Midrash and Midrashic Interpretation

It is often remarked that what is Jewish about the Bible is not the Bible itself, not even the Hebrew text of the Bible, but the Jewish interpretation of the Bible. And of all the types of Jewish biblical interpretation, none have been identified so closely with the Jewish Bible as midrash. Indeed, the two have been so closely identified that for some, midrash has become a virtual trope for Judaism, a figure for all that is distinctive and different about the Jews, their religion, and culture.

Midrash is the specific name for the activity of biblical interpretation as practiced by the Rabbis of the land of Israel in the first five centuries of the common era. The Hebrew word derives from the root, d-r-sh, which literally means "to inquire" or "to search after." In the earlier books of the Bible, the root is used to refer to the act of seeking out God's will (e.g., Gen. 25:22; Exod. 18:13), particularly through consulting a figure like Moses or a prophet or another type of oracular authority. By the end of the biblical period, the locus for that search appears to have settled on the text of the Torah where, it was now believed, God's will for the present moment was to be found. Thus the scribe Ezra, we are told in the book by his name, "had dedicated himself to study the Teaching (torah) of the Lord so as to observe it" (Ezra 7:10). The Hebrew word for "study" used in the verse, lidrash, has the same root as midrash. By late antiquity, midrash had come to designate Bible study in general. The Rabbis called their academy a bet midrash, literally "a house of study," and from such usage, midrash came to be the term the Rabbis themselves employed to designate the way they studied Scripture and interpreted its meaning.

In its primary sense, then, midrash refers to an activity, a mode of study. Somewhat confusingly, the same word is also applied to the products of that activity, namely, individual interpretations—a specific midrash of a verse or word, for example. These midrashic interpretations originally circulated and were transmitted orally, both in rabbinic schools and through synagogue sermons. Around the 3rd or 4th century CE, the oral traditions of the Rabbis began to be collected in literary anthologies, and these collections also came to be known as midrashim, as in Midrash Rabba, the folio-sized collection of homiletical midrashim on the Torah which was first pub-
lished in Constantinople in 1512. For the past hundred years, however, some scholars have appropriated the word "midrash" as a collective term to describe ancient biblical interpretation in general. For example, the French scholar Renee Bloch used the term "midrash" to describe any ancient "meditation on the sacred texts," an activity that could be found equally in the Aramaic translations of the Bible, in many of the books of the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, and in the New Testament, as well as in later rabbinic text. And still more recently, the term has passed into popular circulation as a name for all "creative" interpretations of the Bible that seek to move beyond the historical, "original" sense of the biblical text. In this usage, the word "midrash" stands for everything from novelistic retellings of biblical episodes to post-modernist essayistic explorations of Genesis and Exodus, New Age homilies, and contemporary poems that re-imagine the biblical text.

Language, of course, follows usage, not the strictures of scholars. Even if the latter (including myself) would prefer to restrict the use of the word "midrash" to the ancient biblical interpretations of the Rabbin—-who, if they did not invent the term, nonetheless were the first ones to use it extensively—-scholars do not control the fate of words. On the other hand, while contemporary efforts as "neo-midrash" are not direct descendants of the classical midrashic tradition of the Rabbis, it is also not entirely inappropriate to call these latter-day compositions living examples of the midrashic "spirit," motivated by some of the same desires that inspired the Rabbis to interpret the Bible. Yet precisely how to define that "spirit" is not an easy task. Perhaps the closest thing to a definition might be the classical midrashic statement attributed to the early sage Akiva (died ca. 135 CE), a comment on Deut. 32:47: "[This law] is no empty thing for you, its dust repels meken." Exploiting the fact that the preposition mekem literally means "from," not "for," you, Akiva explained: "If it seems empty, it is from you—on account of your own failure—for you do not know how to study (midrash) its meaning properly." (Gen. Rab. 11:14). The imperative facing every Bible interpreter is, to paraphrase F. M. Foster, to connect, to find the text's significance for the present moment, to make it speak to us now. Nothing in the Bible is without such significance. If the interpreter can't find it, the fault is his or her own, not the Bible's. Akiva's elaboration might be called the credo of Jewish biblical interpretation.

In fact, the precise relation of midrash to other types of Jewish biblical interpretation, and to Jewish tradition at large involves a truly complex set of questions, and these become even more complicated if the relationship of midrash is considered in connection with the competing traditions of Christian and Islamic interpretation. Ultimately, these questions boil down to some of the most fundamental issues that involve the study of biblical interpretation in general, and Jewish interpretation in particular. What does it mean to call a type of interpretation like midrash "Jewish"? Is there a distinctly or uniquely "Jewish" way of reading the Bible? Is a Jewish reading of the Bible distinguished merely by its content and by the theological beliefs it brings to its reading, or is there something intrinsically different about the very procedures of interpretation that Jews employ as opposed to those, say, Christian readers of the Bible?

