

THE BIBLE IN ANCIENT CHRISTIANITY

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Handbook of Patristic Exegesis

The Bible in Ancient Christianity

by Charles Kannengiesser

WITH SPECIAL CONTRIBUTIONS BY VARIOUS SCHOLARS

Volume I



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II RABBINIC LITERATURE

A SPECIAL CONTRIBUTION
by Michael A. Signer and Susan L. Graham

INTRODUCTION

Scripture and its interpretation are the center of religious life for the Jewish people. In Neh 8:1–8, Ezra reads from the book of the Law of God, surrounded by the priests who translate and interpret it to the people. These two activities, reading the word of God and interpreting it in the light of the contemporary milieu so that it might be applied to the life of Israel, are the fundamental axioms of biblical studies in Judaism. The dynamic relationship between concern for the sacred character of the words, their transmission to the next generation, and their application to the exigencies of life, has been the source of renewal for Judaism throughout its history. It is also the source of development of biblical interpretation in Judaism. However, the story of Judaism from 70 C.E. on is shaped and told by a single group within Judaism: the rabbinic movement initially centered in Eretz Israel.¹ Because of the central place of Rabbinic literature in Jewish tradition, we have omitted discussion of Jewish Apocrypha, Hellenistic Judaism, and the Dead Sea scrolls.²

1. The strength of this tradition is clear in the earliest assessments of Jewish exegetical history, the *Seder Tannaim ve-Amoraim*, commonly thought to date ca. 884 C.E., and the *Iggeret Rab Sherira Gaon*, which is the letter that Sherira, the gaon (leader) of the Babylonian town of Pumbeditha, wrote ca. 987 to answer questions regarding the redaction of the various rabbinic texts (G. Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996] 6–7, cf. 192–94).

2. We can say confidently, thanks to recent studies, that the Judaism of the Second Temple period was characterized by great diversity (e.g., the Qumran separatist community, the Alexandrian community, nascent Christianity). Even after the destruction of the Second Temple by Titus in 70 C.E., Judaism maintained a diversity which is manifested in the archaeological record, but not in the texts. (See Simon, *Verus Israel*, 54 and Stemberger, *Introduction*, 48–49.) The diverse traditions of the late Second Temple period offer great potential for insight into the development of Judaism and Jewish exegesis in the early centuries of the Common Era (Shinan, *World of the Aggadah*), although whether these currents within Judaism affected Rabbinic literary effort has not yet been determined (Stemberger, *Introduction*, 48). The bibliography at the end of this essay includes some of these authors.

a. Dual Torah

The student of rabbinic Judaism in the period ca. 70–700 C.E. should consider the nature of the canon which constitutes its sacred literature. For the Rabbis, revelation consists of a “dual Torah.” One part is the Written Torah, or “written law,” מִקְרָא (*Miqra*), more generally called simply תּוֹרָה שֶׁבִכְתָּב (*Torah*). The second part is the Oral Torah, or “oral law,” תּוֹרָה שֶׁבְּעַל־פֶּה. Rabbinic tradition holds that the Oral Torah contained a revelation of all possible interpretations of the written Torah to Moses. However, for those who came later, it required discovery:

God said to Moses: “Write these things, for it is by means of these things that I have made a covenant with Israel” [Exod 34:27]. When God was about to give the Torah, He recited it to Moses in proper order, Scriptures, Mishnah, Aggadah, and Talmud, for God spoke all these words [Exod 20:1], even the answers to questions which advanced disciples in the future are destined to ask their teachers did God reveal to Moses! (*Tanuma* Buber (1885), *Ki Tissa* 58b.)

The principal text belonging to the Oral Torah was the Mishnah, which was seminal for subsequent interpretations of Scripture, including the Midrashim and Talmud, as we shall see. The concept of the dual Torah emphasizes that every genre of post-biblical Jewish literature is related to Scripture.

b. Dating the Texts

It is also necessary to consider that the traditions belonging to our period are embedded in later redactions and additions to the texts that the early Rabbis produced. This is in part due to the very nature of the development of the written documents of Rabbinic literature, which are compilations of their opinions and discussions. Rabbinic tradition evolved chiefly in the בֵּית הַבְּנַיִת (the synagogue), and especially in the disputations which took place in the בֵּית הַמִּדְרָשׁ (*beit ha-Midrash*), or house of study. Some of these opinions may have been transmitted orally, some in written form. Referring to the context of the original debates serves to clarify many passages which would otherwise remain puzzling. For example, only in the context of disputation does the following passage from the Mishnah regarding the daily recitation of the *Shema* (Deut 6:4) make sense:

One who recited the *Shema* so softly that he could not hear it still fulfilled his obligation.

