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The Nature of the Aggadah

Aggadah is inextricably bound up with the idea of speech; indeed, *Haggadah*, the equivalent term used by Palestinian sources, is the noun-form of the verb *le-haggid*, which means "to say" or "to tell." Yet, it is not entirely clear just how this particular name became attached to the particular type of literature to which it refers. One possible approach to this question is suggested by the fact that *le-haggid* is synonymous with *le-sapper*, "to tell or relate a story." Many aggadot do, in fact, relate stories or at least add to or elaborate the biblical narrative—many but not all. For there is certainly no lack of aggadot which are strictly exegetical in nature, and many of these clarify the non-narrative portions of the biblical text. Nor is there a lack of aggadot which fall into the categories of wise sayings, moral dicta or maxims, philosophical speculation, and the like. Another approach to this question, that suggested by Bacher,¹ is to see the name Aggadah-Haggadah as being derived from the technical term *maggid ha-katuv* ("Scripture says"), which is frequently used in midrashic literature to introduce a quotation from Scripture. But this suggestion, too, is not totally plausible, for this term occurs principally in halachic midrashim rather than in aggadic midrashim (I shall deal with the important distinction between Halakhah and Aggadah below). Whereas the first approach overemphasizes the narrative aspect of Aggadah, the second approach overemphasizes its exegetical aspect. For not all Aggadah is intended to clarify Scripture, but it may include anecdotes and folktales completely unrelated to the Bible. Furthermore, just as not all Aggadah is Midrash, not all Midrash—the halachic midrashim, for example—is Aggadah. Perhaps the most

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convincing explanation of the name Aggadah is one that relates the name not to the contents of the Aggadah but rather to its method of transmission. While Scripture was read aloud in the synagogue from a scroll, the aggadot were not read to the people in the context of the synagogue service. Rather, the aggadic tradition was transmitted chiefly by word of mouth, that is, by being related orally in the public sermon.²

Just as it is difficult to reconstruct the derivation of the name Aggadah, so too is it difficult to define precisely the nature of the Aggadah. In terms of content, it includes wise sayings, expressions of faith, expositions and elaborations of Scripture, stories, and so on. Its formal patterns include epigrams, anecdotes, examples of wit and humor, terse explanations of a single word in Scripture, and stories of almost epic length. Since the Middle Ages it has been customary to define the Aggadah by what it is not, as in this statement ascribed to R. Samuel ha-Nagid: "Haggadah is all commentary in the Talmud that deals with something other than *mizvah* [here in the sense of Jewish law]."³ This definition is, of course, overly restrictive, for aggadot are found not only in the Talmud but first and foremost in the various works of midrashic literature. Second, as we have noted above, not all aggadot can be categorized as exegetical commentary. Nevertheless, to this day no more precise formulation has been found than to define Aggadah as that multifaceted type of material found in talmudic-midrashic literature which does not fall into the category of Jewish law (i.e., *Halakhah*).⁴ The chief defect of this negative form of definition is, of course, that it conveys no positive information about the nature and character of what it seeks to define.

Aggadah, in all its rich variety of form and content, is, we may affirm, by and large the product of the Jewish community in Palestine. As far back as the middle of the Second Temple period, after the conquest of Palestine by Alexander the Great, the Aggadah began to take shape and continued to be a living literary form for more than a millennium, at least until the Arab conquest of Palestine.⁵ To a certain extent, the Aggadah represents a creative reaction to the upheavals suffered by Israel in their land during this long period. It also represents an attempt to develop new methods of exegesis designed to yield new understandings of Scripture for a time of crisis and a period of conflict, with foreign cultural influence pressing from without and sectarian agitation from within. This period demanded a response to the crises

brought about by historical events, foremost the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple and the total loss of political independence. This complex of spiritual, political, and national challenges required constant grappling with problems and taking new stands suited to present needs. The Jewish people sought, successfully, to continue living according to the dictates of the Torah. To achieve this, it was necessary that the Torah remain dynamic and open to varying interpretation in order to meet the challenges of drastically varying circumstances. By developing a method of "creative exegesis" the aggadists were able to find in Scripture—which might otherwise have come to seem irrelevant to contemporary needs—the new answers and values which made it possible to grapple with the shifts and changes of reality.

