

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Marc Lee Raphael, ed. *Agendas for the Study of Midrash in the Twenty-First Century*.
Williamsburg, Va.: College of William and Mary, 1999. 136 pp.

Reviewed by Rivka B. Ulmer (Center for Jewish Studies, University of California, Los Angeles)

Published on H-Judaic (May, 1999)

This booklet contains an introduction and seven articles on different aspects of midrash study. This eclectic anthology contains comparative studies, presents new conclusions, addresses the editing of midrash, compares midrash and modern literature and includes a feminist study.

Steven D. Fraade in his “‘Comparative Midrash’ Revisited: The Case of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Rabbinic Midrash” demonstrates that the method of scriptural interpretation prevalent in the texts from the Dead Sea has almost no relation to the rabbinic method of exegesis called “midrash” due to different social and cultural settings. The “pesharim” of the Dead Sea Scrolls “decode earlier prophecies to locate their actualization in the life of the later interpretive community” (p. 6), whereas the rabbinic “petirah” does not have this objective. The “petirah” refers intertextually to biblical figures and events. One aspect of the “petirah” is dream interpretation, as discussed by Fraade; in addition to Fraade’s comments on dream interpretation one should refer to the fascinating inquiry by E. Guettgemanns in *Linguistica Biblica* (1987). In his essay, Fraade challenges the contention that the “peshar” in the Dead Sea Scrolls is a precursor of rabbinic midrashic activity. The methodology utilized in presenting his argumentation is cogent and compelling.

“Origen and Seder Eliyahu: A Meeting of Midrashic Trajectories?” by David J. Halperin is a comparative study that focuses on passages in Origen (*Homilies on Leviticus*) and the midrashic work of Seder Eliyahu. Origen’s ninth homily parallels rabbinic midrash concerning the scapegoat ritual. Esau is the repository for Jacob’s sins as found in midrashic literature; additionally in Seder Eliyahu God listens to Esau’s pleas and relieves him of the burden of Jacob’s sins. Halperin claims that in

respect to this one episode, rabbinic Judaism was influenced by Origen. In determining the intellectual history of certain midrashic passages one cannot ignore Christian texts.

“Seeing With the Sages: Midrash as Visualization in the Legends of the Akedah” by Marc Bregman posits that some midrashic texts provide the reader with a visualization of the events. In this essay, this highly effective teacher relies to some degree on the theoretical and practical framework of film technique, such as focusing. Certain rabbinic texts lead the reader as if one is sitting in a cinema. In my opinion, Bregman justifiably supplements rabbinic texts concerning the “Akedah” with pictorial evidence of “The Binding of Isaac” in order to illustrate some particular points of the story and in order to elucidate his theory of visualization in midrash. One might want to add that some midrashic scenes strongly lend themselves to comparisons with dramas, festivals and processions in the period of late antiquity in which the spiritual was frequently made visual. Ever since the discovery of the pictorial scenes in the Dura Europos synagogue, it has been noticed by Joseph Gutmann and others that some of these depictions reflect post-biblical material, including midrashic texts.

In his essay “Is Every Medieval Hebrew Manuscript a New Composition?”, Lewis Barth presents the reader with the dilemma faced by any editor of rabbinic texts in respect to a fluid text transmission that continued beyond the manuscripts into the printed editions. Rather than the “critical” or “synoptic” editions found in printed form, Barth takes the editing process of rabbinic texts to a different medium. Barth works on the very difficult text transmission of Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer; here Barth lists more than one hundred manuscripts and fragments.

The sheer number of these text-witnesses would render a synoptic edition impossible. Barth also discusses the available text editions of Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer which are all incomplete as far as all the possible text variants are concerned. His proposed "hypertext edition" in cyberspace would contain word-by-word collations of all text-witnesses plus commentaries, descriptions, electronic concordance capabilities, and numerous other possibilities. All these features would become accessible in "pull-down menus," in short, the Shangri-La of any scholar working with rabbinic texts. However, Barth, who is at the forefront of these developments, cautions that there are still some "significant technological issues" that will have to be overcome (p. 52). This reviewer accepts the likelihood that these technological problems will be resolved. However, these new "hypertexts" will raise the following questions: How accessible will electronic versions of rabbinic texts be, especially if they require sophisticated software or are published in CD-ROM editions that cost thousands of dollars? Will these specialized formats further limit access to scholars at smaller universities or libraries as is already the case with talmudic databases on CD-ROMs? Nevertheless, the electronic revolution in text editions has superior capabilities in respect to "searchability" and the combination of various sources.

"Men Imagining Women Imagining God: Gender Issues in Classical Midrash" by Dvora E. Weisberg addresses the issue of women praying before the Almighty in midrashic texts. To the best of our knowledge these passages were all written by male authors and presented from a male perspective. Nevertheless, some of the women in midrash are portrayed as being effective petitioners before God.

Thomas Mann's trilogy *Joseph and His Brothers* is the topic of Alan T. Levenson in his essay "Christian Author, Jewish Book? Methods and Sources in Thomas Mann's Joseph." The reader learns that Mann purposely utilized the available contemporary German "aggadah" collections, in particular, Micha Josef bin Gurion *Der Born Juddas* 1918 (first edition), in order to make a political statement at a time when Jewish culture in Germany was sys-

tematically being annihilated. In fact, Mann emphatically stated that he wanted his Joseph novel to read like a "rabbinic midrash." Mann began his Joseph novel in Germany and had to finish it in exile in the United States. In the judgment of this reviewer, the examples of similarities between Mann's approach to the Joseph material and the approach to the Hebrew Bible by the rabbis of the formative period of Judaism of the first few centuries of the Common Era are not uniquely rabbinic strategies. Many writers confronted with a historical or biblical figure have employed similar "midrashic" approaches, as for example Herman Melville in *Moby Dick*.

David Richter, in "Farewell My Concubine: The Difficult, the Stubborn and the Outrage of Gibeah," presents a novel approach to a well-known story in the Book of Judges. The larger part of the paper is devoted to the retelling of this story. Richter then applies the literary methods that he discussed in his introduction, especially of W. Booth's *A Rhetoric of Irony* and *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Literary genres greatly influence the perceptions and presumptions of the reader of any particular work (p. 113). Richter furthermore maintains that this "stubborn" piece in the Hebrew Bible contains clues of satire and parody, which can lead to reading the story in an "undecidable" manner. For example, feminist and source-critical approaches to this ambiguous story have been utilized. Richter's analysis brings to mind some text units in rabbinic midrashic literature, especially the case of the "mashal" which can be read from different genre approaches as well. After applying rhetorical "narratology," Richter states that the Story of the Concubine contains a political perspective during an age of chaos. This interpretation implying the politics of chaos seems highly appropriate in this volume focusing upon midrashic agendas at the end of this century.

This slim volume of midrashic studies should be in the library of every specialist in midrash and in comparative literature.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

Citation: Rivka B. Ulmer. Review of Raphael, Marc Lee, ed., *Agendas for the Study of Midrash in the Twenty-First Century*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. May, 1999.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3110>

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.