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CONTOURS OF AN ANCIENT JEWISH EXEGETICAL TRADITION SPANNING TIME, PLACE, AND LANGUAGE

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A review of:
אָחוֹר וָקֶדֶם: המשכיות וצמיחה של מסורות בין ספרות בית שני לספרות חז"ל [*Dynamics of Midrashic Traditions in Second Temple and Rabbinic Literature*] by Menahem Kister. 498 pp. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2024. Paperback $43, eBook $17.

Menahem Kister's new book tackles a central question: What is the relationship between midrash found in rabbinic texts and midrash found in Second Temple period texts, including Hellenistic works like Philo, sectarian works from Qumran, as well as apocrypha and pseudepigrapha? His answer in one sentence: They all develop out of a common exegetical tradition, not just in method, but in specific midrashic readings.

Though many scholars have touched on the connection between various strands of ancient Jewish literature – Vered Noam's studies being, perhaps, the most obvious and extensive[1] – the perspective and scope of Kister's book is reminiscent of James Kugel's 1,000-page oeuvre, *Traditions of the Bible* (1998), though the organization is quite different. Kugel's tome follows the order of the Bible and reads like a commentary of sorts, in which he introduces the story then quotes various midrashic interpretations drawn from ancient sources. In Kister's book, however, each chapter lays out one type of connection (same theme, halakhic practice, or interpretation) or genre (allegory, pesher, rewritten scripture) and then offering several examples to support the truth of the claim that different texts from different communities derive from a shared exegetical tradition.

More than just demonstrating the fact of the interrelated exegesis, Kister argues that by doing these comparisons, we can uncover the meaning of obscure passages in different works, since what is opaque or

1. See, e.g., Noam 2010, and 2018. Noam is just illustrative here, many scholars are analyzing these connections, but this review is not the place for an exhaustive list. Kister, of course, discusses many of them in his book, and its extensive bibliographies are a helpful place to start.

abbreviated in one can be clear or expansive in another. And this can be true in reverse historical order, with a later source preserving material better than an earlier one, since the book is not arguing for the traditions being linear and built on the sources we have, but for the pervasiveness of traditional exegesis everywhere among ancient Jewish scholarship based on avenues of transmission now lost to us.

The project is easy to summarize in the abstract, as I did above, but to give a sense of what Kister has built requires presenting a mini-version. This is because the full effect can only be felt when seeing the myriads of types of similarities, the extent of the sources and how different they are, and some specifics to get a taste of just how persuasive the argument for a connection can be.

TEXTUAL VARIANTS

In chapter 1, Kister gives a complex example that ties Samaritan, Qumran, and Rabbinic exegesis together.[2] Deuteronomy 11:29–30 says that when the Israelites cross the Jordan, they should do the blessing and curse on Mounts Gerizim and Ebal, which are opposite Gilgal near Elonei Moreh. If the Gilgal mentioned here is the same as that near Jericho, which is often assumed by traditional readers, it is far from Elonei Moreh (=Shechem). A similar problem appears in Deuteronomy 27:1–7, according to which the Israelites are to set up stones upon crossing the river, plaster them, write the words of the Torah on them, and set them up on Mount Ebal (or Gerizim in the SP).

Kister suggests that the problem may derive from the conflation of what was once two different traditions about Joshua's ritual act upon entering the land, but the main point is that the problem is solved in diverse ways among ancient commentators, beginning even in the book of Joshua itself. In MT, the ritual appears after the conquest of Ai, before the encounter with the Gibeonites, implying that the Israelites had already made it well into the hill country, thus the ritual could take place just outside Shechem/Elonei Moreh. In 4QJosh^{a}, it appears immediately upon crossing the Jordan, implying that it takes place between Jericho and the Jordan River, i.e., opposite Gilgal.

2. Example §10, pp. 39–46. Each chapter, and even each subsection, has numerous supporting examples. Throughout the review, I am simply presenting ones that seem especially useful in clarifying how Kister works with the material and what he is and is not trying to show.

