Midrash and Indeterminacy

David Stern

Literary theory, newly conscious of its own historicism, has recently turned its attention to the history of interpretation. For midrash, this attention has arrived none too soon. The activity of Biblical interpretation as practiced by the sages of early Rabbinic Judaism in late antiquity, midrash has long been known to Western scholars, but mainly as either an exegetical curiosity or a source to be mined for facts about the Jewish background of early Christianity. The perspective of literary theory has placed midrash in a decidedly new light. The very nature of midrash (as recorded in the Talmud as well as in the more typical midrashic collections) has now come to epitomize precisely that order of literary discourse to which much critical writing has recently aspired, a discourse that avoids the dichotomized opposition of literature versus commentary and instead resides in the dense shuttle space between text and interpreter. In the hermeneutical techniques of midrash, critics have found especially attractive the sense of interpretation as play rather than as explication, the use of commentary as a means of extending a text's meanings rather than as a mere forum for the arbitration of original authorial intention. Some theoreticians have gone so far as to invoke midrash as a precursor, in a spiritual if not a historical sense, to more recent post-structuralist literary theory, in particular to deconstruction with its critique of logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence.

For students of midrash, the connection with literary theory has been both productive and troublesome. On the beneficial side, the new perspective has virtually revolutionized the traditional study of midrash,

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enabling its readers to view it as literary discourse in its own right. But specialists in midrash too often find literary theorizing about midrash—even when most insightful—not adequately supported by the requisite familiarity with the material under discussion, that is, more wishful than knowledgeable. This shortcoming is hardly theoretical, but it does call into question the motivation behind some recent attempts to extract from classical Jewish exegesis a model for an alternative, nonlogocentric hermeneutics to replace the ruling Western exemplars.

There are other, more obvious difficulties with these attempts, among them the basic question that can be addressed to the entire deconstructionist project: is there "any other way that thinking may operate beyond or outside the enclosure of logocentrism?" Precisely this question was asked in the pages of this journal not long ago by Zhang Longxi in an article exploring the parallels between deconstruction and classical Chinese hermeneutics. After considering from the Chinese perspective Jacques Derrida's supposed claims for the similarity of the two systems, Zhang disputes their validity and points out in the course of his essay a lengthy train of misinterpretations of Chinese thought by Western thinkers, among whom Derrida is only the most recent.[1] The deeper question raised by Zhang's argument, however, bears on the desire that led Derrida to invoke the Chinese model in the first place. That question in turn raises still other matters for inquiry that in their broadest terms concern our every intellectual effort to look at non-Western cultures through the lens of Western critical categories. If the essential theme of the Western hermeneutical tradition has been the challenge involved in understanding the Other, then cultures outside the West and its hermeneutical traditions would seem to epitomize Otherness. Yet granting the impossibility for the subject (the interpreter) ever to achieve total identification with the

1. Zhang Longxi, "The *Tao* and the *Logos*: Notes on Derrida's Critique of Logocentrism," *Critical Inquiry* 11 (Mar. 1985): 395. Derrida does not draw a direct parallel between deconstruction and classical Chinese hermeneutics but between Chinese writing and a nonlogocentric (or nonphonetic) system. What Zhang questions in his essay is the degree to which Chinese writing can be said to be nonlogocentric. Derrida himself, with proper caution, does not ascribe to Chinese writing a fully nonphonetic (or, one assumes, nonlogocentric) character, and explicitly states that "phonetic" and "nonphonetic" are never pure qualities as such but opposites in theory alone. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, 1976), p. 89.

David Stern is assistant professor of medieval Hebrew literature in the department of Oriental Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Parables in Midrash: The Intersection of Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (forthcoming) and coauthor, with Mark Jay Mirsky, of *Rabbinic Fantasies: Imaginative Narratives from Classical and Medieval Hebrew Literature* (forthcoming).

object of interpretation (non-Western culture/its hermeneutical tradition/a document of interpretation in that tradition), how then does one proceed to understand the Other without distorting it in the very name of Otherness?

In dealing with cultures that have actually developed more or less independently of the West, the solutions to these methodological problems may eventually have to come more from the direction of literary anthropology than from pure theory.[2] The case of midrash raises still other considerations, however, since classical Rabbinic exegesis, like Rabbinic Judaism itself, was not so much completely "other" to, or apart from, Western culture as it was a marginal presence on its borders, a tradition that developed by drawing on Western categories and transforming them without becoming wholly absorbed by them. Historically, Rabbinic Judaism arose in late antiquity out of the fusion between ancient Near Eastern Israelite tradition and Hellenism. Not surprisingly, then, its literature, including midrash, borrowed from both Biblical and classical literary traditions, yet managed to create for itself a fully distinct identity that exists in a kind of intermediate space between the conventional genres of Western literature.

Needless to say, the study of midrash from any methodological orientation must be able to encompass this complex historical etiology. No attempt will ever be sufficient that presents midrash and its hermeneutics in simple opposition to logocentrism, with the latter being characterized as a Greco-Roman or Christian development and the former as a Jewish one. To read midrash as a rewriting of Derrida, Jacques Lacan, or Edmond Jabès is equally misguided. The alternative, however, is not to study midrash through its own methods, which is essentially the way it has been read within traditional Jewish circles since the Middle Ages; rather, it is to approach midrash with a theoretical interest, but to be prepared to take a stance toward literary theory roughly analogous to the marginal stance midrash (and Rabbinic Judaism) historically assumed in relation to the intellectual categories of Hellenism (and in subsequent Jewish history, of Christianity as well as of Islam), which was to be simultaneously receptive and resistant to their universalist ambitions. Such an approach to midrash would be open to the categories of literary theory, yet conscious of *their* otherness and ready to transform them within its own contextualizations.

The present article attempts an investigation along the lines I have just sketched into one aspect of midrash that has been proposed as an antecedent or counterpart to the concept of indeterminacy as it has figured in recent literary theory. The midrashic phenomenon is the conception of Scriptural polysemy and its consequent habit of presenting

2. See Christopher L. Miller, "Theories of Africans: The Question of Literary Anthropology," *Critical Inquiry* 13 (Autumn 1986): 120–39.

multiple interpretations for Scriptural verses or phrases. As I hope to show, multiple interpretation in midrash bears little connection to the notion of indeterminacy; nonetheless, indeterminacy may still remain a significant category for understanding our own reading of midrashic discourse. This lack of equivalence between midrash and the theoretical categories we use to read it may not be purely negative knowledge. Aside from the sheer antiquarian interest in understanding the midrashic phenomenon within its historical context, it may help us see a little more clearly the very conditions of our own theorizing.

Any consideration of the relationship between theory and midrash might do well to begin with the difference between the self-reflexivity of contemporary theory—thought turned in on its own operations—and that of midrash, in which even its statements of theoretical import about exegesis are couched in the language of Scriptural exegesis. No better example of the midrashic habit exists than the Rabbinic traditions about Scriptural polysemy. The locus classicus for these traditions is preserved in the Talmud, where they are cited in the course of a debate over the question as to whether or not in a legal dispute one party may invoke multiple Biblical verses in support of its position, the assumption being that two prooftexts make a stronger case than one. Many sages appear to have opposed this practice, however, and accordingly the Talmud cites two sayings, the first attributed to Abbaye, a fourth-century Babylonian sage, and the second to the School of Rabbi Yishmael, a Palestinian sage who lived approximately two centuries earlier.

> Abbaye said: The verse says, "Once God has spoken, but twice I have heard" (Ps. 62:12). A single verse has several senses, but no two verses ever hold the same meaning.
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> It was taught in the School of Rabbi Yishmael: "Behold, My word is like fire—declares the Lord—and like a hammer that shatters rock" (Jer. 23:29). Just as this hammer produces many sparks [when it strikes the rock], so a single verse has several meanings.[3]

3. Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 34a. See also Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 88b. All translations in this essay are my own. A translation of the complete Babylonian Talmud is available in *The Soncino Talmud,* ed. Isadore Epstein, 35 vols. (London, 1935–52). There is also a Soncino translation of Midrash Rabbah: *Midrash Rabbah,* ed. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, 10 vols. (1939; London and Bournemouth, 1951). A comprehensive bibliography of all Hebrew editions and English translations of midrash may be found in *Midrash and Literature,* ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven, Conn., 1986). I will hereafter identify the Babylonian Talmud as B. and the Jerusalem Talmud as J. in citing Talmudic sources.

