Pesharim

The Pesharim (singular: Pesher) are 'a type of biblical interpretation found in the Qumran scrolls in which selected biblical texts are applied to the contemporary sectarian setting by means of various literary devices' (Berrin 2000, 644).

Writing Pesher, Making the Bible

At the time of the composition of the Pesharim, no 'Bible' as such had yet come into existence. Nevertheless, a wide variety of writings – including some of the later-to-become-biblical books – was considered authoritative by the authors of the Pesharim. The way in which prophetic Scripture (including the Psalms and possibly some other visionary texts such as Gen 49 [4Q252]) was treated in the Pesharim, both emphasized and contributed to its authoritative status. By using these writings to build a communal identity, the authors of the Pesharim implied their authority as divinely inspired Scripture (cf. 1QpHab VI 12–VII 5). At the same time, in this formative period, the use of these writings in the Pesharim – but also in the New Testament, in which by and large the same set of writings can be seen to be often cited – actively contributed to their prominence within the communities behind these writings and, eventually, to their inclusion in the canon.

The scriptural text quoted in the Pesharim cannot simply be identified as a forerunner of the later Masoretic Text: in a notable number of cases, the Pesharim bear witness to other text forms. In some instances, the Pesharim appear to be familiar with more than one reading of the scriptural text, which underscores the polymorphous nature of Scripture as quoted in these commentaries. An oral division of the scriptural text into verses and half-verses may be reflected in the Pesharim, although the scope of their lemmata is in all likelihood due to the aims of the commentator (Tov 2004, 135–42). Some Masoretic divisions of Scripture into sections seem to be paralleled in the Pesharim, but this, in itself, is no conclusive evidence for an established tradition of scriptural section divisions in this period (Tov 2004, 143–63). On the other hand, lemmata and interpretations are often distinguished by means of *vacats*, which points in a more general sense to the scribal practice of indicating sense divisions. Some Pesher scrolls (1Q14,

1Q15, 1QpHab, 4Q161) have the divine name written in Paleo-Hebrew script (Tov 2004, 218–21). Some Pesher scrolls (1QpHab, 4Q163) contain marginal marks; their significance, however, is largely unknown (Tov 2004, 178–218).

Pesher, Identity, and History

It has long been commonplace that the Pesharim provide a unique window onto the history of the movement in which they were composed. Nowadays, however, scholars are more cautious, and the concept of historical memory plays an important role in how the Pesharim are assessed. In the Pesharim, Scripture is not simply read through the lens of the history of the movement, but a communal identity, history, and hope for the future are constructed through the interpretation of Scripture. (Davies 2010)

The Pesharim exhibit a we-you perspective, favoring an in-group referred to with a variety of terms and denoting the movement in which the Pesharim originated, over a variety of out-groups (Jokiranta 2013, 134–48, 173–75). This we-you perspective often develops dichtomies in the base text, such as that between the Assyrians and God's people (1QpHab) or the righteous and the wicked (4Q171). In other cases, threats directed to Israel's enemies are applied to the contemporary opponents of the movement behind the Pesharim (4Q169). This we-you perspective also has a personal side: some of the Pesharim refer to a conflict between the Teacher of Righteousness and his various opponents. In these Pesharim, the image of a righteous teacher who is persecuted by wicked opponents is likewise developed from base text. It is not to be taken *prima facie* as historical evidence: the Pesharim display the historical memory of the movement, not plain historical fact. The memory of the Teacher plays an important role in the Pesharim and in the movement behind them: he is considered a source of major authority (García Martínez 2010) and functions as a prototype (Jokiranta 2013, 175–82) in which various features of the movement as a whole are united (Brooke 2010).

The Pesharim not only attest to the historical memory of the movement in which they originated, but also to its construal of the future. It is well-known that the authors of the Pesharim conceived of themselves as living in the latter days.

Hence, the judgment of the wicked and the vindiciation of the righteous were expected to occur presently. The way in which this judgment and vindication would take place, are, again, often described by picking up on elements in the base text. In 4Q171 II 9–12, for instance, the movement behind the Pesharim – referred to here as *'ēdat ha-'eḇyônîm* ('the counsel of the poor ones') – is said to be rescued, after a period of distress, from the snares of Belial, so as to possess the land and enjoy abundance. These themes are taken from the lemma Ps 37:11: 'and the poor shall possess the land and enjoy peace in plenty.' In sum, the Pesharim provide us with a unique window onto the way in which history and the future were remembered and expected by the authors of these commentaries, who, through their use of Scripture to construct their historical memory and expectations of the future, aimed at creating a communal identity.

Performing Pesher

As commentaries, the Pesharim quote and employ Scripture with a particular aim in mind. However, it can safely be assumed that the Pesharim themselves also fulfilled one or several purposes within the life of the movement in which they were composed. Unfortunately, the Pesharim themselves contain very little clues as to what this purpose may have been. Signs in the manuscripts may point to oral performance (Snyder 2000), but this is not certain. Some scholars have implied a communal or even liturgical setting for the Pesharim by describing some of the thematic commentaries as homiletical or by situating the Pesharim within the context of the study of the law as prescribed in 1QS VIII 14–16. Others, however, have pointed to the fact that only one manuscript of each Pesher seems to have been preserved, and concluded that they are individually executed studies of prophetic Scripture. Hence, it is hard to determine with certainty what role the Pesharim played within the community. Nevertheless, it is plausible that the Pesharim were a 'method of instruction' (Nitzan 1991), which originated and were employed either within a liturgical or a study context (the two are not mutually exclusive), possibly also being used in the instruction of new members.

Further Reading

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