

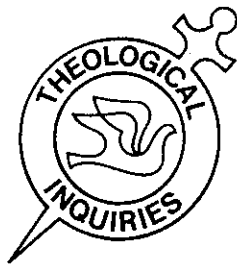
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# The Return to Scripture in Judaism and Christianity

*Essays in Postcritical  
Scriptural Interpretation*

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## Chapter Five

THE TURN TO COMMENTARY  
IN ANCIENT JUDAISM:  
THE CASE OF *SIFRE*  
DEUTERONOMY<sup>1</sup>

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Although scriptural interpretation is as old as scripture itself,<sup>2</sup> the turn to scriptural commentary as a medium of such interpretation was first evidenced, both in Palestine and in the Jewish diaspora, only near the end of the Second Temple period (first century B.C.E.–first century C.E.), and even then not very extensively. Thus, when several rabbinic scriptural commentaries first appeared in literary form in the mid-third century C.E., they had few formal antecedents, even as they drew on a wealth of interpretive traditions extending far back into Second Temple times, perhaps even as far back as when biblical formation and interpretation were as yet indistinguishable. In this essay, I examine this rabbinic turn to commentary, as evidenced in the *Sifre*, the first extant commentary to the biblical book of Deuteronomy and one of our earliest compilations of rabbinic exegesis. I examine the *Sifre* against the backdrop of its only known antecedents as biblical commentary: the prophetic *pēšārîm* of the Dead Sea sectaries and the allegorical commentaries of the Jewish philosopher-exegete Philo of Alexandria. Since, in antiquity as today, there were many other ways to interpret a text, I wish to ask: Why might one choose commentary as the medium for such communication? In asking this question in specific relation to the *Sifre*, I wish to examine the nature, function, and purpose of

such a work of ancient commentary: What, how, and with whom does it seek to communicate? To ask the question in this way is to inquire after the literary form and sociohistorical function of a commentary, and especially after the interrelation of this form and function. Since, as I shall argue, modern critical commentary to such texts of ancient traditional commentary is an appropriate medium for seeking to understand their performative dynamics, the above questions will ring doubly.

I begin with a working definition of commentary as “a systematic series of explanations or interpretations (as of a writing).”<sup>3</sup> Of course, this definition tells us nothing of the methods or forms employed by such interpretations; how closely and in what manner they adhere to the text being interpreted or to one another; or the attitude of their authors toward that base-text, or toward their intended audience. For all of these we can imagine many possibilities. But all commentaries so defined may be said to exhibit the following structural traits: they begin with an extended base-text, of which they designate successive subunits for exegetical attention, to each of which they attach a comment or chain of comments distinct from the base-text, to which the commentary sooner or later returns in order to take up the next selected subunit in sequence. Thus, depending on how much of the base-text it comments upon, the overall movement of the commentary follows to some degree the progression of the base-text to which it attends. Herein lies what might be viewed as commentary’s paradoxical nature: it atomizes its base-text, even as that base-text provides the overall structural framework by which a collection of otherwise discrete and sometimes discordant comments acquire a *degree* of progressive continuity and external coherence.

Although today we might take for granted the commentary form as a way of interpreting a text, especially of scripture, it does not appear to have been the favored mode of scriptural interpretation in postbiblical but prerabbinic varieties of Judaism. The majority of that interpretation took the form of what has been called “rewritten Bible,”<sup>4</sup> which paraphrased the biblical text, blurring the distinction between that text and its interpretation. It was as if the biblical text itself were replaced by its interpretive retelling. In some cases the “rewritten Bible” followed the order of the biblical text

upon which it appears to be based, filling in what are understood to be its gaps and clarifying what are understood to be its ambiguities.<sup>5</sup> But in other cases the "rewritten Bible" substantially reworked the biblical order, blending together biblical texts from different locations and mixing together biblical citation with biblical paraphrase in such a way as to conceal both the words of the biblical text and its order within its retelling. The authority for such retelling was often pseudepigraphically attributed to an inspired biblical figure (e.g. Enoch) or to God himself (as in the *Temple Scroll*), thereby claiming the status of actual revelation for what to us appears as a retelling.

Another form which also needs to be distinguished from the commentary is that of the homily or sermon. A preacher or teacher would begin with a particular biblical verse, story, or motif and weave around it a web of biblical citations, allusions, and interpretations, the organizing and unifying principle of which would be the thematic message he sought to convey. While such a homily might depend heavily on biblical language and image for its rhetorical force, it would not direct its audience's attention to any successive biblical text per se.

Similarly, the books of the New Testament contain extensive interpretations of the Hebrew Bible. However, their outer structure is not that of commenting on scripture, but rather, in the case of the gospels, of telling the story of Jesus' life and death, or, in the case of Acts and the Pauline letters, of relating how his teachings were spread and the church established after his death. This is not to minimize the role of scriptural interpretation in these writings but rather to stress that fragmented biblical interpretation and imagery are here incorporated into the structure of a story, rather than fragmented stories being incorporated into the structure of scriptural commentary, as is often the case in rabbinic commentary.

Against this backdrop and in preparation for our discussion of the *Sifre's* commentary, it is important to examine briefly what I have previously designated as the *only* two extant historical antecedents to rabbinic biblical commentary as such. Even if these did not directly influence rabbinic commentary, they may serve as models for two aspects of commentary which are creatively combined in the *Sifre*: the prophetic *pēšārîm* among the Dead Sea Scrolls, which may

be termed deictic in their mode of commentary, and the allegorical commentaries of Philo, which may be termed dialogical.<sup>6</sup> The continuous *pēšārîm* are commentaries to prophetic texts of scripture (Habakkuk, Nahum, and Psalms being the most extensive and important).<sup>7</sup> They interpret the actual words of those books, sentence by sentence or phrase by phrase in succession, as signifying the events, groups, and personages that play key roles in the sacred history of the Dead Sea sect, some part of which presumably produced and studied these texts. The group's understanding of the revealed nature of these commentaries is best expressed in the following piece of *pēšer* commentary:

And God told Habakkuk to write down the things that are going to come upon the last generation, but the fulfillment of the end-time he did not make known to him. And when it says, "So that he can run who reads it" (Hab. 2:2), the interpretation of it concerns (*pišrô 'al*) the Teacher of Righteousness, to whom God made known all the mysteries of the words of His servants the prophets.<sup>8</sup>

From this we see why the *pēšārîm*, as continuous commentaries, apply to prophetic scriptures. Understood to communicate God's salvific plan for future history, these scriptures were thought to be veiled in a mysterious language whose full meaning had not been disclosed to the prophets and their contemporaries but only subsequently to the Teacher of Righteousness. He in turn, it is presumed, revealed their hidden meanings in the form of *pēšer* commentaries to his sectarian followers. These commentaries enabled the sectaries to understand recent history as a confirmation rather than denial of their elect self-understanding and to prepare for the "end of days," in which they thought themselves to be living and during which they expected, as God's chosen, soon to be vindicated for their exile and sufferings. To give just one example (1QpHab 9.3-12):

[A] When it says, "For you have plundered many nations, but all the rest of peoples will plunder you" (Hab. 2:8a), the interpretation of it concerns (*pišrô 'al*) the last priests of Jerusalem, who amass wealth and profit from plunder of

the peoples; but at the end of days their wealth together with their booty will be given into the hand of the army of the Kittim [= the Romans]. For they are "the rest of the peoples."