Both these interpretations, somewhat ironically, happen to make much the same point, but they derive it from separate verses in very different ways. The Psalms verse, which in its original context serves as an affirmation of God's faithfulness and justice, is understood by Abbaye as saying in effect, "One thing God has spoken but two things I have heard." In this case, the Hebrew words *ahat* and *shetayim* are read not as adverbs ("once" and "twice") but as substantives. In the case of the School of Rabbi Yishmael's saying, the verse from Jeremiah also has a meaning in its Scriptural context very different from the interpretation the sages give it. They understand Jeremiah's declaration as describing not the experience of prophecy but the substance of that experience, the content of prophetic revelation—specifically its literary product, the text of Scripture. This reading derives from what is for the Rabbis a genuine problem in the verse, the presence of the two similes in it. The Rabbis always undertake their study of the Bible with the assumption that every word in Scripture is both necessary and significant. If this is so, however, why are two similes of God's word, fire *and* a hammer, employed by the prophet? The answer—in effect, the interpretation—given by the School of Rabbi Yishmael can be paraphrased as follows: My word, says God, is like fire; but what sort of fire? Like those fiery sparks produced by a hammer when it strikes rock—and like the many senses that every verse in Scripture holds ready to let fly at the strike of the interpretive hammer.[4]

The idea of Scriptural polysemy presented in these two sayings represents a virtual ideological cornerstone of midrashic exegesis. The concept does not appear to have changed or developed perceptibly through the classical Rabbinic period; its use characterizes statements of both halakhah, Rabbinic law, and aggadah, the more homiletical and narrative portion of Rabbinic tradition. (If anything, polysemy is more frequent in aggadah than in halakhah.) Elsewhere in Rabbinic literature, the idea is expressed more allusively, often as a function of a stock number, usually seven or a multiple of seven. A statement in one midrash collection, *Bamidbar [Numbers] Rabbah,* thus refers to the seventy aspects [*panim*] of the Torah, while a later collection, *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer,* refers to the forty-nine senses of Scripture. *The Alphabet of Rabbi Akiba,* a semi-mystical tract of

4. For a full exposition of the two exegeses in this passage, see David Stern, "Literary Criticism or Literary Homilies? Susan Handelman and the Contemporary Study of Midrash," *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History* 5 (Jan. 1985): 102–3 n.1.

A brief word should be said here about my references to the Rabbis. The classical Rabbinic period spans nearly four centuries in Palestine and five in Babylonia, and generalized references to all the sages over this lengthy period are often unjustified and potentially misleading. Rabbinic literature itself, however, does not always distinguish between sages or their individual views, and in their views on the question of polysemy I can find no individual statements that lend greater specificity to the issue. Wherever possible, I have tried to speak of individual sages by name; all other references to the Rabbis in general should be treated with the caution required of all generalizations.

the early post-Talmudic period, describes how Moses was instructed on Mount Sinai in "all seventy aspects of the seventy languages" of the Torah. This idea, however, is already suggested in the Talmud in a passage that relates how on Mount Sinai "every commandment [*dibbur*] that went forth from the mouth of the Almighty was divided into seventy tongues."[5] As any student of midrash knows, the presentation of multiple interpretations (often, though not always, prefaced by the formula *davar aḥer,* "another interpretation") is probably its most ubiquitous feature, almost a kind of stereotype or commonplace.

The notion of Scriptural polysemy raises several questions: If every verse has several meanings, what did the Rabbis believe was the meaning of Scripture? Did the Bible even have for the Rabbis a determinate sense, or was it for them essentially an open text, an unbounded field for the unlimited play of interpretation? But if so, was any interpretation of Scripture valid? Or did there exist exegetical criteria, constraints upon the free activity of Scriptural interpretation, and if so, what were they? In the case of contradictory, mutually excluding, or opposed exegeses, what criteria existed for resolving these conflicts of interpretation?

We may begin by addressing the last question first, since it is explicitly discussed in the following passage, a homily attributed to another early sage of the second century, Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah, as recorded in the Talmudic tractate Hagigah:

> [Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah] recited this proem: "The words of the wise are like goads; like nails well-planted are the words of masters of assemblies; they were given by one shepherd" (Eccles. 12:11). Why are the words of the Torah likened to a goad? To teach you that just as the goad directs the heifer along its furrow to bring forth life to the world, so the words of the Torah direct those who study them from the paths of death to the paths of life. But [you might think that] just as the goad can move [and be removed], so the words of the Torah move [and can be removed]—therefore the texts says: nails [which once nailed down cannot be removed]. But [if you might think that] just as the nail only diminishes [as it is pounded into wood] and does not increase, so too the words of the Torah only diminish and do not increase—therefore the text says: "well-planted." Just as a plant grows and increases, so the words of Torah grow and increase. [What does the phrase] "the masters of assemblies" [mean?] These are the disciples of the wise,

5. *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer o Midrash Shloshim u-Shtayim Middot [The Midrash of Rabbi Eliezer or The Midrash of Thirty-Two Hermeneutic Rules],* ed. H. G. Enelow (New York, 1933), p. 45; *Bamidbar Rabbah* 13:15; *The Alphabet of Rabbi Akiba* [*Otiot de-Rabbi Akiva*], in *Batei Midrashot,* ed. S. A. Wertheimer, 2 vols. (1950–53; Jerusalem, 1968), 2:354; B. Shabbat 88b. For some discussion, see W. Bacher, "Seventy-Two Modes of Exposition," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 4 (Apr. 1892): 509; and Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism,* trans. Ralph Manheim (New York, 1965), pp. 62–63.

> who sit in assemblies and study the Torah, some pronouncing unclean and others pronouncing clean, some prohibiting and others permitting, some declaring unfit and others declaring fit. Should a man say: Since some pronounce unclean and others pronounce clean, some prohibit and others permit, some declare unfit and others declare fit—how then shall I learn Torah? Therefore Scripture says: All of them "were given from one shepherd." One God gave them, one leader (i.e., Moses) proclaimed them from the mouth of the Lord of all creation, blessed be He, as it is written, "And God spoke *all* these words" (Exod. 20:1; [my italics]). Therefore make your ear like the hopper and acquire a perceptive heart to understand the words of those who pronounce unclean and the words of those who pronounce clean, the words of those who prohibit and the words of those who permit, the words of those who declare unfit and the words of those who declare fit.[6]

This passage is a proem, or petiḥta, a common midrashic literary form, which probably derived from brief sermons that were delivered in the synagogue immediately before the weekly reading from Scripture.[7] The structure of the proem is conventional: it nearly always concludes with the initial verse in the weekly reading (as here, Exod. 20:1), while it begins with another verse taken from a completely different and unrelated context in Scripture (as here, Eccles. 12:11). After citing this latter verse, the preacher interprets it in such a way as to build a connection or bridge to the concluding verse; because the audience knows that verse, the proem's destination, the rhetorical shape of the form largely depends on the unpredictability and virtuosity with which the preacher can make the connection between the two verses.

In this proem, Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah's interpretation of Eccles. 12:11 offers an almost perfect illustration of midrashic reading. In the first place, the overall sense of the verse is never in doubt for the sage: "the words of the wise" can only refer to the teachings of the sages themselves. The exegete's task therefore does not involve disclosing a less obvious, hidden, or revisionist meaning for the verse; rather, it consists of unpacking the significance of each separate simile or phrase in the verse. That significance, characteristically, is assumed to lie in substantive contribution to meaning, not in figurative or ornamental novelty.

To unpack these points of significance, Rabbi Eleazar begins by "atomizing" the verse, interpreting each phrase as an independent hermeneutical item. Atomization is one of the most common exegetical techniques of midrash; it proceeds from the assumption that every word and phrase in Scripture is as meaningful in itself as within its larger

6. B. Ḥagigah 3a–b.

7. On the petiḥta, see Stern, "Midrash and the Language of Exegesis: A Study of Vayikra Rabbah, Chapter 1," in *Midrash and Literature,* esp. pp. 107–11.

Scriptural context. Yet at each successive attempt to fix a meaning for the separate phrases, Rabbi Eleazar finds himself faced with an alternative meaning or implication that threatens to undo the interpretation he has just proposed. If the words of the Torah are truly like a goad on a beast of burden's neck, perhaps they too can be removed. To resolve this hermeneutical dilemma, Rabbi Eleazar uses another common midrashic technique: he revises his initial interpretation by interpreting Scripture through Scripture and, in this exegesis, by modifying the initial figure with the succeeding phrase in the verse, the following simile or figure. Thus, he is able to rebut the unforeseen and problematic implication of his previous interpretation likening Torah to a goad by invoking the next figure in the verse that compares the words of the wise to nails, permanently and unalterably fixed. Following this revision, however, Rabbi Eleazar is faced again by another objection: If the words of Torah are like nails, do they also diminish (as they disappear into the wood they are hammered into)? No; for they are like plants; they grow and increase. And so on.

In its overall sequence, this chain of interpretations suggests a unified or univocal reading of Scripture rather than a truly polysemous one. In typical Rabbinic fashion, though, the very next interpretation in the passage offers an explicit formulation of polysemy: Rabbi Eleazar's interpretation for the phrase "the masters of assemblies," which he takes as a reference to the sages themselves as they study and debate the law—some pronouncing unclean, others clean; some prohibiting, others permitting; and so on. If this indeed is the case, as the passage continues, a student might wonder, "How then can I learn Torah?" Rabbi Eleazar responds: there is no cause for despair. Although the sages' opinions may contradict each other, they all are part of Torah, part of a single revelation; they all were once spoken by the mouth of one shepherd—Moses—who in turn received them all from one God. Rabbi Eleazar's confirmation for this answer lies in the exegesis he offers for Exod. 20:1, the verse that serves as the introduction to the revelation at Sinai in which God gave the ten commandments—the basis of the complete Torah—to the children of Israel.[8]

The student's question, it should be noted, is not, "How can I practice the Law?" The answer to that question would be clear to any disciple of the Rabbis: where there is a difference of opinion over the correct law, the halakhah is decided by following the opinion of the majority of sages, a principle of jurisprudence the Rabbis elsewhere justify midrashically

8. It is worth noting that elsewhere in early Rabbinic literature, Exod. 20:1 is given other interpretations suggesting polysemy. Thus, in *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, ed. and trans. Jacob Z. Lauterbach, 3 vols. (Philadelphia, 1933–35), 2:228, the verse is interpreted to mean that God spoke all ten commandments in a single utterance. See also *Siphre D'Be Rab*, ed. H. S. Horovitz, 2 vols. (1917; Jerusalem, 1966), 1:47–48 and 100.

through an interpretation of Exod. 23:2, "after the majority incline."[9] Rather than point to a practical quandary, the student's question and the hermeneutical despair underlying it derive from the chaos of the academy: if the Rabbis disagree about the meaning of every law and verse, if each and every law and verse can simultaneously elicit opposite interpretations, then why bother to study Torah? This dilemma recalls still another passage, the famous description of the first-century schools or "houses" of Hillel and Shammai, named after the legendary Pharisaic sages. The two schools are typically recalled in Rabbinic tradition as engaged in endless debates with each other.

