Midrash and Pesher:
Their Significance to the Intertextuality Debate
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INTRODUCTION

The discovery of the Qumran scrolls has shed much light as to how the scholars of the 1st century viewed the Old Testament Scriptures. In these scrolls we find hermeneutical techniques common to that day that some hold may have influenced the New Testament authors as they themselves used Old Testament passages for their own purposes.

This presentation will attempt to look at concepts of *midrash* and *pesher*, their use in the New Testament, and their relevance to New Testament study today.

TERMINOLOGY

Trying to define midrash and pesher is akin to a maze. Just when you think you have a handle on the thing, you are afforded several new ways in which to go.[1]

Midrash

The term *midrash* is a Hebrew noun (*midrāš*; pl. *midrāšîm*) derived from the verb *dāraš* which means "to search" (i.e. for an answer). Therefore *midrash* means "inquiry," "examination" or "commentary."[2] Ezra 7:10 is the first use where a written text is the object of *dāraš*.

> 10 For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD, and to practice *it,* and to teach *His* statutes and ordinances in Israel.

> 10כִּי עֶזְרָא הֵכִין לְבָבוֹ לִדְרוֹשׁ אֶת־תּוֹרַת יְהוָה וְלַעֲשֹׂת וּלְלַמֵּד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל חֹק וּמִשְׁפָּט׃ ס

Midrash has a variety of meanings and uses in the Qumran literature. It is used to refer to "judicial investigation, study of the law, and interpretation."[3] However the main use at Qumran

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[1] This first presentation is somewhat purposely vague. For the difficulties in defining these terms, see W. Edward Glenny, "The Hermeneutics of the Use of the Old Testament in 1 Peter," (Ph.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1987), 294-311.

[2] C. A. Evans, "Midrash," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green,, Scot McKnight, I Howard Marshall (Downers Grove: IVP, 1992), 544.

[3] Gary Porton, "Midrash," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, 4 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:818.

is to "designate Scriptural interpretation."[4] Porton offers a generic definition of midrash given its various uses.

> Midrash is a type of literature, oral or written, which has its starting point in a fixed canonical text, considered the revealed word of God by the midrashist and his audience, and in which this original verse is explicitly cited or clearly alluded to.[5]

A few observations of this definition are called for. This definition clearly makes midrash a genre.[6] Given that different genres call for different rules of interpretation, a clear set of guidelines for interpreting this kind of genre would be in order.

Secondly, this definition would include both translations (e.g. LXX) and the Targums (i.e. The Aramaic translation and commentary of Hebrew Bible). They both "seek" to recover the original meaning of the text.

Renée Bloch has noted the importance of giving midrash its proper meaning, since it often is taken as a synonym for "fable or moral legend."[7] He goes on to state that it actually "designates an edifying and explanatory genre closely tied to Scripture, in which the role of amplification is real but secondary and always remains subordinate to the primary religious end, which to is show the full import of the work of God, the Word of God."[8]

Midrash however is not satisfied with the meaning of the text. It begins to look at things atomistically, trying to find contemporary meaning at the phrase, syntax and word level.[9] Many observe two kinds of midrash: implicit and explicit.[10] Implicit midrash is in effect the "rewriting that occurs within the Hebrew Old Testament itself."[11] This action account for many of the variant reading of the Old Testament found in the New. This editorial license is reserved for the *pneumatic*, those spirit endowed New Testament leaders who gave their own new, Spirit guide interpretation of the Old Testament in light of the Christ event.[12]

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., 4:819.

[6] For a defense of Midrash as a genre and not a hermeneutical approach, see W. Edward Glenny, "The Hermeneutics of the Use of the Old Testament in 1 Peter," 294-311.

[7] R. Bloch, "Midrash," in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism: Theory and Practice*, ed. by W. S. Green (Brown Judaic Studies, 1; Missoula: Scholars, 1978):29.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Bruce, *Biblical Exegesis in the Qumran Texts*, 11-12.