R. Yose says, “He did not fulfil his obligation.”

[Objection:] If he recited but did not enunciate the letters—

R. Yose says, “He fulfilled his obligation.”

But R. Judah says, “He did not fulfil his obligation.”

If he One who recited in reverse order does not fulfil his obligation. recited and erred, he should return to the place where he erred [and continue reciting from there to the conclusion].³

The Rabbis' lively scholarly discussions resulted in a proliferation of written texts whose mastery became the dominant intellectual force in later Judaism.

Determining the stages of how Rabbinic texts evolved began as part of an ancient tradition, which identified specific generations of rabbis with the emergence of particular texts. For example, the Mishnah is identified with Rabbi Judah the Patriarch. Furthermore, many texts cite the names of important rabbis in connection with specific opinions. Some modern scholars treat such attributions, e.g., in the Mishnah, Talmud, etc., as historically accurate, and take their attributions at face value. Other modern scholars consider these texts which consider the historical evolution of rabbinic literature as a reconstruction of history or an apologetic by the later rabbinic elite.⁴ Despite the problems involved in historical reconstruction of rabbinic history even up to the eleventh century, it is possible to describe genres of rabbinic literature in their chronological sequence. In order to simplify the discussion we shall assign them to the eras which the medieval rabbis utilized when they described them. The work of Stemberger in the bibliography will provide guidance for the discussions of rabbinic chronology by modern scholars.

c. The "Academies"

Schools, or academies, were the locus of Jewish religious education. The origin of these schools may be discovered in the scriptural commandment to provide religious education for children (Deut 11:19). On the basis of rabbinic literature, we may reconstruct how this commandment was fulfilled in the early period of rabbinic Judaism. A communal tutor met the students

3. *M. Berakhot* 2:3, trans. Neusner, *Mishnah*, 5.

4. The "historical" approach to rabbinic literature would be represented in the writings of S. Safrai ed., *The Literature of the Sages, Part 1*, Compendia rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum, section two (Assen/Maastricht: Van Gorcum, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987). The minimalist approach is taken by the school of Jacob Neusner, "The Use of the Mishnah for the History of Judaism Prior to the Time of the Mishnah: A Methodological Note," *JSJ* 11 (1980): 177-85, and in

in the *בֵּית הַסֵּפֶר* (*beit sefer*, "house of the book"), which seems to have been located in or near the synagogue, to learn the Scriptures. Teaching was by reading and repetition aloud, in a set manner of cantillation (see *b. Megilla* 32a). The students first learned Written Torah, especially the Pentateuch, beginning with the book of Leviticus. Oral Torah would be taught later in the *בֵּית הַמִּדְרָשׁ* (*beit ha-Midrash*), or house of study. The school for the study of the Oral Law might be called a *יְשִׁבָּה* (*yeshiva*, lit. "sitting") from the third century on in Eretz Israel.

These academies probably consisted of a small number of students who lived near the residence of the rabbi. A pupil would become a disciple of the rabbi, memorizing the traditions taught in the school. Eventually, the goal of the disciple was to acquire the ability to make independent decisions in matters of religious law. The license to make these decision was called *סמיכה* or ordination. This permitted the student to have the title of "Rabbi," a matter which appears to have required Patriarchal approval.⁵

The academies which gave ordination in Eretz Israel seem to have been more tightly controlled during the first six centuries C.E. than those in Babylonia. In Eretz Israel the word "Rabbi" was utilized increasingly as an indication of professional standing rather than as an honorific form of address during the first two centuries C.E. In Babylonia the title "Rab" was used rather than "Rabbi," and this may indicate that in the Babylonian schools there was no formal ordination corresponding to that in Eretz Israel.

1. TANNAITIC PERIOD

The earliest group of Sages in rabbinic Judaism are called *Tannaim*. The term *Tanna* (תָּנָא; pl. "Tannaim") is an Aramaic word associated with the Hebrew root *שָׁנָה* (*shanah*, "repeat," or "learn"). It is difficult to determine precisely when the Tannaitic period begins. In the Mishnah tractate *'Abot*, the rabbis linked their authority to the "Men of the Great Assembly," particularly Rabbi

his many books. For a survey of the problem, students may consult the summary, "Handling Rabbinic Texts: The Problem of Method," in Stemberger, *Introduction*, 45-55. Stemberger provides a *status questionis* discussion of the redaction and textual histories of the major texts of rabbinic Judaism.

5. When the Patriarchate was ended (by 429), rabbinic ordination was replaced by other forms of declaring a scholar's independence of opinion. See Stemberger, *Introduction*, 8-14.

