

## **Kugel in *JQR***

The latest issue of the *Jewish Quarterly Review* includes a special section of three articles concerning my last book, *How to Read the Bible: a Guide to Scripture, Then and Now*. In the following, I wish to comment on all three, but most of what I have to say will be in response to Benjamin Sommer's article, "Two Introductions to Scripture: James Kugel and the Possibility of Biblical Theology," so I will begin with that.<sup>1</sup> To make things a bit easier in the wide-ranging comments that follow, I have numbered my individual points; I apologize for this somewhat inelegant procedure, but I hope it will provide a certain clarity and will allow me to refer here and there to points made elsewhere. And so:

1. I should like to begin by thanking Benjamin Sommer for the time and effort he obviously put into writing a most thoughtful review: despite such disagreements as I have with him, I am quite sincere in this expression of thanks. He has stated his case clearly and eloquently, and I am grateful for the opportunity his article has given me to clarify a few points in my own thinking. Almost needless to say, his review evidences a very careful

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<sup>1</sup> I regret having to publish this response on my own website; I certainly would have preferred to have it appear in the *Jewish Quarterly Review* alongside the articles of my critics. But the editors of that journal never invited me to submit a response, nor have they now. (Indeed, they never informed me that these three reviews were to appear in *JQR*, as might normally be expected; as a matter of fact, they have had no contact with me at any point, before, during, or after – save for a very brief exchange that I initiated with one of *JQR*'s chief editors once the news reached me that the reviews were in press. But my subject is Sommer's article, not editorial manners.)

reading of the book under discussion – “almost” because this is not always a given in reviews, even scholarly ones – and for this too I am grateful. Finally, I wish to thank him for the kind and generally sympathetic tone throughout, another thing not always characteristic of scholarly give-and-take.

2. But let me turn to the overall claim of his article, which is that my view of modern biblical scholarship is “reductionist” and that, consequently, the sharp conflict that I see between scholarship and the traditional understanding of the Bible is overstated. As I intend to show, this conflict is hardly the point of my book, in fact, it is a rather gross distortion of that point (see below, ¶7). At the same time, I do not think I am the first to suggest that such a conflict exists. After all, there are legions of Christians and Jews who are quite troubled by what modern scholarship has shown about the Bible, in fact, quite a few of them openly condemn that scholarship and banish it from their institutions. This is no fantasy of mine but a simple fact. The question that my book seeks to explore is how this circumstance came about, and how one is to address it now.
3. But that is not Sommer’s concern. Rather, he pooh-poohs this gap and says that, if only one arms oneself with the insights of various modern theologians, the perceived conflict will effectively be neutralized and, in fact, our understanding of the Bible will only be made the richer thereby. Here I am afraid I must disagree. The fact that A. J. Heschel, Louis Jacobs, Moshe Greenberg, Mordechai Breuer and the other writers whom Sommer cites have wrestled with the problems that modern scholarship raises for traditional teachings doesn’t mean that the answers they have provided are satisfactory – or, in some cases, even remotely convincing. Consider, for example, the conclusion of most modern

scholars that the Pentateuch is in fact the work of four or more anonymous authors, all of whom lived long after the time of Moses. Is this not in conflict with Jewish and Christian teachings? On this matter, Sommer refers readers to the solution proposed by one modern authority:

Mordechai Breuer, a rigorously Orthodox rabbi, accepts the Documentary Hypothesis but argues that all four documents that form the Pentateuch were written by God prior to the creation of the world. Each of the four sources, Breuer maintains, reveals a particular aspect of the deity. There is no contradiction between the austere God of P and the immanent God of J; there is no contradiction between the way P describes the miracle at the Reed Sea in a naturalistic way while J describes it in a supernatural way. (Sommer, p. 165)

I suppose that some may agree with Sommer that this is a “stunningly bold synthesis of midrash and *Wissenschaft*” (p. 166), but I confess that I am deaf to its music. Does it really account for two very different laws of the freed female slave (Exod. 21:7 vs. Deut. 15:12-17), or the two different sets of rules about the Passover sacrifice (Exod. 12:3,8 vs. Deut. 16:2, 7)? What exactly do these conflicting laws reveal about different “aspects of the deity,” and – on a practical note – which aspect is a Jew supposed to embrace in deciding what to do on Passover or how to free his female slave? (And why would the Torah have risked confusing its readers in their observance by deciding to reveal God’s different aspects through conflicting *laws*, as opposed to, say, narratives or prophetic discourse?) Similarly, what do we learn about the deity’s aspects by comparing P’s requirement that Noah bring two of each species aboard the ark with J’s requirement that

he bring seven of each clean species? In other words, nice try – but totally unconvincing when it gets down to the details.

