Understanding Rabbinic Midrash
Texts and Commentary

by
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A book entitled *Understanding Rabbinic Midrash* should begin with a definition of its subject matter. To what, exactly, does the term “rabbinic midrash” refer?

Let us focus first on the adjective, “rabbinic.” Most people probably have an idea of what a rabbi is. Many certainly would describe a rabbi as a Jewish clergyman employed by a congregation or synagogue to perform several or all of the following functions: leading the congregation in its ritual activities, officiating at its life-cycle ceremonies (circumcision, Bar Mitzvah, Bat Mitzvah, confirmation, wedding, funeral), counseling its members, directing its growth, overseeing its educational programs, and the like.¹ Our conventional picture of a rabbi is one of an individual who delivers sermons and conducts services on the Sabbath and holidays in front of the congregation. However, this type of rabbi is quite modern. Rabbis did not assume many of these functions before the nineteenth century.² The rabbis with whom we are concerned, the sages who flourished in Palestine and Babylonia (modern-day Iraq) during the first seven centuries of the common era, were much different from present-day rabbis; therefore, in this volume the adjective “rabbinic” has a meaning different from the one that probably first comes to mind.

The defining characteristic of the rabbi in late antiquity was his knowledge; what he knew distinguished him from the rest of the Jews.³ The rabbis taught that Moses had received a dual revelation from God on Mount Sinai. Part of this revelation, the Written Torah, was available to all and was contained in the biblical books of...
Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, which were written on the Torah scrolls housed in the synagogues. The second part of this revelation, the Oral Torah, was in the possession of the rabbis alone. Each rabbi had received the Oral Torah from his master, who had received it from his master, who, in turn, had received it from his master. The unbroken chain stretched all the way back to the first rabbi, mosheh rabbenu. Moses our rabbi, who had learned Torah directly from God, face to face, on Mount Sinai. Thus, to know the whole revelation it was necessary to consult a rabbi. The rabbis' possession of the Written and the Oral Torah gave them special knowledge and constituted the basis of their power and authority.

A rabbi's knowledge began with the Written Torah, with the five books of Moses': the public record of the perfect revelation from the perfect God. This document had to be taken seriously; it had to be read and reread, studied and restudied. Because God's revelation to Moses on Sinai was, by definition, complete and perfect, it contained all that one needed to know, or should know. But those who read the holy scroll encountered problems, for the Written Torah is laden with unfamiliar technical terms, vague commandments, repeated phrases, sentences, and even pericopae, and multiple, different, and often contradictory versions of the same story or accounts of the same event. Because this scroll contained an accurate record of what the One and Only God had revealed to Moses, these difficulties had to be faced and explained. The Torah had to make sense, and it was the rabbi's task to make it comprehensible.

The Oral Torah was the record of the rabbinc attempts to solve the difficulties mentioned above. It filled in the details, explained unclear matters, and expanded upon enigmatic passages. It brought forth material relevant to the biblical accounts and detailed all that was explicit and implicit in the Written Torah. In addition, it offered rules and methods according to which the Torah should be interpreted and upon which an understanding of it should be based. The Oral Torah provided the guidelines that made possible the application of Scripture's lessons to everyday, contemporary life, and it offered countless examples of such applications. The Oral Torah was the key to unlocking the mysteries of the Written Torah, and the rabbis were the only ones who possessed this key.

Because the rabbis believed that they alone possessed both parts of revelation—the Written and the Oral Torah—they claimed that they were the only people who could follow the word of God completely and exactly: They alone knew all that God expected of human beings, they alone could follow the commandments correctly, they alone could practice the rituals in their minutest details, they alone knew the correct ways in which people should interact, and so on. As a result of the Jewish population's acceptance of the rabbis' claims that they fulfilled the duties and responsibilities of human beings more completely than anyone else, the rabbis were considered to be among those most favored by God. The rabbi possessed extraordinary powers because he could be counted among God's "closest friends." This enabled the rabbi to cure people, to foresee people, to foresee the future, to construct amulets, to bring rain, to create food out of nothing, and the like. He was believed to be, in the final analysis, a man of power.

