Introduction

Interpreting the Bible through a Bent Lens

DAVID SHNEER

It is the world's longest running rerun, the best-selling book of all time, the foundational text of Western culture and the core of the Jewish religion. The Hebrew Bible, sacred to nearly half the world's population, infuses the myths, politics, literature, art, and daily language of billions of people across the globe.

Jews throughout the world gather in synagogues every Saturday, as they have been doing for two thousand years, to read together from the Hebrew Bible, what most Christians call the Old Testament. Indeed, reading the Hebrew Bible is one of the longest continuously running ritualized reading and performance of text in history. The Bible, known in some circles as “torah she-bikhtav,” the learning that was written down, is traditionally considered to be the word of God as transmitted to Moses on Mount Sinai, making it one of the world's oldest divine texts.

Within the Hebrew Bible, however, there is a hierarchy of holiness. Jews divide the Bible, or Tanakh, into three main sections that more or less correspond to chronology. The last section is called “Writings,” and contains such texts as the Book of Esther, read every Purim; the Book of Ruth, the classic text of Shavuot; and Psalms, traditionally understood to have been penned by the great kings of Israel. Preceding the Writings in both age and standardized textual order are the Prophets, the books whose stories form the main historical narrative of ancient Israel. From the judge Joshua to kings David and Solomon, this section of the Bible contains historical narratives and moralistic stories that continue to inform modern Jewish thought and Western culture generally.

Moving back in time, and higher in the hierarchy of authority, comes the Torah, known variously as the Five Books of Moses, the Chumash, or in Greek, the Pentateuch. These first five books of the Bible are the most well known, the most interpreted, the most often retold, and the most important texts in Judaism. Although all Judaism's sacred texts are open to commentary and analysis, none is more interpreted than the Torah.

To this day, the Torah is considered so divine that its material form, a scroll of parchment known as a sefer Torah that replicates the structure of ancient scrolls, and a particular version of the Biblical text (known as the Masoretic Text, preserved by
the early Masoretes or rabbis concerned with fixing a particular text) has been passed down almost miraculously with the utmost care in copying. Every letter of every part of the text is precise, perfect, and most important intended. There are no extra words, nothing missing, with every letter, every space, every repetition or seeming inconsistency thus inviting interpretation, or exegesis.

The Torah has been interpreted and reinterpreted ever since it was canonized in the 6th to 5th centuries BCE. After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, Jews were scattered throughout the Mediterranean and away from their physical center, the Temple in Jerusalem. Without a physical home in which a class of priests could manage Jews’ relationship to the divine, the text became the primary route to holiness. Rabbis in the first five centuries after the expulsion crafted a new religion, now known as Rabbinic Judaism, that used the Torah and other holy texts as the basis for laws and customs that would govern Jews’ lives wherever they lived. Temple sacrifice and elaborate priestly rituals gave way to prayer, synagogue services, and textual interpretation.

That early heyday of Torah interpretation was so central to the future of Judaism that the interpretations and commentaries of these early sages were themselves canonized as the Talmud, the foundational text of Rabbinic Judaism. Such rabbinic interpretation of the text was so important that it earned the name Torah she b’al peh, the Oral Torah, thus elevating these rabbinic debates to a status just below the original Torah she'bikhtav. Although this moment of Torah exegesis became canonized, it did not mean the end of Torah interpretation. In fact, interpreting the interpretations of the interpretations became the primary way Jews adapted their rituals and customs in different times and different places.

The system of textual interpretation that formed the basis of Rabbinic Judaism reigned supreme for a thousand years in Europe and in much of the world. But modernity, the Enlightenment, and the rise of reason did a funny thing to the text. The text that was Torah she'bikhtav, the word of God as given to Moses, was suddenly put under a new microscope, as potentially just another text. If the divinity of the Torah, with its parchment scrolls, volupitious drapery, and silver adornments, all stored in a special closet called an aron kodesh, was suddenly under question (okay, not so suddenly . . . the rise of reason and secularization took a long time), then what role would the Torah have? Should it form the basis of a modern, rational Judaism? Should Jews continue living by laws, based on interpretations of interpretations of interpretations of this book, if the book itself was no longer regarded by all Jews as the direct word of God?

