

Reading other people's readings of Scripture

John F. A. Sawyer

FOR MOST OF THE LAST FIFTEEN HUNDRED YEARS OR SO, Judaism and Christianity have developed independently, and Jews and Christians have read their Scriptures in separate worlds, largely ignorant of each other's interests and interpretations. Jews for the most part worked in isolation from the rest of western culture, using the original Hebrew and Aramaic text, and had no interest in Christian interpretations of Scripture whatsoever, which they regarded, often quite rightly, as erroneous. Meanwhile Christian theologians and preachers worked in state-sponsored Christian institutions, using the ancient versions, especially Greek and Latin, and other influential translations like King James' Authorized Version and Luther's Bible, and rarely consulted the original Hebrew. There were exceptions of course, but they were mostly at the level of scholars and professors whose work had little influence on ordinary believers.

The fact that in modern times large numbers of Christians and non-Jews now learn Hebrew and study the Hebrew Bible, from seminarians and divinity students to people interested in ancient Near Eastern history, archaeology, Semitic languages and the like, has also had very little effect on the situation. Christians studying the Hebrew Bible (or rather their Old Testament in Hebrew) seldom come anywhere near an appreciation of Jewish beliefs and practices. In fact Judaism is just about as far removed from the Hebrew Bible as Christianity is. You learn very little about Judaism from reading the Hebrew Bible, because the Hebrew Bible or 'Written Torah' cannot be read apart from the 'Oral Torah', that is to say, the Jewish tradition recorded in the rabbinic literature known as Talmud and Midrash.¹ Jewish students, as well as non-Jewish students of Judaism, read Talmud and Midrash more than the Hebrew Bible. Jews have Talmudical colleges rather than Bible colleges. Jewish tradition is by no means the same thing as the Hebrew Bible, just as the history of Christian doctrine is hardly the same thing as a history of biblical interpretation. This further widens the gap between Jews and Christians reading their Scriptures.

read more at www.theway.org.uk

This century, however, has seen some major changes in the situation. The central event of our century, and not just in the history of Jewish-Christian relations, is the Holocaust. For many Jews and Christians, Auschwitz is as much a watershed in the history of their religion as Sinai or the crucifixion. The implications of this for our reading of the 'Binding of Isaac' (Genesis 22), the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 53), the Book of Job and other texts, still have to be fully explored, but they are likely to be profound. The establishment of the state of Israel has similarly had a profound effect on Jewish readings of Scripture. Modern Zionist uses of the Bible constitute a fertile area of contemporary biblical interpretation which will have to be taken into account as well. A third new factor in the situation, and one which will increasingly influence Christian reading of Scripture, is the dramatic change in the official attitude of the churches toward the Jews in the second half of the twentieth century. Catholics, since the Second Vatican Council, for example, are now officially instructed to abandon their traditional negative, supersessionist beliefs about Judaism, and to seek to appreciate Jewish tradition and its relationship to Christianity in a new way. So as we approach the third millennium, the time is ripe for a reappraisal of the relationship between Jewish and Christian readings of Scripture.

The Hebrew Bible is not the same as the Old Testament

Before we begin to discuss questions about reading and interpretation, we must first define what we mean by 'the Scriptures', and in particular dispose of the widespread misconception that the Hebrew Bible of the Jews and the Christians' Old Testament are one and the same. The Hebrew Bible is not the same thing as the 'Old Testament', and if you underestimate the differences between them, you get a distorted view of both. It has become quite common in universities, colleges and elsewhere to avoid the word 'Old Testament' and call it the 'Hebrew Bible' instead, as if they were the same book.² This is because the term 'Old Testament' can be and often is used in a derogatory and offensive way. 'Old Testament ethics' often means pre-Christian (i.e. primitive or inferior), for example, and the 'God of the Old Testament' is thought of as a bloodthirsty warrior God of justice and vengeance, irrespective of the fact that there are far more texts about God as mother in the 'Old Testament' than in the 'New'.³ But that must not blind us to the differences.

First of all, the *contents* of the two books are different: most of the world's Christians have Tobit, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Wisdom,

Ecclesiasticus and other 'apocryphal texts' in their Old Testaments, books which are not in the Hebrew Bible. Indeed some of these texts, like the Book of Wisdom, were originally written in Greek and could never have been in a Hebrew Bible. The Protestant Bible has the same contents as the Hebrew Bible because one of the reforms of Martin Luther was to remove, as non-canonical or apocryphal, those books that are not in the Hebrew Bible. But the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches still retain these books, while the Coptic and Ethiopian Churches have still more books in their Bibles, including the Book of Enoch and Jubilees, thereby distancing themselves still further from the Jewish tradition.

