

SAME STORIES, DIFFERENT BIBLES

THE BIBLE, in the singular, does not exist; different communities have different Bibles. We don't mean that they prefer different translations but that they have Bibles comprised of different books, in different orders, in different languages. The biggest difference is between the Jewish and Christian communities, for only Christians have a New Testament. In fact, only Christians have an "Old Testament," which itself differs among the various Christian communities. Jews have the Tanakh, and although the Old Testament and Tanakh share books, the communities interpret the shared verses differently. The Old Testament and the Tanakh are not, today for Christians and Jews, self-standing books. Christians read their Old Testament through the lens of the New Testament, and Jews read the Tanakh through the lens of postbiblical Jewish commentaries.

These differences raise major interpretive questions. For example, who is the Bible's main character? Is it God? Is it Jesus? Does it lack a main character? What is its main point, or is there one? Does the "original" meaning of a passage, apart from Christian or later Jewish interpretation, still have anything to say to us?

Different interpretive communities answer these questions differently—and that is what this book is about. What does it mean to read, and interpret, sections of the Bible with and without Jesus? What is gained, or lost? We are not advocating for one correct way

of reading, but we hope, first, that our book will help all readers to see how and why the Bible is such a contested work. Second, we hope that people with different interpretations—with and without Jesus—will talk to each other and understand each other better. The goal of biblical studies should not be to convert each other or to polemize. Conversion is a matter of the heart, not of the academy; polemics function more to “speak to the choir” and shore up internal unity rather than to facilitate understanding, let alone to show love of neighbor. Biblical studies, as we understand it, can rather help us better to understand each other, and to move forward in appreciating the Bible’s power and importance.

As the early followers of Jesus, reflecting on the proclamation of his resurrection, turned to books such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Psalms more fully to understand their risen Lord, they found throughout the ancient sources new meaning. Instead of asking what the texts meant in their original contexts, they asked what the texts meant to them, in their own lives centuries later. Jews throughout the ages have done the same. They looked to their ancient scriptures to understand practices such as honoring the Sabbath and aiding the poor, as well as postbiblical events such as the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by Rome in 70 CE and later their persecution by Christians. In this turn to scripture, Jews and Christians also fought like family members over the disposition of their parents’ legacy. Each claimed the scriptures for themselves, and in doing so they read the texts not only as sources of comfort and inspiration but also as sites of contention and polemic. This book seeks to foster a different future, where Jews and Christians come to understand each other’s positions and beliefs, and at the minimum, respectfully agree to disagree.

This is no easy task. It involves appreciating what biblical texts meant in their earliest contexts¹ and then explaining how over the centuries different communities with different concerns devel-

oped different interpretations. It also means understanding how these ancient scriptures became weaponized—on papyrus, parchment, vellum, paper, and now online—in the war over the “rights” to their meaning. This war continues today, when a Christian tells a Jew, “You obviously don’t understand your Bible because, if you did, you would see how it predicts the Messiah Jesus,” and when a Jew responds, “Not only do you Christians see things in the text that are not there, you mistranslate and you yank verses out of context.” Neither position is helpful, since neither appreciates how and why Jews and Christians understand their own texts. When read through Christian lenses, what the church calls the “Old Testament” points to Jesus. When read through Jewish lenses, what the synagogue calls the “Tanakh” speaks to Jewish experience, without Jesus. When read through the eyes of historians, these original texts yield meanings often lost to both church and synagogue. Even the terms “Old Testament” and “Tanakh” create problems, as we’ll see below.

In this book we focus on texts from ancient Israel that are central in the New Testament. We cannot be comprehensive, for the New Testament either cites directly or alludes to this antecedent scripture from the first verses of Matthew’s Gospel to the last verses of John’s Revelation. Therefore, we chose texts and ideas most people would know, such as God’s speech in Genesis 1:26, “Let us make human-kind in our image, according to our likeness”; the meaning of Isaiah 7:14, “A virgin shall conceive” or “a young woman is pregnant”; and the centrality of blood for atonement.

Each of our ten central chapters, Chapters 3–12, attends to a particular text or theme and has the same structure. In most cases beginning with a New Testament citation, we then backtrack to examine that citation in its original context. We do our best to determine when and why that original text was written as well as how to translate the Hebrew words (often a problem). Next we see what the verses meant

in Jewish sources earlier to and contemporaneous with the New Testament, such as the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew texts) and the Dead Sea Scrolls (scrolls and fragments of biblical and nonbiblical texts, dating from the fourth or third century BCE to the second century CE, found near the Dead Sea). Here we show both how the New Testament draws from Jewish reflections and where it offers distinct readings. The next step is to look at later selected Jewish texts, some of which engage those New Testament readings, and not usually sympathetically. In some cases, we look at how the text was interpreted in early Christian, post–New Testament tradition. We conclude each chapter by seeing what Jews, Christians, and indeed all readers might learn today from those ancient verses. We cover a broad chronological sweep, from the early first millennium BCE, to the first century CE, to the twenty-first century.²

We roughly follow the canonical order of the Bible, but to do this precisely is impossible, since the order of books in the Old Testament differs from that of the Tanakh, and we do not want to privilege either:

CHRISTIAN AND JEWISH BIBLES

THE IMPRECISE TERM “Bible” derives from the Greek *ta biblia*, “the books,” and it suggests that a particular collection of books has priority. There is no such thing as “*the Bible*”; different religious communities have different Bibles.³ The Samaritan community has only the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, as its Bible; it lacks works such as Jeremiah and Psalms. Extending scripture, the Orthodox Tewahedo canon used predominantly in Eritrea and Ethiopia includes 1 Enoch and Jubilees and 1, 2, and 3 Megabyan (which are not, contrary to the sounding of the name, related to 1, 2, and 3 Maccabees, which are found in other Christian canons); additional books have canonical status as well. Other Christian movements, such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (commonly called “Mormons”) and Christian Science, regard denominationally specific works as also authoritative. It should be obvious that the Jewish Bible does not include a New Testament—and thus reflects a Bible “without Jesus”—although we have often been surprised by our students’ unawareness of this fact. Then again, Messianic Jews do include the *brit chadashah*—which is how one would say “the New Testament” in Hebrew—as part of their canon.

