THE READING OF SACRED TEXTS IN THE CONTEXT OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY

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ABSTRACT

The article focusses on the question when the text of Scripture became fixed and unchangeable, on the practice of actualising the received text, and on exegesis as a charismatic activity or even a kind of divination. Understanding the meaning of God's Word was not a matter of establishing the original, historical meaning of the text, but of letting Scripture become part of the present life of the readers. This is probably the reason why the text of Scripture remained fluid for so long. Furthermore, Scripture by itself was not seen as the complete revelation of God's Word. For Christians it was completed when read in the light of the Christ event; for Qumran, when read in the light of their eschatological revelations. The same is true for rabbinical Judaism: Scripture was read together with the oral Torah, and the work of discovering the will of God remained an open-ended task, even after the letters of the text were fixed.

INTRODUCTION

When we begin to understand the way other ages and cultures looked at reality we often find their way of seeing strange; it is often difficult to appreciate their approach. Modern biblical scholars find it difficult to appreciate the way Qumran, or Philo, or the Early Church, or Rabbinical Judaism interpreted Scripture. Most modern exegetes simply ignore the exegesis of the Church Fathers and the Medieval commentators.

In more recent years, however, there has been a tendency to relativise our own perspectives and to accept that we do not have an absolute vantage point from which we can observe reality. We are more aware that our way of looking at reality is one among many, and that we may learn from perspectives which are not our own.

While there may indeed be common logical elements and a common basis of understanding among peoples of different ages and cultures, the sociological perspective clearly recognises that the human mind itself is historically constituted, that it is created through the mediation of symbolic structures which are derived from a particular social history. Different historical peoples may have distinct mind-sets. While classi-
Within the context of this new understanding, and because of the current questioning of the accepted methods of exegesis, there has been a renewed interest in the history of exegesis. From 1963 to 1970 we have witnessed the publication of the well known *Cambridge History of the Bible*. In the eighties we have seen the publication of the eight volume series, *Bible de tous les temps*, under the direction of C Kannengieser. In 1990, Henning Graf Reventlow published the first volume of his history of exegesis, *Epochen der Bibelauslegung*.

Furthermore, among the contemporary methods of exegesis, reception criticism has given a new scope to the study of the history of interpretation and use of particular texts (Berger 1977:242-269).

The aim of this article is not to compare the merits and defects of the historical-critical method with those of the ancient approach (see Steinmetz 1980; Fitzmyer 1989). My aim is simply to explore how Judaism at the time of Jesus and early Christianity looked at the Bible and how they used it.

I will not compare the Jewish and Christian approaches to the Bible with those of the other cultures of the ancient mediterranean world to their sacred writings (see Leipoldt & Morenz 1953), neither will I enter into the specific question of the extent to which Rabbinic hermeneutics was part of the prevailing Hellenistic culture (see Alexander 1990).

After a brief look at some aspects of the sacredness of the text (1), the article will focus on the question when the text of Scripture became fixed (2), followed by a brief consideration of the continuity and discontinuity between pre-70 and post-70 AD Judaism as the historical context for this change (3). The second half of the article will then focus on the practice of actualising the received text (4), and on the tendency towards charismatic exegesis or even exegesis understood as divination (5).

## 1 SACRED TEXT

### 1.1 Inspired, prophetic writings

For the Jews at the time of Jesus there was a distinct body of literature which they considered as having a divine authority. Various names were used for it, like ‘the Law and the Prophets,’ ‘the Scriptures,’ ‘the holy books’ (see the brief treatment by Beckwith 1985:105-109). These writings were considered to have a prophetic quality, which was seen as the reason for their special status.
(Beckwith 1985:64-65). This literature preserved God's life-giving word for his people. As Deuteronomy 32:47-48 expresses it:

Lay to heart all the words which I enjoin upon you this day that you may command them to your children, that they may be careful to do all the words of this law...it is your life...

While Deuteronomy 4:6 had already presented God's statutes as his gift of wisdom and intelligence to Israel, Judaism—under the impact of Hellenistic culture—was very concerned to elaborate this point. The Torah was seen not as an arbitrary set of laws, but as the manifestation of the rational order which sustains all that exists:

The decisive concern of Philo in his discussion of the Law is to show the agreement between the OT Law and the cosmic order in reason and nature at large (Gutbrod 1967:1053).

1.2 Identified with heavenly Wisdom

This leads us to a further aspect. Not only was the Torah considered to be inspired and in agreement with the cosmic order, there was also a tendency, from the time of Ben Sira onwards, to identify the Book of the Law with the divine Wisdom (Hengel 1974:1,157-175).