Within the context of this Jewish Study Bible, it would seem especially opportune to consider these questions even if there are no definitive answers to them. We may begin with a historical sketch of midrash's development. The origins of midrash lie in biblical tradition itself where many biblical passages self-consciously look back upon earlier passages and, in one way or another, reinterpret their meaning. The book of Chronicles, for example, consciously revision the history of the earlier books of Samuel and Kings, adding some episodes and omitting others, and generally spinning the earlier narrative in the course of retelling it in a politically tendentious direction amenable to its author. Elsewhere, many "later" verses in the Bible recycle allusions.
and imagery from "earlier" biblical texts in order to apply them to new contexts and situations. The law of marital divorce became the imagery to describe God's punishment of the people of Israel (cf., e.g., Deut. 24:1-4 and Jer. 3:1); the exodus from Egypt (Exod. chs. 1-15), the paradigm for all future redemption stories, see, for example, Isa. 43:16-20; 51:9-11; Ezek. ch. 20).

In a very few cases it is possible even to see how certain textual "problems" are solved within the Bible itself. For example, in the year 605 BCE, some twenty years before the destruction of the First Temple and the exile of the Judeans to Babylon, the prophet Jeremiah prophesied that Judea "shall be a desolate ruin, and those nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years" (Jer. 25:11). In a second prophecy, somewhat later, he went on to prophesy that "when Babylon's seventy years are over, I will fulfill to you My promise of favor—to bring you back to this place" (29:10).

And some seventy years later, in 538 BCE, when the Judean exiles did indeed return to Judea from Babylon, they must doubtless have believed that Jeremiah's prophecy had been fulfilled. Some 350 years later, however, around the year 165 BCE, in despair over the Hellenistic persecution of their religious practices, Jews had greater difficulty believing in the fulfillment of Jeremiah's promise of redemption even if they were physically living in the land of Israel. The author of the book of Daniel, in order to bolster faith in the apocalyptic he believed was imminent, reinterpreted Jeremiah's "earlier" prophecy so that seventy years became seventy "weeks" of years—490 years, in other words—a date that brought the ancient prophecy close enough to his own time so as to convince his audience of its truth. Or to give a second example of a different type of "interpretation," here is a case where two earlier verses seemed to a later biblical author to contradict each other: Exod. 12:8 stipulates emphatically that the Passover sacrifice must be roasted (tshu 'eib). Speaking about the same sacrifice, however, Deut. 16:7 says, "You shall cook (nashah) it"—a verb implying that the meat should be boiled (as in a stew). 2 Chron. 35:13, obviously troubled by the discrepancy between the two Torah verses, "solved" the textual problem (if not the culinary one) by maintaining both locations: The Jews "cooked the passover sacrifice in fire" (nashah hapelah 'eib)—they boiled the passover sacrifice in fire (which probably means that they braised it).

The scholar Michael Fishbane, who has exhaustively studied these and similar cases in the Bible, has described them as part of a larger phenomenon which he calls inner-biblical exegesis (see "Inner-biblical Interpretation," pp. 182-185). Although most of these examples are not strictly speaking, exegeses (toseftot as they do not explain or clarify anything about the earlier verse), they nonetheless exhibit certain tendencies—inherent dynamics, as it were—that are, at least, exegetical reflexes. These include the tendencies (as we have seen) to harmonize conflicting or discordant verses; to reemploy and reapply biblical paradigms and imagery to new cases; to reinvest "old" historical references with "new" historical contexts; and to integrate nonhistorical portions of the Bible within the larger context of biblical history (for example, by giving individual psalms historical superscriptions that "identify" the precise biblical episode during which David composed the psalm; e.g., Ps. 18:34).

Once the Bible was closed, Fishbane argues, these inner-biblical tendencies emerged as full-fledged, consciously applied interpretive techniques (demonstrating, if nothing else, the deep continuity of early postbiblical interpretation with the preceding tradition). Our earliest genuine commentaries on the Bible are the pešarim, or apocalyptic commentaries, found among the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran, and the allegorical treatises on the Bible written by Philo of Alexandria. The vast amount of early postbiblical interpretation is found, however, not in formal commentaries but in nonexegetical works that span the entire range of ancient postbiblical Jewish literature. These include the Apache Tarumim (or

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translations); the various works of the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha which claim to "fill in" missing episodes or accounts from the Bible; and the various types of compositions sometimes called "the Re-Written Bible," works like the Genesis Apocryphon, the book of Jubilees, and Pseudo-Philo's Biblical Antiquities. These last works claim merely to "retell" the biblical narrative. They do so, however, by adding in, without comment, numerous details and events nowhere to be found in the Bible itself that are really implied interpretations, that is, solutions to "problems" ancient readers may have had with the biblical text.

Such is the context within which rabbinic midrash emerged in Roman Palestine as one type of Jewish exegesis among many others in the first centuries of the common era. We know very little about the inner history of midrash or about its practice, presumably in schools, academies, and synagogues. The one thing we do know is that, with a few scattered exceptions, the Rabbis did not explicitly theorize about their mode of interpretation or formally legislate its procedures. As a result, nearly everything we can say about midrash must be adduced from the texts themselves.