Modern Jews have been wrestling with these questions for a few hundred years. And despite the rise of Reason, of seeing this book as just a fine piece of literature (as many contemporary scholars consider the Torah), Jews still read this text ritualistically around the world every Saturday of every week of every year. The text still has power, and Jews, those who continue to live their lives according to the tenets of Jewish law—known as halacha—as well as those who do not, continue to interpret the text.

If rabbis were the only Jews authorized to produce commentary on the Torah through the period of Rabbinic Judaism, in the modern era, when the printing press,
vernacularization, and mass education for people of all genders democratized access to the Torah, a much wider range of people have the power to interpret the text. Rabbis still have moral and legal authority in many communities, but in the past one hundred years, other groups of people have claimed the right to interpretation and commentary. Most notably, scholars—people who are trained in a rationalist approach to text and who do not interpret the text for the sake of generating new laws and customs but for the sake of knowledge and a better understanding of the text—have become some of the most important interpreters of the Torah. The scholarly study of the Bible in general, and the Torah in particular, goes back to the mid-nineteenth century, when Protestant theologians began seeing the book as one needing to be situated in a particular historical context—the ancient Near East. Jewish scholars, especially in Germany, applied modern history and textual analysis to put the book that held so much sway over Jewish life into its Jewish context.

Some scholars went as far as to identify Biblical “authorship,” with the idea, commonly known as the Documentary Hypothesis, that different parts of the Torah were penned at different times by different groups of people and later assembled into a coherent whole by a Redactor, a single editor or group of editors. The J, or Jahwist, source was theoretically written around 950 BCE. The E, or Elohist, source was written around 850 BCE. The D, or Deuteronomist, source was written around the 7th century BCE. And the P, or Priestly, source written around the 6th century BCE. This idea is a far cry from Torah she-bikhtav as given directly by God to Moses at Mount Sinai.

But all this close scrutiny of the text presumes that the Torah, even if its divinity comes under assault, is still central, foundational in fact, as a text, myth, and history for Jews, Christians, and Muslims and for much of Western society. God’s word or not, as a literary text it still holds sway. It holds so much sway that the oldest fragments of a Torah text, some of which are now called the Dead Sea Scrolls, draw millions of visitors whenever they are exhibited. Clearly, even in the age of Reason, this book is not just another book. It is ritualized, sanctified, and elevated, even for many of those who see themselves as secular.

There was a time, under the influence of modernity, when some Jews and Christians tried to dismiss the power of the Bible. They argued that if the Hebrew Bible is just another old book, it should hold no more power over the laws and customs of a secular society than any other canonical old book, such as the Epic of Gilgamesh or ancient Greek myths. It could be read, enjoyed, and performed, but frankly, these critics argued, given its role in the creation of rigid and sometimes archaic religious systems, modern society would be better off if the Bible were relegated to the past. The impulse to take the Bible off its physical and metaphoric pedestal often came from liberal and progressive activists, who saw religion as an impediment to social justice in the modern era. Read in this way, the Bible is a text narrating the story of a vengeful God, of violent wars and conquests, proclaiming arcane laws and customs that frankly have little to do with modern life.

The origins of this impulse to set the Bible aside began during the Enlightenment with thinkers such as Baruch Spinoza, who questioned revelation, and Voltaire, who saw all forms of religious ritual as superstition. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels
took the idea even further, with Marx calling religion the “opiate of the masses,” for what he considered its ability to blind people to their suffering in this world with the hope of redemption in the next—thus dulling what he felt was their impulse toward revolution.

From the late 19th century onward, Jewish intellectuals across the ideological spectrum, including socialists, Zionists, anarchists, liberal democrats, and others, saw a clear correlation between a decline in the power of religion and an improvement in society. Religion, in this view, was oppressive of the working classes, women, minorities, gays and lesbians, and the poor and should be cast off as society becomes more just. This powerful link between social justice and secularism dominated the 20th century and still largely holds sway over American and European societies today and is also powerful in modern Israel.

