

**Suggestions for Research Methods on the History of
Jewish Exegesis:
Reviewing Koji Osawa, *The Incident of the Golden Calf:
A History of Exegesis* (Kyobunkwan, 2018)**

Nozomi Abe

Introduction

The Hebrew Bible has a long history of being read together with commentaries. At any given time in history, the reading of the actual biblical texts has required explanation, translation, or exegesis by commentators. Therefore, it has become more important to meticulously read the secondary documents and sources while more deeply examine the history of the Bible's interpretation. This is particularly the case in deciding how to handle classical Jewish texts, especially when it comes to examining the difference between Jewish and Christian exegeses. In the past, a few scholars had attempted comparative studies on such issues. Despite their efforts, however, there has been a tendency to not carefully or adequately read Jewish classical texts. Therefore, it is essential to check interpretations against revised editions of high quality and manuscripts that are highly accurate, but there has been no environment in which these source materials could be accessed until now. Now, fortunately, in this age of the internet, revised editions of high quality have become widely available, so scholars have direct access to such vital manuscripts that were previously unavailable. With the emergence of such an environment, it is possible to conduct more careful research on such source material, implying that one cannot excuse even minor errors in verifying such material's authenticity. It is worth noting that Osawa's study has a solid basis for confirming the accuracy of basic source materials. Mostly through reference to previous studies, his study adopted well-structured research procedures to demonstrate that the source materials used were classified according to historical periods. In particular, there was a clear distinction in such source materials between the Tannaitic and Amoraic periods. Consequently, his study made significant, unprecedented progress in this field because it enabled readers to follow and observe the sequential development of such textual interpretation over time. In the following, I would like to develop my review while discussing how to handle the source materials.

1. On Issues of Handling Source Materials (Choosing Basic Manuscripts and Revised Editions)

The treatment of Jewish exegesis requires a process of carefully verifying the accuracy of the biblical texts. This is because the notation of the Hebrew Bible itself gives absolute authority and legitimacy to Jewish exegesis. The Old Testament scholarship uses variants of BHS and BHQ as the original texts in verifying documents' accuracy. Their typesetting, however, is not the same as that of B19a found in the Leningrad Codex. In most cases, modern biblical scholarship accepts a division of paragraphs and colons according to the formatting used. The primary task, therefore, is to check the accuracy of the texts of the Hebrew Bible based on or in reference to the original version.

The next matter concerns the treatment of the classical Jewish texts. Rabbinic Hebrew, with a grammatical structure that is different in many ways from that of biblical Hebrew, is a type of Hebrew used in the Common Era. Therefore, the type of Hebrew used in these texts is not at all identical to that of biblical Hebrew. For instance, recent studies have shown that the authority of the Hebrew Bible was so absolutely accepted in the Jewish world that even completely different variants of Hebrew texts in later periods were revised or corrected carelessly due to their wording and grammar.

Furthermore, as the Babylonian Talmud became accepted as the most authoritative canonical text for the study of biblical exegesis after the sixth century, its authorization gradually began to influence the Midrashic literature recorded by the Tannaim, who had been active in the land of Israel earlier. In response to the Tannaitic Midrash called the "Eretz Yisrael tradition," there were cases where the sages, who were active in Babylonia, replaced the "Eretz Yisrael tradition" with the "Babylonian tradition" to match the notation and wording with the Babylonian Talmud. Nevertheless, both traditions differ significantly in Hebrew spelling, phrasing, and grammar, as well as their interpretation of the Torah. It is, therefore, indispensable to select **primary manuscripts** in making comparisons of several types of variants redacted, between the Tannaitic and Amoraic periods. Such manuscripts as those described above should not be subject to any revision at all, or at least have only minimal revisions. Moreover, **revised editions**, based on such manuscripts, have to be employed in further promoting this kind of study. The author's work should be held in high regard for its significance because his selection of such manuscripts is indeed accurate. Based on the above assumptions, I would like to give my review of the contents as follows.