In Ben Sira Sira 24, Wisdom is presented in poetic terms as a kind of 'world reason' emanating from God, which filled and permeated the whole creation and finds the culmination of this task in making man a rational being (1.9f; cf. 17.7). . . . Ben Sira identified 'wisdom' as the 'primal image' and the 'principle of order' of the world created by God, which was 'poured out on all (God's) works' (Sir 1.9), with the firmly delineated moral norms for pious Jews, the Torah communicated exclusively to Israel on Sinai:

all this is the book of the covenant of the Most High God, the law which Moses commanded us, as an inheritance for the congregations of Jacob (Sir 24:22) (Hengel 1974:1,159-160).


In Rabbinic Judaism the Torah takes the place of Wisdom in the creation of the world. Torah 'became the mediator of creation and of revelation between God and the world' (Hengel 1974:1,171). This gave new importance to the Torah. As the wisdom of God it contained all knowledge. This is beautifully expressed in Mishnah Aboth 5:22: 'Turn it and turn it again for everything is in it.'
Since Torah was involved in the creation of the world, it could be seen as the means by which God had overcome the powers of chaos. Neglect of Torah could lead to the destruction of the world. According to R Ishmael (died AD 135), ‘if (while copying Torah) you leave out a single letter or write a single letter too much, you will be found as one who destroys the whole world’ (quoted in Hengel 1974:1,172).

All this naturally led to a unique valuation of the study of Torah.

1.3 The sanctity and power of the sacred letters
The way in which the books were handled also expresses something of the way they were understood: a copy of these holy books was preserved in the Temple archives, a further expression of their divine status (Beckwith 1985:80-86). Furthermore, for the Pharisees,

...the Scriptures must be saved from a fire, even at the cost of breaking the sabbath;...when unfit for use, they must not be destroyed but stored away, and left to decay naturally;...they make the hands unclean, so that the hands must be washed whenever the Scriptures have been handled (M Shabbath 16.1; M Yadaim 3.5) (Beckwith 1985:71).

Why the Scriptures should make the hands unclean is not quite clear. (For an overview of the discussion see Beckwith 1985:279-281). The idea seems to be that, since these books have been inspired by the Holy Spirit, they must be treated with the greatest respect and not be handled like any other object. As the Mishnah (Yadaim 4.6) expresses it: ‘As is our love for them so is our uncleanness - that no man make spoons of the bones of his father or mother.’

According to Mishnah Yadaim 4.5, only books with the text in the original Hebrew or Aramaic language and written in the square script on parchment, and in ink defile the hands. The status of translations is clearly different from that of the original.

The text of Scripture was also believed to have special protective power, as can be seen in the custom of wearing phylacteries tied to the left arm and forehead, and in the use of mezuzot, or parchments which were attached to the door posts of the homes. According to Mishnah Megillah 1.8, these could only be written in square script, while the Books of Scripture could be written in any language, or at least also in Greek (see Bar-Il an 1988:25).

This concern about the use of the correct script may sound like magic, but it seems more likely that it expresses the growing understanding among the rabbis that God had given his people a set of written signs. These material signs were seen as God’s precious gift and were therefore surrounded with special reverence. As written signs they were to be carefully maintained and preserved,
while their meaning remained open in order to be able to speak to every new generation (Goldberg 1990).

This explains why the rabbis could draw meaning from all kinds of details of the letters. For instance, the fact that the story of creation in Genesis 1 begins with the letter beth, which is closed on three sides, could be interpreted as meaning that we should not ask questions about what was before creation, or about what is in heaven above, or in the nether-world. Letters could be read according to their numerical value (gematria), or each letter could be interpreted as representing a word (notarilon). The order of the letters could also be changed so that one word is read instead of another: ayin, mem, lamed (= work) is read as mem, ayin, lamed (= transgression) in 1QpHab 2:5-6 (Fishbane 1988:375).

Fishbane quotes a kabbalistic book which claims that Scripture as that specific conglomerate of material signs is in fact an icon of divinity:

All the letters of the Torah, in all their shapes—combined and separated; swaddled, curved and crooked ones; superfluous and elliptical letters; minute, large and inverted ones...[indeed, even] the calligraphy of the letters...all of them constitute the very shape of God, Blessed be He...(Fishbane 1989:43).

We have seen different ways of conceiving the depth of Torah: as the inspired, life-giving word of God, as eternal Wisdom embodied in a text, as a text which in its constellation of letters and spaces allows the reader to discover God’s word for the here and now. This last way of seeing Scripture seems to be more typical of Rabbinical Judaism.

2 THE TEXT: FIXED OR FLUID?

2.1 Introduction
The saying of R Ishmael quoted above, ‘if (while copying Torah) you leave out a single letter or write a single letter too much, you will be found as one who destroys the whole world,’ seems to indicate that for rabbinical Judaism by the year AD 135 the text was already seen as absolutely fixed. We now have to consider when the text of Scripture came to be seen as fixed and unchangeable.