Simon the Just. Modern scholars date his activity to the Hasmonean period. This would provide a beginning date for the rabbinic teachers toward the end of the second century B.C.E. However, most of the earliest masters cited in the Mishnah begin after the period of Hillel and Shammai, which would place their activity in the first century C.E. Jacob Neusner and many other scholars argue that it is difficult to make any definitive statements about teachings which are prior to the destruction of the temple in 70 C.E. There seems to have been a significant consolidation of rabbinic Judaism after the destruction of the temple. This is usually described as the Yavneh or Jamnian period. Many scholars raise questions about the accuracy of the traditions associated with Yavneh. Modern scholars ascribe to the post-Bar Kokhba period (135 C.E.) a significant development of the Tannaitic traditions. This period, from 135 to 200, represents the relocation of the academies to the Galilee region. The Mishnah itself defines the end of the Tannaitic period. This would mean that by the mid-third century C.E., the Tannaitic period came to an end.

The third century was a period of unrest. It was a time of crisis throughout the Roman Empire, which the Jewish communities in Eretz Israel experienced in the form of onerous taxation. By the end of the century, there were two geographical centers of rabbinic Judaism. In addition to the rabbis in Eretz Israel, still centered around Galilee, a second center of rabbinic study and exegesis had developed in the long-established Jewish community in Babylon. Rabbis who had fled from Eretz Israel after the destructions of 70 and 135 augmented this community and its academies. The many links, formal and informal, between these communities become clear through an investigation of the interrelationship between the two Talmuds: sayings of Babylonian sages can be found in the Jerusalem Talmud, and elements of the Jerusalem Talmud are found in the Babylonian Talmud.

2. AMORAIC PERIOD

The next period is called "Amoraic," named after the "Amoraim" (אַמוראים), from the root אָמַר, *amar*, "say," "name," or "explain"). The Amoraim were the "interpreters" or commentators on the Mishnah. The compiling of the principal commentaries on the Mishnah, the two Talmud, define the Amoraic period. This definition implies the development of two groups of scholars—in Eretz Israel and Babylonia—and the eventual redaction of the two Talmuds.

The Amoraic period in Eretz Israel follows the contours of the political

developments in the eastern Roman empire. After Constantine's final conquest of the land in 324, Roman legislation became increasingly anti-Jewish, and by the end of the fourth century the Patriarchate and synagogues were principal targets of anti-Jewish laws (see *Codex Theodosianus* 16.8.1, 5, 6, 13, 26, and 16.9.1, 2). In mid-century there was a rebellion, followed by a decline of the capital cities (Tiberias, Sepphoris, Lydda) noted in the archaeological record. Tradition records that many rabbis emigrated to Babylonia at this time, possibly as a result of these events. The Patriarchate was abolished by Roman edict by 429, and in the latter half of the century the academies declined, and, perhaps responding to these political turns, the Jerusalem Talmud (JT) was redacted and the Amoraic period in Eretz Israel came to a close ca. 400. In Babylonia, it extends another century, since the Babylonian Talmud (BT) received significant redactions ca. 500, only to assume its final form in the following period.

The Amoraic period in Babylonia extends from the third through the fifth centuries C.E. Relations between the Jewish communities and their non-Jewish rulers there seem to have been more harmonious than in the Roman empire. With the exception of some conflicts with the Sassanian monarchs in the mid-fifth century, the academies of Amoraim continued activity without interference. Modern scholars distinguish between the end of the Amoraic period at the end of the fifth century and the redaction of the Babylonian Talmud, which may have happened under the Islamic rulers in the seventh century.

3. PRINCIPAL NOTIONS OF EXEGESIS AND TEXT

a. Halakah, Haggadah

In order to continue our discussion, it will be helpful to explain the two most significant categories of interpretation found in the Oral Torah: halakah and haggadah. In practice, halakah and haggadah can be difficult to distinguish, since individual passages and even entire works (e.g., the Mishnah) often include examples of both categories, even while subsequent generations of readers would emphasize one category as more significant than the other. For example, some might claim that the Mishnah is exclusively halakah. Both halakah and haggadah are concerned with resolving questions raised by the Written Torah, and by the reality of observing its commandments. Hence the subjects of both categories of interpretation are the same: Sabbaths, festivals, prayer, international relations, education of children, kashrut (dietary

laws), relations between neighbors. They are differentiated by the purpose of the debate and its character (see Avigdor Shinan, *World of the Aggadah*, 117; cf. 114–18).

