HEBREW BIBLE
OLD TESTAMENT

The History of Its Interpretation

Edited by Magne Sæbø

1/2: The Middle Ages

Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht
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The History of Its Interpretation

Volume 1/2

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Hebrew Bible / Old Testament
The History of Its Interpretation

Edited by
Magne Sæbø

VOLUME I
From the Beginnings to the Middle Ages
(Until 1300)

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Contents

Preface .......................................................... 15

C. Christian and Jewish Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament in the Middle Ages

23. The Problem of Periodization of 'the Middle Ages':
   Some Introductory Remarks
   By MAGNE SÆBØ, Oslo ........................................ 19

24. Political and Cultural Changes from the Fifth
    to the Eleventh Century
   By ARYEH GRABOIS, Haifa .................................. 28
   1. The Decline of the Roman Empire and Its Successors .......... 30
   2. The Rise of Muslim Civilization .................................. 39
   3. The New Political and Social Order in the Carolingian Era .... 43
   4. The Effect of Political, Social and Cultural Upheavals
      for the Jewish Settlements and Centres of Learning .......... 49

25. Jewish Bible Interpretation in Early Post-Talmudic Times .... 56
   25.1. The Significance of Hebrew Philology for the Development
        of a Literal and Historical Jewish Bible Interpretation
        By FREDERICK E. GREENSPAHN, Denver, CO ............ 56
   25.2. The Interpretative Value of the Massoretic Punctuation
        By E. J. REVELL, Toronto ..................................... 64
   25.3. The Geonim of Babylonia as Biblical Exegetes
        By ROBERT BRODY, Jerusalem .............................. 74
        1. Introduction .................................................. 75
        2. The Scope of Geonic Exegesis ............................ 77
        3. Exegetical Principles ........................................ 80
        4. Theological and Polemical Dimensions .................... 82
        5. The Relationship between Talmudic and Geonic Exegesis ... 86
   25.4. Medieval Jewish Biblical Exegesis in Northern Africa
        By FREDERICK E. GREENSPAHN, Denver, CO ............ 89
25.5. Early Hebraists in Spain: Menahem ben Saruq and Dunash ben Labrat
By Angel Sàenz-Badillos, Madrid ........................................... 96
1. Introduction ................................................................. 96
2. The Philological and Exegetical Work of Menahem and Dunash ..... 98
3. Hermeneutical Attitude .................................................... 100
4. Philological Exegesis ..................................................... 105

25.6. Karaite Exegesis
By Daniel Frank, Columbus, OH ............................................. 110
1. Introduction: Karaism and Scripturalism ............................ 110
2. Origins in the East (ca. 750–950) ........................................ 111
2.1. Anan ben David ............................................................ 111
2.2. Daniel al-Qumisi .......................................................... 112
2.3. Polemics between Saadiah Gaon and Karaite Scholars ...... 114
2.4. Al-Qirqisâni ................................................................. 116
3. The Jerusalem School (ca. 950–1099) .................................. 119
3.1. The Mourners for Zion (ca. 950–1000) ............................. 119
3.2. The Scholastic Phase (Eleventh Century) ......................... 123
4. The Later Byzantine Phase ............................................... 126

25.7. Clearing Peshat and Derash
By Stephan Garfinkel, New York ........................................... 129

26. Gregory the Great: A Figure of Tradition and Transition in Church Exegesis
By Stephan Ch. Kessler, Freiburg/Br. ......................................... 135
1. General and Biographical Remarks .................................... 136
2. The Role of the Bible in the Non-Exegetical Scriptures of Gregory ... 137
3. Gregory’s Exegetical Work ............................................... 139
4. Conclusion ................................................................. 145

27. The Institutional Framework of Christian Exegesis in the Middle Ages
By Ulrich Köpf, Tübingen .................................................... 148
1. Preliminary Notes .......................................................... 148
2. Theological Education before the Universities ..................... 150
2.1. Monastic Erudition ...................................................... 150
2.1.1. The Variety of Early Medieval Monasticism ................. 150
2.1.2. Concept and Reality of Monastic Education ............... 151
2.1.3. The Monastery as Framework of Monastic Erudition .... 153
2.2. Urban Clerical Schools ............................................... 156
2.3. Other Sites of Christian Education .................................. 160
3. Theological Education and Learning at Universities ............. 161
3.1. The First Universities .................................................. 162
3.2. Masters and Students at the Theological Faculty .............. 163
3.2.1. Secular Clergy and Monks ........................................ 163
3.2.2. The New Orders ..................................................... 164

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3.3. The Institutions of Theological Studies ............................................. 170
  3.3.1. The Educational Work and Its Literary Outcome ...................... 170
  3.3.2. The Theologian's Academic Career ........................................... 173

