someone “lewd and silly” in Chaucer’s day was hardly to criticize; the person was, in fact, being described as uneducated and defenseless.

In the same way, many Hebrew words had shifted their meaning by the end of the biblical period. Even such basic concepts as “get,” “take,” “need,” “want,” “time,” and “much” were expressed with new terms; the old words had either shifted their meaning or dropped out of sight entirely. As a result, someone trying to read a text from the ancient past could not always make sense of it; an expert, someone acquainted with old texts and their meanings, was needed.

Words were not the only thing to change: ideas, social institutions, and political reality likewise shifted. Some of Israel’s bitterest enemies of days gone by no longer existed, replaced by new foes unheard of in an earlier age. Old forms of organization and governance had likewise fallen from view. Successive waves of conquerors—the Babylonians, Persians, Greeks (subdivided into the Hellenized Ptolemies of Egypt and the Hellenized Seleucids of Syria), then the Romans—had introduced not only new words into the Hebrew language, but also new ideas and ways of thinking, indeed, whole new civilizations. Taken together, such changes had a way of distancing people from their own past: texts that had at one time been quite comprehensible might now appear to be an encoded mystery. There is little doubt that, for just such reasons, many of the particulars in the stories of Genesis or the laws of Exodus were no longer clear to readers as early as the time of the return from Babylonian exile. Henceforth interpreters of Scripture would increasingly be necessary.

Such interpreters were needed even more because of a curious feature in the transmission of ancient Hebrew Scripture. The Hebrew writing system was more than a little ambiguous. Like certain other Semitic languages, Hebrew was written down by recording the consonants alone: there were no letters to represent vowels. (Eventually, the consonants corresponding to our H, Y, and W came to be widely used as a way of indicating *some* vowels, but this was done only inconsistently at first and in any case still left many ambiguities.)

Of course, writing only the consonants in words would not work at all in English. The letters BRD, for example, could be interpreted as standing for “bird,” “bard,” “bared,” “barred,” “beard,” “broad,” “bored,” “board,” “brad,” “bread,” “bred,” “breed,” “braid,” “by-road,” “buried,” “borrowed,” and so on. In Hebrew, things are far easier: most words are built on a triconsonantal root and there are relatively few homonyms. The basic meaning of BRD, for example, is “hail.” But even within the triconsonantal root structure, context alone will often determine whether a particular word is to be construed as a

noun or a verb, or as belonging to one class of verb as opposed to another, or as being in the passive or active voice. Here, certainly, was plenty of room for ambiguity!

What is more, biblical texts were written without the use of capital letters, periods, commas, or any other kind of punctuation. Thus, even where a sentence began or ended was often a matter of opinion: it all depended on how you interpreted it. Indeed, even the separation between individual words was, in ancient times, frequently left ambiguous by author or scribe. And within the sentence, basic decisions about which words went together with which others and where, therefore, syntactic pauses were to occur—these too were a matter of interpretation.

Such ambiguities might at first seem rather minor, even trivial. However, especially when combined with other obscurities resulting from the passage of time, they created a significant barrier between text and reader. As a matter of fact, this ambiguous writing system was responsible for a great many of the interpretations charted in this book. The existence of such a writing system not only seemed to call forth interpreters to explain the biblical text, but soon enough, it furnished those interpreters with a flexible tool for tipping the interpretive scales in one particular direction or another. Carried to an extreme, the freedom of interpreters to read a single word in different ways or to break up a block of text into various syntactic combinations could at times allow them to make a text out to be saying exactly the opposite of its apparent meaning. The importance of the Hebrew writing system can thus hardly be overstated.

The Mode of Return

Many of the above factors, however, had existed from earliest times; while the passage of time may have heightened their effect, they alone are probably not sufficient to explain why it was the period following the return from Babylonian exile that inaugurated a new interest in the interpretation of Scripture. To account for this, a number of further historical considerations must be mentioned.³

The first might be called the “mode of return” in which the Jews found themselves after the return from the Babylonian exile. Not all those who had been exiled to Babylon did return; a number of them stayed in their new

3. I have discussed these factors at greater length in Kugel and Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation*, 31–51.

home. Those who went back to Judah⁴ doubtless did so for a variety of reasons, but certainly one of them was a straightforward desire to return to the place and the way of life that had been their ancestors' in days gone by. Yet here was a problem. For, while the physical places previously inhabited may have been clear enough, the way of life that had been followed in them was not. One could not interrogate the hills or the trees to find out how one's forebears had acted two or three generations earlier: that information depended on the restored community's collective memory, a memory embodied in (among other things) its library of ancient texts. Thus, the very mode of return—the desire to go back to something that once existed—probably made this community bookish to an abnormal degree.

Political differences among different groups within the returning exiles reinforced this tendency. To judge by the biblical evidence itself, some Jews at that time were bent on restoring the Davidic dynasty to full political leadership. (David's descendants had continuously ruled in Judah from the time of David himself, in the tenth century B.C.E., until the Babylonian exile.) Hopes eventually crystallized in the figure of Zerubbabel, heir to the Davidic throne. Many apparently looked to Zerubbabel to bring about drastic changes in the Jews' situation, perhaps through out-and-out rebellion against the Persian authorities; this hope is reflected in, among others, the writings of the biblical prophets Haggai and Zechariah (see Haggai 2; Zech. 4:6–7). At the same time, however, other Jews were more reserved in their political opinions. It is striking, for example, that the biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah nowhere mention Zerubbabel's Davidic origins in their treatment of him; apparently, the author of these books saw the Persians as legitimate rulers.⁵ Indeed, the author of Ezra begins by asserting that the emperor Cyrus had been commissioned by God Himself to rule "all the kingdoms of the earth" and to build a temple for Him in Jerusalem (Ezra 1:1–2).

Such political differences might exist at any time and in any place. But it is significant that the Jews of this period turned to their own ancient writings to

4. Here it might be appropriate to clarify a matter of terminology. Judah was one of Israel's original twelve tribes, eventually, the dominant one in the south. King David had united the twelve tribes into a single monarchy at the start of the tenth century B.C.E.; when this United Monarchy subsequently split in two under David's grandson Rehoboam, the southern part became the kingdom of Judah. The northern kingdom was subsequently conquered by Assyria in the eighth century B.C.E. and its citizenry dispersed; only the southern kingdom, Judah, continued to exist, still ruled by David's descendants. It was this kingdom that the Babylonians conquered early in the sixth century B.C.E. and to which the exiles returned at the end of that century. In Greco-Roman sources, the country is called Judaea (or Judea) and its people the Jews. However, the general term "Israel" also continued to be used as a name for the Jewish people.

5. Japhet, "Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel"; see also her *Ideology of the Book of Chronicles*, 395–504.

legitimate their political views. Thus, when the prophet Haggai, a proponent of Zerubbabel, first prophesied about him,

On that day, says the Lord of Hosts, I will take you, Zerubbabel my servant, son of Shealtiel, and make you **like a signet ring**, for I have chosen you, says the Lord of Hosts. —Hag. 2:23

his words had a somewhat "biblical" ring, perhaps intended specifically to evoke a dire prophecy of Jeremiah's from an earlier age:

As I live, says the Lord, though Coniah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, were a **signet ring on my right hand**, yet I would tear you off and give you into the hand of those who seek your life.

—Jer. 22:24–25

The same prophet Jeremiah was evoked by members of the opposite camp—in the opposite sense, of course. The opening words of the book of Ezra, alluded to above, might be cited in full here:

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, **in order to accomplish the word of the Lord uttered by Jeremiah**, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia so that he made a proclamation. —Ezra 1:1

According to this source, not only was Cyrus a legitimate, divinely chosen ruler, but his deeds were nothing less than the fulfillment of a biblical prophecy uttered by the same Jeremiah.

So, more generally, the returning Jews used the stories, prophecies, songs, and prayers saved from before the Babylonian exile to bolster their own ideas on all manner of different issues. For example, the book of Chronicles has been shown to contain a detailed program for the restored Jewish community after the Babylonian exile: its author was a firm supporter of the Davidic monarchy; he was in favor of uniting the northern and southern parts of the country into a single polity, a state whose very existence was predicated on what he saw as the people's eternal (and, in his view, virtually uninterrupted) presence on its own land and loyalty to its God.⁶ Yet how interesting, and typical, that this author sought to put forward his political program not as such, but in the form of a history of bygone times—specifically, a retelling of much of the biblical books of Samuel and Kings. It was no doubt the mode of return that led this author, like so many others, to present his ideas not as innovations but as a return to the glorious past. That is, by omitting some

6. These points are discussed at length in Japhet, *Ideology of the Book of Chronicles*.

things and adding others, this author reshaped the past and so made it into a more perfect model of what he himself wished to prescribe for the future.

The Centrality of Laws

Texts from the ancient past not only served as a general guide to how life had been lived before the exile. These texts—and in particular what is called the Pentateuch or Torah, the first five books of the Bible—contained numerous laws and commandments from an earlier day. Another result of the mode of return in which the Jews found themselves was the heightened importance of these laws.

Obedying laws is usually thought of in our society as a rather small and unimportant part of life. True, most people obey speed limits and traffic lights, stay off private property, and pay their taxes, but such acts of obedience hardly register in our daily consciousness. Ordinary citizens do not usually spend a lot of time in court. The whole subject of law seems rather specialized and marginal.

Among the returning exiles, by contrast, laws occupied a central position. According to the book of Nehemiah, the people at this time specifically took an oath “to walk in God’s law which was given by Moses, the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our master and perform His ordinances and statutes” (Neh. 10:29). It was, apparently, crucially important that all members of the restored community do their utmost to conform to the divinely given statutes of old.

One reason was that they were *divine*, God’s own commandments. If this divine provenance were not in itself sufficient to command the sustained attention of the community, the whole atmosphere of the postexilic period made it sufficient. The Babylonian conquest and exile had been *the* traumatic event in Jewish history. Not only had the defeat cost the Jews their freedom and homeland—as well as quite a few lives—but it had challenged the very foundations of Israel’s understanding of its God and His ways with the world. The Jerusalem Temple, God’s physical home on earth, had suddenly been razed by the enemy, and the daily Temple sacrifices, a centuries-old routine by which, in the common esteem, the divine will was appeased and made favorable toward mankind, had now been brutally put to an end. How could such events be understood?

The explanation offered by Jewish prophets and sages was that these events constituted God’s punishment for the people’s failure to obey the divine laws. When, in conformity to Jeremiah’s prophecy (and in contradiction to all that common sense or political science might have predicted), the

Babylonians were in turn overthrown a few short decades after their defeat of the Jews, it certainly seemed as if the “punishment” explanation was indeed correct: God had used the Babylonians to show His people Israel the error of its ways but, once having done so, He in turn toppled the Babylonians from power lest anyone conclude that it was *their* military might, rather than God’s will, that had brought them victory.

