

**Chapter Ten - Text and Context:  
Normative Canon and Ideological Revisionism**

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## Introduction: Ideological Revisionism and Canon

Torah means instruction, law, and much of it seeks to convey ethical, national, theological messages, not merely to commemorate historical event or engage in literary representation. Neither fact nor art sum up the normative goals of the Torah. Thus Torah must also be interpreted as **the community's ideological education** to engender values, behaviors, attitudes in its listeners who share its identity. The way the history of past origins is retold is of course part of teaching future generations how to see themselves and how to act. Therefore even narratives may reflect internal and external polemics between various communities claiming the same origins in these normative texts. The content, the borders of a text and the order of the books in the Tanakh constitute a **canon** - a law laid down by the community to define its sacred, binding texts and thereby who is in and who is out of the community. The ordering of the text as well as its tone and chosen content persuade its readers to take a particular value stance.

However as a site for ideological constructs given authority by its community of readers, as holy Bible, as sacred scriptures, the Torah is also a **field of contested interpretation** through deconstruction and reconstruction. For example, Phyllis Trible takes the story of the origins of woman which is often used to establish her hierarchal subordination to man (she becomes "one flesh" with man and loses her independent identity or she desires him so "he will rule over her"). Then she deconstructs the text separating it from thousands of years of its interpretative community reading it as chauvinist to show it could and perhaps should best be read according to the pshat as egalitarian in its normative message. Just by opening up the possibility of reasonable reading that is not hierarchal, she undermines the self-evident sense of the authority of the text as educational propaganda for the establishment. In the story of Akedah Trible ventures to construct a missing chapter about Sarah's response to the Akedah which like the midrash fills gaps in consistent extrapolation with the Pshat but motivated self-consciously by the revisionist political goal of legitimating a woman's place in the canon. Many feminists write their own poetry to fill out the female characters slighted in the Tanakh, such as Hagar or Bat Yiftach.

**Harold Bloom**, the radical literary theorist, argues that revisionism is the thrust of all great re-readings of the tradition whether as commentary or as the adding of new literary creations in a tradition. Using the Freudian model of the Oedipal conflict all writers or interpreters must make room for themselves in a tradition by shunting aside the father figure of authority. However the father figure was a great creator who contributed mightily to shaping the sons of that tradition who now need to rebel against him to assert themselves. Thus a **revisionist move** claims that the son's interpretation of the Torah is simply a loyal continuation of the father but in fact the son reinterprets the father's creation, his Torah or his poetry, in the spirit of the son. Thus paradoxically some cultural sons proclaim a revolt when they are only continuing what the father said. Even greater sons proclaim that they are merely continuing the father's original intent (as Hazal say, all the questions and answers posed by students of Torah were already revealed on Sinai in the Torah) so they hide the revolt because they have reconstructed the tradition to say what they want to say. Susan Handelman argues that Tanur shel Akhnai offers a solution to this Oedipal conflict without slaying the father or the son. The father God wants the sons to out-argue him and defeat him for even if the content is new and disagrees with the God, the form of creation, the commentary

explicating God's word, shows respect for the traditional continuity at the same time that it makes room for innovation ( Hazal say the father scholars left room for the sons to fence off their own space - *lhitgader bi*).

Every student and every great commentator/darshan has a deep ego need for *hiddush* as well as for continuity and the study of the Torah and the study of the history of the interpretation of Torah must acknowledge that subjective need. For the master-disciple (rav/talmid) relation between the Jew and God, between the student and Torah and between student in school and his teacher involve the assertion of one's identity in the twofold sense of how I am different than you and how I am still identified with you. That **dialectical hevruta relationship** is itself a primary "game of interpretation" in Torah's educational approach, not less than objective rules for uncovering pshat or self-expressive freedom to create one's own midrash in any way one wants. The asking of hard kushiot (see above Aviva Zornberg on Kushiot) of the text and its masters is an emancipation from and yet an initiation into the way of the Torah community (recall Resh Lakish and Rabbi Yochanan).

Viewing **Tanakh as an Ideological Canon** suggests many ways to read it:

- ☒ **Community members contesting their place in the community will often reedit an ancient authoritative text** (for example the editor of Kings added his own summaries evaluating each king by his relationship to the *bamot* local cultic centers and the centralization of the cult in Jerusalem or the editor of Ecclesiastes added a pious ending to soften the heretical views expressed in Kohelet).
- ☒ Those who **shaped the whole Biblical canon** often shuffled the **order of the books** to make a point by juxtaposing one text with another (See below the location of the Book of Ruth in various orders of the Tanakh and its relationship to King David). In the Septuagint for example, the book of Ruth appears after Judges and before Samuel. Not only does that make chronological sense since the Book of Ruth opens with "In the days of the judges," but it can be seen as ideological propaganda for pro- David and anti- Saul forces. The book of Judges ends with the awful violation of hospitality and the Sodom-like rape of the concubine in Givah - home of the future Saul the rejected first king. The Book of Ruth describes idyllic hospitable people from Beit Lehem - home of David the founder of the true dynasty.)

Some Bibles are structured as Torah, Ketuvim and Neviim, so that the last book of Neviim - Zecharia ends with a verse about the coming of Elijah as the messianic forerunner. This ending has an ideological message - especially when the New Testament comes next. The difference between the Old Testament and the Tanakh is precisely on this point. Do we read the Hebrew Bible as the "Old" Testament, as the forerunner and prefiguration of the "ending" of the Bible in the New Testament? Usually revisionist reediting of the Tanakh is done surreptitiously to present one's own perspective as the one and only one, as the ancient and historically true one. However the Tanakh often preserves side by

side without comment more than one version of the normative account making is overall editorial policy more like an anthology than a propaganda tract.

