

Methods for Jewish constructive theology

Version 2.2, 10/25/2018

Counter-history is a type of revisionist historiography, but where the revisionist proposes a new theory or finds new facts, the counter-historian transvalues old ones. He does not deny that his predecessors' interpretation of history is correct, as does the revisionist, but he rejects the completeness of that interpretation.

David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History*

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INTRODUCTION

Kabbalah and Ecology: God's Image in the More-Than-Human World is a work founded on questions that arise from the postmodern critique of modernism, joined with a cultural critique rooted in ecology. As such, it uses methods that are rarely combined, especially in the field of Jewish Studies. This essay will explore the methodology I use in *Kabbalah and Ecology*, both from the perspective of the goals of *Kabbalah and Ecology*, and from the perspective of doing the best reading of Jewish texts possible.

Kabbalah and Ecology embraces the fullness of Jewish tradition, while using the diversity of traditional voices to free theological thinking from being dominated by one voice. Alongside traditional text criticism and historical analysis, in *Kabbalah and Ecology* I engage in constructive thought and literary analysis, using methods drawn from many areas, including feminist studies of rabbinic and Biblical texts, Christian ecotheology, and hermeneutical methods related to “textual reasoning”, as well as some of the methods of deconstruction. In this essay, I will delineate some of the methods of analysis used there and compare them to the work of other scholars. A brief on this methodology can also be found in *Kabbalah and Ecology*, in the section of the *Introduction* titled “Constructive theology” (pp.35-7, online at kabbalahandecology.com).

THE POLEMICS OF MODERNISM

One particular voice has dominated almost all contemporary or popular Jewish theology from the beginnings of modernity until now. This voice had its origins in the moment when secular and Christian theologians, philosophers and religious historians posited a radical dichotomy between history and nature. They mapped human evolution from a more “primitive” way of seeing the world to a more “enlightened” one, equating this with evolution from paganism through Judaism to Christianity, culminating in the Enlightenment. Jewish philosophers of the *Haskalah* (“Enlightenment”), and the academicians who followed in their footsteps, overcame the disadvantage to Judaism embedded in this framework by asserting an absolute dichotomy between Judaism and paganism, and by equating Judaism with humanistic rationalism. This dichotomy has been criticized from the perspective of intellectual history. As discussed in the section on “Jewish ecological thought” of

Kabbalah and Ecology (pp.7–11),¹ Ismar Schorsch described this “celebration of ‘historical monotheism’” as “a legacy of nineteenth century Christian-Jewish polemics, a fierce attempt by Jewish thinkers to distance Judaism from the world of paganism.”

The prejudices arising from this framework coincided in the 20th century with the Jewish people’s deeply wounded sense of place in the world. This led to an extraordinary near-consensual misreading of the Jewish tradition, a misreading that I label “modernist-humanist”. (Many examples of this are examined in *Kabbalah and Ecology*, abbreviated *KAE* below. See especially Chapter 3 therein.)

The modernist-humanist framework is not rooted in an historical picture but rather in a kind of mythical picture that dates back not to ancient times but to an even earlier imagined Biblical revolution against “paganism”, a religious category that in historical terms is not coherent and has never existed. (See n.33 in *KAE*.) It projects a hierarchical division of rationalistic religion over superstition, and of history’s progress over nature’s cycles, that yields a theology about God’s image which is or pretends to be transcendental, while it is in fact an artifact of the nineteenth century. This framework is modernist in that it believes that religious evolution is a history of progress, and humanist in that it believes in the supremacy of logic and reason, i.e. the human mind, over other ways of knowing and being, and affirms in the importance of human needs above other needs.

Rather than simply demonstrate the recency in intellectual history of this framework, *KAE* takes ancient and medieval texts about *tselem Elohim* (God’s image) and shows that these texts support alternative frameworks of meaning. What becomes clear in *KAE* is that the modernist-humanist interpretation is often not the best reading, and certainly not the only reading, of rabbinic texts in their contexts.

There is no need to infer or construct some imagined rabbinic culture or history, or any actual history of the Enlightenment, in order to demonstrate this to be true. It is enough simply to read the texts. By doing so, the modernist-humanist framework becomes, as it were, suspended, allowing room for other interpretations to take root.

The Kabbalistic alternative

Not only is the modernist-humanist reading of God’s image out of sync with early rabbinic midrash. The Kabbalah, diverse as it is, includes

¹ As within *Kabbalah and Ecology* itself, page number references in this essay preceded by “p.” or “pp.” refer to *Kabbalah and Ecology* unless otherwise noted.

many texts that present an even stronger contradiction to the modernist-humanist paradigm than the Midrash does. By focusing on those Kabbalistic texts, which stand as countertexts in relation not only to modernist-humanism but also to medieval Jewish philosophy, *KAE* traces the development of a worldview within Kabbalah that contrasts strongly with modernist-humanism. In so doing, *KAE* concretizes four points:

1. The polemical interpretation imposed by modernist-humanist theology on the Jewish tradition inaccurately reads rabbinic literature and fails to read Kabbalistic literature.
2. A careful reading of the texts yields a picture that is more in line with ideas current in ecological thinking, and that, independent of ecological questions, is theologically rich and important.

These first two points are justifiable according to the canons of textual and literary scholarship, following specific methodologies related to the work of Kadushin, Boyarin, Neusner, Wolfson, and others, including especially those whose work helped introduce postmodern criticism firmly into the domain of Jewish Studies.

The second two points fall in the domain of constructive theology rather than textual scholarship:

3. Interpreting these same texts homiletically, one can arrive at a well-grounded ecotheology that would be the monotheistic correlative to deep ecology, and that is, in comparison with modernist humanism, often a more sensitive reading of rabbinic textuality.
4. All of these elements fully justify the choice of an ecotheological perspective, rooted in an authentic reading of the Jewish tradition, a perspective that is also demanded by the current situation of humanity upon the earth.²

Establishing these points means rooting alternative theologies in the sources and soil of Jewish tradition.

TOWARDS A JEWISH HERMENEUTIC

In this section, I will explore synergies and congruencies between the hermeneutics of reading rabbinic literature and the hermeneutics of constructing Jewish theology. Further on, I will contrast these methods

² I am using “authentic” here provisionally to mean authentically open and responsible to the panoply of texts, traditions and contradictions. See *The Jargon of Authenticity* (London, 1973) by Theodor Adorno.

with some of the methods used in Christian theology and ecotheology, in order to highlight the special nature of doing Jewish theology.

Boyarin's methodological model

Daniel Boyarin in *Carnal Israel* provided a model for some aspects of the methodology I use in *KAE*. Though Boyarin later rejected aspects of his methodology, *Carnal Israel* had a profound impact on the study of rabbinic literature, attuning scholars to the subject of the body, and introducing methods of literary and cultural theorists from the humanities into Jewish studies.³ I will start by describing both the methodology of *Carnal Israel*, and the critiques of *Carnal Israel* by Gwynn Kessler, Burton Visotzky, and Aryeh Cohen.⁴ In comparing *Carnal Israel* to *KAE*, I will also discuss whether those critiques might apply to *KAE*, and if not, why not.

For the purpose of this essay, what is most important is not how *Carnal Israel* connected rabbinic studies to the body or to postmodern criticism (though these connections are resonant in *KAE*), but rather how Boyarin's work is informed by a political agenda, summarized by Charlotte Fonrobert as the "goal of changing Jewish culture and its gender issues".⁵ In *Carnal Israel*, Boyarin reads Talmudic stories in order to show that there are voices within rabbinic literature that contradict the dominant patriarchal understanding of gender. Boyarin's goal was to undermine that dominant understanding, and he describes his intent as both "redemptive" and "cultural-critical".⁶ Boyarin's choice of texts and motifs was driven by feminist concerns, and what is chosen is subject to critical analysis only after the fact of being chosen. By lifting up feminist concerns, Boyarin hoped to establish a new picture of the rabbis and their social and cultural world, one which is not exactly feminist but which is at least "redeemable".

³ See "On *Carnal Israel* and the Consequences: Talmudic Studies since Foucault", Charlotte Fonrobert, *The Jewish Quarterly*, 95:3 (Summer 2005) 462-469.

⁴ Kessler and Visotzky, "Intersexuality and the Reading of Talmudic Culture" in *Arachne* 1 (1994) 238-52; Aryeh Cohen, *Rereading Talmud: Gender, Law, and the Poetics of Sugyot* (Atlanta GA: Scholars Press, 1998), 90-96. Though Boyarin has abrogated many of the methods he used in *Carnal Israel*, its method both provides a model and serves as a foil to help describe my method. As I will describe further on, the method I use also differs substantially from Boyarin's, and thereby eliminates some of its elements that others criticized.

⁵ "On *Carnal Israel*", 463.

⁶ *Carnal Israel*, 230.

Boyarin's hope was that by historicizing the nature of androcentrism and misogyny in ancient cultures (both through contrasting rabbinic and Hellenistic culture, and through comparing different rabbinic cultures, i.e. Babylonia and Palestine), androcentrism and misogyny would become "demystified", that is, they would cease to seem natural and hence become less stable and more transmutable. In Boyarin's words:

[T]he very fact that we can show that the different androcentric formations functioned in entirely different fashions at different times and places provides a kind of demystifying historicization, showing that each was contingent and specific and that all are equally unsettled from the position of trans-historical natural status.⁷

Boyarin's intention of destabilizing assumed meanings is critically important, and it structures his entire book from beginning to end. It is also an important strategy used in *KAE*. This goal of *Carnal Israel* was heavily critiqued, and Boyarin largely repudiated it in later works.

However, Boyarin's method does not correspond to what I do in *KAE*, especially because I have no intention of doing cultural history, and also because my method for choosing texts to analyze is quite different. These differences are important for explaining how the constructive aspects of *KAE* are consonant with traditional Jewish Studies.

In *Carnal Israel*, Boyarin hoped to be able to reconstruct the worldview and social practice of the rabbis by lifting up and connecting texts that contradict the picture of rabbinic misogyny that feminists have criticized. Boyarin rejected the idea that he was constructing a heroic alternative to this stereotyped picture, insisting that "[t]he cultural reward of this analysis is not...in the discovery of a golden age in the past".⁸ This, however, did not stop Boyarin from making constructive claims about the rabbis' social world.

Boyarin writes that counter-hegemonic voices "manifest themselves in the social body as dissident groups, in the individual as hidden and partly repressed desires, in the texts of the culture as intertextuality".⁹ For the Boyarin of *Carnal Israel*, all three of these areas of concern were analogous to the emergence of the repressed, each charged with the power of historical manifestation. In particular, his claim is that the repressed feminine emerges even within the framework of rabbinic hegemony. Is there a correlation, as Boyarin implies, between intertextual resistance, cultural practice and dissident social bodies?¹⁰

⁷ Ibid., 243.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 104.

¹⁰ A similar idea is put forth by Judith Hauptman. Citing Judith Baskin, Hauptman writes,

The implication of his formulation is not only that the emergence of the feminine can redeem what would otherwise be an oppressive or misogynistic discourse, but also that one can extrapolate from the texts where the discursive hegemony is broken to actual social and culture practices that were counter-hegemonic.

This aspect of Boyarin's work was strongly criticized by both Visotzky and Kessler, and as mentioned, Boyarin himself rejected these claims in later works. As Kessler stated, Boyarin is an acute reader and interpreter of cultural dialectics, but he missteps when he equates cultural dialectics with social practice.¹¹ Boyarin in fact was also unclear about whether or not he was doing history and/or studying social practices.