2. Incident of the Golden Calf in Midrashic Literature

2-1. *Sifre Dévarim*

The following passage was presented as part of this discussion by the school of Rabbi Akiva in the relevant section of “*Sifre Dévarim*” in Midrashic literature during the Tannaitic period. *Sifre Dévarim*, which was reportedly redacted in the Halakhic Midrash in the 4th century C.E., is also considered a crucial document in its description of the modes of biblical exegesis used by Jewish society at the beginning of the Common Era. Osawa quotes this section, but only the Gothic part of the texts (below) are quoted, the rest of the passages are omitted. Reading its contents, checked carefully with its context, it is apparent that part of the quotations are inappropriate. Especially, in dealing with Jewish biblical interpretation, it is necessary to treat it comprehensively.

Sifre Devarim, Pisqa’ 1

12 “**And Di-Zahav**” (Dt.1:1)— [The Holy One] said to them: I can overlook all you’ve done, but **the incident of the [golden] calf pains Me the most!** R. Judah used to teach: There is an analogy— a certain fellow caused his companion many troubles. Finally, he added one more. [The companion] said to him: I can overlook all you’ve done, but this latest incident pains me the most! This is what the All-Present said to Israel: I can overlook all you’ve done, but the incident of the [golden] calf pains me the most! R. Shimon says: There is an analogy— a certain fellow received sages and their disciples, and everyone sang his praises. Then gentiles came, and he received them. Then bandits came and he received them. People began to say: It must be So-and-so’s way to receive any one! Thus did Moses say to Israel: That’s enough gold (*dai-zahav*)— for the Dwelling! That’s enough gold—for the calf!

13 R. Banyah says: Israel served a foreign cult. By rights they should have been worthy of annihilation! [But no!] The gold [collected for] the Dwelling offers absolution for the gold [collected for] the calf! R. Yose b. Hanina says: “And you shall fashion a cover of pure gold” (Ex.25:17)— the gold [collected for] the Ark-cover offers absolution for the gold [collected for] the calf!

(※The English translated text has been referred by the editorial to: Marty Jaffee, *Sifre Devarim* (accessed on Jan. 31, 2020).

<https://jewishstudies.washington.edu/book/sifre-devarim/chapter/pisqa-6/>

The organization of the above Midrash is as follows: (1) The incident of the Golden Calf was viewed as the most heinous of all sins ever committed; (2) Gold items of the same material as the Golden Calf were collected as offerings to effect atonement for this greatest sin. It follows that one's sins, as a result, are atoned for through the use of the vessels made from the gold in the atonement ritual.

Even so, what was the intention in this Midrash of introducing a discussion that was unrelated to the above context in the last part of Deut.1:1? Although Osawa never explicitly stated the reason behind this, that discussion seems to be at the very origin, in my view, of the Jewish understanding of the "Incident of the Golden Calf."

The introductory phrase of this Midrash, "*Ve di zahav*" (*an abundance of gold*), found in the last part of Deut.1:1, indicates the five places, "*Paran*," "*Tophel*," "*Laban*," "*Hazereth*," and "*Di zahav*," where Moses addressed the Israelites in giving the words of the Torah. This Midrash, however, is deeply problematic by the fact that the phrase "*Ve di zahav*" is described last in the names of these places. Moreover, if one searches for the meaning of the phrase "*Ve di zahav*," the word "*Di*" (דִּי), which refers to a term that describes quality, quantity, time, and sufficiency in Hebrew ("*Dai*" or "*De*") , has the same spelling as the name of the place. When considered in Aramaic, the word "*Di*" (דִּי) constitutes a grammatical element that denotes "of." "*Zhav*," taken from the phrase "*Di zahav*," also denotes a word that refers to "gold" as metal. Judging from the context of Deuteronomy, those who can think in Hebrew could quickly identify the phrase "*Di zahav*" as referring to the name of a particular place, sensing that God's intention is hidden behind this term. Such a reading of this term, as a result, seems to involve a forced leap of logic. The primary reason for inserting the Midrash of the Golden Calf at the beginning of Deuteronomy is, in my view, to state that "the giving of the Torah to Israel is for the sake of atonement for the sins caused by the Golden Calf." Although this line of argument, unfortunately, cannot be seen in Osawa's study, my hope is that he will further investigate the validity of this viewpoint.