> Rabbi Abba said in the name of Samuel: For three years the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai argued. These said, The law is according to our view; and the others said, The law is according to our view. [Finally] a heavenly oracle decreed: The words of both Houses are the words of the living God, and the law is like the House of Hillel.

The Talmud then asks, quite reasonably:

> But if the words of both Houses are the words of the living God, why did the House of Hillel merit having the halakhah decided according to their view? Because they were peaceful and humble men, and they taught the teachings of the House of Shammai as well as their own, and even more than that, they taught the teachings of the House of Shammai before they taught their own.[10]

In other words, the halakhah was eventually decided according to the opinion of the House of Hillel, not because their teachings were any more correct or valid than those of the House of Shammai, but for ethical reasons. Even though the House of Hillel disagreed with its opponents, it treated the House of Shammai with respect. Another tradition tells us that while the Houses of Hillel and Shammai disagreed over the legitimacy of children born from certain types of marriages, they still did not refrain from marrying each others' daughters—because, we are told, they preferred to practice the Scriptural command, "You must love truth and peace" (Zech. 8:19).[11] From a strictly hermeneutical perspective, however, both interpretations, even if they contradict each other, are considered true, equally alive to Torah's meaning and to the words of the living God.

9. J. Sanhedrin 4:2, 22a–b; B. Baba Mezi'a 59b. On the latter text, see my discussion below.

10. B. Eruvin 13b.

11. The first statement is found in *Mishnah Yebamot* 1:4; the exegesis is recorded in the Talmudic discussion in B. Yebamot 14b. Note that according to this tradition, the House of Shammai also married the daughters of the other house, and acted as ethically as did the members of the House of Hillel.

The sanction for such paradoxical truth is explicitly stated in the homily of Rabbi Eleazar: it is the common divine origin that both interpretations are said to share, the belief that the contradictory opinions of the two houses were both originally spoken by the mouth of the Lord of all creation. This divine sanction for Scriptural polysemy also differentiates the midrashic concept of polysemy from its post-structuralist counterpart, indeterminacy. By indeterminacy, I hasten to add, I do not mean nihilism, the sheer relativizing or negation of meaning as an infinitely deferred presence or nonpresence. Instead, I refer to the concept as it has been subtly characterized by Geoffrey Hartman, as being close to the process of commentary itself, "the taking away, modification, elaboration, of previous meanings."[12] In this sense, midrashic reading can sometimes be, as in Rabbi Eleazar's interpretation of Eccles. 12:11, very close to a literary criticism predicated on indeterminacy. What differentiates midrash from indeterminacy is not its style, but rather the latter's formal resistance to closure, its final revelation of a perspective that, as Hartman writes, "may be, precisely, the absence of one and only one context from which to view the flux of time or the empirical world, of one and only one method that would destabilize all but itself, of one and only one language to rule understanding and prevent misunderstanding."[13] In contrast, midrashic polysemy is predicated precisely on the existence of such a perspective, the divine presence from which all the contradictory interpretations derive. Precisely what type of perspective this is we will try to say shortly.

If the difference between Rabbinic polysemy and contemporary indeterminacy is fairly clear, it is more revealing that the midrashic conception has no real parallel, so far as I know, in other interpretive traditions in the ancient world that also approached the Bible as a divinely inspired text. Consider the example of the earliest datable literature of Jewish Biblical exegesis, the fragments of commentaries found at the library of Qumran. The technical term for exegesis at Qumran is *pesher,* a Hebrew word semantically equivalent to the Sumerian *bur* and cognate to the Akkadian *pasharu,* verbal roots that mean "to release, resolve, and solve," and that became in ancient Near Eastern dream-interpretation literature the technical terms for the therapeutical-magical process whereby the symbolic meaning of a dream—particularly of a troubling dream—is explained, and hence explained away.[14] In the Bible, a cognate verb, *patar,* is also used for dream interpretation, and the same root, as we

12. Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* (New Haven, Conn., 1980), p. 270.

13. Ibid., p. 271. Compare Hartman's sensitive comments on irony, specifically in connection with the reading of sacred literature, on pp. 278–83.

14. See A. Leo Oppenheim, "The Interpretation of Dreams in the Ancient Near East," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 46 (Sept. 1956): 217–37. More recently, see Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 443–99.

shall see immediately, is the basis for the name of a specific type of midrashic interpretation, the *petirah*.[15]

The connection between Qumranic pesher and ancient dream interpretation is, in fact, a virtual commonplace of modern scholarship.[16] Like ancient dream interpretation, with its single-minded desire to unravel the one and only meaning of the dream, pesher interpretation views Scripture as an enigma to be solved and decoded, the key to the solution and its underlying code being the apocalyptic history of the sectarian Dead Sea community itself. Thus, in the *Pesher Habakkuk,* one phrase after another in the book of Habakkuk—many of them sufficiently mysterious to begin with—is made to refer to a contemporary event or personage, from the Teacher of Righteousness (as the founder of the sect appears to have been known) and his followers to their many and assorted Jewish enemies, as well as to the gentile scourge, Rome. In this exegesis there is little room for contradictory or multiple interpretations.[17] Indeed, the apocalyptic force of the commentary, its persuasiveness as a political and religious document, directly depends on the absoluteness of its claim that each and every interpretation is true and that the contemporary meanings—the events and personages—that underlie the Scriptural text will exhaust that text's prophecy as soon as they come to pass in the imminent future. The same type of interpretation also appears in the New Testament gospels, in the so-called fulfillment prophecies in which verses from the Hebrew Bible are cited as prophecies of events that are said to have been realized in the life of Jesus. The most famous of these prophecies is Matthew's misinterpretation of Isa. 7:14, "the maiden is with child and will soon give birth to a son whom she will call Immanuel," which Matthew understood as a prophecy fulfilled in the virgin birth.

As in Qumranic exegesis, many exegetical techniques in Rabbinic midrash can also be traced to various procedures of ancient dream interpretation.[18] Yet the essential thrust of midrash toward finding multiple

15. Wilhelm Bacher, *Die Exegetische Terminologie der Jüdischen Traditionsliteratur*, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1905), 2:178–80. For Biblical use of *patar* as referring to dream interpretation, see the Joseph story, specifically Gen. 40:8, 22, and numerous other occasions in that chapter and the next one.

16. The classic statement of the connection between Qumranic exegesis and ancient dream interpretation is found in Lou H. Silberman's "Unriddling the Riddle: A Study in the Structure and Language of the Habakkuk Pesher (1 Q p Hab.)," *Révue de Qumran* 3 (Nov. 1961): 323–64. More recently, see Fishbane, "The Qumran Pesher and Traits of Ancient Hermeneutics," *Proceedings of the Sixth World Congress of Jewish Studies* 1 (1977): 97–114.

17. Fishbane, "The Qumran Pesher," p. 99, cites p Hab ii, 1–10 (in William H. Brownlee, *The Midrash Pesher of Habakkuk* [Missoula, Mont., 1979], pp. 53–58) as a case of multiple interpretations, but these examples are simply variants on a single theme. The same is admittedly true of many examples of multiple interpretation in Rabbinic midrash.

18. For the classic statement of the connections between ancient dream interpretation and Rabbinic hermeneutics, see Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine: Studies in the Literary Transmission Beliefs and Manners of Palestine in the I Century B.C.E.—IV Century C.E.,*

interpretations of Scripture could not be more opposed to the basic intentions of ancient dream interpretation. Unlike the exegetes of Qumran, the Rabbis appear to have repudiated the absolutist claims of apocalyptic fulfillment in favor of hermeneutical multiplicity. For example, the petirah, the cognate midrashic form I have mentioned, adapts for midrash the form of the Qumranic pesher. Like the pesher, the petirah takes an ahistorical, generally abstract if not abstruse Biblical verse and applies it to a concrete and specific event. Unlike the pesher, however, the events interpreted in the petirah are not contemporary, certainly not imminent in the eschatological future (or recent, near apocalyptic past, as in the New Testament use of the fulfillment form); rather, they tend to be chosen from the far past, usually from the Biblical past, a realm of history that can be characterized best by its unthreatening distance from the interpreter. Furthermore, once again in contrast to Qumranic pesher, midrashic petirot, even when they are applied to the Biblical narrative, are usually presented in series—not one petirah, but two or three, sometimes as many as four or five petirot.[19] The entire apocalyptic and absolutist claims of Qumranic pesher have been effectively neutralized in midrash—in the religious-political as well as hermeneutical spheres—by a virtually ideological policy of polysemy.

