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Reviewed by Rachel Adelman (Hebrew College)

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Commissioned by Matthew A. Kraus (University of Cincinnati)

Bifocal Readings of Midrash: A Lens into Biblical Interpretation and the Rabbinic World

This collection of essays, *âItâs Better to Hear the Rebuke of the Wise Than the Song of Foolsâ (Qoh 7:5)*, is culled from the proceedings of the Midrash Section convened at the Society for Biblical Literature meetings from 2012 to 2014. A review of these diverse seven essays presents a particular challenge for the reviewer since there is not one theme or central text, or even a unified approach to the reading of rabbinic texts. Midrash itself, however, as a rabbinic method that entails creative interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, undergirds all these essays. Even the seventh contribution, âInner Biblical Exegesis in Rashbamâs Commentary on Qohelet,â by Jonathan Jacobs may be classified under âmidrash,â though Rashbam (Rabbi ben Meir, c. 1080-c. 1160) is renowned for his âplain-senseâ (*peshat*) commentary of Hebrew scripture. It is on the basis of midrash, as a *non*-historical contextual rabbinic method of biblical interpretation and as a lens into the history of rabbinic interpretation, that I will evaluate each of these essays. The title of the volume, taken from Qohelet 7:5, serves as an admonition: to hear the rebuke of the wise, the moral exhortation in the rabbisâ words, is more important than (to hear) the foolsâ songs, which serve only to titillate. The best of these essays soar when the song of midrash is heard alongside the words of wisdom.

The first essay by Ilaria Ramelli, âAncient Jewish and Christian Exegeses of the âCurse of Hamâ: Divergent Strategies against the Background of Ancient Views on Slavery,â presents a comprehensive study of the attitudes to the institution of slavery in the ancient world. The essay begins with a contrast between two models of slavery in the Hebrew Bible: the Hebrew slave, a temporary form of indentured slavery limited by the Sabbatical Year (*shemittah*), and the Canaanite one, who retains this social status more or less permanently. Ramelli goes on to review the rabbinic tradition, from the Talmud to *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*, which traces the status of the Canaanite slave, etiologically, back to the curse of Ham, Canaanâs son (Genesis 9:18-27). By contrast, the Jewish ascetic sects of the Essenes and the Therapeutae rejected the ownership of slaves altogether (according to Philo and Josephus). Likewise, the church fathers Origen of Alexandria and the Syriac, Aphrahat (in contrast to Ambrose of Milan and Basil of Caesarea), rejected the institution of slavery and reinterpret âthe curse of Hamâ allegorically. This essay, which reads more like a doctoral dissertation than a conference paper, is a thorough review of the history of interpretation on slavery in late antiquity and provides insight into the contrast between rabbinic and Christian hermeneutics.

The second, third, and fourth essays also speak to the history of interpretation (and misinterpretation by modern scholars of midrash). In Steven Sacksâs study, âJacobâs Double: A Reduplicative Confabulation of Post-

Biblical Literature,â the patriarchâs image is split between the âheavenly archetypeâ as engraved on the divine throne and the mortal founder of the people, Israel, in Genesis. While the image of the supernal Jacob is a trope found throughout the apocryphal sources, such as the *Hekhalot* literature (sixth to eighth centuries), it takes on a particularly nuanced hue in rabbinic texts (*Bereshit Rabbah, b. ág̱ulin, Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer,* and the *piyyut* of Kallir). Sacks grounds the rabbinic exegetical tradition in the double naming of Jacob/Israel, both names maintained throughout the Hebrew Bible, and in the complexity of his character in the patriarchal narratives. This hermeneutic move is characteristic of rabbinic mythmaking, which retracts from allegory and speculation of the heavenly realm, while at the same time upholding the complex image of the patriarch as paradigmatic for theological diversity and competing ideas of national self-conception in their time. This is a rather tall claim, which requires substantiation in an analysis of the polemics undergirding these rabbinic sources within their historical context.