The rabbi knew more than other people, and this led him to act differently from the majority of Jews. The rabbis were scrupulous about their dress, their food, their language, their prayers, and their daily actions. They knew the fine points of God's law, and they ardently strove to fulfill their potential as the type of human beings God had intended to create. The differences in dress, language, and dietary habits helped to make a rabbi recognizable and to keep the rabbinic class distinguishable from the rest of the Jews. In addition, the rabbis' actions became part of the Oral Torah, for these traits illustrated what the rabbi knew: they were the concretization of the Oral Torah.

A man acquired the status of rabbi by studying with a rabbi. In fact, the classical rabbi's primary task was not to lead a congregation or to deliver sermons every Friday night; rather, the rabbi's highest goal was to create other rabbis. True, membership in the rabbinic class was open to everyone, and in theory, the rabbis wanted all Jews to acquire the knowledge of the Oral Torah so that they would be able to follow God's word correctly. But not everyone could spend time studying with a rabbi, and not everyone had the intellectual ability to succeed in his rabbinical studies. Therefore, the rabbis had to go out into the community and become active in its life in order "to spread the word." Many of the rabbis were the civil servants of the Babylonian and Palestinian Jewish communities. They ran the courts, supervised the markets, prepared and witnessed official documents, and the like. As a result of their being the civil servants of the Jewish community, the rabbis were involved
in the everyday public affairs of that community, and they strove to ensure that at least the community’s public life conformed to the Oral Torah. For example, a rabbi who was a market supervisor could see to it that all of the butchers sold meat that was ritually acceptable and properly slaughtered. However, the rabbi could not enter a Jew’s private home in order to determine whether or not that particular Jew was eating only permitted meat. A rabbi who served as a judge in a Jewish court could adjudicate the cases that came before his court according to the Torah; however, he had no control of cases that did not appear before him or were tried in non-Jewish courts. In fact, he could not even force Jews to appear before rabbinic courts instead of gentile tribunals. In brief, the rabbis of late antiquity could not interfere in a Jew’s private life unless the latter asked them to do so. The rabbis exercised control only over the public affairs of the Jewish community unless specifically requested to deal with a person’s private affairs.

There was, however, one segment of the ancient Jewish community over which the rabbis had absolute and complete control, the rabbinic class. Because membership in the class was a privilege conferred by other members, an individual rabbi had to “toe the line” if he wished to remain part of the rabbinic circle. The rabbinic way of life, therefore, was probably a reality at least for the rabbis, since they probably did live their lives according to the Oral Torah, but it is unlikely that the average Jew followed the minutiae of the rabbinic traditions. Thus, only a small portion of the ancient Jewish community were rabbinic Jews and followed the details of the Oral Torah. 12

The term “rabbinic” refers to the way of life, the beliefs, the ideas, the ideals, and the behaviors of the rabbis of late antiquity. Rabbinic midrash, therefore, is the type of midrash produced by this small segment of the Jewish population of Palestine and Babylonia during the first seven centuries of the common era.

The meaning of “midrash” is much less well-known than the meaning of “rabbinic.” Even to those familiar with Hebrew terminology, the word “midrash” has a variety of connotations. It has been used to describe biblical interpretations or exegesis, sermons, and haggadic (nonlegal) discussions. 13

For the purposes of this volume, “midrash” refers to statements, comments, or remarks that are juxtaposed to the accepted authoritative Jewish Scriptures. From this point of view, rabbinic midrash refers to a literary phenomenon—the juxtaposition of rabbinic statements with the biblical text in a way that suggests that the latter is intimately related to the former.