Similarly, there are no real parallels to multiple interpretations of the midrashic sort in the various hermeneutical traditions of the classical and early Christian worlds. Classical allegoresis first developed as an apologetic instrument of Stoic and Neoplatonic rationalizers of homeric myth, and it was later utilized by Philo as a technique for the philosophical interpretation of Scripture. From its beginnings, allegory distinguished between and built on two distinct levels of meaning: first, the literal or

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Texts and Studies of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, vol. 18 (New York, 1950), pp. 68–82. More recently, see Jeffrey H. Tigay, "An Early Technique of Aggadic Exegesis," in *History, Historiography, and Interpretation: Studies in Biblical and Cuneiform Literatures,* ed. H. Tadmor and M. Weinfeld (Jerusalem, 1983), pp. 169–89. Lieberman cites the famous passage attached to the thirty-two hermeneutical methods of aggadah: " 'Behold it says: "*A dream carried much implication*" (Eccl. 5:2). Now by using the method of *kal vehomer (a minori ad maius)* we reason: If the contents of dreams which have no effect may yield a multitude of interpretations, how much more then should the important concerns of the Torah imply many interpretations in every verse' " (p. 70). While this text suggests that a dream may have more than one interpretation, I am not familiar with a similar statement in the literature of ancient dream interpretation (although it is quite obvious that a symbol or figure may have different meanings in different dreams). One should recall as well that this passage is a late text, probably from the Geonic period in the ninth and tenth centuries, and that it very possibly was written in response to Karaite polemics in order to rationalize Rabbinic hermeneutics. See also Daldianus Artemidorus, *The Interpretation of Dreams,* trans. Robert J. White (Park Ridge, N.J., 1975). Artemidorus explicitly states here that it is impossible for different elements in a dream to contradict each other—for the same image to be both good and bad—"if dreams are to foretell occurrences that will inevitably take place" (p. 175).

19. For an example of a petirah of this sort, see *Vayikra [Leviticus] Rabba* 10:1–3.

manifest meaning (*to phaneron*); second, the underlying or deeper sense (*hē huponoia*). As early as Philo, however, this second level began to be subdivided into more subtle categories—the naturalistic, the ethical, the metaphysical or mystical—and these three subcategories eventually developed in medieval Christian exegesis into the famous fourfold senses of Scripture.

Yet while these traditions all seem to predicate multiple interpretation as a condition of exegesis, the different senses they find in Scripture actually represent a hierarchy of meanings rather than a truly polysemous range of interpretations, each one separate from the others. The medieval senses, rather than being distinct hermeneutical categories, are more like levels of interpretation that could in fact be ordered in an ascending ladder of significance.[20] This is very different from the multiple interpretations of Scripture found in midrash. For example, Hab. 1:7, "That one is terrible, dreadful; its laws and majesty proceeds from itself," a verse that in its original context refers to the Chaldeans, is interpreted in *Vayikra [Leviticus] Rabbah* 18:2 in six different ways. According to the midrash, it refers, respectively, to Adam, Esau, Sennacharib, Hiram king of Tyre, Nebuchadnezer, and the Israelites! Even if the interpretations relating to Esau, Sennacharib, Hiram, and Nebuchadnezer might all be said to be versions of a single interpretive prototype—to refer to an enemy of God (as the first half of the verse is in effect interpreted) from whom a faithful servant of God eventually descended (as the second half of the verse is understood)—one could hardly use this categorization for the interpretations referring to Adam and to the Israelites. These two opinions do not even parallel each other. Or to give another example: on Lam. 3:10, "He is a lurking bear to me," a reference to the unnamed and cruel enemy who is torturing the speaker (an anonymous male personifying the nation of Israel), *Eikha [Lamentations] Rabbah* offers two opinions regarding his historical identity. According to one, the bear is God; according to the other, it is Vespasian (the Roman general and emperor to whom the Rabbis attributed the major blame for the destruction of the Temple in C.E. 70). This last pair of interpretations represents the

20. On this question, see, in particular, James A. Coulter, *The Literary Microcosm: Theories of Interpretation of the Later Neoplatonists,* Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition, vol. 2 (Leiden, 1976), pp. 67, 87–89. As Coulter argues, the credit for devising the theory of ascending levels of meaning, all related analogically in a unified structure, should probably go to Iamblichus. See also Jean Pépin, "Remarques sur la théorie de l'exégèse allégorique chez Philon," in *Philon d'Alexandrie,* ed. Roger Arnaldez, Claude Mondésert, and Jean Poupilloux, Colloques Nationaux du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (Paris, 1967), pp. 131–67; Philip Rollinson, *Classical Theories of Allegory and Christian Culture* (Pittsburgh and London, 1981); and Harry Austryn Wolfson, "Handmaid of Scripture," *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam,* 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1947), 1:87–163. On early medieval exegesis, see Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1952).

aggadic equivalents to the opposed interpretations of the Houses of Hillel and Shammai in the realm of halakhah.

The closest analogue to midrashic polysemy that one can find in the Church Fathers is in Augustine. In one of the most inspired exegeses in the entire history of Scriptural interpretation, Augustine reads God's blessing to mankind "to be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:22, 28) as an injunction to multiply interpretations of Scripture, "to express in manifold ways what we understand in but one, and to understand in manifold ways what we read as obscurely uttered in but one way."[21] And certainly no medieval exegete delights more than Augustine does in multiple interpretations. For Gen. 1:1 alone he offers five different readings.[22]

Yet even for Augustine, the possibility of multiple interpretation in Scriptural exegesis is less a function of an inherently polysemous sacred text than it is the result of the Biblical author's own obscurity. That obscurity may possess divine sanction, but its presence nonetheless creates a hermeneutical dilemma for the Biblical exegete, making it impossible for him or her to determine the originally intended meaning of a verse, and thereby leading the interpreter to invent other readings. For Augustine, however, this eventuality is not inherently dangerous so long as those other meanings represent the "truth" and are "congruous with the truth taught in other passages of the Holy Scriptures."[23] By truth Augustine means essentially charity [*caritas*], that "love of a Being which is to be enjoyed and of a being that can share that enjoyment with us," which serves him as a near rule of faith. While Augustine did not invent the rule of faith, he seems to have been among the first to use it to justify (rather than prohibit) exegetical innovation. A person who understands Scripture in a way different from that intended by its author may therefore be deceived, but "if he is deceived in an interpretation which builds up charity, which is the end of the commandments, he is deceived in the same way as a man who leaves a road by mistake but passes through a field to the same place toward which the road itself leads."[24]

To be sure, one could argue that Rabbinic Judaism also possesses a rule of faith under which all multiple interpretations are to be subsumed. The problem, however, is in stipulating in what this rule consists. If all the statements about faith that characterize Rabbinic Judaism were collected, they would more closely resemble the anthologies of multiple interpretations for a single verse that are found in Rabbinic exegesis than a systematic exposition of religious beliefs. This feature of Rabbinic thought

21. St. Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, ed. and trans. John K. Ryan (Garden City, N.Y., 1960), p. 360.

22. Ibid., p. 321.

23. St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr. (Indianapolis, 1958), p. 102. Also see Robertson's remarks in his introduction, pp. xi–xii and xiv–xvi.

24. Ibid., pp. 30, 31.

has led one modern Jewish theologian to describe its condition as "the indeterminacy of belief."[25] At least since the time of Maimonïdes, Jewish philosophers have been aware of the Rabbis' apparent lack of interest in making a theologically coherent whole out of their disparate beliefs. Only in the recent past, in fact, has the absence of a systematic theology come to be viewed as a virtue of Rabbinic Judaism rather than as a failure.

Difficulties analogous to those facing attempts to define a rule of faith for Rabbinic Judaism also block efforts to describe institutional controls on interpretation within the Rabbinic community. Such controls surely must have existed. Yet outside of the most obviously impossible examples—a reading of Isa. 7:14 as a prophecy of the virgin birth of Jesus as messiah—it is difficult to say precisely what lay beyond the borders of discourse. Even if most institutional controls work silently through what Frank Kermode has described as "the tacit knowledge of the permitted range of sense,"[26] the literature of Rabbinic Judaism sometimes seems to have been edited almost intentionally to camouflage any institutional constraints or conflicts. On the other hand, while Rabbinic literature is replete with controversies and disagreements between Rabbis, sometimes even with one Rabbi accusing another of distorting the sense of Scripture, the fact remains that the objectionable or disputed interpretation is preserved within the Rabbinic corpus along with the unobjectionable or authoritative exegesis; both are handed down as equal words of the living God.[27] There is little evidence to support the existence of explicit mechanisms for internal censorship in Rabbinic society.[28]

The absence of a rule of faith in Rabbinic Judaism or the impossibility of determining the institutional forces that may have controlled exegesis

25. See Max Kadushin, "The Indeterminacy of Belief," *Conservative Judaism* 33 (Spring 1980): 3–6, and "Indeterminacy of Belief," *The Rabbinic Mind* (New York, 1952), pp. 131–42. A similar (and among students of midrash, more famous) model for midrashic discourse, framed in romanticist language and virtually Viconian mythopoeiac terminology, was proposed by Isaac Heinemann in his classic *Darkhei ha'aggadah [The Methods of Aggadah],* 3d ed. (Jerusalem, 1970).