Halakah (pl. halakot; the term is derived from הלך [*halak*], “walk”) is the easier of the two to define. Halakah focuses on the development of a body of ritual and civil legal practice for the Jewish community, and has prescriptive or normative force in the daily life of the community. Halakot would be determined by a series of considerations, such as majority views, tradition, the opinions of the Tannaim, and so on, to arrive at a conclusion. However, once the rabbis reached their conclusion it was binding. For this reason, it is easy to see the development of halakah as essentially confined to rabbinic disputations in the study-houses. The discussions and dialectical arguments found in the Mishnah and Talmud are most clearly understood in this context. Halakic argument is meant to arrive at a decision. Its purpose determines its history as well. Halakic literature develops in a clearly stratified manner. Each generation of rabbis understands itself as the successor and explainer of the preceding generation. We see this development in the Mishnah, Tosefta, and Talmud.

By contrast, *haggadah* (הגדה, pl. *aggadot*; the etymology of the term is not clear), is constituted by narrative material, and develops without any clear strata. This is one of the traits of *haggadah* which leads scholars to define it negatively, as “not halakah.” Haggadic teachings are not concerned to prescribe behavior or to show what is a right or correct opinion: “One does not teach [about praxis] from the *haggadah*,” is a maxim often quoted about the authority of the *haggadah*. In a given *haggadah*, contradictory sources can be presented together; there is no need to arrive at a decision or practice, so the differing traditions are preserved. Haggadic material has the nature of popular literature. It includes genres of folklore, history, poetry, humor (but not frivolity), medicine, natural science, mathematics, astronomy, theology, and religious philosophy.

Halakah and *haggadah* are interconnected at their foundations, and represent two sides of the same entity, the literature of the Sages. As such, these two interpretive methods parallel the legal and narrative unity of the Scriptures themselves.

b. Talmud, Gemara

The term Talmud (תלמוד), which means “study” or “learning,” is used to refer to opinions received from predecessors, to a whole body of learning within the Oral Law, or to teaching derived from exegesis of a Scripture text. Most

often, however, it refers to the redacted collections from the Amoraim in Ertze Israel and the Amoraim and Geonim in Babylonia.

When referring to “the Talmud” we mean a written document that consists of the Mishnah and the Gemara. In modern printed texts, these components are structurally separated. However, this was not the case with the manuscripts of the Talmud. *Gemara* in Babylonian Aramaic means “to complete” or “to learn,” and refers to the collection of analyses on Mishnah made by the Amoraim. The Mishnah text was retained as received, with the Gemara loosely attached, following the order of the Mishnah tractate. The Gemara demonstrates the variety of approaches the Rabbis might take to give issues as a result of their continuing concern to relate the precepts of the Scripture to the exigencies of contemporary life. The lines of argument focus on the sources of authority or reasoning in the Mishnah. The Gemara includes material which searches for the biblical warrant for the statement made by one of the Tannaim. There is also material which presents ethical and theological principles.

4. FOUNDATIONAL DOCUMENTS OF RABBINIC LITERATURE

a. Mishnah

The earliest compilation of Oral Torah is called *Mishnah* (משנה), which means “study” and “oral instruction.” This term derives from a common root with the Aramaic term *Tanna*. It is not clear from the Mishnah whether it was intended to be a collection of sources, or a manual of instruction, or a law code. The traditional view that the Mishnah is a legal code was articulated as early as the Amoraic period. In fact, the Mishnah contains all of these elements.

The Mishnah constitutes a seminal collection of the traditions which answered the community’s needs for guidance regarding religious practice, ethics, and social problems. The Mishnah is organized into six divisions, or סדרים (*sedarim*, “orders”). Each *sefer* is then divided into מסכתות (*masekhtot*, “tractates”), which are then divided into פרקים (*peraqim*, “chapters”), and, finally, into the smallest unit, which is called משנה (*mishnah*). The first order, *Zeraim* (“Seeds”), focuses on acknowledgement of the Divine (prayer) and, primarily, on the holiness of the land of Israel, which is demonstrated through providing tithes to the temple in Jerusalem. The second order, *Moed* (“Set Festivals”), treats the Sabbath and the festivals of the year. *Neziqin* (“Damages”), the third *sefer*, focuses on property and personal injury. Next,

Nashim ("Women") concentrates on those laws relating to marriage and divorce. The fifth and sixth orders, *Qodashim* ("Holy Things") and *Tohorot* ("Purities"), present the Tannaitic traditions on the temple cult and priestly activity. The six divisions and the order of the tractates reveal some variation in the manuscript tradition.

