What Can Modern Exegetes Learn from Ancient Masters? Genesis 23, the Jewish Sages, and John Chrysostom

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Abstract: Ancient biblical commentaries by rabbinic sages and church fathers are often perceived as enigmatic and arbitrary in contrast with modern interpretative methodology, particularly the historical-critical method. However, while ancient and modern hermeneutical approaches are distinct and largely irreconcilable, modern exegetes can benefit from the rabbinic and patristic works. Using the narrative of Sarah's death and burial found in Genesis 23, I present the fundamental principles of historical criticism and then contrast them with the assumptions of ancient masters such as the anonymous contributors to Genesis Rabbah and John Chrysostom. Modern exegetes can gain valuable insights from these ancient commentaries. Not only do these works prompt critical examination of contemporary assumptions and exegetical techniques, but they also reveal ways of reviving the great traditions of the ancient synagogue and church.

Keywords: Biblical Interpretation, Biblical Criticism, Genesis, Late Antiquity, Rabbinic Exegesis, Patristic Exegesis, Judaism, John Chrysostom

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Brian E. Daley observes that many modern readers "find early Christian exegesis puzzling and arbitrary."[1] He attributes this to the hermeneutical shift that occurred at the time of the Enlightenment:

> It is not that patristic interpreters—the best of them, at least—lacked linguistic skills or perceptiveness in reading earlier texts; nor is it that they lacked a sense of the importance of literary or historical context for determining a text's meaning. It is simply that they saw their role, and indeed the significance and context of the Bible itself, differently from the way modern exegetes do.[2]

Daley's comment also applies to the modern reception of rabbinic exegesis.[3] Many readers find rabbinic works even more "puzzling and arbitrary" than the early Christian commentaries, which sometimes leads to the relegation of rabbinic interpretation to an inferior position. While scholars specializing in the history of interpretation do discuss patristic and rabbinic works, others often use them only in liturgical and devotional contexts, rather than treating them as part of the mainstream of exegetical literature.

In view of the above, I investigate ways in which modern scholars might profit from reading the exegetical works of their ancient counterparts, despite the apparent otherness of their exegetical literature. To this end, I present the content and context of Genesis 23, the narrative of Sarah's death and burial, as the starting point of my investigation. Subsequently, I examine two ancient readings of Genesis 23. The first comes from Genesis Rabbah, the oldest rabbinic commentary on the first book of the Hebrew Bible, which reached a significant stage in its literary development around 400 CE.[4] The second reading comes from John Chrysostom's *Homilies on*

[1] Brian E. Daley, *Biblical Interpretation and Doctrine in Early Christianity: Collected Essays* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2025), 31.

[2] Daley, *Biblical Interpretation*, 31.

[3] I use the term "exegesis" in the context of late ancient interpretation in a broad sense. Some scholars warn against using the term in this context, and argue that the term "ancient exegesis" is anachronistic (thus, in respect of rabbinic literature, Albert van der Heide, "Midrash and Exegesis," in *The Book of Genesis in Jewish and Oriental Christian Interpretation: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Judith Frishman and Lucas Van Rompay [Leuven: Peeters, 1997], 43–56). However, many others use the term to mean any type of explication or commentary on the text. For instance, Jacob Neusner writes that midrashic interpretation "refers to the processes of scriptural exegesis carried on by diverse groups of Jews from the time of ancient Israel to nearly the present day. Thus people say, 'He produced a *Midrash* on the verse,' meaning, 'an exegesis'" (Jacob Neusner, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature* [New York: Doubleday, 1994], 224).

[4] The critical edition of Genesis Rabbah is *Midrash Bereshit Rabba: Critical Edition with Notes and Commentary*, ed. Julius Theodor and Chanoch Albeck (Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1965). There are three translations of this Midrash into English: *Genesis Rabbah*, ed. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon (London: Soncino, 1939); *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary on Genesis: A New American Translation,* ed. Jacob Neusner (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985); *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, ed. Nosson

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Genesis, composed and delivered around 385 CE.[5] Both readings represent exegetical traditions that either originated or matured in the fourth century CE, the golden age of patristics and one of the formative centuries of rabbinic Judaism. Both texts are also marked by cultural and theological tensions between the two respective faith communities. John Chrysostom's strong anti-Jewish bias and rhetoric is a prominent example of that tension.[6] At the same time, I demonstrate that the rabbinic and patristic interpretations of Genesis 23 are based on parallel exegetical assumptions and a number of shared theological motifs. Finally, while the answer to the question posed in the title of this article will be given mainly in terms of the historical-critical method, it will also encompass other methods and approaches comprising the complex landscape of contemporary biblical scholarship.

Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz (Brooklyn: Mesorah, 2010–14). In this article, I quote Neusner's translation with its minor modifications to the layout and punctuation and also replace Neusner's translation of biblical texts with the NRSV to ensure uniformity throughout. An interested reader might consult some of the introductions to the rabbinic literature, including midrashic literature: Neusner, *Introduction*; Hermann L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 2nd ed., trans. Markus Bockmuehl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); Eyal Ben-Eliyahu, Yehudah Cohn, and Fergus Millar, *Handbook of Jewish Literature from Late Antiquity, 135–700 CE* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Karin Hedner Zetterholm, *Jewish Interpretation of the Bible: Ancient and Contemporary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2012). A recent comprehensive study of Genesis Rabbah is Sarit Kattan Gribetz et al., eds., *Genesis Rabbah in Text and Context*, TSAJ 166 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016).