How did early reception deal with this? Biblical Antiquities has Joshua, at the end of his life, build an altar at Gilgal and put stones up on Ebal with the words of the Torah written upon them.[3] Josephus suggests that Joshua built the altar on Ebal from the stones that the tribal chiefs set up near Jericho. Rabbinic exegesis contains three solutions. The first two assume that stones were set up near Gilgal and an altar on Mount Ebal, and that the words of the Torah were written either on the former (R. Judah) or the latter (R. Yossi).[4] The third opinion, that of R. Eliezer, is that the Israelites built mounds near Gilgal, and named them Gerizim and Ebal. This may well be what stands behind the Qumran version as well.

Taking a bird's eye view of this material, what does the overlap in exegesis tell us about the relationship between these texts? Here Kister walks a fine line. On one hand, he does not claim that these texts know each other, that R. Eliezer for instance had access to Qumran scrolls. On the other hand, he does not believe that such examples are best explained by pure exegetical needs. Rather, Kister posits an ancient exegetical tradition in which these possibilities or approaches float, and that we see authors from different periods and locations dipping into this reservoir. Of course, no one example can support such a bold claim, which is why Kister relies not only on the force of any specific example, but the sheer number and diversity of them.

To add to the complexity here, Kister notes that in this specific case, R. Eliezer is said to have polemicized against the text of the Samaritan Pentateuch, which reads (Deut 11:30) "near Elonei Moreh, Shechem," saying that the final word – absent from MT – is superfluous, since we already know Elonei Moreh is by Shechem. Notably, this polemic contradicts R. Eliezer's own opinion about the mounds being built near Gilgal, but whether R. Eliezer purposefully contradicted himself for polemical reasons, changed his mind, or that one or both of these texts do not actually originate with R. Eliezer but were fabricated by a later author,[5] we can see here that *somebody* in the Rabbinic tradition was aware of this textual variant, and perhaps others in the SP. Nevertheless, this is a far cry

3. My own view (Farber, 2017) is that *Biblical Antiquities* is a late-Pharisaic/proto-rabbinic text, though this may not be Kister's.
4. These two positions appear in j. Sotah 7:5, that of R. Eliezer in an earlier passage (7:3).
5. Both appear in j. Sotah 7:3. The latter also appears in Sifrei Deuteronomy §56.

from assuming that the rabbis studied textual variants in any systematic way.[6]

REWRITTEN SCRIPTURE[7] AND ANCIENT HALAKHOT

In chapter 2, to show correlations between what would appear to be unconnected traditions, Kister first notes that the LXX version of Esther 2:7 states that Mordechai adopted Esther and brought her up to be his wife.[8] There is no obvious exegetical basis in the text to suggest this understanding; to the contrary, claiming Esther was married makes the rest of the story much more problematic.

In the Babylonian Talmud (Megillah 13a), Rabbi Meir reads the word *le-bayit*, "into his home" as *le-bat*, "as a wife." This midrashic maneuver is more likely a post facto support for a pre-existing tradition, the same that inspired the LXX reading. While it is possible that either the Talmud or Rabbi Meir was aware of the LXX reading, Kister sees this as evidence of an exegetical tradition that spans both the Hellenistic authors of the Greek rewriting of Esther, and the rabbi(s) responsible for midrashically supporting the tradition in the Talmud.

A very different kind of example appears in chapter 3. Elisha Qimron noted that DSS fragment 11Q21 contains a prohibition to raise fowl/chickens in Jerusalem.[9] This same prohibition appears in Mishnah Baba Qama 7:7. The prohibition has no biblical basis at all, and the overlap cannot be explained as an accident of similar exegetical approaches. Here let me quote Kister's comment (translation mine):

> It is impossible not to take to heart how much we are dependent on tiny scraps of parchment to outline the specifics of halakhic practice [in this period] and the principles that emerge from them.