For the rabbis, the authoritative Jewish Scriptures were all contained in the TaNaKh—Torah, Nevi’im (Prophets), Ketuvim (Writings, Haglographa)—the three sections of the Hebrew Bible, which achieved final canonical status sometime during the first three centuries of the common era. 14 This collection of material was considered to be the sum total of God’s public revelation to humans. As stated above, this public revelation contained obscure passages and posed difficulties for those who wished to understand it. However, the process of interpreting the material which eventually achieved canonical status within the Jewish community did not begin with the rabbis. On the contrary, examples of the interpretation of older, accepted material is found within each of the three major sections of the Hebrew Bible. 15 There is virtual agreement among scholars that the process of interpreting Scripture is as old as the Hebrew Bible itself. Thus, we should view the rabbis’ midrashic activity as a continuation of a process begun at the genesis of the Hebrew Bible.

Just as we should not view the rabbinic interpretations of the Bible as a process begun only after the Bible had been canonized, so also we should not conclude that the small group of Jews we have described as “rabbis” were the only Jews of the postbiblical period to exegete the Hebrew Bible. That those Jews and non-Jews who eventually became known as Christians elucidated the Hebrew Bible is a well-known fact. 16 In addition, the small community of Jews who lived on the bluff overlooking the north end of the Dead Sea at Qumran also explained the Bible, and some of their interpretations, known as pesharim after the word pesher (“interpretation”) with which many of the relevant passages open, have come down to us. 17 Furthermore, we have several anonymous documents from the period between 400 B.C.E. and 200 C.E. which rewrite, summarize, paraphrase, or expand upon the accounts contained in Scripture. 18 One could also argue that the translations of the Hebrew Bible into Greek (the Septuagint) 19 and into Aramaic (the targum) 20 contain as much interpretation as translation. In each of these examples the relationship between the biblical text and the comment is clear and unambiguous.

The central feature of a midrashic comment is its explicit relation-
ship to the Bible. Let me explain this point with reference to the rabbinic texts. The primary document of first- and second-century Palestinian Judaism is the Mishnah, the first collection of rabbinic teachings. Much of the material found in Mishnah is based on the Hebrew Bible, and there is no doubt that the framers of Mishnah knew the Hebrew Bible and believed that they were producing a document that somehow was based on it. However, Mishnah seldom explicitly refers to the biblical verse upon which its statements are based or to the scriptural text from which its laws are derived. For this reason alone, most of the comments found in Mishnah are not midrashic. In fact, most of them are the opposite of midrash, for they seem to consciously avoid drawing a clear relationship between themselves and the Bible.

The difference between a midrashic and a nonmidrashic statement may be determined by context. If a remark that does not refer to a biblical verse appears in Mishnah with others that also make no reference to Scripture, the remark is nonmidrashic. On the other hand, if the same remark in the same form appears in a midrashic collection as one of several comments juxtaposed to a specific biblical verse, the remark becomes midrashic. The defining characteristic of a midrashic statement is its explicit relationship (real or constructed) and formal juxtaposition to the biblical text, and neither its content nor its particular language.

Let me illustrate. We find the following passage in Mishnah Nega'im 1:2:

The variegation that is in snow-white [leprosy] is like wine that is mixed with snow. “The variegation that is in lime-like [leprosy] is like blood mixed with milk”—the words of Rabbi Ishmael. Rabbi Aqiba says: “The reddish color that is in this and in that is like wine mixed with water.”

This passage offers opinions about the different colors of skin that is infected by disease. Notice that nothing in this passage connects it to a biblical text; therefore, it is a nonmidrashic pericope. However, the same statements appear in Sifra, a collection of rabbinic interpretations of Leviticus. Because in their context in Sifra the statements are presented as an exegesis of a verse from Numbers, the pericope becomes a midrash:

And like what is the intermediate color [of skin disease]? It appears like snow, for it is said: Miriam was leprous, as white as snow (Num. 12:10). From here they said the signs of leprosy are two, which are four. “[Spot (bht) in Leviticus and Numbers refers to] a spot which is an intensely bright spot [white] as snow. The second is [a color] like the lime [on the outside] of the Temple. The swelled sore [is a color] like the membrane surrounding an egg. The second is like white wool”—the words of Rabbi Meir. But sages say: “The swelled sore is like wool and the second is like the membrane surrounding an egg.” The variegation that is in snow-white [leprosy] is like wine that is mixed with snow. “The variegation that is in lime-like [leprosy] is like blood mixed with milk”—the words of Rabbi Ishmael. Rabbi Aqiba says: “The reddish color that is in this and in that is like wine mixed with water.”