[5] John Chrysostom's *Homilies on Genesis* should not be confused with a smaller collection of his sermons on Genesis (critical edition: *Sermons sur la Genèse,* ed. Laurence Brottier [Paris: Cerf, 1998]). There is no critical edition of the *Homilies*. The original Greek text and its Latin translation are found in PG 53:21–54:580 and in *Joannis Chrysostomi Opera Omnia*, ed. Henry Savile (Eton: John Norton, 1612), 1:1–519. The only English translation is John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis,* ed. Robert C. Hill (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1986). In this article, I quote Hill's translation. References to the *Homilies* follow the page and section numbering of PG (section numbering in Hill's translation differs from that of PG). I also quote Hill's translation by volume and page number. An interested reader might consult some of the introductions to patristic literature and theology, including the works of John Chrysostom: Manlio Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church: An Historical Introduction to Patristic Exegesis,* trans. John A. Hughes (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994); Angelo Di Berardino and Basil Studer, eds., *The Patristic Period*, vol. 1 of *History of Theology*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997); Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998); Charles Kannengiesser, *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis* (Leiden: Brill, 2006); Angelo Di Berardino, Thomas C. Oden, and Joel C. Elowsky, eds., *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014). A recent comprehensive study of Chrysostom's works and theology is Chris L. de Wet and Wendy Mayer, eds., *Revisioning John Chrysostom: New Approaches, New Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2019). A recent monograph on *Homilies on Genesis* is Samuel Pomeroy, *Chrysostom as Exegete: Scholarly Traditions and Rhetorical Aims in the* Homilies on Genesis (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

[6] See John Chrysostom's eight sermons against the judaizing Christians, and, by implication, against the Jews, known as Λόγοι κατὰ Ἰουδαίων (*Adversus Judaeos*). The text of these sermons is found in PG 48:843–942 and in *Joannis Chrysostomi Opera Omnia*, ed. Henry Savile (Eton: John Norton, 1612), 6:312–388. The English translation is titled *Discourses against Judaizing Christians*, trans. Paul W. Harkins (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1979).

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The Content and Context of Genesis 23

Genesis 23 recounts the death and burial of Sarah, Abraham's wife, and the purchase of a family burial site in Canaan. Sarah dies in Kiriath-arba (also known as Hebron), at the age of 127 and is the only woman mentioned in the Bible whose age at death is recorded.[7] Seeking a burial place for his wife, Abraham approaches the Hittites, and identifies himself as a foreigner and sojourner among them. The latter offer Abraham the choice of their tombs, recognizing him as a "mighty prince (נשיא אלהים)" among them (Gen 23:6).[8] Abraham requests the cave of Machpelah, owned by Ephron the Hittite, as a permanent family burial site, and insists on paying the full price. After the negotiations are over, Sarah is buried in the cave, east of Mamre, which thus becomes the first piece of land Abraham owns in Canaan. This is a significant step in the fulfilment of God's promise that Abraham's descendants will inherit the land (cf. Gen 12:7; 13:14–15; 15:18–21; 17:8).

The theological message of this chapter needs to be understood in its literary context. Following the Aqedah narrative in Gen 22:1–19, the remaining five verses of Genesis 22—the genealogy of the twelve descendants of Nahor, Abraham's brother—attract little attention from the expositors. However, if we consider the overall development of theological themes in the Abraham narrative, we might agree that the purpose of the short section in Gen 22:20–24 is to introduce the figure of Rebekah into the story. This section also clearly emphasizes the vitality of Abraham's extended family, and lessens the impact of Sarah's death described in the following chapter. The first generation of ancestors may soon pass away, but their children will continue to live and multiply. One cannot think of a more positive message, delivered immediately after the narrative of testing and tribulation in Gen 22:1–19.

A striking feature of Genesis 23 is that the narrative does not dwell upon Abraham's grief after the death of Sarah. One terse statement summarizes the patriarch's sorrow: "And Sarah died at Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan; and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her" (Gen 23:2). What follows is a detailed description of Abraham's purchase of the plot of land in Machpelah. Thus Sarah is dead, but Abraham is again busy living his life. Sarah's life has run its course, but Abraham's continues with a view to securing a future for his and Sarah's children.

[7] Perhaps the best-known explanation for this number comes from Rashi: "At 100, Sarah was as free of sin as a 20-year old (for a 20-year-old is not subject to punishment for sin); and at 20 she was as beautiful as a 7-year-old" (Michael Carasik, ed., *Genesis* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 2018], 199). Rashi seems to elaborate on Gen. Rab. 58:1 (Theodor-Albeck 2:618–19). For alternative explanations of Sarah's age, see Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 125–26.

[8] The ASV and ESV translate this phrase literally as a "prince of God."

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Though the narrative reticence about Sarah's death results in much speculation in the rabbinic literature, put simply, the contrast between her death and Abraham's life emphasizes the continuing relevance of the story. It is not primarily about the past, but about the present and the future. Joseph Blenkinsopp writes: "The notice about Sarah's death (23:1–2) follows a familiar pattern: length of life, death, place of death. Throughout the account of her relationship with Abraham, Sarah's age had been pegged to his. She was ten years younger (17:17), but Abraham outlived her by nearly half a century."[9]

Genesis 24 continues this ancient story of life and hope, as Abraham needs to find a suitable wife for his son among his relatives. In sending his servant to upper Mesopotamia, he trusts in divine providence. There the servant finds Rebekah—already introduced in Gen 22:23—who returns with him to Abraham and Isaac. Towards the end of Genesis 24, Sarah is again mentioned when Rebekah is brought into her tent (v. 67). The grief caused by the matriarch's death is now replaced with joy, the prospect of marriage, and the promise of a new life.

