Michael Fishbane is one of the most prodigious and dynamic forces alive in Jewish scholarship. His articles, books, seminars, and lectures have invigorated the study of Judaism for nearly fifty years now, and his work today is as inspired and energized as ever. To consider his scholarly contributions, one must broaden one's gaze to behold the entire expanse of Jewish history, for Fishbane has composed seminal works in the areas of Hebrew Bible (and history of the ancient Near East more generally), Midrash, medieval Jewish philosophy and mysticism, Hasidism, modern Jewish philosophy, and Hebrew poetry. Furthermore, in recent years Fishbane has turned many heads and hearts with his own constructive theological writings. It is ultimately this latter material that sealed Fishbane’s place in this collection, the Library of Contemporary Jewish Philosophers. However, the historical and constructive phases of his career constitute an integrated whole—not only because there are thematic and theological correlations between them, but because they together reflect a lifetime of strivings for truth and meaning that interrogate the very binary of scholarship and spirituality.

The unifying theme throughout Fishbane’s corpus of writings is Jewish hermeneutics. He has attuned his readers and students to the fact that Jewish thought throughout history has been exegetical through and through. In his groundbreaking work *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* he demonstrated that this is no less true in the Hebrew Bible itself than in the postbiblical commentary traditions. Jewish individuals and communities have characteristically expressed Jewish wisdom vis-à-vis the texts and con-texts of Jewish tradition and history. A person is a palimpsest, always already bearing inscriptions of “texts” (literally and figuratively) from the past in her being, even while exercising faculties of reflection and

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imagination. The natural self and the cultural self bleed together, and Jewish theology thus springs from what Fishbane calls the “exegetical imagination”—a confluence of primary sources and primordial intuitions, raw experience and the language of tradition. It is both canonically rooted and richly creative. Even the most wildly imaginative myths in Judaism—those of sea monsters and heavenly battles, godly weeping and divine eros—invariably incorporate canonical citations into their literary structures, reworking the old as they express the new. In Saussure’s terminology, the speech-acts or parole of Jewish thought arise out of the lingual matrix or langue of Jewish sources. And all of this is no more and no less than Jewish theology, which is “not propositional but concrete through and through.”

The exegetical imagination extends as well beyond verbal expressions into the very concreteness of life. Fishbane embraces Thomas Mann’s concept of “zitathafes Leben” (textualized life or citational existence) to refer to ways in which thought, behavior, and life-perceptions all arise in rela-

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2 The notion that human consciousness is always already shaped by “texts” of the past is, of course, a foundational insight of philosophical hermeneutics. This pertains to Heidegger’s conception of the “hermeneutic circle,” where every hermeneutical act is conducted within one’s prior hermeneutical situatedness. Heidegger’s student Gadamer later reformulated this principle according to his notion of prejudice (Vorurteil), whereby all understanding involves prejudgments rooted in prior influences, as well as his concept of “historically effected consciousness” (wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein), which further affirms that the “texts” of the past delineate the horizons of all consciousness. Fishbane himself points to contemporary conceptions of “intertextuality,” citing philosophers such as Julia Kristeva and Jonathan Culler. According to Fishbane’s own summation of this concept, “one may say that we are constituted—even appropriated—by the texts we read. They are our interior Tower of Babel, filling us with the many voices of the many texts that make us who we are.” See Fishbane, Garments of Torah, 126–27. However, it would be reductionist to conclude that Fishbane merely borrows such notions of hermeneutical situatedness from the discourse of philosophical hermeneutics and then applies it to Jewish thought. Indeed, as we shall see, much of Fishbane’s scholarship highlights the extent to which Jewish exegetes themselves throughout the centuries have regarded the textual matrix of Jewish tradition as inseparable from all cognition and creativity, perception and existence. My references to other philosophers here and elsewhere in this introduction are not intended so much to address questions of “influence”—such inquiries are notoriously tricky, and they rarely illuminate the heart of a person’s work—but rather to situate Fishbane’s thought in a broader intellectual context. For readers who take interest in such considerations, most of these comments will appear in footnotes throughout this essay.


5 See Fishbane, Exegetical Imagination, 11–13, 18, 21, 187n. These passages all appear below in Fishbane’s second essay in this volume, “Midrash and the Nature of Scripture.”

6 Fishbane, Exegetical Imagination, 6.