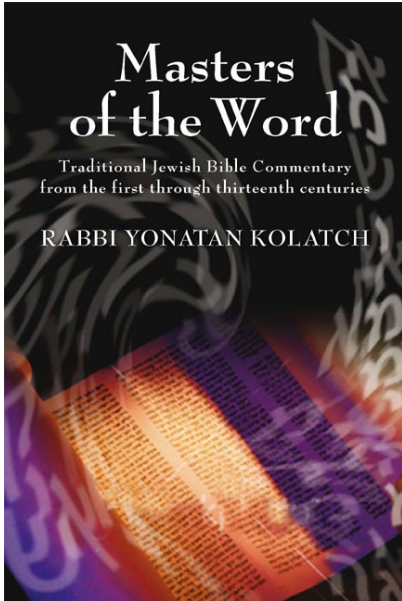


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**Kolatch, Rabbi Yonatan**

***Masters of the Word: Traditional Jewish Bible Commentary from the First through the Tenth Centuries***

Volume 1

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This is not a book that is normally reviewed in *RBL*, nor is it a work that most of its readers would likely encounter. Yet there is much in this book that will be of great interest to critical Bible scholars, and it can serve as an important reference work. *Masters of the Word*, written by an Orthodox Jewish rabbi, is a study of traditional Jewish biblical interpretation (*parshanut ha-Miqra*) in the first ten centuries C.E.. By “traditional,” the author intends the work to encompass only those forms of Judaism that are within the orbit of rabbinic Judaism (e.g., the “nontraditional” medieval Karaites are excluded). As a book written by an Orthodox rabbi, the author likewise maintains absolute fidelity to rabbinic doctrine and traditional approaches to the Bible fostered in medieval rabbinic culture and further cultivated in modern Orthodox Judaism. Thus, this work rejects the entirety of modern biblical criticism (see 23–25) and indeed much of the rubrics of modern historical criticism in general. The divine origin and inerrancy of the Bible is constantly reaffirmed, with an almost identical reverence assigned to rabbinic literature and the classical rabbis. The historical narratives of rabbinic literature are credulously accepted as authentic and woven into the historical framework that Kolatch employs.

This study seeks to illuminate the goals and techniques of various forms of Jewish biblical exegesis in the first millennium C.E. and the historical and social context of the individuals

and groups engaged in this interpretive activity. After an introductory chapter describing the general enterprise of biblical interpretation, six chapters profile individual examples: classical rabbinic literature; Targum; Zohar and Kabbalah; Geonim (R. Saadia Gaon); Spanish Linguists (Menaḥem ibn Saruk, Dunash ibn Labrat, Yehudah ibn Ḥayyuj, and Yonah ibn Janah); and the Masoretes. Each chapter (excluding the first) contains three sections. The first (“life and times”) provides basic historical background. The second section (“commentary”) outlines the exegetical techniques and interpretive goals for each individual or group. The final part (“selections”) offers a selection of annotated textual examples (Hebrew/Aramaic with English translations). The selections are arranged so that each chapter corresponds with the weekly lectionary readings from the Torah (*parshiyot*). Kolatch intends this to be the first in the series of books following the same format (the table of contents lists the projected chapters for volume 2, which will treat medieval exegetes in Western Europe).

Chapter 1 provides a basic introduction to the enterprise of Jewish biblical interpretation. This chapter exemplifies many of the strengths of this work. The bulk of the chapter is devoted to a summary of the various types of exegetical exigencies presented by the biblical text. Kolatch identifies the many issues of narrative, structure, language, orthography, theology, and law that motivated the interpretive activities of the exegetes under consideration. In doing so, he provides carefully chosen examples that illustrate well the principles being discussed. In this chapter, he further discusses (also with illustrative examples) the various interpretive methods adopted by different exegetes, focusing in particular on the methods of *peshat* (straightforward) interpretation versus *derash* (derived) interpretation as well as the additional methods of *remez* (allusion) and *sod* (esoteric). Since this chapter is intended as an introduction to the projected multivolume study, it is not limited to the particular exegetes under analysis in this volume. Indeed, this chapter ably displays Kolatch’s vast erudition in both classical and medieval rabbinic literature.