Consequently, interpreted in its literary context, Genesis 23 is a story about longevity and the constant expectation of a future good. Moshe Shamah, a modern rabbinic interpreter, asks why Genesis 23 recounts Abraham's negotiations with the Hittites and the purchase of a burial plot for Sarah in great detail, while Jacob's later acquisition of a plot of land from the sons of Hamor is mentioned in only one verse, Gen 33:19. Shamah explains that Abraham "was future oriented; he knew his descendants were going into exile (15:13) and even a small inheritable burial area in the promised land would be a powerful symbol for them."[10] To put it another way, the cave of Machpelah becomes a symbolic point of reference and a reminder in times of tribulation and despair. All hope is not lost. There is always a place where one might return.

Rabbinic and Patristic Exegesis

The main characteristics of rabbinic and patristic exegesis can be easily grasped when contrasted with the principles of modern interpretation, especially its historical-critical variety. By and large, modern scholars seek the meaning of a biblical text by identifying its original historical context and trying to understand its meaning within that context. The historical meaning of a text is often called its "literal sense," a term which has a long and rich tradition in biblical exegesis and has been understood differently through the centuries. As the Pontifical Biblical Commission

[9] Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Abraham: The Story of a Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 176.

[10] Moshe Shamah, *Recalling the Covenant: A Contemporary Commentary on the Five Books of the Torah* (Jersey City: Ktav, 2011), 101.

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puts it, "The literal sense of Scripture is that which has been expressed directly by the inspired human authors…. One arrives at this sense by means of a careful analysis of the text, within its literary and historical context…. To this end, the study of ancient literary genres is particularly necessary."[11] Hence the central question modern critical scholars ask: What did the text in front of us mean when it was composed? Moreover, modern interpreters see the Bible as a diverse collection of texts composed by Jews and Christians over more than a millennium. Taken together, these texts often present dissimilar, even contradictory views, and the origins of many individual biblical books, such as Genesis, are considered highly complex.

Premodern Jewish and Christian scholars view the Bible differently.[12] However, despite the many differences between rabbinic and patristic exegesis, both groups of interpreters inhabit a "common hermeneutic universe," to use a phrase coined by Günter Stemberger.[13] They share a similar set of assumptions about the origin and nature of the Bible, and about the goal of biblical interpretation.[14] First, for both the rabbis and the church fathers, Scripture has a divine origin and is inspired. As a result, and secondly, scriptural texts are of the utmost importance. It is vital that Jews and Christians study them assiduously. Third, Scripture is self-referentially coherent. Given the perfect unity of the Bible, grounded in its divine origin, the seeming differences between its multiple books and passages are explained by applying harmonizing techniques. Even more importantly, the meaning of the text is usually

[11] Joseph A. Fitzmyer, ed., *The Biblical Commission's Document "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church": Text and Commentary* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1995), 120–21.

[12] The focus of this article is on parallels between rabbinic and patristic modes of interpretation. The profound differences between the two modes are not discussed here, but they remain part of the larger picture. First, the Christian theological debates centered on the nature of God and Jesus Christ represent the most significant difference between patristic and rabbinic commentaries. Christian exegetical discourse in the fourth century is framed in Trinitarian and Christological terms. These categories are, of course, absent from the rabbinic works. Second, a strong anti-Jewish polemic is common in Christian commentaries, whereas the rabbis are muted in their criticism of Christianity. Third, different answers to the same exegetical questions, contrasting literary styles, and the essentially anonymous nature of rabbinic literature make the dissimilarities between Jewish and Christian commentaries even greater. That said, aspects of harmony between the two groups of commentators are also distinct and are highlighted in this article.

[13] Günter Stemberger, "Genesis 15 in Rabbinic and Patristic Interpretation," in *The Exegetical Encounter Between Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity*, ed. Emmanouela Grypeou and Helen Spurling (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 161.

[14] The starting point for my formulation of the exegetical assumptions shared by rabbinic and patristic interpreters is James L. Kugel's list of four rabbinic assumptions identified in *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as it Was At the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998). I adopt and modify them in light of patristic exegesis in order to identify the shared Jewish-Christian exegetical heritage. See also James L. Kugel, "Ancient Biblical Interpretation and the Biblical Sage," in *Studies in Ancient Midrash*, ed. James L. Kugel (Cambridge: Harvard University Centre for Jewish Studies, 2001), 1–26; and *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007).

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established in reference to other texts of the canon. In the words of John J. O'Keefe and Russell R. Reno, "treated as a whole, the Bible absorbed [the interpreters'] attention rather than directing it elsewhere, either to the events to which the text refers or the divine truths to which it points."[15] For the same reason, a discussion of the original context of biblical writings is virtually absent from rabbinic and patristic writings. Fourth, Scripture is omnisignificant: every single detail matters, and each individual word communicates meaning.[16] Finally, the goal of biblical interpretation is didactic and ethical. Scripture provides instruction and guides its readers in life. These five assumptions, explicitly or implicitly present in biblical commentaries, form the basis for the exegetical practice of ancient Jews and Christians. They also underlie the two readings of Genesis 23, which I will now discuss.