In the passage from Sifra, Tazri’a 2:4–5, the statements of Ishmael and Aqiba are joined with other comments that are placed in the context of an explanation of Num. 12:10. The editors of this section of Sifra had redacted the rabbis’ remarks to make them appear as interpretations of Num. 12:10. For that reason, they may be classified as midrashic comments, for in this context they are clearly related to a biblical verse.

Mishnah Ketubot 1:1 states:

A virgin should be married on a Wednesday and a widow on a Thursday, for in towns the court sits twice a week, on Mondays and on Thursdays; so that if the husband would lodge a complaint about his bride’s virginity, he may go in the morning immediately to the court.

The Mishnah states that a virgin should be married on a Wednesday and a widow on a Thursday, and it explains that this is the practice so that it will be easy for the new groom to bring any questions about his bride’s virginity before the court. However, in Genesis Rabbah 8:28 we read:

And God blessed them (Gen. 1:28). There [in the Mishnah] we learn that a virgin is married on the fourth day (Wednesday), but a widow [is married] on the fifth day (Thursday). Why [were these...
days designated as wedding days? They were so designated because the word “blessing” is written with regard to them. But “blessing” is written with regard to the fifth day (Thursday) [Gen. 1:22] and the sixth day (Friday) [Gen. 1:28]. Bar Qapara said: “The fourth day is the eve of the fifth, and the fifth is the eve of the sixth.”

This is not the place to discuss the awkward nature of this passage: we shall do that below when we review chapter 8 of Genesis Rabbah. My point here is that the same law appears in Mishnah Ketubot and in Genesis Rabbah. In the former it is in a nonmidrashic passage, while in the latter it is clearly a midrashic statement, for the passage attempts to find the reason for the law in specific and clearly identifiable biblical passages.

To summarize: Midrash, the subject matter of this book, comprises a body of statements pertaining to Scripture and juxtaposed to the scriptural text that were made by the small group of Jews of late antiquity whom we have called rabbis.

II

Although, as we have seen, many types of Jews commented upon the Bible in late antiquity, we can identify important literary features that distinguish rabbinic midrash from other types of Jewish scriptural interpretation. First, the rabbinic texts are collections of independent units whose sequential or thematic arrangements are the work of the editors. It is doubtful that the individual pericopae or statements were originally parts of a consecutive commentary to the Bible. Second, we often find more than one comment per biblical unit in the rabbinic collections. Several synonymous, complementary, or contradictory remarks may appear in connection with a single verse, word, or letter. No comparable phenomenon appears in the nonrabbinic documents. Third, a large number of the rabbinic statements are assigned to named sages. Unlike the other types of midrashim, rabbinic midrashic statements are not all anonymous. However, the editors and authors of the rabbinic collections are unknown to us, just as the creators of the majority of the other forms of Jewish exegesis from this period are also unknown to us. Fourth, the rabbinic comment may be a direct and clearly recogniz- able discussion of the biblical text or it may be part of a dialogue, a story, or an extended soliloquy which has been artificially juxtaposed to Scripture. The comment may answer a question that derives directly from the Bible or it may deal with an issue which was raised in another interpretation of the biblical passage. In some instances, the midrashic comment is so loosely connected to the biblical text that the former would be totally comprehensible in another context where it was not associated with any biblical verse. Fifth, the rabbinic commentator may mention the specific method which forms the basis of his remark. The methods are never explicit in the other forms of midrashic activity.

