PROJECT MUSE®

Biblical Interpretation in Judaism and Christianity (review)

Matthias Henze

Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies, Volume 28,
Number 3, Spring 2010, pp. 159-161 (Article)

Published by Purdue University Press

DOI: 10.1353/sho.0.0470

➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/sho/summary/v028/28.3.henze.html>

Book Reviews

Biblical Interpretation in Judaism and Christianity, edited by Isaac Kalimi and Peter J. Haas. New York and London: T&T Clark, 2006. 265 pp. \$156.00.

One of the more exciting developments in recent decades in the field of biblical studies has been the turn away from a fixation on the prehistory of the sacred text to the study of its reception. This new interest in the history of scriptural interpretation is promising for a number of reasons. It has the potential of overcoming the (often artificial) divide between the scholarly community and the communities of faith, and it rallies together scholars from a variety of backgrounds and academic disciplines—secular and faithful, Jewish and Christian, of the modern and the pre-modern periods—around a common topic. The present volume, which brings together some of the leading scholars in their respective fields, is a most welcome addition to the rapidly growing number of publications on the history of biblical exegesis, as it reaches these objectives formidably.

The book comprises sixteen articles. Of these most (we are not told which) were originally presented at a conference at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, in May 2004, organized in honor of the publication of Isaac Kalimi's book *Early Jewish Exegesis and Theological Controversy* (Assen, 2002).

Following an introductory essay by Isaac Kalimi, the articles are organized in three parts. Part one, with seven essays the longest section in the book, deals with classical and medieval Jewish biblical interpretation. Part Two, consisting of three articles, deals with the intersection of Judaism and Christianity in biblical interpretation. And Part Three, with six articles, turns to modern Jewish biblical studies.

The three sections of the book differ markedly from one another. The focus of a conference volume of this sort will necessarily be on case studies, the study of individual texts and their interpretations, rather than on broader, sys-

tematic overviews. This is particularly true for the first group of articles, with articles on the pre-modern Jewish history of reading of Gen 4:8, and of Gen 35:22, and an essay on the shape of the Menorah. Two articles in particular are interesting. In Isaac Kalimi's article "Targumic and Midrashic Exegesis in Contradiction to the *Peshat* of Biblical Text," the reader is treated to a wealth of cases in which the Rabbis deliberately part from the plain meaning of the biblical text in order to arrive at a certain interpretation. The other article that stands out, both for the breadth of the (otherwise little known) materials the author adduces from diverse Jewish Psalms commentaries and for its insightful conclusions, is Alan Cooper's "On the Typology of Jewish Psalms Interpretation." Cooper argues that there are three different types of Davidic personae in these intriguing commentaries: the king of yore, the longed-for Messiah, and the Everyman of the present.

The second group of essays, on biblical interpretation in Judaism and Christianity, is the weakest part of the book, not because, despite the book's title, Christian interpretation plays only a very minor role, but because the enormous complexities of the primary Christian texts here discussed from the New Testament are not sufficiently acknowledged or reflected in the notes. Larry Schiffman's article on biblical exegesis in the passion narratives and the Dead Sea Scrolls, and Harold Ellens's contribution on the Son of Man in the Gospel of John and other Jewish texts go over much familiar territory but break relatively little new ground. John Townsend in his article on Christianity in Rabbinic literature offers the interesting argument that unambiguous references to Jesus and Christianity in Jewish literature seem to have emerged outside the Christian Roman Empire and before that empire became Christian, whereas later references to Christian theology and scriptural interpretation in the midrashim are considerably more covert.

The third section of the book, finally, on modern Jewish biblical studies, is the most rewarding to read. Especially fascinating are the first two essays. The opening article is by Alan Levenson, "The Rise of Modern Jewish Bible Studies: Preliminary Reflections." Levenson argues that when we speak of "Jewish readings of the Bible," we are talking about the construction of certain tendencies in biblical discourse that are generally recognized as Jewish (pp. 166–67). He mentions four facets of this "Jewish" approach: its polemical, pro-Jewish nature; its frequent recourse to rabbinic traditions; its celebration of the multiple meanings contained in a particular biblical text; and the priority it gives to "R," the biblical redactor(s). The second article by Frederick Greenspahn is titled, "Why Jews Translate the Bible." Greenspahn begins by making the obvious point that in Judaism, it is the Hebrew form of the Bible that is to be preserved, studied, and used for worship. But then Greenspahn continues to

note that, throughout its history, the Jewish tradition has not only tolerated translations, “but on occasion accorded them a degree of authority approaching that of the Hebrew” (p. 181). He lists several intriguing examples, spanning two millennia, and concludes, in a nice twist, with a brief midrash from *Pesikta Rabbati* that asserts “Jewishness” not through ownership of the Bible, but through the uniqueness of the Mishnah (p. 195).

The colorful bouquet of specific Jewish readings, together with the hermeneutical reflections on the Jewishness of Jewish readings of the Bible, collected in this volume make it a delightful read.

Matthias Henze
Rice University

Judas: A Biography, by Susan Gubar. New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2009. 453 pp., 8 color plates and 39 b&w illustrations. \$27.95.

Throughout Christian history, Judas poses a theological conundrum; although he betrays Jesus, without his betrayal there is no death, which means there is no salvation. At the same time, this very act of betrayal turns Judas into the condemned scapegoat. As a consequence, Judas becomes the flashpoint for Christian antisemitism throughout history. It is this latter role that Gubar devotes much of her attention in her overview of textual and visual portrayals of Judas through the centuries.

The introductory chapter sets the tone of the book and outlines the procedure to follow. Drawing upon the metaphor of biography, Gubar wants to show the historical development of this enigmatic figure from his childhood in biblical times, “his fiendish adolescence during antiquity and the premodern period, his erotic coming of age during the Renaissance, his heroic maturation in modernity, his death as well as his astonishing resurrection during the course of the twentieth century, and his venerable afterlife into the twenty-first” (p. 5). Each of these periods is taken up in detail in subsequent chapters. The first two chapters examine the scant evidence for details of the life of the historical person whose role was so significant in the handing over of Jesus—or not! As Gubar rightly points out, the earliest snippets of information seem not to put Judas in the picture, and his “betrayal” develops into something increasingly sinister as one looks at the historical progression of the canonical Gospel narratives. Outside of these so-called orthodox texts Judas’ role remains shrouded in ambiguity.

The next five chapters are collected together under the heading “Evolving Incarnations.” Chapter 3 gives attention to the oral and anal fixations in the