But a countertrend attempted to link religion and social justice, especially in the legacies of Liberation Theology and of Christian leaders, such as the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, and Jewish ones, such as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. These leaders saw social justice and religion as intimately linked and the Bible as a text of liberation, not oppression. Through their and other religious leaders’ examples, progressives, especially in the United States, began to see new ways of approaching the ancient texts.

As the foreword by Judith Plaskow so eloquently articulates, feminism sparked the most powerful form of this textual revolution. Beginning most visibly in the 1960s, although relying on a much older tradition of feminist activism in Judaism, women challenged their exclusion from the religion, from the text, and from positions of authority. Women rabbis began to be ordained in each of the major American Jewish denominations, except for Orthodox Judaism, which maintains the traditional restriction on women’s access to the rabbinate. Putting feminism in service of revolutionizing religion in general, and Judaism in particular, has had profound effects. For the first time in history, the largest Jewish denomination in the United States, the Reform movement, has more women studying for the rabbinate than men; women now hold positions of senior authority in the Conservative movement, the Reconstructionist movement, and in many areas of the Jewish world.

Feminism’s challenge to Judaism meant women’s access not only to Judaism, text, and power but also to the way Judaism was interpreted. A feminist Judaism meant broadening the access points into Judaism. It meant giving education, and therefore power, to more people over their Judaism. Feminist Judaism also contributed to the individualizing of Jewish practices and the notion that one can create new rituals to honor contemporary realities.

Torah Queeries, then, follows a history of textual interpretation that is more than two thousand years old. Reading Torah through a bent lens opens up new insights and allows the text to liberate rather than oppress. As might seem obvious to many readers, lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and for other reasons transgender and intersex people have seen the text as a tool of oppression for as long as the text has been foundational to Western society. In Christianity, the notorious passage in Leviticus, “Thou shalt not lie with a man as with a woman,” at least as the Jewish Publication Society
translates it, has led priests, pastors, ministers, and other religious leaders to exclude gays, lesbians, and bisexuals from their communities—dismissing them as “sinners,” excommunicating them, or in the most extreme cases, killing them. In some Muslim societies, because of the way these and other holy texts are read, homosexuality is still punishable by death.

In the Jewish tradition, those same Biblical passages function as the basis for a system of religious law that absolutely forbids homosexual relations, at least in the Orthodox, or traditional, view. In most traditional Jewish communities, homosexuality is anathema and leads to social opprobrium, making Judaism very much like its Christian and Muslim counterparts. Despite the stringency with which the traditional Jewish law regards gay sex, Jewish leaders rarely escalate to the same level of public vitriol seen among some of the more conservative Christian denominations. The Reverend Fred Phelps may be an admittedly extreme case and not representative of most evangelical or “fundamentalist” Christians, but regardless, his extremely public and violent “God hates fags” rhetoric is hard to imagine coming from a rabbi. The classic sermonic denunciations of gays by Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson have no real Jewish counterparts. The closest example is the antigay rants of insular ultra-Orthodox leaders in Israel. However, it is rare to hear even the most conservative Jewish voice calling for the death of Jewish gays and lesbians. Perhaps in a post-Holocaust Jewish world, calling for death for any Jew seems anathema, unless of course it comes to the politics of Israel.

This is not to trumpet Jewish triumphalism but is instead to suggest that Judaism has textual interpretive traditions built into it that make Torah Queeries not just possible but central to conversations in Judaism writ large. There have been other queer commentaries on the Bible, written within Christian contexts or from an officially interfaith perspective that included a handful of Jewish voices.1 But Torah Queeries pushes in two directions to make this project unique. The editors have sought out the voices of transgender writers as well as scholars of gender to suggest that queer readings are not just about making space for gay and lesbian Jews. Some readers may consider the inclusion of so many trans voices radical, but in fact, one of the things these essays show is how old the notion of a complicated gender system is. In addition, Torah Queeries includes the voices of some of the most central figures in contemporary American Judaism today, from the rector of one of Conservative Judaism’s seminaries to the president and dean of the Reform Movement’s seminary and the president of a national rabbinical association, highlighting, in some ways, just how central the topic of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) inclusion has become, at least in the American Jewish world.