4. Retrospective View: The Bible in the Medieval System of Education . 178

28. Aspects of Old Testament Interpretation in the Church from the Seventh to the Tenth Century
   By Claudio Leonardi, Florence ................................................................. 180

1. Isidore of Seville .............................................................................................. 181
2. The Venerable Bede ........................................................................................... 185
3. Exegesis at the Time of Charlemagne ............................................................. 188
4. From Angelomus of Luxeuil to Remigius of Auxerre ................................... 192

29. Genres, Forms and Various Methods in Christian Exegesis of the Middle Ages
   By Gilbert Dahan, Paris .................................................................................. 196

1. The Genres ....................................................................................................... 200
   1.1. Monastic Exegesis .................................................................................. 200
   1.2. The Exegesis of the Schools .................................................................... 206
   1.3. The Exegesis of the University ............................................................... 211
2. The Forms ............................................................................................................ 216
   2.1. The Exegetical Chains .......................................................................... 216
   2.2. Anthological Commentaries ................................................................... 218
   2.3. The Running Gloss ................................................................................ 218
   2.4. Distinctiones ............................................................................................ 220
   2.5. The questio .............................................................................................. 222
   2.6. The Homily ............................................................................................... 224
3. Methods ......................................................................................................... 226
   3.1. The Methods of Literal Exegesis ............................................................ 227
      3.1.1. Textual Study .................................................................................. 227
      3.1.2. Literary Analysis .............................................................................. 228
      3.1.3. Jewish Interpretations ..................................................................... 230
   3.2. Methods of Spiritual Analysis ................................................................... 232
      3.2.1. The Words Signify ......................................................................... 232
      3.2.2. Things Signify ................................................................................ 234
      3.2.3. Analysis of the translatio ............................................................. 235
      3.2.4. Analysis by Concordance ............................................................ 235

   By G.R. Evans, Cambridge .............................................................................. 237

1. The Axis of Paris : Laon .................................................................................. 238
   1.1. The Cathedral School at Laon ................................................................. 239
   1.2. Paris ........................................................................................................ 241
2. Anselm of Laon ................................................................................................... 247
3. Exegesis in the Schools of Chartres and Other Cathedrals ......................... 251
4. The Impact of Christian Contact with Jewish Exegetes .........................254
  4.1. Knowledge of Hebrew .........................................................................254
  4.2. The Victorines at Paris .........................................................................257

31. The Flourishing Era of Jewish Exegesis in Spain .................................261

31.1. The Linguistic School: Judah Ḥayyūj, Jonah ibn Janāḥ, Moses ibn Chiquitilla and Judah ibn Balʿam
By Aharon Maman, Jerusalem .................................................................261
  1. Judah Ḥayyūj ......................................................................................263
    1.1. Triliterality of the Hebrew Root ...............................................264
    1.2. Characteristics of the Philological Exegesis ..............................265
    1.3. Ḥayyūj’s Successors .....................................................................267
  2. Jonah ibn Janāḥ ......................................................................................267
    2.1. His Philological Work .................................................................268
    2.2. The Comparison with Rabbinic Hebrew ...................................270
    2.3. Ibn Janāḥ and the Opinions of the Sages ...................................271
    2.4. The Comparison with Aramaic and Arabic ..............................271
  3. Moses Chiquitilla ..................................................................................275
  4. Judah ibn Balʿam ..................................................................................277

31.2. The Aesthetic Exegesis of Moses ibn Ezra
By Mordechai Cohen, New York .................................................................282
  1. Introduction ...........................................................................................282
  2. In the Rationalist Tradition ...................................................................284
    2.1. Ibn Ezra’s Sources .........................................................................284
    2.2. Linguistic Exegesis .........................................................................286
    2.3. Philosophical Exegesis ..................................................................287
  3. A Poetic Perspective ..............................................................................289
    3.1. The Arabic Model .........................................................................289
    3.2. Literary Theory ..............................................................................291
    3.3. Defining Biblical Poetics ............................................................293
  4. Legacy ...................................................................................................300

31.3. The Philosophical Exegesis
By Sara Klein-Braslavy, Tel Aviv .................................................................302
  1. Introduction ...........................................................................................303
  2. Solomon ibn Gabirol ..............................................................................304
  3. Bahya ben Joseph ibn Paquda ..................................................................306
  4. Judah Halevi ...........................................................................................309
  5. Moses ben Maimon / Maimonides (Rambam) ........................................311
## Contents

32. The School of Literal Jewish Exegesis in Northern France  
By AVRAHAM GROSSMAN, Jerusalem .................................................. 321