Nor is the Old Testament the same for all Christians. The Roman Catholic, Anglican, Eastern Orthodox, and Assyrian Churches include books written by Jews before New Testament times but

preserved in Greek, such as Sirach or Judith, as part of their Old Testament. These books are typically called the “Apocrypha” by Protestants or, for those communions that hold them as having the status of scripture, “deuterocanonical” or part of the “second canon.”

Part two of the Christian Bible is “the New Testament.” The word “testament” is a synonym for “covenant” and the term “New Testament” used for the second part of the Christian canon is first attested by the North African church father Tertullian (ca. 155–ca. 240). The expression refers to Jeremiah 31:31: “The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.” We return to Jeremiah 31, which the New Testament frequently either cites or evokes, in our concluding chapter.

The terms “New Testament” and “Old Testament” are theologically loaded. In this book, we use “New Testament” in a technical sense to refer to the twenty-seven books from Matthew to Revelation that all Christian churches eventually recognized as canonical.⁴

It is more difficult to know what to call scripture’s first section. The early rabbis used the Hebrew terms *mikra*, “that which is written,” or *ktivvei hakodesh*, “the holy writings,”⁵ but these terms are no longer broadly employed. “Old Testament,” first attested in the late second century CE by the church father Melito of Sardis,⁶ makes sense only within a Christian context. One needs a “New Testament” in order to have an “Old Testament.” Making the expression “Old Testament” even more problematic is a verse from the New Testament, Hebrews 8:13, which says, “In speaking of ‘a new covenant’ [the Greek can be translated as “new testament”] he [Jesus] has made the first one obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear.” In fact, in the early second century, a fellow named Marcion declared that this first testament should be rejected, along with the God it proclaimed. The nascent Christian Church declared Marcion a heretic—yet the rhetoric of the “Old Testament God of wrath” ver-

sus the “New Testament God of love,” frequently heard in churches even today, repeats Marcion’s heresy and is a misreading of both testaments.

The term “Hebrew Bible,” coined by modern biblical scholars seeking a more religiously neutral term than “Old Testament,” is inaccurate, since part of this text is in Aramaic, not Hebrew. “Jewish Bible” is problematic for a different reason: it strips this work from the Christian canon.

Some scholars, in the effort to avoid the problem of connecting the term “old” with something outdated or decrepit, speak of the “First Testament.”⁷ This good-faith effort has its own problems, as Jews don’t have a “first Testament” but an “only Testament.” Worse, if the earlier material is the “First Testament,” then the New Testament becomes the “Second Testament,” and there is nothing positive about “second,” as second hand, second place, and second rate all suggest.

To refer to the Jewish Bible, we use the medieval term “Tanakh,” an acronym of Torah (Hebrew “instruction”; the first five books, also known as the Pentateuch), Nevi’im (Hebrew “prophets”), and Ketuvim (Hebrew “writings”), the term Jews typically use, and the title for the New Jewish Publication Society translation.⁸ “Tanakh” refers to the Jewish Bible in its medieval form, as codified by scholars called the Masoretes, and therefore it is also called the Masoretic Text (MT); these scholars added written vowel points, cantillation marks, and other signs to the consonantal text.⁹ When we refer to more or less the same work within a Christian context, we use the term “Old Testament.” When we are talking about the books of this corpus, in their original historical setting, we will use, for convenience, both “Hebrew Bible” and “scriptures of Israel.”

We say “more or less” because the Christian Old Testament is not identical to the Jewish Tanakh. This is true even within Protestantism, which lacks the Apocrypha. Unlike the three-part division of

the Jewish canon, the Christian Old Testament has four sections: Pentateuch, Histories, Poetry and Wisdom, and Prophecy. The last book in the Old Testament is Malachi, and the end of Malachi predicts the return of the prophet Elijah and the coming of the messianic age. Thus, the Christian canon emphasizes prophecy in the Old Testament and fulfillment of that prophecy in the New Testament. By putting the prophets (Nevi'im) in the middle of the canon, the Jewish scriptures appear in comparison to de-emphasize prophecy, although that was not likely the original intent of the canonizers. At least according to some New Testament texts, the canon of the Jews followed the order that became the Tanakh. In Matthew 23:35, following his excoriation of a Jewish movement called the Pharisees, Jesus states, "so that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of the righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar." This verse is a sweep of biblical history, from Abel in Genesis 4 (the Pharisees were hardly present at the time) to 2 Chronicles 24:20–22, which mentions this death of Zechariah, although identifying him as the son of Jehoiada. Similarly, Luke 24:44–45 reports that the resurrected Jesus told his disciples, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms [likely a reference to the third part of the canon, beginning with Psalms] must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures." We see here both the continuity and the change: the canonical order remains the same, but for Luke's Gospel only Jesus can provide its correct interpretation.

Although the order of Ketuvim, the Writings, never fully stabilized, most editions end with 2 Chronicles, which concludes with Cyrus of Persia encouraging Jews exiled in Babylonia to return to Israel. The final words of the Tanakh are, "Whoever is among you

of all his people, may the LORD his God be with him! Let him go up" (2 Chr 36:23). This ending signals not the coming of the messiah but the centrality of the land of Israel. A few early Jewish canonical collections, such as the famous Aleppo Codex, end with the book of Ezra-Nehemiah. This text concludes, "Remember me, O my God, for good." Perhaps coincidentally, the Hebrew word for "God," *'elohim*, and the Hebrew word for "good," *tov*, echo the first chapter of Genesis, where *'elohim* saw that everything was very good.