2-2. The value of comparative studies with the Dead Sea Scrolls

Now that the entire picture of the Dead Sea Scrolls, whose study has received little attention for quite a while, is becoming clearer, other sources containing similar arguments need to be examined in comparison with the scrolls. Therefore, it is suggested that the Dead Sea Scrolls, completely unrevised by other authors, be used while

acknowledging their uniqueness as primary sources.

In particular, studies on the Dead Sea Scrolls suggest that it is possible to extract their ideas and ideological trends from the first century BCE or CE by investigating the sectarian documents of the Qumran community. If there were the same lines of argument or ideas in the “Eretz Yisrael tradition” of the Tannaitic period, this would indicate that these concepts might have been discussed since the BCE era. The following sources suggest areas that may overlap with classical Jewish literature in the Dead Sea Scrolls: (1) The Rewritten Bible; (2) Narratives based on biblical Themes; (3) The Halakhah.

2-3. Incident of the Golden Calf in the Dead Sea Scrolls

The manuscript fragment of **4Q159** in the Dead Sea Scrolls, which covers the “Incident of the Golden Calf,” also deals with discussions over the Halakhah. As the description of its narrative part suddenly appears in the middle of a passage within the fragment, the segment of the Incident of the Golden Calf (fragment 1-ii, line 17 & fragment 5, line 1) begins with the introductory phrase *Pesher* (פֶּשֶׁר), which contains a reference to Exod. 32. The Halakah covered in this fragment is discussed in the same order as the accounts of Exodus. Thus, the literary form in which the Halakhic debates unfold or its narratives are partially inserted, according to the order of the biblical account, recalls the form of the later Halakhic Midrash. While this is only speculation, researcher A. Shemesh has speculated that it may have been the beginning of the Halakhic Midrash¹. While referring to Shemesh's commentary below, I would like to look into the intention behind it, examining the description of the “Incident of the Golden Calf” in this passage.

4Q159

Fig. 1 ii + 9

1.]yw '[]nhl lw[]
2.]'l his com[ma]ndments **and to atone for all [t]heir rebellious acts[]**
3. [shiuld] a man make of it a threshing-floor or winepress, whoever comes to the threshing f;oor[or the winepress]
4. [anyone] in Israel who has nothing may eat it and gather it in for himself, and for his ho[usehold]
5. [in] the field may eat with his month, but may not bring it into his house to store it up[]

6. [Rega]rding [the matter of the] money of valuation which they gave, each one as the ransom for his life, half [a sheqel as an offering to the Load;]
7. only one [time] in his days shall he give it. The sheqel is twenty *gerah* by the sa[nctuary sheqel. And the atonement money was]
8. for the six h[un]dred thousand, one hundred talents; for the third (?), half a talent, [and for the five hundred, five minas]
9. and for the fifty, half a m[in]a, [twenty-]five sheqel. Al[l by the sanctuary sheqel]
10. the mina. š l wš for the ten minas[]
11. [fi]ve [silv]er pieces, a tenth of a m[ina]
12. []sanctuary [sheq]el, ha[lf]
13. []the *ephah* and the *bath* are [have on]e measure []
14. [] the [th]ree tenths []
15. []*vacat* []
16. [he sprinkled o]n the people and upon [their] ga[rmen]ts[]
17. [and **the calf which the I]sraelites [**made**] **Moses burnt**[]**

Frg. 5

1. [When] they [angered] God and **they died. The interpretation[of the matter]**
2. [] *vacat* sons of L[evi?]
3. []in judgement. And as for that which it say[s]
4. [] when moses took the [tent and pitched it outside the camp, then all who]
5. [sought the Load] would go out thither. The interpretation of the matte[r]
6. [to se]ek the Law in distress, w []
7. [whi]ch Moses spoke[]
8. []all[]

(※The English translated text has been referred by the editorial to:

M. Bernstein trans., “4Q159 (4QOrdinances^a) trans. M. Bernstein (provisional edition),” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls Reader, Second Edition, Revised and Expanded* (Donald W. Parry and Emanuel Tov eds.; Leiden • Boston: Brill, 2014), vol. 1, pp. 321, 323.)