Second, the *literary structure* of the two books is completely different: the Hebrew Bible starts with the Torah ('the Law') and the Prophets, and ends with the Writings, an arrangement obviously designed to place the Torah in a position of special honour and authority at one end and to indicate a line of descending authority to the Writings at the other end. This arrangement incidentally gives Jewish Scripture its Hebrew name, *Tanakh*, derived from the initials of its three parts: Torah, Nebi'im ('Prophets') and Ketubim ('Writings'). The Christian canon reverses this direction, beginning with Genesis, in the dim and distant past, and progressing through the timeless Wisdom literature and the poetry of the Psalms, towards the Prophets who point with increasing urgency and specificity towards the fulfilment in the Gospels to which they are attached. Another significant difference in the arrangement of the books is that, for Jews, Daniel is among the 'Writings' near the end of the Bible, while in the Christian tradition he is one of the Prophets.

The *language* of the two books is also different. The *Tanakh* is in Hebrew; but who has ever seen an Old Testament in Hebrew? Parts of it maybe, and in a different order, but I don't believe a complete Old Testament in Hebrew exists anywhere. Some of the modern translations of the New Testament into Hebrew have been appended to the *Tanakh* in one volume, but that is not the same thing. It is a curious hybrid, neither one thing nor the other. The oldest complete manuscripts of the Old Testament are in Greek, and date from the fourth and fifth centuries. The oldest complete manuscripts of the *Tanakh* are medieval and are in Hebrew. There are some modern Jewish translations of the *Tanakh*, such as the Soncino commentaries and the Jewish Publication Society versions. But the Bible is still read in Hebrew in the synagogue, and the Hebrew original is always more central to Jewish interpretations than it ever could be in a Christian context.

Finally, if the contents, structure and language of the two books are so different, I hardly need spend time on the totally different *context* in which the two books are read. The one is read in the context of rabbinic, medieval and modern Jewish exegetical tradition; the other, bound in the same volume as the New Testament, is read in the quite separate context of patristic, medieval and modern Christian exegetical tradition. When a Jewish reader of the Bible wants to know what a particular word or phrase in the Bible means, he often starts with the question, ‘What does Rashi say?’ Rashi (an abbreviation for Rabbi Shlomo ben Itzhaq) (1040–1105) is the most widely used Jewish commentator on Scripture. A native of Troyes in north-east France, he wrote massive commentaries on the whole of the *Tanakh* as well as the Talmud, and most printed editions of both have for centuries been accompanied by Rashi’s commentary.⁴ The particular strength of his commentaries is that they include, in convenient verse by verse format, references to material otherwise hard to locate in the rabbinic literature: this means that, in consulting Rashi, you are at the same time looking up what the Talmud and Midrash say. In the Jewish context, that is what matters most, not what the original author intended, and of course not what St Jerome or Martin Luther or Gerhard von Rad says it means.

So great are the differences that I am not going to try to find ‘common ground’ between us. That can too often lead to distortion and oversimplification. Of course Jews and Christians are both monotheists, but Jewish monotheism is not the same as Christian monotheism. Jews and Christians both believe in the Messiah, but Jewish Messianism is very different from Christian Messianism. Instead I would like to try to illustrate some of the distinctive insights of Jewish interpretation by reference to three well-known and representative examples, in the hope that Christians reading the same text may find new things there they had not noticed before. Christians reading Jewish interpretations, and more are doing this now than ever before, often learn something about the Scriptures and their own faith, as well as about Jews and Judaism.⁵ My three examples concern three fundamental aspects of Judaism – creation, suffering and Messianism; and each illustrates one aspect of the distinctive dynamic of Jewish interpretation – language, storytelling and a sense of history. There is of course much more to be said about Jewish ways of reading the Scriptures. I have left out the whole of Jewish ethical tradition, for instance. *Halakhah* has been neglected in favour of *Aggadah*.⁶ But it is to be hoped that the examples selected here will be representative enough to give readers an authentic taste

(Hebrew *ta'am*) of the subject and encourage them to delve more deeply into the world of Jewish exegetical literature.

Jewish uses of language: 'In the beginning' (Genesis 1—3)

Since ancient times the language of Scripture has been referred to as 'the sacred language'. Hebrew is the language of the angels, so that prayers in any other language were ineffective. Adam and Eve spoke Hebrew. The words of the Torah were dictated by God to Moses in Hebrew.⁷ The original language of Scripture has always been far more central to Jewish interpretation than it ever was in Christianity, even when it was no longer the everyday language of the Jews. Still today in most synagogues, the weekly Scripture readings are in Hebrew, and a large part of religious education is taken up with Hebrew language teaching. It was a father's duty, according to the rabbis, to teach his son 'the sacred language' as soon as he could speak.