In contrast to Boyarin in *Carnal Israel*, to the extent that I do construct an alternative vision of the rabbis in *KAE*, it is a vision that is restricted to their intellectual-textual practices. Since my inquiry there is strictly focused on the terminological language of rabbinic and Kabbalistic texts related to *tselem Elohim*, I make no attempt to extrapolate from these texts to any notion of social practice, and I only rarely make reference to the rabbis' social world. Furthermore, the diverse meanings of *tselem Elohim* that are recovered in *KAE* were never repressed in rabbinic culture, but rather repressed later by the medieval rationalists and modern humanists when they read rabbinic literature. Finally, as an area of inquiry, ecology is not an area in which the rabbis had social practices that could be judged negatively by our twenty-first century standards. Because of this, their lifeworld and society have no need of our "redeeming" interpretation.¹²

Rather, the redemptive goal in *KAE* is analogous to what was enumerated above as Boyarin's third goal, that is, to historicize and

In exploring images of women...we find evidence of multivocality, of minority views that are sometimes more enlightened than those of the dominant view of women's essential difference from and inferiority to man. (*Rereading the Rabbis: A Woman's Voice* [Boulder CO, 1997], 13, n.13)

¹¹ "Intersexuality", 247-9, esp. 248. Visotzky makes a similar claim, though his statement of it is far more polemical: "Asserting that literature must represent the culture in which it was produced, Boyarin confuses the narrative world of didactic literature with the real world that produced these idealistic texts....Old orthodoxy does not die, it just fades to postmodern generous critique." (246)

¹² On the contrary, to the extent that we have a record of social practice in the form of Jewish law, the rabbis were models of ecological virtue in comparison with modern-day economic practice in the Western world. There is still a risk that the polemical aspect of *Kabbalah and Ecology* will lead to over-general or essentialist conclusions that parry the essentialism of the modernist-humanist paradigm. The guard against this is to stay aware of the problem.

hence problematize a certain anti-ecological reading of Jewish tradition. Boyarin's description of his method for analyzing gender is in this respect an exact analogue of the method of about one-third of *KAE*:

My hope is that by paying attention precisely to the differences between the many stories from many times and many texts we will be able to generate a more nuanced and historicized understanding of the different readings of the signifier "woman" in different rabbinic cultures, opening up space, perhaps, for new possibilities for the future.¹³

With the proviso that I am looking at teachings about the signifier *tselem* in different rabbinic literatures, rather than "rabbinic cultures", Boyarin fairly accurately describes my approach to Midrash and to Kabbalah.

Selecting texts

This is not the place to go into Boyarin's conceptualization of Hellenism versus the rabbis, which Visotzky expansively critiques, and which I discuss in Chapter 5 of *KAE*.¹⁴ What I do want to go into are Visotzky's concerns about how Boyarin's redemptive goals affect his selection of primary texts. For Visotzky, Boyarin's method leads to a discounting of important evidence. The same concern is raised by both Kessler and Cohen. Kessler writes that there are many misogynistic texts which Boyarin "dismisses as exceptional", but which in fact should be viewed as countertexts. "They are opposing views within talmudic culture that by Boyarin's own practice of reading should have been magnified, not minimized."¹⁵ The essence of this critique is that when

¹³ *Carnal Israel*, 86.

¹⁴ See the section "The human soul in the rabbinic tradition". Boyarin repudiated much of this analysis as well. See n.64.

¹⁵ 250. While Kessler's point is undeniable, what is also true is that such misogynistic texts had already been well discussed and debated, whereas the texts and the tropes that Boyarin was pointing out had been largely overlooked. Highlighting them may therefore be considered a necessary if temporary corrective (and the same could be said about some of the proto-ecological texts focused on in *KAE*).

Note that Kessler's critique is both methodological and feminist. She remarks, "In effect, [Boyarin] saves rabbinic (male) sexuality by sacrificing 'woman'" (251). Boyarin himself notes the tension between these two "poles" when he asks "Can...dialectical description...provide us with tools for a synthesis that will enable **both the valorization of sexuality and the liberation of women?**" (30, my emphasis). See also Tal Ilan's related critique in *Mine and Yours and Hers: Retrieving Women's History from Rabbinic Literature* (Leiden NL: Brill, 1997), 30, n.111.

As Boyarin himself notes, his method has great potential for exactly these kinds of mistakes, which he hopes his readers will correct. Visotzky might ask, Why employ a method that is susceptible to failure in this way? I think the answer must be, because the rewards of reading "redemptively" are so great. Visotzky might reply, that is why

one is looking to confirm a hope, one is likely to ignore disconfirming evidence.

One obvious solution is to read all the possible evidence first. This can be taken to an extreme, as one finds in Jacob Neusner's work.¹⁶ In this context however, what is more important to note is that Neusner's corrective does not fix the problem. The issue is not what texts one has read and digested, but rather which texts one chooses to bring to bear on a particular problem.

Aryeh Cohen suggested a less grandiose corrective to Boyarin's method in his book, *Rereading Talmud: Gender, Law, and the Poetics of Sugyot*. He noted that "while [Boyarin's] method itself is sound, on the whole, Boyarin's application of it is flawed."¹⁷ Boyarin's method, as Cohen epitomizes it, entails identifying a tension within the text and then creating a grouping of intertexts that Boyarin calls a "discursive formation". "It is the second step which is problematic. When does one abandon the rhetorical structure of one text to insert it into another 'formation?' How does one identify a 'discursive formation?'"¹⁸ Cohen's solution is to thoroughly read the text in its full context first before turning to the selection of relevant intertexts. Judith Hauptman responds to the same problem when she discusses her own methodology. She writes that by extracting the main ideas from *loci classici* in Torah and Talmud, "I am not making any choices as to which material to examine but am merely analyzing the rabbis' principal statements on a subject."¹⁹ In both cases, the goal is to avoid making choices based on the ideological answers particular texts can provide, at least during the first phase of gathering evidence.

Quite obviously, these solutions are not foolproof. Who is to decide how much context is necessary to understand a tradition? Is it enough to focus on a whole *sugya*, as Cohen suggests, or must it be a whole book, *à la* Neusner? Can the judgment of what constitutes "principal" statements, *à la* Hauptman, be completely freed of prejudgment? While none of the solutions proposed are free from error, they all share one

the temptations are so great, and why the likelihood of error is also great.

¹⁶ Neusner insisted on reading (that is, for him, "retranslating") the entirety of rabbinic literature before he would make any statements about rabbinic culture other than, "x book says y". One problem with Neusner's method is that he often misses the nuances of texts in his rush to read everything. These problems will be discussed further below.

¹⁷ 90.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁹ *Rereading the Rabbis*, 7.

common feature: the hermeneutic for selecting texts differs categorically from the hermeneutic for reading them.

Note that both Hauptman and Cohen (and to a large degree Boyarin) are all focused on Talmud, which, while it preserves much older traditions, is quite notable for the way in which it reads them into a “canonized dissensus”, as Boyarin calls it,²⁰ a dissensus that nonetheless has an underlying unity. That unity is the basis of what Cohen names “sugyaetics”. Midrash and Kabbalah do not readily show the same underlying unity. Compared to Talmud, early midrash is far less integrated into larger discursive units, while Kabbalah as a genre is a kind of theological anarchy, even though individual Kabbalistic works may be more systematic.

Hauptman’s work relies on a second kind of unity to determine what texts are significant, the post-facto unity of what texts are already read by classical *halakhah* as having normative value. Many of the texts focused on in *KAE* however are distinctly non-normative. While I am of course interested in the context of the traditions I cite, neither *sugyaetics* nor the identification of *loci classici* fits the framework of the texts that play the largest role in developing *KAE*’s thesis.

The solution in *Kabbalah and Ecology*

The solution I chose for *KAE* differs from both Hauptman’s and Cohen’s, but it follows the general pattern they employed. The fundamental issue raised by the critique of Boyarin is how to separate the selection of texts from the method of reading them, particularly when one has a “redemptive” (i.e. polemical, political or ideological) agenda, as I do in *KAE*. The primary selection method I use, which is meant to avoid excluding or prejudging important or disconfirming texts, is to associate texts on the basis of their terminology, rather than on the basis of any conceptual, ideological, or interpreted commonality. This is true both for midrashic and kabbalistic literature. I group texts together not because they make a certain point, but because they read or include a certain trope, or use a certain term. (By trope I mean a repeating turn of phrase in the literal semantic sense, rather than a repeating image in the conceptual sense.) Every text that fits the criteria of containing that trope is valid evidence that requires considered.²¹ After identifying these texts,

²⁰ *Carnal Israel*, 28.

²¹ For the earliest layers of rabbinic literature, it is actually possible to marshal every extant text that uses a particular terminology. For later genres – especially Kabbalah, as well as *Chasidut* – that is hardly possible. For medieval Jewish philosophy, it might be possible, but in none of these cases is it really necessary, since we are not looking for an

the analysis of each one is based on rhetorical and text-critical (that is, contextual) considerations.

For Midrash, I strive to include every instance in early rabbinic literature (that is, before the Talmud) where the term *tselem Elohim* is interpreted, whether or not it accords with or relates to my political agenda. My analysis of midrashic texts in Part 1 establishes both the parameters within which the rabbis debated the meaning of God's image, as well as the terminology that is most significant for these interpretations. In Kabbalah, which is a far more vast corpus, I focus on those texts and authors that differ in a significant way from the array of interpretations found in Midrash.

One often finds that the same trope is used with a conceptual meaning that differs radically from one period to another, so that texts that are related by common terminology may be ideologically quite distant from each other. In many cases it is the use of a common terminology that indicates that a significant intellectual shift is taking place. For this reason, I also pay close attention to any texts that use the terminologies found in Midrash that relate to *tselem* and repurpose them. Much of the textual work and intellectual history that I do in *KAE* therefore is shaped as a history of terminology, carried out in a way that explicitly brackets out cultural or social history and practice (see next section). In this sense *KAE* can be described as a study of intertextuality.

Standard analytical methods used in Jewish Studies also pay attention to such phenomena, but in *KAE* these diachronic differences are also used to destabilize any univocal meaning or interpretation. Thus, intertextual analysis is done in a diachronic rather than synchronic way. This also differs from Boyarin's description of intertextuality, which he describes as a kind of synchronic analysis in contrast to other textual methods.²² So, while the goals of *KAE* can be called "redemptive", intertextuality is not treated as a privileged method of reading.

exhaustive catalog of all interpretations at each stage of history, but rather for those interpretations in subsequent stages that specifically deviate from or transform what came before them.

²² He equates intertextuality with a synchronic view and "the search for sources and influences" with a diachronic view. I would note that 'synchronic' and 'diachronic' must always be partly relative terms, because anytime one isolates one culture from another, as we do rabbinic culture from ancient non-Jewish cultures and from medieval and modern Jewish cultures, one must invoke, at however many removes, a historical and diachronic view of textuality. That is, not every text in every time and place is equally relevant. I think however that what Boyarin means is that in the moment of comparison, using the tools and methods denoted by intertextuality, the associated texts are treated as though they could have been written together, regardless of their

I do also discuss the homiletical meaning of the texts analyzed in *KAE*. However, whenever I do this, I explicitly label such discussion as homiletical, and distinguish and segregate it from the historical-critical analysis. Theology therefore becomes something explicitly added on top of historical analysis. This has the potential not only to preserve the integrity of historical and critical analysis, but also to bring to light the freedom involved in the theological process. The appearance of this freedom within these limits is one important feature of the methodology I use in *KAE*.

THE TEXTUAL PROCESS

The whole of traditional Jewish literature is imbued with a hypersensitive consciousness of textual, terminological and linguistic correlations, even when an author is not using this hermeneutic explicitly, as one may find in some medieval philosophical texts.²³ By citing the earliest versions of an interpretation or saying, focusing on the terminological tropes and linguistic or semiotic ideas that make that interpretation possible, and then analyzing the use of the same tropes in later texts, one can trace the history of theological thinking without imposing a prior interpretation on what the tropes mean.