The text preserved in cave 4 was severely damaged, making it difficult to be viewed in its entirety. Nevertheless, the statement that Moses burned the calf made by the people of Israel clearly refers to Exod. 32:20. Immediately following the statement “when they enraged God, they died,” the content expands on this phrase, explaining “what this means (*Pesher*²).” The phrases “the children of the Levites” and “in judgment” are also used immediately after that. In the Hebrew Bible, this flow of the biblical passage seems to be identical to that in which those who made the golden calf and did not stand on the LORD’s side, despite Moses’ severe accusation, were killed by the Levites. Moreover, the description based on Exod. 33:7, “As Moses would take the Tent and pitch it outside the camp, those who sought the LORD would go out there” follows. Consequently, this confirms that the literary form in which the flow of the story evolves along with the biblical verses was, in a sense, already established.

2-4. Purpose of Inserting the *Pesher*

Pesher’s format, sandwiched between descriptions of *Halakhah*, is organized as a type of Midrash with the *Aggadah* mixed with the *Halakhah*. In Fragment 1–2, line 2, the phrase “To redeem all their iniquities” can be verified. What could have been done to “redeem all their iniquities,” unfortunately, cannot be restored due to the lack of text. The *Halakhot*, nevertheless, are enumerated after this phrasing.

What this suggests is that the following *Halakhot* are listed to “redeem all their iniquities.” According to the views held by the Qumran community, it appears that before and after the “Incident of the Golden Calf,” some ‘*Halakhah*’ is indispensable to the atonement for the incident reportedly described as “the most heinous sin” (חטאה גדולה). It may be assumed that the Halakah has been instituted for this atonement. Given the idea that the Incident of the Golden Calf may as well have been understood as the most heinous sin by the members of the Qumran community, it is also reasonable to assume that the Temple cult had been started as expiation for the incident.

2-5. Comparison with Targum Pseudo-Jonathan

Next, I would like to make a comparison with Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, the Aramaic Targum translation of the Hebrew Bible. It is highly questionable, however, whether this document is part of the genre of the “Targum.” This is because the document was originally written as Aramaic literature, not as an Aramaic translation according to the Torah reading in the synagogue. Since its content is different from the Midrashic literary form edited according to the weekly Torah reading, its literary genre,

classified as “Literature of the Rewritten Bible,”³ is believed to have been edited in the 8th century C.E.⁴

The author tried to rewrite the story presented in this literature from his own perspective. It has also been pointed out that this “Targum Pseudo-Jonathan,” which has passages in common with those of the Dead Sea Scrolls, also quotes traditions contained in the Midrashic literature reportedly established in the 4th century CE.⁵ The passage of Deut. 1:1 in Targum Pseud-Jonathan is not the Aramaic Targum of the Hebrew text but rather understood as a commentary that reflects the author’s views. The five places named “*Paran*,” “*Tophel*,” “*Laban*,” “*Hazeroth*,” and “*Di zahav*” are understood not as the places where Moses addressed the people of Israel using the words of the Torah but rather as the places where the people of Israel sinned. In fact, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan is seriously put in question by the term “*Di zahav*” appearing last in the passage, as in *Sifre D’varim* quoted earlier. If the term “*Di zahav*” implied the “Incident of the Golden Calf,” then its usage should be placed at the foot of Mt. Sinai, since its name would come first in this narrative. Moreover, even in “Targum Pseudo-Jonathan,” we can confirm the notion that a ritual using gold utensils would atone for the sins of the Incident of the Golden Calf.

Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, Deut. 1:1

1. These are the words of *reproof* that Moses spoke with all of Israel. *He gathered them before him when they were on the other side of the Jordan. He answered and said to them: “Was not the Law given to you in the desert at Mount Sinai and explained to you on the plants of Moab? How many miracles and wonders the Holy One blessed be he performed for you from the time when you crossed by the shore of the Red Sea where he made for you a way for every single tribe! But you, you have deviated from his Memra and you incited his anger at Paran because of the spies’ report; and you have charged him with lying and you have murmured about the manna that he caused to come down white from heaven for you. You have demanded meat at Haseroth; and it was fit for you to be destroyed from the midst of the world but because it is remembered for you by the merits of your fathers, the righteous ones, the Tent of Meeting, the ark of the covenant, and the holy vessels that you covered with pure gold, he has atoned for you concerning the sin of the golden calf.*

(※The English translated text has been referred by the editorial to:

Ernest G. Clarke, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Deuteronomy: translated, with notes* (Kevin Cathcart, et al. eds., *The Aramaic Bible: The Targums*, Volume 5B), (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), pp. 6-7.)