A Rabbinic Reading of Genesis 23

In a nutshell, Genesis Rabbah presents Sarah as a heroine whose noble life has profound consequences for the future of the entire nation, even after her death. Remembering Sarah, God will raise leaders, both male and female, who will lead the Jewish nation to victory over its enemies, bringing both peace and prosperity. This idea is linked to a wider theme of Genesis Rabbah, which many scholars regard as the central theme of this Midrash. For instance, Jacob Neusner argues that "Genesis Rabbah transforms the book of Genesis … into a book of the laws of history and rules of the salvation of Israel: the deeds of the founders become omens and signs for the final generations."[17]

The account of Sarah's death and burial in Genesis 23 is the subject of parashah 58. It comes as no surprise that the passing away of the matriarch provides an opportunity for the rabbis to praise her life. In the opening section of parashah 58, they juxtapose Gen 23:1, where Sarah's long life is mentioned, with Ps 37:18: "The Lord knows the days of the blameless, and their heritage will abide forever."[18] The two subsequent sections of the same parashah elaborate on this idea. First, the death

[15] John J. O'Keefe and Russell R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 11. This feature of rabbinic and patristic commentaries is perhaps the least understood by modern readers, leading to anachronistic interpretations of what the ancient writers are actually saying.

[16] See the comment on Rabbi Aqiba ben Yosef in the following section.

[17] Jacob Neusner, "Genesis in Genesis Rabbah," in *Encyclopaedia of Midrash: Biblical Interpretation in Formative Judaism*, ed. Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery-Peck (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2005), 88. Others see Genesis Rabbah and the rabbinic literature as a whole as less thematically unified. See, e.g., Martin S. Jaffee, "Rabbinic Authorship as a Collective Enterprise," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 32.

[18] Gen. Rab. 58:1 (Theodor-Albeck 2:618–19).

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of a righteous person such as Sarah in Israel, heralds the birth of another virtuous man or woman. Second, Sarah's death marks the moment when her significance is clearly recognized, but her mission does not end there. Her good deeds are seen as a guarantee of future blessings for Israel. Her mission extends beyond the grave.

Typological interpretation abounds in Genesis Rabbah, and Sarah's life also foreshadows the lives of notable figures in the subsequent history of Israel.[19] Hence, in Gen. Rab. 58:2, the sages create four chains of figuration, which, in a manner characteristic of rabbinic interpretation, end with the biblical verse in question, Gen 23:1. The first and longest chain refers to the Jewish leaders contemporary with the editors of the midrash. It begins with Rabbi Aqiba ben Yosef (50–135 CE) and Rabbi Judah the Prince (135–217 CE), and then develops proleptically.[20] The death of one leader coincides with the birth of another. The following three short figurative chains are based on a somewhat different principle. A new leader rises when his or her predecessor is still alive, and this logic is applied first to Moses, Joshua, and Othniel, then to Eli and Samuel, and finally to Sarah and Rebekah.

> "The sun rises and the sun goes down" (Qoh 1:5).
>
> Said Rabbi Abba: "Now, do we not know that the sun rises and the sun sets? But the sense is this: before the Holy One, blessed be he, makes the sun of one righteous man set, he brings up into the sky the sun of another righteous man. On the day on which R. Aqiba died, Our Rabbi [Judah the Prince] was born. In his regard, they recited the following verse: 'The sun rises and the sun goes down' (Qoh 1:5). On the day on which Our Rabbi died, R. Adda bar Ahbah was born. In his regard, they recited the following verse: 'The sun rises and the sun goes down' (Qoh 1:5). On the day on which R. Adda died, R. Abin was born. In his regard, they recited the following verse: 'The sun rises and the sun goes down' (Qoh 1:5). On the day on which R. Abin died, R. Abin his son was born. In his regard, they recited the following verse: 'The sun rises and the sun goes down' (Qoh 1:5). On the day on which R. Abin died, Abba Hoshaiah of Taraya was born. In his regard, they recited the following verse: 'The sun rises and the sun goes down' (Qoh 1:5). On the day on which Abba Hoshaiah of Taraya

[19] Jonathan Kaplan, *My Perfect One: Typology and Early Rabbinic Interpretation of Song of Songs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015) is foundational for an in-depth understanding of typological (or figurative) interpretation in early midrashic literature.

[20] Aqiba ben Yosef was a prominent rabbinic authority known for his extensive legal contributions to the Mishnah and the Tosefta. He believed that every element of the Bible, including seemingly insignificant details, held meaning and purpose. Aqiba welcomed the Second Jewish Revolt (132–36 CE), continued to teach the Torah, and was tortured to death by the Romans. Judah the Prince was the religious and political leader of the Jews after the Second Revolt. He edited and promulgated the Mishnah ca. 200 CE. See Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery-Peck, *The Routledge Dictionary of Judaism* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 8, 69.