The problem of nomenclature is even more complex when we look to scripture in the first century CE, the time of Jesus. Terms like "canon" and "Bible" typically indicate a fixed set of books. During the first century, however, Jews and the followers of Jesus, both Jewish and gentile, had no such canon. To speak of the Tanakh in the time of Jesus would be anachronistic—there was no agreed-upon, three-part Bible to which all Jews then subscribed.¹⁰ Beyond the Torah or Pentateuch, the first five books in all traditions, the order and selection of the books that communities held sacred differed; nor was the text of the various books yet uniform. For this reason, we use the amorphous term "scriptures of Israel" to refer to the writings that were central to Jews during the time of Jesus.¹¹

The books comprising this collection were written mostly in Hebrew, with several chapters of some books in Aramaic, a Semitic language also used by many Jews of the sixth and following centuries BCE. But many Jews living outside the land of Israel, such as in Alexandria in Egypt, knew neither Hebrew nor Aramaic: they spoke Greek. Thus, beginning in the third century BCE, they translated the Torah and then other books into Greek. The initial translation is called the Septuagint (from the Latin *Septuaginta*, meaning "seventy"), based on the legend that seventy (or seventy-two) Jewish scholars prepared the translation. The text is abbreviated as LXX, the Roman numeral for 70.¹²

A legend, initially preserved in a circa 250 BCE Greek text called the *Letter of Aristaeas* and known to the rabbis (b. Megillah 9a–b), describes the translation of the Torah (not the entire Tanakh) into Greek. In the account, the high priest sent seventy-two scribes from Jerusalem to Egypt to create the Greek translation, and this legend came to sanction the Septuagint for Greek-speaking Jews. Today, “Septuagint” is frequently used to refer to the Greek translation of all the books of the Hebrew Bible as well as the books in the Old Testament Apocrypha or deuterocanonical literature.

The Septuagint encouraged Jews to maintain their identity in the Greek-speaking world. Rather than a prompt for assimilation, it had the opposite effect: it allowed Jews to proclaim and promote their own traditions. The Babylonian Talmud (a collection of Jewish law and lore compiled beginning in the sixth century in Babylonia, present-day Iraq) recognizes the legitimacy of at least some Greek translations (b. Megillah 9a). Eventually, synagogues determined that the Masoretic Text be a unifying factor of all Jewish communities, just as the (Arabic) Qur’an is for the Islamic world. For a time, the Latin translation united the Roman Catholic Church, as the Greek does for Greek Orthodoxy. For Protestants, for whom there is no one recognized translation, unity is more difficult to achieve. What is sacred to one Christian denomination may be consigned to the flames by another.

As evangelists for Jesus began to speak to Jews in the diaspora, the areas outside of Israel, as well as to gentiles, Greek was the preferred language. Thus, the New Testament frequently cites some version of, or versions of, the Septuagint.¹³ It is from the Greek translation that we get, for example, Isaiah’s prediction of a virginal conception.

As the old Italian proverb goes, all translators are traitors. Words always have connotations, and when they move from one language to another, those connotations often change. Because the New

Testament writers primarily used the Greek translation of Israel’s scriptures, some Hebrew nuances are erased or replaced. From the familiar “Beatitudes” of the equally familiar “Sermon on the Mount” (Matt 5–7), Jesus states, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Matt 5:5). This is a partial quotation from the Greek translation of Psalm 37:11. However, whereas the Greek (Ps 36:11 LXX) speaks of inheriting the earth (Greek *gē*, as in geology), the Hebrew speaks of inheriting the land (Hebrew *’eretz*), which to its initial hearers would have meant the land of Israel, not all the earth.

Eastern-rite churches, such as the Greek Orthodox Church, to this day regard the Septuagint, rather than the Hebrew Bible, as canonical. Eventually, Greek-speaking Jewish communities produced new Greek translations that were closer to the Hebrew in order to combat Christian claims. Later, the Jewish people decided that for liturgical purposes their sacred texts would remain in the original Hebrew (or Aramaic). Conversely, Christian churches use various vernacular translations in worship.

ON INTERPRETATION

BECAUSE 2 Timothy 3:16 states that “all scripture [the reference Testament” at the time 2 Timothy was written] is inspired by God [or “God-breathed],” the idea developed in Christian circles that all biblical passages are replete with meaning. More, the corollary was that because the text is inspired, it cannot have contradictions: it is “inerrant,” containing no error or faults. Jews traditionally have taken the same approach: scripture is divine; it contains revelation.

If we begin with this premise of inerrancy, we will spend ages attempting to harmonize inharmonious texts written by different authors at different times. Genesis 1:1–2:4a (the “a” refers to the first half of the verse) and Genesis 2:4b to the end of the garden of Eden story are different versions of creation, as we see in Chapters 3 and 4. So too, the Gospels give four different versions of the life of Jesus, with major distinctions. Either Jesus died on the first day of the Passover holiday (so Matthew, Mark, and Luke, called the “Synoptic Gospels” because they “see together” or share the same basic plot) or he died the day before, when the Passover lambs were being slaughtered in the Temple (so John’s Gospel). Either Joseph’s father was named Jacob, like the original Jacob, father of Joseph (he of the *Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*) in Genesis, who also dreamed dreams and took his family

to Egypt (so Matthew); or Joseph’s father was named Heli (so Luke).

In our view, the biblical story is a marvelous tapestry created by many weavers of tales over many centuries, each with a different understanding of history, of the relationship of God to the covenant community, and of how people in that community should believe and act. We celebrate the various perspectives rather than try to harmonize them. Similarly, we celebrate the different Jewish and Christian interpretations rather than try to reconcile them. As mainstream biblical scholars, we respect both views in our work of interpretation, and we recognize that interpretation of texts is a complicated process.

For example, many words have multiple meanings. The English word “port” may refer to a type of fortified wine or to a harbor, and thus the sentence “the sailors enjoyed the port” is ambiguous.¹⁴ Equally ambiguous is the sentence “Roberta likes horses more than Mark,” but its ambiguity is syntactic instead of lexical: perhaps Roberta likes horses more than she likes Mark, or perhaps she has a greater liking for horses than Mark does. In most cases, context resolves such ambiguities; however, as we shall see with the biblical texts, the context is often unknown, and different historical contexts yield different interpretations. For example, depending on when it was written, the Tower of Babel story in Genesis 11:1–9 may reflect the hope that Babylon will soon fall, or it may be a story mocking that empire after the Persians conquered it. The words stay the same, but the frame affects what the story means.