4. In rejecting this solution of Breuer's (and, frankly, Louis Jacob's and Heschel's and quite a few others'), I should make it clear that my rejection says nothing about the divine origin of the Torah. Rather, as I say repeatedly in my book (see especially pp. 688-89), the Torah's divine character is not an issue that modern biblical scholarship can ever seek to address; it is entirely a matter of belief. That is, there is simply no way to prove or disprove that this particular word, or sentence, or paragraph came from God, while that one didn't. Even if we had a videotape of Moses ascending Mount Sinai and descending forty days later, that would tell us nothing about the divine origin of the text he brought with him. Contradictions within the text, or repetitions, or any other signs of what might seem symptomatic of human authorship or compilation, actually prove nothing: Who makes up the rules of what a divine author can or cannot do? But the larger point to which this one is attached is that, as I also say (p. 687), the whole attribution of divine authorship *in Judaism* does not exist so as to provide some sort of seal of approval to the Torah's words, since those words will, by all accounts, be dragged hither and yon by the Torah's human interpreters anyway. Instead:

Upon inspection, Judaism turns out to be quite the opposite of fundamentalism. The written text alone is not all-powerful; in fact, it rarely stands on its own. Its true significance usually lies not in the plain sense of its words but in what the Oral Torah has made of those words; this is its definitive and final interpretation" (*How to Read*, p. 681).

It is this – and not my supposedly “reductionist” view of modern scholarship – that is at the heart of Sommer’s disagreement with me. That is why I stressed the words *in Judaism* above. His disagreement is really not with the first thirty-five chapters of my book – which have nothing particularly Jewish or Christian about them, and do no more than illustrate how biblical interpretation has changed over the centuries – but rather with what my thirty-sixth chapter says about, specifically, what these changes imply for Judaism. Let me try to make my thinking on this point clearer:

5. He, and a lot of other modern scholars, Jewish and Christian, wish to explore what his title calls “the possibility of biblical theology,” that is, the possibility of theologizing about the biblical text quite apart from what traditional teachings have said and, often, in the face of all the down-to-earth details they know about the text and its creation. Well, what’s wrong with all that? Not much if you’re a Protestant (and I say this in my book, too). But from a Jewish standpoint, such an enterprise is predicated on something like a total reconfiguration of Judaism and its doctrine of two Torahs. Instead, there will now be three: the text of the Written Torah, along with what the Oral Torah says it means; and, in parallel, a third Torah based on modern scholars’ understanding of the original text (in the light of its putative time of composition, the political and cultural circumstances underlying it, and so forth) and then leavened with such theological lessons as the modern scholar might discover in it on his or her own. From a Jewish standpoint there are lots of problems with this new configuration (see especially below, ¶14). But one problem that should be apparent to all is the very idea that the original, historical text as

restored by modern scholars has any “lessons” to deliver in the first place. Often, by the best lights of modern scholarship, this does not appear to be the case. Take, for example, the tendency of modern theologians to treat the human beings in the narratives of Genesis and elsewhere as moral exemplars (see on this *How to Read* p. 79 and my Appendix 1 on this website). That is actually a notion that cannot be located, for example, in the stories of Noah, or Abram and Sarai, or Isaac and Rebekah, or Jacob and Esau, or Jacob and Laban, or lots of other early narratives; the idea that these figures are there to serve as moral exemplars is, as a matter of fact, one of the great achievements of the ancient interpreters. So the modern theological reading of these stories is basically a kind of *sha‘atnez* operation. It puts aside the ancient interpreters’ Four Assumptions about the Bible in favor of modern scholarship’s view of the real, *original* meaning of these texts – for example, that the people in them are not so much “characters” as representative of whole nations. But then it goes on to resurrect one of those assumptions (that the Bible, although it talks about the past, is really transmitting lessons for us today) in order to treat those people as characters and then find some relevant higher teaching in what these stories recount about them. In the process, certain aspects of modern scholarship often end up getting soft-pedaled or passed over entirely; this is what my Appendix 1 calls “Biblical Criticism Lite.”