- ☒ More recently in the case of feminism, **revisionism** has openly declared its own reinterpretation of the text as the preferred norm combating what is admitted as the pshat bias of the existing text.(see Phyllis Tribble on the origin of woman and the question of her natural, Divinely mandated subordination to man in Genesis 2-3). Here an interpretation must be read not as the best and most coherent neutral reading of the text's values but a deconstructive reading against the grain which uncovers partially suppressed alternative pro-revisionist kernels of the text.
- ☒ Beyond that, **feminist midrash** fills in gaps that feminists wish open up in the text - like the untold story of Dinah's rape from her point of view or Sarah's story of the Akeda. Normative authority is claimed for these midrashim as completing and counterbalancing the onesidedness of the text as edited in its traditional canon. The canon is therefore understood as still open as it was until the official canonization. In fact there is no hard historical evidence for an official canonization process of the Tanakh despite much speculation, so perhaps the difference between Oral Torah and Written is not so clear. Oral traditions even older than any written version are sometimes preserved in later midrash and that open-ended process is claimed as a precedent for ongoing midrashic revisionism. Feminism is by no means the only such revisionist movement.
- ☒ Harold Bloom claims that revisionist interpretation and writing within a tradition - any tradition - is necessarily an **Oedipal struggle** to rewrite one's "parental" origins in the text to make room for one's own normative perspective in the present under the guise of being merely a continuation of the past. .

**#1 - Genesis 2 and Feminist Revisionism:  
Phyllis Tribble on the Question:  
Is the story of building woman  
from the rib of man (Genesis 2) chauvinistic?**

Does the story of the creation of woman, in the second creation story, come to establish the denigrated status of women from birth and their natural subordination to men, or does this story argue the equality of the sexes as in the first creation story-- "*male and female did he create them*" (Genesis 1:26-28)?

This discussion which occupies many biblical commentators today, in the age of the feminist revolution, also occupied commentators in previous generations as we shall presently see. The importance of this discussion is manifest in that thinkers saw--and still see--in these Genesis stories an attempt to define the ideal and natural way of the world.

In order to engage in a meaningful discussion on this matter, we shall carefully examine a number of textual expressions. We shall scrutinize each expression in light of the central question: "How does each expression add to the understanding of the ideal relationship between man and woman?"

**SUMMING UP: Is Genesis 2 a Chauvinistic Story or a Tale of Equality?**

Some of the traditional and modern commentators see the formation of woman from man's "*tzelah*" as an expression of her natural subordination to her husband. Therefore they contrast this Divinely established natural hierarchy with the tragic reversal of roles when the man listened to the woman's advice regarding the tree of knowledge. Yet the modern Bible scholar and Protestant theologian, Phyllis Tribble, adamantly claims that there is no hint of second-class status or subordination of woman to man in Genesis 2. She brings a list of accepted claims which express inequality between man and woman in Genesis 2 and refutes them one by one.

| <b>Claims of Subordination</b>  | <b>Claims of Equality</b>  |
|---|--|
| Man was created first, therefore he is more highly valued. The woman was created only at the end of the process. She was the second one created, therefore she has second-class status. | Woman is last like the jewel in a crown. In the story of creation--male and female were created last according to the rule that "the last is best" and they are destined to rule everything which preceded them.<br>The story of the search for and creation of woman is a long one and therefore indicates its importance in the completion of creation. The woman arrives at the end since she is the long-awaited solution. |
| Woman was created to satisfy the needs of man as a help-mate: a servant.  | Man needs woman as one who redeems him-- a "helper" in the sense of savior. She completes him and without her, man would remain essentially "not good".  |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Woman was created from a rib--an unimportant and secondary bone. In fact, contrary to nature, woman comes out of man; she is denied even her natural function of birthing and that function is given to man. | Woman is created by cutting in half the human in which each half is called a side (as in the side of the tabernacle).*   |
| Man names woman which expresses his power over her just as he named animals and has dominion over them.  | The human invents new names to call each side: "man" and "woman" to indicate their mutual yearning for one another. If we are more precise we see that the man did not name his mate but rather prophesied the she "would be called woman because from man was she taken". |
| Woman was created from man and is therefore dependent upon him and inferior to him.  | Woman was built by God from material which was taken from man; therefore what is formed is of higher quality and status than the original material.  |

***Didactic Suggestion:** In order to enliven the argument we presented the material in a polarized manner oscillating between subordination and equality. One could stage a debate between two students, each asked to defend or refute the claim that this second creation story is chauvinistic. Each side could be armed with the above mentioned points. At the conclusion of this staged debate, each student in the class would receive this chart and be asked to develop his/her own personal position while refuting the opposite claim.*

In conclusion, there are commentators who view the formation of woman and man's reaction to her as the climax of creation. The connection between the man and woman, one of love between companions, is the deepest and most meaningful connection created. As described in the Seven Wedding Blessings which are offered to the bride and groom: "Be exceedingly happy, loving companions, as happy as the happiness experienced in the ancient Garden of Eden. Blessed are You, God, who formed the human." Such commentators view the Garden of Eden as a the ideal model of equality and unification of hearts.

Nonetheless, there are other commentators who find proof in this story of the subordination of woman to man; subordination of the "less good" to the "better", of the second class to the primary person. There are midrashim which emphasize the unsavory side of woman, which is hinted at in her creation, and actualized in her nature when she latter eats from the tree of knowledge. Woman is presented in these midrashim not only as less good and subordinate, but as evil and even as a creature around whom one should be cautious.