The significance of this for our understanding of Jewish methods of exegesis cannot be overestimated. The first words in the Book of Genesis, for example, in Hebrew do not necessarily mean 'In the beginning God created . . .': they can also mean 'In the beginning of God's creation . . .'.⁸ Before God said 'Let there be light!', before the first act of divine creation, in other words, the formless earth, the deep, the darkness and the waters were already there, and the rabbis then had to face the philosophical problem of who created chaos, if it was not God.⁹ This is not a picture of creation from nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*), but a more complex picture in which God transforms chaos into order, darkness into light, in the same way that he created Israel, not out of nothing, but out of slavery (Isai 43:1, 7). In the Jewish lectionary, each reading from the Torah is accompanied by a reading from the Prophets known as a Haftorah, and in this case the Haftorah is Isaiah 42:5—43:10, which superbly establishes this connection between the 'creation of heaven and earth' and the 'creation' of the people of God. Elsewhere God creates a new heart out of guilt and despair (Ps 51) and a New Jerusalem out of sin and destruction (Isai 65:18). 'Creation' in Jewish tradition is thus defined more by reference to God's continuing intervention on behalf of his people than by philosophical speculation about the origin of the universe or the problem of evil.

The original language of the Adam and Eve story similarly influences the way it is understood by Jewish interpreters.¹⁰ In Hebrew the word *adam* means either Adam, a proper name like Eve, Cain and Abel, or 'human creature', male or female. In Genesis 1:27 'God creates the *adam* . . . male and female', and in the next chapter

'he forms the *adam* out of the dust of the ground' (2:7). Not until verse 22 is the body of the *adam* divided into a man and a woman.¹¹ There is nothing in the text to prove that only the man was created in the image of God, or that man was created before woman as some Christian theologians have claimed (1 Tim 2:13). The word *elohim* is similarly ambiguous in Hebrew: it usually means 'God' or 'gods', but it can also mean 'divine beings' or 'angels'. Being created 'in the image of God' (1:26) might then be better explained by reference to Genesis 3:22 ('like one of us') and Psalm 8 ('a little less than angels'), texts that are manifestly less theological than rhetorical or poetic. Incidentally the linguistic skill and enthusiasm of Jewish interpreters was applied to the ancient Greek version of Scripture as well as the Hebrew: the four letters of the Greek form of 'Adam' were interpreted as the initials of the four points of the Greek compass, thus symbolizing the unity of all humankind.¹²

The Jews as story-tellers: 'The binding of Isaac' (Genesis 22)

The *Akedah* or 'the binding of Isaac' is one of the most often read stories in all of Jewish literature. The extraordinary challenge to Abraham's faith, the sacrifice of Isaac and the divine intervention at the moment of crisis, have been interpreted and reinterpreted against the background of suffering and persecution, right down to the present post-Holocaust era. No wonder that, in line with traditional Jewish exegetical method, every detail of the short biblical narrative has been pondered on, every gap in the story filled in, every possible allusion explored, every clue to the responses of the protagonists meticulously examined. Here are a few examples. First, why did Abraham, a wealthy man with servants, saddle his own ass (v 3)? Rashi explains that this was because love disregards the normal rules of social conduct: this was to be no ordinary expedition but one in which a man's love for his son, his only son (vv 2, 12), was to be in conflict with his love of God. Why is the sentence 'and they went both of them together' repeated twice (vv 6 and 8)? The repetition suggests that Isaac, even though still a boy, was of one mind with his father, willing to die for his faith. His mother was involved too. According to Jewish (and some Christian) traditions, Sarah died of grief when news reached her that her son was dead: for why else is her death described immediately after the *Akedah* (Gen 23:2)?¹³