Generally speaking, the underlying interpretive assumptions that the Rabbis brought to midrash were not different from those of their nonrabbinic contemporaries, Jewish or Gentile. As scholars have shown repeatedly over the last century, the Rabbis shared hermeneutical techniques and procedures with their Greco-Roman neighbors as well as with the larger and more ancient Near Eastern culture into which ancient Judaism was born. Midrash dealing with halakhah, or legal matters, uses many of the same hermeneutical principles used by Greek and Roman jurists, and the Rabbis seem to have borrowed at least the names for some of those principles from their pagan contemporaries. In the realm of aggadah—narrative and love—midrash applied to the Bible techniques known to be used in ancient literary and dream interpretation. Such, for example, seems to be the origin of gematria, perhaps the most "notorious" type of hermeneutical technique in midrash; wherein the numerical sum of a word's letters is used to decode its meaning. A good example of this type of technique is an interpretation attributed to R. Levi for the word 'khah ('ala'), the first word in the book of Lamentations, a book that the Rabbis read not only as a lament but also as a prophecy of the destruction of the Temple. The numerical sum of the word's four letters (alef = 1; yod = 10; kaf = 20; heh = 5) is 36, and this number, according to R. Levi, points to the 36 transgressions punishable by excommunication that the Jews committed, thereby bringing upon themselves the destruction of the Temple. The unusual word 'khah,' with its archaic elongated form (rather than the shorter, more common 'khah') was understood, in other words, to be the hermeneutical key to the meaning of the entire scroll of Lamentations—the reason the Jews were forced to lament their fate. Along the same lines, in a related but different form of interpretation—nationikon (literally: stenographic interpretation), or interpretation by acrostics—Ben Azai used the same word's four letters as a key to showing that the Jews were not punished until they had denied the One (alef) God; transgressed all Ten (yod) Commandments, spurned circumcision (which was given after twenty [heh] generations), and—on top of everything else—rejected all the commandments in the Five (heh) Books of Moses. Both types of hermeneutical principles are attested in ancient handbooks for dream interpreters.

Beyond these particular techniques, however, nearly all ancient readers of the Bible also shared four basic beliefs about the nature of Scripture, as James Kugel has cogently argued. First, they believed that the Bible was essentially a cryptic document—that its true meaning was not to be found on the surface but had to be discovered within the text, and that this discovery required special skills and wisdom. In this, ancient readers of the Bible would have found themselves in agreement with ancient philosophers for whom it was no less a—
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Midrash and Midrashic Interpretation

It is manifest that all truth is obscure, never obvious or manifest to all; otherwise, anybody could be a philosopher or, for that matter, a scriptural exegete! Second, the Bible was believed to be a perfect document, without contradiction, inconsistency, or superfluity. What might seem to be a contradiction or to be superfluous, even a word or phrase, was really an occasion—for some, a tip-off—for interpretation. Third, the Bible is always relevant—that is to say, its true meaning is always one that has import for the present moment. Nothing in the Bible—neither genealogies nor prophecies—is in Scripture for purely historical reasons, preserved for its antiquarian interest alone. Fourth, the Bible was believed to be of divine origin. As Kugel notes, however, this last feature was probably the least simple, since the Bible's divinity was not seen necessarily to preclude Moses' authorship. Furthermore, attributing divinity to the Bible means little if one does not define the nature of that divinity more closely. The God whom the Rabbis believed authored the Bible was hardly the same author as the God of an early Christian reader of the Bible like Origen.

Still, while the Rabbis shared these assumptions about the Bible with other ancient readers, Jews and Christians alike, they also brought some distinctive convictions of their own to their study. First and foremost, the Rabbis believed that the Bible—or what they called the Written Torah—was only one of two revelations God had given to the children of Israel at Mt. Sinai. Alongside the Written Torah, they believed, God had also revealed to the Israelites an Oral Torah which, as its name indicates, was delivered and transmitted orally. Precisely how to define the Oral Torah is one of the great debates among Jewish scholars. For our present purposes we may say that it comprises everything that the Rabbis believed was "Judaism" that is not explicitly written in the Torah; admittedly, this is a vast and heterogeneous body of material that encompasses everything from the many laws not spelled out in the Bible to the Rabbis' own beliefs and theology as well as all their folk wisdom and lore. Midrash itself is part of the Oral Torah, but the most important fact for understanding the role of the Oral Torah in midrash is that, for the Rabbis, these two Torahs—the Written and the Oral—were understood to be complementary. The "relevance" of the Written Torah for the Rabbis lay, we may say, in its application as Oral Torah; the two were not only in absolute agreement but deeply intertwined and mutually embedded. As a result, a great part of the Rabbis' midrashic efforts are devoted either to finding the roots of the Oral Torah in the Written Torah, or to elucidating the hidden truths of the Written Torah so as to make it yield the insights of what they already knew to be Oral Torah.