The way the use of terminology changes from earlier to later texts constitutes primary evidence that new theological ideas are being worked out. Unique phrases and individual words come to have a kind of reserved function within rabbinic literature, and are thereafter sites for attention and reinterpretation by later texts. This evidence is completely independent of the form of a text, i.e. whether it looks like commentary or code, *responsa* or philosophy, whether it is consciously theological or not. An author will choose an already significant theological term and appropriate it for a new usage, often without acknowledging (or perhaps even noticing) that a transformation has taken place. One can be assured that any reserved theological term that remains in use over many

history. What is “intertextual” in the method I am describing, however, is that two texts sharing a common terminology are read as if they were connected, with the later text reading the earlier, regardless of the possibility of proving any historical lines of influence between them.

²³ It is also true that from a deconstructive or literary point of view one may draw such correlations regardless of whether these correlations are intended or even contextually justified.

centuries carries or structures important theological information and evolutionary change.

Take the primary subject of *KAE*. The *Tanakh* uses the terms *tselem* (image) and *d'mut* (likeness) in relation to human beings in only three places, almost entirely without explication. The *locus classicus* for the meaning of *tselem* and *d'mut* in Judaism is not the Torah but rather the Midrash, where one finds the earliest statements of what these terms meant for the rabbis. A primary example is the idea of the upper and lower creations, which is fundamental to rabbinic ideas about God's image: "The upper ones (creatures) /*elyonim* were created in the image and likeness, and don't bear fruit and multiply; and the lower ones /*tachtonim* bear fruit and multiply and were not created in the image and likeness."²⁴ The use of the terms "upper" and "lower" can easily be traced in later texts. One can outline the evolution of different ideas about the human place in the world by attending to how these terms are used. (I will return to this example several times below.)

The evidence of the earliest layers of midrashic commentary is what defines both the rabbis' anthropology and the place of *tselem* in that anthropology. Therefore, the evidence of the early midrash needs to be surveyed in full, attending to the variety of interpretations and the subtlety of their rhetoric. Comprehending the range of this evidence, including its rhetoric, is of utmost importance in order to establish a baseline that will enable us to examine how both the Kabbalah²⁵ and modern thought take advantage of the rabbinic tradition and how they each have creatively betray that tradition.²⁶

Later texts will often refer to, modify, or overturn this anthropology by using the same rhetorical vocabulary, the same tropes, even without directly referencing the term *tselem* or earlier conceptual meanings. In tracing passages from different genres where the terms "upper" and "lower" appear, we may not be tracing the continuous evolution of a concept or idea, since the conceptual meaning of the same terms changed quite radically over time. Rather, what we are witnessing is a history of theological "grammar", tracing the way in which subsequent

²⁴ *B'rei'shit Rabbah* 8:11.

²⁵ Since Chasidic interpretation draws directly on the tradition of Kabbalah, Chasidic texts are also cited in *KAE* as extensions of Kabbalistic interpretation for the sake of this analysis. Again, I focus on the way they reinterpret the meaning of the tropes they inherit. In most cases, the theological or historical relationship between Chasidism and Kabbalah may be bracketed out for the sake of this analysis.

²⁶ The terminology "creative betrayal" was coined by David Roskies. See *Against the Apocalypse* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1984) and *A Bridge of Longing* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

authors read the tradition that came before them and assimilated it into their own lifeworld.

Terminology as the primary factum for Jewish theology – Kadushin

If one wanted to label the overall approach used in *KAE*, it could be defined as a “intellectual history of the rhetoric of theology”, in this case rhetoric related to the idea of God’s image. I am not writing about “theology” in the traditional, limited sense of reasoning about God (though aspects of theology in this sense do come into play whenever the intellectual and rhetorical history of theology is dealt with).²⁷ The method used in *KAE* bears some similarity both to Kadushin and to some of the later work of Neusner. Like Schechter before him, Kadushin emphasized again and again that the terms under which rabbinic thinking should be examined must be based on native categories.²⁸ What Kadushin added, critically, is that the nature of the relationship between these categories, the process of thinking and connecting, was also unique. Kadushin called this “organic thinking” and he thought it was uniquely expressed by rabbinic literature, though he also thought that organic thinking was representative of other non-Western cultures.

Kadushin’s cultural-historical and essentialist claims notwithstanding,²⁹ the inductive process through which he arrived at a description of “the rabbinic mind” is an important precedent for the methods used in *KAE*. His insistence on tracing the connections between rabbinic ideas using native categories and eschewing hierarchical logics focused him upon terminology. Kadushin was the first one to note that if the rabbis did not coin a terminology for a theological idea, it could not be considered a “value-concept”; he associated this process particularly with the rabbis coining abstract nouns derived from Biblical roots. Kadushin attempted to carefully build up an understanding of the rabbinic worldview on the basis of these value-concepts, identifying some as fundamental concepts and others as sub-concepts. He also firmly demonstrated that categories of rabbinic thought could not be put

²⁷ By “theological history” I mean history done with theological objectives rather than history about theology. By “rhetoric of theology” I mean both the language and hermeneutics used by theology, especially as it is expressed through the use of terminology, as opposed to theological concepts.

²⁸ Neusner dismisses Schechter’s work in this direction (as well as Urbach’s), but both of them furthered this agenda in significant ways.

²⁹ I want to caution that in my opinion, and in the opinion of Neusner (with whom I rarely concur), Kadushin did not succeed in his goals. Furthermore, his use of essentialist categories (such as “the rabbinic mind”, as if there were one floating amongst the Platonic forms) would have made success improbable.

into a metaphysical or ontological hierarchy, as one might do with the categories of philosophy or Christian theology, and that to do so necessarily violated and misrepresented what the rabbis believed.

Despite the importance of Kadushin's principles, his method also comes up against limitations that make accurate description of the evolution of ideas difficult. Because Kadushin focused on "value-concepts", he tended to ignore other kinds intellectual coherence and other aspects of discourse. Specifically, Kadushin emphasized that the expression of fundamental value-concepts emerged in contradictory formulations because different concepts were being emphasized in different texts. This perspective, while valuable, meant that he tended to overlook actual disagreements within and between rabbinic texts, attributing all such tensions to the nature of the "organic mind", rather than exploring the possibility that these tensions could represent a *makhloket* or argument between various rabbinic perspectives. Fundamentally, he moved too quickly from terminology to concept, sometimes missing the text in the process.

Also, by limiting himself to enumerating "value-concepts", Kadushin ignored many tropes that do not express any value-concept at all, but that are still important descriptors of the rabbinic worldview. Often these elements reflect the deep structure of what he calls the "rabbinic mind". Two examples from *KAE* that are inadequately noted by Kadushin and other modern scholars are the already discussed division of the world into "upper" and "lower", and the idea of stature or *qomah*. These terminologies are metonymic for rabbinic anthropology, and they became incorporated into the subsequent evolution of ideas about cosmos and Nature (or what in *KAE* is called the more-than-human world).³⁰ Such elements are not explicit theological ideas, not "value-concepts". Rather they represent fundamental aspects of how the rabbis perceived and interpreted the world. It is these elements that are the main focus of *KAE*.

Neusner himself went far beyond Kadushin's work by enumerating a great number of fundamental theological ideas that he calls "native categories", and by exploring, both in his later work on the theology of the rabbis, and in his earlier work on the polemics of individual rabbinic books, the hermeneutical devices that connect these ideas and make them coherent.³¹ However, because Neusner's ear is not always sensitive

³⁰ i.e., they can be used to trace the development in Jewish thought of ideas about the human role and the structure of the cosmos, through rabbinic, philosophical, Kabbalistic and modern literatures.

³¹ See esp. *Theological Grammar*, vol.1, 4-7 on "native categories"; also vol.3, 361-92 on

to the subtleties of terminology, translation, and allusion, his hammer hits the nails that have big heads, so to speak, and bends others out of shape. (One of his readings will be analyzed below as an example.) Nonetheless, I see Neusner's willingness to further Kadushin's agenda on a practical and textual level as exemplary. The major problem is that he used conceptual rather than terminological categories.

The focus on terminology inherent in Kadushin's method is particularly well-suited to the subject of God's image, and to the process of developing a new theology about *tselem*. The term *tselem Elohim* is correlated with a vast number of diverse concepts. It therefore makes sense to look at the way in which *tselem Elohim* and its associated terminology evolve and come to have radically diverse meanings, through different incarnations, in different texts and literatures.

Terminology and textuality

While much of the analysis in *KAE* looks at texts synchronically, its fundamental method is diachronic, even when, as in the Midrash chapters, I am most interested in early midrashic texts and not in later texts. That is because every text is examined implicitly in relation to its difference from modernist and humanist interpretations. Whenever diachronic changes are examined in *KAE*, my primary interest is not in how a whole tradition or concept changes *per se*, but in how particular tropes or terminologies evolve and change. This means looking at the way such tropes are recontextualized in later texts, focusing especially on those examples where a trope takes on a different meaning. When I shift into homiletical commentary in *KAE*, only then do I focus in on those texts that move the anthropology of Judaism in an ecologically significant direction.

This diachronic approach is especially important for deriving a series of positions that can be dated as earlier and later. I am always interested in whether a trajectory of development is suggested by this series. To the extent that these atomistic points adds up to a greater picture, it is the picture of a "theologoumenon", a complex of ideas connected to a particular set of theological tropes and terminology. On a homiletical level, their trajectory can be used to extrapolate what kind of contemporary theological evolution would be in harmony with earlier incarnations of the same trope or theologoumenon.

"models of analysis".

As explained, in most cases it is the terminology used to express an interpretation or idea, rather than the “conceptual meaning” that it signifies, is the basis for comparing texts. To the extent that people think of the physical (written or articulated) word as a kind of body and its meaning as a kind of soul, I am primarily interested in the body. This is partly because continuity of terminology can be defined objectively and measured independently of anyone’s agenda or interpretation. This focus is also congruent with the nature of traditional rabbinic texts, because the fundamental unit of continuity in rabbinic hermeneutics is the individual word or root that creates associations between two statements or teachings. Such associations are often intended by the text and presumed to be an integral part of the reader’s experience.³²

Though this method is diachronic, and corresponds in many ways to classical historical criticism, my ultimate interest is not in the historical-contextual meaning of a given text, but in the possibilities it enacts for a contemporary theology. Thus, among all the texts examined, those texts that have retrospective value as determined by a postmodern ecological sensibility, or that demonstrate the development of other texts that have such value, are the ones lifted up in the homiletical sections.

³² According to Zvi Septimus, this is actually a description of the ideal reader from the point of view of the final editors of the Babylonian Talmud (the *Bavli*): the entire Talmudic corpus is presumed to be known to this ideal *Bavli* reader, and any use of a specific terminology automatically acts as a “trigger” that “activates” other passages that use the same terminology:

The *Bavli* reader understands what a word means in its current context and then compares its meaning in that context with the way that the same word means in the other contexts. When the *Bavli* reader turns to the second or third context in which the rare word appears, he returns not only with the meaning of a particular word but with the entire weight of the context in which that word appears. This reader then rereads the current context with all of that other information raised to the surface. Since the rabbis apply this type of semiotic reading technique in their interpretation of the Biblical text, it makes sense that their culture would produce a text that lends itself to operate on its reader in a similar manner. This is all the more true if the *Bavli* reader learns how to read by mimicking the reading practices of the rabbis, the reading practices employed by the *Bavli*. (“The Poetic Superstructure of the Babylonian Talmud and the Reader It Fashions”, University of California Berkeley, PhD dissertation, 2011, 136–7)

What I am suggesting is that even as the *Bavli*’s internal hermeneutic derives from the application of the rabbis’ Biblical hermeneutics to the *Bavli* itself, so too can we assume that this broadly intertextual hermeneutic can be applied and is operative in later literature, and even in all rabbinic literature, such that earlier uses of a specific terminology appearing in *loci classici* may be assumed to be “activated” by its use in a later text, even when the “content” is unrelated.