1. Introduction: The Revolution in Eleventh Century France .......... 323

2. Biblical Exegesis in Germany and Northern France before Rashi . 325

3. Reasons for the Rise of Literal Exegesis  
   3.1. Influence of Spanish-Jewish Culture .................................. 327
   3.2. The Twelfth-Century Renaissance ..................................... 328
   3.3. Jewish-Christian Polemics ............................................... 329

4. Menahem ben Helbo ................................................................. 331

5. Solomon Yishaqi / Rashi (1040–1105) ........................................ 332
   5.1. Text of Rashi’s Commentaries ............................................. 333
   5.2. Relation between Plain and Homiletical Meaning in Rashi’s Commentaries .................................................. 334
   5.3. Language and Grammar ..................................................... 337
   5.4. Philosophy and Mysticism .................................................. 338
   5.5. Jewish-Christian Polemics .................................................. 339
   5.6. Realia, Historical Background and Literary Elements .......... 340
   5.7. Scriptural Interpretation in Rashi’s Commentary to Talmud ... 341
   5.8. Emendations and Additions ................................................. 342
   5.9. The Continuing Importance of Rashi’s Commentaries to the Bible .............. 343

6. Joseph Kara (1050–1125) ............................................................ 346
   6.1. Joseph Kara’s Commentary on the Pentateuch ................. 348
   6.2. The Commentary on Psalms ................................................. 348
   6.3. Printed Editions and Manuscripts of Kara’s Bible Commentaries 349
   6.4. Kara’s Approach to the Biblical Text ................................. 351
   6.5. Kara’s Rational Approach ................................................. 352
   6.6. Manifestations of Religious Polemics in Kara’s Commentaries . 353
   6.7. The Relationship between Kara’s Bible Exegesis,  
        His Commentaries on Liturgical Poetry and the Heritage of Spain 355

7. Shemaiah (1060–1130) ................................................................. 356

8. Samuel ben Meir / Rashbam (1080–1160)  
   8.1. Rashbam’s Commentaries .................................................. 358
   8.2. Rashbam and Jewish-Christian Polemics ............................ 361
   8.3. Rashbam and the Twelfth-Century Renaissance ................. 363

9. Eliezer of Beaugency ................................................................. 363
   9.1. Eliezer’s Exegesis ............................................................. 364
   9.2. Anti-Christian Polemics and the Influence of Rationalism .... 366

10. Joseph Bekhor Shor (1130–1200) ................................................. 367

11. The Historical Fate of the School of Literal Exegesis ................. 370

33. Jewish Exegesis in Spain and Provence, and in the East,  
    in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries ................................. 372

33.1. Isaac ben Samuel Al-Kanzi  
    By URIEL SIMON, Jerusalem .................................................. 372

33.2. Abraham ibn Ezra  
    By URIEL SIMON, Jerusalem .................................................. 377
## Contents

### 33.3. The Qimhi Family

**By Mordechai Cohen, New York**

1. Joseph Qimhi ................................. 390
   1.1. Rationalism .............................. 390
   1.2. Linguistics .............................. 391
   1.3. Rabbinic Exegesis vs. Rabbinic Traditions .............................. 393
   1.4. Influence ............................ 395
2. Moses Qimhi ................................ 395
3. David Qimhi (Radak) ....................... 396
   3.1. Rationalism .............................. 398
   3.2. Linguistic and Stylistic Patterns ........................................ 400
   3.3. Interpreting Linguistic Nuance ................................................ 403
   3.4. Historical Thinking ................................................ 407
   3.5. Religious Inspiration ................................................ 410
   3.6. Influence ............................ 414

### 33.4. Moses ben Nahman / Nahmanides (Ramban)

**By Yaakov Elman, New York**

1. Biographical and General Remarks ......... 416
2. Aspects of Nahmanides’ Exegetical Method ...................................... 417
   2.1. Omnisignificance .......................... 419
   2.2. Structure and Theme .......................... 420
   2.3. Patterning .......................... 422
   2.4. Sequence .......................... 423
   2.5. Proportion and Placement .................. 427
   2.6. Historical Sense .......................... 430
3. Aspects of Nahmanides’ Thought ............ 431
   3.1. Theological Principles .......................... 431
   3.2. Psychological Insights .......................... 432
   3.3. Esoteric Interpretations .......................... 432

### 33.5. The Post-Maimonidean Schools of Exegesis in the East:
Abraham Maimonides, the Pietists, Tanhum ha-Yerusalmi and the Yemenite School

**By Paul B. Fenton, Paris**

1. Introduction .................................. 433
2. Abraham Maimonides .......................... 434
3. Pietist Exegesis ............................ 442
   3.1. Abû Sulayman Abraham ibn Abi r-Rabî’a he-Ḥasîd (d. 1223) .......... 442
   3.2. Ḥanân’el ben Samuel (fl. 1180–1250) .......................... 447
   3.3. Obadyah Maimonides (1228–1265) .......................... 447
   3.4. David II Maimonides (fl. 1335–1415) .......................... 449
4. Late Exegetes in the Oriental School .......... 451
5. The Yemenite School .......................... 454