Mishnah fully complements Miqra and, therefore, has foundational importance for rabbinic tradition and exegesis. A significant perspective on the genre of Mishnah has been developed by Jacob Neusner, who has described the Mishnah as philosophical in character. He asserts that, in its stress on proper order and right rule, the Mishnah "makes a statement to be classified as philosophy concerning the order of the natural world in its correspondence with the supernatural world."⁶

b. Tosefta

The most significant literary production of this period, next to the Mishnah, was a collection called the Tosefta, which rabbinic tradition attributed to R. Yiyya, (ca. 220–230). The Tosefta (Aramaic תוספתא, meaning "addition"; not to be confused with the much later *Tosafot*) is sometimes considered a "supplement" or "companion" to the Mishnah, and was possibly edited to function in this way. About three times as large as the Mishnah, it consists of a collection of *baraitot* (ברייתות, "statements external to the Mishnah") which come from the Tannaim, and the earliest generation of the Amoraim. Much of the Tosefta consists of discussion based on citations from the Mishnah. However, approximately one-fifth of the Tosefta includes material which is not treated systematically, or not treated at all, in the Mishnah.

c. Jerusalem Talmud

The literary production which represents the most extensive development of Mishnah commentary in Eretz Israel is the Jerusalem Talmud (also called the "Talmud of the Land of Israel," and the "Palestinian Talmud"). The JT is composed of the Mishnah and the Gemara by the Amoraim in Eretz Israel. It was redacted earlier than the Babylonian Talmud. JT comments on only the first four orders of Mishnah, and on only one tractate in order Toharot. JT develops the halakah of Mishnah, and augments it with haggadic material and biblical exposition. It is a significant source for the history of Judaism in

Palestine, and the development of Jewish liturgy. However, in the tradition of rabbinic Judaism, the Babylonian Talmud displaced the JT, even in Eretz Israel, by ca. 750.

5. DEVELOPMENT OF MIDRASHIC LITERATURE

In Eretz Israel concurrent with the development of Mishnah-Gemara literature, another exegetical literature developed. This literature, which provided commentary that followed the order of the biblical text, may be classified in two groups: Targum and midrash.

a. Targum

The earliest example of exegetical literature in the post-biblical period is the Targum. The term תרגום means "translation." Aramaic was the lingua franca of the Near East until the Hellenistic conquest. It is difficult to fix a date of origin for Targum, but the development of the synagogue liturgy included a public reading from Scripture. The Scripture lection was read aloud with translations given verse by verse. The exegetical work of the Targum seems to have placed greatest emphasis on the paraphrase of texts in the Hebrew Bible. Some of the Targumim follow the biblical text with an attempt at literal translation, while others provide elaborations in order to explain "gaps" in the biblical text. The latter Targumim share a common characteristic with that body of rabbinic literature called midrash.

The Targumim seem to have originated in Eretz Israel, and include early haggadot, some perhaps representing Tannaitic traditions lost from the Mishnah. The earliest known Targum, Targum Onkelos on the Pentateuch, was evidently used in the synagogue liturgies in Eretz Israel in the third century, and from the third century on in the Jewish communities in Babylonia. Likewise, Targum Yonatan (Jonathan) on the Prophets was used in the Babylonian communities in the third or fourth century; however, its origins also can be traced to Eretz Israel. The value of the Targumim can be seen by the comment repeated in the Babylonian Talmud when quoting Targum Yonatan, "Were it not for the Targum of this verse we should not know what it means." Other Targumim were redacted sometime before the Arab conquest of the Middle East in 657.

6. Neusner, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature*, 99.

b. Midrash

The second group of texts which reflect biblical interpretation dating from the Amoraic period in Eretz Israel is called midrash. The term (מִדְרָשׁ, from שָׂרַשׁ, *darash*, “to seek,” “inquire,” “investigate”) refers to a method of expounding the text and to a collection of such texts. These texts are commentary and elaboration on the Written Torah. The various collections which fall under the head of midrash, however, can focus on deriving rabbinic halakah based on Scripture, or provide elaborations on narrative passages in the Bible. They may be organized according to the order of the biblical text, or arranged as homilies corresponding to the lection on Sabbaths and Holy Days.

In midrash we can discern some of the interrelationship of Judaism and Christianity during the early Christian period. There are some remarkable parallels in hermeneutical method between the midrashim and Greek and Syriac patristic literature. Origen and Jerome are explicitly aware of midrashic traditions. Moreover, in the third century tensions between Jews and Christians (including Origen and Eusebius) living in Eretz Israel rose to a level of confrontation. These debates can be discerned in the pages of midrash from this period, and the development of midrash in Eretz Israel (not in Babylonia) may in part be the result of Jewish efforts to confront their Christian counterparts regarding interpretation of the Scriptures.