Back in their homeland, the Jews resolved to learn the lesson of history: henceforth they would be more careful, henceforth they would be sure to observe the divine statutes with punctilious zeal. But such resolve only heightened the interpretive crux of biblical law. How could one demand strict observance of laws that were frequently and notoriously short on particulars? For example, working on the Sabbath was forbidden—but what constituted “work”? Performing one’s usual profession? Doing *any* work which was part of *a* profession, even if it was not one’s own? Or perhaps something still more stringent? (For some answers, see Chapter 20.) Similarly, the book of Leviticus commanded that one not “take revenge or hold a grudge” (Lev. 19:18) against one’s kinsman—but what did that mean? If “revenge” here implied actually harming him or killing him to recompense a wrong suffered, did the further prohibition of holding a grudge mean that one could not even resent him for the harm inflicted? Was this humanly possible? And did the continuation of this same verse—“And you shall love your neighbor as yourself”—mean that one was actually ordered by God to love someone whom one might otherwise be inclined to hate? How can love be *commanded*? (For answers given to these questions, see Chapter 22.) Like these, dozens and hundreds of other laws had to be understood precisely and thoroughly if another catastrophe was to be averted.

Quite apart from what we would think of as the “religious” importance of obeying biblical laws—the desire of the community to find favor with God and to head off another disaster—there may have been a more immediate spur to making sure that these laws were definitively interpreted and explained. It is likely that biblical laws were quite simply the law of the land in the restored community of Judah. Persian imperial policy under Darius I apparently consisted of giving the empire’s stamp of approval to the old legal systems of its various subject peoples. Thus, in the year 518 B.C.E., Darius wrote to his satrap in Egypt to send him Egyptian scholars who might write down “the former law of Egypt.” The scholars apparently complied, writing their laws “on one roll.”⁷ It seems likely that something similar happened with

7. Bickerman, *The Jews in the Greek Age*, 30. Bickerman elaborated on this theme in a paper presented at the Eighth World Congress of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem, 1981. (Unfortunately, he died

the Jews: the ancient laws, presented in definitive form, acquired the authority of the ruling powers. The words of Artaxerxes I (who reigned from 465 or 464 to 424 B.C.E.), cited in the book of Ezra, are eloquent in this regard:

“I, Artaxerxes the king, make a decree to all the treasurers in the province Beyond the River: Whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, requires of you, be it done with diligence . . . And you, Ezra, according to the **wisdom of your God which is in your hand**, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people in the province Beyond the River, all such as **know the laws of your God**; and those who do not know them, you shall teach. Then, whoever will not obey the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be strictly executed upon him, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of his goods or for imprisonment.”

— Ezra 7:21, 25–26

Henceforth, the ancient Hebrew laws stood on a par with, or were equated with, the laws of the Persian rulers: the “law of your God and the law of the king” comprised the legal corpus by which daily life was to be governed, and not only the Jews but, as well, the Persian government officials in their midst were required to make sure that ancient biblical statutes were widely understood (“those who do not know them, you shall teach”) and fully enforced as the law of the land.

The Rise of the Interpreter

For all these reasons, the interpreters of Scripture enjoyed an increasing prominence and authority in the period following the Babylonian exile. They were, first of all, the guardians of writings preserved from Israel’s ancient past. With their bookman’s skills, they could explain what that past was, what had been set down in writing by or about Israel’s historic leaders; they could likewise look deeply into the words of ancient lore and traditions, the writings of divinely chosen prophets or sages from days gone by. Clearly, interpreting such ancient texts was a matter of more than merely antiquarian interest: the interpretation of Scripture could lend support for this or that political pro-

shortly after the conference and the paper was never published.) If it was similarly demanded of Jewish sages that they write down their “former law,” this may have been an event of crucial importance not only to the ancient interpretation of biblical laws but to their very formulation in a final, fixed text of the Pentateuch.

gram or leader, and it determined as well the significance of divine law and its application to daily life.

Who were these interpreters? There is good indication that they came from within different groups and levels of Jewish society. Some of them were, like “Ezra the priest” (Ezra 7:21) just mentioned, priests or levites—people who, by birth, had a special association with the service of God—since part of their job had from earliest times involved not only interpreting divine statutes but promulgating and explaining them to the people. The book of Deuteronomy had said about the tribe of Levi (from which priests and levites were said to descend):

They shall teach Your statutes to Jacob, and to Israel Your Torah.

— Deut. 33:10

Elsewhere in the same book, the role of members of this tribe in interpreting the law is made specific (Deut. 17:8–13). So too in later times:

“Thus says the Lord of Hosts: Ask the priests to decide this question.”

— Hag. 2:11

True instruction was in his [Levi’s] mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips . . . For the lips of the priest guard knowledge, and people seek instruction [*torah*] from his mouth, for he is an emissary of the Lord of Hosts.

— Mal. 2:6–7

But priests and levites were hardly the only interpreters. We have glimpsed above the special association that judges, teachers, sages, and scribes probably had with the interpretation of ancient texts, and people from these walks of life as well served as Scriptural interpreters on into the Second Temple period and beyond. (Note that Ezra the priest is further described in the same verse as “the scribe of the law of the God of heaven”; Ezra 7:21). No doubt for a time at least, interpreting Scripture had merely been a function—one among many—associated with each of these various offices; indeed, certain areas of interpretation were probably long associated specifically with certain types of interpreters (for example, laws of sacrifices, purity, and impurity with priests). From the closing centuries before the common era, however, comes evidence of more “all-purpose” interpreters, people who held forth on every area of scriptural interpretation, and such continued to be the case in the centuries thereafter.

In explaining Scripture in their particular fashion, interpreters ultimately came to encroach on territory that had previously belonged to another, rather different figure: the biblical prophet. For centuries before the Babylonian

exile, prophets had acted as divine spokesmen in Israel. They were seen, quite literally, as messengers of God, and the messages they brought—words of rebuke and announcements of divine judgment and punishment, as well as messages of hope and divine encouragement, or simply divine directives and commandments—compelled the attention of kings and commoners alike. Prophets, in short, were an intermediary link in communications between God and humanity. But then, in the period following the return from exile, prophecy began to fall into disrepute. Although we possess the words of prophets who existed at the time of the return itself, in the centuries that followed there is a void: apparently, prophecy was no longer regarded as it had been previously.⁸ Perhaps the institution itself had fallen, or was falling, into disrepute:

And if anyone again appears as a prophet, his father and mother who bore him will say to him, “You shall not live, for you speak lies in the name of the Lord”; and his father and his mother shall pierce him through when he prophesies. On that day, every prophet will be ashamed of his vision when he prophesies; he will not put on the hairy mantle in order to deceive, but he will say, “I am no prophet, I am a tiller of the soil.”

—Zech. 13:3–5

Later prophets sometimes alluded to, or interpreted, the words of earlier prophets, and these references in themselves may indicate a change in the air. Were not the words of the great prophets of the past turned to as a source of inspiration, or even information, about the present precisely because these words, now part of Scripture, outweighed anything that might be uttered by the latter-day prophets “in your midst”? God’s word was increasingly thought of as a *written* word, given to Israel for all time, and it was therefore those who

8. This is not to say that prophecy itself ceased to exist as a phenomenon in postexilic times, although this was indeed asserted or implied in a number of ancient sources (1 Macc. 4:46, 9:27, 14:41; Prayer of Azariah 15; 2 Bar. 85:3; (perhaps) *Testament of Benjamin* 9:2; Josephus, *AgApion* 1:40–41; as well as in numerous rabbinic sources, e.g., *Seder Olam* 30, T. *Soṭa* 13:2, b. *Baba Batra* 12b, etc.). Elsewhere, however, is evidence of a different opinion: *Wisd.* 7:27, Philo, *Who Is Heir* 259, (1QH) *Thanksgiving Hymns* 4:16, 1 Cor. 11:4–5, 12:10, 14:4–5, etc., Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 13:311–13, 20:97, 169, etc. It seems not so much that prophecy ceased as that the prophet’s very identity and role came to be redefined and significantly broadened, while at the same time the conviction was spreading that the great prophets were a thing of the past (and, perhaps, the future). See further Urbach, “When Did Prophecy Cease?” idem, “Halakhah and Prophecy,” 1–27; Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*, 69–82; Blenkinsopp, “Prophecy and Priesthood in Josephus”; Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity*; Horsely, “Like One of the Prophets of Old”; Greenspahn, “Why Prophecy Ceased”; Kugel, “David the Prophet”; Winston, “Two Types of Mosaic Prophecy”; Feldman, “Prophets and Prophecy in Josephus”; Brin, “Biblical Prophecy in the Dead Sea Scrolls”; and Milikowsky, “The End of Prophecy and the End of the Bible.”

interpreted sacred texts from the past who were God’s present-day messengers and spokesmen.

If the influence of prophets was on the decline, on the rise was that of another figure who had long existed in Israel, the sage or wise man. Sages in ancient Israel—and in the ancient Near East in general—were teachers and advisers, many or most of them no doubt attached to the royal court. They were often champions of a particular philosophy and way of life called “wisdom.” Wisdom is not given to easy summary, but its basic tenet was that all of reality is shaped by a great, underlying pattern. This pattern, referred to in itself as wisdom, was of divine origin. Everything that happens in the world—the ways of nature and of human society, the course of history and of individual human lives—happens in keeping with this divine pattern. While it is not given to humanity to know all the particulars of the divine pattern, parts of it had certainly been grasped over the centuries by those who pursued wisdom, namely, the sages themselves. Their insights into the divine pattern had been “packaged” into little units, the pithy sayings or proverbs that were the sage’s stock-in-trade. Such proverbs—whose overall message was one of patient self-control, treading the strait and narrow path—were often cleverly worded and required sustained contemplation to be fully understood. (Three biblical books that abound in such material are Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes.) Sages taught this material to their students and sought to live by its teachings in their own lives.

These same sages became interpreters of Scripture. With the passage of time, the texts they contemplated and explained were no longer limited to ancient proverbs and sayings: laws and narratives and prophecies likewise came to be included in their repertoire. Soon enough, the writings they themselves produced encompassed more than old-fashioned proverbs: without quite abandoning these, they added pithily phrased expositions of Scripture to their words of wisdom.

The process by which such teachers of wisdom (in the sense described above) became teachers of Scripture is not hard to document: it happens before our very eyes in books like the *Wisdom of Ben Sira* (or *Sirach*, written around 180 B.C.E.) or the *Wisdom of Solomon* (late first century B.C.E.).⁹ The sages who wrote these books are, in a sense, transitional figures. They are, on the one hand, traditional wisdom teachers whose mission it still is to put insights into the ways of God and men in little one-line proverbs, and the

9. An interpreter such as Philo of Alexandria might at first seem altogether free of any connection with the earlier wisdom heritage, yet even in his case has this connection been asserted: Mack, *Logos und Sophia*; Laporte, “Philo in the Tradition of Biblical Wisdom Literature.”

proverbs they wrote and included in their books are no different in kind from the proverbs written by earlier sages, the authors of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. On the other hand, Ben Sira or the author of the Wisdom of Solomon did something no sage had done before: they made Scripture part of the *subject* of their inquiry. It is a striking fact that nowhere do earlier wisdom collections—Proverbs, Job, or Ecclesiastes—ever talk about Abraham or Jacob or Moses, the history of the people of Israel or the messages transmitted by Israel's prophets. It is not that these things were unknown to the sages in question; of course they knew them. Rather, the universal nature of wisdom itself seemed to rule out any reference to such particulars, such local details: the great underlying pattern of the universe must, it seemed to them, apply equally to all of humanity and lie beyond any particularity of time or space.

