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THESES OF DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

REFLECTIONS ON ANCIENT INTERPRETATIONS OF THE FALL AND THE SUFFERING MESSIAH – THE QUESTION OF EXEGETICAL INTERACTIONS IN LIGHT OF GENESIS 3 AND ISAIAH 53

Dissertatio ad Doctoratum

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"The internal unity of the Church's Bible, which comprises the Old and New Testaments, was a central theme in the theology of the Church Fathers." Building on the insights of the Pontifical Biblical Commission's document *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (2002), this doctoral thesis intends to explore the multifaceted relationship between the *Old* and *New Testaments*, the *Hebrew Bible* and the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the rabbinic Judaism and the patristic literature. It seeks to shed light on the historical processes of exegetical reception and the possible interactions surrounding a specific biblical passage. As Pope John Paul II emphasized in his address in Mainz (1980), "The encounter between the people of God of the Old Covenant, which has never been revoked by God (cf. Rom 11:29), and that of the New Covenant is also an *internal* dialogue in our Church, similar to that between the first and second part of its Bible." In light of the shared roots and common eschatological horizon, the Church recognizes the Jewish people as "elder brothers." However, it is equally important to acknowledge the dynamic and reciprocal nature of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. This interaction was not one-sided; rather, it involved mutual influence and theological exchange. This reciprocal dimension, particularly the influence of early Christian interpretation on rabbinic exegesis, has received comparatively little scholarly attention. This dissertation aims to fill this gap by demonstrating that early Christian hermeneutical developments contributed to shaping certain aspects of rabbinic interpretive tradition (even if only with a "pre-emptive" way of exegesis), thereby highlighting the dynamic and dialogical evolution of both religious traditions.

As Louis Ginzberg – one of the foremost scholars in the study of Jewish–Christian exegetical relations – has observed, "in the rich literature of the Church Fathers many a Jewish legend lies embalmed which one would seek in vain in Jewish books".[1] This observation underscores the substantial common heritage shared by Judaism and Christianity. Over the past century, a variety of scholarly methodologies have been developed and refined to investigate the complex dynamics between rabbinic and patristic exegesis in antiquity – a formative period that shaped the theological and interpretive identities of both traditions. These approaches aim at assessing the likelihood, nature, and extent of connections – whether real, literary, or polemical – between Jewish and Christian exegetes. Centred on the *Hebrew Bible* and the *Old Testament* as a shared scriptural *corpus*, recent scholarship has increasingly focused on the possibility of exegetical encounters in late antiquity, as reflected in works such as the *Jewish and Christian Perspectives*

[1] GINZBERG, L., *The Legends of the Jews I. Bible Times and Characters from the Creation to Jacob*, The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia 1909, 4.

Series. This dissertation seeks to contribute to this field by identifying and analysing instances of potential interaction between rabbinic and early Christian interpretive traditions. It aims to address several key inquiries: To what extent did rabbinic and Christian exegetical ideas interact during the formative period of both religions? In what ways do these interactions illuminate the historical development of rabbinic and Christian hermeneutics? Can the notion of an 'exegetical encounter' be substantiated through textual evidence? And what are the broader implications of such encounters for understanding the so-called 'parting of the ways' and the enduring entanglement of the two traditions in this pivotal period?

It is indeed valuable to emphasize the intertextual relationship between rabbinic and patristic exegetical traditions, and the methodological significance of interpreting each within the context of the other in order to better grasp the nature of their interactions. As Günter Stemberger has observed, "possible reactions of rabbinic exegesis still need further exploration, but it is already very clear that it was mainly the Christian side which learned from and reacted to the Jewish one".[2] As previously noted, although considerable scholarly focus has been devoted to Christian authors and their interactions with Judaism, the issue of possible rabbinic responses to early Christian polemics and theological challenges remains comparatively underexplored. References to Jews, Jewish practices, and both actual and literary encounters are common within ancient Christian literature. Many Christian writers report disputes or dialogues with Jewish interlocutors and engage directly with Jewish beliefs and customs. Notably, entire treatises are devoted to theological argumentation against what is identified as "Judaism," as exemplified by the *adversus Iudaeos* literature. Particular attention has been given in scholarly research to Church Fathers such as Justin Martyr, Origen of Alexandria, and St. Jerome, who either interacted with Jewish individuals or traditions or explicitly referenced such engagements in their writings. Within this context, the present study defines "exegetical encounter" as an instance of interaction between rabbinic and Christian interpretations – manifested in a specific exegetical tradition – that suggests awareness of, or response to, interpretive positions articulated in the writings of the other tradition. This working definition naturally raises questions concerning the challenges of comparing traditions across diverse geographic settings and temporal contexts, particularly given the well-known complexities surrounding the dating of rabbinic sources.