6. The matter may be exemplified by referring to what Sommer has to say about the etiological underpinnings of many biblical narratives. Ever since Hermann Gunkel in the late nineteenth century, scholars have recognized that many of the narratives in Genesis

have an *etiological* purpose, that is, they aim to explain how things are *now* (in the time of the narrative's author) by referring to events that took place in the distant past. Thus: the Bible's account of Jacob's and Esau struggles *in utero* and afterwards were originally intended to explain the strife between their descendants, the nations of biblical Israel and Edom, at the time in which these tales were written; similarly, the biblical account of the Israelites' unwillingness to hear God's voice directly at Sinai explains why God instituted a whole series of prophets in Israel instead of simply having the divine voice boom out His orders directly from heaven; and so forth. Sommer is prepared to recognize the etiological character of these narratives, but he considers it unimportant; the proof is that "in the thirty lectures I gave in my annual course at Northwestern University, 'Introduction to Hebrew Bible,' I mentioned etiology twice, both times in passing" (p. 158). I don't find this a thunderous proof of anything other than Sommer's own preference for turning these tales into part of a great *histoire moralisée* (see below, especially ¶8 and ¶11), that is, turning them to the service of biblical theology. In this enterprise he is hardly alone; indeed, biblical theology used to be spoken of (and in some quarters still is, no doubt) as the "queen" of the biblical disciplines, that to which everything else is intended to lead. So *of course* he and other scholars, even when they do recognize the etiological character of these stories, often downplay that aspect in favor of some loftier lesson the stories presumably also impart. After all, these scholars – Jews and Christians – for the most part earnestly wish to find some redeeming message in the Good Book even after performing on it the sort of rigorous, historical analysis in which they themselves were trained and to which they themselves contribute. It is the result of

these two conflicting goals – what I called “having your Bible and criticizing it too” – that creates Sommer’s “possibility” (one might better say the necessity) “of biblical theology.” Via that possibility, one can recognize that the biblical Flood story is a reworking of a Mesopotamian original and still maintain that it has an uplifting message lacking in its prototype, a message about monotheism. But as I said about that argument in Appendix 1, “these scholars are fudging a bit when they imply that part of the biblical tale’s uplifting message is that YHWH is the ‘sole God.’ In its recasting of this story, the Bible may have changed ‘the gods’ to God (it would certainly have been surprising if it had not), but there is actually nothing in the narrative that asserts that He is the only God in the world. Monotheism is simply not part of this story’s concerns.” The same point holds for all the other narratives I treated in detail (and whose etiological character Sommer downplays in generalizations but never actually gets around to discussing). By this same procedure, the story of Cain and Abel may be seen to be an old etiological tale explaining the origin of the Kenites, but it simultaneously contains an uplifting message about divine justice and divine mercy, all the while depicting the eternal struggle of the good with the bad; similarly, the story about God’s attempt to slay Moses on his way back to Egypt may really have started as a polemical attempt to reinterpret the expression *hatan dammim*, but it too has some higher, redeeming message. Well, I can’t stop people from making such arguments, but frankly, I just don’t find them credible. It’s not only their inherent improbability (What exactly is *good* about Abel according to the biblical text? Is it really plausible that the brief etymological note about the phrase *hatan dammim*, three verses long, was simultaneously intended to telegraph a message about

the sometimes self-contradictory ways of the good Lord? And if so, why didn't the text say something, even one word, indicating that *that*, rather than, or in addition to, etymology, was its point?).

