

EDMOND JABÈS: RABBI-POET OF THE BOOK

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ABSTRACT

(Paper subsequently published in *Pacifica* 7 - February, 1994)

The paper locates the writings of Edmond Jabès in the context of the Rabbinic interpretive tradition. This tradition has been suppressed throughout much of Western history under the dominance of Christian and Greek construals of reality. The paper suggests that the history of interpretation has been shaped by the schism between Jews and Christians and their different understandings of the interpretation of texts. It draws some contrasts between Western and Rabbinic interpretive traditions, suggesting that whereas the Christian metaphor of 'fulfilment' has influenced much of Western interpretive practice, the Jewish metaphor of 'exile' runs as a counter-history to the dominant Christian tradition.

This 'exilic hermeneutic' is central to Jabès' writings. It alludes to all that is ambiguous, distorted, incomplete, untold, unwritten, unsaid in life - and all those voices who have been excluded from our mainstream conversations. It is also a hermeneutic that evokes a longing, a wandering desire, a deep questioning that in the end can sustain us, can help us survive. There is much that keeps us tied to the dominant order, the settled truth of having already arrived, the exclusion of those who do not belong. Jabès points us to a wandering, nomadic truth that knows absence and the desert, yet is sustained by an open, indeterminate book rather than a closed, completed book.

The paper creatively places Jabès' writings in the margins of the text - a demonstration of the Rabbinic practice that the text which gives rise to interpretation is intimately intertwined with the interpretation itself. Jabès emerges as a contemporary 'Rabbi-poet of the book', a deep and profound commentator on the 'Book of Questions' through which our existence strives - in all its pain and ambiguity, and its continual yearning and hope.

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