Nowhere is this more evident than in midrash halakah, or legal exegesis. One passage will suffice to illustrate the point—a series of interpretations connected with the laws of kashrut, the dietary laws, and specifically the regulations pertaining to the separation of meat and milk products. Few laws are more closely associated with classical Judaism. Yet the source of these laws is a single injunction in the entire Bible, "You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk" (Exod. 23:19) which, as we know today, was originally a cultic regulation, not a dietary rule. Curiously, that injunction also happens to be repeated verbatim twice more in the Bible (Exod. 34:26; Deut. 14:21), raising the additional problem of the verses' superfluity: Why say the same thing three times? Not surprisingly, the Rabbis exploited the multiple appearances of the injunction in order to expand the range of the single law. In the Mekhilta (Kapra 5, Lauterbach, III, 187-190), the earliest collection of midrashim on the book of Exodus, nine interpretations are offered to explain why the verse is repeated, and seven more simply to explain the full significance of the Exodus verse alone. Here is a small sampling of the interpretations:

R. Jonathan says: Why is this law stated in three places? Once to apply to domestic an-
imai, once to apply to the beast of chase, and once to apply to fowl.

Abba Hanin said in the name of R. Elea-
zer: Why is this law stated in three places? Once to apply to large cattle, once to apply to goats, and once to apply to sheep.

R. Simon ben Yohai says: Why is this law stated in three places? One is a prohibition against eating it, one is a prohibition against deriving any benefit from it, and one is a prohibition against the mere cooking of it.

R. Yosi the Galilean: Scripture says, "You shall not eat anything that dies a natural death" (Deut. 14:21), and in the same passage, it is said, "You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk." From this it follows that the flesh of any animal which is forbidden to be eaten if the animal dies a natural death (and is not ritually slaughtered according to the laws of kashrut) is also forbidden to be cooked with milk. Now one might think that fowl, since it becomes forbidden to eat if it dies a natural death, should also be forbidden to be cooked with milk. Scripture, however, stipulates, "in its mother's milk." This excludes fowl because it has no mother's milk. And the unclean animal [an animal like pig that Scripture forbids one to eat in any case] is also excluded from the prohibition [of cooking it with milk] because it is forbidden to be eaten whether it is ritually slaughtered properly or whether it dies a natural death.

The first two opinions in the passage use "the extra verses"—the multiple occurrences of the verse—to extend its application from a goat, the actual subject of the verse, to other species of animals. R. Jonathan and Abba Hanin both adopt the same interpretative strategy, but they divide the animal kingdom in different cuts, as it were. The third opinion, of Rabbi Simon ben Yohai, uses the extra verses to extend the prohibition from cooking milk and meat together (which is itself already an interpretation, since the biblical verse prohibits only cooking a kid in its mother's milk) to eating it and even deriving benefit from it (by, for example, selling meat and milk cooked together); this interpretation takes the biblical verse even closer to the complete dietary regulation in its full rabbinic form.

Now clearly, these opinions are being used to justify and to legitimate existing practices, which must have developed out of their own logic. The interpretations were not invented to derive the practices anew or for the first time. There is simply no way that any interpreter could have looked at the three identical verses and extrapolated from them the different prohibitions that, say, R. Simon bar Yohai proposes. With the fourth and final interpretation of R. Yosi the Galilean, however, the interpretations take a very different turn. The very form and style of Yosi's interpretation is of a very different nature than the first three—not only more expansive but also more academic in tone. The interpretation is based on the fact that Deut. 14:21 contains not only the prohibition against boiling a kid in its mother's milk but also the additional prohibition against eating an animal that has died a natural death and not been ritually slaughtered. From the fact that the two prohibitions are stated in the same verse, R. Yosi initially hypothesizes that all animals that fall under one prohibition should fall under the other as well. This would seem to be a completely unexceptionable assumption, but R. Yosi himself immediately argues against it—and here the real gist of his interpretation emerges. For the verse prohibiting boiling a kid in milk explicitly states that the milk must be "its mother's," thereby excluding fowl from the prohibition since, as R. Yosi explains, they do not give milk. Similarly, he continues, an unclean animal—that is, an animal like pig that cannot be eaten under any circumstances—also does not fall under the prohibition, which is to say, it could be boiled in its mother's milk as long as one didn't eat it.

The structure of argument in this interpretation is very different from that in the first three. Essentially, R. Yosi builds upon the contingency of the two prohibitions in the same
verse to draw a general principle, and then use that generalization to highlight a specific detail in the same verse ("its mother’s milk") to prove an exception to the generalization. This technique (in Hebrew known as kalal yeferit, a general rule followed by a particular) is one of the legal principles that the Rabbis share in common with ancient jurists in general. Yet even more striking about Yosi’s interpretation, which excludes fowl from the prohibition, is the fact that it conflicts with that of R. Jonathan, who did include fowl under the prohibition. Exactly what is at stake in this disagreement is intriguing but unclear—whether their dispute really extends to practice for some contemporary Jewish readers, it would be wonderful news to learn that a great sage like R. Yosi ate chicken with dairy products!, or whether it is a purely theoretical, academic argument. The more relevant observation to make is that the editor of the midrashic collection himself makes no note of the disagreement. He records the two interpretations along with the others as though there were absolutely no significant difference between them, no disagreement, no inconsistency.