In the process of gathering the writers for this book, more than one colleague suggested that perhaps all the contributors should be LGBT rabbis, implying that the lived experience of a committed gay or trans Jew is the most fruitful lens with which to approach such a project. Instead, a significant percentage of the contributors to this volume identify as “straight allies,” and several do not personally identify as Jews but work within the scholarly circles of Judaic studies or Biblical studies. As much as the editors may celebrate the diversity of this book’s contributors, that very diversity
highlights the ways in which the topics of LGBT inclusion, gender, and sexuality have become frames of reference for all people, regardless of their particular identity politics or subject position.

On the American religious scene, established Jewish communities are wrestling with the issue of sexuality and homosexuality in fairly radical ways. The two largest Jewish denominations, Reform and Conservative Judaism, now ordain gays and lesbians as rabbis and allow their rabbis to perform same-sex weddings; and even Modern Orthodox communities in the United States are starting discreetly to make space for gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews. The equivalent in Christianity would be if the Episcopalian, Methodist, and Presbyterian denominations began freely ordaining and sanctifying the unions of gays and lesbians. Unlike the Episcopal Church, for example, there has been no official schism in Conservative Judaism, whose American rabbinic seminaries just opened their doors to openly gay and lesbian Jews in 2006.

What all this means is that actual gay and lesbian Jews have had more access to Judaism and the ability to live Jewishly rich lives for a longer period of time than members of other religions. There have been openly queer rabbis for thirty years. For this fact alone, Jews have had pressing reason to reread the Bible to make space for gay, lesbian, and bisexual Jews. This has been a social-justice issue that followed on the heels of the feminist revolution in Judaism, and the work has been profound.

More recently, transgender Jews have been creating space for more diverse expressions of gender in Judaism, and this effort has forced a reexamination not only of the Bible but of the history of Judaism’s relationship to gender. Judaism has historically had a very strict gender system, prescribing roles for men and women, sex segregating Jewish public life, and at times even sex segregating Jewish private life, as in the laws of niddah (laws of ritual purity focused on women and the family). But just as feminism called for a reexamination of the gender system in Judaism, more recently transgender Jews have called for a reexamination of the very notion of fixed gender. One of the things found by people interested in complicating notions of gender is that the rabbis of the Talmud, so often brushed off as those who created the strict gender system in the first place, had a more complicated understanding of gender than we moderns do.

Reading the Bible through a bent lens, then, puts the nearly fifty authors in this book in a very long line of illustrious readers and interpreters of the Bible. In fact, most of the contributors to Torah Queeries rely on the most authoritative rabbinic source to make their point about queering the text. Names such as the Rambam (Maimonides), Ibn Ezra, and Rashi get dropped in nearly every essay. By wrestling with ancient text to illuminate modern concerns, these authors are in fact engaging in something incredibly traditional. Each generation has had its particular lens through which to look at the text. The very fact of this book suggests that people interested in things queer nonetheless have a deep investment in text and tradition, and in the way they are used to shape contemporary society.

But reading the Torah queerly also means doing something not very traditional. This book brings together scholars who are well trained in reading the Bible, like the traditional rabbinic elite, with scholars who are trained to read the Bible in very
different ways. For some of these scholarly voices, the goal is to excavate the meaning of the Bible in its ancient Near Eastern context, rather than as it has been understood since medieval or in modern times. Others take the same historical approach for the Talmudic period and ask, “What did the rabbis, in their world, mean by this text?” These questions lead to some surprising conclusions.

And this book includes the voices of social-change activists, who fifty years ago would have probably run screaming from a project that asked them to wrestle with the “Holy Book” that, for many activists, has been the source of pain and oppression, not liberation. These writers focus on issues of social justice, rethinking community, and understanding power, and they are using rereadings of the Torah to make new commentaries on contemporary social reality. *Torah Queeries* brings all these voices together in one volume.