The selections included in this volume illustrate several presuppositions that underlie the rabbinic interpretation of the Bible. Because the rabbis believed that the Bible was the accurate and complete public record of a direct revelation from the One, Only, and Perfect God to His people, nothing in the Bible could be frivolous. Every element of the text—every letter, every verse, every phrase—was important and written as it was for specific reasons. The Bible contained no needless expressions, no “mere” repetitions, and no superfluous words or phrases. If something appeared to be superfluous, repetitious, or needless, it had to be explained and interpreted in order to demonstrate that this was not the case. The assumption that every element of the biblical text was written in a specific way in order to teach something underlies all of the comments found in rabbinic midrash.

A second major rabbinic presupposition is that everything in the whole Bible—the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings—is interrelated. Over and over again we shall see that one cannot explain a particular verse without taking other verses into consideration. Frequently we shall be told that a given verse needed to appear in order to modify another sentence or phrase.

A third concept that underlies our texts is that there may be more than one possible interpretation for any given biblical verse. Again and again we shall encounter several interpretations of a given text, with no resolution among them.

A fourth idea that runs through our texts, especially through Sifra, Mekhilta, and Sifre, is that reason unaided by revelation is fallible. A common technique in our midrashim is to refute a reasonable or logical conclusion merely by citing a verse from Scrip-
The midrashic activity was important, for without it, people might not act in proper ways and might misunderstand the realities of the world, man, and God.

A fifth assumption of the authors of our texts is that the midrashic activity was a religious, God-centered activity. It should be obvious that Jews were not the only people who interpreted an ancient text. In fact, at exactly the same time that the rabbis in Palestine and Babylonia were elucidating the Holy Writings, the Greek rhetoricians in Alexandria, Egypt, were commenting upon the classical Greek authors.

Indeed, many of the techniques employed by the rhetoricians were applied to the Bible by the rabbis. Scholars have pointed out that many of the technical terms of rabbinic exegesis are merely Hebrew translations of the names the Greek rhetoricians applied to their own methods of interpretation. However, at its core rabbinic midrash was based on the word of the One and Only God. For the rabbis, the Bible contained all the secrets of the universe, and it was the source of all knowledge and wisdom. Midrash thus was a means of discovering these secrets, of attaining true knowledge and wisdom. The Bible was the ultimate guide for human action; it was the standard against which one measured one's deeds, the final arbiter of true and false, right and wrong. The rabbis dealt with only one book, and that book was not of human origin. With the passing of time, the study of the Torah became the most holy task possible to humans and, thus, the goal of a well-led life. Its rewards were found in this world; but, more importantly, they were bestowed fully in the world-to-come. The rabbis' interest in the Bible was not merely historical or antiquarian. The rabbis were not merely interested in explaining difficult words or passages, in identifying unknown places, in solving problems within the text. Their interpretation and study led to salvation, not only for the Jews, but for the whole world. Midrash was the product of rabbinic theology. It focused on the word of the One and Only God who had created the world, revealed His will on Mount Sinai, and who would eventually perfect His creation. In all of its forms, midrash was a religious exercise. Midrash reached its zenith only after the Temple in Jerusalem lay in ruins. Just as the Torah replaced the Temple as the locus for meeting God, so also the midrashist replaced the priest as the intermediary between God's word and humanity. Midrash replaced the sacrifices as the means of securing God's favor and of joining the upper and the lower worlds. While the rabbis might “play” with the biblical text, this was holy “play.” Midrash was, above all, a means of confronting God and of bringing Him into contact with His people.

Now that we have an initial picture of rabbinic midrash, we should ask why it is important. What do we learn if we “understand rabbinic midrash”? We saw above that rabbinic Judaism is Torah-centered and that rabbis were rabbis because they studied and lived Torah. Therefore, by examining how they dealt with the Torah, how they interpreted it, how they read it, how they studied it, we shall achieve a better understanding of the rabbis themselves, for we shall discover how they dealt with the central symbol of their system of thought.