This feature is common to the editing of many midrashic collections, but nowhere is it more the case than in midrash aggadah, that is, interpretations dealing with legend and lore, the vast terrain of nonlegal and homiletic material which effectively includes everything in rabbinc tradition from narrative to theology. In theory, midrash aggadah does not differ substantially or methodologically from midrash halakhah, and most midrashic collections mix halakhah and aggadah indiscriminately. As rabbinic literature developed, however, midrash became increasingly identified with aggadah, and it is for its aggadic interpretations that midrash has become most famous (or infamous, depending on your perspective) for its creative, playful, and multiple interpretations.

As a typical example of such multiple interpretations, consider the following passage. Gen. 25:19-36.42 is largely devoted to the story of Jacob and Esau and their rivalry from the time of their conception to their mature middle age. This rivalry began in utero. Rebekah, like all the matriarchs, cannot initially conceive, but once she does become pregnant with the two boys, Scripture tells us, "vayirtzotzu yabanim bekirah, "the children struggled in her womb" (Gen. 25:22). On this phrase, Gen. Rabbah, the classical midrash on Genesis, offers the following four interpretations:

R. Yohanan and R. Shimon ben Lakish [both offered opinions]. R. Yohanan said: This one ran (natz) to kill the other, and the other ran (natz) to kill the first one. [Namely, R. Yohanan associates the word vayirtzotzu with the word for “run” (natz).]

R. Shimon ben Lakish said: This one permitted [what was forbidden; by command (hitir tizivig) to the other, and the other one permitted [what was forbidden], by command to the first [meaning, in other words, that from the beginning each one’s laws and practices seem to have been diametrically opposed, in conflict with each other. The interpretation puffa vayirtzotzu and hitir tizivig say the two words quickly, and they’ll begin to sound alike.]

R. Berechiah said in the name of R. Levi: Lest you think that it was only after they left the womb that the one attacked the other, [this verse teaches us] that even while they were in the womb [Esau] raised his fist (natiel) against [Jacob]. This is what is written, “The wicked are defiant (zenu) from the womb” (Ps. 38:4) (playing on the word zenu and the Aramaic word for fist. This interpretation seems to emphasize the word bekirah, “in her womb” as the basis for its interpretation.)

"Vayirtzotzu yabanim bekirah" (“the children struggled in her womb”) means that they tried to run out of her womb. When Rebekah passed by a pagan temple, Esau would kick her to let him leave; this is what is written, “The wicked are defiant (zenu) from the womb” (Ps. 38:4) (playing on the word zenu and the second half of the
Each of these four interpretations offers a slightly different though equally typical midrashic way of reading the word *vayyipatztezu*. Some break it up into smaller words like *ratz* ("run"), or pur it with a similarly sounding phrase like *hitir tzizuyav* ("permitted the commands"), or connect the Genesis base-verse with another verse in Scripture (eg., Ps. 58.4) which, through more purring interpretations, is enlisted to gloss the meaning of the base-verse. In the very last interpretation of Jer. 1.5, the anonymous Rabbi exploits the fact that the Hebrew text of the Bible in a Torah scroll records only consonantal letters, and no vowels—a fact that, somewhat ironically, now allows the midrashic reader to change the vowels of certain biblical words and thus their meaning, as here from the active form, *yediatikha* ("I knew") to the causative *yedaitikha* ("I caused you to know").

What leads the Rabbis to base so many of their interpretations on phonetic puns on associations between the sound of a word like *vayyipatztezu* and other similarly sounding words and phrases? In part, this strongly aural dimension of midrash may derive from the Bible's own use of oral puns and sound-play—a habit facilitated by the very nature of spoken Hebrew—but it also probably reflects the way the Bible was learned by the Rabbis. Most likely, Jews in the land of Israel during the rabbinic period did not study the Bible by reading it directly in scrolls, which were doughty scarce and, because of their size, rather unwieldy; rather, they learned Scripture from hearing it read aloud during the synagogue service or in classes in the academy. From such repeated auditory experiences, one assumes the Rabbis memorized the scriptural text and carried it around in their heads as a *heard* text. As we now know, a text learned this way is "known" differently than one learned from having read it on a page (or scroll). For one thing, the page itself does not figure as a primary unit in one's memory of the text. Another thing is that one "hears" the text rather than "sees" it (even in the mind's eye), and as a consequence, one is more likely to associate like-sounding words or phrases or verses (the latter probably having been the main units of memorization) rather than these connected by visual elements (either physical proximity in the written text or on a page, or matters of orthography). And while it may seem paradoxical, it is in fact perfectly explicable why the Rabbis tend to atomize verses or words into their constituent sounds, and simultaneously to associate otherwise unrelated verses or phrases on the basis of shared phonetic elements; in both cases, they are responding to the phonetic/aural nature of the text. This is not to say that the Rabbis did not know the Bible as a written text; it was, in fact, the only text normatively written down in rabbinic culture. It was, however, also the only text in rabbinic culture to be regularly read aloud from the written scroll. Indeed, the Bible's most common name in rabbinic Hebrew is *migna*, "that which is read aloud."