2.2 The Hebrew Text
According to Barthélemy (1976) a consideration of the history of the text of the OT suggests that there was a clear difference between the attitude towards the biblical text before and after AD 70. Among the Qumran scrolls, which date from 250 BC to AD 70, there was still a great deal of fluidity in the text of Scripture. We find some archaic texts, which are more difficult to read, like
1QIs(b), but also a number of other texts, which are easier, more developed, with many *matres lectionis*. Genesis and Isaiah had reached a high degree of standardisation by the second century BC. Most manuscripts of these works represent the standard text, while 1QIs(a) is an exception. The manuscripts of Exodus through Deuteronomy show great variation.

In general, the Palestinian text for these books may be seen as an expanding, harmonising type, distinct from the received MT, and showing some kinship with the 'proto-Lucianic' reworking of the LXX (O'Connell 1990:1087).

Jeremiah is an interesting case, because 4QJer(b) represents the shorter version, which also appears in the LXX; the other manuscripts represent the longer text as in the MT.

...the divided evidence for Jer supports the hypothesis that MT Jer's fuller text represents mainly a reworking, presumably in Palestine, of an older short edition (O'Connell 1990:1087).

This evidence seems to indicate that the text of Scripture was not fully standardised and fixed before AD 70. (It is conceivable, however, that the presence of other text types among the Qumran Scrolls simply means that they took cognisance of these texts without accepting them as authoritative).

After AD 70, in the manuscripts of the caves of the second revolt (those of Wadi Murabba'at and Nahal Hever) the only text form which is represented is the archaic one. In other words, before AD 70 the biblical texts were preserved in a variety of forms, while after that date we observe the tendency towards one standard text, the archaic one. As Barthélemy (1976:881) sums this up:

In the year AD 68 archaic and carefully executed biblical texts occupied only a small place in the library of the community of the New Covenant. Yet it was a text of this type that ousted all other text forms and became the Holy Scripture of the refugees of Wadi Murabba'at and Nahal Hever. The same text furnished the consonantal basis for the work of the Masoretes 750 years later.

In order to understand the nature of the Hebrew text of Scripture in the first century AD, we have to see it as a movement from a fluid to a more fixed state. Barthélemy (1976:880) identifies four stages in this process:

1: the conviction that a certain book is sacred Scripture;
2: as a result of this conviction the book crystallises into one or more traditions;
3: in the transmission of the text it gets corrupted by slips in writing, emenda-
tions, harmonisations, theological corrections, ...

4: the attempt to stabilise the text and to protect it against corruption.

Besides efforts to stabilise the texts there was also the tendency towards a single or standard text. Between AD 70 and AD 135 one text was chosen as normative; the other existing manuscripts were corrected or consigned to the genizah.

... it was the catastrophe of A.D. 70 that had the most decisive effect on the work of standardising the text. This was but one of the many measures of conservation and defense that were adopted to save Judaism (Barthélemy 1976:881).

2.3 The Greek Text

In the transmission of the LXX there was also a process of revision, which aimed at conforming the text more closely to the Hebrew. The earliest Palestinian revision, 'Proto-Lucian' (for Samuel—Kings), represents accommodation to a Hebrew text which was still quite different from the MT text and circulated in Palestine in the second and first centuries BC. The scroll of the Minor Prophets discovered at Nahal Hever is a representative of the kaige—Theodotion recension and must have been completed before AD 50. This recension is 'related to rules of textual interpretation formulated by the rabbis around the turn of the era' (O'Connell 1990:1092). It should be clear that in Palestine of the first century BC and the first century AD extensive recensional work was being done on the Greek text. The Hebrew manuscripts on which these recensions are based are

often closer to the MT than to the prototypes of the Alexandrian LXX, (but) it is not in fact the precise Hebr consonantal text stabilised at the end of the 1st cent AD that they presuppose (O'Connell 1990:1093).

While the consonantal tradition of the Hebrew text was standardised at the end of the first century AD and the beginning of the second century, the LXX continued to be transmitted in various traditions. Towards the end of the fourth century, Jerome mentions three commonly received traditions: the Egyptian, the Palestinian, and the Antiochian tradition.

We should consider here at least one Greek recension from the second century AD, that of Aquila. This translation continues to some extent the approach of the kaige recensions of the previous century, but Aquila’s version went much further. As a disciple of Rabbi Aqiba, for whom every letter in the Bible is meaningful (Tov 1988:183), he tried by all means to reach exact equivalence between the Hebrew words and the Greek words, a procedure which resulted in very awkward Greek phrases. The Hebrew text followed by
Aquila was the standardised text. This made it a very popular version among the Jews of the later Roman and Byzantine empires and replaced the LXX.