On the level of constructive theology, this means that the texts that are analyzed are then used to show that a certain interpretation is possible within the tradition, rather than to show that a certain interpretation is normative for the tradition. In this respect, the evidence of a single text may be sufficient for demonstrating the historical validity of a new theological idea or a new interpretation of an old trope.

By way of illustration, the Midrash uses a similar hermeneutic in the following *meimra*:

In every place [scripture] advances creation of the heavens before the land, and in one place it says: “in the day of YHVH Elohim’s making earth and heavens” [Gn 2:4], telling that the two of them are equal, this one like this.³³

The hermeneutic underlying this statement is twofold: first, when the system of scripture otherwise appears to concretize one consistent metaphysical position, a single contradictory statement may overturn that position; and second, when that statement appears, its weight as an exception is magnified, so that the position it concretizes has equal weight to all other statements.

Even from the perspective of the midrashic process, this is just one of many ways to read the texts, yet it is a theologically authentic way of reading. The teaching just cited may itself be regarded as an outlying position, since most traditions relating to the order of creation teach that either the earth was created first, or that the heavens were created first, rather than that they are equal. The hermeneutic this teaching illustrates justifies focusing on outlying positions as central to rabbinic discourse.

David Kraemer has examined the importance of this tendency to emphasize alternative interpretations within the rhetorical structure of the Bavli (the Babylonian Talmud).³⁴ If outlying positions, whether concretized in scriptural verses or in rabbinic sayings, are in fact given special significance by rabbinic hermeneutics, this also suggests that whenever the tradition preserves such outlying positions, it is in a sense prepared for them to be read as significant, out of proportion to their frequency. Thus, while these moments of textual discourse are usually regarded as counter-traditions in the sense of minority or dissident voices, there are times when one may, even from a historical-critical

³³ BR 1:15.

³⁴ *The Mind of the Talmud*. Note esp. what Kraemer writes on 322–3:

[T]he rabbis thought “universally valid truths” to be inaccessible....[I]t is precisely this recognition that is embodied in the Talmudic form....This recognition was not complete, however, at the earliest stages of rabbinism....The overwhelming insistence on alternatives in interpretation would await the *Bavli*, and it was at the time of its composition that the full implications of the position described earlier would be recognized and affirmed.

perspective, treat them as equal to other voices without distorting the texts themselves.

On deconstruction

I have noted that a primary method of challenging the “modernist-humanist” interpretation of Torah is through a close reading of the rabbinic texts that are used to support that interpretation. Historical-critical and deconstructive techniques can be used to tease apart meanings and equations between modern thought and classical Midrash, in order to “suspend” the modernist-humanist paradigm that generally dominates contemporary Jewish religious thought.

This approach may create the appearance of a contradiction in my methodology. Where *KAE* explores the development of a new paradigm, in order to create a “lens” for a Jewish deep ecology (see p.34ff.), it sometimes treats diachronic meanings and ideas that are held together by common vocabulary as though they represented a coherent intellectual continuity. Where the modernist paradigm is concerned, however, discontinuities are what is highlighted and accentuated. Thus, it may seem that I employ a double standard, where constructive methods are used when it serves the goals of my thesis, and deconstructive methods are applied to theologies that contradict my thesis. However, as I note in repeatedly *KAE*, it is obvious that any deep ecology or ecotheological reading of tradition can be just as readily deconstructed as a conventional (that is, modernist) reading. Deconstructing modernist-humanism does not represent the erasure or nullification of prior theologies, or necessitate their replacement by newer ones. Rather, it represents the suspension of a dominant paradigm in order to allow other paradigms to be adequately explored alongside it. This is what it means to talk about “suspending” the modernist-humanist paradigm.

Though there are many points in *KAE* where I try to show that a new understanding of *tselem* is a better reading of the rabbinic texts and is more congruent with the Kabbalah, there is no doubt that the modernist-humanist tradition provides a more comprehensive reading of the texts of medieval Jewish philosophy. Furthermore, there is no textual or apodictic reason why a paradigm rooted in an earlier rabbinic conception of the body or anthropology should be more true or authentic than one founded on medieval philosophical conceptions. On the contrary, the suspension of one paradigm and exploration of another is meant to allow these paradigms to stand in equal relationship.

As I wrote in *KAE* and above, the very purpose of the historical and textual work done in *KAE* is to allow the appearance of this degree of freedom to choose from among adequate interpretations. The hermeneutical and theological choices that one makes in that moment are neither objective on the one hand, nor arbitrary on the other. This should both afford us greater choice about what Jewish culture and traditions mean, while also guaranteeing that the meaning we choose is coherent with what came before. The more traditional a new interpretation can be said to be, the more transformational it is, for it transforms not only the future but also the past. Without some kind of process that guarantees such continuity, any new interpretation is strictly homiletical, applying only to its contemporary moment in the present, and only loosely at that.

I believe the world itself makes us choose between paradigms, firstly by virtue of what each paradigm offers in terms of richness and beauty, and secondly by virtue of what political and practical consequences each theology brings. Reality, that is, the real-life value of more fully embracing Life and creating a sustainable future, is sufficient to argue for or against a particular paradigm. While my own prejudices about what that means are clear throughout *KAE*, I do not expect to do more than convince an academic reader that the alternative models I propose to the “standard model” are equally adequate lenses through which to view the tradition, based on both traditional and historical-critical values and hermeneutics. The human being who is also a scholar must make his or her own choices after that.

The truth is that the modernist-humanist paradigm that so strongly affirms human rights and human equality, in a world where human rights are regularly violated, has not outlived its usefulness. Perhaps the best choice is not to deny one paradigm in favor of another, but to acknowledge multiple paradigms, even when they contradict each other. Anything else would only be systematic in the negative sense of excluding truths and beliefs that were inconvenient, and it would be morally and spiritually incomplete.

Hermeneutical foundations, rules of thumb, and examples

Both the constructive and deconstructive aspects of *KAE* are rooted in the hermeneutics of traditional Jewish texts. In this section I will analyze a few specific details about how these hermeneutics function.

Broadly speaking, one finds that new ideas in traditional texts are not signaled by the appearance of new terms, and that when new terms do appear, they do not always signify new ideas. Rather, as already

discussed, new ideas are often introduced by recontextualizing or reinterpreting older terminology. Such older terms are generally rooted in canonical texts, that is, texts to which the hermeneutics of sacred reading apply.³⁵ Because of this, when an older terminology is successfully transplanted into a new field of meaning, it can effectively change the meaning of an entire tradition without disrupting that tradition's continuity.

While there are no strict rules of interaction when comparing two texts that use a common terminology, certain rules of thumb do emerge as guidelines. Based upon the rhetorical conventions of rabbinic texts, one may start with the assumption that the use of a common terminology in two different traditions or texts places them in some relationship, even if the meaning is quite different. (This is simply one facet of intertextuality.) As mentioned, an older terminology may be used specifically to effect radical change, while preserving the appearance of continuity. One example of such conserved terminology is the term *s'firah*, taken from the ancient text *Sefer Y'tsirah*, which was used in later Kabbalah to introduce and bear the weight of a huge system of symbols and ideas.

Where the same terminology is used by different tradents, in the same "book" and without explication, the traditions are likely to be founded upon a common metaphysical conception or hermeneutical idea. Conversely, where different terminology is used in two related teachings – especially when the two teachings appear in the same book – one should look for an ideological or metaphysical divergence between them.

An example of this that I analyze in *KAE* is the difference in *B'rei'shit Rabbah* 8:11 between the terminology *l'ma'lah* ("above") and *'elyonim* ("upper ones").³⁶ The text reads:

R' Yehoshua: God created in the human four creations from above */mil'ma'lah* – he stands like the angels, and speaks like [them, etc.] R' Tifdai: The upper ones */'elyonim* were created in the image and likeness, and don't bear fruit and multiply.

Since the first teaching refers only to the angels, the second teaching, which takes up a different terminology, may refer to something more.

³⁵ The hermeneutics of "sacred reading" means especially the idea that everything in the text will be found to cohere with scripture and with itself if one works over and kneads the gaps sufficiently.

³⁶ See *KAE*, pp.50–54, esp. p.52.

Based on surveying every use of *'elyonim* in *B'rei'shit Rabbah*, one can establish that *B'rei'shit Rabbah* uses *'elyonim* to refer to the angels and the heavens together. I conclude that R' Tifdai, or the image of R' Tifdai created by the book's redactor, claims that the angels and the heavens are all in God's image, while R' Yehoshua holds that only the angels are in God's image. The difference between the two terminologies, which most other scholars treat as equivalent (see further on), actually hints at a metaphysical difference between the two teachings.

More complex hermeneutics arise from this possibility. For example, where the same terminology appears twice in a typically multivocal rabbinic text, if this terminology is explicated in one case but not in the other, it is possible that the tradition in which the terminology is explicated is reformulating the commonly accepted meaning of that terminology. We might search in such cases for an ideological shift from one tradent to the other. This may also be true when the same terminology is used by a different author in a later text. With respect to theological meaning, this process is generally eisegetical: typically, a text that explicates an older terminology is transforming the idea underlying the terminology.³⁷

These reformulations may be intentional and therefore a way of arguing with previous texts or traditions, or they may be evidence of an unconscious evolution of that idea in a new direction, in which case the author or tradent may be imagining what they are teaching to be in agreement with previous uses of that terminology. None of these propositions is very radical, but I have found that such analyses are employed less frequently in scholarly literature than they could be.

Some more examples of terminology

The bottom line is that the use of old terms for new ideas is a powerful and traditional way of revolutionizing the Jewish tradition, while at the same time remaining grounded in the tradition. It is most importantly a way of naturalizing new ideas. The process of developing new concepts using older rabbinic terms often mimics the process of developing rabbinic terminology from scriptural verses.³⁸ An example of this would be the term *beynoni*, originally meaning an average person,

³⁷ An example discussed at length in the next section is "*dibrah Torah bil'shon Adam*" in Maimonides.

³⁸ Some examples are *n'shamah* and *'olam*. Each of these words exist not as theological terminology but as simple concepts in the *Tanakh*. They are both examined in *KAE*, in Chapters 4 and 9.

which was taken over from the Mishnah by Shneur Zalman of Liady to mean a person whose actions are without sin but who wrestles with incorrect desires.³⁹ As such, it became a cornerstone of Chabad ethical thought.

In *halakhah*, a similar process of conserving terminology is incorporated into how legal precedents for decisions are established. The terminology used may derive from a law's *locus classicus* in scripture (though this kind of derivation is as likely to be eisegetical as exegetical), but may also be derived strictly from rabbinic sources.⁴⁰ The same term may provide the rubric for both theological and halakhic innovation, as one finds in Cordovero's use of the term *mitah yafah* ("a good death"), which in the Talmud is applied only to humans, to refer to animal slaughter.⁴¹ Since similar rules apply and the same terminologies may be used, there is no reason to draw a hard line between theological and legal discourse.

This process can apply to whole phrases that describe complex ideas. For example, the hermeneutical principle that "the Torah speaks in human language / *dibrah Torah bilshon Adam*" means very different things in rabbinic and medieval contexts.⁴² Aryeh Cohen examines this example in *Rereading Talmud*:

The Talmudic function of this principle is to limit the applicability of the midrashic reading practice in instances of the doubling of verbs. The "general

³⁹ *Liqutey Amarim (Tanya)*, trans. Nissan Mindel *et al.* (London: Otsar Hachasidim, 1972).