Midrash, then, is very much an exegesis of the *heart* text. This does not, of course, explain everything in midrash. For while they are willing to take the boldest liberties in interpreting Scripture, the Rabbis are also the closest "readers" of Scripture imaginable, with an almost preternatural sensitivity to the least "bump" in the scriptural text—an unnecessary repetition or superfluity, any kind of syntactical or lexical peculiarity, a mere hint at something unsent in the way of behavior, or the smallest possibility of an inconsistency between verses or even between a verse and what the Rabbis believed must be the case. Since we have been considering Jacob and Esau, let us look at an interpretation of an-
other verse from their narrative, from the story in Gen. ch. 27 of Jacob's deception of Isaac, where he fools his aged blind father into giving him the blessing intended for Esau, the first-born son. Jacob's wiliness (of which this episode was not the first case) may or may not have been in itself a cause for embarrassment to the Rabbis, but Gen. 27:19 posed a very concrete problem for them. In response to Isaac's question, "Which of my sons are you?" Jacob tells his father an outright lie, "I am Esau, your first-born." How does the midrash deal with this problem?

The answer is quite simple: By re-reading the verse so that it no longer says, "I am Esau, your first-born," but "I am [that is, Jacob]; Esau is your first-born" (Tanch., ed. S. Buber, Genesis, p. 131). Now this interpretation may seem overly clever, especially as an attempt to whitewash Jacob's reputation, but in fact the interpretation exploits a genuine "problem" in the verse. For why does Jacob need to tell his father that Esau is his first-born son? As an answer to Isaac's question, the detail is irrelevant; and as a piece of familial information, it is obviously something Isaac knows. Further, the Hebrew word that Jacob uses in the verse to identify himself, 'anokhi, "I," is itself noteworthy as a somewhat archaic locution that every Rabbi would have instantly recognized as the opening word of the Decalogue—in deed, as the word with which God introduces Himself: "I am 'anokhi the Lord your God" (Exod. 20:2). (In fact, another, somewhat more expansive version of this midrash states that Jacob said, "I am he who will receive the Decalogue, but Esau is your first-born." [Gen. Rab. 65:18, p. 730.] Faced with all these textual "facts," along with the ethical problem raised by Jacob's outright lie, the midrashic reading might appear almost inevitable.

Almost, but not quite. Did the Rabbis believe that this was the "real" meaning of the verse, or what Jacob actually meant to say? This question takes us to the very heart of midrash and its hermeneutics. Some scholars have suggested that midrashim like this are midrashic "jokes," the humor lying in the self-conscious dissonance between what the Rabbi knows the Bible is saying, and what they wish it to say. This is undoubtedly true: What midrash continually demonstrates is the possibility that Scripture may mean something other than what it says. But there is also a way in which the playfulness of midrash may be interpreted as the Rabbis' sense of the playfulness of Scripture itself. After all, could God have ever really allowed Jacob to mislead Isaac and let the blessing be given to the wrong son? Could Isaac, our ancestor, have been so easily misled? Must he not have known to whom he was giving the blessing? Were not Isaac and Jacob merely pretending to deceive and to be deceived? Isn't this pretense at deception the subtext of the story in which Isaac and Jacob act out their roles of deceivers and deceived so that providential history, the history of Israel and of the Jews, can take place despite history?

The Rabbis, after all, fully knew who Jacob and Esau really were—not just biblical figures, not merely their ancestors. They were also the progenitors of Israel and Rome—the latter was almost as ancient an identification as the former—and, in a certain sense, they were Judaism and Rome. "The voice is the voice of Jacob, yet the hands are the hands of Esau." Isaac announces as the disguised Jacob approaches (Gen. 27:22). On which the midrash comments: "Jacob attains domination through his voice [i.e., the power of language], and Esau through the [power of] his hands." R. Yehuda bar Ilai is said to have added that R. Judah the Prince interpreted the latter verse in even more contemporary terms: "The voice of Jacob cries out for what the hands of Esau have done to him" (Gen. Rab. 65:21, pp. 733–74, 740). The Rabbis knew that the story of Jacob and Esau and their rivalry was not simply biblical history. It was also their own history, the contemporary reality in which they had to struggle daily merely to survive.

With this understanding of the hermeneutical background behind midrash, let us return to the question with which we began this
essay. What is Jewish about midrash? It would be tempting to say that interpretations like the preceding one, identifying Jacob with Judaism and Esau with Rome, point to the inherently Jewish nature of midrash. This is certainly true of the content of the interpretation, but it is worth recalling that ancient and medieval Christian students of the Bible used the same hermeneutical principle to identify Jacob with the church and Esau with Judaism. The same is true by and large of the ancient Jewish and Christian interpretations of the Song of Songs; both traditions interpret the poem as a love song between God and His chosen nation—the major difference being that in one case the beloved nation is Israel, in the other Christianity (or the church). Is the difference between Jewish and Christian interpretation then merely one of theological preferences?