For example, Rabbi Levi saw in the creation of woman (Gen. 2) a hint of her corruption in Gen. 3. Her deficiencies are a result of her essence against which even God seemingly cannot be defended. Her creation from a simple rib should have insured that she be essentially humble and subordinate. Yet despite her natural position, she constantly aspires to pervert all possible attributes of the body.

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\* Checking the concordance reveals that the only biblical use of the word "*tzelah*" is as "side", "wall", or "room" in a building; "*tzelah*" is not used in the bible as reference to a bone of the body (rib). Therefore, it's preferable to translate "*tzelah*" here in Genesis as "side". The term "*tzelah*" was taken from the realm of building (as in: "to build the sides of the tabernacle") and transposed to "building a woman".

| Genesis Rabbah 18:2  | 'בראשית רבה י"ח:ב   |
|--|---|
| <p>R. Joshua of Siknin said in R. Levi's name: WAYYIBEN is written, signifying that He considered well (<i>hithbonnen</i>) from what part to create her. Said He: 'I will not create her from [Adam's] head, lest she be swelled-headed<sup>5</sup>; nor from the eye, lest she be a coquette<sup>6</sup>; nor from the ear, lest she be an eavesdropper; nor from the mouth, lest she be a gossip; nor from the heart, lest she be prone to jealousy; nor from the hand, lest she be light-fingered<sup>7</sup>; nor from the foot, lest she be a gadabout; but from the modest part of man, for even when he stands naked, that part is covered.' And as He created each limb He ordered her, 'Be a modest woman.' Yet in spite of all this, <i>you have set at naught all My counsel, and would none of My reproof</i> (Prov. 1:25). I did not create her from the head, yet she is swelled-headed, as it is written, <i>They walk with stretched-forth necks</i> (Isa. 3:16); nor from the eye, yet she is a coquette: <i>And wanton eyes</i> (ibid.); nor from the ear, yet she is an eavesdropper: <i>Now Sarah listened in the tent door</i> (Gen. 18:10); nor from the heart, yet she is prone to jealousy: <i>Rachel envied her sister</i> (Gen. 30:1); nor from the hand, yet she is light-fingered: <i>And Rachel stole the teraphim</i> (Gen. 31:19); nor from the foot, yet she is a gadabout: <i>And Dinah went out</i>, etc. (Gen. 34:1).</p> <p>_____</p> <p>(5) Others read: light-headed, i.e. frivolous.<br/> (6) Lit. 'a looker'-ogling men.<br/> (7) Lit. 'one who touches things' i.e. thievish.</p> | <p>רבי יהושע דסכנין בשם ר' לוי אמר ויבן כתיב התבונן מאין לבראתה אמר לא אברא אותה מן הראש שלא תהא מיקרת ראשה לא מן העין שלא תהא סקרנית ולא מן האוזן שלא תהא צייתנית ולא מן הפה שלא תהא דברנית ולא מן הלב שלא תהא קנתנית ולא מן היד שלא תהא ממשמשנית אלא ממקום ולא מן הרגל שלא תהא פרסנית שהוא צנוע באדם אפי' בשעה שאדם עומד ערום אותו המקום מכוסה ועל כל אבר ואבר שהיה בורא בה היה אומר לה תהא אשה צנועה אשה צנועה אעפ"כ (משלי א) ותפרעו כל עצתי לא בראתי אותה מן הראש והרי היא מיקרת ראשה שנאמר (ישעיה ג) ותלכנה נטויות גרון ולא מן העין והרי היא סקרנית שנאמר (שם) ומסקרות עינים ולא מן האוזן והרי היא צייתנית שנאמר (בראשית יח) ושרה שומעת פתח האהל ולא מן הלב והרי היא קנתנית שנאמר (שם ל) ותקנא רחל באחותה ולא מן היד והרי היא ממשמשנית שנאמר (שם לא) ותגנוב רחל את התרפים ולא מן הרגל והרי היא פרסנית שנאמר (שם לד) ותצא דינה:</p> |

## **#2 David's Fifty-First Psalm of Repentance and Batsheva's New Reply by Barbara Ellison Rosenblit<sup>1</sup>**

(reprinted in the magazine CROSS CURRENTS)

Psalm 51 is traditionally interpreted as a psalm of confession and renewal. Its poetry has contributed to the daily Jewish prayer liturgy as well as the Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur services. Two verses, 13 and 20, have been set to music; one verse, 17, is repeated three times a day as a prelude to silent prayer, and verse 20 is sung in unison four times each week as the Torah is removed from the ark. A psalm so resonant is worthy of notice. I decided to enter it at a linguistic level.

Once inside, I found myself captured by the possibilities for exploration. Here, my examination of Psalm 51 begins with a new translation, and ends with a set of radically contrasting interpretive readings. ...is an original drama which calls forth the silenced voice of Bat Sheva herself.

Psalm 51 encourages such interpretive tampering. It is one of only nine psalms with an ascription tying it to a specific historical event. David composes it, we are told, after Nathan chastises him for taking his army general's wife to bed and later arranging for that loyal general's death. This great drama, summarized below, is found in 2 Samuel 11-12; it is among the most riveting accounts in the Bible....

At this moment of awareness and calamity, the ascription implies, David brings his sins before God, struggles with his passions and the deep grief he feels, and composes Psalm 51. The drama leaves hard questions in its wake. ...