### 33.6. Kabbalistic Exegesis

**By Moshe Idel, Jerusalem**

1. Kabbalistic Types of Exegesis .............. 456
2. Pardes: the Fourfold Kabbalistic Exegesis .... 457
3. Kabbalistic Symbolic Exegesis .............. 459
34. The School of St. Victor in Paris
By RAINER BERNDT, Frankfurt/M ............................................................ 467

1. Hugh of St. Victor ........................................................... 469
   1.1. Works of Old Testament Exegesis ............................... 470
   1.2. Methods and Sources ................................................. 471
   1.3. Specificity of Hugh: Exegesis and Theology .................. 473

2. Richard of St. Victor .......................................................... 475
   2.1. Works of Old Testament Exegesis ............................... 475
   2.2. Exegetical Methods and Sources .................................. 476
   2.3. Specificity of Richard: Through Exegesis to Contemplation .. 478

3. Andrew of St. Victor .......................................................... 479
   3.1. His Works ................................................................. 479
   3.2. Methods and Sources .................................................. 480
   3.3. Specificity of Andrew: Exegesis as Theology ................. 482

4. Thomas Gallus ................................................................. 484
   4.1. His Exegetical Works .................................................. 484
   4.2. Methods and Sources .................................................. 485
   4.3. Theological Specificity: Knowledge of the Supreme .......... 485

5. Contacts between the Victorines and Jewish Scholars .......... 486
   5.1. Knowledge of Hebrew .................................................. 486
   5.2. New Jewish Sources in the Exegesis of the Victorines ...... 487
   5.3. Reception of Jewish Exegesis ....................................... 488

6. Characteristics and Influence of Victorine Exegesis ............ 490
   6.1. Sources of the Victorines ............................................. 490
   6.2. Understanding of the Canon ....................................... 492
   6.3. Lemmatized Commentaries: Related to the Glossa .......... 493
   6.4. Influence in the Middle Ages: Relations between Exegesis and Theology ........................................ 494

35. Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament in the High Middle Ages
By KARLFRIED FROEHLICH, Princeton, N.J. ................................. 496

1. The Old Testament in the Monastery:
   Bernard of Clairvaux on the Song of Songs ......................... 497

2. The Old Testament in the Schools:
   Gilbert of Poitiers and Peter Lombard ............................. 500

3. Glossing and Preaching:
   Peter Comestor, Peter the Chanter, Stephen Langton ............ 504

4. Old Testament Interpretation in the Thirteenth Century ....... 510
   4.1. Biblical Interpretation in the Mendicant Orders ............ 512
   4.2. The University Curriculum and Its Tools ...................... 517
   4.3. The Impact of the Reception of Aristotle .................... 519
5. Old Testament Interpretation and the New Science: Some Paradigms .......................... 522
   5.1. Prophecy ........................................................................................................ 523
   5.2. Creation ........................................................................................................ 525
   5.3. The Old Law ............................................................................................... 527
   5.4. The Books of Solomon .............................................................................. 529
6. The Great Masters: Albert, Thomas, Bonaventure......................................................... 531
   6.1. Albert the Great ........................................................................................... 532
   6.2. Thomas Aquinas ........................................................................................... 538
   6.3. Bonaventure ............................................................................................... 546
7. Conclusion: Old Testament Scholarship at the End of the Thirteenth Century .......... 554

36. Development of Biblical Interpretation in the Syrian Churches of the Middle Ages
By LUCAS VAN ROMPAY, Leiden ................................................................. 559
1. Introduction ........................................................................................................ 559
2. West-Syrian Works of the Early Islamic Period ..................................................... 560
   2.1. Jacob of Edessa ........................................................................................... 560
   2.2. Moses bar Kepa ........................................................................................... 562
   2.3. Two Exegetical "Catena" ......................................................................... 564
3. East-Syrian Works ............................................................................................... 564
   3.1. East-Syrian Exegesis in the Seventh Century ....................................... 564
   3.2. Theodore bar Koni’s “Scholion” ............................................................ 566
   3.3. Iso’ bar Nun’s Selected Questions ............................................................. 567
   3.4. The Commentary on Gen-Exod 9: 32 of ms. (olim) Diyarbakir
       22 and the Anonymous Commentary on the Old Testament ..................... 568
   3.5. Iso’dad of Merv’s Commentary on the Old Testament ....................... 569
   3.6. The Garden of Delights (Gannat Bussāmē) ................................................. 571
   3.7. Other East-Syrian Exegetical Works ........................................................ 571
4. Dionysius bar Salibi’s Commentary on the Old Testament ............................................ 573
5. Barhebraeus’s Storehouse of Mysteries (Ausar Rāzē) ............................................. 574
6. Epilogue ................................................................................................................ 576