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> died, R. Hoshaiah was born. In his regard, they recited the following verse: 'The sun rises and the sun goes down' (Qoh 1:5)."
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> "Before the Holy One, blessed be he, made the sun of Moses set, he brought up into the sky the sun of Joshua. 'So the LORD said to Moses, "Take Joshua, the son of Nun"' (Num 27:18). Before the Holy One, blessed be he, made the sun of Joshua set, he brought up into the sky the sun of Othniel, son of Kenaz. 'Othniel son of Kenaz, the brother of Caleb, took [the town of Kiriath-sepher]' (Josh 15:17)."
>
> "Before the Holy One, blessed be he, made the sun of Eli set, he brought up into the sky the sun of Samuel. 'The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD' (1 Sam 3:3)."
>
> Said R. Yohanan: "He was like an unblemished calf."[21]
>
> "Before the Holy One, blessed be he, made the sun of Sarah set, he brought up into the sky the sun of Rebekah. 'Milcah also has borne children' (Gen 22:20). 'Sarah lived one hundred twenty-seven years; this was the length of Sarah's life' (Gen 23:1)."[22]

The literary form of this midrash is that of the proem or, in Hebrew, pətîḥâ (פתיחה), which means "an opening." Proems in Genesis Rabbah begin with a scriptural verse taken from outside the book of Genesis, usually from the Writings or the Prophets. Various layers of meaning of this opening verse Qoh 1:5 are subsequently unveiled to throw light on the base verse from Genesis. In a classic proem, the base verse, which is the verse commented upon, appears only at the end. This interpretative technique is very imaginative. It helps the reader uncover unexpected links between scriptural verses, their past and contemporary application, and leads to theological ramifications which transcend the literal sense of the text. Given the fundamental interconnectedness of all verses of Scripture, which is a basic tenet of rabbinic and patristic exegesis, every single verse can potentially be used to open the treasure trove of meaning of another.

In our midrash, Sarah's death is linked to the life of Rebekah, and Gen 22:20, the biblical verse which forges the connection between two women, facilitates the transition from Qoh 1:5 to Gen 23:1. Genesis 22:20 is part of the short genealogy in Gen 22:20–24 and the immediate literary context of Genesis 23. Only part of the verse is included in the midrash ("Milcah also has borne children" [Gen 22:20]),

[21] Rabbi Yohanan's comment, which appears to break the otherwise tight structure of this midrash, is present in the Theodor-Albeck critical edition based on the twelfth-century British Museum MS Additional 27169. However, some later rabbinic authorities, although not all, suggest deleting this line. See Scherman and Zlotowitz, *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 58 §3 n. 15.

[22] Gen. Rab. 58:2 (Theodor-Albeck 2:619–21).

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but the ancient reader, familiar with the entirety of Genesis, would easily recall the entire passage. Milcah, the daughter of Haran, Abraham's brother, gives birth to eight sons. Her last son Bethuel becomes the father of Rebekah, who will later marry Isaac, Abraham and Sarah's son (cf. Gen 11:27–29; 22:20–23). However, what matters most for the rabbinic interpreter is the causative and symbolic link between the death of Sarah and the life of Rebekah.

Other significant personages of biblical and post-biblical history are mentioned in this midrash, and two of them stand out. Moses is the greatest of all prophets (cf. Deut 34:10), serving as the channel through whom the Written and Oral Torah is communicated to the Israelites. Judah the Prince is the compiler of the Mishnah, the primary and foundational written expression of the Oral Torah. Thus the death of the matriarch in Genesis is not only linked to the life of Rebekah, but leads ultimately to the formulation of the Torah in its written and oral forms. One might hardly think of a more impactful and meaningful message delivered in the context of Sarah's death.

A Patristic Reading of Genesis 23

John Chrysostom's interpretation of Genesis 23 communicates a parallel message, but John arrives at his reading of the text in a different manner. In *Homily* 48, John comments on a large amount of biblical text: the narrative of Sarah's death in Genesis 23 and the wooing of Rebekah in Genesis 24. This helps him demonstrate a thematic link between the two chapters. Sarah the matriarch dies at the beginning of chapter 23, whereas Rebekah, a matriarch in the making, takes Sarah's place at the end of chapter 24. The chapter ends with a brief statement: "So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death" (Gen 24:67). As a result, Sarah's death is no longer a cause of distress and the family line continues. Chrysostom recognizes this connection and weaves his commentary on both chapters into a single homily. As in the case of the rabbinic commentary, Sarah's death is closely and symbolically intertwined with Rebekah's life and mission.

However, while there are similarities between the rabbis and Chrysostom's readings of Genesis 23 and 24, a significant difference lies in their treatment of the character of Sarah. For the Jewish sages, Sarah is a prominent figure who deserves admiration and receives a fair amount of acclaim. In contrast, in Chrysostom's commentary, Sarah almost always remains in the shadow of her husband. When Abraham is praised for his virtue, Sarah shares in the commendation bestowed upon him, but the opposite case is very rare. Although it is true, as Demetrios E. Tonias observes, that "Chrysostom depicted their marriage as a true partnership and Sarah

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as anything but a submissive wife to the great patriarch," Sarah seldom plays an independent role in Chrysostom's *Homilies*.[23]

This being the case, it is unlikely that Chrysostom's portrayal of Sarah was influenced by misogynistic views. Wendy Mayer has reexamined the question of Chrysostom's attitude towards women, and concludes that "just as his preaching and theology are increasingly being shown to be sympathetic in most respects towards women, this overlooked evidence of his actions and attitude towards women at the day-to-day level disproves the charges both of misogyny and of an exclusive interest in ascetic women."[24] Hence, Chrysostom's portrayal of Sarah, which differs from that painted by the rabbis, seems motivated mainly by his decision to focus on one character in his commentary on Genesis 12–25. Unsurprisingly, that character is Abraham.