Readers have different kinds of “bent lenses” through which they read the text, and they understand the word *queer* in different ways. Some are highly trained in a body of literature known as “queer theory” that challenges norms, upends hierarchies, and trains people to read against the grain. These kinds of readings break down boundaries and make everything more complicated than it might seem. Others do not have this literary background and instead bring training as Bible interpreters to the table and read the text looking for ways to honor the lives of gays and lesbians. For these readers, boundaries may be useful, but they should be broadened to include gays and lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people. For others, the text is a rallying cry to social action, and for others, the story of the Israelites is one of the world’s most ancient coming-out stories, considering how many Biblical characters conceal parts of their identities to survive in a sometimes hostile world and the forty years of wandering in the desert before reaching the Promised Land. Because of this diversity of lenses, the authors often do not agree on how to read a particular portion. The famous story of Jacob and Esau, for example, gets two quite different queer readings.

Reading the Bible through a bent lens means, of course, rereading the texts that have traditionally been used to exclude queer people, such as the passages in Leviticus about men lying with other men or the Sodom and Gomorrah story, from which comes the modern word *sodomy*. Based on the two-thousand-year history of Jewish textual interpretation, the authors provide radical rereadings of these central texts. The authors also wrestle with seemingly mundane sections of the Torah, such as the detailed recounting of the building of the *Mishkan*, the holy dwelling place of God. The flamboyance of the *Mishkan’s* decoration—gold, precious stones, velvet—is read on the background of queer culture’s flamboyance to render queer fabulousness holy, rather than simply campy. Others have taken on the main characters of the Biblical narrative—from Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel to the “queerest character in the whole Torah,” Joseph—to show how a queer reading illuminates the personalities of these well-known characters.

Like the Biblical characters being reread, the authors also come from different backgrounds, have diverse identities—men, women, and trans—and identify as straight, gay, queer, gender queer, lesbian, bi, and other; some write in first person, others in a very scholarly third person. Most are deeply learned in Jewish tradition
and Jewish text, but what they all bring to the table are unique ways of reading and interpreting that allow the Torah to speak to modern concerns. Interpretation means looking back at texts written thousands of years ago and simultaneously looking forward to new ways of seeing.

The book is organized in the way that Jews traditionally read Torah. Each week, one portion, or parasha, is read publicly from the bimah (stage) in the synagogue. On certain weeks, two portions are read (in order to account for the complexity of the ancient Jewish lunar calendar), and on Jewish holidays different texts are brought to the table. The book provides the reader with a drash, or interpretive reading, of each and every portion and most major holiday readings.

This book is a labor of intellectual rigor, social justice, and personal passions. The contributors have donated their time and intellect to this project, and the editors are putting any proceeds raised from the book back into the Torah Queeries project, launched online in 2006 by Jewish Mosaic: The National Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity. The editors thank all the contributors for their wisdom and time and the staff at Jewish Mosaic, especially Katie Roy and Noach Dzmura, who have built Torah Queeries from an online Torah-interpretation initiative into an important book. The editors are appreciative of the support of Congregation Bet Haverim and of Laurie D. Price for her assistance. Thanks to Judith Plaskow and Alison Schofield, two Bible scholars who read and critiqued the manuscript, to Michael Lee, the editors’ research assistant and project manager, who saw the book through its final stages and to Shane Fountain for his proofreading of the final manuscript. The editors are grateful to Moshe ben Chacon for helping imagine and popularize the original online project and also for translating many of the Web essays into Spanish. The editors are especially thankful to the Kayden Fund at the University of Colorado at Boulder for supporting the publication of the book and to Jennifer Hammer, editor at New York University Press, who had the vision to see the transformative nature of this project and agreed to publish it as the beautiful book you hold in your hands.

**Note**

1. Some volumes that include substantive commentary on the Hebrew Bible or feature one or more contributions from Jewish studies scholars include *The Queer Bible Commentary*, edited by Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache (London: SCM, 2006); *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*, edited by Ken Stone (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2001); *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible*, edited by Robert E. Goss and Mona West (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2000); and Thomas W. Jennings, Jr., *Jacob’s Wound: Homoerotic Narrative in the Literature of Ancient Israel* (New York: Continuum, 2005).