26. Frank Kermode, *The Art of Telling: Essays on Fiction* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), p. 171.

27. For an attempt to sketch the history of this editorial tendency and its academic motivations, see David Weiss Halivni, *Midrash, Mishnah, and Gemara: The Jewish Predilection for Justified Law* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), pp. 108–11. For examples of one Rabbi dismissing and condemning the interpretations of another Rabbi, see the famous passage in B. Sanhedrin 67b (in which Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah attacked Rabbi Akiva for interpreting Exod. 8:2, "And the frog [singular] came up and covered the land of Egypt," as meaning that "there was only one frog and it filled the whole land of Egypt"); *Sifre Deuteronomy,* ed. L. Finkelstein (Berlin, 1939), pp. 6–7; *Vayikra [Leviticus] Rabba* 5:1.

28. Compare, however, the remarks of Morton Smith, "The Image of God: Notes on the Hellenization of Judaism, with Especial Reference to Goodenough's Work on Jewish Symbols," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 40 (1957–58): 473–81 and 487–97. The scholarly debate over internal censorship revolves largely around the arguments of Erwin Goodenough in *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period,* 13 vols. (New York, 1953–68).

does not mean, however, that midrash is entirely open or unconstrained. For one thing, there appear to have existed schools of exegesis with distinct hermeneutical approaches or tendencies. There also exist "lists" of hermeneutical rules and exegetical techniques that reflect some awareness of the mechanisms of interpretation. These lists, however, were not composed in order to serve as how-to manuals for "doing" midrash, as people once thought; rather, scholars of Rabbinics today believe that they were more likely compiled at comparatively late dates by specific exegetical schools to legitimate their hermeneutical methods and to provide polemical documentation against competing exegetical schools (or competing religious groups, like the Karaite sect in the early Middle Ages).[29] In practice, Rabbinic exegesis also turns out to be far less polysemous than some statements we have seen might lead us to expect. Many multiple interpretations, like the exegeses for Hab. 1:7 cited earlier, are actually versions of the same idea and recur in different contexts. Furthermore, while midrash may be unsystematic, its exegeses are not unmotivated: even at its most apparently farfetched or flamboyant moments, midrashic interpreations tend to be situated on genuine textual cruces or irregularities, "bumps" in the plain surface of Scripture, a fact that militates against the worst excesses of unbridled polysemy. Finally, there appears to be a kind of underlying "deep structure" in midrash that both produces and governs multiple interpretations under specific exegetical conditions. This deep structure, as Betty Roitman has recently argued, "enacts at the level of interpretation a dialectic formulated on the ontological plane by Rabbi Akiva: 'All is foreseen, but freedom of choice is given.'" In midrash, Roitman writes, "all is determined, and yet all is open."[30]

Roitman's formulation, though itself slightly too theologized, suggests a possible direction in which to look for a model or explanation for the concept of polysemy in midrash. In contemporary criticism, textual meaning is often described spatially in terms of its position either "behind" the text (the traditional logocentric view) or "in front" of it (from the perspective of deconstruction). In the case of Rabbinic Judaism, the divine guarantee of meaning in Scripture might be described more accurately as coming from above, not in the sense of divine effluence or emanation, but literally from on high, from the top of Mount Sinai, from which, the Rabbis claimed, God gave to Moses not only Scripture, "the written Torah" or the Pentateuch, but also an "oral Torah," passed on by mouth from generation to generation. That oral Torah effectively

29. See Raphael Loewe, "The 'Plain' Meaning of Scripture in Early Jewish Exegesis," *Papers of the Institute of Jewish Studies* 1 (1964): 140–85. More recently, see W. Sibley Towner, "Hermeneutical Systems of Hillel and the Tannaim: A Fresh Look," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 53 (1982): 101–35, for a clear but slightly outdated presentation.

30. Betty Roitman, "Sacred Language and Open Text," in *Midrash and Literature,* p. 160. Akiva's saying is found in *Mishnah Avot* 3:19.

comprised everything in Rabbinic Judaism not explicitly stated in the written Torah. As revealed in its totality at Sinai, it included every multiple interpretation of Scripture, even, as one celebrated saying states, "the very words a disciple of the sages will speak before his teacher."[31]

The two aspects of Torah, written and oral, are not for the Rabbis exactly equivalent, but together they form a unified, timeless entity with a single origin in the divine revelation. As we have already seen, certain Rabbinic traditions, like those describing every divine utterance at Sinai as having issued in seventy tongues, seem to connect polysemy with the original revelation. Still other traditions that describe God's external appearance at different moments when He manifested Himself to Israel also represent Him in ways that hold a family resemblance to the polysemous meaning of Torah. Thus, in one famous passage, we are told that

> God appeared to [the children of Israel] at the Red Sea like a hero in battle, at Sinai like a scribe instructing them in Torah, and in the days of Daniel like an elderly teacher. [God] said to them: Just because you see Me in many images, this does not mean that there are many gods. . . . Said Rabbi Hanina bar Papa: God appeared to them with an angry face, with a neutral face, with a pleasant expression, and with a smiling face. . . . Said Rabbi Levi: God appeared to them like a statue which looks in every direction. A thousand people look at it, and it looks at each of them. Thus, when God spoke to Israel, each Jew said: it is to me that the voice is speaking.[32]

Just as a single verse may have many meanings, so God too possesses many countenances.

A more explicit treatment of the connection between God and the Torah can be found in the following passage in *Midrash Bereshit Rabba,* the midrash on the book of Genesis. The passage, attributed to Rabbi Hoshaya, is the very first interpretation in the collection. Although its subject is Gen. 1:1, it begins with a series of interpretations of Prov. 8:30, a verse that in its original context is spoken by Wisdom, an allegorical figure that the Rabbis identified with Torah:

> Rabbi Hoshaya began: "I was with Him as an *amon* [*Tanakh* (Jewish Publication Society): a confidant; Jerusalem Bible: a master-craftsman], a source of delight every day, rejoicing before Him at all times" (Prov. 8:30). The word *amon* means a tutor. *Amon* means "covered." *Amon* means "hidden." And some say it means "great."

31. J. Peah 17a.

32. *Pesikta de-Rab Kahana,* ed. B. Mandelbaum, 2 vols. (New York, 1963), 1:223–24; see also *Shemot [Exodus] Rabba* 3:6.

> [Each of these interpretations is based on a phonetic pun between the word *amon* and another, similar-sounding word, and verses from Scripture to support each interpretation are then cited for all four opinions.] Another interpretation: *amon* means an artisan. The Torah declares: I was the instrument that the Holy One, blessed be He, used when He practiced His craft. It is customary that when a king of flesh and blood builds a palace, he doesn't build it himself but he hires an architect; even the architect doesn't build it solely from his head, but he uses plans and blueprints in order to know how to lay the rooms and to arrange the doors. So, too, the Holy One, blessed be He, looked into the Torah and created the world. And so the Torah said: "By means of [*be-*, a particle conventionally translated as "in"] the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth," and the word "the beginning" always alludes to the Torah, as Scripture says, "The Lord created me at the beginning of His course" (Prov. 8:22).[33]

The word *amon* in the Proverbs verse happens to be a hapax legomenon, a fact that helps to explain Rabbi Hoshaya's puzzlement at its meaning and why so many interpretations are offered for it. Yet these multiple interpretations also exemplify the kind of wit one typically finds in midrash; indeed, in the second half of the opening Proverbs verse, Torah (Wisdom) is itself described explicitly in terms of this wit, as God's constant joy and delight, entertaining Him all day. As an activity of interpretation, midrash is a form of study that is also an avenue of entertainment, playful and serious at once. Thus, all four interpretations of *amon* are based on ingenious if contrived puns; at the same time, each interpretation presents a different conception of the Torah. One of these may also contain a polemical allusion to Christian statements about the Law. The definition of *amon* as a tutor, *pidagog*, recalls Paul's famous characterization of the Law in Gal. 3:24 as a *paidagogos* whom God appointed over the Israelites, a teacher or schoolmaster whose role, after the crucifixion, was superseded by faith in Christ as a means of justification.[34] Such multiple motivations for a single exegetical impulse are highly typical of midrash.

For our present purposes, the most revealing exegesis in the passage is the final interpretation of *amon* as the blueprint, the plan, that God used in creating the universe. Although the Torah is described here as though it existed before the creation of the world, like the Logos, the

33. *Midrash Bereshit [Genesis] Rabba*, ed. J. Theodor and Ch. Albeck, 3 vols. (Jerusalem, 1965), 1:1–2.

34. For examples of the law as education/teacher motif in Patristic literature, see Stephen D. Benin, "Sacrifice as Education in Augustine and Chrysostom," *Church History* 52 (Mar. 1983): 7–20. In our midrashic passage, the Rabbis seem to be arguing that the law was not devised as a form of accommodation to the historical nature of the Jewish people, but that it was a condition of the universe's existence.

idea is not necessarily Platonic:[35] the Torah is not being defined as the idea of which the universe is its second-order reflection; rather, the Torah is conceived as the instrument God used in creating the world, as His blueprint and set of directions, which He looks into the way an architect looks into a blueprint, or the way the Rabbis themselves looked into the Torah as the blueprint for the existence they constructed for themselves. Torah, then, is not identical with God; its relationship to Him is, one might say, metonymic rather than metaphoric, a matter of extension rather than resemblance. The study of Torah, the activity of midrash, does not therefore constitute an act of directly interpreting God, as though the text itself were literally divine. Instead, one could almost call midrash the interpretation of Torah as a figure or trope for God.