For Chrysostom, Sarah's death leads to two outcomes. Abraham needs to buy a plot of land in Canaan to bury his wife, as he currently does not own one. Secondly, he is now solely responsible for securing Isaac's future and helping him start a family of his own. "Sarah's death was the occasion for the patriarch's first instance of acquiring land," writes Chrysostom, adding that Abraham accepts the Hittites' offer to acquire a burial plot for Sarah only very reluctantly, because his focus is on heavenly, not earthly, realities.[25] To make this point, Chrysostom reads Genesis 23 in light of Hebrews 11, the authorship of which he ascribes to Paul the Apostle, and continues:

> In the hope of things to come … [Abraham] overlooked present realities, and, in the expectation of greater things, he set less store by those of this life—and this before the Law and the age of Grace…. With this in mind, dearly beloved, let us who live in the age of Grace imitate the man who lived

[23] Demetrios E. Tonias, *Abraham in the Works of John Chrysostom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 91. An important exception is found in Gen 21:9–14, where Sarah demands the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael, and Abraham complies.

[24] Wendy Mayer, "John Chrysostom and Women Revisited," in *Men and Women in the Early Christian Centuries*, ed. Wendy Mayer and Ian J. Elmer (Strathfield: St Pauls, 2014), 225.

[25] John Chrysostom, *Hom. Gen.* 48.1 (PG 54:434, FC 87:25). Chrysostom goes to great lengths to avoid creating the impression that Abraham acquires the cave of Machpelah from ulterior motives, and emphasizes that he purchases the cave out of sheer necessity. This helps Chrysostom teach his audience another moral lesson: "Let those heed this who in the twinkling of an eye take to themselves every conceivable thing and, so to say, stretch out in all directions their passion for avarice; let them also imitate the patriarch who had not even a place to inter Sarrah's remains until, under pressure of very necessity, he bought the field and cave from the sons of Chet" (*Hom. Gen.* 48.1 [PG 54:434, FC 87:26]). The spelling of Sarah's name in Hill's translation reflects the Greek Σαρρα. Chrysostom could not read Hebrew. On the Greek text used by Chrysostom, see Katherin Papadopoulos, "Severian and Chrysostom on their Bible's Translation, Texts, and Canon," in *John Chrysostom and Severian of Gabala: Homilists, Exegetes, and Theologians*, ed. Johan Leemans, Geert Roskam, and Josien Segers (Leuven: Peeters, 2019), 179–223.

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> before the Law, not burn with desire for more, and heap up for ourselves to a greater and more intense degree the fire that cannot be extinguished and the flame that is intolerable.[26]

For Chrysostom, Abraham is unique because he fulfils the commandments that Moses will only later receive. Furthermore, as Tonias notes, Abraham is a proto-Christian, and his life is characterized by faith, hope, and charity.[27] This allows Chrysostom to develop a moral lesson: "After all, our being will not come to an end with this present life, nor shall we be always in exile; instead, before long we shall reach our true homeland."[28] This is the message that his congregation hears in the context of Genesis 23 and 24. They are called to emulate Abraham's virtues: his detachment from earthly realities, his expectation of good things to come, and his longing for the true homeland in heaven.[29]

An important feature of patristic and rabbinic interpretation needs to be mentioned again in this context. For Chrysostom, as well as for other church fathers and the rabbis, Scripture is self-referentially coherent. The meaning of a particular biblical passage is usually established in light of other texts of the canon, rather than in relation to historical events (real or fictional) the text recounts, or in relation to theological propositions the text communicates.[30] Chrysostom is as ever eager to teach his congregants a moral lesson, using Genesis 23 as his proof text, but this does not mean that he considers Scripture a mere pretext for constructing an ethical discourse independent of the text. His ethical imperatives remain firmly grounded in the text. Like the rabbis, he quotes an array of scriptural verses outside of Genesis to make specific points.

For example, in the opening sections of *Homily* 48, Chrysostom interprets the story of Sarah's burial in light of Hebrews 11, Isaiah 5, and Luke 12.[31] We have

[26] John Chrysostom, *Hom. Gen.* 48.1 (PG 54:435, FC 87:26–27).

[27] Tonias, *Abraham*, 64.

[28] John Chrysostom, *Hom. Gen.* 48.2 (PG 54:436, FC 87:28).

[29] Abraham's expectation of good things to come is related to the overarching theme of hope present, not only in the *Homilies,* but also in Genesis Rabbah. I recently devoted a short study to the theme of hope where I argue that "the Midrash places the emphasis on the temporal aspect of the reward that hope brings, whereas the *Homilies* are more focused on the eschatological dimension. Nevertheless, both of them are an articulation of the universal yearning for that kind of good that can be promised and brought to fruition only by God" ("A Message of Hope: Genesis 21:1–8 in Genesis Rabbah and John Chrysostom's *Homilies on Genesis*," in *Theology of the Hebrew Bible, Volume 2: Texts, Readers, and Their Worlds*, ed. Soo Kim Sweeney, David Frankel, and Marvin A. Sweeney [Atlanta: SBL Press, 2024], 307). I am also about to complete a monograph dedicated to the theme of hope in these two commentaries.

[30] For a brief summary of pre-modern biblical hermeneutics and its eclipse by modern interpretative modes, as understood by Hans W. Frei, see Kris Sonek, "Reading Gen 12:3 with Hans W. Frei: Some Implications for Historical Criticism," *RB* 119.1 (2012): 6–9.