⁴⁰ Some examples of the former include *m'la'khah* ("work", from Ex 35:2,29), *bal tashchit* ("not wasting", from Dt 20:20). Note however that many key rabbinic concepts have no grounding in the terms used by scripture. For example, "*eiver min hachai*" denotes taking part of an animal for food while it is still alive. The specific terminology used in the verses where the prohibition appears, "flesh with its life / *basar b'nafsho*" (Gn 9:4) and "the life with the flesh / *hanefesh im habasar*" (Dt 12:23), was not incorporated into halakhic discourse. The appearance of new terminology here, as in other cases, may indicate a new concept, or it may indicate the concretization of an older concept.

⁴¹ See *KAE*, pp.164–5. *B'rakhah* or blessing is another example that illustrates both tendencies. This noun form in *Tanakh* denotes blessings that God grants to people or that one person grants to another; when this root is used for a person blessing God in the Torah it appears only as a verb. The idea of blessing God, specifically "making a *b'rakhah*" by uttering the appropriate rabbinically-coined formula "*Barukh atah...*", represents both a theological and ritual innovation, and it also defines a category that can be the target of legislation.

⁴² Another fascinating example of this process, where the change is from early to late classical rabbinic literature, can be seen in the transformation of the interpretation of Ec 12:11 from the *Tosefta* to the Talmud. See Shlomo Naeh, "Make Yourself Many Rooms: Another Look at the Utterances of the Sages About Controversy," in *Renewing Jewish Commitment: The Work and Thought of David Hartman*, eds. A. Sagi and Z. Zohar (Jerusalem: Hartman Institute, 2002), 851–75.

rule” that one might draw from this principle is that certain stylistic devices of biblical text are not to be counted as redundancies, and therefore are not to be read midrashically. Maimonides reads this principle as a rabbinic validation of a specific reading of Torah. That is, Maimonides imputes to the phrase the general rule that all anthropomorphic or anthropopathic terms in the Torah are not to be taken as literal. It is not however, the language of the phrase that has changed, but its context.⁴³

Concerning the “cultural context of interpretation”, Cohen explains, “It was the neo-Aristotelian philosophical discourse of the early Middle Ages that naturalized this recontextualization of the phrase.”⁴⁴ Cohen refers both to the recontextualization of the principle of *bilshon Adam* by Maimonides, as well as the recontextualization of Jewish civilization, which Maimonides is responding to as well as creating.

In this example, Maimonides does not explicitly reinterpret the phrase “*bilshon Adam*”. At no point does he show any awareness that he has transformed its meaning. Rather, as Cohen states, he is recontextualizing the phrase. While this has the effect of changing the meaning of the Talmudic principle, it is possible that neither Maimonides nor his sympathetic readers would have recognized that a change had taken place. It is not wrong to regard this move as a reinterpretation, and one could certainly claim that the new meaning was intended to supplant or erase the earlier meaning of the phrase in its original context. However, it is probably more accurate to treat the phrase itself as a thread that ties together the steps in an evolutionary thought process.

In this example, the technical terminology of *bilshon Adam*, in both its rabbinic and Maimonidean usage, points to a similar kind of hermeneutical principle. One could say that this is its primary function, rather than having its primary function be one or another of its meanings, and that this function has remained constant, even though the phrase has been transferred by Maimonides to a wholly new context.

Noticing that Maimonides is radically redefining the meaning of the concept *bilshon Adam* neither invalidates his reading of rabbinic tradition, nor does it make Maimonides’ theological position less true than the rabbinic position. It does let us do two useful things, however: it allows us to see the contingency of Maimonides’ reading, and it makes it easier for us to notice alternative evolutions for the same terminology.⁴⁵ This is the method employed in *KAE*.

⁴³ 134–5. See also *The Rabbinic Mind*, 321, n.68, citing Yehezkel Kaufman.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ To the extent that the Maimonidean usage has become normative for Jews thinking about the Jewish tradition, a new concept that relied on the same terminology would

From Cohen to Neusner: How much context?

One element that factors into understanding the transformation of terminology is to understand a terminology's redactional context. This raises the question of how much context is necessary to meaningfully analyze a text. Cohen would suggest that a whole *sugya* is sufficient, while for Neusner, the smallest sufficient context is a whole book.⁴⁶ Neusner's insistence on only drawing conclusions on the basis of whole books is a reaction against many decades of scholarship that were focused on the one hand on the minutiae of text-critical work, and on the other, on what amounted to homiletical interpretation. The work of describing the content of "Judaism", which scholars like Schechter pursued, often catalogued rabbinic sayings through topical or homiletical association, while disregarding their redactional or rhetorical context.⁴⁷

Neusner's radical shift in focus transformed Jewish Studies, and it lies in the background of much of the postmodern, rhetorical, and literary criticism. Neusner therefore provides a good foil for illuminating the reasons for the methods I use in *KAE*. In his explicitly theological work, Neusner moves from reading whole books to accounting for "the whole corpus". "Viewed synchronically, how do the assertions of the documentary components of the Oral Torah cohere? Theology responds to that question."⁴⁸ What emerges for Neusner are the "native categories" – a vast improvement over the paucity of value-concepts Kadushin provided, but limited to what Neusner calls the "head-nouns" of the language of theology.⁴⁹ (One might say that *KAE* is interested in the theological "prepositions" that relate to a discursive group of Neusner's nouns.) However, Neusner's synoptic and large-scale conceptual method of reading obscures what I believe was a primary motivation of the redactor: not (or not primarily) to create a unified polemic, but rather to create a multivocal dialectic.

necessarily either compete with his recontextualization, or extend and somehow include it.

⁴⁶ Kadushin in *Theology of Seder Eliahu* really set out the methodology Neusner adopted when he wrote, "To guard against the possibility of imposing an arbitrary or subjective organization upon the material, I have utilized every available statement of the Mishnah." (21) On the following page he suggests that his project would require the same level of analysis for other *midrashim*, describing this task as one "on which...I hope sometime to venture". Neusner essentially undertook Kadushin's project.

⁴⁷ See Neusner, "The Documentary History of Judaism, Or: Why Schechter, Moore, and Urbach Are Irrelevant to Scholarship Today" in *From Literature to Theology in Formative Judaism* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 197–218.

⁴⁸ *Theological Grammar*, 3, 4.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 5–7.

I have found that Neusner's tendency to read larger and larger contexts, in order to avoid the atomizing and cataloguing style of older scholarship, leads to other kinds of errors as well, as one finds for example in his book *Genesis and Judaism*.⁵⁰ In this work, Neusner reads long chains of midrashic sayings as though they add up to unified arguments. By focusing almost exclusively on finding what he regards as **the** consistent or predominant message, Neusner sometimes misreads individual statements and misses rhetorical subtleties.

His fundamental point, that a multivocal text is not the same as a "mere anthology" or catalog of sayings, is of course correct.⁵¹ But his point needs to be followed several steps further. For example, we have already discussed the difference in *B'rei'shit Rabbah* 8:11 between the terminology *l'ma'lah* ("above") used in one teaching, and *'elyonim* ("upper ones") used in a paired teaching. For both, a fundamental point is that the divine image in human beings is an image of the more exalted creations of God, rather than of God directly. Nevertheless, by juxtaposing statements that use different terminologies, the redactor suggests that a *makhloket* or disagreement existed between two schools of thought about this very point.⁵²

Neusner, however, translates *l'ma'lah* and *'elyonim* with the same phrase, "beings/creatures of the upper world". This kind of blurry translation makes it easy for Neusner, and others (*KAE*, pp.50-1), to conclude that R' Yehoshua and R' Tifdai are saying the same thing. However, it is my contention that this kind of juxtaposition in midrashic collections like *B'rei'shit Rabbah* is part of a dialectical method. This would dovetail with Zvi Septimus's understanding of the ideal reader envisioned by the editors of the Bavli (see n.32 herein). However, I would claim that this ideal reader was already envisioned by the redactors of earlier rabbinic literature.

These are all reasons why I focus throughout *KAE* on terminology. Rather than reading whole books or even whole pericopes or *sugyot*, I instead read the "molecular" level of the texts where a particular terminology appears. As such, the context can be both smaller than a

⁵⁰ *Genesis and Judaism: The Perspective of Genesis Rabbah: An Analytical Anthology* (Atlanta GA: Scholars Press, 1985).

⁵¹ 49.

⁵² See p.19 of this essay. Whether these schools of thought existed prior to the redaction is a separate question. A systematic study would be needed to determine if this method of juxtaposition is a large part of the program of *B'rei'shit Rabbah*, or if it simply appears as an occasional hermeneutical technique. If it is a general program, as I suspect, then one might hypothesize that the redactional methods of this midrash (and similar ones) sowed seeds that developed into the more explicit dialectics of the Talmuds.

sugya and larger than a book, since that context can extend intertextually over many centuries and genres.

JEWISH THEOLOGY

In this section I want to consider some of the more conventional ways of doing Jewish theology, as well as to look more broadly at the relatively recent phenomenon of “textual reasoning”, which is closely related to the methodology I use in *KAE*. Jewish theology is a genre that has been widely open to midrashic or sermonistic styling, since it has no real canons or gatekeepers. For this reason, Jewish theology has traditionally been done outside the academy.

Popular Jewish theology is often constituted as a description of basic Jewish concepts, and/or definitions of what the “essence” of Judaism is. It generally accepts Judaism as an ontologically real and unified category. Many scholarly expositions of Jewish theology tend to elaborate the same kinds of concepts and definitions, using more philosophically refined categories. Either approach can become ahistorical, hegemonic, and deaf to the nuances of rabbinic literature and culture.⁵³ A more meaningful (though still popular) approach is to catalog the different voices within tradition using conceptual frameworks, e.g., “What does Judaism say about life after death?” Much of the teaching about Jewish philosophy is just a more technical version of this approach, in which each philosopher is categorized according to the conceptual position he took on a standardized set of issues (e.g. *creatio ex nihilo*, the nature of prophecy, etc.). This framework is not alien to medieval Jewish philosophy, which is largely structured according to principles and concepts rather than texts or intertexts. It would seem then that one could give a meaningful account of at least this narrow area of Jewish thought according to conceptual and rationalistic categories.

However, I would claim on the contrary that what is most significant about specific Jewish thinkers, even in medieval philosophy, is not what propositions they believed, but rather how they read texts, and more broadly, how they read the tradition, both synoptically as a coherent whole, and intertextually as a chorus of many voices. Perhaps **the** main

⁵³ See Lori Krafte-Jacobs, “The ‘Essence’ of Judaism: A Process Relational Critique” in *Jewish Theology and Process Thought*, eds. Sandra Lubarsky and David Ray Griffin (Albany, 1996), 75–87. See also Seidenberg, “Confessions of a Jewish Post-Postmodernist” in *Response* (Summer 1995) 14–22 and online at neohasid.org/culture/confessions.

difference between those Jewish philosophers who had a great impact on Judaism over the course of centuries, and those who did not, is how thoroughly they read the texts of the tradition, and whether their reading of **the texts** was compelling to others.

Understanding this process means understanding the hermeneutics of reception and reading, which precede any concrescence of “what is Judaism”. The hermeneutics of a particular thinker are the truest measure of how he or she stands in relation Judaism as a whole tradition. How do they inherit from those that come before them and how do they pass on to those that come after – that is, to us? Without accounting for this dimension, one has not explained what a particular work means to the tradition, or why it has a place in that tradition. This is why cataloging the conceptual turns of Jewish thought cannot adequately give an account of Jewish thought. At most it can be a preface to the practice of philosophy or theology.

