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Scripture and Tradition: Rabbi Akiva and the Triumph of Midrash (Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion)

Azzan Yadin-Israel

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The earliest rabbinic commentary to the Book of Leviticus, the Sifra, is generally considered an exemplum of Rabbi Akiva's intensely scriptural school of interpretation. But, Azzan Yadin-Israel contends, the Sifra commentary exhibits two distinct layers of interpretation that bring dramatically different assumptions to bear on the biblical text: earlier interpretations accord with the hermeneutic principles associated with Rabbi Ishmael, the other major school of early rabbinic midrash, while later additions subtly alter hermeneutic terminology and formulas, resulting in an engagement with Scripture that is not interpretive at all. Rather, the midrashic terminology in the Sifra's anonymous passages is part of what Yadin-Israel calls "a hermeneutic of camouflage," aimed at presenting oral traditions as though they were Scripture-based injunctions.

Scripture and Tradition offers a radical rereading of the Sifra and its authorship, with far-reaching ramifications for our understanding of rabbinic literature as a whole. Using this new understanding of the Sifra as his starting point, Yadin-Israel demonstrates a two fold break in the portrayal of Rabbi Akiva: hermeneutically, the sober midrashist who appeared in earlier rabbinic sources is transformed into an inspired, oracular interpreter of Scripture in the Babylonian Talmud; while the biographically unremarkable sage is recast as a youthful ignoramus who came to Torah study late in life. The dual transformations of Rabbi Akiva—like the Sifra's hermeneutic of camouflage—are motivated by an ideological shift toward a greater emphasis on scriptural authority and away from received traditions, an insight that sheds new light on the vexing question of midrash and oral tradition in rabbinic sources. Through this close examination of a notoriously difficult text, *Scripture and Tradition* recovers a vital piece of the history of Jewish thought.

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