2.4 Conclusion
The one, normative and fixed text of Scripture was something which became a reality only towards the end of the first century or the beginning of the second century AD. This affects our understanding of the use of Scripture in the New Testament. The one, normative, and fixed text of Scripture as we have it now in the Masoretic Text was still in the making when the New Testament was emerging. The Greek text continued to retain greater diversity; eventually Christians and Jews ended up each having their own version.

3 THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT: JUDAISM BEFORE AD 70 AND RABBINIC JUDAISM

It is important to put the above conclusion within the wider context of the developments within Judaism at that time. We have to be careful not to read the teachings and practices of Rabbinical Judaism back into the period before AD 70. According to Jacob Neusner (1979:3-4), a champion of the use of the critical approach to the origins of Rabbinical Judaism,

Rabbinic Judaism took shape in the century from 70 to 170, making use of the antecedent heritage of the Old Testament as well as of the 'traditions of the fathers' associated with Pharisaism and of certain convictions and procedures of scribism. An amalgam of Pharisaism, Scribism, and yet its own distinctive interests shaped in the crucible of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple....

The study of the Torah was not a feature of pre-70 Pharisaism, but was an ideal which was rooted in pre-70 scribal ideas and it took on a new importance after 70 when the Temple cult disappeared.

So Yavnean scribism made important changes in pre-70 scribal ideas. It responded to the new situation in a more appropriate way than did Yavnean Pharisaism represented by Eliezer....If study of the Torah was central and knowledge of the Torah important, then the scribe had authority even in respect to the Temple and the cult (Neusner 1979:38).

While before 70 the sacrificial system was 'a principal aspect of the true worship of God' (Sanders 1992:54), the novelty brought about after 70, especially under the influence of the scribes, was the replacement of 'the Temple cult by study of Torah, the priest by the rabbi (=scribe)...' (Neusner 1979:38). From then onwards, piety was centered on the study of Torah and no longer on the Temple and its cult.
Porton (1979:113-116) argues that the Temple cult and the priesthood followed their own laws and traditions, distinct from, and even at times conflicting with, the Torah:

During the intertestamental period there were two possible sources of authority, two parallel but possibly conflicting paths to God: the priesthood/priestly traditions and the Torah. Until the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, it is likely that the former were the more important (Porton 1979:114).

The study of Torah, which became the centre of rabbinical Judaism, should not be understood simply as the study of the Scriptures. Besides the study of Scripture, there was the study of the traditions, which are found in the Mishnah and the Talmud. These are independent from Scripture; it is a mistake to imagine that Mishnah is a systematic presentation of the laws found in Scripture. The biblical citations in Mishnah

...are few and far between. It has been shown that in many cases these citations are later additions to the text. Neusner has shown that many of the mishnaic laws of purity have little relation to the biblical texts upon which they are supposedly based (Porton 1979:115).

4 ACTUALISATION—'RE-LECTURE'

After all, one of the characteristic elements of traditio in Israel has on the whole been the need, felt from one generation to another, to give fresh relevance to the old traditions for one's own generation. On the one hand, there is the reverential respect for what happened there and then in history; on the other, the need to apply this 'existentially'—here and now—to one's own age and situation (Mulder 1988:89).

The primary concern of the sages, the apocalyptists, and the early Christians was not the original, literal meaning of the Bible, but rather what it had come to mean, i.e. its actualised or contemporised meaning (Aune 1983:340).

4.1 Inner-biblical exegesis

This need to apply the traditions to one's own age and situation was an important factor in the development of the Scriptures. It is worth recalling here a remark by Reventlow (1990:13) that the idea of the individual author's right over his creation, as we know it in our modern world, did not exist in those days. The author was seen as a bearer of tradition, which had to be carried on creatively. In the Old Testament, as in the New Testament, the words of the prophets, as well as those of Jesus, were not just literally and mechanically transmitted; they were interpreted and adjusted so that they would be able to
address the new context.

Especially since the 1950’s various scholars have pointed to the presence of midrashic activity within the Bible. Although there was no complete agreement on how to define midrash, these scholars understood it as a re-working of older texts; using older texts with new meanings for new contexts: Chronicles was seen as a re-working of Kings; Deuteronomy as partly a re-working of ancient legal traditions (Porton 1979:118-119). In more recent years Fishbane (1985; 1989:3-18) has dealt with the issue of inner-Biblical exegesis. As he points out, the Hebrew Bible ‘not only sponsored a monumental culture of textual exegesis but was itself its own first product’ (Fishbane 1989:4). When later on the rabbis insisted on the unity between the sacred text and its interpretation, they were continuing the very process which produced the text, i.e interpretation of older texts.