[B] "On account of human bloodshed and violence done to the land, the city, and all its inhabitants" (ibid., 8b). The interpretation of it concerns the [W]icked Priest, whom—because of wrong done to the Teacher of Righteousness and his partisans [or, council]—God gave into the hand of his enemies to humble him with disease for annihilation in despair, beca[use] he had acted wickedly against his [= God's] chosen ones.

By dividing the verse (Hab 2:8) into two halves and providing different significations for each, the *pēšer* has the verse refer both to the officiating Jerusalem priests of its own time ("the last priests of Jerusalem") and to the Wicked Priest in the time of the sect's "founder," the Teacher of Righteousness. By adjoining these two interpretations according to the scriptural order (the preceding interpretation took 2:8a to refer to the [Wicked] Priest as well), the *pēšer* implicitly enchains them, thereby associating, if not equating, (1) the wickedness of the present priests with that of the Wicked Priest, (2) the expected punishments of the present priests with the already realized punishment of the Wicked Priest, and, more implicitly, (3) the sufferings of the *pēšer*'s audience with those of the Teacher and his associates. Thus, the sectaries' present self-understanding is justified both in relation to scriptural prophecy and in relation to their own intermediate past as these are exegetically re-presented.

Many scholars have noted that both the term *pēšer* and the exegetical methods employed by the *pēšārîm* suggest an activity similar to that of dream, vision, or oracle interpretation, in which each symbolic detail in sequence is assigned its concrete signification in the life of the dreamer or society for whom the oracle is intended.<sup>9</sup> In other words, the enigmatic terms of the original "narrative," here the words of the prophet, are "translated" into the manifest language of a new narrative, here the life of the sect. Each of these narratives is fragmented so as to be *interrelated*, but not successively

integrated with the other. The commentary form serves this decoding function well: it *performatively* demonstrates, over and over again, the complete and continuous correspondence between the *words* of the original prophecy and its fulfillment in the details of the sect's "story." It does so through a terminology that repeatedly connects the one to the other without collapsing the space between them. Although the formal movement is from scripture to the socio-historical world of the sect, it is as much the latter that is given deeper meaning by this interconnection as the former. This commentary structure would have the effect of repeatedly shuttling its sectarian students between the scriptural prophecies and their fulfillment in the life of the community. Such engagement in the very work of commentary would effectively reinforce the message that the *pēšārîm* repeatedly convey: that the sectaries be justified in viewing and experiencing themselves as God's elect, for whose sake history, as foretold in the scriptural prophecies, was rapidly approaching its messianic vindication and consummation. This is rhetorically very different from the converse procedure, whereby the sacred story of the sect might have been continuously told, spiced with prophetic citations to lend that story teleological significance as the fulfillment of biblical prophecies.

Given this function of the *pēšārîm*, it is not surprising that these commentaries usually keep their interpretations short, returning without too much digression to the next unit of the prophetic base-verse. Also related to the oracular nature of the *pēšārîm* is the fact that secondary verses, taken from entirely different parts of scripture, are *not* drawn into the commentary, either to prove the interpretation of the prophetic lemma or to provide the exegetical basis for an associated point. The exegetical focus is entirely on the prophetic base-verse and its equally prophetic decoding. This is in striking contrast with scriptural interpretation found elsewhere in the Dead Sea Scrolls, where the citation and interpretation of one verse may be enchaind with that of another, often from a different part of scripture.<sup>10</sup> Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the oracular nature of the *pēšārîm* requires that each phrase of the prophetic base-text receive a single, authoritative, declarative interpretation, for it is in that interpretation alone that the ancient prophecies are understood to find their *completion*. Thus, the *pēšārîm* may be said to

exemplify a deictic mode of commentary: characterized by a demonstrative terminology that links, in direct correspondence, each discrete segment of the prophetic base-text to its decoded signification.<sup>11</sup>

Although the Dead Sea Scroll *pēšārîm* are often adduced as the closest antecedents to midrashic (rabbinic) commentary,<sup>12</sup> in many ways the commentaries of Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 B.C.E.–ca. 50 C.E.) offer a more important corpus for purposes of comparison and contrast, in part because of their greater volume, but also because they attend, as do our earliest rabbinic collections of commentary, not to prophetic books but to the Torah (Pentateuch). That Philo was our most prolific early Jewish writer of biblical commentaries is most likely related to the fact that Alexandria was in his time a major center of textual scholarship, much of which took the form of running commentaries (*hypomnēmata*) to classical Greek texts, as it had been for at least two centuries earlier.<sup>13</sup> That Philo focused entirely on the books of the Torah is related to his high regard for the divinely inspired, philosopher-lawgiver Moses, in whose writings lay the original and most complete imprint of the divine logos.

I would like to focus briefly on three structural features of Philo's commentaries which distinguish them from the *pēšārîm* and which are shared, *mutatis mutandis*, by early rabbinic scriptural commentaries.

(1) Philo's commentaries are dialectical in style and form. Often, after the lemma is cited, a rhetorical question or problem is raised regarding one of its "literal" (relating to the physical world) meanings. The body of the commentary then advances one or more allegorical (relating to the life of the soul) interpretations of the lemma as either an answer to the question or an obviation of the problem. This form is especially evident in Philo's *Questions and Answers on Genesis* and *Exodus*, but forms the underlying structure of the more complex allegorical commentaries as well. This is not to deny that Philo employs deictic exegesis, that is, linking a biblical word or phrase with its meaning ("this is," "this means," etc.). Rather, it is to stress that this form does not define the structure of his commentaries overall as it does the Qumran *pēšārîm*. The question and answer structure, even if wooden, at least creates the impression of dialogue between the author and scripture, as well as

between the author and his readers. It serves to open the lemma to interpretation and to draw the reader into that activity.