But by the second century B.C.E., all this was changing: for the Jews Scripture itself had become God's great book of instruction—no longer merely the record of events from the distant past of one people, nor prophetic oracles delivered to a specific audience, but words of eternal validity that were relevant, therefore, to anyone in any age. In keeping with this view, Ben Sira devoted some of his wise sayings to the elucidation of biblical laws, since for him these laws embodied timeless principles of God's wisdom. Moreover, he addressed himself at length (chapters 44–49 of his book) to a review of the Bible's major figures, whose very lives and deeds seemed to him less history than moral example, tales told for the edification of readers in any age.

Enoch pleased the Lord and was taken up [to heaven],
he was an **example of repentance** to all generations.

— (Greek) Sir. 44:16¹⁰

The biblical Enoch, mentioned in Gen. 5:18–24, appears in a long genealogical list of people who lived before the flood. As a figure from the shadowy past, he was of little historical significance to later generations of Israelites. Yet, by Ben Sira's time, biblical texts were being scrutinized for all their possible implications. In the case of Enoch, the fact that God was said to have "taken" him (Gen. 5:24) suggested to many that Enoch had been bodily taken *up*, transported into heaven while yet alive, very much as Elijah later was (2 Kings 2:11). Indeed, the idea of Enoch's heavenly sojourn found elaborate expression in such ancient writings as *1 Enoch*. (For more details, see below.) Just exactly

10. This verse is not found at all in the Masada manuscript or the Syriac version of Ben Sira, but it is present (in somewhat different form) in the Hebrew Geniza manuscript B as well as in the Greek. On the place of this verse in the development of the text of Ben Sira, as well as on the differences between the Hebrew and Greek versions: Reiterer, "Urtext" und Übersetzungen, 84–85; Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 499; Yadin, *Ben Sira Scroll from Masada*, 38.

what Enoch had done to be so "taken" by God the book of Genesis did not openly say. But Ben Sira, or at least the exegetical tradition being quoted above, found an answer to this question in the precise wording of the Enoch passage in Genesis:

When Enoch had lived sixty-five years, he became the father of Methuselah. **Enoch walked with God after the birth of Methuselah three hundred years**, and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Enoch were three hundred and sixty-five years. Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him. — Gen. 5:21–24

The passage says that Enoch "walked with God" *after* the birth of Methuselah; the clear implication is that before Methuselah's birth he did *not* walk with God. If so, it would seem that Enoch's great virtue, and the reason for God's taking him, was that he repented. Although he may not have been an exemplary youth, Enoch began to walk with God at age sixty-five and thus became, in the Ben Sira text cited above, "an example of repentance to all generations."

Enoch is only the first biblical figure treated in Ben Sira's category of heroes; after him come Noah, Abraham, Moses, and the others—all of whose lives are presented as models, embodiments of this or that divine teaching. It is in this sense that, for Ben Sira, Scripture itself is the great book of wisdom—so that, after having praised the figure of Wisdom very much in the fashion of earlier sages, Ben Sira can quite naturally add:

All this [Wisdom] is the book of the covenant of the Most High, the Torah which Moses commanded us as an inheritance to the congregation of Jacob. — Sir. 24:23 (cf. Deut. 33:4)

In the same fashion, another sage, roughly a century later, could assert about Wisdom:¹¹

He [God] found the whole way to knowledge, and gave her to Jacob his servant, and to Israel whom he loved . . . She is the book of the commandments of God, and the law that endures forever.

— Bar. 3:36–4:1

For a third sage of this period, the author of the Wisdom of Solomon, Scripture is likewise a great repository of wisdom; and very much in the fashion of Ben Sira, he also presents a catalog of biblical heroes and examples

11. Note in the same connection a wisdom text from Qumran that asserts that God has granted wisdom "to Israel, He gives her as a gracious gift," (4Q185) *Sapiential Work* 2:10.

(chapter 10). What is particularly remarkable in this author's catalog is the extent to which it is mediated by interpretive traditions. Thus, for example, in alluding to the exodus from Egypt, this text observes:

She [Wisdom] gave to holy men the reward of their labors; she guided them along a marvelous path, and became a shelter to them by day and a starry flame through the night. She brought them over the Red Sea, and led them through the deep waters; but she drowned their enemies and cast them up from the depth of the sea. — Wis. 10:17–18

The author is obviously referring to the events recounted in the book of Exodus—yet his account has been touched up a bit to clarify elements that might otherwise be troubling in that narrative. For example, the Israelites there are said to have borrowed silver, gold, and other precious items from the Egyptians before leaving, and so to have “despoiled” the Egyptians (Exod. 12:36). The Wisdom of Solomon is quick to explain that this was not thievery or even deception, but “the reward of their labors”; that is, it was only fair for the Israelites to take these items in recompense for all the years of slavery in which they had served the Egyptians without being paid. As for the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire that accompanied the Israelites on their way out of Egypt (Exod. 13:21), the Wisdom of Solomon explains what the book of Exodus somehow had not, that while the nighttime pillar was made of fire in order to guide them in the dark, the purpose of the daytime pillar of cloud was to give *shelter* to the Israelites from the sun—hence two pillars were necessary. (See Chapter 17.) Moreover, this same author specifies that, after drowning Israel's enemies, Wisdom “cast them up from the depth of the sea.” This is no gratuitous flourish but an attempt to resolve an apparent contradiction in the Exodus account, which at one point specifies that the Egyptians “were drowned in the Red Sea, the floods covered them, they went down into the depths like a stone” (Exod. 15:4–5) but elsewhere says that the Israelites “saw the Egyptians dead upon the seashore” (Exod. 14:30). Where were they, on the seashore or at the bottom of the sea? This author's answer is that they *at first* sank to the bottom of the sea but then were “cast up” to the shore again to be seen by the Israelites.

In short, it is not that teachers of wisdom began merely to include Scripture among their subjects; rather, the whole nature of their activity was changing. Where wisdom had previously consisted of contemplating the natural world and the social order and deducing from them the general plan by which God conducts the world, it was now more and more Scripture that was consulted to understand God's ways. As the examples from the Wisdom of Solomon show, consulting Scripture did not consist merely of finding the

appropriate passage and repeating it, but of looking deeply into its words, for God's teachings were often not obvious. Thus, it happened that the sage, who had previously walked about the world or stood at his window looking out, now sat down at his table and opened the Book. For, the Book, even more than the world, was the place in which God's will and God's ways were expressed—but much thought and contemplation were needed if the sage was to understand fully God's sacred written messages.

In giving expression to these messages, sages—indeed, scriptural interpreters in general—did take over part of the ancient prophet's role. For, if the word of the Lord was no longer reliably spoken by chosen messengers sent directly to Israel, was it not because that word had already been set down in writing, in the great library of divine wisdom that Scripture had become? The interpreter, as mediator of that wisdom, was a bit like the prophet: it was he who could peer deeply into words from the ancient past and explain their present application—how this or that law was to be observed, what the present implications of some ancient narrative were, or even how, in the words of some prophet long dead, there nonetheless lurked a message directed to a later day.

The Four Assumptions

In Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon, we have glimpsed some of the ancient interpreters' *modus operandi*. It might be well, before proceeding, to say something of a more programmatic nature about how interpreters interpreted.

To do so, we must begin with the interpreters' own understanding of Scripture: what was Scripture in their eyes, and *how* did it mean? At first this might seem like a foolish question. After all, why should one assume that so varied a group of interpreters as those treated in this book had any one view of Scripture? Surely what Ben Sira thought about Scripture was not what Philo of Alexandria thought, and their views in any case were hardly identical with those of the author of *Jubilees*.

This is to some extent true. And yet, the more one contemplates the whole corpus of ancient biblical interpretation, the more it becomes clear that, despite the great variety of styles and genres and even interpretive methods involved, underlying it all is a common approach, a common set of assumptions concerning the biblical text. Some of these have been alluded to in passing above, but it is appropriate here to set them out schematically. There are essentially four fundamental assumptions about Scripture that characterize all ancient biblical interpretation.

The first assumption that all ancient interpreters seem to share is that the Bible is a fundamentally cryptic document. That is, all interpreters are fond of maintaining that although Scripture may appear to be saying X, what it really means is Y, or that while Y is not openly said by Scripture, it is somehow implied or hinted at in X. The chapters that follow abound with instances of this assumption at work. Numerous interpreters seek to maintain, for example, that when Moses casts a tree or stick into the waters of Marah (Exod. 15:25), “the word *tree* here means divine teachings,” or that when Dinah’s brothers speak deceitfully to the men of Shechem (Gen. 34:13), “*deceitfully* really means ‘with wisdom.’” Now it is hardly a natural thing to assume that a particular text is fundamentally cryptic or esoteric. Whether we are reading a history book or a newspaper editorial or a rousing hymn, we generally assume that what the words seem to say is what they mean to say. Yet ancient interpreters, when they read a piece of biblical history, or the urgings of a biblical prophet, or the hymns of an ancient psalmist, again and again tell us that in place of, or beyond, the apparent meaning of the text is some hidden, esoteric message. So, more generally, although the biblical text appears to be talking about a historical figure named Abraham, “Abraham is,” according to Philo of Alexandria, “a symbol for the virtue-loving soul” in addition to being that historical figure, while for early Christian interpreters, “Cain’s brother Abel is a foreshadowing of Christ.”

It would be interesting, in another context, to try to trace the roots of this first assumption, which clearly go back to the Bible itself. To mention but one example cited earlier, the suggestion of the prophet-sage Daniel that the real meaning of the expression “seventy years” is 490 years is a classic case of “X really means Y.”¹² The obvious question—If Jeremiah had meant 490 years, why didn’t he say so?—is never addressed by Daniel; apparently even at the time of that book’s composition it was already a well-known fact that Scripture often speaks indirectly or cryptically.

Whatever the origins of this first assumption, it was universally shared by ancient interpreters. Indeed, it had not a little to do with the interpreter’s own standing in the community and with the authority that his interpretations enjoyed. The very fact that the Bible could be demonstrated time and again to contain some meaning other than the apparent one vouchsafed the necessity of specially trained interpreters who could reveal the Bible’s secrets, and the interpretations that they put forward—precisely because they arose out of

12. For some literary connections to this passage, see Grabbe, “The End of the Desolation of Jeremiah.” See also Grelot, “Soixante-dix semaines d’années”; Doukhan, “The Seventy Weeks of Daniel 9.”

careful exegesis and would not appear to most readers at first blush—acquired an authority of their own.

The second assumption shared by all ancient interpreters was that Scripture constitutes one great Book of Instruction, and as such is a fundamentally *relevant* text. To appreciate the significance of this assumption, contrast it to the approach we normally take to the act of reading. If, for example, we were to open up *Gilgamesh* or the *Enuma Elish* or some other ancient Near Eastern text, we might find the stories moving, the language stirring, but no one would likely suggest that we ought to behave in keeping with what is written there, or that the characters are represented as acting in the way that they do so that we might emulate their example. Similarly, we might be drawn to read the prophecies of ancient sibyls in Greek, or read the writings of other makers of oracles, but no one would suggest that what these authors were *really* talking about was America in the twenty-first century. An ancient Roman law code might be of interest to a student of legal history; some of its laws might even serve as a model for new legislation in our own day; but scarcely any reader would think that, because such-and-such a law appears in this code, that fact alone is sufficient reason for us to regard it as currently binding upon ourselves. Songs, hymns, prayers, laments culled from centuries past would likewise have no automatic application to our present situation: we might find them moving, but the very fact of their existence would hardly constitute a reason for us to recite them in solemn assembly or obey their calls to celebrate or mourn.