In the third essay, âThe Holy of Holies or the Holiest? Rabbi Akiva's Characterization of Song of Songs in Mishnah Yadayim 3:5,â Jonathan Kaplan engages in a close study of the term â*qodesh ha-qodashim*,â a phrase invoked by Rabbi Akiva to justify the inclusion of this highly erotic poem within the canon. Where many modern scholars (Marc G. Hirshman and Judith Kates, for example) have interpreted the phrase to refer to the innermost sanctum of the Temple, âthe Holy of Holies,â Kaplan presents a corrective; the term suggests a superlative, the *Song* is âthe holiest of holy (books)â (pp. 64, 69, 74-77, 80-81).[1] He bolsters his argument by a close study of the Mishnah where all the inspired canonical books are deemed âholy,â defiling the hands (Mishnah Yadayim 3:5). In Kaplanâs reading, the *Song* is to âholiest,â according to Rabbi Akiva, because it expresses the divine love between God and the people, Israel, consistent with its allegorical reading throughout Tannaitic literature. Only secondarily, in the Kabbalistic tradition of the Zohar, did it come to be associated with the Holy of Holies of the Sanctuary. While Kaplan admits that one does not preclude the other, Akiva (the âlove rabbiâ par excellence) might be considered the founder of this mystical reading of the *Song of Songs*, which upholds both its literal erotic meaning and its allegorical one.

Likewise, Nehemia Polen presents a corrective to the supposed rabbinic principle that prophecy ceased during the Second Temple period and that the sagesâ interpretation is grounded *solely* in rational principles of argument and persuasion (according to such scholars as Frederick E. Greenspahn, John R. Levison, Stephen Cook, and Isaiah Gafni).[2] Rather than focus on *discontinuity* with prophecy, Polen argues that the rabbinic tradition becomes a conduit for âthe Holy Spirit,â based on *Seder Olam Rabbah* (*SOR*) (dating to the second century CE). While the role of the sage has replaced that of the prophet, this Tannaitic work never asserts that prophecy âceasedâ (*pasqah*) for Israel at the end of the biblical period. In his close study of the five verses from wisdom literature (Proverbs 22:17-21) that conclude this passage in chapter 30 of *SOR* (*Seder Olam Rabbah: Critical Edition, Commentary, and Introduction*, edited by Chaim Joseph Milikowsky [2013]), the rabbis become a siphon for the truth of the divine word. If so, âthen the assertion of sagely authority is grounded in the rabbisâ closeness to God, not in any presumed superior rational facultiesâ (p. 91). *Derashah* (homily) as a mode of inspired interpretation and performance is a direct heir to prophecy. I would love to see this strong reading of the rabbinic interpretive voice corroborated in further studies of the Aggadah, especially in the genre of tales of the sages (*maâaseh chachamim*).

The fifth essay, âBlessed Be He, Who Remembered the Earlier Deeds and Overlooks the Later: Prayer, Benedictions, and Liturgy in the New Rhetoric Garb of Late Midrashic Traditions,â is the most lyrical of essays in this collection. Lennart Lehmhaus engages in a deep reading of selected passages from *Seder Eliyahu Rabbah* (*SER*) and *Seder Eliyahu Zuta* (*SEZ*), which links midrash with praxisâliturgy, blessings and prayers in the Jewish tradition. Dating to the Geonic period (ninth to tenth centuries), the text combines a unique âhybrid characterâ as a âmoral guidebook for righteous conduct, narrative elaboration of Biblical themes, and learned exposition (or *Midrash*)â (p. 97). One such example entails a study of the Sinai episode to illustrate Godâs attribute of forbearance with regard to Israel once they committed apostasy with the Golden Calf. With illuminating insight, Lennart shows how the midrash moves from the classic *mashal* (allegorical tale) of a king (God) whose bride-to-be (Israel) has committed adultery, and then banishes his emissary (Moses) from the kingâs presence, into an exposition of five blessings that strongly parallel the sequence of blessings in the morning prayer (*barukh she-amar*). The passage suggests that, despite Israelâs betrayal, the initial good intentions to accept the Torah and Godâs sovereignty stand them in good stead. It serves as a kind of etiological narrative for how the Jewish people may appeal to God in supplication and praise. Perhaps *this*,

Lennart suggests, is the function of the prooftext, âmy spikenard gave forth its fragranceâ (*Song* 1:17, quoted in *SEZ* 4). Lennart also argues that *SEZ* forwards, in contrast to the elitism of the rabbis in the Talmud, a kind of âminimal Judaismâ for the non-learned Jew (*am haaretz*), in the form of a basic knowledge of Torah, important prayers and benedictions as well as moral behavior and piety (p. 110).[3] This study is groundbreaking in its combination of close, insightful reading and breadth of scholarship, even as it undermines the barriers between traditional subfields of Jewish studies in liturgy, Halakhah, and midrash.