The Aggadah, as we have noted, has many facets. In terms of content, we can categorize aggadot into three broad types: 1) aggadot that are inextricably related to the biblical narrative—the bulk of the aggadot in talmudic-midrashic literature falls into this category; 2) "historical" aggadot which tell of post-biblical personalities and events, and 3) "ethical-didactic" aggadot which offer guidance and outline principles in the area of religious and ethical thought. Such a categorization is unavoidable for there is certainly a qualitative difference between a legend about the life of Abraham and a story about Hillel or Rabbi Akiba, just as there is a fundamental difference between a tale about a woman who caused the death of her sons by rashly making a vow and aphorisms of the type found in *Mishnah Avot* (also known as "The Sayings of the Fathers"): "If I am not for myself who will be for me . . . and if not now when" (I 14), or "All is foreseen, but one is given freedom of choice" (III 15).

However neither the names nor the boundaries of these categories are entirely fixed. If we refer to a legend about the Emperor Titus or about the sage Hillel as a "historical aggadah," we must not forget that what we call "biblical aggadah" also tells of historical figures such as King David and the prophet Isaiah. On the other hand, we must not be deceived into thinking that what the sages relate about their own contemporaries is real history; the "tales of the sages" must also be considered aggadic legend and not reliable historical information. The story of the miracles that occurred during the debate between R. Eliezer and his colleagues and the Heavenly Voice that finally decided the issue is as much a part of aggadic legend as is the aggadah which determines that Nahshon was the first Israelite to plunge into

the Red Sea. All of these legends arise out of the same motivations, and the same creative imagination is at work in all of them. It is preferable, therefore, when we refer to "the tales of the sages," that we speak of them not as "historical aggadot" but rather as "non-biblical" aggadot.

The term "ethical-didactic" aggadot is also somewhat misleading, for it seems to imply that biblical aggadot and tales of the sages have no moral intent. The opposite is true; aggadot of all types are generally intended to teach some lesson. This function is not limited to any particular category; rather, the uniqueness of the "ethical-didactic" aggadot lies in the fact that the didactic message is stated explicitly rather than conveyed implicitly through a story or attached to a biblical verse by way of proof.

Ultimately, this suggested categorization of aggadot into three types is insufficient. To which category do those parables belong which do not serve to clarify a difficult verse? What of anecdotes and folktales which are not about historical figures, such as the stories of riddles which show the wisdom of the "four Jerusalemites who came to Athens"? And even with the addition of these minor categories we have still not exhausted the great variety of material found in the Aggadah. It is of course possible to do without any categorization according to contents. We could categorize aggadot according to their form and literary-aesthetic means of expression or make our primary distinction between folk Aggadah and homiletic or scholarly Aggadah. This latter category would contain those aggadot created by the sages within the context of the study-houses and academies. These typologies are also legitimate, but none of them covers all the many manifestations of what we call the Aggadah.

Even the aggadot that are related to the Bible are not homogeneous, for they consist of both strict explication of the biblical text and expansive elaboration of biblical stories. Moreover, both these sub-categories address themselves to their own time no less than to that of the Bible. Biblical Aggadah seeks to be contemporary or topical, to reveal the image of its own age in the ancient Scriptures. Already in the Septuagint, for example, "Aram before and Philistines behind" (Isa. 9:11) were identified with "the Syrians on the east and the Hellenes on the west." Similarly, we find an interpretation of "So I will stir them to jealousy with those who are no people" (Deut. 32:21) as referring to the Samaritans in Ben Sirah (50:25-26): "With two nations my soul

is vexed and the third is no people, the dwellers in Seir and Philistia and the foolish nation that lives in Shechem." The prophecy "a star shall come forth out of Jacob and a specter shall rise out of Israel" (Num. 24:17) was generally given a messianic interpretation, as in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan. However, the Dead Sea Sect interpreted this verse as referring to their "Interpreter of the Law," and Christianity interpreted it as referring to Jesus, while R. Akiba interpreted as follows: "A star [kokhav] shall come forth out of Jacob—Kozba [Bar Kokh-bah] has come forth out of Jacob . . . this is he, the king messiah!" (P. Ta'anit IV 8, 68d).⁶ Moreover, there are many aggadot which in discussing events historically connected with the destruction of the First Temple, such as the legend about Zechariah's blood (see B. Sanhedrin 96b and parallels), are in fact implicitly commenting on the destruction of the Second Temple.

Biblical Aggadah, however, does not deal exclusively with exegesis. It also expands and elaborates the biblical narrative. The Aggadah tells of Satan's provocation of God that led to Isaac's almost being sacrificed, of Moses' wisdom and heroism as the commander of the army of Ethiopia, of the argument between Cain and Abel over the division of the world between them that led to Abel's murder, and of the altercation between Moses and the angels that took place when Moses ascended to heaven to receive the Torah. In fact there is almost no biblical story that did not undergo aggadic amplification and no biblical figure whose character is not portrayed more fully in the Aggadah. And we must speak not only of amplification but also of alteration. The biblical King David, the heroic fighter, bears little resemblance to the wise and pious David of the Aggadah, who day and night studies Torah. Esau is portrayed in the Aggadah as the utterly wicked enemy of Jacob from their mother's womb—indeed, he is made to symbolize Rome, "the wicked kingdom," and the strife between Israel and the oppressive Roman rulers. And, though the Bible makes it perfectly clear that Moses died just like any other human being, according to the Aggadah, "there are those who say" that Moses did not die but ascended to heaven where he now serves (Sifre to Deuteronomy, 357).