[31] John Chrysostom, *Hom. Gen.* 48.1 (PG 54:434–35, FC 87:25–27).

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already seen that reading Genesis 23 in light of Hebrews 11 allows him to highlight Abraham's faith combined with a freedom from reliance on wealth and property. In turn, reading the Genesis chapter in conjunction with Isaiah 5 and Luke 12 serves to condemn avarice. Isaiah 5:8 calls attention to social injustice caused by the property accumulation of the rich. In Luke 12:20, God condemns the rich fool. Both these passages are contrasted with Abraham's prudent dealings with material goods. That said, these aspects of Chrysostom's reading clearly move beyond the literal sense of Genesis 23, as it hardly speaks of Abraham's shunning worldly goods. Nevertheless, what matters here is the interpreter's attempt to read the text in light of the scriptural canon so as to apply it to the lives of the audience and provide a moral lesson.[32]

Modern Exegetes and Ancient Masters

What can modern critical scholars learn from the commentaries of their ancient predecessors, such as Genesis Rabbah or *Homilies on Genesis*? To answer this question, and first, I need to emphasize that the study of pre-critical exegesis and its underlying principles is a subject in its own right. An investigation into how the Bible was interpreted in late antiquity remains a fascinating academic field, even if it does not lead to an immediate application of ancient exegesis to modern contexts. Practicing biblical interpretation is a creative intellectual game—an idea which I have previously explored elsewhere.[33] Hence, playing the game of ancient exegesis involves learning its intricate assumptions and techniques and studying them in depth.[34] Some of those assumptions have already been mentioned: scriptural

[32] In general, the Abraham narrative in Genesis 12–25 does not speculate on the patriarch's attitude towards material possessions, except for Gen 14:17–24, where his generosity and prudence are highlighted. Instead, Genesis 12–25 portrays him as a wealthy nomad who amasses livestock, silver, and gold (cf. Gen 12:16; 13:2; 20:16; 24:10). In Genesis 23, Abraham is portrayed as an influential local leader, willing to pay a high price for the field and the cave. Cf. Hamilton, *Genesis*, 129; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Continental Commentary,* trans. John Scullion (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 375.

[33] Kris Sonek, *Truth, Beauty, and Goodness in Biblical Narratives: A Hermeneutical Study of Genesis 21:1–21* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009), 263–64.

[34] The principles of rabbinic hermeneutics are often formulated as the Seven Rules of Hillel, the Thirteen Middot of Rabbi Ishmael, or the Thirty-Two Middot (see Hermann L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash,* trans. Markus Bockmuehl [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996], 15–30). Gary G. Porton offers an in-depth analysis of Ishmael's list, the most significant of the three. See Gary G. Porton, *The Traditions of Rabbi Ishmael* (Leiden: Brill, 1976); "Hermeneutics, a Critical Approach," in *Encyclopaedia of Midrash: Biblical Interpretation in Formative Judaism*, ed. Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery-Peck (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2005), 1:250–268; "Methods of Early Rabbinic Biblical Exegesis," in *The Reception and Interpretation of the Bible in Late Antiquity: Proceedings of the Montréal Colloquium in Honour of Charles Kannengiesser, 11–13 October 2006*, ed. Lorenzo DiTommaso and Lucian Turcescu (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 441–66. John Chrysostom's exegetical techniques have been analysed by numerous authors. See, e.g., Robert C. Hill, *Reading the Old Testament in Antioch* (Leiden: Brill, 2005); David Rylaarsdam, *John Chrysostom on Divine Pedagogy: The Coherence of His Theology and Preaching* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Pomeroy, *Chrysostom as Exegete.*

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inspiration, the significance of biblical texts for the believers, the self-referential coherence of Scripture, its omnisignificance, and the didactic character of biblical exegesis. Concerning exegetical techniques, the rabbis interpret Genesis 23 and many other passages by employing the proem, which allows them to link the text under consideration with other biblical texts to uncover the deeper sense of the former. They thus establish a causative link between the lives of Sarah and Rebekah. In a parallel manner, Chrysostom reads Genesis 23 in light of texts taken from both the Old and New Testaments. He also uncovers the deeper senses of Genesis 23 and applies them to the lives of his congregants by highlighting Abraham's faith in God and his freedom from reliance on worldly goods.

Secondly, the study of pre-critical exegesis has a spiritual dimension. As Keith D. Stanglin notes of patristic interpretation, "whether or not we agree with their exegetical conclusions, more often than not our older brothers and sisters will help us see the beauty and glory of the God revealed in Scripture, the telos of which is Christ."[35] Thus Chrysostom points out that in the aftermath of Sarah's death, Abraham's duty is to look after their child Isaac.[36] This, however, cannot be achieved only by human means, but requires God's action. This conviction underlies Abraham's instruction to his servant expressed in Chrysostom's own words: "Have confidence, he is saying, and depart: I am convinced that the one who has given evidence of such great kindness in my regard will add this to his former benefactions and send his angel before you.... You see, I have no doubt that the Lord will take care of you."[37] Similarly, the rabbis recognize that the narrative of Sarah's death in Genesis 23 contains the promise of God's providential action in the subsequent history of Israel. The contribution of the great biblical and post-biblical figures to the life of the nation is undeniable, but it is really God who powerfully acts behind the scenes of history. Rabbi Abba explains this belief: "Now, do we not know that the sun rises and the sun sets? But the sense is this: before the Holy One, blessed be he, makes the sun of one righteous man set, he brings up into the sky the sun of another righteous man."[38] Both Chrysostom's interpretation of Genesis 23 and the rabbinic commentary are statements of faith from the ancient readers, who aim to express aspects of God's nature and action as they interpret their sacred texts. As Stanglin writes, we modern readers may not necessarily accept their theological conclusions in every single case, but we should feel privileged to share the world of their inner thoughts and spiritual insights.