37. Elements of Biblical Interpretation in Medieval Jewish-Christian Disputation
By GÜNTER STEMBERGER, Vienna ...................................................................... 578
1. Antecedents ........................................................................................................ 578
2. Renewal of the Disputation in the Middle Ages ...................................................... 579
3. A Common Biblical Text ................................................................................... 580
4. General Hermeneutical Issues ........................................................................... 581
5. The Question of the Biblical Law ......................................................................... 583
6. Christological versus Historical Interpretation ...................................................... 586
SUPPLEMENT TO CHAPTER FIVE

Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon:
Their Interpretative Significance

5.3. Canon and Scripture in the Book of Ben Sira
(Jesus Sirach / Ecclesiasticus)
By Pancratius C. Beentjes, Utrecht ........................................ 591
1. Introduction ................................................................. 593
2. Ben Sira and the ‘Canon’ ............................................... 594
3. Ben Sira Citing Scripture ............................................. 596
   3.1. Introductory Formulae ........................................... 596
   3.2. Inverted Quotations .............................................. 598
   3.3. Structural Use of Scripture .................................... 600
   3.4. Unique Word Combinations in Ben Sira
        and Their Parallels in the Hebrew Bible ............. 602

5.4. Wisdom of Solomon and Scripture
By Maurice Gilbert, Rome ............................................. 606
1. Introduction ............................................................. 606
2. Wisdom under the Influence of Hebrew Bible ............... 607
   2.1. Opposed Theses Concerning the Righteous
        and the Wicked in Life and Death ....................... 607
   2.2. Wisdom and the Wise ......................................... 609
   2.3. Wisdom and the Heroes of Genesis-Exodus .......... 611
   2.4. Divine Mercy and Cultic Errors ......................... 612
   2.5. Punishment for the Wicked – Blessing for the Righteous .. 613
3. Hebrew Bible in Wisdom ........................................... 615
4. Conclusion ................................................................. 617

Contributors ........................................................................ 621

Abbreviations ...................................................................... 625

Indexes (Names / Topics / References) .............................. 635
Preface

The first volume of the project Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: the History of Its Interpretation, entitled "From the Beginnings to the Middle Ages", was planned as just one volume, not only for formal reasons, but even more on 'inner' objective grounds. For volume I was intended to comprise, as indicated by its title, the first main part of the scriptural history of interpretation, which in spite of inner tensions and many differences exhibits a remarkable ideological consistency, and after which the Renaissance, in various ways, heralded something new and different. In order to keep the original unity of the first volume, at least to some extent, its continuous counting of 37 chapters and its tripartite division have been retained — the present part volume on the Middle Ages constituting its main part C.

In fact, the need for a division of volume I into two part volumes became soon obvious, not to say required; for the rich and variegated material of scriptural interpretation from the Middle Ages, on the Christian as well as on the Jewish side, made it imperative to give more attention and space to this epoch, that so often has been neglected and, due to different forms of prejudice, has been depreciated as "the Dark Ages". It would indeed represent a most positive side effect if the present volume might contribute to a diminishing of prejudice regarding the Middle Ages and to a fostering of an adequate recognition of its richness in exegetical reflection, insight and practice; and, also, even the transition to the Renaissance may in this way be less radical and complicated.

Furthermore, as was stated in general terms in the Preface to the first part volume, that there is a "need for a comprehensive research history in the field, written anew in the light of the current status in biblical as well as in historical disciplines", this, not least, is a burning question as regards the Middle Ages. For in this field, the historians for quite some time have discussed extensively an accurate determination of the term, limitation and content of the so-called 'Middle Ages'. Some aspects of these tangled problems need to be dealt with also on this occasion; that will be done briefly in the introductory chapter.

It belongs to the international and interconfessional character of the HBOT Project that it is written by scholars representing different scholarly milieux and traditions. This state of affairs has its merits, but at the same time it includes some risk of fragmentation, which was discussed in the Prolegomenon of the first part volume (cf. HBOT I/1, p.24); and also it may involve some risk of overlapping, when different authors are treating items that are closely related to each other or even comment on the same subject. Although cases of apparent overlapping have been avoided, the point at issue, nevertheless, has been handled with tolerance, for it may be regarded as positive when a matter,
in a stereo-like way, is treated by different authors from various angles and viewpoints. Finally, on questions of style and transcription, particularly with regard to Hebrew names and to technical terms a standardization has been aimed at, but at the same time one will find, to some degree, minor deviations among the individual authors.