(2) Philo's allegorical commentaries, but not his more succinct *Questions and Answers on Genesis* and *Exodus*, frequently cite other verses from the Pentateuch in addressing an exegetical question or problem initially raised with respect to the lemma, or in supplementing an initial interpretation of the lemma. The link between the lemma and another verse may be verbal or thematic. But unlike contemporary philosophical texts, where Homer may be cited to interpret Homer or Plato to interpret Plato, these secondary verses themselves often become the objects of Philo's interpretation, sometimes in the form of another question or problem. Such concatenation of interpretations can at times be extreme, appearing to lead the reader far from the base-verse and its initial interpretation(s). But this practice is understood by Philo as necessary to uncovering, if not completely, the deeper chain of encoded meanings to which each scriptural verse points, in combination with others. While this procedure of interpreting scripture with scripture is completely absent from the continuous *pēšārîm*, it is a common feature of early rabbinic commentary.

(3) Philo's allegorical commentaries commonly give multiple interpretations of the lemma. In his most basic form of commentary, these multiple levels of meaning are first literal, then allegorical. Very often an adduced literal meaning is either mundanely clear and hence insufficient, or problematic and hence improbable, in either case requiring Philo, in his commitment to the scripture's revelatory purpose, to uncover the text's deeper, under-sense (*hyponoia*). Sign posts to this under-sense are to be found in the scriptural text itself. In other words, the lemma's literal meaning is often considered by Philo not to tell the whole story but to point beyond itself to the whole story. Therefore, the search for the symbolic or allegorical level of meaning cannot begin until the biblical text is first engaged and questioned at its literal level of signification. In the more complex forms of his allegorical commentary, Philo often suggests multiple meanings, *both* at and beyond the literal level, often enchainning them in hierarchical order, ascending as might the soul from most physical to most metaphysical levels. But Philo sometimes simply sets such alternative literal and symbolic meanings

alongside one another as equal, even contradictory alternatives, attributing them sometimes to different *anonymous* exegetes ("some say," "others say").<sup>14</sup> However, even with such concatenation of interpretations, Philo never claims to have exhausted the biblical text's possible meanings. Even when he clearly favors his own, allegorical interpretation over those that have preceded it, he leaves open the possibility of there being still other, deeper meanings to be uncovered, or better ways to express what he has uncovered. Both of these concessions are related not so much to Philo's personal modesty as to his view of the inadequacy of language to represent directly the truth which the inspired soul, whether that of Moses or of Philo as the interpreter of his words, can apprehend.<sup>15</sup> This open-ended practice of multiple interpretations and levels of interpretation, the product of a succession of biblical interpreters to whom Philo acknowledges his debt even while claiming superiority for his own added level of other-worldly interpretation, contrasts sharply with what we witnessed of the Dead Sea *pēšārîm*, with their presumption that the words of the biblical prophets had been directly, univocally, and finally decoded so as to point to a particular set of "historical" (sectarian) referents.

The following passage provides as good an exemplification of these characteristics as is available in one text. It comments on Genesis 15:15, wherein God promises to Abraham: "Thou shalt depart to thy fathers nourished with peace, in a goodly old age."

After "thou shalt depart" come the words "to thy fathers." What fathers? This is worth inquiring. For Moses could not mean those who had lived in the land of the Chaldeans, who were the only kinsfolk Abraham had, seeing that the oracle had set his dwelling away from all those of his blood. For we read, "the Lord said unto Abraham 'depart from thy land and from thy kinsfolk and from the house of thy father unto the land which I shall shew thee, and I will make thee into a great nation'" (Gen. 12:1, 2). Was it reasonable that he should again have affinity with the very persons from whom he had been alienated by the forethought of God? Or that he who was to be the captain of another race and nation should be associated with that

of a former age?<sup>16</sup> . . . No; by "fathers" he does not mean those whom the pilgrim soul has left behind, those who lie buried in the sepulchres of Chaldaeae, but possibly, as some say, the sun, moon and other stars to which it is held that all things on earth owe their birth and framing, or as others think, the archetypal ideas which, invisible and intelligible *there*, are the patterns of things visible and sensible *here*—the idea in which, as they say, the mind of the Sage finds its new home. Others again have surmised that by "fathers" are meant the first principles and potentialities, from which the world has been framed, earth, water, air and fire. For into these, they say, each thing that has come into being is duly resolved. Just as nouns and verbs and all parts of speech which are composed of the "elements" in the grammatical sense are finally resolved into the same, so too each of us is composed of the four mundane elements, borrowing small fragments from the substance of each, and this debt he repays when the appointed time-cycles are completed, rendering the dry in him to earth, the wet to water, the cold to air, and the warm to fire. These all belong to the body, but the soul whose nature is intellectual and celestial will depart to find a father in ether, the purest of the substances. For we may suppose that, as the men of old declared, there is a fifth substance, moving in a circle, differing by its superior quality from the four. Out of this they thought the stars and the whole of heaven had been made and deduced as a natural consequence that the human soul also was a fragment thereof.<sup>17</sup>

What is of interest here is the way in which the commentary dialectically progresses from the first rejected meaning ("fathers" as Abraham's biological ancestors), through a series of more symbolic but not yet allegorical meanings suggested by other exegetes ("fathers" as, successively, the heavenly bodies, the archetypal ideas, and the physical elements), and finally to what we must presume is Philo's own allegorical preference ("fathers" as the heavenly ether from which the perceptible world was born and to which the soul seeks to return). This exegetical progression through multiple inter-

pretations parallels, in a sense, the journey of the soul itself as it leaves its physical confines in order to return to its spiritual source. Put differently, the "breaking-open"<sup>18</sup> of the text of the lemma, initiated by a questioning of its literal probability, is necessary in order to begin the process whereby its deeper sense will eventually be disclosed, just as the final dissolution of the body at death into its constitutive elements is necessary in order to release the soul for return to its ethereal source. In both cases the progression is of necessity by stages. Philo does not so much reject the interpretations of his predecessors as ascend them as steps to his own interpretation. Even in this progression the chain of interpretations oscillates between physical and spiritual poles until it finally reaches its destination: from heavenly, but still physical, bodies to archetypal ideas, and from the mundane elements to the purest of elements, ether. It is not, in the end, that Abraham is promised a return to the heavenly bodies, but that his soul alone should return to its ethereal origins, the origins as well of the heavenly bodies. If there is something circular in this interpretation, beginning and ending with the heavenly bodies, then commentary is circular in yet another way, for the return of the soul to its ethereal source is suggested but not quite realized when Philo returns to the text of scripture, so as to confront in the next verse its literal sense once again.

Here we see something of the performative aspect of Philo's employment of commentary: the overall progression in each unit of commentary from literal to allegorical, whatever its internal delays, is facilitated by the succession of alternative interpretations. This exegetical movement is by a series of steps, like the spiritual progression from fleshly trappings to ethical and spiritual perfection, with each such step requiring attentive effort. This interpretive struggle must be repeated over and over again, even if on the broader plane of scriptural commentary there is net progress, as symbolized for Philo by the chronological progression of biblical characters, each of whom represents an ever higher virtue and state of the soul.