Here, Kister gives a hint to what he thinks about the question he avoids tackling, namely if these texts/authors don't know each other's work, but the overlap has a genetic connection of some sort, what is that connection? Perhaps one part is a trove of texts that were not preserved, to which these ancient authors had access either in writing or orally. Kister's point,

6. For a recent argument that the rabbis were more aware of LXX variants than we may have assumed, see Basser (2025), but even here, the author is working with a limited set and subtle examples.
7. The term is controversial, especially when dealing with liminal cases. See discussion in Zahn (2011). Nevertheless, Kister uses the term and, for our purposes, the general meaning is clear.
8. Section 2, § 4, pp. 75–77.
9. This example is §3, p. 92.

though, is that whatever the explanation, two unconnected traditions prohibiting the raising of fowl cannot be a coincidence.

ANCIENT EXEGESIS AND HELLENISTIC WORKS

Chapter 4 goes back in time to tackle two especially early works, Ben Sira and Jubilees. For the latter work, Kister teases out the well-known example of Abraham's turn to monotheism,[10] something that never appears in the Bible beyond simple statements that YHWH chose him. Building on Joshua's final speech, which claims that Abraham's ancestors worship foreign gods, Jubilees envisions Terah an actual priest for idols (perhaps inverting Jethro) and an astrologer (understanding Chaldean in that sense). In contemplation, Abraham realizes that idols are fake, smashes them, denies astrology, and turns to God, who then communicates with Abraham in an opening revelation. This same theme – and following the same order – appears in the (c. 1st/2nd c. C.E.) Apocalypse of Abraham,[11] Genesis Rabbah (c. 5th c. C.E.),[12] and two (late-)rabbinic piyyutim from the land of Israel.

In his discussion, Kister sticks to his cautious phraseology, that we need to think about מכלולים "clusters" of texts and how later texts can shed light on earlier texts. But if we had to drop caution for a moment, what are the options here? Without being exhaustive, three obvious ones stand out: a) Jubilees existed in some form and the later texts had access to it; b) The theme is somehow intuitive enough from biblical verses that it was recreated independently in different texts; c) The theme existed in the exegetical ether of Jewish interpreters, either orally or in unpreserved texts. The last seems to be Kister's preferred theory, and while this example makes it easy to assume a tradition, given that all texts are from the land of Israel, Kister has little compunction about applying them to exegetical overlaps like this in texts from very different regions and even languages.

This point is perhaps clearest in the collection of short examples Kister includes in chapter 8, which deals with themes that overlap between Hellenistic Jewish sources and rabbinic texts. For example, the Testament of Abraham speaks of Abraham dying from "the kiss" of God, a theme

10. Example §4, pp. 144–153.
11. The text is preserved only in Slavonic, in a 14th century manuscript.
12. Another parallel midrash is preserved in David al-Adani's 14th century Midrash Hagadol, making its origins in rabbinic literature a matter of speculation.

that appears in several places in rabbinic literature.[13] As Kister notes, this Hellenistic work is derivative of a similar one on Moses, mostly lost, and that the midrashic basis for this is the MT phrase that Moses dies על פי "by the mouth" of God – LXX reads "by the word" God. So, we have here a theme that spreads from an original Hebrew midrash to both a Hellenistic interpreter and rabbinic interpreters.

A more poignant example[14] is how in rabbinic literature, R. Ayvo claims that Enoch was sometimes wicked and sometimes righteous, and that God chose to take him during a righteous period so he could get his eternal reward. Kister notes that, while this is often seen as an anti-Christian polemic about the imperfection of a Jesus-like figure, Philo of Alexandria understands Enoch as a repentant individual, and the Wisdom of Solomon describes how God took him so that he wouldn't sin. Here it is worth quoting Kister (my trans.):

> I do not intend to claim a connection between these different texts: a comparison of the texts to each other does not allow for the creation of a harmonistic version between the three. However, an integrative analysis can point to exegetical and ideological dynamics that brought about the growth of these texts from one tradition into Second Temple literature and rabbinic literature... Moreover, cognizance of the accidental nature of the preservation of texts and motifs should bring us to an awareness that the absence of any given tradition in the extra-rabbinic corpus does not necessarily mean that the tradition evolved specifically in rabbinic interpretation and that it is unique to it (pp. 253–255).