But the most striking suggestion deduced from the gaps in the biblical story concerns what happened to Isaac after the ram appeared. Isaac is not mentioned again in the narrative until chapter 24: why is

this? The rabbis used this curious feature of the story as proof that Isaac was not only prepared to die, but actually did die and so became a prototype for Jewish martyrdom.¹⁴ References to ‘the blood of Isaac’ and ‘the ashes of Isaac’ become more frequent in Jewish literature as the persecution of the Jews increased. The fact that the event took place ‘on the third day’ (v 4) provided scriptural evidence for the additional belief that Isaac rose from the dead (cf Hos 6:2; Jon 1:17), and was taken by God to paradise. Christological interpretations of the story of the ‘Sacrifice of Isaac’ (for instance, Isaac carrying the wood prefigures Christ carrying the cross) go some way towards this reading of the story too, but it was the Jews who, in times of persecution, developed it most elaborately and poignantly. A poem by Ephraim of Bonn (1132–1200), written under the shadow of the Second and Third Crusades when many of Germany’s Jews were massacred, is one of the most powerful and explicit examples, in which Abraham ‘slaughtered him with steady hands as prescribed by law’.¹⁵ The well-known twentieth-century reading of the story by Wilfred Owen (1893–1918) was similarly prompted by the carnage of the First World War:

the old man would not so, but slew his son
and half the sons of Europe one by one.¹⁶

History and the Jews: ‘Swords into ploughshares’ (Micah 4:3)

We have seen how history and interpretation are inextricably interwoven in Jewish tradition. Whatever the origin of the *Akedah* story, the faith of Isaac confronting death and the dreadful dilemma of his father are not just pieces of ancient history: they are real issues in which centuries of readers have seen their own experience reflected. The Bible is not just an ancient Near Eastern text like the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh or the Egyptian Book of the Dead: it is a living text, addressed as much to contemporary readers, like Ephraim of Bonn and Wilfred Owen, as to its original readership or audience. An essential part of Jewish exegetical method involves relating it to present-day experience, applying it to the situation in which its readers find themselves, looking for connections between then and now. Nowhere is this more true than in the case of the Messianic hope, the hope for a better world in the future, a world characterized by justice and peace. There is no shortage of scriptural texts about the Messianic age and we end with a look at some of these as Jewish interpreters read them.

Once again we must start by distinguishing clearly between Christian Messianism and Jewish Messianism. For Christians major Messianic texts are Isaiah 7:14 ('Behold, a virgin shall conceive . . .') and Isaiah 53 ('wounded for our transgressions . . .'), while for Jews such texts are of marginal interest. The Hebrew of Isaiah 7:14 actually has 'young woman', not 'virgin', so that the miraculous element is missing, and the context is otherwise not particularly interesting. Similarly Isaiah 53 is not part of the Jewish lectionary and has had little influence on Jewish Messianic tradition. Yet despite these obvious differences of approach, Christian writers down the ages have judged Judaism on their 'erroneous' interpretation of such passages, or their 'stubborn blindness' to the evidence they provide. A graphic example of the almost total lack of communication between the two sides is the public debate between a Dominican friar and a Jewish rabbi that took place in Barcelona in 1263. The Christian, Friar Pablo Christiani, a converted Jew incidentally, argued on the basis of such texts as Isaiah 7:14 and Isaiah 53 that the Messiah had come in the person of Jesus Christ and had suffered and died for the salvation of the human race. The Jew, Rabbi Moses ben Nahman (or Nahmanides), had no difficulty in rejecting the traditional christological interpretations of the passages quoted by Pablo, and based his Messianism instead on the plain meaning of such texts as Micah 4:3 where it is defined in terms of global peace: 'Yet from the days of Jesus until now, the whole world has been full of violence and plundering and the Christians are greater spillers of blood than all the rest . . . and how hard it would be for you, my lord king, and for your knights if they were not to learn war any more!'¹⁷

Jews in many periods of their history have looked in vain for signs that the Messianic age has arrived. There have been many false Messiahs: Shabbetai Tzevi (1626–1675) is one of the best known and most tragic examples.¹⁸ Some of the mystical hasidic sects founded in eighteenth-century Europe have believed from time to time that their leader or Rebbe was the Messiah. Of these, the Brooklyn-based Lubavitchers are probably today's best known and most enthusiastic manifestation, easily accessible on the internet. Last century liberal German Jews believed that the Messianic age had dawned in the new-found freedom and prosperity that followed emancipation, while others, especially the victims of persecution in Europe, have found signs of Messianic hope in the Zionist movement founded in 1897, the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 and especially in the 'miraculous' Six Day War in June 1967.¹⁹ Significant Jewish readings

of Scripture include Israeli place-names like Mevasseret Tzion: 'O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion' (Isai 40:9), Petah Tikvah: 'door of hope' (Hos 2:15 [Heb 2:17]) and Peduyim: 'ransomed' (Isai 35:10), as well as numerous inscriptions on public monuments like the 'swords into ploughshares' text from Micah 4:3 on a 'Monument of Peace' set up in Jerusalem after the Six Day War.²⁰

Reading other people's readings of Scripture

As one who has devoted most of his professional life to trying to interpret the Bible, especially the Hebrew Bible, I have come to the conclusion that one of the most important parts of our job, and one of the most neglected till very recently, is to take seriously what other people have made of it. I am not thinking only of other professional biblical scholars, historians, archaeologists, linguists, commentary-writers and the like. Nor do I want to limit myself to the great religious writers like Augustine, Aquinas and Luther. The Bible has been read and interpreted and used in all kinds of other contexts as well: in art, music, politics, the media, literature and film. It is obvious that what people believe the text means is sometimes more important than what it originally meant or what was in the original author's mind – even if that were accessible to us today.