7. Much more troublesome to me is that, in putting forward such explanations, Sommer and other scholars jump over the great change in the career of the Bible's component texts that is nothing less than my book's main theme. These texts started out as one thing (etiological narratives, royal propaganda, divine instructions to the king, and cultic recitations) and then, thanks to the great Interpretive Revolution of the closing centuries BCE, they became something else entirely (moral tales, historical fact, timeless truths offered to all Israel, and the heartfelt psalms of King David). That is what my book documents time and time and time again, in thirty-five chapters. But Sommer skips over all that, indeed, skips over the very existence of this Revolution, in order to claim that moral tales, timeless truths, etc. are what the texts were about from the start. In skipping over how this Interpretive Revolution transformed these texts, Sommer skips over my book's main theme and message; instead, all he can focus on is my claim (and surely it, too, is justified – but it is there in service of my main theme, the one that Sommer skips) that the modern reading of biblical texts is often at odds with the way the Bible used to be read and explained.
8. Let's look at the one case that Sommer does examine in detail, the insertion of the Judah-Tamar episode in the middle of the Joseph story. Both narratives, Judah-Tamar and at least some parts of the Joseph story, come from "J." Sommer notes – so obviously they were meant to go together (p. 160). I suppose that argument would have more force if "J"

were indeed one person. But nobody (except possibly the late Gerhard von Rad) really maintains that – indeed, the whole *Tendenz* of recent European Pentateuchal studies has been, to quote the title of a 2006 collection of essays, *A Farewell to the Yahwist*. Even Wellhausen insisted that “J” was really a collection of different writers, J<sub>1</sub>, J<sub>2</sub>, J<sub>3</sub>, and so forth, and Rolf Rendtorff, H. H. Schmid and others subsequently made the same case in great detail. So drop that argument – it was false to begin with. And come to think of it, why shouldn’t Sommer want to consider the Judah-Tamar episode an interpolation? Surely he subscribes to some form of the Documentary Hypothesis, nor, therefore, does he likely have any objection in principle to identifying Judah-Tamar as an interpolation. What is more, this episode clearly announces itself as such, starting as it does with that all-purpose editorial transition, “At this same time...” and ending with a staple of nearly all insertions, the resumptive repetition (*Wiederaufnahme*), found here in Gen. 39:1, “Now [as I was saying,] Joseph had been brought down to Egypt.” The Judah-Tamar narrative further identifies itself as an interpolation by its disjunction from the surrounding story of Joseph, most notably in its picture of Judah, who is here an at-least-middle-aged paterfamilias with three grown sons, indeed, a grandfather by the end of the story, whereas much later in the Joseph story, Reuben, the *oldest* brother, can say to his father, “You may kill my two sons if I do not bring him [Benjamin] back to you” (Gen. 42:37). It certainly sounds as if he is talking about two minor children, not mature adults with a will of their own. If so, how can Reuben’s *younger* brother Judah have been the father of grown, married sons still earlier? (Not impossible, surely, but a rather unlikely detail for the unitary author “J” to have stuck in.) The Judah of the Judah-Tamar episode

also seems to be a rather different character from the Judah who appears in the chapters that follow it. The former is a loutish bully who is prepared to condemn his daughter-in-law to death despite the reasonable inference that it was his own cruel prevention of her marrying that led her in desperation to an extramarital pregnancy. By contrast, the Judah of the Joseph story is the moral hero of the entire affair, a man prepared to sacrifice his own welfare in order to allow his brother Benjamin to go free. As many have argued, the only reason for Judah-Tamar's insertion into the Joseph narrative was that it preserved an ancient tradition concerning the ancestry of two allegedly Judahite clans, Perez and Zerah. And if it was inserted where it was, this was simply because there was no other place to put it: it could not come after the Joseph story, at the end of which Judah and his brothers have all immigrated to Egypt, because the events of Judah-Tamar takes place when Judah is still living in the land of Israel; and to put the story before the Joseph narrative would only compound the problem of Judah's middle-aged persona in Judah-Tamar. It had to be inserted somewhere in the middle.