Some scholars have posited the differences between the two interpretive traditions as being that between midrash and allegory. In fact, over the past twenty years, as they have awakened to the existence of midrash, literary theorists in particular have sought to see in rabbinic hermeneutics an alternative mode of interpretation to allegory. Where the latter is said to posit the existence of a reference or meaning “behind” the text as a kind of static metaphysical presence, midrash has been celebrated for seeing meaning “in front” of the text, in the intertextual play between verses in the deferral of a single absolute meaning in favor of a multiplicity of provisional and possible meanings, and not least of all, for its far more open complicity between the interpreter and the act of interpretation as a subjective exercise whose interest lies less in the outcome of interpretation than in the process itself. Some scholars have even identified midrash with a kind of uniquely Jewish “ontology,” or at least a mode of thinking whose difference from the so-called Greco-Christian logocentric tradition, usually identified with allegory, has been seen as closer to that of positivism.

The difficulty with this comparison is not only that its view of midrash is overly romanticized but that it fails to take into account the fact that midrash is itself a form of allegory—not philosophical allegory, to be sure, but nonetheless a form of interpretation that seeks to show how the text means something other than what it says. In this, midrash is not different from other types of ancient interpretation. There is, in fact, much in early Christian interpretation from the New Testament itself through Augustine and the Antiochene fathers that is midrash-like. The main hermeneutical difference between the two is that Christian exegesis is far more systematic because of its greater intimacy with classical philosophical culture. Christian interpretation is heavily theorized and more programmatic (and to that extent, more obviously tendentious than rabbinic interpretation). It is also driven, as it were, by a different set of anxieties. The main anxiety for Christian interpreters is the knowledge that the New Testament is indeed a belated document, a late-comer as it were, and hence the main challenge faced by Christian exegetes is to prove that the New Testament is in fact the key to understanding the Old Testament, and that the latter cannot properly be understood without the full knowledge afforded by the New Testament. In contrast, the anxiety driving the Rabbis is the worry that the Bible itself foresees their rejection and obsolescence; hence the constant challenge they face is to find through midrash a way for God to address them anew, to prove through the study of Scripture that they remain His chosen people, and that their interpretation, as embodied in the Oral Torah, is in fact the true and legitimate interpretation of the Bible’s meaning.

The other feature that truly distinguishes rabbinic midrash is its singular literary form, the modes of discourse in which its hermeneutics are articulated. These literary forms show the close connection between rabbinic interpretation of the Bible and synagogue hymns. The most characteristic of all these forms is the poems of paštâ, a form that may
have served (as Joseph Heinemann has suggested) as a kind of mini-sermon that introduced the initial verse of the weekly Shabbat Torah reading. Instead of beginning with that verse, however, the proem opens with another verse taken from a completely different part of Tanakh; this verse is typically called the “remote” verse because it is, for all practical purposes, unrelated to the weekly Torah reading and its opening verse. It is this verse that the proem actually “interprets,” building in the process a kind of exegetical bridge that eventually culminates in its true subject, the opening verse of the weekly reading.

As a brief example of the form, consider the following for the weekly Torah reading that begins with Lev. 24:2. “Command the Israelite people to bring you clear oil of beaten olives for lighting, so as to maintain lights regularly.”

Bar Kapparah (d. 230 CE) recited a petihah:

“It is You who light my lamp; the Lord, my God, lights up my darkness” (Ps. 13:2).

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to man: Your lamp is in my hand, as it is said, “The lifebreath of man is the lamp of the Lord” (Prov. 20:27). And my lamp is in yours. [This is the meaning of the phrase] “so as to maintain lights regularly” (Lev. 24:2). To which the Holy One, blessed be He, added: If you light my lamp, I will light yours. That is the meaning of “Command the Israelite people…” (Lev. 24:2).

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about this particular petihah is the speech the author of the proem puts into God’s mouth—a speech that is actually an interpretation of Ps. 13:2. God Himself confirms, as it were, the meaning of the verse in the psalm, but it is also through God’s “interpretation” that the preacher or author of this sermon speaks to his audience. While the interpretation itself, as well as that of Prov. 20:27, are independent exegeses, the proem joins them in order to make its own point about Lev. 24:2. Contrary to how it looks in Scripture, this verse is not simply a commandment from God to the Israelites to light a special candelabrum in the sanctuary. Rather, it is testimony to the reciprocity of the deeds of God and man. If Israel lights God’s lamp in the sanctuary, then He will light man’s lamp, namely, his soul. Or to put the same point in more general terms, human life is God’s response to human observance of the commandments.