Even though Philo clearly favors the allegorical level of interpretation, it cannot be attained without first engaging the text of scripture and its literal meanings. This is the exegetical equivalent of the tension Philo acknowledges between the observance of the commandments and the apprehension of their metaphysical signifi-

cance. In a famous passage in which he criticizes those whose preoccupation with the allegorical interpretation of laws leads them to neglect their literal sense as requiring observance, Philo counsels dual aims: "[to give] a more full and exact investigation of what is not seen [=the allegorical] and in what is seen [=the literal] to be stewards without reproach." Exactly as we have to take thought for the body, because it is the abode of the soul, so we must pay heed to the letter of the laws (*phētoi nomoi*).<sup>19</sup>

According to Philo, it is impossible for one to *bypass* the body, or observances, or the literal meanings of scripture while striving to move beyond them in pursuit of virtue and wisdom; in a sense, one must move *through* them. Observing the commandments is as necessary to the virtues as engaging the literal meanings of scripture is necessary to deeper understanding. Such literal engagement is better achieved through the structures of commentary, with their fragmentation of the scriptural text and subsequent concatenation of interpretations, than through more distilled forms of exegesis, which Philo practices as well. Scriptural commentary as a practice stands parallel to observance of the commandments in its performative power and necessity, seeking to make of Philo's readers "stewards" of the text even as they looked and moved beyond it.

The *sociohistorical* functioning of Philo's commentary structures needs also to be considered. Philo seeks to convince his fellow Alexandrian Jews that the two cultures, Jewish and Greek, which compete for their attention are in essence one. Moses alone, the supreme philosopher and lawgiver, had the divine logos imprinted upon his soul, which he in turn has imprinted within the text of his Torah, which in turn can leave its imprint not only on the soul of the individual but also on the life of the community which exegetically and performatively engages it.<sup>20</sup> But since this might not be obvious to those who have no guide in uncovering these teachings hidden beneath the letters of scripture's laws and narratives, Philo offers himself as the supremely qualified guide for his time, endeavoring to demonstrate to his audience that whatever surrounding Greek culture has to offer can be obtained in purer and more original form in Israel's own scriptural heritage.

To sustain this argument, Philo undertakes what amounts to a major translation project, rendering scripture into the best cultural

vernacular of his Hellenistically educated or exposed public. And since his argument is not simply about the contents of scripture, but also about the status of its text as that central symbol which defines Israel and distinguishes the Jewish community from its neighbors, that translation had to take, at least in part, the form of a dialogical engagement with that text—and not simply a distilled paraphrase of it. In other words, Philo sought in the dialogical structure of commentary, itself *adapted* from wider Greek usage, a performative instrument with which to link for his readers the language of Jewish scripture to the philosophical language of high Greek culture as he understood it, without dissolving the difference between them and while asserting the primacy of the former and the *derivativeness* of the latter. Through a rhetorical give and take not only with the plurality of scripture's text, but also with a plurality of post-biblical interpretive voices, Philo's commentaries might draw his community into a dynamic engagement and identification with both Moses' Torah and its philosophically attuned, allegorical translation.

Returning to our earliest rabbinic commentaries, we see that when compared to their *only* two Jewish antecedents—the commentaries of *pēšer* and Philo—they display the characteristic commentary modes of each: deictic and dialogical. For example, the *Sifre's* commentary may definitively proclaim what a scriptural word or phrase signifies, and then question that assigned meaning or set another, even discordant, meaning dialectically alongside it. Still, overall, it is the dialogical mode that characterizes the *Sifre's* commentary.<sup>21</sup> In this way the structure of the *Sifre's* commentary is closer overall to that of Philo than to that of *pēšer*. Not surprisingly, therefore, two other dialogical features of Philo's (and non-Jewish philosophical) commentaries, absent from the *pēšārīm* commentaries, are also found in the *Sifre*, albeit with important differences: the interpretation of scripture with scripture and the concatenation of multiple interpretations. But it is precisely with regard to multiple interpretations that the *Sifre's* commentary, and early rabbinic commentary more generally, are significantly different from those of Philo. In the *Sifre*, multiple interpretations or their sub-groupings may be ordered editorially so as to be encountered in progression,

but not according to any standard hierarchical principle or plan. Before turning to this difference, however, there is something else to be learned from our brief look at the commentaries of *pēšer* and Philo as antecedents to that of the *Sifre*.

Ancient scriptural commentaries—and others may wish to extend this point to other kinds of commentary—even as they closely scrutinize the particles of the text to which they attend, are always about that text as a *whole*. By this I mean that they seek both for the text as a whole to be held in high regard by its interpretive community, and for the interpretive community to view *itself* in relation to that text as mediated by its commentary. Such a commentary is, therefore, not simply a series of declarative assertions about the meanings of words in a text, but also an attempt to *effect* a relationship between that text overall and those for whom it is “scripture.” Ancient scriptural commentaries are not simply constative conduits of meaning but also performative media by which the polymorphic “world” of the text and that of its students are transformatively brought toward each other, while never fully merged, so as to confront one another through the double-dialogue of commentary.<sup>22</sup> In this “double-dialogue,” the commentary simultaneously faces and engages the text that it interprets and the society of “readers” for whom and with whom it interprets.

By focusing attention on this *double-facing* character of ancient scriptural commentary, I wish to avoid two tendencies in scholarly understandings and employments of such commentaries: what I would call the “hermeneuticist” and “historicist” fallacies. The former tendency is to see the commentary primarily in its facing toward scripture and to view hermeneutical practice as if conducted within a sociohistorical isolation booth into which only the commentator and his chosen text, or self-contained corpus of texts, are allowed entrance. The latter tendency is to see the commentary primarily in its facing toward the events and/or circumstances of its time and to view its response to and representation of those events as being only slightly veiled by the formal guise of the scriptural exegesis in which it is wrapped. The former claims to have explained the commentary when it has identified hermeneutical pressures within scripture and the commentary's responses to those. The lat-



ter claims to have explained the commentary when it has identified historical pressures outside of scripture and the commentary's responses to those.

