TYPES OF BIBLICAL INTERTEXTUALITY

by

MICHAEL FISHBANE

Chicago

I wish to open my remarks today with the following bold and somewhat comprehensive assertion about intertextuality generally, and biblical intertextuality in particular. It is this: intertextuality is the core of the canonical imagination; that is, it is the core of the creative imagination that lives within a self-reflexive culture shaped by an authoritative collection of texts. The main reason for this is that a canon (or whatever sort) presupposes the possibility of correlations among its parts, such that new texts may imbed, reuse, or otherwise allude to precursor materials—both as a strategy for meaning-making, and for establishing the authority of a given innovation. Put in a nutshell, I would say that intertextuality is a form that literary creativity takes when innovation is grounded in tradition.¹

To avoid confusion let me quickly add that for the foregoing characterization I do not mean by canon anything like a dogmatic category. This may be an endpoint; but for the broader consideration of intertextuality I am asserting here, I rather mean by “canon” the emerging “measure” of textual authority in a culture or sub-culture, or at least the fluid content of authoritative cultural memory that are presumed at successive stages of culture.²

Thus, different levels of canon may be distinguished. For present purposes, I wish to concentrate on three. The first of these I shall call the proto-canonical level, and mean by it the canon-before-the-canon; the second level I shall designate canon-within-the-canon; and


the third is the canonical corpus itself, together with its post-canonical effects. Each of these levels marks distinct types of intertextuality—and results in diverse genres and creative forms.

In what follows I wish briefly to exemplify the foregoing generalizations about intertextuality by means of a schematic trajectory that leads from Hebrew Scriptures to rabbinic Midrash.

*The Hebrew Bible, or the proto-canonical stage*

I wish to start with the literature of ancient Israel, perceived as an open, pre-canonical diversity of texts and traditions and to note that, even here, one can discern diverse modes of intertextual correlation that condition literary or theological creativity. Two major variants stand out: *unmarked* and *marked intertextuality*.

1. *Unmarked Intertextuality*

The careful reader of Scripture has, from earliest times, observed various forms of repetition or redundancy that seem to be more that the product of accident or formal style. Indeed, the repetitions at hand (whether fragmentary or extensive) reveal connections with other sources upon which their deeper sense depends. To make matters simple, let me recall to mind such dense relations as exist between the account in Genesis 9,1–7 permitting animal meat, but prohibiting the slaying of humans made in the image of God, with Genesis 1,26–29, in which the issue of the divine image in mankind is first articulated. The utilization of the language of Genesis 1,26–29 as the template for the law in Genesis 9,1–7 is unmarked, but the layering establishes the textual authority and limits for the innovation. Here intertextuality shows its central characteristic of tradition-building through the reuse of earlier formulations. Its product, moreover, is in a new genre.³

As a second example of this type, recall how the prohibition of images in Deuteronomy 4,16b–19a evokes by language and structure the sequence of acts of creation found in Genesis 1,14–27. Once again, the correlation and reuse of a *traditum* is not marked in the successor text; nevertheless, we sense that the correlation is deliberate and establishes the theological structure within which ongoing

³ For specifics, see my *Biblical Interpretation* (op. cit., n. 1), pp. 318–21.