Chapter 2 focuses on the mass of biblical interpretation found in classical rabbinic literature. Following the general format, Kolatch first provides a basic historical overview of the rabbinic period followed by a synthetic unit on the goals and techniques of rabbinic exegesis. The latter section of the chapter is one of the strongest in the entire book. In a very readable and understandable way, Kolatch introduces the rabbinic idea of a Dual Torah, the categories of *halakhah* and *haggadah*, and rabbinic hermeneutical rules and interpretive principles. Well-chosen examples accompany these explanations. One additional component that would have added to the value of this chapter, however, is a more detailed description of the different texts found in the vast corpus of rabbinic literature and their location in the world of rabbinic biblical exegesis (see 84–85).

Chapter 3 focuses on the Aramaic Targums. More specifically, Kolatch concentrates on Targum Onqelos and the so-called Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on the Pentateuch. Passing references are made to the Palestinian Targums, although no significant discussion is found. The bulk of the chapter is devoted to Targum Onqelos, with a much smaller section treating Pseudo-Jonathan. Kolatch discusses many of the general questions often found in chapters on Targum: the identity of Onqelos and origins of Targum Onqelos, the role of Targum Onqelos in rabbinic Judaism, the provenance and date of Pseudo-Jonathan, and the translation technique of the Targums.

Chapter 4 will seem oddly out of place to nearly all critical scholars. It treats the Zohar and kabbalistic exegesis. Here Kolatch is following the traditional ascription of authorship of the Zohar to the second century rabbinic sage R. Shimon b. Yoḥai (see discussion on 233–35). Modern critical scholarship, however, has demonstrated that the Zohar is a product of medieval Spain and that its exegetical models reflect this later context. As such, readers would be better served by a historical sketch of twelfth-thirteenth-century Spain rather the profile of R. Shimon b. Yoḥai and second-century Palestine that opens this chapter. The remainder of the chapter provides a general introduction to Jewish mysticism and its study and the Zohar. The general discussion of the Zohar and the annotated selections, however, take much for granted and are inconsistent with the remainder of the book, which is generally accessible to those with no previous knowledge. For example, the kabbalistic idea of the *sephirot* (divine emanations) is introduced without any substantial explanation (43 n. 86, 245). This concept, however, serves as the starting point for much of the Zohar’s symbolic interpretation of the Bible, and indeed Kolatch freely discusses *sephirotic* symbolism in the “selections” section.

The final three chapters contain well-formulated descriptions of exegetical technique and well-chosen illustrative examples. For these chapters, however, Kolatch is far more successful in also situating the literary activities of these individuals in a social and historical context. For example, in addition to treating the general questions regarding biblical interpretation by Saadia Gaon (ch. 5), he likewise discusses the importance of the rise of Islam and the Karaite challenge for understanding his writings. Similarly, the discussion of the Spanish linguists (ch. 7) locates their philological activity in a larger climate of heightened Hebrew literary activity in Spain. One rarely thinks of the Spanish linguists or the Masorettes (ch. 8) as exegetes. Kolatch, however, mines their respective philological and textual writings in order to identify examples of biblical exegesis.

This book is clearly written with a traditional Jewish audience in mind who subscribe to the ideological foundations that inform this work. In this regard, it successfully speaks to its target audience and provides an erudite study of Jewish biblical interpretation (a welcome phenomenon considering the general disinterest in intensive Bible study in

Orthodox Judaism). Biblical scholars, however, will certainly be troubled by the unabashedly uncritical methodology adopted. A case in point is the discussion of the authorship of the Zohar. Kolatch begins by citing the several arguments advanced already in the Middle Ages against the second-century dating (modern scholarly arguments are only alluded to but never discussed). The ascription to R. Shimon b. Yoḥai is affirmed merely based on the extensive list of medieval and modern rabbis who support this view. Rabbinic authority suffices without critical discussion of the merits of the arguments. A similar point is Kolatch's sketchy use of modern scholarship. In general, Kolatch's primary conversation partners are traditional rabbinic scholars. While he does draw upon much important modern scholarly literature, there is a great inconsistency. For example, how can one discuss early Jewish biblical interpretation without engaging with the work of James Kugel or the Zohar and Kabbalah with only a passing reference to Gershom Scholem?

Notwithstanding the stated reservations, this book has much to offer the academic community. Biblical scholars and students interested in the afterlife of the Bible as found in "traditional" Judaism will find here a vast repository of primary sources that illuminate this world. The impressive command of the primary sources that marks this book exemplifies the erudition found among modern rabbinic scholarship. Further volumes in this series will no doubt offer more insight into even lesser-known areas of medieval biblical interpretation.