[35] Keith D. Stanglin, *The Letter and Spirit of Biblical Interpretation: From the Early Church to Modern Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 227.

[36] John Chrysostom, *Hom. Gen.* 48.2 (PG 54:436, FC 87:28).

[37] John Chrysostom, *Hom. Gen.* 48.3 (PG 54:437–38, FC 87:31).

[38] Gen. Rab. 58:2 (Theodor-Albeck 2:619).

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Thirdly, by reflecting on ancient hermeneutics in a critical manner, we can examine our modern assumptions about the biblical text to achieve a deeper understanding of contemporary exegetical methods. The rabbinic reading of Genesis 23 appears to ignore the literal sense of the text in question.[39] Chrysostom, too, moves beyond the literal sense to develop a message which he thinks his audience needs to hear. At the same time, however, both readings develop deeper senses of the text, whose theological and pastoral value seems evident. In contrast, modern historical-critical commentaries on Genesis 23 excel at highlighting the literal sense of the pericope. For instance, Claus Westermann treats this chapter as an "elaboration of the genealogical account of the death of Sarah" coming from the priestly author, and situates the composition of Genesis 23 in the exilic period, "when those driven from their native land were laying 'their dead' to rest and wanted to have a place they could call their own."[40] Victor P. Hamilton recognizes the limitations of source-criticism for the correct understanding of Genesis 23 in its literary context (Genesis 22–24), but the main focus of his commentary is on establishing the correct historical and cultural context for the passage.[41] Questions related to the deeper sense of the text or its application to the lives of modern readers are absent or peripheral in these two commentaries. This should not be considered a drawback of historical-critical commentaries, because they focus mainly on "the world behind the text."[42] Nevertheless, a reader familiar with both ancient and modern commentaries will be able to clearly recognize both the profound differences between the pre-critical and critical approaches, and their respective strengths and limitations.

Finally, studying the works of rabbinic and patristic masters might help us discover ways to revive the great tradition of the ancient synagogue and church, and reclaim it for modern exegetical practice. Brian E. Daley, whose perceptive comments opened this article, offers cautious advice on how this goal might be achieved:

[39] This does not mean that the rabbis could not recognize the literal sense of the text they commented on. Rather, they had little interest in literal exegesis, and preferred non-literal reading modes. Chaim Milikowsky explains: "For if the presupposition implicit in this corpus [of midrashic literature] is that a divinely inspired work—in our case, the Bible—demands exegesis which disregards logic, grammar, and context, i.e., sanctions the use of non-literal exegetical techniques, then the literal meaning can often be disregarded" (Chaim Milikowsky, "Rabbinic Interpretation of the Bible in the Light of Ancient Hermeneutical Practice: The Question of the Literal Meaning," in *"The Words of a Wise Man's Mouth Are Gracious" (Qoh 10:12). Festschrift for Günter Stemberger on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, ed. Mauro Perani (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), 14).

[40] Westermann, *Genesis*, 371, 376.

[41] Hamilton, *Genesis*, 123–36.

[42] This widely used term and its two counterparts, "the world within the text" (or "the world of the text") and "the world in front of the text" (or "the world before the text) were popularized by Sarah M. Schneiders in *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991). The second edition of this book appeared in 1999.

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> Still, a greater familiarity with early Christian interpretation may at least lead the modern scholarly reader to reflect more radically on the hermeneutical conditions for reappropriating the Bible as the book of the Church, and stimulate her or him to develop new strategies for reading it in a Christian—and thus, in some sense, a figural—way, in a historically minded age.[43]

Daley's advice presupposes that ancient and modern interpretative modes are essentially distinct, and there is no easy way of introducing the former into the context of predominantly historical modern exegesis. He refers to the former as "explicitly theological," emphasizing both its grounding in ancient tradition and its potential application to contemporary life. He describes the latter as "secular," defining its purpose as that of addressing textual and historical questions.[44] However, theologically-oriented and historically-oriented modes should be allowed to develop freely and independently in modern academia, as both offer unique advantages. In time, we might see an interaction between the two, leading to a reassessment of the role played by the Bible in the church and to a development of new reading strategies.

If this dual exegetical task continues within scholarly circles, it might bring a better appreciation of the multi-faceted nature of biblical interpretation. While the historical-critical method offers invaluable insight into the historical realities of ancient Israel and the original context of biblical passages, rabbinic and patristic exegesis brings different and often fresh perspectives to that exegetical task. Commenting on Genesis 23, the rabbis express the belief that Sarah's life and death heralds the birth of another prominent person in Israel. Thus Rebekah, Moses, Joshua, and others will guide, protect, and save the subsequent generations of Israelites and Jews. John Chrysostom's reading invites his listeners to focus on the expectation of good things to come, and reminds them that they are still waiting for the true homeland promised to believers. For both, Sarah's passing is viewed in terms of promise. Death does not have the final say. Rather, it signifies a new beginning.PS

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[43] Daley, *Biblical Interpretation*, 61.
[44] Daley, *Biblical Interpretation*, 60–61.

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