The penultimate essay in this collection, âThe Role of Small Forms in *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*,â by Katharina Keim, is disappointing compared to the other six contributions. Perhaps this derives from the limitations of the method, an application of form criticism as founded by the Manchester-Durham Typology project (2007-11), to midrash.[4] The method empties midrash of all content; the innovative interpretation of the biblical text is deemed âwhite space.â Keim, instead, focuses on âsmall forms,â all that is *irrelevant* to the discourse, such as the use of lemmata, which introduce prooftexts (âas it is saidâ), questions and answer units, lists, and terms that introduce *meshalim* (parables). She argues that the discourse structure in *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* attempts to appropriate a classic midrashic form in non-classic and flexible ways, yet she does not engage in comparative work with any earlier compositions to support this claim. Her work with lists is somewhat more compelling, where she shows that the bare list (the Ten items created at twilight of the Sixth day, for example) may be expanded, with each item elaborated in a narrative expansion later in the composition. Rather than a narrow focus on form, Keim explores the content of the âbare listsâ and the way these expansions constitute a thematic and unifying element within the composition as a whole. But she fails to engage with the alternative manuscript tradition, or to refer to parallel aggadic passages, and seems not to have read contemporary scholarship on the topic.[5] Her conclusion that this later midrashic work suggests âa gradual departure from the use of standardized small form structures towards a more flowing discursive style of textâ rings true (p. 165), but the answer to *wherefor*e rings hollow.

The final essay in this collection, âInner-Biblical Exegesis in Rashbamâs Commentary on Qohelet,â is rather anomalous as it does not engage with midrash per se. Insofar as inner-biblical exegesis is precisely what midrash *does,* Jonathan Jacobsâs essay fits. He suggests that Rashbam (as a supposedly *peshat* commentator) engages in a classic form of rabbinic discourse. But his commentary uses intertextuality for the sake of philology in order to narrow down the meaning of a particular Hebrew term in *Qohelet* rather than engage in multi-vocal associative play that midrashic interpretation often entails.

This selection of essays advances midrash scholarship in three directions: with regard to the history of interpretationâwhether it be the âcurse of Hamâ in the justification of slavery, the split image of Jacob the patriarch, the term âthe holiest of holies,â or the Divine Spirit as the source of rabbinic inspiration and the sequel to prophecy; with regard to the content and composition of such texts as *Seder Eliyahu Rabbah* and *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*; and with respect to expanding the approach to the reading of midrashâinner-biblical exegesis and form criticism.

Notes

[1]. Marc G. Hirshman, *A Rivalry of Genius: Jewish and Christian Biblical Interpretation in Late Antiquity* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996); and Judith Kates, âEntering the Holy of Holies: Rabbinic Midrash and the Language of Intimacy,â in *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs*, ed. Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 201-213.

[2]. Frederick E. Greenspahn, âWhy Prophecy Ceased,â *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108, no. 1 (1989): 37-49; John R. Levison, âDid the Holy Spirit Withdraw from Israel? An Evaluation of the Earliest Jewish Data,â *New Testament Studies* 43 (1997): 35-57; Stephen Cook, *On the Question of the âCessation of Prophecyâ in Ancient Judaism* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011); and Isaiah Gafni, âRabbinic Historiography and Representations of the Past,â in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 295-312. See also Benjamin Sommerâs critique of Greenspahn in âDid Prophecy Cease? Evaluating a Reevaluation,â *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 31-47.

[3]. See also Lennart Lehmhaus, ââWere Not Understanding and Knowledge Given to You from Heaven?â Minimal Judaism and the Unlearned âOtherâ in Seder Eliyahu Zuta,â *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (2012): 230-258.

[4]. See `http://www.alc.manchester.ac.uk/subjects/middleeasternstudies/research/projects/ancientjewishliterature/`

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[5]. Dina Stein, *Meimra, magia, mitos: Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer le-âor ha-sifrut ha-âamamit* [Maxims, magic, myth: A Folkloristic perspective of Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2004); and Rachel Adelman, *The Return of the Repressed: Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer and the Pseudepigrapha* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

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