### **Psalm 51**

*For the conductor, a song of David*

*When Nathan the prophet came to him*

*After David had been with Bat Sheva:*

**Be gracious to me, God, with your kindness  
With great compassion, erase my crimes  
Completely wash away my iniquities  
And make me pure despite my sins  
Because my crimes I acknowledge  
And my sins haunt me endlessly**

**Before You and You alone I sinned  
I did evil in your eyes  
So that Your words will be justified**

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<sup>1</sup> Rosenblit has taught in myriad exotic locales, including Yerucham, an isolated town in Israel's Negev Desert. She is studying in the Judaic Studies program at Emory University and is a Bible and literature teacher at the Weber Jewish day school in Atlanta, Georgia.



So that You will be right in Your verdict

Look! In iniquity was I born  
Sinful was my mother's heated passion

'Here! You seek truth in my innermost being,  
So, make me know wisdom in my innermost heart

Disinfect me with hyssop and I will be pure  
Wash me and I will be as white as snow  
Let me hear joy and gladness  
Then the bones You crushed will rejoice

Hide Your Face from my sins  
And erase all my iniquities  
A pure heart create for me, O God  
A proper spirit renew in my inner being

Don't send me away from Your presence  
Don't take away Your holy spirit from me

Return to me the joy of Your salvation  
And with a generous spirit support me  
I will teach sinners Your ways  
Sinners will return to You

Let my tongue sing joyously of Your righteousness  
My Lord, open my lips

And my mouth will tell of Your praises  
Since You do not wish an offering, else I would give it  
Nor a burnt offering do you want  
The slaughter offerings of God are a broken spirit  
and a broken, battered heart  
These God will not reject

Do good as is Your will, to Zion  
Rebuild the walls of Jerusalem  
Then You will desire righteous sacrifice,  
burnt offerings and whole offerings  
Then bullocks will be offered on Your altar.

## Reading for Two Voices

David's psalm of confession and renewal  
*Bat Sheva's psalm of unremitting suffering*

*[Bat Sheva weeps from outside David's chamber.*

*Inside the room, David cries to God for forgiveness, approaching God with the gift-offering of the poet.*

*From the periphery, outside the inner sanctum, Bat Sheva sobs out her anger, her loss, her psalm. She hears David as he approaches God.*

*David cannot hear her. Hers is the marginalized voice of the silenced soul.]*

**Bat Sheva:** I hate him. Rushing about. Howling. Shrieking. I despise him. Nathan is gone now and suddenly, he cries out, all contrition and tears. And I am left to mourn my dead husband, and to nurse this child of sin. His lips won't suck, his eyes are hollow. His tiny fingers cannot grasp my shaking hand.

God, what have You done to me?

*[From within the chamber she hears his voice, filled with weeping and remorse.]*

**David:** *Be gracious to me, God, with Your kindness  
With great compassion, erase my crimes  
Completely wash away my iniquities  
And make me pure despite my sins*

**Bat Sheva:** How dare his guilty lips give voice to such a cry. He knows how to cry or forgiveness, while I live with this guilt. I know the guilt of women. I know the bargain we strike. I know my choices.

I, too, acknowledge my crimes because my sins haunt me endlessly.

Is there no comfort from my grief?

**David:**

Before You and You alone  
I sinned I did evil in your eyes  
So that Your words will be justified  
So that You will be right in Your verdict

**Bat Sheva:** Before You and You alone!? Who? Before whom? Before God - and not before me!? Before whom will I repent? When you summoned me forth to sin, to whom should I have appealed? Let him *never forget!*

I will never forget.

I will never forget that day. Air so clear. I had gone to the ritual bath late, as the sun began to set behind the Judean hills. The ritual waters surrounded me - they cleansed me.

It was the last time I felt clean.

Could I have known? I was dressing when I saw the king's guard inquiring of the bathhouse attendant. She cast a glance my way and whispered to him. He grinned - it was a leer - when he looked my way.

I had rounded the corner to my house when they approached, those three men, snickering under their stinking robes. "Dress quickly, lucky lady. You have been chosen to warm the king's bed tonight."

He cries to *You* for mercy?! He cries to *You* for compassion, to make him pure?!

Who can make me pure?

*Look! In iniquity was I born. Sinful was my mother's heated passion*

And in sin this baby was conceived with the guilt of heat. Through me my sins have borne such sickly fruit.

*David: Here! You seek truth in my innermost being  
So make me know wisdom in my innermost heart  
Disinfect me with hyssop and I will be pure  
Wash me and I will be white as snow  
Let me hear joy and gladness  
Then the bones You crushed will rejoice*

**Bat Sheva:** There is not water enough on earth to wash this stain from me.

I can still feel the blood leak down my legs. It stains me forever. I carry my sin in my arms. Blood pulsates through those tiny veins, that pallid flesh.

My shame envelops me, as once You did.

*David: Hide Your Face from my sins*

*[As both speak 'from my sins,' David's voice fades, Bat Sheva's rises]*

**Bat Sheva:** *From my sins, too, erase all my iniquities. A pure heart create for me. O God, don't let my hatred consume me. Don't let my grief press me into the earth. Don't let this baby suffer for my sins. You love his father. Then love him. Save this child for his sake, if not for mine. Surely not for mine. Are You so cruel?*

*David: [His voice grows stronger:]*

*A proper spirit renew in my inner being*

**Bat Sheva:** *I deserved Your cruelty. For some sin of mine that I know not, God, forgive me. Don't leave me.*

*Don't send me away from Your Presence.*

*[Bat Sheva weeps, for her blasphemy, for her sorrow, for the innocent child who she fears will be sacrificed to atone for her sin, for her dead husband, for her arrogant lover.]*

*David: [His voice stronger still.]*

*Don't take away Your holy spirit from me.*

*Return to me the joy of Your salvation*

*And with a generous spirit support me*

*I will teach sinners Your ways*

*Sinners will return to You*

**Bat Sheva:** Your lips are golden. How sweetly they form the words. And yet you dare to exclude *me* from your prayer? Those honeyed lips that dared to call me to your bed, that dared to call for the murder of my husband. What remorse did your lips form then? You. You! You will "teach sinners"!?