[2] STEMBERGER, G., *Exegetical Contacts between Christians and Jews in the Roman Empire*, in SÆBØ, M. (ed.), *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. The History of Its Interpretation I.*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1996, 575.

Furthermore, the concept of *pre-emptive exegesis*, as introduced by Philip S. Alexander and employed in this study,[3] refers to the idea that ancient (Jewish) texts were often shaped by an awareness of potential interpretive challenges and thus embedded interpretive strategies aimed at guiding and constraining possible readings. These strategies, expressed through hermeneutical emphasis or *relecture*, functioned to preclude certain interpretations deemed problematic or divergent. In this way, exegetical traditions sought to anticipate and forestall "misreadings" or "misinterpretation" by shaping the interpretive framework.

From antiquity onward, both the Christian Church and the synagogue have acknowledged the "same" *corpus* of sacred texts – the *Hebrew Bible* (*Tanakh*) or the *Old Testament* – as the divinely inspired Word of God. This shared Scripture represents a potential source of unity and the foundation of a common Judeo–Christian tradition. Yet, paradoxically, it also became a site of deep division and polemical contestation, as divergent theological frameworks yielded substantially different interpretations of the same texts. A key argument of the present study is that both rabbinic and patristic interpretations – often conveyed through translations that were themselves interpretive acts, thus serving as condensed forms of exegesis with a discernible "theological profile" – tended this divergence by developing hermeneutical approaches that implicitly or explicitly excluded the interpretive legitimacy of the other tradition. This does not, however, suggest that themes such as the universality of the Fall or messianic interpretations of the Suffering Servant were absent from pre-Christian Jewish thought. On the contrary, the hypothesis advanced here posits that key rabbinic interpretations of Scripture were, at times, reconfigured in conscious or subconscious response to emerging Christian readings, particularly those of a Christological nature. Thus, the possibility of a "pre-emptive" exegetical interaction – where rabbinic exegesis intentionally counters or precludes Christian interpretive claims – is both plausible and significant for understanding the dialogical and polemical dynamics of late antique scriptural interpretation.

This dissertation aims to explore the potential interactions between rabbinic and patristic traditions of biblical exegesis. While several valuable contributions have emerged from the perspective of dialectical hermeneutics, comprehensive and systematic analyses of exegetical interaction remain relatively scarce. Apart from the noteworthy studies by Hanneke Reuling[4]

[3] Cf. ALEXANDER, P. S., *Pre-Emptive Exegesis: Genesis Rabba's Reading of the Story of Creation*, in *Journal of Jewish Studies* 43 (1992), 230–244.
[4] Cf. REULING, H., *After Eden. Church Fathers and Rabbis on Genesis 3:16-21* (*Jewish and Christian Perspectives Series* 10), Brill, Leiden-Boston 2006.

and, more recently, Matthias Morgenstern[5] – whose work was published during the present research – there is, to the best of my knowledge, a lack of comprehensive monographic treatments specifically examining the possible impact of patristic Christian exegesis on rabbinic hermeneutical developments. Accordingly, the present study seeks to explore the possibility of Christian influence on Jewish interpretation, proposing that certain strands of rabbinic biblical interpretation presuppose, and potentially respond to, patristic hermeneutical frameworks. This hypothesis positions rabbinic literature within a broader exegetical dialogue, in which the interpretive strategies of the Church Fathers played a formative, though often unacknowledged (implicit), role.

This study aims at exploring the intertextual dynamics between rabbinic and patristic exegetical traditions through a close examination of selected biblical texts. The first chapter focuses on *Genesis* 3, analysing the interpretation of the Fall and its consequences as it was developed in the history of reception. The analysis traces how ancient translations influenced interpretive trajectories: in rabbinic Judaism, primarily through the concept of *teshuvah* (repentance and spiritual renewal), and in patristic theology through the formulation of the doctrine of original sin. The second chapter turns to *Isaiah* 52–53, the so-called fourth Servant Song, and investigates the exegetical interaction surrounding the figure of the suffering and atoning Messiah. While Christianity clearly identified this passage with the death of Jesus Christ, the chapter asks whether, and in what form, this messianic figure emerged in Jewish interpretation.

