



Moshe J. Bernstein

Reading and Re-reading Scripture at Qumran

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Reviewing a set of collected essays presents a number of challenges. Since the material in the volume (or volumes, in this case) do not constitute a single developed argument, it is difficult to communicate the full academic agenda of the project, as many different arguments are made. Moreover, a collection of essays, reproduced more or less in the form in which they were originally published, prepared for a variety of different contexts, naturally tends toward a certain repetitiveness. Necessary groundwork has to be laid for each originally independent essay. That being said, a collection of essays is also an excellent way to get to know the intellectual preoccupations and the mindset of an author, as well as his or her place in the ecology of scholarship, as one sees again and again how an author sets up an intellectual problem and addresses it.

So it is with this substantial collection of thirty essays covering some thirty-three years by the prominent scholar of Qumran literature, Moshe Bernstein. As far as scope and focus is concerned, Bernstein characterizes the central focus of these essays as “touching upon a variety of the ways that Scripture ... was read, interpreted, and employed at Qumran” (1:xii). More specifically, the first volume focuses on the book of Genesis and the ways in which it engendered interpretation in a variety of documents found at Qumran. The second volume is more disparate. It contains three essays that provide an overview of biblical interpretation of the Qumran scrolls, but the major concern of these essays is on

the interpretation of biblical law in the Dead Sea Scrolls. After surveying the contents, I will return to the themes that run through both volumes.

The first three essays in volume 1, “Pentateuchal Interpretation at Qumran,” “‘Rewritten Bible’: A Generic Category Which Has Outlived Its Usefulness?” and “Contours of Genesis Interpretation at Qumran: Contents, Context, and Nomenclature,” provide an overview and classification of the types of texts from Qumran that can be said to engage in scriptural interpretation. One of Bernstein’s concerns is to carefully differentiate the different types of texts represented, their different organizing principles, and their approaches to interpretation. The essay on the category “rewritten Bible” is particularly important for his analysis of the ways in which Geza Vermes’s definition of rewritten Bible as a genre was later unhelpfully extended and reinterpreted by other scholars to describe a “process” rather than a genre or otherwise used with vagueness to refer to a hodgepodge of texts. Building on work by Michael Segal, Bernstein rehabilitates a disciplined usage of the term “rewritten Bible” close to the way Vermes originally defined it. Scholarship would do well to follow Bernstein’s lead using this term as he suggests. A related concern, which is introduced in “Contours of Genesis Interpretation” but which recurs in several essays, is Bernstein’s demonstration that inappropriate or misleading titles given to a number of works has skewed their interpretation in unhelpful ways. While it may not be possible to retitle many of these works, scholars should guard against the hermeneutical biases that the titles encourage.

Three essays (chs. 4–6) are devoted to the difficult and contested 4Q252 (Commentary on Genesis A): “4Q252: From Re-written Bible to Biblical Commentary,” “4Q252 I 2 לא ידור לעולם רוחי באדם לעולם: Biblical Text or Biblical Interpretation?” and “4Q252: Method and Context, Genre and Sources (A Response to George J. Brooke, ‘The Thematic Content of 4Q252’).” Bernstein makes a strong case that 4Q252 should be understood as a “simple sense” commentary, that is, one that attempts to resolve conundrums in the text. Moreover, it may well not be a simply authored work but be composed by excerpting material from other documents.

Chapters 7–12 focus on the Genesis Apocryphon. These chapters explore how the Genesis Apocryphon relates (or does not) to the biblical text (ch. 7, “From the Watchers to the Flood: Story and Exegesis in the Early Columns of the Genesis Apocryphon”), the techniques of rewriting employed (ch. 8, “Rearrangement, Anticipation and Harmonization as Exegetical Features in the Genesis Apocryphon,”), and in chapter 9, “Divine Titles and Epithets and the Sources of the Genesis Apocryphon,” how the distribution of these terms not only indicates different sources but suggests affinities between cols. 0–17 and 1 Enoch and between cols. 19–22 and Jubilees. In light of the differences between the two sections of the Genesis Apocryphon, chapter 11 (“Is the

Genesis Apocryphon a Unity?") notes certain formal and thematic unifiers and aptly suggests that readers who were not intently comparing the text with Genesis would likely experience it as a reasonably coherent and unified composition. Chapter 10, "The Genre(s) of the Genesis Apocryphon," concludes that the Genesis Apocryphon is best described as "multi-generic," though it is never made quite clear what is at stake in the designation of a genre or genres. Later discussions of the issue of genre in other essays are more nuanced. In chapter 12, "The Genesis Apocryphon and the Aramaic Targumim," Bernstein denies that Aramaic biblical citations implies the existence of Aramaic targumim but suggests that some of the techniques of Aramaic "rewritten Bible" compositions may have influenced the development of targumic approaches to interpretation.