9. But if that explains the existence and placement of this interpolation, why should Sommer fight against such a reading? It seems that the reason is that his own, synthetic reading affords him the "possibility of biblical theology," namely, the opportunity to find some redeeming lesson in a story otherwise notably devoid of morality (after all, a daughter-in-law who dresses up as a prostitute and sleeps with her father-in-law is not the usual stuff of theology). But if you can claim that the Judah-Tamar episode is no mere interpolation but Act II in a three-act drama called *Judah Becomes a Mensch*, then, without ever having abandoned the canons of modern scholarship, you can show that

there is more to that scholarship than merely discovering editorial cut-and-paste; there are also great lessons to be learned about how bad people can amend their ways. “The episode involving Tamar tells us how Judah went from the villain of [chapter] 37 to the paragon of [chapter] 44. Genesis 38 doesn’t interrupt; it is a crucial piece of narrative that gets us from A to B. *By noting this, I have said nothing inimical to modern biblical scholarship, or even to classical source criticism*” (Sommer, p. 161). For Sommer and many others, that’s what it’s all about, combining MBS with an old-fashioned *Mussarschmooze*, thereby giving the lie to those who, like Kugel, see the whole enterprise of modern scholarship as fundamentally inimical to the traditional place and role of Scripture in Judaism.

10. But who says that Sommer’s integrative reading of Judah-Tamar is wrong? Indeed, haven’t some of the writers he cites *proven* that these chapters are all of one piece, via the appearance of the command “Recognize!” and one or two other supposed connections between Judah-Tamar and the Joseph story? On this point, permit me here to cite a paragraph from my own Appendix 1:

If so, then who is responsible for all those marvelous points of connection between the two stories, “Recognize!” and “went down” and articles-of-clothing-used-to-deceive? When I was an undergraduate, such questions used to be ruled out of bounds: the literary text just *was*, and speculating about whether the author had actually intended this or that effect was called, in a famous essay by William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy.” But that essay was itself fallacious, since it assumed that there was just one standard way of approaching a text, one set of assumptions that all readers brought to the act of reading. In the case of the Bible, as we have seen, the assumptions one brings to the text are crucial to its meaning. Ancient interpreters operated on the assumption that Genesis (along with the rest of the Bible) was the flawless product of

divine inspiration, whereas modern interpreters generally assume that Genesis is an anthology riddled with doublets and other indications that its editor(s) cared little for consistency or subtle relationships among its constituent parts. Yet modern literary scholars of the Bible, though they usually act as if they belong to this second group, often disregard this assumption in presenting their literary analyses: no subtlety is too subtle and no finesse too fine for their close readings. That is to say, there is no crossover between what they assume elsewhere about *how* biblical authors and editors operated and the assumptions they bring to the act of reading this or that story; those assumptions are imported from their experience as critics of modern, Western literature. This is indeed the “View from Nowhere,” or more precisely, the confusion of two very different sets of assumptions.

Beyond this, I can only repeat what I have said endlessly to students: There are no “proofs” in interpretation. There are only arguments, convincing or lame: you be the judge. I find the arguments marshaled by Sommer and others about Judah-Tamar to be lame. Perhaps I’m a particularly ungenerous reader, but I don’t think so. As the bumper sticker says, “Interpolation happens.”

11. A similar case is Sommer’s embrace of Jon Levenson’s connection of the Jewish recitation of the *Shema*’ with ancient Near Eastern covenants; recitation of the *Shema*’, Sommer writes, is “really a sort of covenant renewal ceremony” such as that which lies at the heart of Deuteronomy (Sommer, 173). I must confess I never bought into this part of Levenson’s book, and if I mention it here, it is because this case may stand as something of a *pars pro toto* for my complaint about a great many attempts by biblicists to jump over the Interpretive Revolution and connect all that modern scholarship knows about the putative original meaning of the text with their own religious practice or ideas (not just the *Shema*’, but ecology and global warming, gay rights, and a good deal more). So:

what's wrong with connecting the practice of saying the *Shema*' with biblical covenant renewal? To begin with, I've never met a Jew, Orthodox or otherwise, who says that he/she recites the *Shema*' in the morning as a way of renewing, even symbolically, the great Sinai covenant. Jews say the *Shema*' because it is one of the 613 commandments, not the special, covenant-renewal one, and/or because that's what their parents told them to do from the time they were very little. So there's something altogether theoretical and academic about suggesting that covenant renewal has anything to do with it. (Saying, as the rabbis did, that the theme of the first paragraph of the *Shema*' is "accepting the yoke of heaven" while that of the second is "accepting the yoke of the *mitzvo*t" is, despite what Sommer says, hardly an evocation of the Sinai covenant.)