The process of writing down the ancient oral traditions did not stop the process of adaptation and transformation of the received texts.

Then also, as before, the culture determined its values by what it chose to receive and transmit as authoritative....it is clear that the authoritative text being explicated was not considered inviolable but subject to the invasion of a tradition of interpretation which rendered it more comprehensible (Fishbane 1989:5).

The scribes saw it as their task to make the law livable in their context and the divine promises and threats relevant to their situation. They did this by means of various kinds of interventions in the text. Apparently, they did not perceive these changes to the texts as pious fraud, but as articulations of what the text really meant to say to their generation.

One may say that the entire corpus of Scripture remains open to these invasive procedures and strategic reworkings up to the close of the canon in the early rabbinic period, and so the received text is complexly compacted of teachings and their subversion, of rules and their extension, of topos and their revision. Within ancient Israel, as long as the textual corpus remained open, Revelation and Tradition were thickly interwoven and interdependent, and the received text of the Bible is itself, therefore, the product of an interpretative tradition (Fishbane 1989:18).

A similar attitude and approach to authoritative words can be seen in the way the early Church transmitted and actualised the parables of Jesus. This approach is obviously very different from the approach of the historical critical method, which is shaped by a sharp awareness of the difference between the present and the past, the difference between the historical facts and the later reports. The desire to get to the facts behind the texts led to a neglect of the perspective of
the texts in their own right. For example, the prophetic books and the Gospels were dismembered to get at the message of the historical prophet or the historical Jesus. Finally, the historical facts thus reached were objectified and isolated from the present existential concerns of the reader (Stuhlmacher 1977:62, 84). The biblical tradition, on the other hand, clearly operates out of another perspective, i.e., the text aims primarily at the present readers in their existential concerns.

4.2 Exegesis at Qumran

There can be no doubt that the study of Scripture was very important for the Qumran community. The Rule Scroll (1QS 6:6-8) expects any community of ten or more to study God's law day and night (as described in Psalm 1:1-2). Among the manuscripts found at Qumran all canonical books are represented, except Esther.

A well-known feature of their use of Scripture is the interpretation in terms of their own history. For instance, in 1QS 8:13-15, Isaiah 40:3 is applied to the community, who moved into the desert to study the Law of the Lord. The same applies to the pesher literature, which sees the true, eschatological meaning of Scripture realised in the present and future life of the community.

Another feature of their use of Scripture, which can be seen particularly in the Temple Scroll (11QTemp), is the re-interpretation of sections of the Torah in order to give divine authority to the Law as understood and practiced by the community. In 11QTemp 11-29 material is selected mainly from Numbers 28-29; in columns 40-66 the material is taken mainly from Deuteronomy 12-23. This new Torah, using Scripture as its basis, is presented as God's own words (Fishbane 1988:350-351).

Fishbane (1988:359) concludes:

...virtually the entirety of Mikra is used and reused by the writers of the Qumran scrolls in order to author, reauthor, and—ultimately—to authorise their practices and beliefs.

Not only did the Qumran community read Scripture in terms of their own history, their own self-understanding, and their own understanding of God's Law, they also claim that they alone have the key to understand it correctly. According to their interpretation of Deuteronomy 29:29, the 'revealed things' were for all the Jews, while the 'hidden things' were known only to the members of the community. The 'hidden things' are the true interpretation of the Torah and the Prophets as revealed through the Teacher. Those who do not know this interpretation fall into sin (1QS 5:11-12; CD 3:12-16). The members of the sect, on the other hand, know God's will and they do not go astray.
The original Law, with its conventional and traditional interpretations, was thus not abrogated but rather superceded (sic) through innovative and ongoing revelations of its meaning (Fishbane 1988:364).

There seems to have been a deep conviction among the various currents in Judaism at the time of Jesus that Scripture was indeed God’s authoritative word, but that it had to be ‘interpreted’ in order to express God’s word for their time. The scribes did this by intervening in the text so that their ‘interpretation’ became part of Scripture. The Temple Scroll follows another approach: it is a new and distinct literary product which is seen as the true and final interpretation of God’s Torah, revealed by God (Fishbane 1988:363-366, 376; Dimant 1984:527-528). In this sense we can say that, at the time of Jesus, Scripture was seen as open-ended. It had to be completed by the ‘right interpretation.’ This is clear in the Qumran writings and in Early Christianity. Even later on, in Rabbinical Judaism, when the letters of Scripture were considered to be fixed, the meaning of Scripture remained open. This is beautifully expressed in the following midrashic comment from Eliyahu Zutta, II, quoted by Fishbane (1989:37-38):

> When the Holy One, blessed be He, gave the Torah to Israel, He only gave it as wheat from which to extract flour, and as flax wherewith to weave a garment ...

