

The Four Levels of Biblical Interpretation

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The rabbinic methods of interpretation are based on what they call *four levels*, abbreviated as PaRDeS.¹ PaRDeS is an acronym of the following words:

- Peshat (פְּשָׁט): meaning *plain* or *simple*. It is used for the most obvious and simple meaning of a text.
- Remez (רֵמֵז): meaning *hints*. It is used for the allegoric (hidden or symbolic) meaning beyond the literal sense.
- Derash (דְּרָשׁ): meaning *inquire* or *seek*. It is used for the comparative (midrashic) meaning, looking at similar occurrences of a word.
- Sod (סוּד): meaning *secret* or *mystery*. It is used for the esoteric and mystical meaning, as often used in the Kabbalah.

A closer look at the PaRDeS

Peshat – פְּשָׁט

Peshat refers to the plain text in its context in the scriptures. A chapter can only be fully understood in its context, and that context might include the entirety of the bible. Many biblical prophets quote other books in the bible. A simple example is Peter's quote of the book of Joel in his sermon (Acts 2).

The Peshat (or Pshat) is therefore the most basic literal meaning of the Torah. Rabbinic beliefs claim that *it is not necessarily identical to the apparent plain meaning of the text, but is an explanation of the text based on the tradition as it has been handed down in the Oral Torah (Mishnah and Talmud) following closely the literal meaning. Most traditional Jewish editions of the Torah are published together with Rashi's commentary, which is the classic example of Pshat exegesis.*¹

*The Jewish commentary that deals with the Peshat level is called the Mishnah, meaning second to the Torah. It offers simple explanations of the various Mosaic Laws and rituals. Coupled with the [Gemara], the two commentaries make up the Talmud. The [Gemara] is the commentary used in the Remez or hint level of interpretation.*²

Remez – רֵמֵז

The Remez is the hint level, and it uses allegorical hints. For example, if an author explains his interpretation of a biblical text without quoting a verse literally, a person with sufficient knowledge of the bible can still understand the meaning of the interpretation and the

allusions. The Remez is also an allegorical and philosophical level. It goes beyond mere elementary knowledge, for example by helping us to apply a text to our daily life.

Linguistic analysis of the text and gematria (sums of the numeric values of the letters in a word) are basic techniques of the Remez exegesis.¹

Derash – דרש

The commentary for the Derash (or Drash) level is called Midrash. The term comes from the process of thrashing grain – separating the kernel from the chaff. [...] Remez may be allegorical, but drash deals with parables or riddles. [...] Allegories (see Remez) are simply metaphoric stories that teach a practical lesson. Riddles, on the other hand, are far more difficult to understand.²

The Remez includes moralistic parables as well as derivation of rabbinical legal rulings based on the text. There are two types of Midrashim, Aggadic and Halakhic Midrashim:³

1. Midrash Halacha – Scriptural sources for Jewish Laws.
2. Midrash Aggada – blend of history, parables, and poetry.

Many parables and poetic texts are included in the Tanakh, like the psalms or prophecies, that have a deeper, a Remez, meaning. Even Yeshua (Jesus) uses parables in his teachings to convey deeper meaning.

Sod – סוד

The fourth level, Sod, literally means *secret*, because of the esoteric interpretation used in the Kabbalah. Another Sod level, the *Sod of Sod*, or *secret of secrets*, is sometimes used for *the innermost meaning of the Torah as it is expounded in the philosophy of Chassidism.*¹ Prophecies are sometimes called as being part of the Sod level, as they are deeper revelations, which are not of this world.

The rabbis describe it as one standing in the darkness of the early morning and seeing the finger-like radiance of the sun that announces its imminent rising. Once the sun lifts above the eastern horizon, the radiance disappears. It is the radiance or aura that speaks of [Sod] – the secret level. It can best be seen if one does not look directly at it, but rather catches it out of the corner of the eye.²

Conclusions

Some rabbinic methods of interpretation may be slightly problematic for several reasons:

WORD COUNTS & GEMATRIA

Considering how often the ancient biblical texts had to be copied in order to safely transmit them, it is surprising that only some minor errors were introduced in the texts.

And Cain said to Abel his brother. And it came to pass when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slayed him. Gen. 4:8, Masoretic text

Here, the words “*Let us go into the field*” are missing. They were re-introduced in many translations based on the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Tanakh) that contains them. In some cases, letters were simply doubled, or left out. The text can still be understood and therefore, these errors cannot be seen in modern translations.

Nevertheless, the result of these errors is that it becomes difficult to believe interpretations based on word counts, or sometimes gematria. This does not have an influence on etymological analyses of single words though.

OTHER

Many interpretations based on the Drash and Sod levels are difficult to comprehend, and are sometimes erroneous. Sometimes, single words are taken out of context in order to convey a certain meaning, even so far as to contradict the Pshat (simple, obvious) meaning of the text.⁴

Examples

The parables of Yeshua (Jesus)

The riddle aspects of the Drash can be seen in Yeshua’s parables. In Matthew 13, the disciples ask him why he uses these riddles. They ask Jesus to speak more plainly so that the multitudes might understand. To this, Jesus replies that the parables were designed so that the blind might not see. Expanding on this passage goes beyond the scope of this post though.

Paul’s interpretation of Hagar and Sarah

In Galatians 4:21-31, Paul uses the Remez level of interpretation, which is why it seems a quite unusual to people unfamiliar with it:

Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. Galatians 4:24-26

Considering that Paul was *educated at the feet of Gamaliel* (Acts 22:3), a grand-son of Hillel, the respected Jewish rabbi.” about Jewish religious law Acts 23:3. Therefore, he was used to the Jewish methods of interpretation, and his mention of *allegories* most probably referred to the Remez.

References

¹ Article on Chabad.org

² Article on Prophecy In The News

³ Article on Bet Emunah

⁴ Nehemia Gordon in The Hebrew Yeshua vs. the Greek Jesus, starting at 29:00

Additional links

- PaRDeS on Wikipedia
- Messiah in Remez, by Beth Emunah