Our favorite example of taking a text out of context comes from Ben Witherington’s essay on hermeneutics. The term “hermeneutics” comes from the Greek god Hermes, the go-between deity of Olympus and earth and therefore the interpreter of the gods’ pronouncements. Hermeneutics today is the art of interpretation. Witherington writes:

I had a phone call over twenty years ago from a parishoner from one of my four N.C. Methodist Churches in the middle of the state. He wanted to know if it was o.k. to breed dogs, 'cause his fellow carpenter had told him that it said somewhere in the KJV [the King James Version] that God's people shouldn't do that. I told him I would look up all the references to dog in the Bible and get to the bottom of this. There was nothing of any relevance in the NT [New Testament], but then I came across this peculiar translation of an OT [Old Testament] verse—"Thou shalt not breed with the dogs." I called my church member up and told him, "I've got good news and bad news for you." He asked for the good news first. I said, "Well you can breed as many of those furry four-footed creatures as you like, nothing in the Bible against it." He then asked what the bad news was. "Well," I said, "there is this verse that calls foreign women 'dogs' and warns the Israelites not to breed with them." There was a pregnant silence on the other end of the line, and finally Mr. Smith said, "Well, I am feeling much relieved, my wife Betty Sue is from just down the road in Chatham county!"¹⁵

Actually, the "dogs" probably refers to prostitutes, not foreign women; the King James Version does not, in the printed versions we could find, refer to breeding; and the Torah tends to prohibit cross-breeding as part of its concern for placing things in appropriate categories. But the example still holds.

Also complicating interpretation is our incomplete understanding of ancient Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek language and grammar. These issues affect translation of the Bible's first verse: One reading of the Hebrew is the NRSV's "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth"; the "when" connects this opening line to the following clause, "the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep." The NRSV translation suggests that God

created this world from a formless earth and water. However, the English Standard Version reads, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth," an absolute statement that suggests creation *ex nihilo*—creation from nothing. In addition, "heavens and earth" may refer to two specific bodies, or the phrase could be a merism, a literary device in which two opposites express the two poles and everything in-between—and thus "heavens and earth" may refer to God's creation of everything.

Features of ancient writing create even more ambiguity. Until the late first millennium CE, Hebrew writing contained only consonants; it had no vowels. If we were to imagine English written in this system, the word "red" would be written "rd." But "rd" could also indicate read, reed, road, raid, rid, rad, ride, rod, ready, or redo. Context will *almost* always clarify what word "rd" represents. A favorite exercise of Bible teachers is to ask students to read, in comprehensible English, the sentence GDSNWHR. Some take the optimistic "God is now here"; others opt for "God is nowhere."

For a biblical example, the first word of Isaiah 9:8 (9:7 Heb.) in Hebrew is *dvr*, which may be vocalized as *davar*, "a thing, word" or *daver*, "pestilence." The Masoretes vocalized it as *davar*, yielding the translation "The Lord sent a word against Jacob," while the Septuagint translators read *dvr* as "pestilence" and so translated it as *thamaton* (Greek for "death"). Both readings make sense in context. It is also possible that the Hebrew author was punning.

Ancient Hebrew and Greek texts also lacked punctuation marks. Psalm 116:15 could be rendered, "Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his faithful ones," or "Is the death of his faithful ones precious in the sight of the LORD?" Psalm 121:1 reads, "I lift up my eyes to the hills— / from where will my help come"; the context may suggest that the sentence is a question: "Will my help come from the hills?" and the answer is, "No, you're looking to the wrong

place.” Help will come from “the LORD, who made heaven and earth” (Ps 121:2). But numerous Christian hymns take the statement as a declarative and then see nature as revealing the divine presence.

Punctuation also matters in the New Testament. A centurion tells Jesus, “Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress” (Matt 8:6). Most translations then have Jesus state, “I will come and cure him.” However, given that in Matthew’s Gospel Jesus restricts his mission to Jews, the sentence could just as easily be taken as a question, “Shall I come and heal him?”

An example that illustrates the Jewish-Christian interpretive divide appears in how we punctuate Isaiah 40:3–4. As punctuated through the cantillation marks found in the Masoretic Text, Isaiah reads:

A voice cries out:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.”

In other words, God will build a road in the desert to facilitate the Jews’ return from Babylon.

The Gospel of Mark, however, opens as follows:

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;

the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’”

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (Mark 1:2–4)

The Hebrew text speaks of a voice telling the people to build a road: “A voice cries out”—colon, quotation mark—“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD.” The Gospel speaks of “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness”—colon, quotation mark—“Prepare the way of the Lord.” Here a dispute over punctuation is intertwined with a major theological issue. This example shows how even such small matters as commas are significant, as illustrated by the sentences “Let’s eat, Grandma” and “Let’s eat Grandma.”

The work of scribes, especially before the invention of the printing press, also contributed to interpretive problems. As ancient texts were repeatedly copied, different versions of the same text developed. For example, the Hebrew of Genesis 22:13, from the story of the binding and near sacrifice of Isaac, speaks of an *‘ayil ‘achar*, “a ram after,” which is difficult to understand—after what? The Greek reads, more logically, *krios heis*, “one ram.” The underlying Hebrew text would have been *‘ayil echad*. In Hebrew, the letters for “r” (ר) and “d” (ד) are visually similar and apt to get confused. In this case, the Greek probably reflects the original reading. It is therefore impossible to speak of the original text of the Tanakh, though many Jewish and some Protestant readers view the medieval Hebrew Masoretic Text as definitive. The same problems apply to the New Testament.¹⁶

When we look at ancient, or important, texts, interpretation becomes even more complex, and often contested. The Second Amendment to the US Constitution reads: “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.” But what rights are enshrined? Does the amendment refer to the individual or to the state? What types of weapons are regulated—handguns?

Kalashnikovs? Grenade launchers?¹⁷ And how should we decide? Are we restricted by the original intent of the framers, and if we are, how can we securely know this intent? Or do the words take on a meaning of their own, irrespective of their original intent? The latter position is sometimes called “pragmatism”; it claims that it is “both wise and appropriate to change constitutional norms to serve modern needs.”¹⁸ Pragmatism is this same process that allows students to find ever-new meaning in literary texts, whether those by Homer or by Hemingway. Because readers always bring their own experiences to the act of interpretation, they will always find new meanings in ancient texts. This we know from our own experiences: no matter how often we teach the biblical texts, our students every year find new interpretations.