The final three essays demonstrate how exegetical motifs and freely composed traditions appear in a variety of texts. Chapter 13, "Three Notes on 4Q464," shows connections between exegetical details in that text and rabbinic sources. Similarly, chapter 15, "Angels at the Aqedah: A Study in the Development of a Midrashic Motif," makes the case for an interpretive tradition attested in rabbinic sources that may have its origins in a tradition already present in Jubilees and Pseudo-Jubilees. The most significant of these final essays is chapter 14, "Noah and the Flood at Qumran," which carefully surveys the wide variety of materials referring to these subjects, concluding that there is no evidence for a single "Book of Noah" but more likely a number of shorter compositions on different aspects of Noah and his life.

The second volume of the collection is more disparate, and I will treat it more briefly. This volume is bookended by two essays that survey the impact of the Qumran scrolls on our understanding of biblical interpretation (ch. 16, "The Contribution of the Qumran Discoveries to the History of Early Biblical Interpretation"; ch. 17, "The Dead Sea Scrolls and Jewish Biblical Interpretation in Antiquity: A Multi-generic Perspective") and one that surveys the history and projects an agenda for studying biblical interpretation in the scrolls, including the need to reform the nomenclature of the documents, the analysis of their genres, and methodologically up-to-date commentaries (ch. 30, "Biblical Interpretation in the Dead Sea Scrolls: Looking Back and Looking Ahead"). The other broad essay, chapter 18, "Pseudepigraphy in the Qumran Scrolls: Categories and Functions," distinguishes between those texts in which the pseudepigraphical attribution is an essential part of the work's authority claim, those anonymous works in which pseudepigraphic voices speak in the first person, and compositions whose titles but not their content associates them with a figure of antiquity.

The essays on a variety of legal texts are introduced with an excellent study, chapter 19, "The Interpretation of Biblical Law in the Dead Sea scrolls: Forms and Methods" (co-

authored with S. A. Koyfman), which provides helpful categories for analyzing different ways in which interpretation is generated and presented. Although the evidence is too limited for substantial conclusions, the treatment of laws in 4QReworked Pentateuch and 4Q159 are the subjects of the following chapters (ch. 20, “What Has Happened to the Laws? The Treatment of Legal Material in 4QReworked Pentateuch”; ch. 21, “The Representation of ‘Biblical’ Legal Material at Qumran: Three Cases from 4Q159 [4QOrdinances^a]”). Two further essays on 4Q159 raise cautions about forcing texts into generic categories that they do not fit, even if they show some similarities to, in this instance, peshar exegesis (ch. 22, “4Q159: Nomenclature, Text, Exegesis, Genre;” ch. 23, “4Q159 Fragment 5 and the ‘Desert Theology’ of the Qumran Sect”). An early essay on 4QMMT (ch. 24, “The Employment and Interpretation of scripture in 4QMMT: Preliminary Observations”) leads one to hope that Bernstein will return to this text in future work.

Two essays focus on the difficult interpretation of Deut 21:22–23 in the Temple Scroll and other texts and traditions (ch. 25, “Midrash Halakhah at Qumran? 11Q Temple 64:6–13 and Deuteronomy 21:22–23” and chapter 26, “כי קללת אלהים תלוי (Deut. 21:23): A Study in Early Jewish Exegesis”), demonstrating once again Bernstein’s concern for precision in using categories such as “midrash halakhah” and for documenting complexity in interpretive traditions and avoiding facile conclusions. Bernstein’s survey in chapter 27, “Women and Children in Legal and Liturgical Texts from Qumran,” is now complemented by the in-depth study of Cecilia Wassen, *Women in the Damascus Document* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005). Chapter 28, “Introductory Formulas for Citation and Re-citation of Biblical Verses in the Qumran Pesharim: Observations on a Peshar Technique,” makes the case for a more nuanced categorization of pesharim than a simple division between continuous and thematic. Chapter 29, “‘Walking in the Festivals of the Gentiles’: 4QpHosea^a 2:15–17 and *Jubilees* 6:34–38,” not only demonstrates connections between these texts but also provides another indication of disputes about the calendar at Qumran.