Each chapter begins with an exposition of the biblical passage and its literary-historical context, followed by an analysis of the key ancient translations (LXX, Aquila, Symmachus, Theodotion, and the Targums). The study then moves to examine possible points of exegetical interaction. In the first chapter, this is undertaken through a comparative analysis of *Genesis Rabbah*, the writings of Didymus the Blind, and John Chrysostom, with special attention to the theological concept of *felix culpa* considering both rabbinic and patristic anthropologies. The second chapter explores interpretations of the suffering Messiah in the *Targum Isaiah* and related midrashic texts, comparing these with Christological readings found in the New Testament and the Church Fathers.

[5] Cf. MORGENSTERN, M., *Die große Genesis-Dichtung. Juden und Christen im Gespräch über das erste Buch der Bibel im Midrash Genesis Rabba*, Brill Schöningh, Paderborn 2022.

Both chapters conclude with a focused analysis of St. Jerome's commentaries: *Hebrew Questions on Genesis* in the first chapter and his *Commentary on Isaiah* in the second. Special attention is given to Jerome's interaction with the *Veritas Hebraica*, providing a philological and theological reassessment of its significance in the work of the *vir trilinguis*. Jerome's exegetical work synthesizes Hebrew, Greek, and Latin traditions while demonstrating a nuanced awareness of both rabbinic and early Christian sources – thus constituting a significant, though often overlooked, site of Jewish–Christian exegetical interaction. The concluding section of the dissertation seeks to address a significant lacuna in current scholarship: the absence of Jerome from discussions concerning the reciprocal interactions between rabbinic and patristic exegesis. By examining his interpretive strategies and theological commitments, the study aims to illuminate both the possibilities and limits of intertextual engagement in his work.

An appendix is included, providing the relevant textual variants of the biblical passages discussed (drawn from the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, LXX, later Greek translators such as Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion, as well as the *Vetus Latina*, Vulgate, and Targums). In addition, the appendix includes selections from the medieval anthology *Yalkut Shimoni*, which collects the rabbinic interpretations after each biblical verse and has only recently been subjected to scholarly translation and analysis. This compilation offers an expanded framework for comparing interpretations across traditions and time periods.

In summary, this dissertation has investigated the interrelationship between rabbinic and patristic exegesis through the reception history of two foundational biblical passages: *Genesis* 3 and *Isaiah* 52–53. By analysing interpretations of the Fall and the figure of the Suffering Servant, the study has illuminated the exegetical interplay between Jewish and Christian traditions, with particular focus on their underlying theological and polemical dimensions. With regard to *Genesis* 3, the research uncovered evidence of both direct and indirect intertextual engagement between patristic figures – such as Didymus the Blind and John Chrysostom – and rabbinic texts, notably *Genesis Rabbah*. This interaction appears to centre on key theological motifs, including *felix culpa* and human freedom, suggesting that certain rabbinic interpretations may be understood as anticipatory responses to emerging Christian theological formulations, especially those associated with Augustine.

In the study of *Isaiah* 52–53, a similar dynamic emerged. Contrary to earlier scholarship which denied the presence of messianic interpretation in pre-Christian Judaism, this thesis argues – based on textual evidence from the *Hebrew Bible*, Qumran, and midrashic literature –

that notions of a suffering, atoning Messiah were already present within early Jewish traditions. The analysis of the *Isaiah Targum* and homiletic midrashim such as *Pesikta Rabbati* revealed interpretive strategies that not only reflect an awareness of Christian claims but also reframe the Servant figure within a distinctly Jewish theological framework, suggesting a confident and deliberate response to Christian exegesis.

The second principal thesis of this dissertation concerns the exegetical work of St. Jerome, particularly his reassessment and application of the principle of *Veritas Hebraica*. Central to Jerome's hermeneutical approach was his recourse to the Hebrew text of Scripture – considered by him to be the *original* – which enabled a novel synthesis of Christian exegesis. This was realized through a new Latin translation (*iuxta Hebraeos*, or IH), as well as a judicious incorporation of rabbinic interpretations. Jerome's stated objective was to "to Latin ears the secrets of Hebrew scholarship and the recondite instruction of the teachers of the synagogue, at least that which agrees with Holy Scripture" (*semel proposui arcana eruditionis Hebraicae, et magistrorum synagogae reconditam disciplinam, eam dumtaxat, quae scripturis sanctis convenit, Latinis auribus prodere*).[6]

Building on the insights of Adam Kamesar[7] and Robert Hayward,[8] this study proposes that *Quaestiones Hebraicae in Genesim* (QHG) may be understood as an apologia for the "*recentiores*-rabbinic" philological methodology that undergirds the IH. This approach is not merely philological but is also deeply theological and exegetical. Through the QHG, Jerome presents a unique attempt to render a *corpus* of Hebrew teachings and traditions (*semel opusculum nostrum vel quaestionum hebraicarum vel traditionum congregatio est*[9]) accessible to the Christian Church as a new interpretative framework (*opus novum*). Significantly, Jerome does not adopt rabbinic interpretations uncritically. Rather, he consistently refers to the *traditio Hebraeorum* as the true (*uera*) and authoritative reading of Scripture, positing that both the Hebrew text and the Jewish exegetical tradition possess the capacity to disclose the *mysterium*, the *sacramentum*, and the anagogical dimensions inherent in the biblical narrative.