Nathan came to tell you a children's story so you could understand what you had done. A story about sheep, so you could understand. You shepherd, in king's robes - You arrogant self-centered killer! What were your prayers when you sent Uriah away, his own death warrant in his hand? Did nothing, no one, none of the deaths count to you until Nathan came and told you a story he made up? And oh, to watch you fly into a rage over a rich man who took another's sheep! It was comical, your anger so easily aroused. You! Too selfish to notice anyone or anything. Or to see yourself. What you had done.

**David:** *Rescue me from this blood!*

**Bat Sheva:** *Rescue me from this blood.*

**David:** *God, God of my Deliverance  
Let my tongue sing joyously of Your righteousness  
My Lord, open my lips  
And my mouth will tell of Your praises  
Since You do not wish an offering, else I would give it  
Nor a burnt offering do You want.  
The slaughter offerings of God  
are a broken spirit and a broken, battered heart.  
These God will not reject.*

*[Bat Sheva falls to the ground, clutching the child in her arms. He does not cry out.]*

**Bat Sheva:** The slaughter offerings of God are "a broken spirit and a broken, battered heart. These God will not reject." My broken spirit, my battered heart I bring before You. I have only that to offer. Can I heal from this sorrow? O God, "open my lips too," that my sorrow will give way to... to what? What? I cannot even say the words. As he opens his heart, so do I yearn for comfort. But You have turned from me. Taken from me to give to him.

**David:**

*Do good as is Your will, to Zion  
Rebuild the walls of Jerusalem  
Then You will desire righteous sacrifice,  
burnt offerings and whole offerings  
Then bullocks will be offered on Your altar.*

**Bat Sheva:** When will You have taken enough? When will I have given enough? I pray

**Dear God,**

**Let the yelps and spraying blood of some dumb beast  
Hurled helpless upon Your altar  
Replace the sacrifice of this dying babe.**

**Rebuild the walls of my womb**

**to house the seed of Your people.**

**Heal me, O God. Heal me now.  
For I am broken.**

### #3 - Placing Megillat Ruth in the Canon: Order as Interpretation

Besides the intention of the author and meaning understood by the historic audience when a book was composed, there is also its place in the **official memory** of the people or their library later established. In this case it is the place in the order of the Bible or Tanakh. There are in fact many different organizations of the Tanakh and in many of them the Book of Ruth is located differently.

**Exercise:** Examine the record of placements as against the placement in the Masoretic text finalized in Tiberias in 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> century. Teachers may bring Bibles of different traditions - Catholic, Protestant, Septuagint, Masoretic to class for comparison and also reprint list so books found in various Biblical encyclopedias. Speculate on the meaning of the placement.

- a. Ruth between Book of Judges and Book of Samuel. (Septuagint, Greek Jewish, Syriac Christian and later Catholic order of cannon, also reported by Origen).
- b. Ruth before Tehillim/Psalms in Ketuvim (TB Baba Batra 14b baraita)
- c. Ruth among Five Megillot in order: Shir HaShirim/Ruth/Eicha/Kohelet/Esther (Masoretic)
- d. Ruth/ Shir Hashirim/ Kohelet/ Eicha /Esther (Sephardi manuscript of Tanakh)
- e. Job / Tehillim / Proverbs / Ruth (Leningrad manuscript)

Some scholars speculate that:

(a) **Ruth between Book of Judges and Book of Samuel.** (Septuagint, Greek Jewish and later Catholic order of cannon) follows the historical introduction to Megillat Ruth in the days of the Judges and it helps to establish why David is preferable to Saul by comparing the rape of concubine in Givah, home of Saul, with Ruth in Bethlehem, home of David. This also fills the gap regarding David's genealogy and birth story which is missing in the Book of Samuel. TB Baba Batra 14B attributes the books of Judges, Ruth and Samuel to the **authorship of Samuel**, so it makes sense to group them together. Similarly Eicha attributed to Jeremiah is often placed after Jeremiah's book of prophecies and Esther is often placed with Ezra-Nehemia from the second Temple Period.

(b) **Ruth before Tehillim/Psalms in Ketuvim** (TB Baba Batra 14b baraita) reflects the attribution of Tehillim to **King David**, so it is prefaced with the story of his ancestor's birth.  
(Ruth/Tehillim/Job/Proverbs/Kohelet/Shir Hashirim/Eicha/Esther

(c) **Ruth among Five Megillot** in order: Shir HaShirim /Ruth/Eicha /Kohelet /Esther (Masoretic) reflects the **liturgical order** (first documented in Geonic times) that the Megillot are read publicly at each

holiday in order of the Hebrew months beginning with Nisan<sup>2</sup>, the first Hebrew month. So Shir HaShirim = Pesach = Nisan /Ruth = Shavuot = harvest of barley and wheat/Eicha = Tisha B'Av /Kohelet = Sukkot = Tishrei /Esther = Purim = Adar. Shavuot is also identified in rabbinic tradition with the birth and death day of David. Scholars speculate that the five Megillot were taken out of the historical order and grouped together sometime after the sixth century when the liturgical custom of reading a different Megillah on each holiday was established, as witnessed in Masechet Sofrim.