What this also means is that the most important Jewish theological work occurs either through a systematic rereading of the texts of the tradition (as in Maimonides’ *Moreh N’vukhim*), or through the systemic application of a new hermeneutic to many diverse texts (as in Chasidic theology/commentary). In other words, Jewish theology must operate in relation to a canonical text or set of texts, and must pose its questions and answers as interpretations of its canon. Most importantly for *KAE*, Kabbalah fundamentally works out its metaphysics by working through texts, reading the tradition and realigning the matrices of rabbinic thought on new lines, through the process of commentary. It is for this reason that the canonical book of Kabbalah is the *Zohar* and not any of the books that define and enumerate the Sefirot. The *Zohar*, by working through virtually the entire scriptural canon, created the fact of Kabbalah as an all-encompassing reading of Judaism, without ever needing to systematize any of its ideas. Similarly, Lurianic Kabbalah, which seems so *sui generis* and eisegetical, can still be read as a commentary on the *Zohar*, being rooted not only in the concepts but especially in the “ungrammaticalities” of the *Zohar*.⁵⁴

There are virtually no modern Jewish theologians that come near to accomplishing such a systematic reading of the tradition, with the

⁵⁴ See Shaul Magid, “From Theosophy to Midrash: Lurianic Exegesis and the Garden of Eden” in *AJS Review* (22:1 1997) 37-75. I am making use here of Aryeh Cohen’s explanation of reading, which draws both on traditional rabbinic methodology and on literary theorists like Bakhtin.

exception of Heschel in his *Torah Min Hashamayim b'Aspaqlariyah shel Hadorot*,⁵⁵ and to a lesser degree Rosenzweig in *The Star of Redemption*.

Since these aspects of Jewish thought are not taken into account in the conventional understanding of “Jewish theology”, it is an important typological question whether to regard these questions as a different form of theology, or as alternatives to theology itself. We can even see historical precedent for such ambivalence: Kabbalah, as a reaction against philosophy, may be said to have rejected the idea of theology, even while it enumerated and elaborated a vastly complex series of theological ideas.⁵⁶

These processes and hermeneutics exist across a wide variety of texts, even though the models delineated by scholarship are mostly derived from classical rabbinic literature, rather than from later literatures. Max Kadushin defined what he called the “organic thinking” in terms of the early rabbis,⁵⁷ and his ideas have been explored further by other scholars such as Jacob Neusner⁵⁸ and Peter Ochs, especially in Ochs’ elaboration of what he calls “text-process thought” based upon Kadushin, Pierce, and postmodernism.⁵⁹ Kabbalah however equally provides examples of non-linear, non-hierarchical, “organic” thinking.

⁵⁵ (New York: Shonitsin, 1962). Heschel’s work is a systematic rereading of classical rabbinic literature, rather than all of Jewish tradition. This is the only work of Heschel’s that could be said to deal with the tradition in a hermeneutical as opposed to ideological way. While *Torah Min Hashamayim*, like most of Heschel’s work, is overlaid with poetic ornamentation, it is a very strong reading of the texts. See esp. the sections “*Min Hashamayim*” (vol.2, 80–2) and “*Kol Torah Amar Mipi Haqadosh*” (vol.2, 72), and his summary of vol.2 in the introduction to vol.3.

⁵⁶ Obviously, there are also many texts written as part of the tradition of Kabbalah that interpret that tradition in a more systematic or conceptual manner, especially the many popular treatises on ethics, like Luzzatto’s *M’silat Y’sharim*. See Joseph Dan’s brief but well-formulated book, *Jewish Mysticism and Jewish Ethics* (Northvale NJ, 1996), esp. 6–9, 11–3 and ch.2.

⁵⁷ See especially Kadushin’s *The Theology of Seder Eliahu: A Study in Rabbinic Judaism* (New York: Bloch Publishing, 1932), as well as *The Rabbinic Mind*. Also, of the articles on Kadushin in *Understanding the Rabbinic Mind: Essays on the Hermeneutic of Max Kadushin*, ed. Peter Ochs (Atlanta GA: Scholars Press, 1990), see esp. Simon Greenberg, “Coherence and Change in the Rabbinic Universe of Discourse: Kadushin’s Theory of the Value Concept” (19–43) and Richard Sarason, “Kadushin’s Study of Midrash: Value Concepts and Their Literary Embodiment” (45–72).

⁵⁸ Among the books by Neusner that show the influence of Kadushin, see especially *From Literature to Theology in Formative Judaism* (Atlanta GA: Scholars Press, 1989), and *Theological Grammar of the Oral Torah*, (Oakdale NY: Dowling College Press, 1998).

⁵⁹ See his article “Rabbinic Text Process Theology” in *Jewish Theology and Process Thought*, eds. Sandra Lubarsky and David Ray Griffin (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1996), 195–231.

Other attempts at deriving a clearer description of “what Jews do” can be found in Rosenzweig’s notion of *sprach-gedenken* or speech-thinking, also known by his term “the new thinking”.⁶⁰ In the previous two decades, descriptions of rabbinic method in terms of deconstruction and post-critical theory, first by Susan Handelman,⁶¹ then in Boyarin, as already discussed, and in the annals of the “Textual Reasoning” listserv and the *Journal of Textual Reasoning*,⁶² constituted a vibrant understanding of “what Jews do”. Midrash was the matrix and model that inspired many of these accounts of a different process of thinking, a process that is somehow natively Jewish and theological without being reified as theology.

The framework of textual reasoning, as opposed to philosophical reasoning, is perhaps the most inclusive and instructive of all of these models. Kadushin’s formulations sometimes imply that logic is not part of rabbinic thinking, but the emphasis on reasoning in the phrase “textual reasoning” is a reminder that rabbinic thinking is not the opposite of logical, but rather based in a different kind of logic. This framework leads towards ethics and reading, and away from so-called

⁶⁰ Rosenzweig’s statement is translated in its entirety in Alan Udoff and Barbara E. Galli, *Franz Rosenzweig’s “The New Thinking”* (Syracuse NY, 1999). See esp. 74–87. See also Michael Oppenheim on “the new thinking” in *Speaking/Writing of God: Jewish Philosophical Reflections on the Life with Others*, 36–41. Rosenzweig’s ideas about speech-thinking or new-thinking are strongly based in his own theory of translation and in the modes of signification that he and Buber analyzed in their translation of Hebrew scripture. However, Rosenzweig’s account of *das neugedenken* is limited in its descriptive capacity by his Hegelian focus on completeness. Rosenzweig even claims (p.87) that “[c]ompleteness is after all the true verification of the new thinking”. Rosenzweig subsumes Judaism under Hegelian and post-Hegelian categories in this moment (even though his post-Hegelian categories arose in part from his dialogue with Jewish tradition). By doing so he shows how very far his idea is from the nature of Talmudic discourse – not because the rabbis did not strive to describe the world as thoroughly as possible, but because they could never have imagined any description as being complete.

⁶¹ See *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1982). Handelman’s groundbreaking work was criticized in the Jewish Studies academy for several reasons, but it was repaired and re-deployed by other scholars like Boyarin. On modern Jewish thought and ancient Jewish thinking, see Steven Kepnes, Peter Ochs, and Robert Gibbs, eds., *Reasoning After Revelation: Dialogues in Postmodern Jewish Philosophy* (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1998). Discussions on this topic can sometimes be more about the Jewish identity of the scholar than they are about Jewish thought.

⁶² Both grew out of Ochs’ gatherings of scholars under the banner of the “Postmodern Jewish Philosophy Network”. Archives can be found at etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/tr/indexpast.html (Sep. 2012). See also Peter Ochs and Nancy Levene, eds., *Textual Reasonings: Jewish Philosophy and Text Study at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002).

“Greek” ontology.⁶³ Though there are obvious problems with stereotyping and forced harmonization of diverse approaches, problems that can be found within any tradition, this framework has proven useful to many interpreters of Jewish thought.⁶⁴

Returning to the problem at hand, one may see these *techne* and literatures either as alternative methods of doing theology, or, as Kadushin would claim, alternatives to theology. Further on, I will use the frame of alternative methods of theology, and in particular, talk about these methods as alternatives to philosophical or “discursive theology”, to quote Ira Stone.⁶⁵

Christian theology: systematics and models

It may be helpful to contrast what I have described above as Jewish theology with the Christian practice of “systematic theology”. While one can find examples of theology in the Jewish tradition that may be categorized as systematic, the term and its meaning are rooted strictly in Christian tradition. Paul Tillich’s description of systematics may show why it is difficult to use the methods of Christian theology to “do” theology within Judaism.

“Systematic theology” according to Tillich systematizes the “world” through the conceptual rather than textual categories of a tradition, particularly through the conceptual categories of the Christian tradition. Tillich contrasts this with what we would call textual reasoning:

There is no ontological thought in biblical religion; but there is no symbol or no theological concept in it which does not have ontological implications...To

⁶³ Levinas of course is the most important partisan for this paradigm of ethics vs. ontology. Levinas’s two most important works for this question are *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (Dordrecht NL: Kluwer, 1991) and *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1990).

⁶⁴ Any discussion of the “Jewish/Greek” dichotomy needs to grapple with Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction of it in his essay on Levinas, “Violence and Metaphysics” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Bass (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1978), 79–193. Since Derrida and Levinas, for most scholars of Jewish thought, are the primary exemplars of “rabbinism” inside the world of “Greek thought”, Derrida’s critique of this difference is especially interesting. Note also Boyarin’s *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), which argues that the most intense dialectical layer of the Talmud is connected to a Greek literary form, specifically Menippean satire.

⁶⁵ See Stone, *Seeking the Path to Life: Theological Meditations on God, the Nature of People, Love, Life and Death* (Woodstock VT, 1992). Stone writes, “I call the natural functioning of these ways of expression ‘imaginative theology’ in order to distinguish it from what theologians do. That I call ‘discursive theology’.” (106)

prohibit the transformation of the potential into an actual theology – of course, within the theological circle – would reduce theology to a repetition and organization of biblical passages.⁶⁶

Tillich's formulation essentially rules out textual reasoning, which he sees as mere "repetition and organization". While Tillich acknowledges that ontological categories and systematics cannot encompass Biblical religion, his formulation would apply to the textuality of any tradition. Assuming the correctness of Tillich's description, any Christian doing systematics must attempt to systematize the "religion", that is, evidence of the tradition itself, through concepts alone. But this is not possible without excluding all the contrary systems and creeds that have preceded the author's own theological statement. Thus, what counts as evidence for a given systematic theology is not all the available evidence of a tradition, but rather the evidence that relates to a particular set of creed-based symbols and categories. Tillich calls this a process of correlation between existential questions and theological answers.⁶⁷

While systematic theology attempts to systematize all experience and phenomena available into a complete unified model, it is the categories of the model itself that provide the primary evidence. A systematic theology arranges in a particular way all the significant categories of Christian thought and belief. This requires at least a "denomination-wide" agreement about what those significant categories are, which in a creed-based religion is quite plausible.

These facts can also form the basis for a different kind of theological thinking, one that acknowledges that the theologian cannot create a complete system out of the intersection of religion and world. Instead, she or he can only provide a partial model that explains some aspects of this intersection. The word "model", used in Christian theology very deliberately to indicate that the picture one creates in theology is nothing more than an integrated metaphor, depends for its meaning not upon any verifiable truth or transcendent gnosis, but rather upon simple psychology and hermeneutics. This paradigm, expounded in Sallie

⁶⁶ *Systematic Theology* (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1967), vol.2, 12.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, vol.1, 60–2: "Systematic theology uses the method of correlation....The method of correlation explains the contents of the Christian faith through existential questions and theological answers in mutual interdependence....In using the method of correlation, systematic theology proceeds in the following way: it makes an analysis of the human situation out of which the existential questions arise, and it demonstrates that the symbols used in the Christian message are the answers to these questions."

