ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF BIBLICAL NARRATIVES IN RABBINIC LITERATURE, PHILO, AND ORIGEN: SOME CASE STUDIES*

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Preliminary remarks: The present article deals with rabbinic traditions, as well as some passages from the Dead Sea Scrolls, in which biblical narratives are given a nonliteral, symbolic interpretation of a sort rather rare in (but not absent from) rabbinic literature, and more akin to what might be labeled allegorical interpretation. These rabbinic traditions will be studied against the foil of Philo, Origen, and later patristic writers who use allegory and typology as hermeneutical techniques. Much scholarly discussion has been devoted to the border between typological and allegorical interpretation—or figurative/figural interpretations, as others would prefer to call them.2

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* Translations of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament in this paper utilize the RSV, with occasional modifications. Translations of Philo follow F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker, Philo in Ten Volumes (LCL; London: Heinemann, 1929–1962). Translations of rabbinic works are my own, based on the texts of the following editions:


   Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shim’on ben Yochai (MekhRSh): J. N. Epstein and E. Z. Melamed, Mekhilta d’Rabbi Shim’on b. Jochai (Jerusalem: Mekitse Nirdamim, 1955); Kahana, Mekhilot.

   Sifre Numbers (Sifre Num.): H. S. Horovitz, Sifre on Numbers and Sifre Zuta (Leipzig: Gustav Fock, 1917).

   Sifre Deuteronomy (Sifre Deut.): L. Finkelstein, Sifre on Deuteronomy (Berlin: Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Wissenschaft des Judentums, 1939).


   1 The interesting problem of the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs is not discussed in the present article.

   2 For a survey of the literature concerning this problem see P. W. Martens, “Revisiting the Allegory/Typology Distinction: The Case of Origen,” JECS 16 (2008): 283–317. I take “typology” to be a species of “allegory,” as suggested in this article (following previous scholars). The nomenclature “figurative” and “figural” was suggested by J. D. Dawson, Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity (Berkeley: University of California, 2002). For a thorough study of the Latin term figura through the ages, see E. Auerbach,
Because the starting point of my study is the rabbinic corpus, I do not enter here into this definitional debate: definitions and terminology for these methods of interpretation in Hellenistic and patristic writings scarcely affect the study of similar (but not identical) methods in rabbinic and prerabbinic tradition, which, unlike Philo and the church fathers, are not directly related to Greek terminology and interpretative techniques.

**INTRODUCTION**

In his description of the Sabbath practices of the Essenes, Philo writes: 
"Then one takes the books and reads aloud, and another of especial proficiency comes forward and explains what is not understood. For most of their philosophical study is through symbols (διὰ συμβόλων), and in this they emulate the traditions of the past."  
Evidently Philo considers the Essenes’ method of biblical exegesis to be similar to his own allegorical interpretation. We do not know what from among the Essenes’ teachings was accessible to Philo, nor is this what matters most; a more fundamental question is what, if any, allegorical interpretation of biblical passages, and especially of biblical narratives, was being done in Palestine in Philo’s time and in the first centuries of the Common Era? The question has occupied scholarship for more than a hundred years, and more research is still needed. Most of the Jews in Palestine did not have Philo’s knowledge of Greek literature.

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*Figura,* in idem, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Theory and History of Literature 9; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 11–60. I thank Dr. David Satran and Dr. Ruth Clements for drawing my attention to scholarly discussions of this complex problem in the study of early Christian literature. In the study of midrash it is not uncommon to refer to “allegorical interpretation” (I. Heinemann, *Darkhe ha-Aggadah* [3d ed.; Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 1970], 149–61 [in Hebrew]; Y. Fraenkel, *Darkhe ha-Aggadah ve-ha-midrash* [Giv’atayim: Yad Latalmud and Masada, 1991], 197–232 [in Hebrew]). The term “typology” should be used carefully when applied to rabbinic literature. The midrashic hermeneutic rule *מעשה אבות סימן לבנים* draws an analogy between two sets of events (somewhat reminiscent of the analogy to Jannes and Jambres in 2 Tim 3:8, to which compare CD 5:17–19); it does not suggest, however, the novel reading of the biblical narrative which is so characteristic of Christian typology.

3 Philo, *Every Good Man is Free*, 82.

4 "One is tempted to see in this alleged allegorization of the Essenes the survival into Philo’s days of the allegory or near-allegory which we have found in the Habakkuk Commentary and the Damascus Covenant, and indeed Dupont-Sommer affirms confidently that this hypothesis is true. Philo’s reference, however, is vague enough for us to need caution in agreeing with this view" (R. P. C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event* [London: SCM Press, 1959], 45).

5 A pioneering study was that of J. Z. Lauterbach, “The Ancient Jewish Allegorists in Talmud and Midrash,” JQR n.s. 1 (1910/11): 291–333, which is an admixture of interesting observations and far-fetched interpretations (for a critique see D. Boyarin, “On the Identification...