An example of rabbinic response to Christianity can be found in *Genesis Rabbah* on the sacrifice of Isaac (the Akedah, Gen 22:1–18). The account begins with the command to Abraham to go to the place he would be told, and sacrifice his son (Gen 22:2). He took two slaves and Isaac on the journey, and sacrifice his son (Gen 22:2). He took two slaves and Isaac on the journey. Then he “saw the place from afar” (Gen 22:4; מָקוֹם (*maqom*), meaning “place” also serves as a euphemism for God. The midrash asks, “What did he see?” “He saw a cloud attached to the mountain”—i.e., a manifestation of the divine presence, which made it clear to him that this mountain was the place which God had commanded as the appropriate place to offer up Isaac.

He [Abraham] said: “It would appear that is the place upon which the Holy one, blessed be He, commanded me to sacrifice my son.” He said to Isaac: “My son, do you see what I do?” He told him, “Yes.” He said to his two young men, “Do you see what I do?” They said to him, “No.” He said: “Since you do not see it, REMAIN HERE WITH THE ASS [Gen 22:5], for you are like the ass [which also does not see].” (*Gen. Rab.* 56.1–2)

We learn from other sources that the Gentiles are “a nation resembling an ass.” Christians and Jews debated vehemently in the third and fourth centuries about the possibility of how, after the destruction of the Second Temple, that

one could verify divine revelation, and whether divine revelation to a non-Jew was possible at all. In the above passage we observe the denigration of the two non-Jewish servants. They do not have any perception of the divine. As non-Jews they are like the ass, a dumb animal incapable of perception. Modern scholars may have some disagreement about whether or not the “people who is like an ass” refers specifically to Christians or more generally to pagans. Nonetheless, there are many passages in midrash literature which focus on the theme of *Verus Israel* and God’s continued covenant with the Jewish people in their exile.

i. Tannaitic Midrashim

The oldest group of midrashim are the so-called Tannaitic midrashim, sometimes called halakic midrashim or מִדְרָשׁי הַהֲלָכָה (*midreshei halakah*, meaning “midrashim of the halakah”). The works included in this subgroup are the *Mekilta d’Rabbi Ishmael* and the *Mekilta de Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai* on Exodus, *Sipra* on Leviticus; and *Sipre* on Numbers and Deuteronomy. The Tannaitic midrashim may be said to form a continuous commentary on the Pentateuch from Exodus to Deuteronomy. In these midrashim there is extensive use of rabbinic hermeneutics to demonstrate how various expansions of the Oral Law are grounded in Scripture. Despite the use of the name halakic midrashim, these collections all contain commentary on narrative passages in their respective biblical books.

ii. Exegetical Midrashim

A second set of midrashim consists of those referred to as “exegetical” and “homiletic.” The “exegetical” midrashim are later than the *midreshei halakah*, but a number were compiled during the fifth century. It is important to remember that the *midreshei halakah* are exegetical, but modern scholars refer to them as “exegetical” because these collections are organized according to the biblical verse order. The term “exegetical midrashim” merely distinguishes them from the next group to be described, which are called “homiletic midrashim.”

Genesis Rabbah explicates the book of Genesis. Scholars postulate that it was redacted in the fifth century. It is considered by some to be the best example of the exegetical midrashim because the rabbis reveal deep layers of meaning within the text. The meanings the rabbis sought in the Scriptures included truths which pertained to their own age. *Genesis Rabbah* provides many examples of rabbinic apologetic against pagan and Christian arguments. In the narratives about the patriarchs and matriarchs, it is possible

to discern their veiled arguments against Christian claims that these biblical figures reached their true fulfillment only in Christ.

In this period exegetical midrashim were also edited on the five books in the Hebrew Bible called the Five Megillot, or "Five Scrolls." These biblical books were read as part of the synagogue liturgy for the three pilgrimage festivals: Passover (Canticles), Pentecost (Ruth), and Tabernacles (Ecclesiastes); and on Purim (the Feast of Esther) and the Ninth of Ab commemorating the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem (Lamentations). The earliest description of the liturgical role for these books is in the Mishnah, tractate *Megillah*.

These midrashim would include *Canticles Rabbah*; *Midrash Ruth* (also called *Ruth Rabbah*); *Lamentations Rabbah*; *Midrash Qoheleth* (also called *Ecclesiastes Rabbah*); and the first half (§§ 1–6) of *Esther Rabbah*.

iii. Homiletic Midrashim

"Homiletic" midrashim are so called because the order of their composition follows the readings for Sabbaths and for special Sabbaths, or Holy Days, in the liturgical year. These collections do not follow the order of the biblical text. Rather, they develop thematically. As we have them, these homilies have sometimes been subjected to abbreviation or other editorial reformulation. The most significant collections dating to the Amoraic period include *Leviticus Rabbah*, containing thirty-seven homilies, which dates to the fifth century (perhaps later); the *Pesiqta de Rab Kahana*, a collection of homilies for feasts and special Sabbaths, redacted in the fifth century, though subject to later additions; and the *Tanhuma* on the Pentateuch, which contains some material from the Amoraic period but was not redacted until the medieval period.