INTERPRETING DIVINELY REVEALED TEXTS

INTERPRETING *biblical* texts adds another two layers of complexity. In some cases, religious communities have understood the Bible’s proper interpretation to be revealed by divine intermediaries such as angels or inspired teachers. Scholars call this “revelatory exegesis.”¹⁹ This type of interpretation is already found in the Bible, when the second-century BCE book of Daniel interprets the late seventh- and early sixth-century prophecies of Jeremiah. The book of Daniel, although containing earlier material, is in its final form a response to the outrages of the Syrian Greek king Antiochus IV Epiphanes, whose defeat is commemorated in the Jewish festival of Hanukkah. Antiochus forbade central Jewish practices, such as circumcision and Sabbath observance, and he and some highly assimilated Jewish priests converted the Jerusalem Temple into a temple for Zeus. For other Jews, these actions contravened Jeremiah’s prediction that the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar would conquer Judea (which he did in 586 BCE) and rule over the Judeans for seventy (Hebrew *shiv'im*) years (Jer 25:11). Then, Jeremiah predicted, there would be a grand restoration (Jer 29:10–14). Antiochus was not a grand restorer but a tyrant.

Enter the book of Daniel. (Like many biblical books, the book of

Daniel was not written by the sage to whom it is attributed.) When Daniel prays for guidance on this contradiction between ancient prophecy and current reality (Dan 9:2), the angel Gabriel (named angels, both Gabriel and Michael, appear in the Tanakh only in Daniel—one indication of the book's late date) explains that seventy years is not actually seventy years: "Seventy weeks [Hebrew *shavu'im shiv'im*] are decreed for your people and your holy city: to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place" (Dan 9:24). "Seventy weeks" of years means 70 times 7 (since a week has 7 days), or 490 years; thus Jeremiah's prophecy gets a 420-year extension, from 70 years to 490 years, and so it can still be fulfilled.

This extension is based on a manipulation of Jeremiah's words. The Hebrew word for seventy is *shiv'im*, and pronounced this way, it is not ambiguous. But as noted above, Hebrew during this period was written with only consonants, so this word was written *shiv'im*. The same consonants with different vowels yields *shavu'im*, "weeks." Gabriel reads the Hebrew consonants twice—once as *shavu'im* (weeks) and once as *shiv'im* (seventy), yielding his novel interpretation through which 70 equals 490, an interpretation that only an angel can reveal.

The idea that angelic figures know the true meaning of scripture is not unique to Daniel. Jubilees, a text probably written in the second century BCE and thus near the time of Daniel, offers a similar approach. Jubilees presents itself as the words of the Angel of the Presence²⁰ to Moses, and this angel offers an authoritative interpretation of the first two biblical books, Genesis and part of Exodus. The angel's words constitute a "Second Law" that "amplifies and clarifies the first."²¹ For example, Jubilees adds the creation of angels to Genesis 1–3:

For on the first day He created the heavens, which are above, and the earth, and the waters and all of the spirits which minister before Him:

the angels of the Presence,
and the angels of sanctification,
and the angels of the spirit of fire,
and the angels of the spirit of the winds,
and the angels of the spirit of the clouds and darkness and snow
and hail and frost,
and the angels of resoundings and thunder and lightning,
and the angels of the spirits of cold and heat and winter and
springtime and harvest and summer, and all of the spirits of
His creatures which are in heaven and on earth.

Jubilees presents itself as revealed by an angel and thus claims that angels were among the first things created.²² As we see in our discussion of the Epistle to the Hebrews (Chapter 5), the author ensures that Jesus is far superior to these angels, who were in early Jewish literature getting an upgrade.

The idea that later figures offer correct interpretation is also found in the Dead Sea Scrolls.²³ The Hebrew word *peshar* means "interpretation," and the pesher literature from Qumran asserts that ancient texts were actualized in the author's own time.²⁴ Pesher Habakkuk interprets the first two chapters of Habakkuk, one of the twelve minor (in the sense of short) prophets, as applicable to the author's situation. Interpreting the end of Habakkuk 2:2 the pesher reads, "When it says, 'so that with ease someone can read it,' this refers to the Teacher of Righteousness [likely the founder of the group] to whom God made known all the mysterious revelations of his servants the prophets" (column 7, lines 3–5). According to this passage, when Habakkuk uttered his prophecy in the late seventh century BCE, he did not understand its meaning; only the Teacher

of Righteousness, centuries later, did. The pesher takes biblical verses wildly out of context in order to make them relevant to later readers.²⁵

The New Testament makes similar moves when the followers of Jesus reinterpret ancient Jewish texts—turning them into the Bible “with Jesus.” For example, Matthew 12:40 states, “For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth.” Jonah the prophet (another book, like Daniel, ascribed to an ancient worthy) was not, several centuries earlier, thinking about Jesus’s burial. That was not a message his original readers would have taken either. We return to what Jesus calls “the sign of Jonah” in Chapter 10.

Another example that fits the category of revelatory interpretation appears in the famous Sermon on the Mount. Here Jesus uses the words “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times” to introduce his own interpretation of such sayings as “an eye for an eye” and “do not commit murder.” Rabbinic commentary provides its own interpretations of these passages, as we see in Chapter 6.

These examples from Daniel, Jubilees, Pesher Habakkuk, and Matthew introduce a concern fundamental to our study: what a text *meant* versus what a text *means*.²⁶ Many biblical scholars seek to reconstruct the earliest form of a text and determine what it meant in its original context—for example, finding (what is closest to) the words uttered by the prophet Ezekiel and understanding how the exiled Judean community in sixth-century BCE Babylonia understood his words.

Other biblical scholars are interested in reception history, in seeing how texts are understood over time.²⁷ Sometimes these interpretations seem strange to us, even ad hoc. But reception is not always a free-for-all, such that interpreters make a text say anything they want.

Even Daniel’s “creative philology”²⁸ in making 70 mean 490 follows a certain logic.

One scholar of Jewish biblical interpretation, James Kugel, outlines four principles of ancient Jewish exegesis that help explain Daniel’s interpretive moves as well as how early Jewish communities understood their scripture:²⁹

1. “The Bible is a fundamentally cryptic text.” Thus, texts need not mean what they obviously seem to mean.
2. “Scripture constitutes one great Book of Instruction, and as such is a fundamentally *relevant* text.” Even were a prophet speaking to his generation, he is not speaking only to his generation. Further, the text may, indeed must, be reinterpreted to remain relevant.
3. “Scripture is perfect and perfectly harmonious.” Consequently, texts that appear to be contradictory are not; it is the interpreter’s job to make them comport.
4. “All of Scripture is somehow divinely sanctioned, of divine provenance, or divinely inspired.” Therefore scriptural language is not quotidian, human language. When a friend says, “I will meet you in seventy minutes,” she expects you to be waiting in seventy minutes; but when God says through a prophet, “You will be restored in seventy years,” that could mean 490 years.