The concept of Torah in midrash can therefore be characterized best by its figurative status. As in all cases of rhetorical figuration, this status allows the Torah to be both identified and not identified with its presumed object. To begin with the positive side, the near identification of Torah and God provides the Rabbis with the basic axioms of midrashic hermeneutics: first, the belief in the omnisignificance of Scripture, in the meaningfulness of its every word, letter, even (according to one famous report) scribal flourish; second, the claim of the essential unity of Scripture as the expression of the single divine will. From the first axiom proceeds the common midrashic technique of atomization whereby verses and phrases, sometimes even single words, in Scripture are broken up into smaller units, which are then exploited in isolation for hermeneutical significance. From the second axiom derives the equally typical midrashic habits of viewing the Bible atemporally, of explaining Scripture through Scripture, and of connecting the most disparate and seemingly unrelated verses in order to create new and overreaching nexuses of meaning: in short, intertextuality that is elevated in midrash to the level of a virtual exegetical principle.

Both hermeneutical axioms and their resulting practices stem from the association of Torah with its author—or, as in the midrash cited earlier, of the blueprint with the architect who presumably drew the blueprint to help him in his job. To know Torah, to read and follow the divine blueprint is, in this sense, a way to come to know the mind of the divine architect, and ultimately, to imitate Him and construct a human existence modeled after God's creation of the world. From this perspective it is possible to understand why midrash is not merely an act of literary interpretation, but a path toward holiness. "If you want to come to know

35. See Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, trans. Israel Abrahams, 2 vols. (Jerusalem, 1975), 1:199–201. Urbach argues against a connection between Platonic Logos and Rabbi Hoshaya's image. For a recent interesting attempt to argue the connection, however, see David Winston, *Logos and Mystical Theology in Philo of Alexandria* (Cincinnati, 1985), pp. 25–58.

the One who spoke and created the world, study [midrash] aggadah," the interpreters of aggadah said, "and you will come to know Him who by His word created the world."[36] As Judah Goldin has recently argued, this seemingly theological axiom is actually a polemical statement asserting that one can serve God through the study of aggadah and midrash just as effectively as by the practice of halakhah.[37]

The other side of the equation between God and Torah, however, is the refusal of midrash to make the identification of Torah and God literal. This side can easily be seen if one compares the midrashic position with mystical, quasi-gnostic conceptions of Torah as the name of God and of Scriptural exegesis as the unfolding of the essence of that name. The full identification of Torah with God becomes truly explicit only in Kabbalistic speculation of the later Middle Ages, in formulations that openly connect the infinity of God's being with the infinity of meanings to be found in Torah, and in Scriptural exegesis that "decodes the Bible as a mystical biography of the infra-divine infinite processes and of the regulations which influence the function of these processes."[38] Yet even in the Rabbinic period, there are testimonies in contemporary mystical/gnostic documents that literally identify God and Torah: one hymn refers to the text of the Torah as being inscribed on God's "limbs," His "arms" and "legs."[39] Other texts, using similarly anthropomorphic terms, speak of Scriptural interpretation as literal description of God's body. This notion of Torah is clearly different from the one underlying midrash; indeed, midrash might even be said to have consciously rejected this equation. A midrashic exegesis always returns to the text, not to God.

Just as midrash rejects the mystical idea of the literal infinity of meanings in the Torah (and its corollary, the infinity of God), so too does midrash avoid the twin conceptions of the interpreter as a transported, divinely inspired being and of the act of interpretation as a mantic, prophetic activity occurring within states of ecstasy, through paranormal spiritual experiences—angelic revelations, demonic encounters, oneiric messages, and so on. For the mystical conception of interpretation, such experiences are virtually a "condition [for] the attainment of the sublime secrets of Torah."[40] As the distance between God and Torah disappears, the distinction between God and man becomes equally blurred, so that

36. *Sifre Deuteronomy,* p. 115.

37. Judah Goldin, "The Freedom and Restraint of Haggadah," in *Midrash and Literature,* pp. 57–76.

38. Moshe Idel, "Infinities of Torah in Kabbalah," in *Midrash and Literature,* p. 151.

39. For these sources, see Idel, "The Concept of Torah in the Heikhalot and the Kabbalah" [Hebrew], *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 1 (1981), esp. pp. 40–45. See also Scholem, "The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbala (I)," *Diogenes* 79 (Fall 1972): 68–80, and "The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbala (II)," *Diogenes* 80 (Winter 1972): 164–94.

40. Idel, "Infinities of Torah in Kabbalah," p. 144.

the mystical act of inspired interpretation itself becomes an occasion for *unio mystica.*

Descriptions of supernatural phenomena attending sages engaged in Scriptural interpretation are not entirely lacking in Rabbinic literature.[41] But the act of interpretation in midrash is itself almost completely severed from any connection with prophecy or analogous types of revelatory experience. One of the most famous stories in all Rabbinic literature relates how one sage, Rabbi Eleazar ben Hyrkanus, disputed with the entire academy of sages at Yavneh over a matter concerning the laws of purity. Refusing to concede his position, Rabbi Eleazar called on heaven to come to his aid and testify on his behalf. Immediately, the story relates, Rabbi Eleazar successfully ordered a carob tree to uproot itself and fly a hundred feet (according to some, four hundred feet); then, for a nearby stream to flow backward; finally, for a divine oracle to confirm his position. Nevertheless, the sages refused to accept the divine testimony, citing as proof of their own position—as decided by majority rule—the Deuteronomic verse, "It is not in heaven" (Deut. 3:12), which Rabbi Yermiyah interpreted as follows: "Since the Torah has already been given from Mount Sinai, we do not pay attention to heavenly voices, for You have already written at Mount Sinai, 'after the majority incline' (Exod. 23:2)." Rabbi Yermiyah effectively invokes Scripture against God. The story concludes by relating how God, listening in heaven to this Rabbinic debate, laughed and said, "My children have defeated me, my children have defeated me!"[42]

The dissociation of interpretation from prophecy also distinguishes midrashic exegesis from other types of Scriptural exegesis more contemporary with the Rabbis. As Joseph Blenkinsopp has shown, the transition from prophecy to interpretation as a source of religious authority was initially achieved by attributing prophetic inspiration to interpretation.[43] This move can be witnessed as early as in the Book of Daniel, but it is far more evident in the most famous example of Biblical exegesis found at Qumran, the Commentary on Habakkuk. This commentary not only attributes prophetic stature to its interpreter-author, probably the Teacher of Righteousness himself; it even claims, as part of its exegesis of Habakkuk, that the prophet Habakkuk wrote down the prophecies God had revealed to him without knowing the meaning of what he wrote. Indeed, God is said to have concealed that meaning to Himself until the Teacher of

41. Note, for example, *Vayikra [Leviticus] Rabba* 16:4. For discussion, see David J. Halperin, *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature,* American Oriental Series, vol. 62 (New Haven, Conn., 1980), pp. 128–33 and bibliography cited there.

42. B. Baba Mezi'a 59a–b.

43. Joseph Blenkinsopp, "Interpretation and the Tendency to Sectarianism: An Aspect of Second Temple History," in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition,* ed. E. P. Sanders et al., 3 vols. (Philadelphia, 1980–83), 2:1–26.

Righteousness was born and "God made known [to him] all the mysteries of the words of His servants the Prophets."[44] This last claim is itself derived from a phrase in Habakkuk, "that he who reads may read it speedily" (Hab. 2:2). According to the pesher interpretation of this phrase, God in effect foresees that the prophet-interpreter will supersede the prophet-writer in prophetic power and will usurp his position.

Viewed against the backdrop of Qumranic exegesis, it is possible to see in midrash an attempt on the part of the Rabbis to divest exegesis of both such prophetic pretensions (and their potential subversion of Scripture's unique status) as well as the more publicly dangerous charge of apocalyptic and sectarian politics. To be sure, this act of repudiation—or neutralization—also expressed an agenda of its own. The destruction of the Temple in C.E. 70 and the catastrophes that followed the destruction in subsequent centuries bred in the Rabbis a certain despair with history, as it did with many of their contemporaries, but that despair did not lead them into either apocalyptic fantasy or gnostic dualism. Rather, the estrangement that the Rabbis felt between God and the world, the disparity they saw between the divine promise and its fulfillment in human reality, appears to have turned their energies inward, into the construction of paradigms of holiness within their self-enclosed society. Seemingly oblivious to the larger historical arena in which they lived, yet wary as well of their own desire for messianically inspired political activism, they instead directed their imaginations into the text of the Torah and its interpretation.

The Rabbis' conception of Torah as a figurative trope for God—treating God and Torah simultaneously as identical and as not identical—expresses both their sense of alienation and their attempt to overcome that alienation intellectually. Following the Temple's destruction, the text of the Torah became for the Rabbis the primary sign of the continued existence of the covenantal relationship between God and Israel, and the activity of Torah study—midrash—thus came to serve them as the foremost medium for preserving and pursuing that relationship. Understood this way, the object of midrash was not so much to find the meaning of Scripture as it was literally to engage its text. Midrash became a kind of conversation the Rabbis invented in order to enable God to speak to them from between the lines of Scripture, in the textual fissures and discontinuities that exegesis discovers. The multiplication of interpretations in midrash was one way, as it were, to prolong that conversation.