12. But the problem, and the parallels, go deeper than that. The fact is that we have no evidence of the practice of saying the *Shema*' anytime before the very end of the biblical period. Thus, the book of Jubilees (ca. 200 BCE) mentions all sorts of post-biblical laws and practices, but there is not a word in it about saying the *Shema*', nor is there any evocation of that all-important commandment, "And you shall love the Lord your God..." anywhere in that book. This silence is most striking in those passages in which Jubilees alludes to *other* verses in the Torah that it sees as all-important (on Lev. 19:18, for example, see Jub. 20:2, 36:3-4, 7-8). So there is no unbroken tradition or slow evolution from a corporate covenant renewal in Deuteronomy into an individual one and the current practice of the *Shema*'. Rather, saying the *Shema*' is patently the product of a highly creative interpretation of Deut. 6:6-7, "And let these words/things that I command you today be upon your hearts. Teach them to your children and recite them when you

stay at home or are on a journey, when you lie down and when you get up.” The exegetical question was, what are “these words/things”? I daresay an ordinary reader would probably conclude that the text is referring to all the matters that are about to be commanded in “this Torah”; in plain English, what it is saying is: “Keep in mind everything I am about to tell you today.” But how exactly is one to carry out such a commandment – how can a person keep in mind *everything* all the time? So it was that this commandment was exegetically reconfigured as the obligation to say “these words” – that is, the words of the two verses just preceding these, namely, “Hear O Israel...” and “And you shall love the Lord your God.” That is how the commandment of reciting the *Shema*‘ got started, *exegetically* – just like a great deal of rabbinic Judaism. And that’s just my larger point. You can’t act as if that great Interpretive Revolution didn’t happen and that what Judaism is somehow flows directly from the Torah’s own words. Repeat: You can’t act as if that great Interpretive Revolution didn’t happen and that what Judaism is somehow flows directly from the Torah’s own words.

13. This is not to say (and I do *not* say) that there is no continuity between biblical and post-biblical religion. On the contrary, there is a quite visible development from the one to the other, and it is a fairly straight-line development: it goes from the earliest stages of Israelite religion[s] through all the oft-charted revisions and reconfigurations of the eighth and seventh centuries, then into the Babylonian exile and the subsequent return, the central focus on Torah and divine law that is already evident in the later books of the Jewish canon, the flowering of the specialized pursuit known as biblical interpretation in the closing centuries before the common era, and then the rise of rabbinic Judaism and

Christianity in the centuries that followed. The problem with viewing the *Shema*‘ as covenant renewal is the problem of a great deal of Jewish biblical scholarship today, namely, that it seeks to jump over this straight-line development and see some direct connection between Deuteronomy and Mishnah *Berakhot*.

14. I come now, finally, to Sommer’s claim that there are really two Kugels: the one who vehemently denies all of modern scholarship and the other who has actually contributed to it in the past and who, even in *How to Read*, ends by evoking an altogether modern argument about the great change that comes in Israel’s understanding of ‘*avodat ha-Shem*, the service of God. Actually, there are not two Kugels at all, and it is a source of some frustration to me that Sommer might think so, since I thought I had made very clear what I think. Modern biblical scholarship is an academic pursuit proper to the university: its aim is to understand the Bible in terms of its original, historical environment and in the light of everything we know about the process of its composition, ancient Israel’s neighbors, and so forth. (This might be compared to today’s Homeric scholarship, or Shakespearean scholarship, or all sorts of other pursuits in the humanities.) But Torah, the Scripture of Judaism – that is something else entirely. Every chapter, every verse took on a new meaning in the great Interpretive Revolution that began in the late biblical period and culminated (from a Jewish point of view) in the Torah as explained by our rabbis. Torah in this sense is not a collection of religious ideas, but a religious proclamation. It is not a history but a sermon, a call to action, a call to the service of God. One can certainly study the elements that make up the original text, indeed, one can study the most fundamental assumptions and affiliations underlying biblical narratives and laws

and poetry, and such study may even move the hearts of men and women today; but it will not be Torah. That is the difference between being a Jew and being a Protestant.