Neusner (1983:137), in fact, speaks about ‘the always open canon’ in rabbinical Judaism:

> The rabbi speaks with authority about the Mishnah and the Scripture. He therefore has authority deriving from revelation. He himself may participate in the processes of revelation (there is no material difference). Since that is so, the rabbi’s book, whether Talmud to the Mishnah or midrash to Scripture, is torah, that is, revealed by God. It also forms part of the Torah, a fully ‘canonical’ document....So in the rabbi, the word of God was made flesh. And out of the union of man and Torah, producing the rabbi as Torah incarnate, was born Judaism, the faith of Torah: the ever-present revelation, the always open canon.

4.3 The New Testament writings

D A Koch (1986:322-326) points to two Pauline texts, (1 Cor 9:10; Rm 4:23f), which state as it were a hermeneutical rule that Scripture was written for our sake. Not only the commandments, but everything in Scripture is meant for us, the present readers.

The same view is also expressed in Romans 15:4:

> For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by
steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.

God’s action in the past, as told in the Scriptures, is a warning ‘written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come’ (1 Cor 10:11). The early Christian community, like all other Jewish groups, read the Scriptures in order to receive encouragement, instruction, warning. In other words, to be ‘equipped for every good work’ (2 Tm 3:17).

Furthermore, the question of the correct interpretation of the Law and the right understanding of the prophecies was of crucial importance. For the Qumran community the right understanding of the Law and the Prophets was a secret which had been revealed only to them. In a similar way the Christian communities believed that only they had the true understanding of the Scriptures thanks to Christ:

for to this day, when they (the Jews) read they old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ it is taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their minds; but when a man turns to the Lord the veil is removed (2 Cor 3:14-16).

Koch (1986:331-341) has discussed the problems involved in the interpretation of this text, and I follow his conclusions. As long as the Jews do not turn to Christ, they cannot understand the Scriptures. The contrast between ‘the letter and the Spirit’ (2 Cor 3:6) is the contrast between two fundamentally different ways of interpreting Scripture, the one of the Synagogue (‘the letter which kills’) and that of the Church (‘the Spirit which gives life’).

Koch (1986:341-344) also draws our attention to Romans 1:2 and 3:21. The first text represents a more traditional pre-Pauline formulation, while the second text expresses more clearly the Pauline perspective. According to Romans 3:21, not only the Prophets, but the Law and the Prophets witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in its particular Pauline form, ‘that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law’ (Rm 3:28). This does not mean that the law is abolished (Rm 3:31), but that it is ‘interpreted’ in the right way as ‘the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus’ (Rm 8:2).

In the process of this interpretation, as Koch (1986:346-347) points out, Paul feels quite free to change the text of Scripture quite drastically. He is justified in doing so, because he understands the texts as speaking to the present readers, in their eschatological context; he is not concerned about the message for the original readers in their original context. Furthermore, since Christ is the image of God, in whom God has revealed his saving action, the Scriptures have to be understood and ‘corrected’ in the light of this full revelation.

While all Christians agreed that Scripture had to be understood in the light of
Christ, in practice there were, of course, different positions. Matthew, for instance, is more appreciative of the old than Paul or Mark:

While Mark 2:22 simply stresses that new wine is incompatible with old wine skins and must be poured into new skins, Matt 9:17 adds with broad-minded inclusiveness that, if this is done, then both types of skins will be preserved. That is his theological programme: to preserve both the new and the old, from the proper hermeneutical perspective of the new (Brown & Meier 1983:59-60).

5 EXEGESIS AS A FORM OF DIVINATION AND CHARISMATIC EXEGESIS

5.1 Scripture as a message concealed in a hidden code
In the Book of Daniel the word ‘pesher’ is used for the interpretation of dreams (ch 2), for the interpretation of the mysterious writing on the wall (ch 5), and for the interpretation of the night visions (ch 7). The same word is also used in the Qumran literature for the interpretation of Scripture.

God’s messages are concealed in codes, whether visions, dreams or scriptures. There is need of a wise interpreter to understand the mysteries (Collins 1977:78).

For instance, the ‘seventy years’ of Jeremiah 25:9-12 are interpreted in Daniel 9:24 as ‘seventy weeks of years.’ The Scriptures are seen here in a new way, as similar to the other means through which God reveals his mysteries: dreams, astrological constellations, visions, omens, et cetera. The interpretation of the Scriptures was seen as a kind of divination. As Fishbane (1985:517) puts it:

It is no longer an oral prophecy given immediately to a prophet by YHWH, with clear contemporary relevance. It is now a written prophecy read by a wise man and interpreted by an angelic intermediary, with relevance for a historical moment centuries later. A living divine word originally destined for public knowledge has been transformed into a coded message whose secret meaning is revealed to a special adept....

