

SOME THOUGHTS ON HERMENEUTICS AND TEXTUAL REASONING

MICHAEL ZANK

Boston University

In the Middle Ages—shrewdly or honestly (see Leo Strauss on “Persecution and the Art of Writing”!)—there prevails the assumption of the mental and moral superiority of the author of the text relative to the reader: the prophetology of perfect mind in combination with an imagination perfectly attuned to the perfect mind accounts for the fact that the perfect law combines within itself philosophical and popular meanings. Prophetological hermeneutics achieves this by referring to a full coherence of authorial intent and textual meanings.

Protestant Orthodoxy—naively?—assumes uninhibited flow of divine inspiration; the author is the mere writer or, even less, the pen (stylus), the tool, through which divine revelation is brought to earth. This assumption of quasi direct divine agency is necessary to maintain and explain how the sufficiency of the intervention of Christ (solus Christus) can be had without human agency of any sort (sola gratia), namely through Scripture as the last remaining relic or reliquary that Protestantism recognizes in this world (sola scriptura). Hence the last “solus” is added only by the later generations.

In modern Protestant hermeneutics divine intervention on the expense of human agency is displaced by inspired human agency. The ingenuity and spontaneity of the author's (i.e., the auctor's) intuition is the origin of revelation, yet it is the no less ingenious work of the interpreter to understand the author (who is, after all, in-spired and intuits the universe, albeit in an original manner) better than he understood himself. It is the interpreter who uncovers the, as it were, "eternal" and timeless value of the text, who distinguishes between historical convention and the truth content of the text.

What these three models have in common against, say, rabbinic and post-modern hermeneutics, seems to me their proceeding from the assumption of a conscious mind: in the case of medieval philosophy from the assumption of the conscious and sufficient mind of the philosopher contemplating the truth and expressing it perfectly (i.e., as appropriate to his audience); in the case of protestant orthodoxy from the assumption of the conscious (and certainly sufficient) mind of God who renders truth through prophets who are mere conduits; and in the case of modern protestant hermeneutics from the assumption of the congeniality of the minds of authors and readers.

In contrast, rabbinic hermeneutics seems unselfconscious. Hence the intriguing rapport between rabbinic and post-modern hermeneutics, whereby it would be possible to distinguish the two historically distant postures by simply reminding oneself that post-modern hermeneutics is, in a manner of speaking, self-consciously unselfconscious while rabbinic hermeneutics would be unselfconsciously unselfconscious. The modern presupposition of a consciously anti-anthropomorphic trend on the part of the rabbis (as evidenced, presumably, in the circumscription of the name of God in early Aramaic Targum) can hardly be advanced as proof to the contrary since it seems to rest on modern apologetic interests rather than on responsible historical critique.

If this is correct, then one could perhaps construct a phenomenology of correspondences between such unspoken hermeneutic assumptions which are taken for granted rather than reflected upon, or practised rather than theorized, and other fundamental and unspoken assumptions and

rules of mental and social behavior, a system of mutually reinforcing presuppositions and turns of mind.

Keywords coming to mind to describe this social and mental phenomenology of first assumptions governing not only rabbinic hermeneutics but also rabbinic social practices are *acephalism* (social organization without clear or permanent political institutions of leadership), *exile* (scattered and varied social reality of "Israel" corresponding to the almost infinite distribution of meanings in the text without dogmatic rules of interpretation), *halakhah and the 13 principles of hermeneutics* (rules rather than creedal formulations make up the structured and firm, yet pliable, ground on which the reality of exile, plurality, lack of national boundaries and institutions, etc. are compensated by; it is, after all, a religious and national system developed and maintained by text-scholars/lawyers; contrary to how the law is projected by lawgivers and experienced by their subordinate subjects, lawyers experience and project the infinite intricacy of legal textualities rather than the political force of the law). Ancient rabbinic Judaism is thus acephalic, textual, reflecting on the ins and outs of textual relations, meanwhile weaving an ever more perfect combination of life and text that, strangely enough, is broadly accepted not only as livable but as liberating, meaningful, and desirable.

The authority of this kind of reading/weaving together of text and reality is perhaps the most elusive aspect for people like myself who are steeped in self-conscious and mind-conscious traditions. It is also the aspect that eluded all of those modern readers that were favorably inclined towards the power and authority of mind and self (from Spinoza to Hegel: the narrative of the authorial, emancipated self, along with the narrative of conquest of the natural world). To them, Judaism was confined to the mosaic revelation in its literal, political sense which was read without regard to the rabbinic project. To be sure, the latter was itself somewhat buried under pilpulistic habits of reading and other degenerative aberrations lamented by Mendelssohn and others who were modernizers while maintaining the intuition that rabbinic Judaism contained valid possibilities. [Not by accident it is the discourse on

aesthetics more than the discourses on metaphysics and morality that provides Mendelssohn and others with a first alley for the defense of religion beyond rational theology. But this is another topic, to be pursued elsewhere and by others. I hope, our co-(t-)reasoner Leah Hochman will enlighten us on this.]

With rational theology discredited by Kant, the defense of the religious experience was advanced by Schleiermacher, again as a quasi-aesthetic experience, but in a way that was congenial to the Protestant concerns with the individual relation with God on the one hand and with the establishment of a community of like-minded people on the other. In its mental and social phenomenology, Schleiermacher's religion had little to offer those Prussian Jews who were on the cusp of converting to Protestantism anyway, if only for the sake of social convenience. In a cephalic and cerebral environment, religion was the religion of the heart, not of the limbs.

With industrialized mass society and its complexities and challenges arises discontent with this privatized, conventicized, and elitist type of religious hermeneutics. Hermann Cohen's socialist ethics and his emphasis on the suffering other as the condition of the self inaugurates the decline of self-centered ethics in philosophy and religious thought, intuiting renewed plausibility for the sensitivities underlying the textual reasoning of the rabbis. Yet the Jewish postmodern philosophical enterprise can hardly rest assured that the right hermeneutics for our time is simply retrievable from the ancient texts, so as if it lay bare on the surface and was not, at the same time, the task of the (post)modern reader to retrieve. In other words, the modern mandate of understanding the text better than did the author is still with us. We are, thus, at best in a situation of hybridity: neither a repristation of rabbinic manners of speaking, nor a complete step out of the modern consciousness is possible, or even desirable. And why should it be otherwise?