McFague's earlier works,⁶⁸ becomes the foundation for the "theology of nature" she develops in *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*.⁶⁹

But even if one focuses on the "models" approach rather than on systematics, both frameworks are limited in their applicability to Jewish theological thinking. Judaism is hardly based upon creed or pure conceptual categories, and Jewish thought or meaning cannot be encompassed by any system or model.⁷⁰ Without a canonical set of categories for describing belief and faith, which Judaism lacks, such systematization is untenable. This is not only true of rabbinic thought, whose resistance to systematization and hierarchical categories has been well-documented in Kadushin's work and in many other explorations of Jewish texts.⁷¹ It is also evidenced by the fact that the enumeration of *'iqarim*, principles of faith, so important to medieval Jewish philosophy, never succeeded as a framework for the systematic exposition of Judaism, but rather existed as a kind of superstructure at most, what the Talmud might have called ornamentation or "*parpar'ot*".⁷²

In fact, I would say that the only truly significant successes in what might be called "systematic Jewish theology" may be limited to Maimonides' *Moreh N'vukhim* and Franz Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption*.⁷³ These works were essentially motivated and structured by

⁶⁸ *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 1982); *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 1987).

⁶⁹ (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 1993).

⁷⁰ See Kadushin, *The Theology of Seder Eliahu*, 24. "Scriptural reasoning", a sister enterprise to textual reasoning that sprung up among Christian interlocutors in the textual reasoning circle, is another alternative to systematics, which is in fact compatible with Jewish textual theology.

⁷¹ Among the many books that assume this perspective, David Kraemer's work *The Mind of the Talmud* is especially important in that he shows that the intensely defined logic of the Babylonian Talmud serves not to systematize but to destabilize meaning and categorical definition.

⁷² Mishnah *Avot* 3:18. The most systematic expositions of Judaism focus on Jewish practice and are structured by the **halakhic categories** that define Jewish practice, rather than by philosophical or creedal categories. This is most importantly true of works like Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, even though it does expound theology in one of its fourteen volumes. Moreover, in modern times the small number of ideological issues around which there is intense inter-denominational dispute, and hence relative unanimity within each denomination (e.g. the origin of Torah), hardly come close to being a sufficient framework for organizing the meaning of Judaism, much less the meaning of religious and human experience in general.

⁷³ One might also mention the *Tanya* here as an example of a relatively systematic work of Jewish thought that is grounded in native Jewish categories. In *Tanya*, Shneur Zalman created a new "systemic" lens through which all of Judaism could be read, consciously using the textual evidence of much earlier Kabbalah rather than *Chasidut*.

secular philosophical systems of thought, rather than by native Jewish categories. This is quite different than Christian systematics, which is rooted in native Christian categories. Whether a systematic exposition of Judaism's meaning could be possible from out of the native categories of Judaism is an open question; there is no work that has accomplished this. Maimonides' *magnum opus* in particular reads the tradition in terms of a set of problems; it is not a systematic exposition of Judaism in the sense used by Christian theologians, though it can be correlated with Christian systematics.

Systematic v. "systemic" theology

The grounds for creating a contemporary systematic theology for Judaism, *à la* Maimonides rather than Tillich, do exist. A full-blown system of secular-scientific thought is presenting itself today as a framework for new theology, and there is a need to coherently explain Judaism in terms that can be joined to this framework. However, *KAE* is not an attempt at a systematic theology in this sense. Instead, I work in *KAE* towards what I call a systemic theological lens. By this I mean the construction of a "lens" through which one can view the entirety of the evidence of Judaism, including texts, ideologies, ethics, rituals and practices. This lens brings into focus diverse parts of the tradition through renewed "native" categories, rooted in pre-modern terminology. Through this "systemic" process, one could in theory develop a "systematic" comprehension of the Jewish tradition, not in the Christian sense but in a sense that may fit rabbinic Judaism. I hope to explore that larger project in a subsequent book.

One goal of a systemic approach to ecotheology is to shape a religious sensibility that focuses on the appreciation and enhancement of the abundance of life, in the fullest interior and worldly senses. A systemic lens, as I am describing it, is therefore an ideological lens. However, the principle of its construction is not ideology but rather historical-critical evidence drawn from earlier textual traditions. I have specifically excluded modern Jewish ecological thought from the primary evidence that I consider in *KAE*, focusing rather on traditions that not only pre-date ecological concerns and questions, but that also pre-date or aver most of the medieval philosophical ideas which are the basis of

However, unlike Maimonides or Rosenzweig, who endeavored to read the whole of reality from a particular philosophical perspective, and unlike Christian systematics, *Tanya* had a more narrowly defined goal of systematically reading Kabbalah from the perspective of *Chasidut*.

modernist thought. (This does not diminish the significance of Maimonides in *KAE*, whom I rely on heavily for his opposition to anthropocentrism.)

As discussed, the homiletical way the lens is used must be different from the historical-critical way the lens is constructed. Furthermore, in *KAE* I try to distinguish between the homiletical and historical-critical use of texts. This is a departure from most other works of Jewish theology, which are constructed using the same homiletical methods and ideology that they wish to inculcate. In other words, the typical theological writer is either unconscious or equivocal in some way about there being any difference between their perspective and the perspectives they derive from the texts they are reading. This is true of both modern and medieval theological texts, with some arguable exceptions, which may include not only some passages in Maimonides' works but perhaps also passages in Saadyah Gaon's *Emunot v'Dei'ot*.⁷⁴

KABBALAH AS COUNTER-HISTORY

Both medieval philosophical interpretation and Kabbalah significantly alter the anthropology received from the rabbis. The anthropology of medieval philosophy was remade yet again in the modernist-humanist thought of most contemporary Jewish theologians. Kabbalah in turn provides a basis for developing an alternative anthropology based in Jewish tradition.

My exploration of Kabbalah in *KAE* focuses on noticing those changes in meaning that move towards a more holistic and less anthropocentric or hierarchical anthropology. While the primary reason for focusing on Kabbalah here is its openness both to diversity in the cosmos and to human responsibility for the cosmos (see *KAE*, 37–8), its hermeneutic variegation and power to generate new images and symbols are equally important. It may in fact be the case that these two dimensions are concomitant with each other. Thus Kabbalah (along with much of the Hasidic and philosophical literature that interpreted the Kabbalah) is the main focus of the constructive parts of *KAE*.

⁷⁴ I emphasize that I am speaking only about the most well-known theological works. I have not attempted to analyze the entire literature of Jewish theology in terms of this question. One might also include modern works that consciously confess their own contingent nature, like Arthur Green's trilogy (see *KAE*, p.24).

As discussed, modernist interpretations, based largely on medieval rationalism, virtually ignore the Kabbalah. Consequently, any alternative anthropology, sourced in Kabbalistic texts, easily allows one to show that any modernist interpretation is conditioned by its own ideology, and is not congruent with major parts of the tradition.

Rather than reconstructing the anthropology of whole Kabbalistic texts or systems, I have lifted up “textual moments”, i.e., so-called counter-texts, to generate a counter-history of Jewish thought and theology. As such, I am using Kabbalah in a manner congruent with my focus on tropes and terminology. Such a method does not by itself provide a statement of Kabbalistic anthropology. Rather, it focuses on the variation and divergence from the dominant paradigm that can be found within these literatures.

On a historical-critical level, as already mentioned, there is strong ground for applying such techniques to rabbinic texts, since they are so clearly and intentionally multivocal. The lifting up of counter-traditions (or countertexts, multivocality, heterogeneity, counter-hegemonic texts, etc., depending upon which scholar’s terminology one wishes to use) can happen under several interpretive regimes. For example, one may employ literary criticism to bracket out historical context, or propose a cultural history to explain the counter-tradition in question. There may even be counter-traditions within the work of a single author or even a single text, and all the more so in collections like the Talmuds – as has been amply explored in Kraemer’s work on the rhetoric of the *Bavli*.⁷⁵ More strongly, alternative texts may be treated as counter-traditions in the manner in which critics like Mieke Bal read the text of the Bible.⁷⁶ Part of

⁷⁵ Deconstructionism methodically finds such counter-voices within single works by single authors. On the counter-voices of the *Bavli*, see also Boyarin, *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis*, esp. 143–6, 184–6, 194–204. Boyarin identifies two different *stamma* (editorial voices) in the *Bavli*, one voice seeking to create a “dominant language” in which argument leads to authoritative *halakhah*, and another discordant voice, the product of a later editor, which calls this program into question.

⁷⁶ See *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington IL: University of Indiana Press, 1987) and *Death and Dissymetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988); also see Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). In the area of Bible studies, one may examine counter-traditions and piece together pictures of alternative theologies along with alternative documents and histories, whereas in other areas of Jewish Studies, such an approach would often be seen as breaking the boundary between scholarship and subjective reading. Similarly, in the margins of Jewish Studies, i.e. those areas less centered on rabbinic texts, advocating feminist positions through reading texts is often part and parcel of academic work, and many of the models for both new Jewish theology and criticism come from feminist writers doing engaged rather than “objective” scholarship.

the notion of countertexts in Biblical scholarship is that different voices have been preserved in the process of combining different documents. This has opened the door to wide acceptance of feminist literary theory and to the reconstruction of what might be deemed liberating voices within the textual traditions of the Bible.

Gershom Scholem also used the idea of re-emergence to explain Kabbalah as the return of the repressed energy of myth – something that can be understood as its own kind of countertext. More generally, the hermeneutics of Kabbalah and the abundance of theological images and relationships within Kabbalistic literature provide their own grounds for attending to multivocality. By connecting these together, one can generate an alternative history of what Judaism means and what it can mean. This is exactly what David Biale calls “counter-history”:

Counter-history is a type of revisionist historiography, but where the revisionist proposes a new theory or finds new facts, the counter-historian transvalues old ones. He does not deny that his predecessors’ interpretation of history is correct, as does the revisionist, but he rejects the completeness of that interpretation.⁷⁷

In sum, by focusing on countertexts and on areas of the tradition that have not been taken into account in modern theology, such work points out the incompleteness of modern readings of Judaism and suggests a direction which can lead us toward a more complete understanding of the tradition.

Wolfson and the reading of Kabbalah

Can one make ecotheology out of selected texts of Kabbalah in this manner? While Biale would appear to support this approach, Elliot R. Wolfson, discussing the idea of “the divine feminine in Nature”, answers no. As I discuss in *KAE*, Wolfson says that Kabbalah cannot generate “a

⁷⁷ David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 7. He applies these concepts to Kabbalah in the following manner:

Where the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* saw only a historical corpse, Scholem finds “hidden life”....[By] considering “degeneracy” and “impotent hallucinations” as equally legitimate within Judaism, one discovers hidden life – “a great living myth,” which Scholem finds in Jewish Gnosticism and the Kabbalah. I shall call Scholem’s historical method of unearthing the “hidden virtue” from the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* “counter-history.” I mean by this term the belief that the true history lies in a subterranean tradition that must be brought to light, much as the apocalyptic thinker decodes an ancient prophecy or as Walter Benjamin spoke of “brushing history against the grain.” Counter-history is a type of revisionist historiography[.]

more positive view of nature”, and that those who would use Kabbalah in this way are misreading the texts, explaining that this is “a misreading that I readily endorse as a human being but regrettably reject as a historical scholar.”⁷⁸ Wolfson describes the feminist and ecologically inspired reading of Nature in Kabbalah as a “morally demanded midrashic eisegesis”, thereby simultaneously rejecting and endorsing it. His critique of the feminist and ecological interpretations of Kabbalah is parallel in some ways to Visotzky’s critique of Boyarin. Susan E. Shapiro notes, “Wolfson does not in principle foreclose feminist rereadings of these texts as long as they are based on the recognition that such was not the authorial intent of the medieval mystics.”⁷⁹

But what is the authorial intent of “Kabbalah”? According to Wolfson in *Circle in the Square*, “The purpose of the divine catharsis is to purify the feminine aspect of the divine, but the ultimate purification is attained only when the feminine is restored to the male, when the other is obliterated in the identity of sameness.”⁸⁰ In other words, the lifting up of the feminine within Kabbalah has no feminist implications, since the feminine in its/her redeemed state is masculinized and “obliterated”.

