Introduction

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One of the most compelling and characteristic features of Jewish creativity is its "midrashic imagination." Growing out of the earliest interpretations of the Bible, the genres of Midrash, as they developed in classical Judaism, extend genres found in the Bible itself. Thus just as the Bible is marked by legal, theological, legendary, historiographical, and rhetorical materials—which are variously, though not systematically, subject to clarifications and expansions *within* the biblical corpus—so are the earliest collections of Midrash (*outside* the Bible) marked by sustained hermeneutical attention to just these literary texts. The result is a rich harvest of interpretations that virutally transform the Bible into a rabbinic work, so profoundly and vigorously do the sages project their own theological and legal agenda into Scripture. What is more, rabbinic Midrash expands and develops the native biblical genres themselves. The result of this development is sustained legal and theological discussions, homilies of various sorts and types, and legendary accretions to the historical narrative of the Bible.

All this is Midrash—forged out of a subtle, serious and even playful imagination, as it comes to grips with life and Scripture. As interpretations succeeded or complemented one another, a massive texture of texts and techniques formed the warp and woof of rabbinic culture, setting its patterns and forms for the ages. Each new period saw successive developments along these lines, even as radically new expressions emerged. In some areas like law, midrashic correlations of biblical texts soon gave way to correlations among the rabbinic solutions, in increasing subtlety. In theology, the impress of philosophy or theosophy led to different uses of the scriptural inheritance, and therewith different conceptions of the nature of the biblical text. And finally, even in the area of medieval historiography, where scholars have often pondered the balance of fact and fiction, one may discover a midrashic template at the core. Therefore across the breadth of Judaism, it is not only the insistent recourse to the Bible that marks its creativity, but the very midrashic mode of correlating Scriptures among themselves and with new values, virtues or events. From this perspective, "Midrash" is not only a (multifaceted) literary genre but itself a generic structure of Jewish tradition.

The chapters in this book provide a select but significant sampling of the dimensions of the topic. As hermeneutics roughly subdivides into the three

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broad areas of theory of textual meaning, strategies of interpretative technique, and modes of actualizing received authors or authorities, a threefold structure underlies this collection. There is not only a repeated concern of the authors to address the presuppositions or conditions of a certain body of texts, through specific examples, but an attempt to clarify the exegetical techniques used and the way these contribute to the texts at hand. In this way one can see how interpretation retrieves its sources and shapes them for the ongoing culture. Even historiography could not escape the grip of exegesis.

The opening part of this collection therefore begins with a discussion (by I. Gruenwald) of Midrash as a fundamental constituent of the Jewish imagination. The conditions of textual creativity are reflected on, as are the innovative results. Indeed, the role of historical conditions in providing many of the preconditions of exegetical revision are considered. The result is a wide-ranging reflection on exegetical creativity and tradition. To begin to mark the move from the text in itself and in its primary contextual sense (the *Peshat*) to these midrashic transformations (*Derash*), is the burden of the second essay (by D. Weiss Halivni). Here we immediately begin to see how the shift from the one (*Peshat*) to the other (*Derash*) inevitably involves a different sense of the text and its authority. By the same token, the authority of the test to sponsor or legitimate radically new readings, and to consider them as "always already" present to the textuality of Scripture, inevitably involves matters bearing on the authority of the interpreter. A whole spate of theological matters follow—all the more challenging as the *Derash* seems to diverge from the *Peshat*. Rabbinical sages are deeply concerned to validate their readings through reference to the original divine revelation at Sinai. Just as deeply must they ponder the perplexing problem of how their interpretations reveal the real sense of Scripture when it often seems to break with the latter, both lexically and ideologically. Bold constructs emerge to save appearances, including both the notion of an apparently "faulty text" and an apparently unbiblical exegetical tradition.

The final chapter of the part (by M. Idel) comes at the matter of *Derash* from a more phenomenological and typological perspective, and also provides a fitting transfer to latter discussions of rabbinic and kabbalistic Midrash. Once again—but now in bold conceptual terms— the effect of exegesis on the notion of the biblical text is articulated, as also the differing theologies that may result. Differences and continuities between ancient rabbinic Midrash and midrashic ventures in the medieval period are sharply formulated. The full bounty of *Derash* is thus heralded. The subsequent studies provide details.

Part II of the book turns to rabbinic Midrash itself and explores aspects of its hermeneutical creativity through two fundamental modes: mythmaking (by M. Fishbane) and parables (by D. Stern). The role of each mode as a

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shaping power of the exegetical imagination is explored. In different ways, both essays also treat matters of history and theology. The complex interrelationships that result indicate just how much Midrash is not just a reservoir of ancient exegetical activity and creativity, but also a source for penetrating the mental realities of the sages. The ancient rabbis thought textually, and to following their mind one must learn to follow Midrash.

Part III of the book turns to the Middle Ages and unfurls a broad canvass of Jewish interpretation. Both because of its inherent importance and to set more midrashic dimensions of medieval exegesis in perspective, we begin with an exacting study (by S. Japhet) on the revival of the *Peshat* in Franco-Germany; from here we turn to a study (by J. Stern) on the role of *Remez* or philosophical allegory in Spain and another (by E. Wolfson) on the more midrashic dimension of the esoteric sense, or *Sod*, in the Kabbalah (the *Zohar*, in particular). A study of aspects of renaissance exegesis (by A. Lesley), in its exquisite balance of types, follows. Moving among this spectacular array of themes and examples, the reader will see further how different authors hold multiple exegetical modes in creative tension, place them in different hierarchies, or actually subvert the apparent tensions or hierarchies. It will not follow, therefore, that *Peshat* is simply the "lower" form of interpretation. For this would hardly conform to the task and agenda that the practitioners of this craft set for themselves (or, indeed, of the caustic way they regarded other types of interpretation); nor would it conform to the unexpected way that masters of the *Sod* claimed (in one way or another) that this truth is the truth of the *Peshat* and that only a proper understanding of the *Peshat* (or even the *Derash*) will reveal the *Sod*. Thus we come to see the paradoxical relations among the methods and are forced to recognize that for many exegetes the *Peshat* is the "deepest" of all levels of interpretations—concealing the *Sod*. The philosophical allegorists have a completely different perspective on this issue and quite different appreciations of the functions of *Derash* and *Remez*. In short, the famous rabbinic dictum, that "Scripture never loses its *Peshat* sense," is parsed in altogether different and paradoxical ways in the history of Jewish interpretation.

The final part of the book takes us into an unexpected realm: historiography. Here we see in no uncertain terms just how much the "midrashic imagination" prevailed on the masters and formulators of Jewish memory, in both medieval Italy and Germany. The implications of the essays (by R. Bonfil, S. Bowman, and I. Marcus) are far ranging and far reaching, and they return us to the opening point that "Midrash" is a fundamental habit of mind, imagination, and creativity for rabbinic culture. Indeed, the very notions of fact and fiction must be qualified here. For once we talk of midrashic fact and midrashic fiction there is a certain collapse of old polarities. The enmeshment of medieval Jewish culture in textuality thus had its inevitable

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result in historical texts of equally complex textuality—of a type that the authors convincingly describe as midrashic.

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