[10] E. Earle Ellis, *The Old Testament in Early Christianity*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 92-101.

[11] Ibid., 92.

[12] cf. E. Earle Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity*, (Grand Raids: Eerdmans, 1978); the entire work.

Explicit midrash is more the exposition of an Old Testament text. An example of explicit midrash is found in Matthew 21:33-46, where there is a pronouncement of judgment on Israel's leaders for rejecting the Messiah. Here there is a citing of an Old Testament text, and exposition, followed by an application. Ellis lays it out according to the following form:[13]

33   - Initial text (Isa 5:1f).
34-41   - Exposition via a parable, verbally linked to the initial and/or final texts (ἀμπελών, 33, 39; λίθος, 42, 44, cf. 35; Isa 5:2; cf. οἰκοδομεῖν, 33, 42).
42-44   - Concluding texts (Ps 118:22f.; Dan 2:34f., 44f.) and application.

Longenecker notes that midrashic exegesis

> ostensibly takes its point of departure from the biblical text itself (though psychologically it may be motivated by other factors) and seeks to explicate the hidden meanings contained therein by means of agreed on hermeneutical rules in order to contemporize the revelation of God. It may be characterized by the maxim "that has relevance to this" – that is, what is written in Scripture has relevance to our present situation.[14]

Pesher

The term *pesher* was a term employed by the Qumran community to introduce an interpretation of a particular biblical text. The term is currently applied to the Qumran material in four ways:

> (a) a Qumranic biblical commentary written in a pesher-like form; (b) the formal term used to introduce the expository section of this kind of commentary; (c) the literary genre of these commentaries; and (d) the particular exegetical method of these Qumranic commentaries.[15]

That the members of Qumran quoted and commented on the Hebrew Bible is a given. The key element of what they noted in their pesher was that the biblical prophecies which they were addressing were being fulfilled in their our life and community. Therefore the pesharim are eschatological and even apocalyptic.[16]

The term *pesher* is derived from a Hebrew noun and has the lexical meaning of "solution," "interpretation."[17] It is found only once in the Old Testament, in Ecclesiastes 8:1:

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[13] *The Old Testament in Early Christianity*, 98.

[14] Richard Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 22.

[15] Divorah Dimant, "Pesharim, Qumran" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 5:244.

[16] Porton, 4:819.

[17] *Brown Driver Briggs*, 833.

8:1 WHO is like the wise man and who knows the interpretation of a matter? A man's wisdom illumines him and causes his stern face to beam.

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כְּהֶחָכָם וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ פֵּשֶׁר דָּבָר חָכְמַת אָדָם תָּאִיר פָּנָיו¹

וְעֹז פָּנָיו יְשֻׁנֶּא׃

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Here the interpretation/solution (i.e. pesher) is tied to wisdom. Bruce notes that this is especially true in the Book of Daniel, with the use of the cognate *pĕshar* in the book's Aramaic portions.[18] There *pĕshar* is used of Daniel's two interpretations of Nebuchadnezzar's two dreams and the writing on the wall at Belshazzr's feast. The point is that insight or wisdom is given to each of the mysteries. Bruce defines it this way: "The pesher, then, is an interpretation which passes the power of ordinary wisdom to attain; it is given by divine illumination."[19] This kind of mystery is mentioned in the Qumran literature with the use of the term *rāz* that also appears in the Aramaic portions of Daniel. Bruce notes,

> When Daniel enters the king's presence to explain his dream of the great image, he says: 'not because of any wisdom that I have more than all the living has this mystery (*rāz*) been revealed to me, but in order that the interpretation (*pĕshar*) may be made known to the king' (Dan. ii. 30). And when Nebuchadnezzar enlists Daniel's aid to explain his dream of the great tree, he says (Dan. iv. 9): 'because I know that the spirit of the holy gods is in you and that no mystery (*rāz*) is difficult for you, here is the dream which I saw; tell me its interpretation (*pĕshar*).'
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> In the Greek versions of the Septuagint and Theodotion, this term *rāz*, wherever it occurs in Daniel, is represented by *mystērion*; and it is helpful to bear this in mind when we meet the word *mystērion* in the Greek New Testament.[20]