Yet, it should be obvious, precisely these things were said about the Bible by ancient interpreters. As we have seen briefly in the case of Enoch, so Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and other biblical figures were held up as models of conduct, their stories regarded as a guide given to later human beings for the leading of their own lives. (Some interpreters saw the figures themselves as moral exemplars, others as allegorical representations of virtues to be emulated; it matters little, since the point in any case is that these historical figures are not merely historical but instructional.) Biblical prophecies were similarly read as *relevant* to the interpreter and his audience: one obvious effect achieved by Daniel’s interpreting 70 years as 490 was to move the relevance of Jeremiah’s prophecy four centuries into the future (rather close, in fact, to the time when, according to many scholars, this part of the book of Daniel was probably composed). Similarly, the Dead Sea Scrolls have yielded many examples of ancient *pesharim* (“actualized interpretations”) whereby the prophecies of Habakkuk, Nahum, and other biblical prophets are explained as referring to the politics of Roman-occupied Palestine centuries after these prophets themselves had lived. The early Christian interpretation of the

prophecies of Isaiah and other Old Testament figures are another well-known instance of making ancient works relevant. And, as will be seen in the following chapters, the same fundamental assumption was held to be true about *all* of the Hebrew Bible, the songs and psalms and prayers and laws and narratives it contained. Everything was held to apply to present-day readers and to contain within it an imperative for adoption and application to the readers' own lives. Paul's observation about the biblical narrative of the Israelites' wanderings in the desert,

Now these things [that happened to the Israelites in the desert] happened to them as a warning, **but they were written down for our instruction**, upon whom the end of the ages has come —1 Cor. 10:11

is merely one formulation of an assumption that had long characterized ancient biblical interpretation. For Paul, as for all ancient interpreters, the Bible is not *essentially* a record of things that happened or were spoken in the past. That they happened is of course true; but if they were written down in the Bible, it was not so as to record what has occurred in some distant past, but "for our instruction," so that, by reading the sacred text whose material comes to us from the past, we might learn some vital lesson for our own lives.

The third basic assumption is that Scripture is perfect and perfectly harmonious. By this I mean, first of all, that there is no mistake in the Bible, and anything that might look like a mistake—the fact that, for example, Gen. 15:13 asserts that the Israelites "will be oppressed for four hundred years" in Egypt, while Exod. 12:41 speaks of 430 years, whereas a calculation based on biblical genealogies yielded a figure of 210 years—must therefore be an illusion to be clarified by proper interpretation.

But this third assumption goes well beyond the rejection of apparent mistakes or inconsistencies. It posits a perfect harmony between the Bible's various parts. Again, a comparison with other texts might be illuminating here. In an anthology of texts in English or Latin, for example, written by many authors over a period of more than a thousand years in diverse locales and under different political regimes and cultural norms, we would hardly expect to find absolute uniformity of views. One text would disagree with another not only in fundamental matters of orientation and belief, but even in its presentation of past events, since people's view of history tends to be colored by their own ideologies and, of course, to change radically over time. Yet with regard to Scripture—precisely because it was Scripture, a body of *sacred* writings—ancient interpreters adopted a different approach. They sought to discover the basic harmony underlying apparently discordant words, since all of Scripture, in their view, must speak with one voice. By the same logic, any biblical text might illuminate any other: Josh. 24:2–3 might

provide some of the background information necessary for an understanding of God's words to Abraham in Gen. 12:1–3, and Prov. 10:8 might be a reference to Moses' meritorious deed in Exod. 13:19.

Taken to its extreme, this same view of Scripture's perfection ultimately led to the doctrine of "omnisignificance," whereby nothing in Scripture is said in vain or for rhetorical flourish: every detail is important, everything is intended to impart some teaching. While this doctrine finds its fullest expression in rabbinic writings, its traces can be found far earlier. Thus, the fact that Jacob is said to dwell "in tents" (Gen. 25:27) was used to support the notion that he, unlike his brother Esau, had had some sort of schooling—that is, the plural "tents" here is interpreted to imply at least two tents, one for a school and one for home. This understanding of the special significance of "tents" is openly stated in some rabbinic texts, but it probably underlies as well the assertion that Jacob "learned to read" in the book of *Jubilees* (19:14). In the same vein, the fact that Lev. 19:17 uses the emphatically "doubled" form of the word "reproach" suggested to Ben Sira that two different acts of reproaching were being urged, one before the misdeed occurs, and another afterward (Sir. 19:13–14). In similar fashion, all sorts of other, apparently insignificant details in the Bible—an unusual word or grammatical form, any repetition, the juxtaposition of one law to another or one story to another—all were read as potentially significant, a manifestation of Scripture's perfection.

Finally, it should be noted that this perfection of Scripture of course included the conduct of biblical heroes or the content of Scripture's own teachings. Thus, Abraham, Jacob, and other meritorious figures ought not to behave in unseemly fashion, and if at times they appeared to do so, ancient interpreters frequently saw themselves as obliged to come to the rescue. As just mentioned, when Dinah's brothers speak deceitfully to the men of Shechem (Gen. 34:13), "*deceitfully* really means 'with wisdom.'" This assertion reflects the belief not only that Scripture speaks, or can speak, cryptically, but that Scripture's very nature is such that it would scarcely seek to present Jacob's sons as a bunch of liars. Something else *must* have been meant, for Scripture is, in regard to its teachings as well, perfect. Similarly, although Rachel is said to have stolen her father's household gods (Gen. 31:19), she must not really have *stolen* them so much as taken them to protect her father from sin or for some other worthy purpose. Likewise, if a given interpreter believed (as the author of *Jubilees* did) that the moon has no role in determining the time of festivals or the duration of months, then all scriptural texts, even Gen. 1:14–18, had to be shown to conform to this view. Scripture's perfection, in other words, ultimately included its being in accord with the interpreter's own ideas, standards of conduct, and the like.

The fourth assumption is that all of Scripture is somehow divinely sanc-

tioned, of divine provenance, or divinely inspired. Needless to say, much of Scripture itself asserts that its words come from God: "Thus says the Lord" is the introductory proclamation of many a prophet, and biblical laws in the Pentateuch are frequently introduced with "And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying . . ." Yet this very fact might have implied to ancient interpreters that the rest of Scripture was somehow of human fashioning—that, for example, the history of intrigue in David's court, or the corpus of supplications and praises directed to God in the book of Psalms, or many other texts within the canon could not have come from God in the same manner as divine prophecies or laws.

I have saved this fourth assumption for last because it is the one least frequently in evidence: particularly among the most ancient interpreters, the subject of the divine provenance of Scripture as a whole is hardly even addressed. What is more, the common practice of interpreters writing in Greek to refer to "Moses," "David," "Solomon," and others as the authors of this or that biblical composition—without further reference to them as mere conduits of the divine word—might suggest that, for such interpreters, the biblical compositions in question were fundamentally the product of human authors, however extraordinary the humans in question might be. But this is hardly so for a great many Greek-writing interpreters (as Philo of Alexandria, for example, makes clear), and evidence of the contrary view is occasionally explicit. In particular, a certain explanation of Gen. 34:7 found in the book of Judith (see Chapter 13) gives clear testimony that its author believed the divine authorship of Scripture to extend to the ordinary narrative fabric of biblical books: God was, according to this author, the omniscient narrator of Genesis. The author of *Jubilees* similarly believed all of the Genesis narratives to be of divine provenance—as much so as the laws of Exodus through Deuteronomy that are specifically attributed to God. Indeed, *Jubilees* likewise maintains that later scriptural books (apparently including, among others, Isaiah and Psalms) were inscribed in the "heavenly tablets" long before the human transmitters of these texts had even been born. A text from among the Dead Sea Scrolls, 11QPs.^a, similarly asserts that David's songs and psalms were "given to him from the Most High," and this belief is reflected as well in Philo of Alexandria and Acts 2:30–31.¹³

If this is so, it would nevertheless be a mistake, in my opinion, to assume that this fourth assumption stands behind the other three—that, in other words, first it was assumed that all of Scripture is of divine provenance or inspiration, and then out of this first assumption developed the others sur-

13. Kugel, "David the Prophet."

veyed above, that all of Scripture is perfect, fundamentally relevant, and cryptic in its form of expression. To begin with, these things do not necessarily follow from the assumption of divine provenance (although I admit that, with regard to Scripture's perfection, a certain logical connection exists). But, more to the point, I do not believe that the interpretive texts themselves suggest such a sequence of events. As noted, the divine provenance of all of Scripture is a notion specifically addressed only rather late in the history of ancient interpreters, and it even seems to be contradicted here or there by some ancient writers, whereas the first three assumptions are attested across the whole spectrum of ancient interpreters, early and often. This is not the place to elaborate such a hypothesis, but my own belief is that the first three of the assumptions named are evidenced within the Hebrew Bible itself, indeed, they extend back even to parts of the Bible written before the Babylonian exile. If the fourth assumption is plainly stated about *some* parts of Scripture, it apparently did not come to be extended in homogeneous fashion to Scripture as a whole until a relatively late period. Therefore, I must reject the notion that assumptions 1, 2, and 3 developed out of assumption 4.

How Interpreters Interpreted

Bearing in mind these four assumptions will help in understanding why interpreters say what they do about the biblical text. Convinced that Scripture was a fundamentally cryptic document, they scrutinized its every detail in search of hidden meaning. That meaning was to be, by definition, relevant to the situation of the interpreter and his listeners—not some insight into the historical circumstances in which the text was originally written, but a message of immediate value and applicability, either a timeless moral truth or a law to be observed in one particular fashion or something bearing in some other way on the present or the immediate future. In searching for such a message, the interpreter could rest assured that no detail in Scripture's manner of speaking was insignificant, nor would there be any inconsistency between what is said in one place and what is said in another, nor any lesson that contradicted right thinking. For that reason, any apparent contradiction, or unnecessary detail or repetition or even an emphatic turn of phrase, seemed to be an invitation to the interpreter to look deeply into the text's words and so discover its *real* meaning, the hidden, relevant, perfect truth that only befitted the word of God.

Indeed, the examples of interpretation already glimpsed in the Wisdom of Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon may serve as a ready illustration of these ideas. Thus, the brief mention of Enoch in Gen. 5:18–24 says nothing about

repentance, and a normal reader of the text nowadays would probably assume that Enoch's particular virtue had simply been omitted by the Bible; it says that Enoch "walked with God" without giving any further details. But an interpreter convinced of our first assumption, that Scripture is fundamentally cryptic, would be moved thereby to look more deeply—leading him, as we have seen, to Ben Sira's conclusion that Enoch's virtue was, specifically, repentance. And what greater expression of the second assumption than Ben Sira's own assertion that Enoch is not merely some obscure figure from the distant past but "an example of repentance to all generations"? As for the third assumption, we saw how the Wisdom of Solomon sought to resolve the apparent contradiction in Scripture with regard to the drowned Egyptians: first they sank to the bottom of the sea, then they were vomited up again onto the shore. Underlying this piece of exegesis is the conviction that Scripture does not contradict itself or even exaggerate: if the song of Exodus 15 says that the Egyptians sank "like a stone" but the preceding narrative has them "dead upon the shore," then both statements must be shown to be true. With regard to the fourth assumption, Ben Sira's assertion that the "book of the covenant of the Most High" is nought but divine wisdom (Sir. 24:23) is, while not an utterly unambiguous statement of the divine provenance of all Scripture, rather representative of the sort of programmatic formulations of this assumption that survive from our most ancient interpreters.