A text from Josephus, BJ iii,351-54, shows clearly how he is thinking of exegesis in terms of divination:

(Josephus) skilled in divining the meaning of ambiguous utterances of the Deity; ...he was not ignorant of the prophecies in the sacred books. At that hour he was inspired to read their meaning...

It is interesting to point out that, for the Essenes, the work of interpretation required several sorts of purification rites (Jos BJ 2,159). Daniel 9 mentions
prayer, fasting, confession of sins; in response Gabriel comes to give wisdom and understanding (verse 22). Daniel’s prayer of thanksgiving (Dn 2:20-23) makes it clear that the understanding was seen as God’s gift. This is also true for the Qumran literature: 1QpHab 7:4; 1QH 1:21; 1QH 12:11-13 (Collins 1977:78-79).

Collins (1977:74-87) attributes this new approach to the Scriptures and this particular understanding of revelation to the influence of Babylonian mantic wisdom, an influence which pervaded the Hellenistic world. More particularly, according to Hengel, the development of the wisdom tradition and the emphasis on revealed wisdom should be understood in its historical setting as a means to defend Israel’s tradition against the competition of Hellenistic influence. From the second century BC onwards, as a reaction against the rationalism and scepticism of Hellenistic culture, we can notice a widespread interest in the irrational and the mysterious as these are revealed in the writings of the wise men from the East, ‘from whom answers were sought to questions of life which remained inaccessible to rational thought’ (Hengel 1974, 1:212).

5.2 Charismatic exegesis

A closely related perspective on the mysterious dimension of Scripture is what has been called charismatic exegesis. According to Aune (1983:339) the term was apparently first used by H L Ginsberg to describe the kind of interpretation used in the Qumran commentary on Habakkuk. The three essential features of charismatic exegesis are that ‘it is a commentary, it is eschatological, and it is inspired’ (Aune 1983:339). Aune is particularly interested in the question whether charismatic exegesis was really one of the major tasks of early Christian prophets, a view defended by a number of NT scholars, particularly E. E. Ellis. Aune (1983:345) concludes that there is ‘virtually no evidence’ for this, but he agrees that charismatic exegesis was ‘widely practiced.’

It may be useful to look briefly at the three characteristics of charismatic exegesis.

5.2.1 Inspired

Even in cases where Scripture is not specifically viewed as a coded message to be interpreted like a dream or an omen, there is the conviction that the words of God have such wonderful depth that it is only through God’s gift that we can come to a fuller understanding. Fishbane (1985:539-542) draws our attention to Psalm 119:18: ‘Open my eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law.’ ‘Wondrous things’ are those that are beyond our understanding (compare Job 42:3; Pr 30:18). While Deuteronomy 29:29 and Sirach 3:20-22 warn against the search for such wondrous knowledge (‘speculations which involved apocalyptic experiences,’ according to Fishbane 1985:542), Psalm 119:18 prays
for a full knowledge of God's commandment, which is 'exceedingly broad' (verse 96).

In the New Testament too, insight into the things of God, including the Scriptures, is seen as gift from God, often through the Spirit.

The Spirit was thought to provide supernatural insight into spiritual matters generally (1 Cor. 2:6-16; 1 John 2:21,27) as well as into the true meaning of the words of Jesus (Jn 2:22; 12:16; 14:26; 16:12-15) and the OT (Luke 24:45; 2 Cor 3:14-18) (Aune 1983:342).

According to 1 Corinthians 2:9-10, only the Spirit of God can reveal to us the depths of God, and by these are meant not some remote esoteric knowledge, but knowledge of God's plan of salvation (= the gifts bestowed on us by God: verse 12). The same applies to the gifts of the 'spirit of wisdom and of revelation of the knowledge...' in Ephesians 1:17-23.

5.2.2 Commentary

Aune (1983:339-340) points to a number of contrasts between prophecy and charismatic exegesis. The third one deserves some special attention:

The product of charismatic exegesis (whether oral or written) stands in a secondary, dependent relationship to the inspired text from which it arises, whereas prophetic speech (whether oral or written) possesses an intrinsic authority. The inspired text, in spite of the activity of the charismatic exegete, remains the primary locus of divine revelation; it is never replaced or rivaled by the ‘inspired’ commentary (Aune 1983:340).