The one who was able to put all this together, the revelation of God (Old Testament prophets) and the interpretation (*pesher*), was the Teacher of Righteousness. He was the chosen interpreter and founder of the Qumran community. His existence is contained in a pesher itself. In commenting on Habakkuk 2:1f we see how the community at Qumran viewed this teacher. Habakkuk 2:1-3 reads:

> 2:1 I WILL stand on my guard post
> And station myself on the rampart;
> And I will keep watch to see what He will speak to me,
> And how I may reply when I am reproved.
> 2 Then the LORD answered me and said, "Record the vision
> And inscribe *it* on tablets,

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[18] F. F. Bruce, *Biblical Exegesis in the Qumran Texts*, 8-9.

[19] Ibid., 8.

[20] Ibid.

That the one who reads it may run.
3 "For the vision is yet for the appointed time;
It hastens toward the goal, and it will not fail.
Though it tarries, wait for it;
For it will certainly come, it will not delay.

In the Habakkuk commentary at Qumran (1Qp Hab. vii. 1-5) we read the following pesher:[21]

God commanded Habakkuk to write the things that were coming upon the last generation, but the fulfillment of the epoch He did not make known to him. And for the words, *so he may run who reads it*, their interpretation (*pesher*) concerns the Teacher of Righteousness, to whom God made known all the mysteries (*rāzīm*) of the words of His servants the prophets.

Therefore:

1. God has revealed His purposes to the prophets, but they could not be understood until the end when its meaning was interpreted to the Teacher of Righteousness.
2. All of what the prophets wrote refers to the end of the age.
3. The end of the age is at hand.[22]

One can begin to see the implications of this on the New Testament writers given the discovery of the Qumran Scrolls. Jesus came expounding the prophets and the promised kingdom. He then says to His disciples:

11 And He was saying to them, "To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God; but those who are outside get everything in parables, 12 in order that WHILE SEEING, THEY MAY SEE AND NOT PERCEIVE; AND WHILE HEARING, THEY MAY HEAR AND NOT UNDERSTAND LEST THEY RETURN AND BE FORGIVEN."

In a sense, the disciples are those who have God's revelation (along with others), but it is Jesus who comes along (i.e. Teacher of Righteousness) and gives the pesher! Given the disciples concern after the resurrection if Jesus was about to restore the kingdom (Acts 1:6), one can see why they might have thought that they were living in the last days as well.

Paul's use of pesher is rooted in three major factors: textual deviations, a "this is that" fulfillment motif, and a *raz-pesher* understanding of the prophetic message.[23] As for the first part regarding textual deviations, Ellis hold that it is the right of spiritually endowed believers to alter or "mould" the text for their own purposes.[24] The second element, the "this is that" formula is found

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[21] Ibid., 9.

[22] Ibid., 10. This is a summary of Bruce's summary. An interesting note about conclusion # 1. It sounds a bit like *sensus plenior*!

[23] Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*, 113.

in the New Testament, but sparingly in Paul.[25] As for the *raz-pesher* understanding of the prophetic message, many have noted Paul's twenty uses of "mystery" as a kind of pesher.[26] However Longenecker disputes this.[27]

It is clear that the discovery of the Qumran literature has stimulated New Testament scholars to take a good hard look at what New Testament writers are doing with the Old Testament text.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MIDRASH AND PESHER

As a general rule, midrash is a larger category of which pesher is a subset. In other words, pesher is a kind of midrash.[28] As noted above, midrash is a type of literature. Some believe it can refer to activity within the Hebrew Bible, especially among post-exilic prophets since their situations were almost 1000 years removed from the writings of the Pentateuch.[29] It can refer to translations, and writings among the sect at Qumran. In addition, there is also rabbinic midrash that contained fluctuating rules of interpretation with seemingly each new era.[30] The point is that there is an attempt to explain the text. Midrash starts with the text.