These four principles characterizing early Jewish biblical interpretation from the second century BCE to the first century CE and continuing in many later Jewish readings³⁰ also characterize the New Testament, though that collection has an additional assumption: the scriptures of Israel are concerned with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

JEWISH INTERPRETATIONS: TWO JEWS, THREE OPINIONS

AN OLD JEWISH joke proclaims, “two Jews, three opinions.” In more mundane terms, the joke correctly indicates that Jewish interpretation is multivocal rather than univocal. We can literally see this appreciation for various interpretations in the Rabbinic Bible, a Tanakh surrounded by commentaries that often disagree with each other yet all live together on the same page.³¹ This possibility is due to what Kugel has called the Bible’s “omnificance.”³² Every detail of the text is meaningful: even seemingly quotidian differences in spelling are divinely intended, and passages that seem insignificant must convey deeper meaning.

Classical rabbinic literature expresses this principle in several ways. The best-known expression is *shiv'im panim latorah*, Hebrew for “The Torah has seventy face(s) (of interpretation).”³³ The principle of omnificance is also found in the rabbinic explanation of Psalm 62:11 (62:12 Heb.), “One thing God has spoken; two things have I heard” (NJPS), which some rabbis interpret to mean, “One verse gives rise to several laws or meanings” (b. Sanhedrin 34a). The same talmudic passage interprets Jeremiah 23:29, “like a hammer that shatters rock” (NJPS), to mean, “Just as the hammer is divided into several sparks, so a single verse gives rise to several laws.”³⁴ Each of these rabbinic interpretations expresses the Bible’s omnificance.

Another central feature of Jewish biblical interpretation is that it has no single point or goal. As we will see, this approach contrasts sharply with Christian interpretation, which sees Jesus as a main theme of the Old Testament, even though he is never explicitly mentioned there.

Multiple views of a single text can also be found in Jewish translations. These ancient projects, whether Greek (most significantly the Septuagint) or the Aramaic targumim (singular: targum), were produced over several centuries and run the gamut from literal to expansive. For example, Targum Onkelos, a typically literal translation, renders Exodus 23:19 (cf. Exod 34:26; Deut 14:21) — “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk” — as “You shall not eat meat in milk,” which reflects the rabbinic understanding of this injunction. The takeaway here is that Jews who observe the dietary laws or “keep kosher” will not eat cheeseburgers. Some targumic renderings are even more expansive. The targum to the Song of Songs takes this originally highly erotic book as a historical allegory of the love between God and Israel; the song’s second verse, “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! / For your love is better than wine” (Song 1:2), is transformed into:

Solomon the prophet said: Blessed be the name of the Lord, who by the hands of Moses the great scribe has given to us the Torah written on two stone tablets and the Six Orders of the Mishnah and the Talmud by oral recitation. And He would speak with us face to face as a man who kisses his friend because of the great love wherewith He loves us, more than seventy nations.

This targum reflects the thinning of the line between translation and exegesis.

Jewish communities living under Hellenistic and Roman rule also produced biblical interpretations. These include not only the Dead

Sea Scrolls but also “pseudepigrapha.” A catchall term, “pseudepigrapha” takes its name from the Greek for “false writings,” since several of these texts are ascribed to ancient worthies—Moses, Ezra, even Adam and Enoch—but the texts were written much later, in the first few centuries BCE and CE—around and after the time of Daniel. Jewish in origin, most of these texts were preserved and edited by Christians. The great Alexandrian sage Philo (ca. 20 BCE–ca. 50 CE) often interprets biblical texts in an allegorical fashion that would typify later Christianity, while the Jewish historian Josephus (37–ca. 100 CE), in retelling biblical stories in his multivolume *Antiquities of the Jews*, paraphrases, embellishes, or interprets them. We’ll return to these writers throughout this book.

The earliest rabbinic texts are preserved from a later period, the third century CE, with the first being the Mishnah, a law-code of sorts compiled in the land of Israel. The Mishnah sometimes cites the Hebrew Bible and interprets it, as does the Tosefta, a slightly later, similar text. The Talmud is an extended commentary on the Mishnah, with many digressions. It takes two forms: the Talmud of the land of Israel, also imprecisely called the Jerusalem Talmud (the Yerushalmi), dates from about the fourth century CE; the longer and more important for later Jewish practice Babylonian Talmud (the Bavli) is from the sixth or seventh century. These rabbinic texts contain the first Jewish readings that directly counter Christian interpretations of the books both communities deem sacred.

The rabbinic period also saw the growth of midrash (plural: *midrashim*)—that is, elaborations on biblical passages. These commentaries, which do not exposit every biblical verse, often collect a variety of differing, even contradictory, explanations of the same word or phrase. Midrashim typically treat the text atomistically by focusing on single words rather than the broader story. Some even focus on a single letter. For example, the sixth-century midrash Genesis Rabbah

(1:10) speculates on why the Bible begins with the letter *bet*, the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which has this shape, ב:

Rabbi Yonah said in the name of Rabbi Levi: Why was the world created with a “bet”? Just as a bet is closed on all sides and open in the front, so you are not permitted to say, “What is beneath? What is above? What came before? What will come after?” Rather from the day the world was created and after.³⁵

The midrash looks to each detail, seen to be infused with meaning. At the same time, it forecloses questions about existence before creation. As we shall see in our discussion of Genesis 1 (Chapter 3), not all rabbis followed this idea. And as we shall also see in Chapter 3, John’s magnificent prologue, “In the beginning was the Word . . .,” is a midrash on Genesis 1.

Only in the late first millennium CE does full-fledged commentary develop within Judaism. The greatest medieval commentator was Rashi, an acronym of Rabbi Solomon (Hebrew *Shlomo*) son of Isaac, who lived in what is now France (1040–1105) and who compiled earlier interpretations into a brilliant *Reader’s Digest* of rabbinic literature in a verse-by-verse fashion. Unlike classical rabbinic commentary, Rashi focused more on the broader story than on individual words. His method of interpretation is often called *peshat*, sometimes rendered “simple,” though “contextual” is a better translation for this approach. Other medieval scholars were less dependent on classical rabbinic sources. Some compared Hebrew to Aramaic and to the Arabic of their Muslim-majority cultures, while others were influenced by emerging mystical traditions.