2-6. Midrash Tanchuma

Even in Tanchuma, a type of Midrashic literature probably compiled by the 8th century CE, there is a story that seems to indicate that burnt offerings started in the Temple as atonement for the Incident of the Golden Calf. Its characteristic position is that the purpose of constructing the Temple, considering the interconnectedness between the Tabernacle's construction and the Incident of the Golden Calf, was to make atonement for the sins wrought by the Incident of the Golden Calf.

Midrash Tanchuma, Terumah 8

Terumah, Siman 8

And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them (Exod. 25:8). On which day did He relate to Moses the portion relating to the Temple? It was on the Day of Atonement. That was so despite the fact that the Torah portion describing the Sanctuary precedes the incident of the golden calf. R. Judah the son of R. Shalum said: There is actually no such thing as preceding or following in the Torah, as is said: *Lest she should walk the even path of life, her ways wander, but she knoweth it not (Prov. 5:6)*. This verse refers to the arrangement of the Torah and its sections. Hence, it was on the Day of Atonement that He told Moses: *Make Me a Sanctuary*.

Whence do we know this to be so? Moses went up Mount Sinai on the sixth day of Sivan, and remained there for forty days and forty nights. He stayed there another forty days, and then a final forty days, totaling one hundred and twenty days in all. Thus you find that it must have been on the Day of Atonement that he told Moses about the Temple, for it was on that day that they were forgiven. And on that day the Holy One, blessed be He, told them: *Make Me a Sanctuary, that I may dwell therein*, so that the nations might know that He had forgiven them for the episode of the golden calf. It was called the Sanctuary of the Testimony, for it bore witness to the nations of the world that

the Holy One, blessed be He, dwelt within their Sanctuary.

The Holy One, blessed be He, declared: Let gold be placed within the Sanctuary to atone for the gold with which the golden calf was fashioned, as it is said: *And all the people broke off the golden rings (Exod. 32:3)*. Thus they atoned with gold; *And this is the offering which ye shall take of them: gold (ibid. 25:2)*. The Holy One, blessed be He, said: *For I will restore health unto thee, and I will heal thee of thy wounds (Jer. 30:17)*.

(※The English translated text has been referred to by the editorial and contains merged sections from the following text versions:

“Midrash Tanchuma” (Samuel A. Berman trans., *An English Translation of Genesis and Exodus from the Printed Version of Tanhuma-Yelammedenu with an Introduction, Notes, and Indexes* (KTAV Publishing House, Inc.: Hoboken, New Jersey), in *A Living Library of Jewish Texts* (The Sefaria Library), Terumah 8 (accessed on Feb. 17, 2020).

https://www.sefaria.org/Midrash_Tanchuma%2C_Terumah.8?lang=bi

3. Elucidating the Development of Exegesis according to Eras?

Let me address the fundamental issue here. Osawa, on p. 79, footnote 151, describes the tradition of Leviticus Rabba as follows:

One of the features of Jewish literature is that its traditions are not consistent even within the same literature. For this reason, although Leviticus Rabba has a tradition of explicitly advocating Aaron's cause or a tendency to defend him, it is unclear whether the document as a whole indeed advocates his cause. What is vital to this work is that this literature preserves a certain amount of traditions of advocating Aaron's cause.

This view can be paraphrased as follows: In Jewish literature, a single document always includes writings of multiple traditions appearing concurrently. This situation, then, implies the need for fundamental research methods that deal with the question of whether it is possible to analyze and extract specific themes as part of the history of exegesis for each era. Since sages in each era, who knew of such exegetical traditions, did not explicitly discuss them as part of their debates, it is easy to assume that this

method of inquiry has serious flaws.