These two tendencies, even as they face, and view commentary as facing, opposite directions, are really two sides of the same coin. That is the coin which presumes that the hermeneutics and historicity of scriptural commentary can conveniently and neatly be detached from one another, in the first case by viewing the hermeneutics of commentary's *interpretations* apart from the sociohistorical grounding of its performance, and in the latter case by viewing the historicity of commentary's *representations* apart from the hermeneutical grounding of its performance. One consequence of this common position is the view that such a text, whether as a whole or in its parts, is either hermeneutical or historiographic, facing either in upon itself and the texts with which it intersects or out upon history and society. Rather than reject either of these two facings, I wish to assert their inextricable interconnection. Their bifurcation, while perhaps useful for maintaining our disciplinary boundaries, reductively distorts the hermeneutical and historical aspects of a commentary such as the *Sifre's* by viewing them in isolation from one another. Such a text of scriptural commentary may be seen as reflecting on and responding to its sociohistorical setting no less significantly, even if less directly and more complexly, than a continuous narration of the same. Likewise, bits of historical narrative set within a text of scriptural commentary must be understood in rhetorical relation to their more explicitly exegetical contexts, and not simply extracted as direct historical representations.<sup>23</sup>

Let us look now at one small example from the *Sifre* that exhibits the congruence of deictic and dialogical modes of interpretation. The verse to be commented upon is Deuteronomy 32:7, part of the "song" that Moses delivered to the people shortly before his death, in which he rehearsed their sacred history in order to prepare them for entering the promised land. The verse comprises two parallel doublets:

Remember the days of old (*olām*),  
consider the years (*šēnôt*) of each and every generation;

ask your father and he will inform you,  
your elders and they will tell you.

The *Sifre* divides the verse in order to explicate its parts, and does so twice. Here is its first set of comments:

[A] "Remember the days of old": [God said to them:] Take heed of what I did to the earliest generations: what I did to the people of the generation of the Flood, and what I did to the people of the generation of the Dispersion [the Tower of Babel], and what I did to the people of Sodom.

[B] "Consider the years of each and every generation": You can find no generation without people like those of the generation of the Flood, and you can find no generation without people like those of the generation of the Dispersion and like those of Sodom, but each and every individual is judged according to his deeds.

[C] "Ask your father and he will inform you": These are the prophets as it says, "When Elisha beheld it he cried out [to Elijah], 'Father, father'" (2 Kgs. 2:12).

[D] "Your elders and they will tell you": These are the elders, as it is said, "Gather for Me seventy men of the elders of Israel" (Num. 11:16).<sup>24</sup>

At the most basic level, the commentary distinguishes between the verse's parallel elements: "days of old" and "each and every generation"; "your father" and "your elders." The commentary begins by identifying "days of old" (literally, "days of eternity") with the earliest generations of human history, in particular with three generations that are understood by the rabbis to have been thoroughly wicked and rebellious in their behavior.<sup>25</sup> It is these specific generations which God Himself urges Israel to recall in the commentary's paraphrastic restatement of the lemma. This interpretation of "days of old" as referring to the early rebellious *generations*

anticipates the interpretation of the next clause, with its "each and every generation." According to that interpretation, Moses urges his audience to differentiate (*bînû*) between the earliest rebellious generations whose members were entirely wicked, and later generations, including that of the present, whose moral make-up is more mixed. These later generations are no longer judged en masse, but their individual members are judged each according to his or her own deeds.

Next, the terms "father" and "elders," appearing in parallel construction in the biblical text, are understood as signifying not one's own biological father and the elderly of one's family or community as sources of wisdom, as would seem to be the scriptural sense, but *inspired biblical leadership classes*. The word "father" is deictically interpreted, with the aid of another verse, to signify "prophets." The word "elders" is similarly interpreted as signifying "elders," but now, again with the aid of another verse, not those of advanced age within one's community but those non-priests who were divinely authorized to share in Moses' leadership and judiciary functions (Ex 18:13-26; Num 11:16-25; Deut 1:9-18). In the *Sifre*, as in other rabbinic collections, the rabbinic sages view themselves as the extension of this biblical class of lay elders, especially in their appointment to positions of judicial and administrative responsibility over the larger Jewish community. The commentary's juxtaposition of "prophets" and "elders" may also serve subtly to associate the two, as they are associated elsewhere in early rabbinic tradition. Thus, according to the rabbinic "chain of tradition," Joshua transmitted the Torah to the elders, who passed it on to the prophets, who, in turn, passed it on to the proto-rabbinic elders of Second Temple times.<sup>26</sup>

Returning to the *Sifre's* commentary to Deuteronomy 32:7, we see that if the first set of interpretations (A-D) focuses on the biblical past, the second set focuses on the ultimate future:

Another interpretation:

[A] "Remember the days of old eternity (·olām)": He [=Moses] said to them: Whenever God brings sufferings to you, remember how many good and consoling things he will give you in the world (·olām) to come.

[B] "Consider the years of each and every generation": This is the generation of the Messiah, which will last for three generations, as it is said, "Let them fear You as long as the sun shines and the moon lasts, for a generation and generations" (Ps. 72:5).<sup>27</sup>

[C] "Ask your father and he will inform you": In the future Israel will be able to see and hear as if hearing from the Holy One, as it is said, "Your ears shall hear a word behind you" (Isa. 30:21), and it says, "Your teacher [=God] shall not hide himself any more, and your eyes shall see your teacher" (Isa. 30:20).

[D] "Your elders and they will tell you": What I [=God] revealed to the elders on the mountain, as it is said, "And to Moses He said, 'Ascend to God [you and Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel]' " (Exod. 24:1).

This second set of interpretations, demarcated by "another interpretation," begins with the sufferings of the present and then shifts our attention to the distant, messianic future. In the midst of such present sufferings, the righteous (we may presume) are told by Moses to consider the *future* "days of eternity," wherein they will finally be rewarded. Similarly, the generations referred to in the verse's second clause, earlier interpreted as signifying the three earliest rebellious generations, are now deictically interpreted as signifying the three generations of the Messiah at the end of time. Thus, in both sets of comments the "days of eternity" are defined in relation to the next biblical clause as referring to three generations, primeval and messianic. Similarly, the verse's "father," first interpreted as signifying the prophets, is now interpreted less directly as signifying God, who in the messianic future will be the teacher of *all* of Israel, obviating the need for mediating prophets. Note how the order of the prooftext verses from Isaiah has been reversed (30:21 followed by 30:20): not only will Israel hear the word of their teacher but they will see him. This reversal permits the commentary to ask implicitly: What will be the nature of that direct vision of God? This implicit question is answered by the citation and interpretation of the

final clause of the lemma, once again in God's own voice: In the future *all* of Israel will directly behold me, as did the inspired biblical elders upon Mount Sinai (as related in Exodus 24:9-11).<sup>28</sup>