There are signs that I am not alone in concluding that this aspect of the subject, known as the reception-history or *Wirkungsgeschichte*, 'the impact history' of the Bible, is important. There have been many publications in recent years devoted to it,²¹ and now Blackwells of Oxford are to publish a series of biblical commentaries uniquely devoted to the reception-history of every book of the Bible.²² But perhaps nowhere will this change of emphasis be more significant than in relation to Jewish and Christian readings of Scripture down the centuries. How the Jewish interpreters have handled a text may be quite different from our more familiar Christian traditions; but they frequently tell us something worth listening to about the meaning of the text, as well as something even more worth listening to about the Jews and Judaism. I believe that reading other people's readings of Scripture, with the same sensitivity and critical expertise as anything else we read, is going to become a major component of biblical studies in the future, and one that cannot fail to make a positive contribution to Jewish-Christian relations at every level.

John F. A. Sawyer was for many years Head of Religious Studies at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, and is now Professor of Biblical and Jewish Studies at Lancaster University. He is the author of many scholarly books and articles including *Prophecy and the biblical prophets* (1993), *The fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the history of Christianity* (1996) and *Sacred languages and sacred texts* (1999).

NOTES

- 1 L. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, one-volume edition (Philadelphia, 1975).
- 2 See R. Murray's article in *The Month* (December 1998), pp 468–474.
- 3 Cf J. F. A. Sawyer, 'Combating prejudices about the Jews and Judaism', *Theology* 94 (1991), pp 269–278.
- 4 See Chaim Pearl, *Rashi*, Jewish Thinkers Series (London, 1988).
- 5 E.g. G. Larsson, *Bound for freedom: the Book of Exodus in Jewish and Christian traditions* (Peabody, MA, 1999).
- 6 R. Loewe, 'Jewish exegesis' in *Dictionary of biblical interpretation*, ed R. J. Coggins and J. L. Houlden (London, 1990), pp 346–347.
- 7 M. Weitzman, 'Judaism' in *Encyclopedia of language and linguistics* (Oxford, 1994), vol 4, pp 1827–1831.
- 8 Cf the *New Revised Standard Version* (Oxford, 1991).
- 9 J. H. Hertz (ed), *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs* (Soncino, 1929–36), p 1.
- 10 Cf J. Magonet, *A rabbi's Bible* (London, 1991), pp 111–122.
- 11 Ginzberg, *Legends*, p 35.
- 12 Sibylline Oracles 3:24–26; 2 Enoch 30:13; cf J. F. A. Sawyer, *Sacred languages and sacred texts* (London, 1999), p 163.
- 13 Ginzberg, *Legends*, pp 128–136.
- 14 See Shalom Spiegel's fascinating study, *The last trial: on the legends and lore of the command to Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice: the Akedah* (New York, 1979).
- 15 English translation in T. Carmi, *Penguin book of Hebrew verse* (London, 1981), pp 379–384.
- 16 *The collected poems of Wilfred Owen*, ed C. D. Lewis (New York, 1964), p 42.
- 17 H. Maccoby, *Judaism on trial: Jewish-Christian disputations in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1982), pp 113–121.
- 18 G. Scholem, *The Messianic idea in Judaism* (New York, 1971), pp 78–141.
- 19 A. Hertzberg, *The Zionist idea: a historical analysis and reader* (New York, 1959); N. Glazer, 'The year 1967 and its meaning' in *American Judaism* (Philadelphia, 1972), pp. 169–176.
- 20 J. F. A. Sawyer, *The fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the history of Christianity* (Cambridge, 1996), pp 103–106.
- 21 E.g. W. Beuken, S. Freyne and A. Weiler (eds), *The Bible and its readers* (London, 1991); D. L. Jeffrey (ed), *A dictionary of biblical tradition in English literature* (Grand Rapids, 1992); J. H. Hayes (ed), *Dictionary of biblical interpretation*, 2 volumes (Nashville, 1999).
- 22 J. F. A. Sawyer, C. C. Rowland and J. L. Kovacs (eds), *Blackwell Bible commentaries* (Oxford, 2001–).