All Jewish groups of late antiquity had to confront the Hebrew Bible and deal with it. In fact, the different ways in which the various types of Jews interpreted the Bible were major factors in their self-understanding. By examining rabbinic midrash, we shall gain better insight into how the rabbis understood themselves and the type of Judaism they created. By studying rabbinic midrash we shall begin to understand what it means to say that rabbinic Judaism was “Torah-centered,” and what the rabbis meant when they suggested that the study of Torah was the most important activity in which a human could be engaged.

Understanding the rabbinic Judaism of late antiquity is important because contemporary Judaism is its direct descendant. The realities of contemporary Judaism were first encountered by the rabbis of the first seven centuries of the common era. It was then that the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed and replaced by the synagogues. With the end of the Temple came the cessation of the sacrificial cult and the creation of the prayer services designed to take its place. It was then that the priests were replaced by the rabbis. It was then that the center of Judaism moved from Palestine to the Diaspora, so that instead of living under an independent government of their own, the Jews were obliged to subsist in foreign countries under non-Jewish rulers. The responses which the rabbis made to these changes still play a role in contemporary Judaism. The rabbinic texts still form the basis of our Judaism. We study their writings and we pray their prayers. Their use of the Bible, the
ways they read it and interpreted it, was central to Judaism's surviving the trauma of the Temple's destruction in 70 C.E.

Rabbinic Judaism, like many religions, was based on a revealed text that had been given to humans in the distant past. By looking at the ways in which one group of people, the rabbis, dealt with a specific revealed document, the Torah, we shall gain insight into the broader problem of the relationship between a "revealed text" and those who lived a long time after the revelation but still considered the revealed document to be valid and important. Thus, our study of rabbinic midrash will help us to understand both rabbinic Judaism in particular and other text-oriented religions in general.26

In addition, midrash constitutes one of the primary corpora of rabbinic literature. It stands apart from other rabbinic literary creations because all of its statements are juxtaposed clearly and directly to the Bible. For this reason, it can be studied independently of the other types of rabbinic texts, such as Mishnah or Talmud. As we shall discover below, despite the variety of midrashim, this category of literature is sufficiently coherent to provide an independent subject of study. Rabbinic midrash as a general literary category and the individual midrashic collections as discrete documents deserve the same attention that has been paid to Mishnah, Tosefta, the Talmuds, the liturgical statements, and the mystical texts of Judaism of late antiquity.27

IV

We have explained above what the reader is going to encounter in this volume and why the subject of this book is worthy of concern. It is now time to turn to the method for studying rabbinic midrash which will be employed below. How are we going to undertake the process of "understanding rabbinic midrash"? Our discussion of rabbinic midrash will focus on three aspects: the processes by which statements were juxtaposed to the Bible, the statements themselves, and the rabbinic collections of these statements. Let us now look at each of these issues in turn.

The processes by which statements were juxtaposed to the Bible are complex. Some rabbinic comments are merely restatements of the "literal" meaning of the biblical text, and the process that brought them into being was the simple rewriting of the biblical verse in different words. Others derive from a real or perceived problem in the biblical text. The process that produced them was the master's identifying the problem and then solving it. In these cases the midrashic statements may explain an obscure word, an enigmatic reference, or an unusual spelling in the biblical verse. In other cases, however, the problem "discovered" in the biblical text may be artificial and merely an "excuse" for the master to make his exegetical comment. Furthermore, some rabbinic comments appear to be attempts to ground a particular theological, political, social, or economic point or ritual in the Bible. In these instances the midrashist began with the nonbiblical reality and then discovered a biblical proof-text which justified that reality. Finally, some passages in the rabbinic midrashic collections seem to have little relationship to the verses to which they have been joined. In these instances, the process by which the remark became "midrashic" was the work of the editors of the texts. These different processes created different types of midrashic statements, each of which relates to the biblical verses in different ways.