(d) Tehillim/Proverbs/Job/ Ruth/ Shir Hashirim/ Kohelet/ Eicha /Esther (Sephardi manuscript of the Tanakh) reflects the **historical order of putative authors**: David, then Solomon for Shir Hashirim (Solomon as young man according to the Rabbis) / Kohelet (Solomon as old disillusioned man according to the Rabbis), and Jeremiah for Eicha and Esther for Esther.

(e) Job / Tehillim / Proverbs / Ruth (Leningrad manuscript) reflects the connection between Proverbs = Mishlei which ends in Proverbs Chapter 31 with the poem to **Eishet Hayil** and then proceeds with Megillat Ruth that praises Ruth as "Eishet Hayil." (David is also described as a *gibor hayil* - I Samuel 16:18 and he too lived in Bethlehem - I Samuel 17:12).

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<sup>2</sup> A few rare manuscripts place Tishrei first so the order is: Kohelet/Esther/Shir Hashirim/Ruth/Eicha.

## Appendix: Harold Bloom and the Heretic Hermeneutic versus New Criticism in Literary Criticism by Susan Handelman from *The Slayers of Moses* (p. 179 ff)

Hebraism and Hellenism-between these two points of influence move our world. At one time it feels more powerfully the attraction of one of them, at another time of the other; and it ought to be, though it never is, evenly and happily balanced between them.

--Matthew Arnold

He who is willing to work gives birth to his own father.

-Kierkegaard

The wars between Jews and Greeks, so long fought on Mediterranean and European soil, have come, finally, to America. American literary theory, so long under the sway of the **New Critics** who came to prominence in the 1930s and 1940s, has been radically transformed in the postwar period. The character of the New Critics, led by such figures as John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and Cleanth Brooks, was predominantly Southern, agrarian, conservative, and Christian. And T. S. Eliot's neo-Catholicism had left its mark on them all. The New Critical Gospel of formalism-that one must pay attention solely to the formal structures of the words on the page-might be summed up in the famous phrase that Wimsatt and Beardsley took from Archibald MacLeish: **"A poem should not mean but be."**

The New Critics intended to do away with the sloppy excrescences of "meaning" produced by such unhealthy considerations as, in Ransom's terms: "personal registrations, which are the declaration of the effect of the art-work upon the critic as reader," "historical studies," "linguistic studies," "moral studies," "any other special studies which deal with some abstract or prose content taken out of the work." **Criticism must be "scientific," "precise," "objective," respectful of the autonomy of the work of art.** Underlying this vision, of course, is a Hellenistic dream of logic, order, form, and lucidity.

For thinkers like the New Critics, the intellectual movements that have swept through Europe since World War II- existentialism, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, structuralism, deconstructionism -are anathema. Yet while the Yale University English Department harbored the New Critics Warren, Brooks, and Wimsatt, it has also more recently nurtured **Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman, Paul de Man,** and J. Hillis Miller. And this new generation of Yale scholars has been one of the main conduits through which these recent trends in European literary theory- especially **Freud-Lacan-Derrida** - have entered the United States. The Yale school has met with much resistance from the American literary heartland, and has been resented as a kind of literary mafia, trying to infiltrate and dominate the plain, honest, objective tradesmen of literary criticism. To the plain folk of criticism, the baroque abstraction of these strange imported European fashions - **the attempt to erase the distinction between literary commentary and literature itself, and to subvert the traditional hierarchies of author-text-critic-student-** seem arbitrary, irrational, willful, and esoteric.



G. Douglas Atkins points out that the Yale school so threatens and unsettles because its underlying aim is, in his words, to "de-Hellenize" literary criticism.' Our contemporary battle of the books is between Hebrews and Hellenes. The plainstyle critics, as he calls them, have an implicit faith in ` logic, reason, and order, i.e., in the classic Hellenistic view of things; the Yale school questions the very possibility of order and unity and turns toward a speculative, visionary, and hermeneutic style. Atkins discerns that the Yale critics' "opposition to Hellenism and the classical logos derives from notions strikingly similar to Hebraic and biblical thought." The Yale critics are by no means unaware of these Hebraic tendencies. Bloom is perhaps their most striking representative.

With Bloom, the **heretic hermeneutic** attains full systematic theoretical self-realization. Bloom focuses his efforts on something we have barely touched upon in the authors studied so far: **the will-to-power of interpretation. Commentary and exegesis are not innocent.**

### **From the Visionary to the Re-visionary Company**

Everyone who now reads and writes in the West ... is still a son or daughter of Homer. As a teacher of literature who prefers the morality of the Hebrew Bible to Homer, indeed who prefers the Bible aesthetically to Homer, I am no happier about this dark truth than you are.

Bloom has openly declared poetic and critical warfare against the Greeks: in the past decade, he has produced a series of books in which his explicit aim has been to "de-idealize" literature and literary criticism. One of **Bloom's central axioms** is that **making and reading poetry is not a highly refined humanistic endeavor, but a fierce Oedipal struggle, an open warfare conducted between poets and their precursors, as well as readers and their poets: a battlefield in which the combatants are all engaged in trying to create some kind of original space for themselves. The processes of reading and writing well are not, to Bloom, "polite":**

Reading is always a defensive process is defensive warfare....  
**Strong poets** . . . , should always be condemned by a humanist morality, for strong poets are necessarily perverse . . . Perverse in relation to the precursors . . .