MOTIFS THAT CONTRADICT THE TEXT

In chapter 5, one example of an exegetical motif that actually contradicts the biblical text[15] deals with Genesis 7:19's clearly stated claim that no land whatsoever remained above water during Noah's flood. In fact, Genesis Rabbah (32:10) records a debate between R. Jonathan and a Samaritan, while the latter claims that Mount Gerizim was not covered by the flood waters, R. Jonathan's donkey driver responds by showing him that this contradicts the Torah. Notably, this is not just rabbinic straw-manning, but in Tibat Marqah (3:33), we do indeed find the claim that Noah offers his sacrifice near Mount Gerizim because it was devoid of

13. §2 pp. 246–247.
14. §4 pp. 250–257.
15. §1 pp. 167–171

impurity, as no dead bodies piled upon it, since it was never covered with water.

This sharp polemic, however, does not end matters, since elsewhere in Genesis Rabbah (33:6), Rabbi Levi claims that all the land of Israel remained dry from flood waters. This tradition appears already in Biblical Antiquities. In addition, a (rabbinic) targum to Judges claims that Mount Tabor was never covered with water, and we see similar claims about various Islamic holy places. What we seem to be seeing here, Kister argues, is a motif that runs through various Jewish and Jewish-adjacent traditions, but whose details change depending on the source and the author's theological commitments (Gerizim for Samaritans, etc.).

Sectarian Midrash, Pesher, and Allegory

Chapter 6 takes a deep dive into sectarian midrash at Qumran and contributes little to the main argument of the book. Instead, Kister here concentrates on a more general point: some of the style of putting together an exegetical passage in these works is similar in structure and thinking – not content – to what we find in Talmudic pericopes.

For instance,[16] a passage in the Damascus Covenant (4:20–5:6) dealing with the sectarian belief that polygyny is always prohibited first brings prooftexts from the creation and Noah's-ark stories, and Deuteronomy's prohibition for a king to multiply his wives. It then notes that David had multiple wives, and explains, though he would have read the Torah as Deuteronomy commands, he could not because the Torah was locked away in the ark after Elazar died, a reading of Joshua's burial story as per the LXX and not the MT.[17] It is again worth quoting Kister:

> It is not my intention to point to content or exegetical similarities between this passage and rabbinic literature, rather to the style of the discourse, and the sophisticated way verses, arguments, and proofs for a given halakhic argument are embedded, and the ways of countering alternative arguments (p. 205).

Chapter 7 looks at two limited exegetical phenomena, the pesher and allegory. For the sectarian pesher, Kister does not point to robust parallels in rabbinic literature, though he notes that, on an ideological plain, Seder Olam's principle that only prophecies relevant to the future were recorded in the Bible can be seen as parallel (p. 213).

16. §4 pp. 205–211
17. This was noted by Rofé (2018).

He also notes that the style of pesher is similar to that of midrash (and later medieval commentaries), quoting a lemma and then glossing it (p. 216). He also notes that both traditions connect Balaam's (Num 24:17) "a star rises from Jacob" as referring to a later leader, the expounder of Torah from the Damascus Covenant (7:18–20) and for the sages (j. Taanit 4:5) Bar Kochba (p. 220). Kister also points to a pesher style reading of a later phrase in this verse, "and smashes the brow of Moab" in Ben Sira (36:12), as referring to an arrogant leader in the days of the author.

For allegorical readings, Kister finds more extensive parallels. For instance,[18] the understanding of "water" as something spiritual. Thus, Exodus 15:22 tells how the Israelites could not find water, and the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael says they couldn't find words of Torah. The Damascus Covenant (6:3–10) understands the song of the well (Num 21:16–18) as referring to the Torah-study approach newly dug by the sectarian group. Paul of Tarsus understands the water the Israelites received from the stone as their receiving the spirit of Christ (1 Cor 10:1–5).

Here again we do not have authors copying from each other – they aren't even glossing the same verse – but a motif that spans traditions, though one that is not hard to derive from biblical verses, such as Isaiah 55:1's "let all who thirst go to water," which the rabbis understand as Torah.