A Project of this kind cannot exist and be pursued without many relations of dependence and support, for which I have the pleasure of expressing my deep gratitude. Once again, I should like to pay tribute to the Co-Editors of the First Volume, especially Professor Haran who so generously has helped at some critical points of the road. I also wish to thank Professor Dr. Drs. h.c. Otto Kaiser, of Marburg, for valuable help. Once again, my deepfelt thanks go to Dr. Arndt Ruprecht and Reinhilde Ruprecht, PhD, for their unabated support and to the staff of Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht for taking such good care of the Project. Also this time, I am deeply indebted to Förderungs- und Beihilfefonds Wissenschaft der VG Wort, of Munich, that has granted a considerable financial support, and so also to the Norwegian Research Council, as well as to the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters and to the Fridtjof Nansen Fond, of Oslo, for their financial support of the editorial work, and in this respect, also to my own Faculty, The Norwegian Lutheran School of Theology, and its Director Finn Olav Myhre, for all practical support of the Project, even after my retirement. Finally, I should like to express my very best thanks to HBOT’s linguistic consultants, first cand. theol. Richard Lee Blucher, of Oslo, and now especially Professor Ronald E. Clements, of Cambridge, for their required and invaluable help; and I also thank stud. theol. Eskil Helgerud Andersen for his helpful work on the Indexes.

Last but not least, the present volume of HBOT would have been nothing without its authors. I feel deeply obliged for their respective essays which not only represent actual surveys but also new research, whereby they have contributed positively to the progress of biblical and historical scholarship.

Oslo, in March 2000

Magne Sæbø
C.

Christian and Jewish Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament in the Middle Ages
Chapter Twenty-three

The Problem of Periodization of ‘the Middle Ages’
Some Introductory Remarks

By Magne Sæbø, Oslo


When moving from Antiquity, which was the subject of the first part volume (HBOT I/1) to the subsequent epoch of history, the so-called ‘Middle Ages’, that is the special field of the present part volume, one is confronted with a
The Problem of Periodization of ‘the Middle Ages’

most delicate historiographical problem: for what really does the term ‘Middle Ages’ mean, and still more difficult: what period of time does it more exactly comprise? In the present context, where the epoch as a whole is under discussion, it will not only be most appropriate but simply necessary to make some introductory reflections on this problem of modern historiography.

The conventional term ‘Middle Ages’ seems prima facie to be quite simple, meaning literally the time ‘in the middle’ of some other periods; indicated is the period between Antiquity and the New or ‘Modern’ Time. However, the meaning and use of the term are not as obvious or ‘simple’ as it at first may seem; for, as far as modern historical research is concerned, the term ‘Middle Ages’ appears to be a highly problematic one, not least from a methodological point of view.

Problematic is this term not only because of the indicated tripartition of history, especially when seen in a wider and universal perspective, but also with regard to the way in which this historical division generally has been carried through. When it comes to a more exact determination of the ‘Middle Ages’, an approach of this kind will have a bearing on several complex problems. In the first instance, it raises questions of an adequate chronological delimitation of its beginning and end as a specific historical epoch as well as of complicated socio-political, cultural and ideological descriptions of its ‘content’ or inner structure, in other words, what may constitute this epoch as unique in comparison with the preceding and the following epoch. The ‘simple’ terminology, then, involves many and manifold problems, among which even the problem of periodization, both on a chronological and a structural level, is of a basic character and function. In an introductory discussion of this particular problem it may be appropriate to focus briefly on the (1) terminological, (2) chronological, and (3) ideological and theological aspects of the ‘Middle Ages’.

1. The commonly used term ‘Middle Ages’ — similarly Mittelalter in German and Moyen Age in French — that indicates a specific historical epoch in ‘the middle’ of History, is not very old but it has roots in older traditions. Therefore, it may be meaningful to differentiate between the use of the term as a term of periodization and the idea of some historical ‘middle period’.

The first use of ‘Middle Ages’ as a term of historical periodization has generally been associated with a three volume handbook in World History by Christoph Cellarius (Keller; 1638–1707), of Weimar and Halle; his three volumes were related to a tripartite scheme of history, i.e. Antiquity (Historia antiqua, 1685) — Middle Ages (Historia medii aevi, 1688) — New Time (Historia nova, 1696). But he was not the first one to use this scheme of periodization

of history, for some years earlier Georg Horn (1620–1670), of Leiden, had already made use of it, although within a framework of a different kind. It seems likely, though, that it was the handbook of Cellarius that had the greater influence on the historiography to come.

The main thing, however, was the fact that a historical periodization of this kind appeared for the first time in the seventeenth century and, notably, found its specific form in the later part of the century. Even though a historical handbook had given the term its most effective start its rise can scarcely be explained on practical or pedagogical grounds alone; its general acceptance may have had deeper reasons and presuppositions. On this occasion, with the focus on the history of scriptural interpretation, it may be appropriate to point to two different, but also related, circumstances.