If the imagination's gift comes necessarily from the perversity of the spirit, then the living labyrinth of literature is built upon the ruin of every impulse most generous in us. So we are wrong to have founded a humanism directly upon literature itself, and the phrase "humane letters" is an oxymoron. . . **the strong imagination comes to its painful birth through savagery and misrepresentation.**

Reading is a defensive act of battle against a precursor text, a necessary misreading.

For such interpretive battles, Bloom arms himself - not with Aristotle and Plato, classical logic or New Critical formalism; ..but to Jewish mysticism, to Kabbalah. Bloom

has written over a dozen books in the past two decades, beginning with studies of the major figures of the romantic era: Shelley and Blake - *The Visionary Company; A Reading of English Romantic Poetry*.

But in 1973, Bloom published the first of four theoretical books, which have proposed startling new theories of criticism: *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973); *A Map of Misreading* (1975); *Kabbalah and Criticism* (1975); *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens* (1976); and even a novel - *The Flight-to Lucifer: A Gnostic Fantasy* (1979). Bloom's path from the visionary to the revisionary company has been long and involved.

Perhaps the best place to begin is *The Anxiety of Influence*, in which Bloom first fully articulated his new, radical "manifesto for an antithetical criticism,".... The key to this work is Bloom's quotation from Kierkegaard: "**He who is willing to work gives birth to his own father.**", Like Freud and Derrida, Bloom is obsessed with the question of origins. At the root of Bloom's anxiety in *The Anxiety of Influence* is the despair over not having been self-begotten, at not being one's own father; for the question of birth is ultimately an attempt to overcome death. **The primal wound for Bloom is to have been "thrown" into a world not one's own; the primal passion is to reverse one's fall by recreating that world in one's own image, by recreating and re-begetting oneself, thereby becoming one's own father, capturing the power of giving life.** Hence the themes of Anxiety are belatedness, revisionism, discontinuity, subversion, interpretive reversal-themes that inform all of Bloom's work (and Freud's as well). And hence Bloom considers Milton's Satan "the greatest really Modern or Post-Enlightenment poet in the language.... Satan like any strong poet, declines merely to be a latecomer. His way of returning to origins, of making Oedipal trespass, is to become a rival creator to God-as-creator. He embraces Sin as his Muse, and begets upon her the highly original poem of Death, the only poem that God will permit him to write.""

In Bloom's vision, **poetry is a conflict with God, an attempt at rival divination.** The modern poet is heroic because like Satan he refuses the "incarnation of God's son," refuses the creation as ordered by God. Poetic election is a kind of curse, then, because it means belated and ultimately impossible rebellion against one's powerful precursor poet, who functions as God, as it were: a rebellion against culture, history, tradition, all of which exert tremendous influence over the new poet, blocking his own creativity. **...Essentially what the new poet does in order to clear space for himself is to misread his precursor.** Intrapoetic relations are a struggle between fathers and sons, as in the classic Freudian family romance; and the **necessary misreadings** are at the same time (Freudian) defensive maneuvers of psychic survival.

The reader's encounter with the text is no different, in effect, than the new poet's encounters with his predecessor texts, and this encounter is governed by the same Bloomian laws: "The influence relation governs reading as it governs writing, and reading is therefore a miswriting, just as writing is a misreading. As literary history lengthens, all poetry becomes verse-criticism, just as all criticism becomes prose-poetry." **...The boundaries, then, between commentary and text dissolve....** Both in effect are exegetes, grapplers with a Text, which each tries to appropriate for himself in a manner wherein the belated commentary somehow gains power over and appropriates the power of the initial Text, reversing the roles so that, in Wordsworth's famous phrase, "**The child is father to the Man.**"

In the tradition of heretic hermeneutics there is a need to slay Moses and give the New Law, to rewrite origins and usurp the father, to make the son one with the father - above all through acts of revisionary interpretation - ties all these figures together. The heretic hermeneutic as a complex of identification and displacement is what Bloom maps in his misreadings.

That Bloom locates this subversive revisionary impulse in Kabbalah and Gnosticism, instead of within Rabbinic tradition, itself is a misreading; for, in essence, the **Rabbinic tradition contains** within it, even in the legalistic writings, **the mechanism for its own interpretive reversals**, a mechanism clearly at work, for example, in the famous Talmudic passage about **R. Eliezer's** dispute with the sages. In that passage, the majority of Rabbis force God to say, "*My sons have defeated me, my sons have defeated me.*"

### **The Conflict of Literary Traditions: Genteel Classical versus Judaic Antithetical**

T.S. Eliot's famous essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," to which Bloom alludes articulated Eliot's immensely influential "Impersonal Theory of Poetry." **Eliot argued that the poet must, in effect, surrender his personality and individuality to the past tradition. Here there are no dialectical struggles, no Oedipal agonies, no will-to-power. Simply put, in ` Eliot's words: "The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" to what Eliot calls the "mind of Europe," defined as "the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer."** This great tradition is composed of a timeless, simultaneous order, whose "existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves."

Eliot intends to purge romantic self-expression; the poet, in his famous analogy, is similar to a piece of platinum that acts as a catalyst, combining chemical elements. He is not a personality, but rather a neutral medium, combining emotions and experiences. Just as in the chemical reaction, the platinum remains "inert, neutral, and unchanged . . . the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates."