Specifically, as cited on pages 7–79, the Midrash, which interpreted the verse “When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it” (Exod. 32:5) as “Aaron was afraid and realized from the murder in front of him,” in fact appears in “Leviticus Rabba.” Even though this Midrash is treated as an exegesis in the Amoraic period, it is still reasonable to assume that the replacement of biblical verses, which was achieved with only a small change in the vowels of the Hebrew text, might have been made by many people in eras when they did not add vowels to Hebrew text. Therefore, it is not surprising that they likely made this exegesis during the Tannaitic period.

To compensate for these methodological flaws, instead of resorting solely to interpreting and pursuing particular themes, the study of Midrashic literature has focused attention on reconstructing the editing processes of specific traditions by finding traces of quotations from other traditions contained in a single document. This method was taken because it can more surely confirm mutual effects. Osawa’s study, unfortunately, does not seem to go deeper into the research from this perspective. In the future, we would expect his continuing research to incorporate the philology of Jewish literature.

4. Parts of the Argument that Require Rethinking

In making his argument, Osawa argued, “But the LORD said, ‘Who caused you to make golden gods? It is I, who have given you much gold.’ In other words, God himself acknowledged that the cause of the Incident of the Golden Calf lies with Him. Therefore, this interpretation might imply that the parties concerned in the case, including the people of Israel, are not liable (pp. 122–123), explaining that “God acknowledges that He is solely responsible for causing the Incident of the Calf to happen.” Although it is indeed God Himself who allowed the Israelites to receive gold works from the Egyptians, He awarded these gold works to them for their 430 years of slavery. Although it was God who gave gold to Israel, its use was determined by their free will. The decision of using the gold for either right or wrong purposes, such as using golden holy vessels for the Temple cult or for building a golden calf, was entrusted entirely to human judgment. Therefore, he needs to add an element of “human free will” to this type of discussion.

Furthermore, Osawa’s above quote was cited as his commentary on a quote from Tosefta, Kippurim 4 (5) 14. According to the edition of S. Lieberman, the passage that

may be read as “Who caused **you** to make golden gods?” was not written in the second person. Instead, the passage “Who caused **them** to make golden gods?” should be read in the third person. Although this is a complicated matter, it seems that such a mistake could have been avoided by confirming the passage against the revised edition. The reason why I took up the issue of reading the passage in the third person is that it is possible that “they” as a subject could actually refer to “much gold.” If the latter understanding is adopted, the course of the discussion may be slightly different.

Notes

- ¹ A. Shemesh & C. Werman, *Revealing the Hidden: Exegesis and Halakha in the Qumran Scrolls*, Jerusalem (2011): 43 Note 53. [in Hebrew]
- ² “Peshar” and “Midrash” have a common feature in that they do not seek to derive meaning from the context of the biblical text (P’shat), since they espouse fundamentally different ideas. (1) “Peshar” is a unique method of exegesis used by the Qumran community, while “Midrash” is part of the worldview espoused by Rabbinic Judaism. (2) “Peshar” is not aimed at the enactment of the Halakha extracted from biblical passages, and thus it is not the same as Midrash Halakha. (3) There is no hermeneutical method in “Peshar” that can expand on arguments such as “Kal vahomer” as used in Midrash Aggadah. (4) “Peshar” is intended to explain how the biblical accounts were/are going to be realized during or before the interpreter’s lifetime, seeking to prove the authenticity of the Qumran community’s viewpoint. (5) The contents of “Peshar” are a mode of exegesis hidden to those who are not members of the Qumran community; they are a mystery revealed only to the members of the Qumran community. Thus, there are no objections to the divinely inspired interpretations. This shows that the situation is fundamentally different from the world of the Jewish sages, which allows for several objections. Y. Frankel, *Midrash and Agadah*, The Open University of Israel, Tel Aviv (1996): 77. [in Hebrew]
- ³ The literary genre, “The Rewritten Bible,” was named by G. Vermesh. G. Vermesh, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism²*, Leiden (1973).
- ⁴ Avigdor Shinan, *The Embroidered Targum*, The Aggadah in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan of the Pentateuch, Jerusalem (1992). [in Hebrew]
- ⁵ David Henshke, On the Relationship between Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and the Halakhic Midrashim, *Tarbiz* 68, Jerusalem (1999): 187-210. [in Hebrew]