Clues from the Text

One aspect of the way interpreters interpreted needs to be highlighted. It is frequently said that these ancient writers played fast and loose with the Bible, twisting the plain sense of the text to fit their own ideology or the events of their own day, creating all manner of imaginative additions to what the Bible itself says. This is true, but to say only this is to miss the point about how ancient interpreters worked.

The formal starting point for ancient interpreters is always Scripture itself. An interpreter may be eager to assert that, for example, the Platonic doctrine of ideal forms is found in the Bible, or that Israel's prophets predicted the fall of the Roman empire, or that Jacob did not really deceive his father into giving him a blessing intended for his brother, Esau, or that the crucifixion of Jesus is an event foreshadowed in Hebrew Scripture centuries earlier. Interpreters did claim all these things, and more, but they did not simply claim them: they anchored their claims in some detail, however insignificant, found in the biblical text itself. That is to say, no matter how far-reaching or inventive the assertions of ancient biblical interpretation, they are formally a kind of exege-

sis. The Platonic doctrine of ideal forms is therefore evidenced in the Bible via a particular feature of the text, the fact that God created a "heavenly man" in Genesis 1 who was somehow different from the earthly one in Genesis 2. Similarly, Rome's fall is amply foretold by the prophet Obadiah, if only one understands—on the basis of Gen. 27:40 and other texts—that the words addressed to "Edom" in Obad. 1:4 are really meant for Rome. As for Jacob, he certainly would not lie to his father—and he doesn't, so long as his words in Gen. 27:19 and 24 undergo a radical repunctuation. That the crucifixion had been foreshadowed of old was supported through a reading of the Genesis account of the binding of Isaac, wherein even Jesus' crown of thorns was present in the text's reference to a "thicket" at the place of the offering (Gen. 22:13).

The foregoing are all examples of what one might call, broadly speaking, ideologically motivated interpretations—the interpreter clearly wishes to get the text to say something that accords with his own ideology or outlook. Yet it would be wrong to imply that interpreters were *always* motivated by ideology or some outside interest, that they were always seeking to import some extrabiblical doctrine or political stand into the world of the Bible. Very often their primary or sole motivation appears to be making sense out of the biblical text—but making sense out of *all* of it, its little details, chance juxtapositions, everything. For, once the rules of interpretive procedure had been established, the biblical text seemed virtually to invite the interpreter to try his hand at seeking out its fullest possible meaning. In so doing, interpreters were indeed quite free, reconstructing conversations never reported by the biblical narrator, recounting whole incidents somehow omitted in the narrative itself, connecting this with that in the most creative fashion. But if interpreters were, in this sense, free, it was because the text had granted them this freedom by including some unusual turn of phrase or repetition or unexplained ellipsis. By the rules of interpretation implied in the Four Assumptions, such creative turns are simply part of the business of interpreting. They could be used for some ulterior motive, but often they were not.

This point is important because many modern studies of the texts that talk about biblical figures or biblical stories have focused on their "ideological" side. Scholars have tended to assume that if an ancient author deviated from the biblical narrative in his retelling of it, that deviation must somehow have been motivated by the reteller's political allegiance or religious agenda or some other matter of ideology, or it must at least have been an attempt (if only an unconscious one) to retroject the realities of the reteller's own time back to the time of the biblical narrative. Such factors certainly did affect the way biblical stories were retold. But to these factors should be added another

extremely significant one, the desire to explain the biblical text, to account for its particulars in one fashion or another.

In general, the attempt to distinguish between “pure” exegesis among ancient interpreters and exegesis that is ideologically or politically motivated is doomed to fail for any large sampling of texts. On the one hand, “pure” exegesis as such does not really exist. The ancient interpreter *always* had an axe to grind, always had a bit of an ulterior motive: at the very least, this interpreter wished to convince listeners or readers that the text means something other than what it might seem to mean at first glance, that his clever way of explaining things reveals the text’s true significance. Sometimes that “true” significance does indeed turn out to correspond to something current in the interpreter’s own world, some part of the political or religious or intellectual backdrop. Often, however, it does not: the interpretation is just that, an attempt to make sense of the text, albeit in keeping with the freewheeling methods suggested by the Four Assumptions charted above. Moreover, even in the case of blatantly ideological interpretations, it is usually quite difficult to decide whether a given interpreter set out to patrol all of Scripture in search of a place to “plant” an expression of his own ideology, or whether, on the contrary, faced with a particular exegetical stimulus in the biblical text—an unusual word, an apparent incongruity, or the like—the interpreter came up with an explanation that, in one way or another, also reflected his own ideology or the issues of his day.¹⁴ For these reasons, it seems best to leave aside any distinction between “pure” and other forms of exegesis.

The Heritage of Wisdom

I should add that, in everything that has been said thus far about the methods of ancient interpretation, the heritage of wisdom is clearly visible. For, as was mentioned earlier, wise men of old had packaged their insights in clever proverbs that often demanded sustained scrutiny by later sages and students of wisdom in order to be fully understood. Schooled in these techniques, sages quite naturally brought them to bear on Scripture: were not *its* words just as likely to be cryptic, esoteric, in need of sustained contemplation in order to be fully understood? Likewise, the very conception of Scripture as a great corpus of divine instruction whose lessons, therefore, are relevant to every age—is not this also a projection of the sage’s assumptions about wisdom literature onto *all* of Israel’s variegated corpus of ancient writings? The treatment of

14. I have tried to illustrate some of the difficulties involved in making such a distinction in *In Potiphar’s House*, 248–251.

various biblical figures as examples, models of proper conduct, is similarly a sagely construct. Indeed, it is certainly significant, in the light of wisdom literature’s polarized division of humanity into the righteous and the wicked, the wise and the foolish, that a similar polarization takes place in ancient exegesis: biblical heroes are altogether good, with any fault air-brushed away, whereas figures like Esau or Balaam are altogether demonized—as if their neither-good-nor-evil status in the Bible itself was somehow intolerable. (The most persuasive instances of such polarization occur with figures like Lot or Enosh, simultaneously demonized by one group of interpreters while pronounced altogether righteous by another. Apparently they could go one way or another, but not remain in the intolerable ambiguity of the middle.)¹⁵ On another occasion it might be profitable to explore the “wisdom connection” in ancient interpretation in greater detail.¹⁶

Where Is Interpretation Found?

In the past, the quantity of surviving ancient biblical interpretations has frequently been understated. This is because of a peculiar feature of the way ancient interpreters presented their material; with a few exceptions (Philo of Alexandria, some Dead Sea Scrolls texts), they did not write commentaries as such, mentioning a biblical verse and then offering their own interpretation of it. Instead, they followed the practice of *substitution*: in place of the element to be explained, X, the interpreter simply substituted his explanation, Y. This practice can operate on the level of a single word, whereby, for example, a difficult term no longer widely understood is replaced by a word in common use, or—as was glimpsed earlier—an ideologically difficult word (like “deceitfully” in Gen. 34:13) is replaced by a more acceptable term (“with wisdom”). But substitution can go well beyond a single word: as will be seen in Chapter 4, interpreters inserted, as the direct object of the verb “say” in Gen. 4:8, a whole conversation between Cain and Abel not found in the Bible itself, and in place of a cryptic reference in Gen. 49:24 they inserted a little story to the effect that Joseph was saved from sinning with Potiphar’s wife because of the sudden appearance of his father’s face at the critical moment. But the point is

15. See below, Chapter 10; see also Loader, *Tale of Two Cities*; Fraade, *Enosh and His Generation*.

16. Particularly suggestive in connection with this topic is Otzen, “Old Testament Wisdom Literature and Dualistic Thinking.” “Dualistic thinking” in his definition includes not only the polarization of humanity into good and evil or wise and foolish, but as well such dualisms as the “sons of light/sons of darkness” and “two spirits” found at Qumran. See also such texts as Sir. 15:14–20, *Testament of Asher* 1:3–5, Philo, *The Worse Attacks the Better* 82–84, and Baer, *Philo’s Use of the Categories Male and Female*.

that these explanations were simply inserted in a re-presentation of the biblical text: they were not labeled or specifically presented as interpretation or commentary.

Because interpreters tended to substitute for, rather than comment upon, difficulties in the text, there emerged the genre of writing known to modern scholars as “The Rewritten [or “Retold”] Bible.”¹⁷ The Rewritten Bible is really the interpreted Bible: an ancient interpreter—the author of *Jubilees* or the Wisdom of Solomon or the *Book of Biblical Antiquities*—retells a biblical story or group of stories *with the interpretations already inserted in the text*. Sometimes, as in the case of *Jubilees*, the retelling is a calculated, highly self-conscious attempt to explain Scripture (and, in this particular case, to explain it in keeping with a definite political and religious program). Other retellers of Scripture seem less self-conscious: sometimes the reteller himself may not even be aware where the biblical text leaves off and the interpretation begins, since he is simply passing along what he has heard or learned as a child is the meaning of a biblical text. In either case, however, the Rewritten Bible (whether one is talking about an extended retelling of whole biblical books, or the “retelling” of a single verse) should be recognized for what it is: the most popular transmitter of biblical interpretation among ancient writers.

This being the case, the first step in studying ancient biblical interpretation is to identify it, to sift carefully any restatement of a biblical law or any retelling of, or allusion to, a biblical narrative or prophecy or song, in order to isolate the interpretive elements. Often, this is not easy. An ordinary reader, unschooled in the ways of ancient interpretation, would probably not recognize as such *any* of the interpretations examined above: “a model of repentance,” “reward for their labors,” “cast them up from the depth”—these would doubtless strike most readers as simple restatement, not interpretation. It is therefore necessary to scrutinize all potentially interpretive texts with great care. The best guide in such scrutiny is the Bible itself: any deviation from its words, no matter how slight, may conceal an ancient interpretation of those words. (To be sure, some deviations are quite innocent; this too makes difficult the job of isolating interpretive material.)

The Exegetical Motif

Ancient biblical interpretation is an interpretation of verses, not stories.¹⁸ Precisely because they focused their attention on the little details of the

biblical text, interpreters tended to pass on their insights in the form of verse-centered comments: “The word ‘water’ here means divine learning.” “What the brothers told Shechem [in Gen. 34:13] was actually true.” It is not that the overall significance of a particular story was neglected: Ben Sira, for example, sums up in a single phrase the whole significance of Abraham’s offering up of his son Isaac, “He [Abraham] was found faithful when tested” (Sir. 44:20), and does the same for numerous other biblical narratives in the same catalog of biblical heroes (Sirach 44–49). But such summary treatment could hardly be regarded as *insightful*: any fool could figure such things out! The true insight was to realize that, for example, the opening verse of the story of the offering of Isaac, “And it came to pass, *after these things*” (Gen. 22:1), was actually an allusion to the previous tests that Abraham had undergone or, alternately, to certain “words” that had been spoken against Abraham in heaven (on both, see Chapter 9). And so it was such localized insights as these that tended to circulate, passed from one sage to another or from teacher to pupil. (Again, the heritage of wisdom here is clear.)