While I have attempted to give some sense of the particular arguments of Bernstein’s work, the themes that run through these essays have less to do with particular conclusions about the texts than they do about how to conduct scholarship on the scrolls itself. As one reads through these more than seven hundred pages of essays, one is repeatedly brought back to the virtues of first categorizing and analyzing the data. In a characteristic phrase Bernstein introduces his work in one essay by saying, “it will prove valuable first to categorize the kinds of texts in which...” (2:615). Again and again one reads an essay, whether about recently published material or material that has been in the scholarly arena for some time, in which Bernstein brings the reader back to the necessity of first sorting the data and developing basic analytical categories. That may seem like a simple thing, but

in the rush by scholars to advance interpretive theses this stage of fundamental scholarly analysis is too often overlooked.

But there is much more to Bernstein's approach than just patient and careful categorization. He is also a subtle hermeneutical critic who points out repeatedly how the generic labeling and entitling of documents influences (often inappropriately) their interpretation. Indeed, one of the leitmotifs of Bernstein's work is his concern for the issue of genre. Since the articles are not presented in strict chronological order, it is difficult to trace his developing understanding of genre and its significance in interpreting Qumran texts. In "The Genre(s) of the *Genesis Apocryphon*," the discussion suffers from a lack of self-conscious reflection on what "genre" is and does and what is at stake in the use of genre as a critical category. But in "The *Genesis Apocryphon* and the Aramaic *Targumim*," he makes the very nuanced observation that "the assignments of generic rubrics is intimately tied up with the goals of our study in any particular case; and second, and perhaps more paradoxical, we may be able to assign the same works productively to different genres without violating literary and academic canons" (1:284). Where Bernstein is, throughout the essays, a strong critic of a "pigeonhole" theory of genres, here he comes close to the pragmatic theory of genre in which genre is less a feature of cultural competency of an author in antiquity who knows how to compose "that sort" of text and more a feature of scholarly analysis in which modern readers sort texts in ways that are productive but which might not be the same as an ancient understanding of types of texts. Nevertheless, one senses that Bernstein also values a generic analysis that reconstructs the ancient generic repertoire. Indeed, if there were one further essay I would have liked to have seen in this collection, it would have been one in which Bernstein addressed the issues of genre more comprehensively.

Equally important, in terms of an overview of Bernstein's intellectual stance in these essays, one would need to note his attention to sorting out what he calls in one essay "forms and methods" of biblical interpretation. As he describes it in "The Interpretation of Biblical Law in the Dead Sea Scrolls," "by *form*, we mean the way the interpretation is articulated; by *method*, we mean the way the interpretation is arrived at" (2:452). Although Bernstein makes this distinction explicit in this essay, this insight characterizes his careful and insightful analysis in many of his contributions. As he observes, the same form may be the vehicle for more than one different method of interpretation. Similarly, a single method of interpretation may make its appearance in more than one form. Here again, one sees his concern for careful sorting and analysis of data, so that heuristic categories do not become reified and distort what the data actually signifies.

Finally, as important as are Bernstein's articulations of various particular intellectual virtues is his modeling of the cardinal intellectual virtue: modesty. Frequently Bernstein

will confess that he has “more questions than answers” or that he “does not know” what to make of a particular text. It is so refreshing to see someone situate his highly erudite analysis of a text not as the final word but as an invitation to further conversation. Intellectually, Bernstein does not like the “full stop.” He prefers the comma or the colon or the semicolon—marks that invite another comment that will take the conversation further as he suggests what needs to be done next.

Along with praise of his intellectual virtues, it is necessary also to identify the implicit limitation of the intellectual style that is Bernstein’s forte. As I finished more than 700 pages of meticulously disciplined reiterations of careful sorting, analyzing, and exegetical probing of texts, I found myself yearning for a big, grand thesis, much as one on a prolonged spa diet yearns for a large cheeseburger. But this is not to identify some flaw in Bernstein’s work. Instead, this is a simple observation about what he does and what he chooses not to do. It directs one back to the ecology of scholarship. Bernstein critiques premature syntheses, because he sees them as not only bypassing the needed detailed analysis of data but as actively suppressing it. But as one works through Bernstein’s own careful analyses of particular texts, one has the sense that he himself has laid the groundwork for better synthetic treatments. Syntheses need not be postponed forever, and Bernstein’s work has gone a long way toward readying the field for new interpretive syntheses that will stand up to critique better than some of the earlier ones. We are all much in his debt for over thirty years of scholarship of the highest order.