Pesher on the other hand seeks a solution to a dilemma, often times the circumstance of the day. With pesher, the starting point is not an Old Testament text but an event or person.[31] The pesher on Habakkuk 2:6-7 where God pronounces judgment upon Babylon is seen in the Qumran community as a wicked priest in Jerusalem who had caused trouble for those at Qumran.

Pesher exegesis is in effect a "this" (contemporary situation) is "that" (Scripture) device for doing exegesis. Midrash is more of a "that" (the text) is "this" (applicable to present situation).[32] I will use a "contemporary" example to help "explain" the difference: (i.e. my pesher/solution):

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[24] E. Earle Ellis, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 147; cf. also *The Old Testament in Early Christianity*, 66.

[25] cf. Gal. 5:14.

[26] Ellis, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament*, 144.

[27] *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*, 114-116.

[28] Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Essays on the Semitic Background of the New Testament*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1971), 5. cf. also Porton who calls pesher "midrashim, albeit of a special type." (4:819). This is because there is some debate whether or not pesher is midrash.

[29] cf. especially Porter, "Midrash" (4:819).

[30] At the time of Jesus there were 7 rules of interpretation that guided the exegetes of the day.

[31] Klyne Snodgrass, "The Use of the Old Testament in the New," in *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Method and Issues*, (Nashville: Broadman, 2001), 218.

[32] Richard Longenecker, "Negative Answer to the Question" in *The Right Doctrine From the Wrong Texts?: Essays on the Use of the Old Testament in the New*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 381-2.

Midrash is more an exegetical attempt at bible study. However at times it finds meaning at such a deep level that it is hard to justify the exegesis.

Pesher is more a topical sermon where the events of the day (e.g. Sept. 11; Attention Deficit Disorder; European Common Market; cashless society) are driving sermons and passages are then found to prove the thesis.

THE SIGNIFICANCE TO THE INTERTEXTUALITY DEBATE

The real significance of midrash and pesher to the intertextuality debate depends on who you talk to. Clearly at Qumran the scholars were using midrash and pesher both in their interpretation of the biblical texts as well as in relating the events of the Old Testament to their own situations.

The question is this: were New Testament writers doing the same thing with the Old Testament? If so, can we?[33]

IT'S EVANGELICAL PROPONENTS

Robert Gundry

Gundry's 1982 commentary on Matthew brought the issue of midrash into the discussion among evangelicals.[34] However his is a kind that Ellis notes takes minor details like word plays and turning them into "a fictional story."[35]

Klyne Snodgrass

Snodgrass argues that "midrashic techniques are observable in the New Testament."[36]

Richard Longenecker

Longenecker for one argues strongly that midrash and pesher exegesis were taking place in 1st century Judaism and in the New Testament as well. However he argues that we cannot reproduce their exegesis since we cannot base our interpretation on the same revelatory stand on which they did.[37]

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[33] Longenecker says no.

[34] cf. Gundry class presentation.

[35] *The Old Testament in Early Christianity*, 94. Ellis cites Gundry and his commentary on Matthew as an example of this sort of rabbinic midrashim run amok.

[36] "The Use of the Old Testament in the New" in *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues*, 219.

[37] Richard Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*, 197-8.

E. Earle Ellis

Ellis argues strongly that such techniques are found in the New Testament.[38]

CONCLUSION

Midrash and pesher are notoriously difficult to define.[39] Therefore it is also difficult to see the justification in how one commentator conceives these techniques from another. For instance, almost all evangelicals agree that midrash is not fiction (contra Gundry), but exactly what it is, and the extent to how it is used in the New Testament is far from certain.[40]

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[38] *Paul's Use of the Old Testament*, 114-49; *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity*, 173-81; The Old Testament in Early Christianity, 91-100.

[39] cf. W. Edward Glenny, 294.

[40] But what is an evangelical is also uncertain today.