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[6] ADRIEAN, M. (ed.), *Hieronymus. Commentarii in prophetas minores II.* (CCSL 76), Brepols, Turnhout 1964, 796.
[7] Cf. KAMESAR, A., *Jerome, Greek Scholarship, and the Hebrew Bible. A Study of the* Quaestiones Hebraicae in Genesim, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1993.
[8] Cf. HAYWARD, C. T. R., *Jerome's Hebrew Questions on Genesis* (*Oxford Early Christian Studies*), Clarendon Press, Oxford 1995.
[9] Cf. LAGARDE, P. DE (ed.), *Hieronymi Quaestiones Hebraicae in Libro Geneseos*, Gorgias Press, Piscataway 2009, 24.

This thesis is further substantiated through an analysis of Jerome's *Commentary on Isaiah*, which reveals a crystallized and orthodox Christology. The commentary draws heavily on Eusebius of Caesarea, particularly his exegetical structure, while simultaneously offering a critical engagement with Eusebius' subordinationist theology. Jerome's use of the translations of Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion – also utilized by Eusebius – demonstrates that his intent was to contest Eusebius' theological conclusions by providing a theologically orthodox reading rooted in the *recentiores*. In this respect, Jerome's aim appears to have been to demonstrate that a proper application of the *recentiores* method could yield an orthodox Christological interpretation – affirming both the full divinity of Christ and his unity with the Father (*sic et de diuinitate illius sentiendum est, quod nullus sit Deus, nisi ipse qui loquitur, et puer eius quem elegit*) as well as his assumed human nature (*ut assumptum ostenderet hominem qui processit de utero uirginali*).[10]

Despite its theological richness, the implications of Jerome's engagement with the *recentiores* tradition remain underexplored in existing scholarship. In contrast to Louis Ginzberg[11], and in divergence from Hayward's suggestion that Jerome primarily accessed Jewish traditions through the Targums, this dissertation argues that the commentaries reflect instead the use of a pre-Masoretic Hebrew *Vorlage*. While Jerome may have been aware of Aramaic translations, the Targums do not appear to have served as authoritative sources for him. A key indication of this is the absence of any reference to the Hebrew-Aramaic interpretive tradition in Is 52:13 that identifies the Servant with the Messiah.

The findings of the *Commentary on Isaiah* thus corroborate the conclusions drawn from the QHG. *Veritas Hebraica* in Jerome's exegetical practice represents more than a linguistic principle; it constitutes a theological-philological synthesis with profound implications. For Jerome, *ueritas* is aligned with the Hebrew text, while the label *Iudaei* typically introduces interpretations he regards as carnal and opposed to Christian understanding. His work thereby exemplifies the dynamic interface between rabbinic and patristic exegetical traditions, a central concern of this dissertation.

As one of the most influential Fathers of the Western Church, Jerome (*vir trilinguis*) dedicated his life to the translation and interpretation of Scripture, serving as a bridge between

[10] ADRIAEN, M. (ed.), *Hieronymus. Commentariorum in Esaiam* (CCSL 73), Brepols, Turnhout 1963, 588.
[11] Cf. GINZBERG, L., *Die Haggada bei den Kirchenvätern VI. Der Kommentar des Hieronymus zu Jesaja*, in BARON, S. W. – MARX, A. (eds), *Jewish Studies in Memory of George A. Kohut*, Bloch Publishing, New York 1935, 279–314.

Eastern and Western Christianity, and between Jewish and Christian traditions. He did not merely rely on established Christian interpretations, but also consciously drew from the *traditio Hebraeorum*, incorporating insights learned from his Jewish teachers. His recourse to the Hebrew texts was not simply a philological undertaking but carried profound theological significance. On the one hand, it emphasized the centrality of pursuing divine revelation; on the other, it advanced a model of inculturation designed to facilitate a theologically sound and hermeneutically fruitful engagement with Scripture. In this context, the opening maxim of his *Commentary on Isaiah – ignoratio Scripturarum ignoratio Christi est*[12] – becomes especially significant.

[12] ADRIAEN, M. (ed.), *Hieronymus. Commentariorum in Esaiam*, 1.