Modern scholarship has concentrated considerable effort on the structure of these homilies, especially the formal conventions for their beginning and conclusion. The *petiah*, which is generally understood to be a kind of proem or introduction to the homilies, is the most common rhetorical form in midrashic literature. *Petiot* aim at artfully leading the hearer from verses in other parts of the Hebrew Bible, such as Psalms or Proverbs, to consider the opening verse(s) of the Pentateuchal reading of the day. The *atimah*, or peroration of the homily, has also been studied. Particularly in the *Pesiqta de Rab Kahana*, and *Tanhuma*, these *atimot* lead to an eschatological teaching which concludes the homily with a message of hope in the messianic deliverance of the Jewish people from the harshness of its exile. These *atimot* may offer students of patristic literature some understanding of the development of early Christian typological exegesis.

6. JUDAISM IN BABYLONIA

Rabbinic tradition marks the beginning of the Amoraic period in Babylonia with the return of Rav from Eretz Israel in 219. During this period, the Jewish community interacted with the successive Persian dynasties (the Sassanian period corresponds to the Babylonian Amoraic period) and its official Zoroastrian clergy. Under the Sassanids, the community no longer had its previous freedom, but it was able to maintain a *modus vivendi* with the Persians. However, in the mid-fifth century there was a power shift, and the Zoroastrian clergy entered on a series of persecutions of the Jewish population which may have weakened the rabbinic leadership of the Jewish people.

Jewish fortunes changed again with the Arab conquest ca. 640 c.e. The location of the first Arab capital was in Damascus, which put Eretz Israel in a position of potential political centrality. However, when the Abbasid Caliphate moved the capital to Baghdad in the eighth century, Babylonian Jews once more found themselves at the center of the empire.

Internally, the Jewish communities in Babylon were governed by an Exilarchate, an office which emerged ca. 200. The Exilarch dominated Jewish communal life, dictating legal and economic practices, and representing Judaism before the Persian monarch. The academies of the Amoraim began to assert their hegemony over the religious life of Babylonian Jewry. Formal gatherings around the Sages, at regular times, in a fixed setting and organization, can be attested for this period. By the beginning of the sixth century, because of the weakened status of Byzantine Jewry and the rise of the Islamic empire, the schools of Babylonia took on greater importance, especially with the decline of the Amoraim in Eretz Israel. With the rise of the Abbasid empire and the network established by the Babylonian academies, the Babylonian Talmud surpassed the Jerusalem Talmud in authority. It was through the literary correspondence of the Geonim, the heads of the Babylonian academies, that the Babylonian Talmud became normative for Jews in the Mediterranean world and, later, in northern Europe.

a. Babylonian Talmud

The thriving (and often competing) academies in Babylonia contributed to lively discussion and an independent approach toward the Mishnah which is reflected in the Babylonian Talmud (BT). The BT differs from the JT in both form and content. The order of tractates differs. While neither Talmud comments on all tractates of the Mishnah, the BT includes commentaries on tractates not treated in the JT.

Although the BT, three times the length of the JT, did not use the JT as a source, sayings and decisions of the rabbis of Eretz Israel are nevertheless found in abundance in it. For example, haggadic material which is included in the midrash literature of Eretz Israel appears in BT. The BT is almost one-third haggadic; by contrast, the JT does not include much haggadic material. Some kinds of haggadic material, for instance angelology, which is absent in JT, is abundant in BT. In contrast to the laconic style of JT, BT has great literary intricacy.

The Babylonian Talmud may have started to crystallize as early as the fifth century. Tradition attributes this redaction to Rav Ashi (ca. 376–427) and the two generations succeeding him: the death of Rabina, the last of these compilers (ca. 499), marks the end of the Amoraic period in Babylonia. Another account sets this *terminus* by the Persian abolition of the Babylonian Jewish Exilarchate in 500. It was further edited together with additions in the following century by the *Saboraim*.

b. Saboraim and Geonim

Saboraim is the name given by the later Geonim to the final editors of the BT. The Aramaic term סְבוּרָאִים (*saboraim*) also appears in the JT (*Qidd.* 2, 63d). The Saboraim completed the ordering of the BT, clarified some of its decisions, introduced additional discussions and explanations of texts, and inserted technical phrases as study aids. Little is known about the history of the Saboraim. The dates of their activity remain a matter of speculation. Most scholars date their work to the period 500–589, but some scholars extend it to 689.