First, to begin with the latest and possibly most specific one, there was a ‘modern’ condition, fostered by the approaching and developing Enlightenment, namely, the enhancing secularization of history and historiography. In the course of time, History lost its biblical and theological basis and was no longer regarded as some sort of Heilsgeschichte; nor was it, comparably to still other religiously related partitions of History, divided into two main parts any more, i.e., the pagan times before Christ and the times after Christ, the era of the Church. The universal History was, moreover, to incorporate Church History, for which the new state of affairs generated new problems, as in particular K. Heussi has pointed out.

Second, the new historiographical use of the term ‘Middle Ages’ had old roots in Humanism, that is to say in the idea of medium aevum, a ‘middle era’, which leads back to an early time of the Renaissance. In this way Humanism provided an ideological bridge from the Renaissance to the new historical terminology that was worked out in the course of the seventeenth century. However, when early Italian humanists, like Petrarch, as well as later humanists spoke of a medium tempus — or in similar forms of this expression — the term was not related to History in a strict sense, not to say historiography, but it was used in a literary and linguistic sense — as also the well-known humanistic device ad fontes was used in a literary, not in a historical sense. It was not least with regard to the use and standard of Latin as practised by the Church in the preceding centuries compared with the classic use of it in Antiquity that the

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5 Schäferdiek, *Mittelalter* (1994) 112, goes even back to 1601, when the historian H. Canisius edited a collection of documents, *Antiquae lectiones*, whose content was described as *antiqua documenta ad historiam mediae aetatis illustrandum*, including documents from the third to the sixteenth century.
‘middle age’ was looked upon as an inferior period, or, as “a period of decline”.  

Although the idea and term of a ‘middle age’ for a long time was not used in a historiographical sense, it nevertheless expressed a historical perspective: over the ‘time in between’, one looked back at the time of Antiquity, like a cultural Golden Age, in comparison with which the medium aevum was regarded not only as an inferior period but was characterized in a still more negative way when the period was called saeculum obscurum, the ‘Dark Ages’.  

The term ‘Middle Ages’, then, was from the beginning not just a neutrally dividing term of time but also, in a clearly negative manner, a characterizing term, coined at a distance by humanists who most consciously regarding their own time evaluated the ‘time in between’ against the background of Antiquity’s classic culture. The negative expression was carried on and even reinforced by many Protestants for whom the ‘Dark Ages’, against the background of the New Testament and the Church Fathers, mirrored the negative sides of the Catholic Church, whereas in the time of Enlightenment — for representatives like Voltaire and D. Hume — the ‘Middle Ages’ first of all embodied ignorance. Although estimated in the time of Romanticism, the negative characteristics of the Middle Ages have been carried on, up to the present time; mirabile dictu, also Farrar used the term ‘Dark Ages’. But slowly, new and increased insights into the creativity and richness of the Middle Ages seem to bring about a more positive — and adequate — portrayal of these central centuries.  

2. The question that has been asked by many, especially in recent research, relates to the limits of the period in question: when did the ‘Middle Ages’ really begin and when did it end? To be sure, when the definition of the term ‘Middle Ages’ turns out to be a rather intricate question, as was shown above, the chronological delimitation of the assumed epoch seems to be an even more controversial matter. Scholars have been far from any consensus in this respect, while the historical discussion continues; correspondingly, the concrete descriptions of the chronological limits of the ‘Middle Ages’ differ considerably — and, in general, may be met with some reservation. Also here, the old saying: quot homines, tot sententiae reminds one of required prudence.  

For Cellarius the ‘Middle Ages’ comprised the long period from the times...
of Constantine the Great to the capture of Constantinople by the Turks,\textsuperscript{17} i.e., from about 313 (as far as the \textit{Decree of Milan} is included) to 1453, in other words, it covered more than a millenium. However, it may be neither possible nor necessary to discuss the potential reasons for such a broad delimitation of the ‘Middle Ages’; it is remarkable, though, that this very long span of time was not unusual, up to the present time.\textsuperscript{18} On this occasion, it may suffice to make some brief remarks on the beginning, the question of a possible inner division, and the end of the epoch.