The second issue we shall discuss is the formal structure of the midrashic statements. Here our interest will be in the way in which they are formulated, to whom they are attributed, to whom they are addressed, and how they substantially and formally are related to the biblical text. We shall find some statements that are closely and carefully juxtaposed to biblical verses, and others that are related to a particular biblical text only by the context in which they occur. In addition, we shall discover midrashic statements, disputes, and debates. Furthermore, we shall see that some midrashic statements are set in a narrative framework, while others are short pithy remarks. In brief, we shall discover that midrashic statements and pericopae are not formally different from any other rabbinic comments, with the exception of their juxtaposition to the biblical text.

The last broad subject with which we shall deal concerns the nature of the collections of the rabbinic interpretations. Below, the reader will encounter examples taken from the six major rabbinic midrashic collections. We shall discover that each document asks its questions in a unique manner, has its own presuppositions, and constructs its exegetical comments in its own ways. Although, all of the texts share some common features and presuppositions, and even deal with the same issues, they are each distinctive. Upon finishing this volume, the reader should have a good idea of the variety of rabbinic midrashic collections.
The selections that appear in this anthology have been chosen because they allow the reader to understand the three aspects of midrash mentioned: the process of creating interpretations, the interpretations themselves, and the collections of these interpretations. Each example presents a variety of rabbinic interpretive techniques and exhibits a wide range of rabbinic presuppositions about revelation and reason. Some examples merely repeat the literal meaning of the biblical text, while others seem to ignore the actual words of Scripture.

In order to address the issues raised above, I have provided passages lengthy enough to allow the reader to acquire a sense of the different collections. The differences in approach, language, and presuppositions among the various rabbinic midrashic collections are clearly evident on the following pages. Throughout, I have tried to maintain terminological consistency. The translations are uninterrupted by comments or notes so that the reader can confront each text on its own terms. All translations are original for this volume. Although I have been sensitive to the need to render the passages into idiomatic English, I have attempted to reflect distinctive language, technical terminology, and syntax in the translations. I have transcribed the Tetragrammaton as YHWH. This noun is a proper name, and the usual translation of “Lord” does not convey this to the modern reader. Because the rabbinic tradition prohibited the pronunciation of God’s name, I have omitted the vowels when transcribing the Hebrew consonants. It is well to observe that the midrash often reads a biblical verse in a specific way. Sometimes by altering either the vocalization of words or the syntax of a verse, if the flow of the midrash demands that a verse be rendered in a way different from its conventional English translation, I have offered the translation required by the text. However, if the midrash only reads a particular verse in a unique manner, I have placed the midrash’s understanding of the verse in the notes. Words enclosed by brackets may not be found in the Hebrew text but are required in English to make sense out of the passage.

Each selection is introduced by a brief discussion of the collection in general. These remarks make it clear that there is much we do not know about the rabbinic collections. We do not know the names of their editors, nor do we know the exact dates of their compilation. In addition, the introductions present a short summary of the midrash so that the reader will have an idea of what he or she will encounter in the rabbinic text.

My comments follow the translations. In these comments, I explain the rabbinic exegeses, the issues that are explicit or implicit in the interpretations, the methods the rabbis employed, the stories and the issues that are assumed by the masters, and the ways the various comments fit together and relate to one another and to the biblical text to which they are juxtaposed. Some of the comments draw on the traditional commentaries to these collections, but many present my own interpretations. Unlike most traditional commentaries, my commentary seeks to interpret each portion of a midrashic text in its own terms. It does not presuppose that rabbinic midrash is monolithic, and that scriptural interpretations can be understood apart from their immediate literary contexts. It therefore makes only occasional use of parallels or passages outside of the document under discussion. Although I sometimes rely on medieval and modern commentators, I consistently note the century in which the commentator flourished. Therefore, a twelfth-century explanation of a third-century text is identified as such, and the reader is left to decide on the value of the explanation. The comments are meant only as an aid to the reader; they are not designed to offer a complete and definitive analysis of the midrashim which appear in this volume. Their purpose is to raise issues as well as to answer questions.