With the Arab conquest the Geonim emerge (sg., Gaon; the term is of indeterminate origin). These were the heads of the principal academies in Babylonia (at Sura and Pumbeditha) in the Abassid empire. In their governance of the Jews as *Dhimmi*, or protected minority under Muslim rule, the Geonim served as the juridical authority for the Jewish communities throughout the Abassid empire. Under their leadership, intellectual and juridical, rabbinic Judaism was consolidated.

The centralized power of the Geonim began to decline together with the Baghdad Caliphate in the tenth century. Although the office remained until at least the end of the twelfth century, its power was severely diminished, and the title Gaon became simply a name for the head of a major talmudic academy in the Islamic world.

7. ERETZ ISRAEL AND THE WESTERN DIASPORA AFTER THE END OF THE AMORAIC PERIOD: *PIYYUIM*

During the Saboraic period the Byzantine Empire was separated from Rome and Western Christendom (ca. 565–1071). A significant number of Jews continued to live under Byzantine rule. Despite several attempts at legally forcing conversions to Christianity, and persecutions, most notably in the seventh century, the Jews were generally tolerated. During this period some of the major collections of midrashim were redacted. In addition, a significant new genre of rabbinic literature developed, the *piyyu* or religious poem.

During this post-Amoraic period in Eretz Israel, we find the earliest collections of liturgical poetry, called *piyyuim* (פְּיּוּט, *piyyut*, is derived from Greek ποιητής, *poiêtês*, or poet). The roots of *piyyuim* are found in the synagogue liturgy. They were written to embellish and give variety to the synagogue service by providing an alternative to the set prayers. The earliest examples of these poems belong to the Amoraic period, while the statutory prayers were still developing. They can be found in talmudic sources and in some portions embedded in the texts of the statutory prayers which have been part of the liturgical tradition.

The first poet known to us was Yose ben Yose, dated to the fifth century. Most of his *piyyuim* which have been recovered were composed for the Days of Awe, including *selihot*, or prayers of repentance, and are characterized by a simple style. He also composed a special type of *piyyu*, the long *Avodah* (“worship”), which describes the order of worship for Yom Kippur: a poetic rendering of part of Mishnah tractate *Yoma*. In this poem, the rites for the Day of Atonement are preceded by a long history from creation and culminating in the building of the temple and the worship there on Yom Kippur.

A century after Yose ben Yose, the next poet whose name has come down to us, Yannai, began composing his *piyyuim*. He is principally known for his *kerovot*, a type of *piyyu* which consists of a poetic alternative for the Eighteen Benedictions (*Amidah*). Liturgical poetry flowers after him in the Byzantine period (ca. 565–1071) in Eretz Israel. Rhyme appears, as liturgical poetry becomes more expressive in vocabulary and flowery in style.

Haggadic and halakic material both appear in liturgical poetry. For example, Yose ben Yose includes a haggadah in the *Avodah* the tradition that Jacob's name was inscribed on the throne of the Holy One and that for his sake the angels ascended and descended the ladder (cf. Gen 28:12–15):

The One who knows him stood above him in his sleeping place,
And said: I am your guard, a shadow on your right hand,

Holy Ones descend and ascend, for his [Jacob's] sake,

To recognize his shape engraved on high.⁷

Yannai includes a unique haggadah on Moses' rod: "He threw it down, and it became three kinds: a viper, a crocodile and a cobra." It is not known whether he invented this image or whether he drew upon previous haggadic traditions. These examples indicate that the thought world of the rabbis cannot be fully understood without including a study of the *piyyuim*.

CONCLUSION

Mishnah, Tosefta, Talmud, midrash, Targum, piyyu: these all constitute genres and texts of rabbinic biblical interpretation. As "classics" they engender a long tradition of interpretation themselves. Subsequent generations of Jewish literature draw upon formal aspects of Talmud and midrash (as the two principal genres) to create their own expositions of Scripture. Exposition of Talmud and the codification of halakic decisions become central genres of rabbinic Judaism.

Two characteristics distinguish the compositions of the classical period. First, they are compilations of the traditions of all the rabbis, rather than the work of a single author. Only the *piyyuim* represent the work of a single author. Second, they have a utopian and atemporal nature. These texts do not emphasize the time or place when something happened. The transcendent presentation of time and space in these texts may have reinforced the rabbis' estimation that Written and Oral Torah were the twin repositories of divine revelation.

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