Because each of these two commentaries to Deuteronomy 32:7 comprises a set of four interpretations, how we perceive the effect of their overall juxtaposition is related to how we perceive the nature of the internal linkages between their parts. At the outermost level, the fact that the first set of interpretations moves from the distant past to the present, while the second moves from the present to the distant future, suggests that the editorial ordering of these two commentaries is not as accidental as might first appear: textual order as encountered in the chronology of "reading" bears some relation to "historical" chronology. The three "pre-historical" rebellious generations are set opposite the three messianic generations. In the former the wicked are punished while in the latter the righteous will be rewarded. In the delicately suspended "time-between," the righteous are punished for their own deeds, even as they look forward in consolation to their future rewards. Whereas in biblical times Israel obtained knowledge of God's will through the intermediacy of their divinely authorized prophets and elders, in the messianic future Israel will hear and behold God directly. But how is God's will to be known and his presence experienced in the here-and-now, when there are neither prophets in the biblical sense nor possibilities for direct knowledge of God? This question, implicitly asked by the commentary's juxtapositions, is also implicitly answered: the rabbinic successors to the biblical elders presently fulfill this mediating function. In this regard it is significant that the elders alone remain constant both between the lemma and its interpretation and between the two sets of interpretations. Thus, "father" is taken to signify first prophets and then God, "days of eternity" is taken to signify first the beginning of time and then its end, and "each and every generation" is taken to signify first early rebellious generations and then the final messianic generations. But "elders" are always the elders—the inspired class of elders, that is—whose biblically assigned roles in revelation and in its societal adjudication remain operative throughout time, or until such time as Israel's direct hearing and seeing of God will make their mediating functions unnecessary.

Finally, it may be noted that the two-part commentary is framed overall by one other recurring feature: in the very first interpretation (A) and the very last (D), God himself addresses Israel directly, whereas in the intermediary interpretations (as in the "time-between") either Moses (A) or the anonymous voice of the rabbinic commentary does the speaking.

Thus, the commentary's editorial juxtaposition of otherwise deictic significations of scriptural meaning draws its students into a collective, interpretive dialogue with the divine voice in scripture. This feature, in many different forms, is characteristic of the *Sifre's* anthological structure at its multiple levels of composition. Not only are multiple interpretations often provided for a given lemma, but even within a single interpretation diverse types of materials (another verse, a parable, a story, a rule) are often combined in such ways that the unspecified nature of their interconnections is unclear. Even where a verse is minutely divided and a different brief interpretation is offered for each of its atomized parts (as in the above example), the student of the text is left with several questions whether or not, and if so how, those interpretations should be understood in relation to one another, and how are a sequence of interpretations to successive verses to be viewed in relation to one another: discretely or interdependently? In sum, to what extent do we have a collection of independent exegetical assertions and traditional recollections that have been strung together for no apparent reason other than to preserve them, and to what extent do we have, as we saw in *pēšer* and in Philo, the editorial enchainment of traditions and interpretations for other purposes, presumably rhetorical, as well? Our difficulty in answering this question lies in part in our frequent lack of an authorial voice to tell us how to proceed from one such assertion to the next: how, as interpreters of the commentary, to fill the connective gaps between the traditions set before us.

In this regard, let us return briefly to our two Jewish commentary antecedents. The Dead Sea *pēšārîm*, as we saw, present themselves as the authoritative decodings of scriptural prophecies, having been revealed by God to the Teacher of Righteousness, who in turn passed them on to his followers. Even if we cannot discern what precisely in the lemma is "producing" its interpretation, the overall relation of prophetic scripture to its commentary, and of that com-

mentary to its community of students, is self-evident: together the commentary's interpretations add up to the prophetically prefigured sacred history of the sect as God's elect in the end of days. Philo's allegorical commentaries are also presented as the work of a single author, even though he incorporates the interpretations of "others." We may wonder often why Philo leads us so far afield, and how to interconnect our tour of one verse with that of the next, but at least we know that it is he who is leading us. Once again, there is a degree of predictability, albeit less so than with the *pēsārīm*, as he repeatedly takes us from lemma, to its literal meaning, to a chain of symbolic meanings, often in ascending order. The overall route of the commentary is that of the journey of the soul to moral and spiritual perfection.

By contrast, the *Sifre's* commentary presents itself, implicitly to be sure, as the *collective* and *cumulative* teachings of the class of rabbinic sages, even as those teachings are understood to originate in the revelation at Sinai. Already in the *Sifre*, Sinaitic revelation is re-presented as being twofold: that which was immediately inscribed as scripture and that which as oral teaching only achieved its socially available expression over time.<sup>29</sup> Between Sinai and the time of the text's redaction (mid-third century C.E.), there stands no single individual who is said to have authored the commentary or to have authorized its interpretations. In other words, the commentary lacks overall a single subsuming narrative voice or hermeneutical mastercode.

The collective nature of the *Sifre's* text is not just a matter of its authoring or redacting, but also of its implied audience: the collectivity or class of rabbinic sages and their disciples of mid-third century Palestine, in addition to whatever audiences extended well beyond such time and place. The *Sifre* uses several metaphors to describe the study activity of such sages and their disciples. They are to attend constantly to "words of Torah" (both scriptural and rabbinic), cultivating them again and again like a farmer does his field or vineyard.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the first task of the sage is to maintain the words of Torah that he has learned by continually reviewing them, pouring over them, to the point of fully absorbing them into his person, that is, memory.<sup>31</sup> Then, having them ever ready in his "mouth," he can

disseminate them as needed.<sup>32</sup> In this activity the sage is compared to a well that constantly gathers waters (Torah teachings) from all sides, so that once full he can disperse those waters to his disciples.<sup>33</sup> Note the two-step procedure: gathering and disseminating, joining and dividing. Similarly, the collectivity of rabbinic teachings is compared to a mixture of flour, bran, and meal, which the disciple sorts out with a sieve. The disciple according to this tradition does not so much correspond to the person who does the sorting as to the *sieve* itself, refining teachings as they pass *through* him.<sup>34</sup>

These metaphors for rabbinic study can be taken to describe the "production" of the text of commentary, wherein diverse rabbinic traditions have been gathered, arranged and often subtly reshaped in the process. But to the extent that these gathered, arranged, and reshaped traditions still do not fully cohere or concord with one another, or with the verses of Deuteronomy to which they are attached, the above descriptions of rabbinic study can be taken to describe as well the dialogical "consumption" of the text of commentary by the plurality of its students. They, in working their way through the collected traditions of the commentary, continue the interpretive process of connecting and differentiating that the redacted text itself has set in motion *but not completed*. These students advance its unfinished work by filling-out, but never finally, the anonymous narrative voice which is only partially present in the text itself. The dialectical dynamic of such study leads to the transformative internalization and actualization of the commentary's network of traditions (and perspectives) within its students. In a sense, as they work through the commentary, the commentary works through them.