Beginning in the late thirteenth century, Jewish biblical interpretation was often divided into four categories, summarized through the acronym PaRDaS: *peshat*, the simple or contextual meaning;

remez, literally “hint,” an allegorical meaning; *derash*, a homiletical meaning; and *sod*, a secret mystical meaning.³⁶ This term is based on a Persian loanword meaning “orchard” and its use in Song of Songs 4:13. The same Persian word, via Greek, gives us the English “paradise.” As the following chapters illustrate, for many commentators, these four modes of interpretation were mutually enhancing rather than mutually exclusive.

Michael Fishbane’s Song of Songs commentary, which is formatted like a page from the Rabbinic Bible, visually illustrates these approaches. Instead of offering different commentators on each page, Fishbane offers commentaries from these four main perspectives.³⁷ We quote selectively from his interpretations of Song 1:2, which opens “Oh, give me of the kisses of your mouth” (NJPS):

Peshat: “The verb . . . articulates the speaker’s intense longing for a kiss.”

Derash: “At the center of covenant love stands Mount Sinai, the classic site of a revelation whose words are like kisses.”

Remez: “‘Kisses’ boldly express the intensity of the longing for contact with God. . . . The kiss represents the desired infusion of divine reality into the human self—the yearning for spiritual transformation. It is a moment of meeting that silences speech.”

Sod: “The spiritual quest begins with great longing, marked by absence and otherness. . . . It wishes for contact with Divinity, symbolized by a kiss. Spiritually understood, the kiss is the co-infusion of breath or spirit between one being and another.”

Therefore, “the reader is to consider each level of interpretation in its own right—and to read them interactively as multiple expressions of the human spirit.”³⁸ We note again: such different modes in Jewish tradition are not mutually exclusive; they are mutually enhancing.

We conclude this section with what would have been a surprising

statement had we opened with it—but it should now make sense. The Bible itself is less important in Judaism than the Bible *interpreted*. According to Nehemiah 8:8, when the Torah was read publicly as part of the restoration project in the fifth century BCE when the Jews returned to the land of Israel from Babylonian exile, “they read from the book, from the law [the Torah] of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.” Interpretation in Jewish tradition is an ongoing process, a partnership where humans interpret a divine text.

CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION: ALIGNED WITH BELIEF

WHEREAS Jewish biblical interpretation tends to celebrate and subsequent Christian commentary, despite its own magnificent diversity. While the present book concentrates on Jewish interpretation before and after Jesus, similar volumes describe how Christian interpreters have, or should, read their Old Testament.³⁹

Showing how the Old Testament foreshadows the New is central to Christian interpretation. In addition, maintaining correct doctrine was, and is, more important in Christianity than in Judaism. As Jesus tells Nicodemus, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” (John 3:3). The Greek word *anōthen*, here translated “from above,” can also mean “anew” and “again,” and it is from that last translation that we get the familiar expression “born-again Christian.” Nicodemus, identified by John as a ruler of the Pharisees, takes the meaning “again” and asks how he might crawl back into his mother’s womb, for how else would one be “born again”? Jesus, however, intends to mean “from above.” One is not born into the new movement as one would be born to a Jewish, Egyptian, or Roman parent. Identity is, for the followers of Jesus, defined by belief, not by parentage and so not by ethnicity.

This example from John’s Gospel, one of John’s many plays on

words, shows not only the potential for language to be misunderstood but also one major way in which the movement of Christians that later became Christianity diverged from what we know as Judaism. Neither Paul nor the Gospels use the term “Christianity,” just as neither Paul nor the Gospel authors knew they were writing a “New Testament.” They were writing to help create and maintain a community that, in various ways, understood Jesus of Nazareth to be divine. They were writing to a community brought together by an emerging set of beliefs, even as they were attempting to standardize those beliefs.

But Jews were not then, or ever, simply defined by a belief system. Jews also speak of having a common ancestry traceable to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; they claim Hebrew as a common language and the land of Israel as a homeland; thus Jews, whether they are of Asian, African, European, Latin American, or any other geographic origin, are like a single ethnic group or a nationality.⁴⁰ People within such a group can disagree and still maintain membership in the group. No matter how much US citizens disagree over political issues—and we do disagree!—at the end of the day, we are all still US citizens. That same point holds for Jews, who do not have major problems with most alternative readings of scripture. In Judaism, orthopraxy, what one does, is more important than orthodoxy, what one believes.⁴¹ There are Jewish atheists; technically, however, “Christian atheist” would be an oxymoron.

If one enters a movement by belief, by being born from above, disagreement is a greater problem, and thus scriptural interpretation is more likely to be constrained. If one enters a group by belief, one also leaves by belief. Christianity therefore developed creeds to assure that its members would all hold the same major beliefs. Otherwise put: orthodoxy, correct belief, is paramount in Christianity. We have seen this concern for correct interpretation in Luke’s story of

Jesus, incognito, meeting two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus. The two, aware of Jesus's death, are despondent. The stranger on the road then "interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures" (Luke 24:27).

The New Testament itself admits that its presentations are both selective and open to multiple interpretations. The Gospel of Luke opens with the observation that others have attempted to tell the story of Jesus, but this Gospel is going to do so accurately and in order (Luke 1:3). Indeed, even having four Gospels instead of harmonizing them into one admits a kind of multiplicity. The Second Epistle of Peter (like Daniel and Jonah, a text probably not written by the figure to whom it is ascribed) says regarding Paul's letters, "There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures" (2 Pet 3:16). For this author, Paul's letters have scriptural status, and not all agree on what they mean. To this day, debates continue over what Paul meant, whether he changed his mind or displayed remarkable consistency, whether he wrote to specific congregations only or to all followers of Jesus, and so on.

Christians, like Jews, also debate matters of translation. Here are three examples of Christian translations based on theological reasoning, two from antiquity and one from today's headlines. First, in a parable about a tenacious widow and an uncaring judge, Jesus has the widow insist, "*ekdikēson me against my opponent*" (Luke 18:3). Almost all English translations have the widow saying "grant me justice," but the Greek verb asks not for "justice" but for "vengeance," as in the famous phrase, "Vengeance is mine . . . says the Lord" (Rom 12:19, quoting Deut 32:35). Translators were uncomfortable having a morally problematic heroine in a parable or having readers think asking for vengeance was okay, so they modified the original text to comport with their own beliefs.