Case Histories

In chapter 9 Kister presents three case histories of especially complex examples of tradition overlap. The second example is the story of "the argument at the Sea," when the Israelites think they are trapped and that they are about to be slaughtered by the pursuing Egyptian army.[19] The Mekhilta of R. Ishmael says that they broke into four groups, one that said they should throw themselves in the water, another to return to Egypt, another to stand a fight, and the last to scream at them. None suggest trusting in God. A midrashic collection, Pirka DeRabbeinu HaKadosh leaves out the fourth group, but it turns out that this fits with a more ancient version, found in Biblical Antiquities, which divides the three groups of four tribes, highlighting how a Geonic text could preserve a version of the midrash older than that of the Mekhilta, even though it

18. §1.2, pp. 232–233.
19. §2 pp. 298–311.

almost certainly did not have access to this work (which has been preserved only in a Latin translation of a Greek translation). The Samaritan Tibat Marqa (4:63) also has only three groups, but instead of one group suggesting that they throw themselves in the water, they suggest running away into the wilderness.

Earlier than all these sources is Philo's Life of Moses, where he replays this scene twice. In the first (§170–172), Philo envisions them saying that the exodus was pointless, they can't fight Egyptians without weapons, they can't survive in the wilderness or cross the water. In the second (§243–244), he has them prepare to jump in the water and drown themselves, since that kind of death is preferable to suffering death at the hands of an enemy. Unlike the other presentations, Philo does not connect these suggestions to biblical verses read in midrashic fashion, but to logical or melodramatic theoretical possibilities the frightened Hebrews grapple with. Which method – the logical, theoretical musing in Philo or the midrashic parsing of text in the other versions – is older is not clear, but it is a very specific scene to imagine all these disparate sources, in different languages, coming up with independently.

Textual Echoes and Multifaceted Motifs

An example of a textual echo is the story of the sorcerers who argue with Moses (chapter 10).[20] In the Babylonian Talmud (Menachot 85a) Yoḥanan and Mamre tease Moses, telling him that bringing magic to Egypt is like bringing straw to Afarayim, known for having the best straw, but Moses simply retorts that you bring herbs to where herbs are best appreciated. Noting that this feels like a fragment of a longer tradition, Kister points to the story of Yannes and Yambres, preserved in Greek, who are sent by Pharaoh to defeat Moses with sorcery but lose.

The oldest version of the story that we have appears in the Damascus Covenant (5:17–19), in which Belial, the force of darkness, sends Yoḥna and his brother to battle Moses and his brother Aaron, who stand for the force of light. The Second Epistle to Timothy (3:8) also references Yannes and Yambres, who went up against Moses. So does the late first millennium Targum Pseudo-Jonathan (Exod 1:15, 7:11), who uses the Greek version of their names, even though he is writing in Aramaic.

20. §2 pp. 323–329.

Clearly, this story in a general format was floating around in Jewish exegesis and used in different places.

As for complex motifs, take the final example in the book,[21] dealing with the angels going up and down in Bethel. Kister suggests that the origin of the motif is the ambiguity of the word בו, which on a simple level refers to the staircase but grammatically can refer to Jacob himself. In Genesis Rabbah, we already find derivatives of this concept, with R. Yohanan (69:3) suggesting that the angels were protecting him like a patron, and others (68:12) suggesting other possibilities of what they were doing with or on him. Alternatively, the phrase is understood as going up and down on account of Jacob, because – as per the midrashic reading of the verse about "its head" entering heaven as a reference to Jacob's – they were shocked that the same face they recognized from heaven was down on earth. Finally, the up and down is interpreted metaphorically as judging him.

This midrashic motif is alluded to in the Gospel of John 1:51, which refers to the heavens opening and angels going up and down the Man, meaning Jesus of course, but likely deriving from the imagery about Jacob as understood in this midrashic motif. In a lost work called the Prayer of Joseph, we hear that Jacob is the firstborn of creation, greater than the angels, which also, claims Kister, derives from this motif.[22] Even further afield, R. Abahu, again in Genesis Rabbah, imagines angels all over Jacob like flies, and God removing them and taking Jacob into his bosom, extending the midrash to the next phrase about God standing upon him, and presenting it literally.