Bloom considers Eliot's idea of tradition- as a simultaneous order through which one attains freedom through sacramental communion and self-immolation - a "fiction," a "noble idealization, and a lie against time that will go the way of every noble idealization." **Bloomian tradition, in contrast, is an agony of conflict, dialectical struggle, a family history of struggles with "inversion, incest, sado-masochistic parody.... "** Tradition is the anxiety of influence, a passing down, surrender, and betrayal, and Bloom says he would rather model it after the mishnah, the Jewish Oral tradition, than the mind of Europe from Homer." Jewish tradition is a study in exile, catastrophe, weeping, endless commentary on a Sacred Text, which alone gave its people a means to endure and a meaning to endure. In tracing the etymology of the word *meaning*, Bloom finds that it is related to *moaning*, and concludes: "**A poem's meaning is a poem's complaint.**" Poetry for Bloom is a Wailing Wall - the place of moaning and meaning. (The Western -or "Wailing" -Wall, of course, is the fragment left of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem where Jews have come for two thousand years to weep their sorrows.)

Where exactly Scripture fits into Eliot's tradition is uncertain, though his later return to Anglo-Catholicism, of course, leaves an important place for the New Testament. (Of

Eliot's personal feeling about Jews, the less said the better.) But Eliot's tradition certainly had no place for Jewish weeping, wandering, midrashic excess, Kabbalistic speculation, meaning and moaning. Poetry, asserts Eliot, "is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotion know what it means to want to escape from these things." Eliot's flight from emotion led him not to the couch of Sigmund Freud, but to the bosom of the Church.

Bloom certainly knows what it means to have personality and emotion, but his response—as has traditionally been that of the Jews in their various agonies, ecstasies, and catastrophes—is to passionately open the Sacred Text to the sorrows of time and history. That precisely is the response of revisionist interpretation. Bloom is so attracted to the Kabbalah of the sixteenth century specifically because, following Scholem, he sees it as a response to historical catastrophe (the expulsion from Spain), and as a solution to the problem of how to accommodate new religious insight in catastrophic times when confronted with a massive and already canonized and interpreted tradition:

Their [the Kabbalists'] stance in relation to all this tradition, becomes, I think, the classic paradigm upon which Western revisionism in all areas was to model itself ever since, usually in rather indirect emulation. For the Kabbalists developed implicitly *a psychology of belatedness*, and with it an explicit rhetorical sense of techniques for opening Scripture and even received commentary to their own historical sufferings, and their own new, theosophical insights. [Emphasis in original.]

For Bloom, the important fact is that Kabbalah is a model for strong poetry and criticism because it forcefully manipulates, opens, misreads, revises the tradition in accordance with its own catastrophic vision - which is exactly what the strong poet and reader must do to their texts.

Eliot in his essay "The Function of Criticism:" The difference between classicism and romanticism is "the difference between the complete and the fragmentary, the adult and the immature, the orderly and chaotic." "Catholicism stands for the principle or unquestioned spiritual authority outside the individual; that is also the principle of Classicism in literature." Classicism, Catholicism, tradition, piety, and criticism form one genteel (and Gentile) whole.

For Bloom, the poet is by no means an autonomous ego, that, in fact, is the poet's desperate, doomed dream; and the tradition is by no means an ideal, genteel order. The poet is inextricably enmeshed in a complex dialectic with his precursor; and the poet's imagination must necessarily misinterpret his precursor, antithetically swerve. And since criticism is for Bloom but another form of poetry, criticism must also become antithetical, must itself swerve, misinterpret, correct, revise, in acts of "creative misunderstanding." ...To Wimsatt and Beardsley's formula, "A poem should not mean but be," Bloom counters: "The meaning of a poem can only be another poem." Against Eliot's ideal simultaneous order, Bloom asserts: "**Every poem is a misinterpretation of a parent poem**"; against Eliot's demand for the poet's self-sacrifice and escape from emotion is Bloom's formula: "A poem is not an overcoming of anxiety, but is that anxiety." "How do we understand anxiety? By ourselves becoming anxious." And despite

Eliot's desire for scientific objectivity and impersonal poetry, Bloom maintains, "**There are no interpretations but only misinterpretations.**"

What I take to be a crucial aspect of the dynamic of Rabbinic thought: the ability to produce and absorb its own inversions. The precursor-father-text, in this case Scripture, reasserts its priority by embracing its own revision. **This ability to absorb its rebelling sons is in fact one of the distinguishing characteristics of Rabbinic interpretation; that is, to absorb interpretive reversal and the sufferings of history back into itself, making it appear as if they had been hidden in the father-text all along, awaiting only the proper time for revelation.** (This, of course, is the aspect of Rabbinic thought that Christianity appropriates and takes to an extreme.) In other words, if *Paradise Lost* had not been a Protestant poem, and if Milton's Satan had been Jewish, would he, instead, have merely set up another Rabbinical academy and written another commentary, instead of laboring in the domain of Hell?

How, for example, do the Rabbis deal with the case of the literal **rebellious son** of the Bible (Deut. 21:18-21), whom the text declares in no uncertain terms must be put to death? They claim that the law applies only if the son committed the transgression within three months of the age of thirteen, and only if the trial were completed in the same time ... needless to say, a difficult set of conditions to fulfill. About this verse, they wrote: "There never has been a stubborn and rebellious son, and never will be. Why then was the law written? That you may study it and receive reward." **The literal rebellion, an occasion of denial of the text's authority, is transformed through an act of interpretation into another occasion for interpretation.**

*Genesis* - ham

Zakovitz on pilesgesh bagivah and anti saul

Brevards Childs on canon criticism

Meir Sternberg on ideological writing