To this some may counter with the well known midrashic saying that the Torah has “seventy aspects” or “faces”; does this not mean that it will always be open to new interpretations and understandings? Actually, this is a misunderstanding of the true import of this saying; there are certain very clear limits as to what those new interpretations might include.<sup>2</sup> A long time ago I wrote that the alleged freedom of rabbinic midrash is an illusion: the midrashist is free to discover whatever nuance he can find that adds to Abraham’s righteousness, but he is not free to discover that Abraham was a villain. Even if he could *prove* that Abraham was a villain, the result might be scholarship, but it would not be midrash. I say this in different ways in my last chapter, but perhaps most succinctly at the end: “It is this book of changed meanings that *was* the original Bible” (671). Biblical scholarship, with its aim of going back behind that Interpretive Revolution and, as a matter of fact, seeking to undo it utterly, is completely incompatible with the whole idea of Torah and its function within Judaism. I can’t put it more simply than that.

15. John Reeves’ review in the same issue of JQR, “Problematizing the Bible...Then and Now,” is, as he himself notes, not really a review of my book, but an extended consideration of the common assumption that interpretation comes *after* the text of the Bible is already a fixed and immutable thing. This assumption is both common and wrong: all the evidence we possess, especially now from Qumran, suggests that the text

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<sup>2</sup> These include, prominently, the Four Assumptions of the ancient interpreters that I highlight in my book. Even great innovative interpreters, such as Maimonides or the Spanish Kabbalists, never dreamt of departing from any of them.

was changing simultaneously with its interpretation, so that these are really to be viewed as two coordinate activities. This is a point I quite agree with, indeed, as Sommer's article points out, I have been one of the people to champion this idea elsewhere. I am not quite sure, however, that I am prepared to share the full measure of Reeves' skepticism with regard to the Pentateuch (as opposed to the rest of "the Bible"). None of this, in any case, diminishes the importance of the great Interpretive Revolution – reflected in text and interpretation alike – that was my subject; moreover, it is undeniably true that the methods championed by that Revolution continued to redefine the meaning of biblical texts long after their precise wording had become fixed. This said, Reeves' point is important, and I am glad he made it.

16. William Kolbrener's "How to Read *How to Read the Bible*" presents a pretty good summary of some of my ideas, but he certainly errs in saying (p. 188) that while I "gesture to the role of assumptions in interpretation (p. 135), the mantra of 'the real Bible,' repeated throughout *How to Read the Bible*, betrays a faith in a somehow unmediated text." *I gesture?* It is the role of assumptions in interpretation that is the true mantra of my book, chanted in every chapter. But if he is implying that I am not sufficiently interested in the interpretive assumptions of modern biblical scholars, I should point out that the Bible is a rather different from *Paradise Lost*, to which Kolbrener compares it. Much of the Hebrew Bible was written twenty centuries or more before Milton, in a society and literary environment very different from our own, and in a language still imperfectly understood. What is more, many biblical texts purport to recount historical events, and almost all of them presume a knowledge of specific

historical and cultural details proper to biblical times. All these things have been immeasurably illuminated by the last six or seven generations of scholars working in various fields connected to the Bible. What I find lacking in Kolbrener's article is any appreciation of this circumstance or, indeed, any real acquaintance with modern scholarship apart from the things that I have to say about it – and sometimes not even with those. He doesn't seem to think that archaeological evidence, Assyriology, Egyptology, ancient Near Eastern history, and comparative Semitics need to play any decisive role in our attempt to understand the meaning of biblical texts. But it is precisely these things that *must* mediate any serious, critical engagement with the Bible today. Kolbrener apparently believes that they can be dismissed with a postmodernist wave of the hand: they're all just one possible way of reading. This may fly with Milton scholars, but I don't think biblical studies are quite there yet. In short: I would like to be kinder, but I'm afraid this is one game he shouldn't have suited up for.