THESIS: PROS AND CONS

The main thrust of the monograph is to demonstrate the thickness or extent of the connections, with the goal of flooding the readers with enough examples, analyzed in detail, to convince them that the claim is factually true, that there must be some kind of pervasive traditional exegesis of biblical passages. The work of figuring out how exactly this process occurred, however, is left for scholars who are convinced and wish to tackle this thorny problem.

21. §5 pp. 354–358.

22. See p. 356, fn 171. Here there is some editorial confusion, since on the next page, Kister references this point as if it had been discussed in the main text. Likely the complexity of Kister's book and the plethora of example material made such confusion inevitable.

In the book, Kister does not spend his energy explaining how it is all these communities, distant in time and place, and sometimes even language (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek), could be aware of each other's exegesis. In other words, Kister does not tackle the mechanics of the connection, but does offer an overall impression of how the connection can be explained, noting that often what seems like unexplainable gaps are optical illusions (p. 15). His approach is justified by the fact that the texts we study are an accidental remainder from a much larger pool of written and oral texts that once existed.

In biblical studies, we come up against such phenomena all the time. For example, the book of Ezekiel – a 6th century BCE work at the earliest – refers to a righteous person named Danel, whom we know only from a tablet found in Ugarit, which tells the story of him and his son Aqhat. The story is dated to the 14th century BCE or even earlier.[23] Clearly, Ezekiel, or whatever scribe composed that prophecy, didn't read Ugaritic or dig up tablets; the story survived in some form for another eight centuries despite our having no written allusion to it in the preserved documents from this period.[24]

The aggregate of the examples in the book, Kister argues, points to the importance of integrative reading, putting together all the various versions of a motif across the time and space of Jewish exegetical readings. While he does not commit to the specific mechanism of how they are connected, Kister believes that the evidence is overwhelming enough to establish that some kind of joint exegetical tradition existed, and that this must be taken into account when trying to understand specific texts.

It is hard to evaluate the amorphous, of course, and say what would or would not be a reasonable mechanism. That said, I do think that Kister has succeeded in presenting a persuasive argument that some such thing is more likely than not, and while one could pick at any specific example of his, the facility with which he reads the texts and builds his case makes the book not only a worthwhile study, but one that at least poses the hard question for those who don't accept the thesis to present reasonable alternative explanations.

23. The tablets themselves are later, dating to ca. 1220/1210 BCE.
24. See Day (1980), "The Daniel of Ugarit and Ezekiel."

ADDENDUM ON ADDENDA

In the back of the book, Kister includes addenda with the cute name עוללות "Gleanings," which are mini-deep dives into interesting facets of the texts or themes under discussion which go beyond the book's main thrust. These are all presented as extensions of the footnotes, which call attention to them. For example, §10 (pp. 369–370) argues for a tradition that stargazing on Rosh Hashanah can predict the year's rain, §22 (pp. 378–379) traces the way one exegetical tradition blames the women seduced by the angels for being seductresses, and §24 (pp. 380–381) argues that a parallel to the rabbinic blessing against sectarians exists already in Ben Sira.[25]

The book includes two bibliographies. The first is annotated, and is meant to guide readers through the primary sources, explaining what each source is when necessary, and offering a selection of academic works to explore in depth. This is very useful for researchers who want to learn about texts with which they are unfamiliar. The second is the standard bibliography, which is quite extensive.

The book also has three good indices: one for biblical verses, a second for primary sources, and the third is a subject index. Thus, the monograph can serve as a kind of handbook, reference book, or introductory study for Hebrew readers on Jewish exegesis. That said, readers will have to have some background, as the work is denser, more technical, and harder to navigate than Kugel's *Traditions of the Bible*, which, as noted, seems to me to be the most comparable work in the field.

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25. One confusing element in the book's editing, however, is that the same types of addenda exist for expansions on the main text as well, but instead of placing them in addenda in the back, they appear in the main part of the book with indented margins and a change in font size. See pp. 62–63, 64, 70, 107–108, 114–115, 123, 127, 149–150,179, 181, 201, 202, 214, 223, 267, 268–269, 275–276, 280, 301, 321.

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