Second, translators of the parable of the Friend at Midnight betray a similar discomfort with Jesus's words. The parable describes a man who requests from his friend, in the middle of the night, three loaves of bread for a visitor. It concludes with the notice that even though the sleepy friend "will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his *anaitēia* he will get up and give him whatever he needs" (Luke 11:8). The Greek term clearly means "shamelessness," but translators from the patristic period (that is, the time of the church fathers) onward, not wanting to comment such behavior, have rendered the Greek "persistence."⁴²

The most recent example of theological concern is the 2019 papal approval of a new translation of the "Our Father" prayer that replaces the famous line "lead us not into temptation" with "do not let us fall into temptation." For the Vatican, the new translation avoids the suggestion that "Our Father" would lead his children into temptation (see Jas 1:13); that would be Satan's role. The Greek could also be translated "do not bring us to the test," which would make better sense of the prayer, since in the Bible God does "test" people's fidelity. For example, in Genesis 22:2, God "tests" Abraham by commanding him to sacrifice his son.

Ancient and medieval Christians formulated similar maps of levels of meaning in scripture parallel to the Jewish fourfold typology described above—in fact, Jewish interpreters may have based their fourfold methods on Christian interpretations. Although most interpreters agreed on the need for the literal sense, a variety of other, "fuller" senses emerged: the moral sense, the anagogical sense, the typological sense, the allegorical sense, and so forth.⁴³ Each of these so-called fuller senses (Latin *sensus plenior*) was typically privileged above the literal sense. Already in 2 Corinthians 3:12–16, Paul writes that Jews are unable to understand their own scriptures. Adducing the notice in Exodus 34:33–35 that Moses wore a veil in order not to

frighten the people because his face shone after speaking with God, Paul states that Moses “put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside” (2 Cor 3:13) and affirms, “But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant [the phrase can be translated “old testament”]; the reference here is to the Torah], that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside” (3:14). Paul then doubles down: “Indeed, to this very day, whenever Moses [i.e., the Torah] is read, a veil lies over their [i.e., Jews who do not believe in the Christ] minds; but when one turns to the Lord [i.e., Jesus], the veil is removed” (3:15–16). The literal reading, or any reading that does not lead to the Christ, is therefore at best incomplete.

Expanding upon the *peshat* or simple or literal reading, a form of allegorical interpretation known as “typology” shows how some followers of Jesus understood the antecedent scriptures. Typological readings propose that earlier texts offer models, types, or first drafts of what comes to fulfillment with the Christ. For example, Paul reads Adam as, literally, “a type [Greek *typos*] of the one who was to come” (Rom 5:14), and the coming one is the Christ. For Paul, Adam, the first man, brought sin and death into the world; his antitype, the Christ, brings forgiveness and life. We return to diverse readings of Adam and Eve in Chapter 4. Similarly, Jonah’s three days in the belly of the fish, the focus of Chapter 10, came to be seen as a type or prefiguration of the Christ, who spent three days in the tomb. The New Testament text that makes the greatest use of typology is the Epistle to the Hebrews, as we’ll see in Chapter 5.

The *derash* or homiletical meaning finds its counterpart in Christian concern for a moral interpretation. Here Christians and Jews find some common ground, although the Talmud insists that this type of interpretation cannot lose its connection to the *peshat* (b. Shabbat 63a). A *derash* today might, for example, interpret the story of Abra-

ham’s initial sojourn in Egypt (Gen 12)—where he instructs his wife to say she is his sister so that the Egyptians will not kill him—as an example of human trafficking. A *derash* in the New Testament, here one that resembles the *remez* or allegorical reading, would be Paul’s interpretation in Galatians 4 of Sarah and Hagar as representing two covenants: Hagar is Mount Sinai, in the wilderness, and in slavery, whereas Sarah, the “mother above,” represents the gentile followers of Jesus who do not practice those rituals (understood as enslavement) that mark Jews as distinct from gentiles, such as circumcision. Here, however, Paul has detached the meaning from the literal story.

Finally, the *sod* or secret teaching relates to the Christian concern for the anagogical interpretation. This Christian reading strategy comes from the Greek term *anagoge*, meaning “climb” or “ascent,” and it suggests an interpretation that relates to salvation. The connection between *sod* and *anagoge* is not exact, but the two modes function on the same mystical, rather than mundane, level. Daniel’s angelic revelations are part of this category as is the Qumran pesher literature, and it extends to the Jewish mystical tradition most familiar from the medieval Kabbalah. The same approach appears in the New Testament. For example, Ephesians 3:3–6 explains how gentiles join the covenant community: “And how the mystery was made known to me by revelation. . . . In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs.”

While both the followers of Jesus and the rabbinic tradition on occasion take texts out of context and use them as prooftexts (see the next chapter), it is often the case that knowing the context adds nuance to the verse. According to the Gospel of Matthew, Herod the king seeks to kill Jesus, who, he has heard, is the newborn “King of the Jews.” He orders the massacre of all the children of Bethlehem,

from infants to age two. Speaking of this “Slaughter of the Innocents,” Matthew states:

Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

“A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”
(Matt 2:17–18)

Matthew is quoting Jeremiah 31:15, a chapter to which we return at the end of the book.

Jeremiah’s context indicates that the verse responds to the Babylonian exile. Rachel, the beloved wife of the patriarch Jacob and the mother of that first Joseph, had died in childbirth and was buried in Ramah, on the outskirts of Jerusalem. In the next two verses, Jeremiah offers comfort to Rachel and so to his readers in exile:

Thus says the LORD:
Keep your voice from weeping,
and your eyes from tears;
for there is a reward for your work,
says the LORD:
they shall come back from the land of the enemy;
there is hope for your future,
says the LORD:
your children shall come back to their own country.
(Jer 31:16–17)

For Jews, the concern of return to the land of Israel surfaces. Christian readers might see this next verse as a promise of the resurrection.

At times, Jewish and Christian readings can complement each other; at times, one community adopts a reading that the other might find impossible. Similar reading strategies can yield substantially different conclusions, since all interpretation depends on a particular starting point, either in Jewish life or in Christian doctrine. If we could better understand how Jews and Christians came to understand the same texts in different ways, we would be in a better position to understand both traditions, and to see the often contingent nature of what each tradition teaches.