This last statement raises a number of issues. The basic issue seems to be whether charismatic exegesis gives the true meaning of the inspired text, or whether it corrects the inspired text. Our spontaneous understanding of ‘commentary’ is that it explains the true meaning. Therefore, by calling charismatic exegesis a commentary a bias has been introduced in favour of the first alternative. In fact, some writings are clearly in the form of a commentary (e.g. 1QpHab), but there are other writings which are in fact new editions of passages of Scripture, like the Qumran Temple Scroll, which re-writes Numbers 28-29 and Deuteronomy 12-23. While the various Jewish groups would consider their exegesis as the true meaning of the text, we nevertheless have to admit that what they are actually doing is to give a new meaning to the text. In giving new meaning to the text, they did not hesitate to change the words of the text. For instance, in Ephesians 4:8, Psalm 68:8 is quoted in a slightly altered form and is then interpreted.

Furthermore, the writings which were seen as revealed interpretations of
Scripture were probably considered as superior to Scripture. This seems to be the case in 4 Ezra 14:45-47. Beckwith (1985:363-364) admits this for 4 Ezra, but he tries to prove that this was an exception in the Jewish literature and that 'the pseudepigrapha seem to be kept distinct from the canonical books not by way of pre-eminence but by way of subordination' (1985:364). There is reason to believe that the Qumran community and the circles in which the Apocalypses originated, like the early Christians, believed their writings to be at least equal to Scripture and even the norm for the interpretation of Scripture.

In any case, it should be clear that 'commenting' on the text was not seen as 'sticking to the text' but as using the text to go beyond it. In this sense, Qumran and Christianity showed a deep awareness of the incompleteness, or openness, of Scripture. This will become clearer and sharper in our next point.

5.2.3 Eschatological

While rabbinical midrashim actualised or contemporised Scripture, but not within an eschatological framework, Qumran and the early Church were convinced that they were living 'in the last days.' This affected their understanding of Scripture, because the eschatological condition involved a new revelation.

1QpHab 7 points to the limitations of revelation in the prophets and the full revelation through the Teacher of Righteousness:

...and God told Habakkuk to write down that which would happen to the final generation, but he did not make known to him when time would come to an end...this concerns the Teacher of Righteousness, to whom God made known all the mysteries of the words of his servants the prophets.

The commentary on Habakkuk 2:3a continues:

Interpreted this means that the final age shall be prolonged and shall exceed all that the prophets have said; for the mysteries of God are astounding.

For the Christian community Jesus was seen as the final revelation, as the embodiment of Wisdom. All previous revelations had to be interpreted in the light of Jesus and the Gospel. As in the Qumran community, the eschatological 'now' is the full revelation, which at first sight appears to overshadow and abolish the Scriptures. This can be seen in a number of primarily Pauline and deuto-Pauline passages, which use the so-called 'revelation schema': the mystery hidden for ages has now been revealed. The main texts are: 1 Cor 2:7-10; Rm 16:25-26; Col 1:26-27; Eph 3:5, 9-10; 2 Tm 1:9-10; Tt 1:2-3; 1 Pt 1:20. These texts, except possibly for Rm 16:26, do not attribute any positive role to the Old Testament Scriptures. In this schema the relationship between the Old Testament and the New is understood in terms of the opposites 'hidden-
revealed.’ Of course, this is not the only way of seeing the Scriptures. In other passages the Scriptures are re-interpreted and associated with the proclamation of the Gospel. This is conceived in various ways: for example although the prophets had to proclaim messages which were not fully clear to them (1 Pt 1:10-12), nevertheless they were rendering a service to those to whom the Gospel is now being proclaimed (1 Pt 1:12); they are said to ‘announce beforehand’ (Rm 1:2), to ‘witness’ (Rm 3:21); their words are ‘fulfilled’ in the Christ event and in the teaching of Jesus (especially in Matthew).

6 CONCLUSION

Judaism in its various forms had a very deep respect for Scripture as God’s Word. However, understanding the meaning of God’s Word was not a matter of establishing the original, historical meaning of the text. What they were interested in was the ‘contemporised,’ existential meaning of the text. It was not a matter of going back to the origins, but of letting Scripture become part of the present life of the readers.

Furthermore, Scripture was not seen as the complete revelation of God’s Word by itself. For Christians it was completed when read in the light of the Christ event; for Qumran when read in the light of their eschatological revelations. The same is true for Rabbinical Judaism; Scripture was read together with the oral Torah, and the work of discovering the will of God remained an open-ended task.

On the other hand, the fact that Scripture was seen as the embodiment of God’s Wisdom gave it a depth which cannot be fully grasped. Even when rabbinical Judaism considered the letters of Scripture to be fixed, these letters could be read in any possible way to let that transcendent Wisdom of God come through. For Christians, that transcendent Wisdom of God was fully revealed in Christ and it was only by letting Christ shine through the letters that they grasped the full meaning of Scripture.

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