Unlike the ruling interpretive ideologies of Western culture, which may be said to be motivated by an anxiety over the loss of meaning or presence (an anxiety that has led Western thinkers to substitute for genuine presence a metaphysics of presence or, as Derrida has argued, a covert

44. p Hab vii, 1–5 (in Brownlee, *The Midrash Pesher of Habakkuk*, p. 107).

theology for it), Rabbinic interpretation is not worried by the possible absence of meaning, by a fear that presence in the text may be irrecoverable or lost. Rather than doubts about the divine guarantee behind Scripture's meaning, the fear that more likely haunted Rabbinic Judaism was that *its* tradition of interpretation, that entire body of practice and exegesis expressed in the oral Torah, may not have represented the authoritative and divinely sanctioned heritage of the Biblical revelation.

Part of this anxiety certainly derived from the Rabbis' historical experience. Palestinian Judaism in late antiquity consisted of a spectrum of competing religious sects—among them, such groups as the Qumran sects, the Jewish Christians, and the Rabbis or their predecessors—each of which claimed to be the sole and authentic heirs of the Biblical tradition. Among these groups, the Rabbis were not always the most obviously successful (nor the least), but the destruction of the Temple in C.E. 70 was exploited by some of their competitors—Christians, for example—to prove that God had rejected the Jews and chosen others, like themselves, as the true Israel. Yet even without such specific provocations, the Rabbis' anxiety over their election was in some sense inevitable since, after all, Rabbinic Judaism, like the other Jewish sects contemporary with it, *was* an extension of Biblical religion and not the only existing adumbration of that heritage and interpretation of its contemporary relevance.

The response the Rabbis made to these doubts about their election and the authority of their tradition was to adopt an interpretive posture that represents the very opposite of Harold Bloom's idea of the anxiety of influence. The Rabbis consciously, happily, assume the stance of belatedness. Precisely what they seek to prove is that all the innovations and inventions of their tradition are already to be found in the text of the Bible, that nothing they have to say is original; hence the essential preoccupation of midrash with finding in the Biblical text a source for every law and belief in Rabbinic tradition, no matter how contrived the connection may be. Thus, too, the overriding concern of the Rabbis with confirming the chain of tradition, a chain the Rabbis claim began with God's revelation at Sinai and proceeded, oral link by link, from Moses and the prophets down through the generations to Ezra and at last to the sages themselves. And finally, this same anxiety is doubtless the source for the virtual obsession in Rabbinic discourse with attribution, with naming authors and students and tracing the history of traditions: a student who neglects to name the author of a tradition will thereby forget all his learning, one tradition reports by way of warning.[45] It is not difficult to understand, from all the special exigencies of their historical situation, the essential conservatism of the Rabbis, their upholding of

45. *Koheleth [Ecclesiastes] Rabba* 2:16; see *Mishnah Avot* 6:6 and *Tanhuma*, ed. S. Buber, 2 vols. (Vilna, 1885), 2:11a–b.

tradition and refusal of prophecy as well as anything else that might be construed as usurpation of Scripture's unique status.

Such contented belatedness was one response the Rabbis made to anxiety over their claim to being the sole authentic heirs of the Biblical tradition. Another response, perhaps more pertinent to their interpretive activities, can be seen in their treatment of multiple interpretations. The question asked by Rabbi Eleazar's student, "How can I study Torah?," should be understood as an expression not only of despair but of anxiety. If the Rabbis disagree about every point of the Law, how can they claim to be its genuine interpreters, the owners of its truth? The response to this expression of anxiety is given by Rabbi Eleazar: even in the case of such conflicts, the opinions of both sages—of the one that permits and of the one that forbids—are the words of the living God.

Looked at this way, the citation of multiple interpretations in midrash is an attempt to represent in textual terms an idealized academy of Rabbinic tradition where all the opinions of the sages are recorded equally as part of a single divine conversation. Opinions that in human discourse may appear as contradictory or mutually exclusive are raised to the state of paradox once traced to their common source in the speech of the divine author. This representation, however, is clearly a literary artifact, like much of Rabbinic discourse, which attempts to capture or to imitate in writing the oral exchanges that took place between sages in both formal debates in the academy and less formal occasions elsewhere. The phenomenon we witness in multiple interpretation, in other words, is in actuality an impression given by the redaction of Rabbinic literature, the result of a common choice made by its anonymous editors to preserve minority as well as majority opinions, the varieties of traditions rather than single versions. In making this choice, the Rabbinic editors did not act without precedent; indeed, they followed in a venerable tradition of early Jewish literature that included such other sacred "compromise texts" as the Pentateuch, in which separate documentary sources are combined into a single composition as though their agenda and ideologies were compatible (which they eventually are made out to be), or the New Testament, in which the four gospels, each with a different Christology, stand side by side.[46] The difference between these earlier texts and the Rabbinic midrashim is simply that in the latter, editorial policy was elevated to the order of exegetical ideology, to the conception of polysemy as a trait of sacred Scripture. Here, for the first time, editorial pluralism has become a condition of meaning.

Polysemy in midrash, then, is to be understood as a claim to textual stability rather than its opposite, an indeterminate state of endlessly deferred meanings and unresolved conflicts. In fact, midrashic polysemy

46. For a recent collection of articles on these questions, see *Empirical Models for Biblical Criticism*, ed. Tigay (Philadelphia, 1985).

suggests more than just textual stability; it points to a fantasy of social stability, of human community in complete harmony, where disagreement is either resolved agreeably or maintained in peace. Such a fantasy of inner oneness, beyond difference, would certainly have counterbalanced the Rabbis' sense of their nation's position in the larger external world, a far more multitudinous, fragmented, and disagreeable world in which, as Pliny once remarked, there were more gods than people.[47]

In reality, though, Rabbinic society itself, far from being so harmonious and unified, was often rent by dissension and acrimonious, prolonged disputes among sages. Many individual Rabbis led schools with their private disciples, while the collective body of sages in each respective generation appears to have composed a fiercely argumentative and independent class that sometimes opposed the decisions of the patriarch, the officially recognized leader of the Palestinian Jewish community and the head of the main Rabbinic court.[48] As we saw in the story mentioned earlier about Rabbi Eleazar ben Hyrkanus, there were not infrequent contentious episodes between individual sages and the patriarch. Especially during the first hundred years following the destruction of the Temple in C.E. 70, the major task faced by the patriarch—first Gamliel II, later his son Simon ben Gamliel—was to consolidate Palestinian Jewry under the form of the specific religious vision that eventually came to be known as Rabbinic Judaism. This task required the patriarch to unify a highly fragmented society as well as a corpus of diverse beliefs and practices. The task of unification was not accomplished easily; indeed, the endemic divisiveness that was a source of tragic factionalism in Palestinian Judaism as well as of its individualism and creativity was never entirely eradicated. The patriarchs themselves at times acted with great arrogance and authoritarianism, and their behavior in turn exasperated already tense situations. Precisely how strife ridden the internal political situation of Rabbinic Judaism actually was can be gauged from the fact that both Gamliel and his son Simon faced attempts by the other sages to depose them from their hereditary offices. The story of the deposition of Rabban Gamliel is one of the better-known incidents in Rabbinic history.

That story is also directly relevant to the larger Talmudic passage in Ḥagigah from which the lengthy sermon of Rabbi Eleazar quoted earlier was taken; in fact, if read against the backdrop of the story of Gamliel's deposition, Rabbi Eleazar's sermon takes on a somewhat different meaning. In concluding this essay, I would like to explore that other reading and its implications for our larger concerns about the relationship between midrash and literary theory.

47. Pliny, *Naturalis Historia,* 2.5.

48. For the most recent bibliography on this subject, see Robert Goldenberg, "History and Ideology in Talmudic Narrative," in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism,* ed. William Scott Green, 5 vols. (Chico, Calif., 1983), 4:159–71.

The attempted deposition, as narrated in the Talmud, followed a series of three confrontations between the patriarch Gamliel and one of the more distinguished sages of the generation, Joshua ben Ḥananiah.[49] In each confrontation, Joshua dared to teach halakhic rulings opposed to the patriarch's, while Gamliel responded to what he considered Joshua's insubordination by publicly humiliating him. The other sages, outraged by the patriarch's behavior, voted to depose Gamliel and to appoint another sage, Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah, to the office of the patriarchate. After being deposed, however, Gamliel was persuaded to apologize to Joshua; after the latter accepted his apology, Gamliel was allowed to resume his former position. At the same time, the sages, in deference to Rabbi Eleazar, created a new office for him, president of the high court, and also granted him the privilege to preach the Sabbath sermon in the academy at Yavneh every third week. That Sabbath became known as "the Sabbath of Rabbi Eleazar."