Thus, interpreters frequently explained biblical texts by retelling them, explaining in their own words not just what Scripture said but what Scripture meant. In the process, several, or even many, little, verse-centered explanations—either those created by the reteller himself, or someone else’s explanations that the reteller had learned—became incorporated into an overall rewording of the text in question. Such retellings are found in a variety of ancient documents: in a brief prayer made by the heroine of the book of Judith; in Josephus’ multivolume retelling of all of biblical history; in Abraham’s first-person account of his trip to Egypt in the *Genesis Apocryphon*; and so forth.

How does one go about studying the biblical interpretation found in such retellings? Precisely because they tend to incorporate a number of separate, discrete insights into particular verses, the smooth-flowing unity of these retellings is deceptive. All too often in the past, scholars have dealt with things like “Josephus’ Version of the Exodus” as if it were all of a piece, the sustained reflection of a single interpreter contemplating a large chunk of the biblical text. This is misleading on two counts. First, Josephus—like all his predecessors—had his eye on individual verses or even single words or phrases within individual verses. When, therefore, in retelling the story of the exodus or any other biblical narrative, he deviates from what the Bible itself seems to be saying, it is usually because he is expanding upon some little particularity in the narrative. True, these insights are strung together into a continuous narrative, Josephus’ retelling of the exodus. But from the standpoint of biblical interpretation, it is most important not to lose sight of the trees for the forest:

17. This term was apparently first used by Vermes; see his *Post-Biblical Jewish Studies*.

18. At greater length, see Kugel, “Two Introductions.”

Josephus' "interpretation" consists of *interpretations*, little insights—selected, to be sure, molded into a seamless narrative stamped with his own personal seal, but nonetheless capable of being broken down into its constitutive elements and connected with specific verses or even words. For this same reason "Josephus' Version of the Exodus" is misleading on a second count as well: it is not Josephus' alone. Many of the little insights that Josephus passes along are ones attested a century or more earlier in the writings of other people. It is highly unlikely that Josephus and these earlier figures all arrived at their interpretations independently (although this *may* happen every once in a while). After all, Josephus himself recounts how, as a youth, he was educated in traditional religious instruction (*Life* 7–12)—indeed, he was uniquely well acquainted with different schools of interpreters in his day—and he otherwise shows a broad awareness of exegetical traditions and even individual authors (he refers by name on one occasion to Philo of Alexandria, *Jewish Antiquities* 18:259–260). In a great many instances, therefore, Josephus' retellings of biblical stories are most likely an amalgam of things he has learned from different sources—indeed, at times he himself may not always be aware that what he is telling *is* interpretation and not, or not necessarily, a straightforward duplication of the biblical text alone.¹⁹

When I first began working on this book, I did not appreciate the extent to which the foregoing was true. I began by assembling long passages from different ancient authors relating to a given biblical story, and I dealt with each retelling as a unit, comparing, for instance, Philo's version of Abraham's departure from Ur with that found in the book of *Jubilees*. After a time, however, I realized that this was the wrong way to proceed: even the briefest allusion to a biblical story in an ancient writer may sometimes involve two or three quite distinct bits of traditional interpretation. Take, for example, Augustine's opening sentence in his discussion of the binding of Isaac:

Among other things, the sum of which it would take too long a time to mention, Abraham was tested with regard to the offering up of his beloved son Isaac, in order to prove his obedience to God and **make it known to the world**, not to God. —Augustine, *City of God* 16.32

The indicated phrases actually refer to two quite distinct interpretive traditions about the offering of Isaac, neither of which originated with Augustine. The first is a tradition mentioned earlier, to the effect that Abraham had undergone *other* tests prior to that of the offering of Isaac (which is specifically

19. See Feldman, "Use, Authority, and Exegesis of Mikra in the Writings of Josephus," esp. 471–476.

labeled as a test in Gen. 22:1). The notion that Abraham had undergone a series of tests is found as early as the book of *Jubilees*, six hundred years before Augustine—indeed, *Jubilees* specifies, as do later, rabbinic sources, that the total number of tests undergone by Abraham was ten (see Chapter 9). Augustine does no more than allude to this tradition here,²⁰ apparently because he felt it would be known to at least some readers; in any case, he is clearly recycling earlier interpretive material. The other bit of traditional interpretation in this sentence is the idea that God put Abraham to the test not in order to discover whether or not he would pass—for certainly an omniscient deity knew the answer to that question in advance, and besides, according to the first tradition Abraham's faith had already been amply tested on prior occasions—but in order to make Abraham's faith "known to the world." Again this is an ancient tradition—attested in *Jubilees* and, somewhat later, in Pseudo-Philo's *Book of Biblical Antiquities*—which is ultimately based on the reading of the Hebrew phrase "now I know" (*yāda'ti*) in Gen. 22:12 as if it read "now I have made known" (*yidda'ti*). (Augustine knew the tradition, though he certainly did not know this textual justification, since he did not know Hebrew.)²¹

The composite nature of such retellings or reflections on Scripture is the rule among ancient interpreters, not the exception—and such composites are sometimes found even in our earliest sources, like *Jubilees* or *1 Enoch*. The following representative passage from a slightly later text, *The Testament of Levi*, concerns the revenge taken by Jacob's sons Levi and Simeon in Genesis 34:

[Levi recalls:] And after this I counseled my father and Reuben my brother **to bid the sons of Hamor not to be circumcised**; for I was zealous because of the abomination which they had wrought on my sister. And **I killed Shechem first, and Simeon [killed] Hamor**. And after that **the brothers came and smote the city** with the edge of the sword. And father heard of it and was angry and distressed, because they had accepted the circumcision and had been killed after that, and in his blessings he did otherwise [that is, he cursed Simeon and Levi instead of blessing them: Gen. 49:7]. And we had sinned in going against his opinion, **and he became sick on that day**. But I saw that **God's verdict upon Shechem was "Guilty"; for they had sought to do**

20. Unless his use of the phrase "other things" is intended to invoke the biblical phrase "After these things" (Gen. 22:1) to which this tradition was attached.

21. The basis of these traditions was certainly known to Eastern Christianity: see Brock, "Genesis 22 in Syriac Tradition."

the same thing to Sarah and Rebecca as they had [now] done to Dinah our sister, but the Lord had stopped them. And in the same way they had persecuted Abraham our father when he was a stranger, and **they had acted against him to suppress his flocks** when they were big with young; and they had mistreated Ieblae, his homeborn slave. And **in this way they treated all strangers**, taking their wives by force and banishing them. But the anger of the Lord against them had reached its term. So I said to my father: Do not be angry, lord, because through you the Lord will reduce the Canaanites to nothing, and he will give their land to you and your seed after you. For **from this day on Shechem will be called a city of imbeciles**; for as a someone mocks a fool, so we mocked them; because **also they** had wrought folly in Israel in defiling our sister.

— *Testament of Levi* 6:3–7:3

Each of the indicated phrases refers to a different interpretive tradition surrounding this biblical story. Some of them, such as the assertion that Jacob became sick as a result of the revenge attack, add details beyond what is explicitly said in the biblical narrative itself. Others, such as Levi's claim that he had counseled his father and brother *not* to tell the Shechemites to undergo circumcision, or Levi's assertion that he and Simeon had killed only one man apiece and that the other Shechemites had been killed by his other brothers, actually seem to contradict what the Bible says. *All* of these traditions, however, are rooted in some peculiarity in the biblical text, justified, as it were, by a particular turn of phrase in the narrative. More to the point, however, even by the time that the *Testament of Levi* was written, much of this interpretive material was traditional, and a good deal of it is attested in sources still earlier than this testament. Indeed, in one matter the above passage contains (again, not atypically) two quite contradictory traditions. The first maintains that the collective slaughter of the Shechemites was justified since all of them had somehow participated in the rape of Dinah; this tradition is alluded to in the very last clause of the above passage. (The same tradition is found elsewhere—for example, in Jth. 9:2–4.) Another interpretive tradition, however, maintained that the collective punishment was justified because of the city's criminal past, its history of previous outrages. This tradition is set forth in the group of three sentences beginning "But I saw that God's verdict was: 'Guilty.'" Since both traditions arose to solve the same difficulty—the apparent unfairness of a collective punishment for crimes committed by one man alone—a single explanation would have sufficed. Indeed, a careful reader might ask, if the Shechemites were killed because they had all participated in the rape of Dinah, then why had God pronounced them guilty even before the rape

occurred? But precisely because this author has heard two traditional explanations each of which he regards as authoritative, he incorporates them both, even when the result is redundancy or internal inconsistency.

Such is the nature of ancient biblical interpretation. Once propounded, interpretations circulated widely, passed on largely by word of mouth. Presented by authoritative teachers as insights into the particulars of the biblical text, these interpretations soon acquired an authority of their own: they were repeated and repeated, often combined with other bits of interpretation, sometimes modified in the process, sometimes misunderstood by later transmitters, and passed on further.

This being the case, it eventually became clear to me that talking about large units of text, "Josephus' Version of the Exodus" and the like, was the wrong way to proceed. The first task was to identify and discuss each and every component of larger units, each of the individual bits of interpretation out of which the larger retellings were made, and to try to identify the same or similar bits of interpretation in the retellings of other ancient authors. So it was that I came to focus this book not on large blocks of texts nor on their authors as such, but on *exegetical motifs*, the individual pieces of interpretation that circulated far and wide and found their way into the writings of different authors of that period.

Simply put, an exegetical motif is an explanation of a biblical verse (or phrase or word therein) that becomes the basis for some ancient writer's expansion or other alteration of what Scripture actually says: in paraphrasing or summarizing Scripture, the ancient writer incorporates the exegetical motif in his retelling and in so doing adds some minor detail or otherwise deviates from mere repetition or restatement of the Bible.

To return to the examples given above: an ancient interpreter, scrutinizing Gen. 5:21–24, came to the conclusion that Enoch was a penitent sinner. Thus was born the exegetical motif that we might refer to as "Enoch the Penitent." In alluding to the story of Enoch, the book of Ben Sira incorporates this motif: Enoch "was an example of repentance to all generations."²² Who was the originator of this motif? The fact that it appears for the first time in the book of Ben Sira does not necessarily mean that *that* is where it was first created. After all, the same motif is found not too much later in the writings of Philo, and it may be hinted at as well in the Wisdom of Solomon (4:14). Perhaps, then, even before Ben Sira, "Enoch the Penitent" was a motif that circulated widely. Similarly, an ancient interpreter scrutinizing the drowning of the Egyptians in the Red Sea came to the conclusion that after they sank to the

22. This is one form of the text; see above, n. 10.

bottom of the sea, the Egyptians were lifted up again and deposited on the shore. Thus was born the exegetical motif that we might call “Ups and Downs of the Egyptians.” This motif first appears in the Wisdom of Solomon and subsequently in the writings of Philo, Josephus, and later interpreters. Again, its original author is a matter of speculation.

As these examples imply, exegetical motifs circulated widely and soon acquired an authority of their own. They were the very fabric of ancient biblical interpretation. Individual authors may have put their own stamp on the motifs that they inherited, and even the choice to include or not include a given motif may reflect the tastes, ideology, or other particulars of a specific author. But the motifs themselves constituted the raw material out of which most ancient retellings and commentaries were made. For that reason I present the material in this book motif by motif, seeking to demonstrate in each case how different authors in different periods explained individual verses or episodes in similar fashion.