We gain here a literary glimpse of the dialogical system of study and teaching by whose illocutionary force disciples became sages and sages became a class that could extend their teachings, practices, and vision of the world into Jewish society more broadly.<sup>35</sup> But that larger world was neither simple nor static, comprising itself a dangerous complex of discordant strands or voices in need of sense-making configuration. The rabbinic work of dynamically configuring the heterogeneity of tradition is related to the rabbinic work of positively positioning Israel as a whole within the heterogeneous web of

history and nature. Commentary could provide the society of sages not only with a performative medium for their own shared self-understanding, but also with one by which they could effectively fashion and refashion larger Israel's supple self-understanding within the world and through time.

Such a medium requires that heterogeneous traditions, whose oral origins we can only guess, be contained but not congealed within the structural framework of ongoing scriptural commentary. Thus rendered accessible but remaining fluid, these traditions might be dynamically absorbed by the students of the commentary as they pore over it in their own repetitive acts of interpretive study. These students, in turn, might return orally the rabbinic "words of Torah" that they have so absorbed back out into rabbinic society and beyond in new combinations and reshapings, which might eventually be collected and configured once again to form another literary work of commentary.

This dialogical view of the *Sifre's* commentary requires that our own critical interpretation of its texts adopt two converging perspectives: that of their formation and that of their reception. By the first I mean attention to how otherwise discrete and sometimes discordant traditions have been redactionally combined and to varying degrees configured so as to form a running commentary to the text of Deuteronomy. There are two ways to discern such activity. The first looks *within* the immediate text for editorial signposts, such as linguistic, structural, or thematic links and repetitions that serve to interconnect adjacent traditions beyond the mere fact of their physical juxtaposition. The second looks *without* the text to other rabbinic texts of the same vintage in which related traditions have been differently combined and subtly reshaped so as to produce different rhetorical effects. Through such comparison and contrast it is possible to see both the relative freedom and the limits to that freedom by which the *Sifre's* editors were able to fashion commentary out of tradition.<sup>36</sup>

The second perspective from which to view the *Sifre's* work of commentary is that of the rabbinic student of its text, putting ourselves in the position of one who, in progressively working through the text of commentary, seeks to understand its contained traditions

in relation both to one another and to the text of scripture upon which it comments. In a sense, such students of our text are drawn into the work of its commentary so as to provide the missing voice that variously joins together *and* differentiates what has already been gathered and arranged before them. If we assume that, in describing the study of activity of the sages and their disciples, the *Sifre* also describes how its own text of Torah teaching ought to be studied by its students, then we cannot understand the social work of that commentary without attempting to pose ourselves in such students' places, even as we employ the distancing tools of the first perspective of intra- and inter-textual critical analysis as controls.

This is a dangerous task, but no less so than the task of any historian who tries to understand an ancient society by viewing it from "within," even while acknowledging and maintaining his or her distance from it. Here I wish to strike a cautionary note. By heuristically posing ourselves in the position of the ancient students of the text, we cannot pretend to *be* such students, exhaustively uncovering in any simple way what would have been its single "original" meaning to them. Our distance from the ancient text of the *Sifre* and its cultural setting, as well as the ambiguities of its own anthological multivocality, precludes such certainty and closure. What we *can* seek is a self-consciously modest understanding of what and how that text might have communicated within the broader parameters and paradigms of meaning and discourse defined by the ancient linguistic and cultural matrices of which that text was a part. Even so, we must admit the hermeneutical circularity of our *reconstructing* of those matrices through our reading of such texts. This is simply to acknowledge that any discrete text of tradition and commentary might "mean more than it says" once it is encountered within such broader interassociative frames, beginning with those of the surrounding *Sifre* commentary and extending to other proximate rabbinic collections and configurations of tradition, midrashic as well as non-midrashic.<sup>37</sup> This is not to suggest a harmonizing approach, but simply one that recognizes that no discrete text is ever understood monologically "in its own terms," but always dialogically in terms of the larger matrices of signification in

which it is set and to which it contributes. For us foreigners that setting—in all its diversity, complexity, and discordancy—is accessible to us mainly in the wider range of rabbinic texts, which like a succession of concentric yet interlocking circles frame the discourse of any particular text, even as they may be challenged by it.

I am proposing that the critical analysis of a rabbinic scriptural commentary take the form of commentary, that in its own way is dialogical, alternating between the perspectives of the text's formation and reception, as well as between those of the ancient student of the text and the modern critic of it. Such a commentary would seek to make both hermeneutical and historical sense of a rabbinic commentary in relation to its ancient setting without claiming reductively to have exhausted or mastered either. If, as I have argued, such a commentary's chief "intent" was to engage dialogically its ancient rabbinic students in the reconstructive and redemptive work of its interpretation, then my own intent is not only to disclose something of how the *Sifre's* commentary interprets scripture, but also to demonstrate how it involves the interpretive collaboration of its students in the ongoing advancement of that work in such a way as to advance their own socioreligious self-understanding. I see no way out of the methodological difficulties of this task, at least not if we wish to ask how the *Sifre's* commentary might have *functioned* as such, that is, how it would have performed its transformative work of interpretation not only in relation to the text of Deuteronomy but also in relation to the society of interpreters whom we know as the rabbinic sages and their disciples. The social construction and solidification of that sub-culture, in significant measure through its collective self-representing work of Torah study, was regarded by the rabbinic shapers of the *Sifre's* commentary as a necessary precondition for their command, in turn and in time, of a similar transformation of Israelite culture and society overall.

Rabbinic shapers of such commentary sought not simply to transmit correct interpretations of scripture, but to shape and ultimately to redeem Jewish society through its dialogically and performatively engaging encounter with a polyphony of "words of Torah." As modern critical students of ancient rabbinic commentary who seek not simply to master its forms and messages but also

to understand and even experience a modest something of how it works, we ourselves need to become practitioners of commentary.

#### NOTES

1. This is a revised version of the introductory chapter of my book, *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and Its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deuteronomy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991). For fuller bibliographic support and finer nuancing of the arguments set forth here, the reader should refer to that chapter, especially to its notes.
2. See Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).
3. *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield: Merriam-Webster, 1983), p. 264. Compare Roland Barthes' characterization of commentary as "the gradual analysis of a single text." *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 12.
4. For this term see Geza Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism*, rev. ed. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1973), pp. 228–29.
5. Examples would be the so-called *Genesis Apocryphon* and Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities*.
6. These terms "deictic" and "dialogical" will be explained through exemplification below.
7. For the texts, translations, notes, and overall discussion, see Maurya P. Horgan, *Pesharim: Qumran Interpretation of Biblical Books* (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1979). The extant *pēšārīm* exist in single copies dating from the late first century B.C.E., even though they are thought to refer to events and personages of the mid-second century B.C.E. How much older these commentaries are than the time of their extant copies is a matter of debate, and probably speculation.
8. 1QpHab 7.1–5. Here and in what follows, the translations of *pēšārīm* are from M. Horgan, *Pesharim*.
9. For more detailed discussion, see in particular Michael Fishbane, "The Qumran Pesharim and Traits of Ancient Hermeneutics," in *Proceedings of the Sixth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, vol. 1

(Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1977), pp. 97–114; Lou Silberman, "Unriddling the Riddle: A Study in the Structure and Language of the Habakkuk Pesharim (1QpHab)," *Revue de Qumran* 3 (1961):323–64; M. Horgan, *Pesharim*, pp. 252–59 (with further bibliography).