My conclusions appear following the comments. In these paragraphs I summarize the midrashic text, pointing out how I believe each section relates to each other section. I explain how I view the collection: how it is structured, what questions it asks, to whom it is addressed, and I draw attention to the sociological, historical, and political realities I believe were in the minds of the authors of our texts. The “conclusions” aim to be suggestive rather than definitive or comprehensive and indicate possibilities for further study and research.

Each chapter concludes with a section of notes. The notes refer to other versions of the passages quoted in the midrash, documents and passages mentioned or assumed by the midrash, the commentators and scholars from whom I have drawn my remarks, and some secondary sources that more fully discuss the issues raised either in the midrashim themselves or in my comments to these selections. In
addition, the notes contain references to parallel versions of the accounts found in the midrashic texts.

I have provided only the first step of the intellectual journey through rabbinic midrash. I have presented the texts in a complete and, I hope, comprehensible manner. I expect interested readers to take this first step with me and to proceed on the remainder of the journey on their own, preferably with the guidance I have provided on the following pages. Rabbinic midrash is interesting because it offers us a wide variety of the intellectual creations of the rabbis. It shows how they dealt with the holiest of texts, the Bible, and it allows us to see how this text functioned in their minds and worldview. Rabbinic midrash is important because Judaism is a text-oriented system; it is based on the supposed accurate record of God's revelation to Moses on Mount Sinai. Rabbinic midrash shows us how the rabbis, the founders of contemporary Judaism, dealt with the revelation on Sinai so that that revelation could indeed have everlasting value, meaning, and importance.

NOTES


4. See, Mishnah, Pirke Avot 1:1 ff.: “Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, the elders to the prophets, the prophets transmitted it to the men of the Great Assembly. . . . Simon the Just was of the remnant of the Great Assembly. . . . Antigonus of Sokho received [the Torah] from Simeon the Just. . . . Yosi the son of Yosiezer of Zeredah and Yosi the son of Yoheanan of Jerusalem received [the Torah] from them,” etc. J. Neusner, The Rabbinic Traditions About the Pharisees before 70 (Leiden, 1971), I, 11–23. For a discussion of “Moses our rabbi,” see Neusner, There We Sat Down, 73–74.

5. Deut. 34:10: And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom YHWH knew face to face.

6. Mishnah, Pirke Avot 5:22: “Ben Bag Bag said: ‘Turn it [the Torah] and turn it again, for everything is in it; and contemplate it and grow gray and old over it and stir not from it, for you can have no better rule than it.’ ”


8. Neusner, There We Sat Down, 72–97.

9. Ibid., 90–92.

10. On the training of rabbis, see D. Goodblatt, Rabbinic Instruction in Sasanian Babylonia (Leiden, 1974).


meanings have been applied to the term "midrash" as to render the word virtually useless as a descriptive term. J. Neusner, *Midrash in Context: Exegesis in Formative Judaism* (Philadelphia, 1983).


15. S. Sandmel suggested that certain portions of Genesis are "haggadic expansions" of earlier sections. G. Vermes suggested that Deuteronomy was a kind of midrash on Exodus and Numbers. J. Halperin considers Ezekiel 10:9–17 to be a type of midrash. Bevard Childs argued that the titles given to some of the Psalms should be viewed as a type of midrash on Psalms, and L. Zunz in the last century was one of the first to claim that the books of Chronicles are a midrash on the books of Kings. For a discussion of this issue and references to the works cited, see Porton, "Defining Midrash," 67–69; "Midrash," 118–119.

16. R. Ruether has argued that the difference between the nascent Christian community and rabbinic Judaism was a matter of midrash, the way in which each group expounded the Hebrew Bible. R. Ruether, *Faith and Fruicide* (New York, 1974), 23–116.