Wolfson has tested the validity of this reading many times, demonstrating – to some people’s satisfaction – that Kabbalah does not provide a model of gender liberation.⁸¹ But there is an alternative vision of gender within Kabbalah that we can authentically draw on without giving the texts a false or ahistorical reading. There are passages in Lurianic Kabbalah, for example, that suggest that the female unites with the male only after becoming complete in herself:

⁷⁸ “The Mirror of Nature in Medieval Jewish Mysticism” in *Judaism and Ecology*, 305–31; 321. In this paper, Wolfson critiques a particular ecofeminist reading of Kabbalah. The manifest challenge, however, which Wolfson does not engage with, is to use Kabbalistic texts to explore new theological responses to ecological questions, not to determine whether a particular interpretation of Kabbalah is correct. Establishing the correct reading of a text may be an intermediary step toward this goal, but it is not the goal.

⁷⁹ “Toward a Postmodern Judaism: A Response” in *Reasoning After Revelation: Dialogues in Postmodern Jewish Philosophy*, eds. Steven Kepnes *et al.* (Boulder CO: Weestview, 1998), 77–92; 89, n.7.

⁸⁰ 116, my emphasis. See also *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

⁸¹ Wolfson’s interpretation is hotly contested within the community of Kabbalah scholarship. See works cited in *KAE*, nn.620 and 624. For example, Idel sees the entire corpus of Kabbalistic texts about *du-par’tzufim*, the double-bodied androgyny used in Midrash to describe the first human and in Kabbalah to describe aspects of the Sefirot, as representing the perspective that the female and the male are destined to achieve equal and independent stature. (*Kabbalah and Eros* [New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2005], 53–103.) Even if one agrees that Wolfson’s overall perspective is correct, the exceptions that prove the rule are more important, and more transformative, than Wolfson admits.

Behold now that the female/*Nuqva* of *Z'eyr Anpin* has two aspects, one in her being included at first with the male, the second when she is separated from him, and he gives her the crown of strength / *'atarah dig'yurah*....[W]hen she separates from upon him and becomes an aspect by herself / *l'atmah*...then the two of them are in the secret of a husband and his wife / *ba'al v'ishto*, the male alone and the female alone.⁸²

Though this text is quoted by Wolfson, he negates its implications, using the continuation of this very passage to explain that “purification of the feminine” is only for the sake of its absorption into the male.

However, there is a competing framework at play here, which in fact is played out in many later texts. As discussed, passages like this one may be treated as countertexts that suggest an alternative system of meaning – not just a “counter-tradition”, but even a counter-theology. There are enough theological statements congruent with this passage that one can justify the claim that this counter-theology has its own coherent history and trajectory.⁸³ Even without making such a strong claim, these texts on gender deconstruct (and reconstruct) what Wolfson describes as the normative system of gender in Kabbalah.

I believe Wolfson is too quick to deconstruct these “redemptive moments”. Wolfson assimilates them back into the greater system of *'Ets Chayyim*, without illuminating how Vital could differ so radically in these sentences from what he writes in conjoining passages. Regardless of Vital's intent or Wolfson's interpretation, no monolithic reading of Kabbalah can adequately represent how later Kabbalists received these traditions about gender. In fact, for several Kabbalists explored in *KAE*, the female becoming complete and independent of the male is the end goal of redemption, and not just a step toward the absorption of the female by the male. We therefore can confirm that earlier passages such as the one from Vital that allude to gender equality inspired a far-reaching reconstruction of gender among a number of later Kabbalists and Chasidic masters. Centuries before Jewish feminists began to take stock of Jewish mysticism, the idea of redemption coming through female autonomy became an overarching theological principle, as demonstrated in Chapter 12 of *KAE*, and in Sarah Schneider's work *Kabbalistic Writings On the Masculine and the Feminine*.⁸⁴

⁸² *'Ets Chayyim, Heykhal 2, 10:3, vol.1, 97, cited also in KAE, n.971; quoted in Wolfson, Circle in the Square, 116.*

⁸³ See Chapter 8, “*Qomah Sh'leymah*” and “*Qomah Sh'leymah in Chasidut*”

⁸⁴ See texts from *Or Hame'ir* and *Tsadiq Y'sod 'Olam* in *KAE*, Chapter 8, already cited above, which represent a tradition of interpreting the verse that describes the moment Boaz finds Ruth lying at his feet (Rt 3:8) in a redemptive fashion. Schneider's book

Redemption plays a central role in Judaism's meaning in almost every time and place, most emphatically in Kabbalah. Theologically and hermeneutically, the concept of redemption points to a context that has not yet come into being. By its very nature, redemption invites the reader to contemplate the transformation of Judaism and religion, and the cosmos in general. Any invocation of redemption necessarily makes reference to something beyond history, i.e., beyond the historical milieu of author and text. The "gender-redemptive" reading that is suggested by these texts is the *'ubar*, the spiritual embryo, within Kabbalah.

CONCLUSION

The aligning of countertexts is related to what I would describe as "retrospective" reading, in which the text is lifted up for what it might contribute to the future and not only for what it has contributed to the past. It may also be called "redemptive reading", though it differs from Boyarin's version of the same. Visotzky's overarching concern is that this method can never become anything other than homiletical. He writes, again about *Carnal Israel*,

[I]t may be good Jewish practice to reread texts in this way – to turn misogynistic texts on their head and make them serve late twentieth-century Judaism. This is an old rabbinic model – it's called midrash – but it belongs in the sermons of synagogue Jews.⁸⁵

Wolfson similarly labeled such interpretation as midrashic eisegesis. But I am claiming that there is something real, in the historical and critical sense, to be found in this method.

Rereading and construction

I want to focus for a moment on the word "reread" as Visotzky has used it. The significance of the trope of "reading", both here and in reader-response theory, is that the reader is the center of meaning. For a long while now, reader-response theory and reader-centered criticism have turned traditional ideas about books upside down and focused our attention on the way texts have meaning to us. While this has opened up

similarly traces the redemptive interpretation of the oft-cited midrash about diminution of the moon and her ultimate restoration as a trope for equality of the feminine in Kabbalah. See also Daniel Abrams's *The Female Body of God in Kabbalistic Literature* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2004).

⁸⁵ "Intersexuality", 244.

many disciplines of academic discourse to literary or deconstructive ways of reading, it can also blur the boundaries between academics and advocacy.

Visotzky argues that what is good Jewish practice is by definition poor scholarly practice. This distinction was indeed one of the foundations of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, the so-called scientific study of Judaism, in the nineteenth century. However, the idea of reading and rereading – including for constructive or contemporary purposes – has already become an important part of scholarly discourse throughout the academy, and in most areas of Jewish Studies.⁸⁶

Reader-centered criticism can never replace history. By focusing on the act of reading, the interests of the reader and the text necessarily overlap in potentially corrosive ways: there is no firm line dividing misreading and rereading. However, a misreading may be transformed into an openly willful but humbly subjective rereading when it is done consciously and conscientiously, with clear acknowledgement of a text's historical context and place. Theology is an ideal arena in which to practice doing this kind of rereading.

A game that's real?

Is there a place then in Jewish Studies for books about rabbinic literature and Jewish theology that simultaneously address constructive and critical issues? The works that attend to rabbinic hermeneutics and multivocality, such as those mentioned in the notes here and above, were in their time mold-breaking. Each one advanced the notion of rabbinic text as literature without blurring the lines between literary and historical-cultural analysis. In *KAE*, I draw on all these methodologies. These works demonstrate that it is not necessary to exile literary and, I propose, constructive, that is, midrashic, methodologies from the academic study of rabbinic texts.

I have already been discussed two approaches in *KAE* taken to avoid the problem of muddy homiletics and muddy scholarship. First, homiletical readings have been distinguished and segregated from both

⁸⁶ Even in the arena of rabbinic texts, which is one of the more conservative areas of Jewish Studies, this trend was well-established by the 90's. The scholarly works cited above, *Rereading Talmud* and *Rereading the Rabbis*, along with *Carnal Israel* (subtitled *Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture*) and David Kraemer's *Reading the Rabbis: The Talmud as Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), revolve around this trope. Though the first three strive to separate their scholarly reading from the feminist interests that motivate them, there must always be "crossings" where the two aspects merge.

literary analysis and historical-critical analysis. Second, the process of identifying which texts are read is based on criteria that are independent of any theological frame of reference, in this case, independent of ecotheology. Texts that use the same terminology are presumed to be relevant, without regard for their theological content or point of view. This is especially true of the midrashic material examined in *KAE*. However, even the Kabbalistic material is chosen not because it fits a theological agenda, but because it extends and transforms the concept of *tselem Elohim* as it was articulated in the Midrash.

Nevertheless, the problems created when scholarship and advocacy overlap can never be entirely eliminated from constructive theology, nor can such theology become purely objective. As Tillich notes,

Since [historical, sociological and psychological] materials from the sources of systematic theology are used not as they appear in their historical, sociological or psychological setting but in terms of their significance for the systematic solution, they belong to the theological answer and do not constitute a section of their own.⁸⁷

While I have contrasted Christian and Jewish theology above, in this manner they are similar. One can attend to the setting of one's texts, whether that be in literary, redactional, historical or cultural terms. This attention can conform to any level of academic objectivity required. But ultimately, if we are reading theologically, we have a certain degree of latitude in our interpretation, because it belongs to a theological answer rather than a historical one.

Nonetheless, if one is able to separate the agendas of these varied methodologies sufficiently, then theology can become a tool for researching the history of texts, as well as vice versa. In fact, there are many *Wissenschaftlich* conclusions I draw in *KAE* that I was only able to limn because of the theological agenda that frames the book. One example would be the recognition that even though the goal of imitating God, *imitatio dei*, appears in the earliest texts, it is not associated with God's image, *tselem Elohim* or *imago dei*, outside of *Tanchuma* and texts we know to be of the Geonic period and later. (See *KAE*, pp.105-8.) I arrived at this conclusion as a result of my focus on deconstructing the modernist interpretation of *tselem Elohim*. But in noticing the late evolution of this association, one also derives evidence of the most hard-nosed *Wissenschaftlich* kind about the composition of *Tanchuma*, evidence that supports the claim that it is a later work.

⁸⁷ *Systematic Theology*, vol.1, 66.

Ultimately, even after the application of all the methods of positive historical scholarship, theology remains a language game that cannot refer to anything outside its own hermeneutic circle. It is not really about metaphysical truths any more than it is about history. But by the same token, as a language game one can apply to it all the scholarly tricks of textual reasoning and postmodern analysis. *KAE* is fundamentally about the language and terminology that frame theology, and only secondarily about beliefs. *KAE* explores the conditions necessary for the appearance of a certain set of ideas that are important to us now, using a much older set of linguistic tropes and precedents.

Is there a way out of this language game? Theodor Adorno remarks, “Taking literally what theology promises would be...barbarian...Yet if these messages [are] cleansed of all subject matter...their core remains empty – and so does religion.”⁸⁸ Since theologians are stuck between barbarity and emptiness, the way beyond language is a way that is beyond theology. As Ira Stone has written, “What is the purpose of theology? It is to bring about the disappearance of theology.”⁸⁹

What lies beyond the game of theology are the relationships we have as living beings with other living beings and with Being in the broader sense (i.e., Nature, the Earth, the more-than-human, or even, with divinity), relationships that may hold within themselves some revelation whose hermeneutical circle encompasses more than theology or language. *Kabbalah and Ecology: God’s Image in the More-Than-Human World* explores the conditions necessary to choose as freely as possible how we use the past and create the future. But it is because our relationships with all Life and all living beings matter, that such choices matter.

⁸⁸ *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1992), 399.

⁸⁹ *Seeking the Path to Life*, 106.

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