10. For example, see in particular CD 7.9–8.2; 4QFlorilegium; and 4QTestimonia.

11. Such declarative terminology (like "this is") may be compared to that employed in the interpretation of dreams, visions, and oracles. On such usage in Jewish and Christian apocalyptic genres, see Martha Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell: An Apocalyptic Form in Jewish and Christian Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), pp. 45–67. Michael Fishbane, in *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), pp. 44–55, uses the term "deictic" for such terminology (e.g., the demonstrative pronoun *zeh*) when used by scribal glossators to scripture. This sort of procedure of direct interpretive correspondence also characterizes most ancient near eastern commentaries, on which see J. Krecher, "Kommentare," in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und vorderasiatischen Archäologie* 6.3/4 (1981):188–91.

12. For a discussion of the extent to which this comparison has been overdrawn, see M. Horgan, *Pesharim*, pp. 250–52 (with bibliography in the notes). See also David Stern, "Midrash and Indeterminacy," *Critical Inquiry* 15 (1988):142–43.

13. For discussion and references, see my *From Tradition to Commentary*, pp. 176–78 (nn. 24, 25).

14. An example will be given below. It has always been a crux of Philonic scholarship to identify the unnamed authorities whose interpretations he so frequently cites. See David M. Hay, "Philo's References to Other Allegorists," *Studia Philonica* 6 (1979–80):41–75; Thomas H. Tobin, *The Creation of Man: Philo and the History of Interpretation*.

15. Thus, Philo will sometimes qualify his interpretations with "perhaps" (*mēpote*). However, he is not adverse to claiming for his "highest" interpretations divine inspiration, even as he is uncertain whether his words can properly express them. See *Cher.* 27.

16. Philo continues here in the same vein.

17. *Her.* 277–83 (LCL 4:424–29).

18. The expression is from David T. Tunia, "The Structure of Philo's Allegorical Treatises: A Review of Two Recent Studies and Some Additional Comments," *Vigiliae Christianae* 38 [1984]:237.

19. *Mig.* 89 (LCL 4:182–3).

20. For a discussion of this language of textual imprint in Philo, see John David Dawson, "Ancient Alexandrian Interpretation of Scripture," pp. 160–65.

21. My distinction between deictic and dialogical should not be drawn too sharply, for even commentaries that are deictic, to the extent that they structurally differentiate between the lemma and its interpretation, may be said to be dialogical, in that they draw their readers into the shuttle between the two. The difference is simply that in raising the dialogical aspect of all commentary to a more explicit level, what I have termed dialogical commentary draws its audience into a more dynamic and open-ended participation in the work of interpretation.

22. I have adapted the heuristic distinction between the constative and performative aspects from Jerome J. McGann, *Social Values and Poetic Acts: The Historical Judgment of Literary Work* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), esp. pp. 19–31, and Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), pp. 57–67, both of whom refer back to John Searle, "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse," in *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 58–75; and ultimately to J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975).

23. For convenient entrances to the larger discussion of the possibilities of historical pursuit following the loss of hermeneutical innocence, see David Simpson, "Literary Criticism and the Return to History," *Critical Inquiry* 14 (1988):721–47; John E. Toews, "Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience," *American History Review* 92 (1987):879–907; Hayden White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," *History and Theory* 23 (1984):1–33. For further bibliography, see my book, *From Tradition to Commentary*, pp. 193–94.

24. *Sifre Deut.* 310. The text can be found in the edition of Louis Finkelstein on pp. 350–51. Where my translation differs from Finkelstein's text, it is because I follow better witnesses.

25. On the rabbinic exegetical portrayal of a chain of early rebellious generations, and its historiographic implications for rabbinic self-understanding, see my book, *Enosh and His Generation: Pre-Israelite Hero and History in Postbiblical Interpretation* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1984), esp. pp. 216–25, 226–27, 231–34.

26. For the sequence Joshua-elders-prophets, see *m. Abot* 1:1, with the Joshua-elders sequence deriving from Joshua 24:31 and Judges 2:7. For the idea that the prophets were succeeded, once classical prophecy ceased, by the elders, who are associated in their authority with the rabbinic sages, see *m. Yad* 4:3 and *Seder Olam Rabba* 30 (ed. Ratner, pp. 140–41), which cites Deuteronomy 32:7 in a way similar to the *Sifre*, but more clearly identifying the elders in that verse with the sages.

27. The phrase “generation and generations” is interpreted as three generations since “generation” is one and “generations” is two, the minimum plural.

28. Thus, Exodus 24:9–10 states that “Moses went up with Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel, and they saw the God of Israel.”

29. See especially *Sifre Deut.* §313 (ed. Finkelstein, p. 355); §351 (p. 408). The oral Torah was nonetheless revealed at Sinai, and even perceived, at least in part, by those standing there.

30. See *Sifre Deut.* §48 (ed. Finkelstein, p. 109).

31. See especially §306 (ed. Finkelstein, p. 336).

32. §13 (ed. Finkelstein, p. 22); §34 (ed. Finkelstein, p. 60).

33. §48 (ed. Finkelstein, pp. 109–10).

34. §48 (ed. Finkelstein, pp. 109–10).

35. My view of the dialogical interrelation of textual formation and reception may be compared to Paul Ricoeur's dialectic of a text's configuration by its author and refiguration by its readers, in *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, esp. pp. 157–79. The relationship between the practice of commentary and the class of sages in third century Palestine, a time of significant rabbinic expansion and solidification, is explored in greater detail in Chapter Three of my book, *From Tradition to Commentary*.

36. For a fuller description and justification of this method, see my earlier, “Sifre Deuteronomy 26 (ad Deut. 3:23: How Conscious the Composition?)” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 54 (1983):245–57.

37. For a fuller discussion, framed in relation to the historical study of earlier political discourse, see J.G.A. Pockock, *Politics, Language, and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (New York: Athenean, 1971), pp. 23–33.