There are, of course, some things that are lost by focusing on these individual units of interpretation. Identifying common exegetical motifs does not tell us much about the specific authors who pass them along, about the particular “spin” that a certain author may seek to put on a given piece of Scripture, nor about how that spin may be attested elsewhere in his writings. Indeed, the individuality of a given text is somewhat submerged by focusing solely on the traditional motifs found within it. Moreover, merely identifying motifs common to different sources does not tell us anything about the history of their transmission—who borrowed what from whom. (Often it is impossible to piece such things together with any certainty, but sometimes we can do so, or at least make an educated guess.) And if, as may have happened in some cases, two interpreters came to the same conclusion quite independently, there is something misleading about treating both under a single rubric, as if both are attestations of a common tradition.

In recognizing these limitations, I hardly seek to belittle them. (Indeed, I myself have elsewhere spent some effort in, for example, trying to trace the development of specific motifs over the centuries, or charting the relationship between one ancient interpreter and another, or characterizing the overall exegetical approach of a single author.) But given the purpose of this book—to offer a detailed look at how the Bible was interpreted in antiquity, to show what the Bible essentially *was* in that period—I found it necessary to focus on motifs in and of themselves, both because such motifs were the actual building blocks of all larger retellings of biblical stories and passages, and because these building blocks are also the only sure guide to common elements found among different ancient authors.

Scripture or Interpretation?

Who were the ancient writers in whose books these exegetical motifs are found? For the most part, we do not know their names or their biographies, and often it is difficult to determine even approximately when or where they lived. Nevertheless, by examining their writings carefully we can determine some basic facts, and sometimes an illuminating detail or two will go far in helping us to understand what motivated these largely anonymous writers to say what they say.

Before discussing any individual authors or works, however, it is necessary to spell out an important truth: one man’s interpreter is another’s Scripture. For example, we have seen briefly that the biblical books of Chronicles and Daniel sometimes interpret Scripture, say, a verse from the book of Genesis or Jeremiah. From the standpoint of the authors of Chronicles or Daniel, these interpretations must have seemed just that. But to a biblical interpreter of, say, the first or second century C.E., Chronicles and Daniel were, no less than Genesis and Jeremiah, part of Scripture. For such an interpreter, the fact that Chronicles talks about something found in Genesis hardly makes Chronicles an *interpretation* of Genesis: both books were part of the great sacred corpus of Scripture, that seamless body of divine instruction that was held to be perfect and perfectly harmonious. Similarly, Ben Sira may have started out by attempting to (among other things) interpret Scripture, but for those ancient Jews and Christians who subsequently came to view Ben Sira’s book as part of the Bible, the things that Ben Sira says about Enoch, Abraham, and other ancient figures simply became part of what *Scripture* has to say about Enoch, Abraham, and the others, that is, they became part of the corpus of things *to be interpreted*. Likewise, while the New Testament frequently interprets (or reflects earlier interpretations of) the Old Testament, for later Christians the New Testament is every bit as authoritative as the Old, and what it says about the heroes of Genesis is thus quite on a par with what Genesis says.

In other words, the corpus of what constitutes “Scripture” and is therefore the object of interpretation changed over time and varied from one group of readers to the next.²³ In compiling this book, I wanted to create a snapshot, or a portrait at least, of the Bible as it was interpreted for a specific period—

23. A further complication is presented by such books as *1 Enoch* or *Jubilees*, books that arguably were at one time considered by some readers to be as scriptural as Genesis or Exodus, but that later in the course of their transmission came to be viewed as less authoritative or altogether irrelevant. If so, then—for a time, at least—the interpretations contained within them must not have been viewed as interpretations at all: they were no less scriptural than the interpretations found in Chronicles or Daniel. Did not the books’ subsequent change of status mean that these same interpretations reverted

roughly speaking, from about 200 B.C.E. through the first century or so C.E. This required defining, in somewhat arbitrary fashion, what "Scripture" would or would not include (since even within this period its content varied over time and from group to group).

The dividing line I have decided to adopt for this purpose is that of the so-called Jewish biblical canon (though this name is not particularly accurate, since only *some* Jews in the period covered accepted its boundaries). In other words, books like Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, Psalms, and Daniel, even though they all contain here and there what is clearly interpretation of earlier biblical books, are considered for the purpose of this study to be Scripture, since they were all probably complete, or virtually complete, by the start of the period covered by this book, and were already considered by many to be Scripture. By contrast, books like *Jubilees*, Ben Sira, the Wisdom of Solomon, and the New Testament are used herein as witnesses to the state of biblical interpretation during the period covered, since these books were all apparently written within that period rather than before it; while all of them would eventually be treated as Scripture by one group or another, for purposes of this study they are not yet Scripture.²⁴

Meet the Sources

The present volume contains ancient biblical interpretations culled from hundreds of different sources—far too many to present individually here. (The Terms and Sources section at the end of this volume contains a brief characterization of each work or author cited herein, along with an approximate dating of the work and related information.) Nevertheless, it might be useful at this point to introduce a few of these sources in order to provide some overview of the sorts of books in which ancient interpretive traditions are to be found. The following, then, are some of the most important ancient texts I used in compiling this book.

1 Enoch: There circulated in antiquity a number of works focusing on or attributed to Enoch—the same Enoch mentioned in Gen. 5:21–24 and dis-

back to their original state, that is, turned from Scripture into interpretation (thereby reversing the path traced by the interpretations canonized in Chronicles and Daniel)?

24. Having taken care of this matter of definition, I must add that I have been careful to breach it in the honoring whenever I judged it worthwhile. That is, in tracing what "the Bible" has to say about a particular matter, I have been careful to include, in addition to the Pentateuchal material itself, later reflections or elaborations found elsewhere within the Jewish canon. While I have necessarily treated such reflections and elaborations as Scripture, the alert reader will certainly recognize in many of them an earlier stage of biblical interpretation.

cussed above. The very fact that this passage apparently asserted that Enoch had been "taken" by God while he was still alive seemed to imply that he continued to exist in heaven—indeed, that he exists there still. From such a vantage point, Enoch could presumably not only observe all that was happening on earth, but was privy to all the secrets of heaven, including the natural order and God's plans for humanity's future.

A number of anonymous writers who wished to discourse on such subjects attributed their writings to Enoch, and eventually a composite "Book of Enoch"—and then *Books of Enoch*—began to circulate. Our present *1 Enoch* is composed of a number of different works. Most or all were apparently originally written in Aramaic, and parts of these Aramaic texts have turned up among the Dead Sea Scrolls (on which see below). The most ancient manuscripts found—drawn from the "Book of Luminaries" section (that is, chapters 72–82) of our present *1 Enoch*, and the "Book of the Watchers" (*1 Enoch* 1–36)—have been dated to the late third or early second century B.C.E.²⁵ Since these manuscripts are apparently only copies of a still earlier work, the date of at least these Enoch writings can be pushed back even earlier. They thus seem to be the oldest Jewish writings that have survived outside the Bible itself. New sections were eventually blended in with the old, and the entire Book of Enoch was subsequently translated into Greek and from Greek into ancient Ethiopic (Ge'ez), in which language alone the book survived in its entirety.

Scriptural interpretation was hardly the major concern of most of *1 Enoch*. The very figure of Enoch in this book may be modeled on that of a Mesopotamian sage, and the astronomical learning and other materials presented likewise bespeak the transmission of ancient, eastern lore.²⁶ Nevertheless, Enoch, Cain and Abel, Lamech, Methuselah, Noah, and other figures from the Bible, as well as incidents mentioned in biblical history, also appear, and in what is said about some of them it is possible to see the outline of some very ancient interpretation, in particular, a grappling with difficulties associated with the story of Noah and the flood.

Septuagint: Starting in the third century B.C.E., Hebrew Scripture began to be translated into Greek, apparently for the use of Greek-speaking Jews in Hellenistic centers like Alexandria, Egypt. A legend eventually sprang up about this translation to the effect that seventy, or seventy-two, Jewish elders were commissioned to do the translation of the Pentateuch, each in an isolated cell; when the translations were compared, they all agreed in every detail,

25. The implications of this dating have been explored by Stone, *Scriptures, Sects, and Visions*, 37–47; idem, "Enoch, Aramaic Levi, and Sectarian Origins."

26. Grelot, "La légende d'Hénoch dans les apocryphes et dans la Bible"; idem, "La géographie mythique d'Hénoch et ses sources orientales"; Neugebauer, "Astronomy of the Book of Enoch."

for the translators had been divinely guided. As a result, this translation came to be known as the *Septuaginta* ("seventy"). (Subsequently, the name "Septuagint" also came to include the old Greek translation of the other books of the Hebrew Bible, a translation made in stages from the third to the first century B.C.E.)

Any translation by nature contains a good bit of interpretation: ambiguities in the original text can rarely be duplicated in translation and, as a result, the translator must take a stand and render the ambiguity one way or another. Moreover, translators aware of this or that traditional interpretation will sometimes incorporate it (consciously or otherwise) into their translation. For both these reasons, the Septuagint, although a fairly close rendering, can frequently provide information about how a particular verse or single word or phrase was understood by Jews as early as the third century B.C.E.

Jubilees: This book purports to contain a revelation given to Moses by the "angel of the Presence," one of the angels closest to God, at the time of the Sinai revelation. It takes the form of a retelling of the book of Genesis and the first part of Exodus: the angel goes over the same material but fills in many details, sometimes shifting slightly the order of things and occasionally skipping over elements in the narrative. The book was originally written in Hebrew, and fragments of it have been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. From Hebrew it was translated into Greek (parts of this translation still survive in quotations from Greek authors) and from Greek into Latin and Ge'ez. The (almost) complete text exists only in Ge'ez, though a substantial section is extant in Latin as well. Many scholars date the book to the middle of the second century B.C.E., while a few (myself included) favor an earlier date, perhaps at the beginning of the second century B.C.E. or even a decade or two before that.

The author of *Jubilees* is one of the heroes of the present study. This writer was a bold, innovative interpreter in his own right—one might say, without exaggeration, something of a genius—and subsequent generations valued highly, even venerated, his book's insights into Scripture. In seeking to retell the book of Genesis and the beginning of Exodus, this author had a definite program: he wished to claim that this initial part of the Pentateuch, although it consists mostly of stories and does not contain any law code as such, had nonetheless been designed to impart legal instruction no less binding than the overt law codes found in the rest of the Pentateuch. In other words, by reading the stories of Genesis carefully, one could figure out all kinds of binding commandments that God had, as it were, hidden in the narrative. Reading in this fashion, the author of *Jubilees* was able to find a set of rules strictly defining what is permitted and forbidden on the Sabbath, regulations forbidding marriage between Jews and non-Jews, strictures against various forms of

"fornication," and other subjects dear to this writer's heart. One interesting feature of the book is its claim that the true calendar ordained by God consisted of exactly 52 Sabbaths (364 days) per year and that the moon, whose waxing and waning determined the months and festivals for other Jews, ought rightly to have no such role in the true calendar. The author sought to show that this calendar, too, was implied by the stories of Genesis.

Apart from these pet issues, *Jubilees'* author ended up presenting a good deal more in the way of biblical interpretation. Some of these other interpretations may likewise have been of his own creation, but others were certainly widespread traditions at the time of his writing. One way or another, the book is a treasure of ancient thinking about the Bible. The Dead Sea Scroll sect adopted the same calendar as that prescribed by *Jubilees*, and it is clear that the members of that group held this book in high esteem.