The confrontation between Gamliel and Joshua probably took place around the years C.E. 100–110. Sometime after Gamliel was reinstated as patriarch, the event narrated in the following passage in Ḥagigah is supposed to have taken place:

> Once Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Beroka and Rabbi Eleazar Ḥisma went to pay their respects to Rabbi Joshua [ben Ḥananiah] at Pekiin. [Rabbi Joshua] asked them: What new teaching was there at the house of study today? They replied: We are your disciples, and we drink your waters. He said to them: Even so, it is impossible for a study session to pass without some new teaching. Whose Sabbath was it? [They answered:] It was the Sabbath of Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah. [He asked:] So what was the theme of his sermon today? They responded: The Biblical section that begins, "Assemble" (Deut. 31:10–13). [Rabbi Joshua asked:] And how did he interpret it? [They replied: Scripture says,] "Assemble the people, the men and the women and the children." If the men came to learn and the women came to listen, why did children have to come? In order to reward those that brought them. [Rabbi Joshua] said to them: That was a precious gem you held in your hands, and you wished to deprive me of it?! [His students continued: Rabbi Eleazar] also expounded: "You have affirmed this day that the Lord is your God . . . and the Lord has affirmed this day that you are His treasured people" (Deut. 26:17–18). The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel: You have made me a unique object of your love in the world, and I shall make you a unique object of My love in the world. You have made me a unique object of your love, as it is written, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One" (Deut. 6:4). And I will make you a unique object of My love, as it

49. The story is recounted several places in the Talmud: B. Berakhot 27b–28a; J. Berakhot 7c–d; J. Taanit 67d.

> is said, "And who is like Your people Israel, a unique nation on earth . . . ?" (1 Chron. 17:21).
>
> [At this point the sermon on Eccles. 12:11, quoted earlier, is cited.]
>
> [Rabbi Joshua then] said to [his two disciples]: The generation in which Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah lives is not an orphan.[50]

Rabbis Yoḥanan ben Beroka and Eleazar Ḥisma were two disciples of Rabbi Joshua ben Ḥananiah. On their way home from the central academy at Yavneh, they stopped at Pekiin to pay respects to their teacher who was living, it seems from the narrative, in some isolation from the other sages. When Rabbi Joshua asked his students what they learned in the main academy, they replied, "We are your disciples, and we drink your waters." This answer can be read at least two ways. According to traditional commentators, the disciples' response expresses their humility in their teacher's presence. We are your students, they tell him, you teach us; we do not presume to instruct you.[51] The same statement, however, can be understood not as showing the students' dutiful respect to their teacher, but party loyalty: we are your students, they tell Joshua, and we do not study with other teachers—a sentiment that would reflect the factionalism of the Yavneh generation. If that is the meaning of their statement, Rabbi Joshua's response to them is a rebuke: *still,* you must have learned something at the academy. He then asks whose Sabbath it was, and their reply, "The Sabbath of Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah," immediately recalls the controversy over the Patriarch Gamliel's authoritarian behavior, his abuse of Rabbi Joshua, *our* Rabbi Joshua, now living in Pekiin at a distance from the main academy in Yavneh, whose intellectual exchange he nonetheless seems clearly to miss, at least enough to want to hear from his disciples what his fellow sages are teaching.

Chastened by their teacher's rebuke, Rabbis Yoḥanan and Eleazar proceed to rehearse for Rabbi Joshua the three homilies they heard at the academy. At the outset it should be stated that the collocation of these separate homilies in a single literary context is almost certainly an invention of the Talmud's editor; it is highly unlikely that Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah actually delivered all three homilies on one occasion, and the individual sermons are found separately elsewhere in Rabbinic literature.[52] Nonetheless, the three homilies all raise issues that are relevant, more or less directly, to the frame story and its background in the conflict between Gamliel and Joshua.

50. B. Ḥagigah 3a–b.

51. See Rashi's commentary on the above passages.

52. For a comprehensive study of the passage and its parallels elsewhere in Rabbinic literature, see Shraga Abramson, "Four Topics in Midrash Halakha" [Hebrew], *Sinai* 74 (1973): 1–7.

The first of these homilies comments on Deut. 31:10–13, a passage in which Moses commands the priests to read the Law before the entire nation on the holiday of Tabernacles every eighth year. The fulfillment of this command was later assumed by the king of Israel, not an incidental fact since the patriarchal family claimed direct descent from the royal House of David. While the substance of the homily stresses the unity of the Israelite community, its shared activity, and recalls the social fantasy implied by the concept of polysemy, it is difficult to read the homily without thinking also of the story of Eleazar ben Azariah's appointment to the patriarchate following Gamliel's deposition, the political conflicts behind that appointment, and the social ramifications of that incident. For Rabbi Eleazar, on "his" Sabbath, to preach a sermon on a Biblical text that itself might serve as an archetype for all subsequent patriarchal sermons might almost be construed as a claim on the part of Eleazar to the patriarchal throne.

The second small homily, in contrast, speaks of the relationship between God and Israel, the singularity of each party in the other's estimation, their mutual uniqueness, and not least of all, Israel's difference from all other nations in God's eyes. This homily returns us to the need of the Rabbis to affirm their identity as God's elect nation, an affirmation directly connected to the activity of midrash and its ideology of interpretation.[53]

The third homily, as we have seen, presents an idealized picture of interpretive pluralism. Yet the very idealism of that picture, the happy coexistence of opposites envisioned within its fantasy, is undercut by the troubling ambiguity of the very conclusion of the passage, that is, Rabbi Joshua's final statement to his disciples. As ostensible praise of his colleague—"The generation in which Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah lives is not an orphan"—Joshua's declaration appears by virtue of its negative form to suggest the very opposite of what it states: to imply, in other words, that his, Joshua's, generation is indeed orphaned; that it lacks a leader or proper leadership; that it is defenseless as an orphan, equally protectorless, and likely to be oppressed and victimized. That sentiment returns us again to the unhappy factionalism of early Rabbinic Judaism and echoes another statement Rabbi Joshua is reputed once to have made, "Woe to the generation of which you are the leader!" This was

53. It is worth noting that the interpretations of Deut. 26:17–18 are based on two words, *heemarta* and *heemirkha,* which together constitute a hapax legomenon. The classical Talmudic commentators suggest different meanings to characterize the uniqueness of the mutual proclamations God and Israel make to each other. For an additional suggestion as to the words' meanings, see Goldin, *The Song at the Sea, Being a Commentary on a Commentary in Two Parts* (New Haven, Conn., 1971), p. 109. Goldin connects the word to the name of a special kind of hem worn as a distinctive article of clothing (like, perhaps, the prayer shawl or *talit*?).

the rhetorical lament he addressed to Gamliel when the deposed patriarch came to him to apologize.[54]

In its entirety, then, this passage presents two very different, almost contradictory, impressions. The first of these, common to all the homilies but epitomized in the lengthy third homily we analyzed in detail, conveys a nearly utopian vision of Rabbinic society, a fantasy of harmonious opposition, where conflict is literally fruitful, and in which the words of Torah grow like plants and lead from death to life even if they are also goads and sharp as nails. In this fantasy, difference exists (as surely as do the differences between men, women, and children), but the resolution of such difference is seen as an essentially benign process. Difference is ultimately overcome and transcended within the shared participation of all Israelites in Torah study, in the relationship of divine election that Israel's occupation in Torah study signifies. In contrast to this portrait of benign conflict resolution, however, the frame for the homilies, the narrative context for their recitation, alludes to a very different evaluation of conflict and its adjudication, even over "matters of Torah." This evaluation sees the nature of conflict as a malignant presence and its resolution as the violent exercise of power, as indeed it sometimes was in Rabbinic society.

The events to which the narrative frame alludes, even if they are not entirely historically factual, may be said to represent what Edward Said has called the "worldly" aspects of the text, the human and social conditions out of which the homilies in the passage came into being.[55] Yet these aspects, with their more pessimistic implications, tend to undermine the idealized portrait of interpretive pluralism portrayed in the homilies. The latter, in turn, viewed from the perspective of the frame, appear almost as a kind of rhetorical denial of a historical reality that persists in making its presence felt within the text even as it is being denied.

A nascently deconstructive reading of this kind concludes, however, with a peculiarly restricted meaning for polysemy in this text: it posits a historical condition and presents the passage as a formation, albeit a negative one, of that condition. What would the Rabbis themselves have made of this reading? It probably would not have been acceptable to them, but not, I would propose, on account of its skepticism about their ideology and about the fantasies that may have motivated that ideology. Rather, I believe that the Rabbis would have acknowledged that the concept of polysemy was a formation or product of something else; they would have located that effective cause not in the historical situation but in the act of Scriptural exegesis itself, that is to say, in the very midrash

54. B. Berakhot 27b.

55. See Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), pp. 31–53.

of Eccles. 12:11 that Rabbi Eleazar presented in his homily. The Rabbis' view—that divine Scripture, if read correctly, dictates its own polysemous reading—may itself be contextualized and explained historically, but for a theoretical reading of the passage, it has other implications, particularly for the relationship of midrash and theory. The most significant implication is that Scriptural exegesis, midrash, is neither identical with literary theory nor simply reducible to it. What a theoretical reading of midrash can contribute is precisely an understanding of the difference between midrash and theory, between (for one thing) the role midrash served the Rabbis, which was to recapture the fullness of divine presence, even if partially and only momentarily, and the function that theory fulfills for us, which is to strengthen our acts of reading and deepen our understanding of them. The difference separating these conceptions is at least one sign of the distance that interpretation has traveled in the course of history.