In current historical scholarship, it is the \textbf{beginning} of the ‘Middle Ages’, its limit ‘in front’, that has been the prime subject of many historical studies; and as far as the ‘front limit’ is concerned it is mainly the important — but difficult — transition from \textit{late} Antiquity to the early ‘Middle Ages’ that has been brought into focus.\textsuperscript{19} As for this transition two related points — among others — have attracted the attention of scholars. First, there was a shift of scene. Although \textit{Imperium Romanum} had its distant \textit{limes} in countries like Britannia and Germany, its ‘home scene’ for centuries was around \textit{mare nostrum}, it was the Mediterranean world, which also included peoples of North Africa and the Near East. It may be contended that with the gradual fall of the glorious Roman Empire also Antiquity came to an end as a specific epoch — but not in its long and influential \textit{Wirkungsgeschichte}. “During the early Middle Ages the unity of the Mediterranean world was permanently broken: the sea which had been the center of a civilization, a channel of communication, now became a frontier to be crossed for commerce or for war.”\textsuperscript{20} After the \textit{sacco di Roma} in 410, through increasing attacks by migrating peoples from the North and with still other elements of a most complex historical process of transition, something quite new entered the stage during the following centuries. For, secondly, in this politically and culturally new and different situation the formation of \textit{Europe} took place;\textsuperscript{21} remarkably, Charlemagne has been called “the Father of Europe”. At the same time, as the Eastern parts of the Mediterranean world for various reasons had receded into the background, whereas the Arabs made continued progress, also a specific \textit{Western} civilization was now developing.\textsuperscript{22} Though being a rich heir of the Mediterranean world, Europe moved its main points of influence and administration from the

\textsuperscript{17} The full title of the second volume was: \textit{Historia medii aevi a temporibus Constantinii magni ad Constantinopolim a Turcis captam deducta}; cf. Schäferdike, \textit{Mittelalter} (1994) 113.


\textsuperscript{19} See esp. the collections of studies edited by Hübinger, \textit{Kulturbruch oder Kulturkontinuität} (1968), and \textit{Zur Frage der Periodengrenze zwischen Altertum und Mittelalter} (1969); cf. also Müller, \textit{Die Grenze zwischen Altertum und Mittelalter} (1887); Aubin, \textit{Die Frage nach der Scheide zwischen Altertum und Mittelalter} (1951/1969).

\textsuperscript{20} So Hoyt, \textit{Europe} (1957) 5; cf. also Kahl, Was bedeutet ‘Mittelalter’? (1989) 19.


South to the Northwest, to Ireland and Britain, to France and Germany, beyond the old limes of the Roman Empire. With this radical shift of scene and the growth of a new Europe there was also a radical “shift of paradigms”, 23 that makes it meaningful to speak of a new historical epoch.

Also within the ‘Middle Ages’, it is customary to make a tripartite division of Early, High and Late Middle Ages. The division, however, is not only highly relative but it may be of less importance as well.24 In recent historical research, it seems to be of primary significance to focus upon the longer inner developments, tensions and divers transitions as exhibited by the new nations and kingdoms, like, for example, the establishing of political, social and financial systems, within the framework of mainly agrarian societies, the tension of ecclesiastical and political authorities or the special relationship between Christians, Jews and Muslims in Spain, and the development of cultural and ecclesiastical institutions, like the monasteries and the different orders. In the present context of a history of scriptural interpretation, it lays near at hand to mention the development of education and the school system.25 In all, the ‘Middle Ages’ presents itself as a rich and dynamic epoch.26

As for the question of the end of this epoch, it is — like the question of its beginning — to an essential degree open to discussion; a borderline between the so-called ‘Late Middle Ages’ and the Renaissance is hard, if ever possible, to draw. Sometimes, the ‘Late Middle Ages’ is extended to the sixteenth century; on the other hand, the question has been raised whether it is appropriate to speak of a Renaissance or ‘Proto-Renaissance’ already in the twelfth century;27 recently, there seems to be some tendency to push Renaissance as long as possible back into the Middle Ages.28

When the present volume of the HBOT Project, except for chapters on the Syrian Churches and on the Medieval Jewish-Christian disputations, ends with the Victorines of Paris and the great Masters of the thirteenth century,29 it is mainly for two reasons.

(a) As the first part volume, dealing with Antiquity, was concluded with an essay on Augustine, whose creative and synthetical work seems to ‘crown’ the traditions of theological reflection and exegetical practice of the Old Church, a corresponding ending of the second part volume is intended with essays on the great theologians and exegetes of the ‘High Middle Ages’; and similarly it may be said of the contemporary Jewish exegesis, especially as it was performed by Rashi in the school of literal Jewish exegesis in Northern France.30

24 Cf. Heussi, Altertum, Mittelalter und Neuzeit (1921/1969) 55f/133f: “bei der Gliederung des Stoffes würde es sich um Klassifikation, nicht um Partition handeln, also nicht um eigentliche historische Perioden”.
29 Chap. 34, by R. Berndt, and chap. 35, by K. Froehlich.
30 See chap. 32, by A. Grossman; cf. chap. 31 and 33 for the rich and significant Jewish exegesis in Spain, and also elsewhere.