Wisdom of Ben Sira[ch]: Yeshu'a ben El'azar ben Sira is one of the rare Hebrew authors of this period known to us by name. He was a sage who wrote his book toward the beginning of the second century B.C.E., around the year 180 or so. From Hebrew the book was subsequently translated into Greek (by Ben Sira's own grandson) and became part of the Greek Bible of early Christianity; other ancient versions were made into Syriac and Latin (in which language it came to be known as "Ecclesiasticus"). Ben Sira's book was particularly beloved among the founders of rabbinic Judaism, but apparently because his identity was well known and the book was not attributed to some ancient worthy from the biblical past, they felt that it could not be included in the rabbinic canon of Scripture, and the original Hebrew version of it was therefore eventually lost. The book survived for centuries only in translation. Substantial fragments of the Hebrew text were recovered at the end of the nineteenth century from five medieval manuscripts that had been stored in a Cairo synagogue; subsequently parts of the Hebrew original have turned up in ancient manuscripts discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls and at nearby Masada.

Ben Sira was, as we have glimpsed briefly, a traditional sage who, characteristically for his period, saw in Scripture a great corpus of divine wisdom; he therefore made broad use of Scripture in writing his own book, including the lengthy catalog of biblical heroes mentioned earlier. But Ben Sira was a conservative in all things—a "classicist," one might say—and this catalog contains relatively little that is not explicitly stated in Scripture itself. He certainly was aware of many interpretive traditions, which, for one reason or another, he chose not to include in his book. This conservatism notwithstanding, the book does contain a number of interpretations from a relatively early stage of development.

Dead Sea Scrolls: This is the name popularly used for a group of manu-

scripts found in the general area of Khirbet Qumran, a site along the shores of the Dead Sea, starting in 1947. Justly described as the greatest manuscript find in history, this collection of biblical manuscripts and other writings seems to have belonged to a group of ascetic Jews who retreated to this desert locale perhaps in the second century B.C.E. and who continued to exist there until 68 C.E. The group may be identified with the Essenes, a religious sect described by Philo of Alexandria, Pliny the Elder, and Josephus; these Essenes may in turn be the same sect as the "Boethusians" known from rabbinic literature.

The Dead Sea Scrolls have provided a wealth of information about the history and development of the biblical text itself, about first-century Judaism and the roots of Christianity, and about biblical interpretation as it existed just before and after the start of the common era. The Dead Sea Scrolls texts cited in this book include the *Genesis Apocryphon*, the *Community Rule* (*Serekh Hayyahad*), the *Damascus Document*, the *Temple Scroll*, a *Genesis Peshet* (4Q252), the *Halakhic Letter* (4Q394-399), and others.

Wisdom of Solomon: This book was written in Greek, probably late in the first century B.C.E. or early in the first century C.E. by a Greek-speaking Jew from, most likely, Alexandria. The book presents itself as the wise writings of the biblical king Solomon; it contains a lengthy praise of, and exhortation to follow, the path of wisdom. As already mentioned, it also summarizes a good bit of Scripture in brief, gnomic sentences that reflect many of the interpretive traditions then current. The author may have inhabited Egypt, but he was well versed in interpretive traditions otherwise known to us in Hebrew or Aramaic, traditions that seem to stem, in other words, from the Jewish homeland.

The *Wisdom of Solomon*, or *Book of Wisdom*, was part of the Greek Bible of early Christianity and has remained, along with *Ben Sira*, *Judith*, and other books, as part of the Old Testament in many churches (although these books are classified by some as biblical Apocrypha or "Deutero-canonical" works).

Writings of Philo of Alexandria: Philo was another Greek-speaking Jew; he lived in Alexandria from sometime before the start of the common era to around 40 C.E. He is the author of a multivolume series of commentaries on the Pentateuch. Philo inherited an already existing tradition of interpreting the Bible allegorically, a tradition that appears to have flourished in Alexandria. Philo championed this approach; for him, although biblical stories recounted historical events, they likewise had an "under-meaning" (*huponoiia*) by which Abraham, Jacob, and other biblical figures were understood to represent abstractions or spiritual realities whose truth applied to all times and places. Philo explained many biblical texts in keeping with then-current Greek philosophical ideas.

Philo's allegorical explanations of Scripture were known to (for example)

Josephus and perhaps as well to some rabbinic exegetes; his commentary may even have found a brief echo in the rabbinic work *Genesis Rabba*.²⁷ Apart from that, however, his works played almost no role in the later history of Jewish biblical interpretation.²⁸ They were, however, extraordinarily important to Alexandrine Christianity and, through the writings of Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius, and other Christian scholars, gained a place for his ideas and methods in much Christian biblical interpretation.²⁹

New Testament: The varied writings that make up the New Testament were not conceived principally as an exposition of Scripture; nevertheless, in numerous places these texts set forth interpretations of Hebrew Scripture that were to prove (or already had proven) critical to the new church. Moreover, New Testament texts everywhere bear witness to exegetical traditions current among Jews in the first century C.E. or earlier and, as well, show just how important was the interpretation of Scripture within the early Christian movement. In addition to the expositions of Scripture found in Paul's letters and the frequent references to the Hebrew Bible scattered throughout the four Gospels, particularly significant for the present study is Stephen's speech in Acts 7 and the Letter to the Hebrews.

Incidentally, the New Testament is only part of the library of early Christians relevant to a consideration of ancient biblical interpretation; along with them, the writings of the Apostolic Fathers (particularly *1 Clement*, the *Didache*, and the *Letter of Barnabas*), Justin Martyr, Origen, Eusebius of Caesarea, Ephraem Syrus, Aphrahat, and various later writers supply much of the material cited in the present study.

[*Flavius*] *Josephus*: Josephus was a Jewish writer who lived from c. 37 C.E. to c. 100 C.E. Born of a priestly family in Jerusalem, he was, by his own account, a gifted student who acquired a broad exposure to the different Jewish schools of thought existent in his own time. He served as a general in

27. See on this Runia, *Philo in Early Christian Literature*, 74-78.

28. Winston, "Philo's *Nachleben*."

29. A lively debate continues over the extent of Philo's acquaintance with biblical interpretation as it existed among his Jewish contemporaries in Judaea. See (inter alia): Siegfried, *Philo von Alexandria als Ausleger*; Bousset, *Judischchristlicher Schulbetrieb in Alexandria und Rom*; Heinemann, *Philons griechische und jüdische Bildung*; idem, *Altjüdische Allegoristik*; Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 5:viii-ix; Stein, *Philo und der Midrasch*; Wolfson, *Philo*; Belkin, *Philo and the Oral Law*; idem, *Philo's Midrash*; Sandmel, *Philo's Place in Judaism*; idem, "Parallelomania"; Nikiprowetzky, *Le Commentaire de l'Écriture*; Bamberger, "Philo and the Aggadah"; Rokeach, "Philo of Alexandria, Midrash, and Ancient Halakhah"; Grabbe, "Philo and Aggadah." Even the last author, highly skeptical of certain others' claims, is prepared to concede that Philo knew "a modest amount" of aggadic traditions from elsewhere. My own feelings on this question are not given to easy summary, but in the end they are somewhat analogous to Kafka's words to the Jews of Prague: "You know more Yiddish than you think." (On the last, see Brod, *Franz Kafka*, 113.)

the great Jewish revolt against the Romans but was defeated and taken prisoner. (Josephus recounts that he prophesied that the Roman commander, Vespasian, would be made emperor; Vespasian spared Josephus' life and when, two years later, the prophecy came true, freed him.) After the war Josephus moved to Rome and composed, among other books, his multivolume *Jewish Antiquities*. This work, which purports to set forth the history of the Jews, begins by retelling much of the Hebrew Bible. Josephus' account is, as we have briefly seen, an amalgam of the biblical text itself and numerous interpretive traditions that accompanied it. This book is thus a valuable source of information about how Jews interpreted Scripture in the first century C.E.

Targums: Targum is a general name for a translation of the Hebrew Bible, or parts thereof, into Aramaic, a Semitic language related to Hebrew and spoken widely throughout the ancient Near East from the eighth century B.C.E. onward. Targums are not only interpretations in the sense already mentioned with regard to the Septuagint; some of them, notably *Targum Neophyti*, the *Fragment Targum*, and *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* (all targums of the Pentateuch), contain frequent exegetical expansions of the biblical text, from a few words to entire paragraphs, not found in the original.

It is difficult to date targums with any certainty. *Targum Neophyti*, frequently cited on the following pages, may go back to the early second century C.E. (or perhaps slightly earlier); it is replete with ancient exegetical traditions. *Targum Onqelos* belongs to roughly the same period; while it sticks more closely to the actual text of the Pentateuch, it nevertheless supplies valuable insights into early biblical interpretation.

Composition and Aims of This Book

These brief sketches may give the uninitiated reader some idea of the sources used in this book, and with them this brief survey of the world of ancient interpreters is complete. Before, however, proceeding to the body of this book, I should perhaps add a final word about my intentions in compiling it, as well as some account of how I hope it may be used.

I did not get far into the present work before I began to worry about its eventual size. There was so much potential material that any one of its twenty-six chapters might in itself be turned into a book-length study. Indeed, some of the overall topics of various chapters—and even, in a few cases, a single exegetical motif therein—had already been the subject of someone else's whole book or monograph. Moreover, I soon began to amass a great deal of material which was altogether new and which, I felt, for that reason alone deserved to be published. All this would mean a book of considerable size—

without even counting the space to be taken up by scholarly footnotes and references to the research of others. Not only might such a volume end up being rather large and costly, but it would probably prove to be a difficult one for the nonspecialist to read and use: the more motifs I covered, the more the average reader was likely to get lost among them, unable to distinguish important, widespread interpretations from interesting but less crucial ones. What to do?

From an early stage, I began to think in terms of two different editions of the book. One would seek to present only the most important, most influential motifs—the sorts of things that a broad spectrum of Jews and Christians in the period covered would have heard or read about various biblical stories and figures. (These same motifs, not coincidentally, were by and large the ones which were transmitted to subsequent generations and which continued to shape people's ideas about the Bible for centuries and centuries afterward.) To keep this first edition reasonably small and reasonably simple, I also decided to avoid wherever possible technical discussions of Hebrew or Aramaic, and to eliminate almost all references to other works of scholarship (apart from the few references included in the present introductory chapter), saving these—along with more detailed discussion of some of the complications involved in the motifs set forth here, and the presentation of quite a few minor motifs not found here at all—for the larger, more technical edition I was preparing simultaneously.³⁰

Even this larger edition has required a lot of pruning and judicious selection in order to be kept to publishable size. Such being the case, I should perhaps state from the beginning what this book, in either edition, is *not*. It is not a presentation of the whole of ancient biblical interpretation of the Pentateuch—far from it! Even the larger, annotated version falls considerably short of that goal. Within the time frame established for this book, the available material far exceeded what could be included. This book therefore represents a *selection* of some motifs from among many, and a *further selection* of some attestations of a given motif from among many. In deciding what material to include, I have been guided by three or four different principles.

In general, I have tried to favor the oldest attested motifs within the designated period. In fact, I have tried wherever possible to allow the oldest texts to determine my agenda. That is, I began by surveying the most ancient sources available—*1 Enoch*, *Jubilees*, the Septuagint, Ben Sira, and so forth—to

30. This plan of two separate editions has indeed gone forward: publication of the present volume is to be followed by that of a longer version, designed for specialists in the field, containing additional motifs and extensive notes discussing some of the more technical aspects of the subjects covered.