The petihah epitomizes the characteristic type of midrashic literary form that exists precisely in the gray area between pure commentary, on the one side, and an origial, creative composition. Indeed, it is precisely in this gray area between the two separate realms of commentary and literature that midrash takes seed and grows, never crossing over entirely into either realm. Flourishing in the space precisely in-between, The petihah is also only one among several literary forms of this kind that come into existence in midrash as the discourse of its exegesis. These relatively short literary units—which include the parable, the extrabiblical legend, pronouncement and fulfillment stories (in which interpreted biblical verses serve as punchlines or prophetic realizations of unusual narratives), and various types of lists and testimony forms—are the real literary units of rabbinic midrash.

Unlike their contemporaries, the Rabbis did not write treatises on the Bible and its meaning (as did Philo, for example); nor did they initially compose tracts in which they sought to “rewrite” the Bible (although such works do come into existence in the early post-rabbinic period). It is not even clear that they wrote commentaries as did the members of the apocalyptic community at Qumran. We know very little about the composition or process of editing of the various midrashic collections, but from their contents and overall skeletal style, it would seem that they were compiled to serve as source-books for “professionals”—that is, rabbinic preachers and teachers who used them to prepare sermons and lessons. There is little indication that they were originally meant to serve as commentaries to be studied alongside the Bible nor were they, as were a number of early Chris-
tian exegetical texts, transcripts of actual sermons or lessons in Scripture. As anthologies of interpretations, with multiple interpretations recorded side-by-side with no comments and few attempts to navigate between them, these midrashic collections embody the delight of midrash in always yet another additional interpretation. Yet unlike their postmodern descendants, in which polysemy signifies an indeterminacy that reflects the fundamental instability of meaning, multiple interpretation as found in midrash is actually a sign of its stability, the guarantee of a belief in Scripture as an inexhaustible font of meaningfulness.

That the Rabbis preferred this type of anthropological composition to systematic treatises or formal commentaries is in itself a revealing fact about the way they saw biblical interpretation. For them, Bible study was an ad hoc activity directed essentially to an audience hungry for a response to its immediate needs and to the desire to have Scripture speak in the present moment. This feature of midrash is also one that seems to have troubled some later rabbinic authorities and even led them to dismiss midrash as at best a poetic form of speech that need not be taken too seriously. Partly because of such ambivalence, midrash’s fortunes following the rabbinic period decidedly waned. The high point of classical midrashic creativity was reached in the first five centuries in the common era, but while encyclopedias of midrash continued to be composed throughout the Middle Ages, original midrashic composition declined until, ultimately, the new forms of peshat-oriented exegesis—so-called contextual or plain-sense interpretation—emerged in the late 10th century in the Islamic world and the 11th century in Europe. What has survived in the popular Jewish tradition of Bible study from the classical midrashic traditions are primarily those interpretations that were selected by Rashi (R. Shlomo Yitzhaki, 1050–1105) for inclusion in his commentary to the Bible. Finally, in the 12th and 13th centuries, the literary forms of classical midrash were appropriated and revived by the fledgling kabbalistic movement in such works as the Sefer Bahir and the Zohar, where they were infused with a new mystical content and thereby transformed into a medium for esoteric teachings. At this point, however, another literary tradition had begun.

For much of the past two centuries, since the beginnings of the Jewish Enlightenment and of modern critical study of the Bible among Jewish scholars, most interest in premodern Jewish biblical interpretation has centered upon the peshat interpreters of the Middle Ages, with their more contextual, grammatically informed, and rationalistic exegesis of the biblical text. And yet, as has become increasingly clear in the last half-century, peshat exegesis has been more of an exception, almost a blip, in the long history of Jewish biblical exegesis. If there has been a dominant mode of Jewish reading of the Bible, it has been more in the “spirit” of midrash—if not classical midrash itself—with its imperative to connect to the biblical text, its irresistible playfulness, and its delight in multiple, polyvalent traditions of interpretation. And nowhere is this more visible than in the very page layout of what becomes the true Jewish study Bible—that is, the Rabbinc Bible, the Misparot Gedolot—as it was first published in 1566 by the Christian printer Daniel Bomberg and then successively built upon and expanded by subsequent publishing houses. On this page, as one can see from Figure 1, the biblical text is surrounded by commentaries and para-exegetical works—the Aramaic Tanquam next to the biblical text, with the commentaries of Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Nahmanides, Sforno, and others below. Although most of these commentaries are peshat commentaries, each one explicitly or implicitly insisting upon the univocal truth of its particular interpretation, here they all lie next to each other on the same page, as though there were no significant difference or disagreement between them, awaiting the reader who will study them all, gleaning each for its own contribution and added significance. In
a Miqra'et Gebalet (rabbinic bible). Vilnius 1907, from the beginning of Exodus 1

The page includes the biblical text, the standard Aramaic translation (Targum Onkelos), Rashi, a super-commentary on Rashi, Nahmanides, Ben Ezra, Sforno, and two other commentaries.

its celebration of the possibilities of multiple interpretation, this very page layout is "midrashic"—and powerful testimony in itself to the supreme power midrash continues to wield in the Jewish study of the Bible.

[David Stern]