There were also many changes in matters of theology. The verse "Who is like Thee, O Lord, among the gods [ba'elim]" (Exod. 15:11) was interpreted by the sages as reading: "Who is like Thee among the mute [ba'illemim]: for He sees His Temple in ruins and remains silent" (B. Gittin 56b and additional texts). This interpretation reflects a burn-

ing theological question: "His children are put in neck-irons—where is His might?" (ibid.). This could only be answered with the idea that divine silence and restraint was in itself a manifestation of God's might, for "Who is mighty? He who subdues his nature" (M. Avot IV 1). In the light of present suffering, it was impossible to hang on to the naive belief that no evil shall befall the righteous man and that he shall be rewarded for his good deeds in this life. The sages did not hesitate to reinterpret, in a spirit contrary to the simple, literal meaning, verses which gave expression to this belief. For example, "He has given sustenance [teref] to those who fear Him; He will ever be mindful of His Covenant" (Ps. 111:5) was reinterpreted by R. Joshua ben Levi: "He has given exile [teruf] to those who fear Him in this world; but in the world to come, 'He will be mindful of His covenant.'" (Genesis Rabbah XL 2). In the wake of the destruction of the Temple and the cessation of the sacrificial cult, which had been Israel's means of atonement, the masters of the Aggadah declared, "we have one means of atonement which is comparable. And what is it? It is deeds of loving-kindness" (Avot de-Rabbi Natan, ver. A, chap. 4). The Aggadah sees the central message of the biblical story of the sacrifice of Isaac not in Abraham's submissiveness to the will of God, but in Isaac's acceptance of martyrdom in allowing himself to be sacrificed. This new interpretation and emphasis of Isaac's role provided an example to Jews of the rabbinic period, many of whom were called upon to choose between martyrdom and apostasy during times of religious persecution.

Another sociohistorical change reflected in the Aggadah is in the concept of religious leadership. The Bible knows of two basic types: the priest, who represented the religious establishment, and the charismatic prophet. But by the talmudic period prophecy had long since ceased, and the power and importance of the priesthood decreased drastically, at least following the destruction of the Temple. Both these types of religious leader were replaced by the sage, the master of Torah. It is not surprising, then, that the aggadists should have sought within the Bible itself some authorization for this new type of leadership. R. Akiba, for example, employed his hermeneutic principle that every *et* (the sign of the direct object in Hebrew) in the biblical text implies or implicitly allows a midrashic amplification, to give a daring reinterpretation of the verse "Thou shalt fear [et] the Lord, thy God" (Deut. 10:20): *et*—to include the sages" (B. Pesahim 22b).

The Aggadah contains materials of a widely different nature which

originated in highly distinct ways. On the one hand, there is no doubt that many aggadot are the creation of popular or folk imagination; this category includes particularly parables, anecdotes, and expanded stories of heroism of biblical figures, which ultimately found their way into apocryphal literature and rabbinic legend. Moreover, many aggadot were created by the authors and compilers of the apocrypha and other books written during the Second Temple period. These works include a literary genre that belongs entirely within the realm of the Aggadah, the rewritten biblical narrative. This type of Aggadah, which reworks the basic biblical stories adding many elaborations and alterations, is illustrated by the Book of Jubilees and the fragments of the Genesis Apocryphon discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls.

My concern here, however, is dealing primarily with aggadot from talmudic and midrashic literature. Though this literature certainly absorbed much material which originated in the contemporaneous folk culture, rabbinic Aggadah itself is no longer the product of that culture but rather is the work of the sages themselves. The aggadot developed by them are not designed principally for entertainment but have a strong and self-conscious didactic function. Yet rabbinic aggadot were for the most part intended for the simple folk and were imparted to them in the public sermon. For this reason the sages utilized every sort of literary and rhetorical technique to make this material attractive and compelling to their audience.⁷ Rabbinic Aggadah tends, therefore, not so much to relate stories as it intends to clarify Scripture and to draw from it some moral point. Indeed, it is for the most part inextricably tied to the biblical text, though this does not prevent it from reinterpreting Scripture, deriving new meanings from the ancient texts, and finding new morals to biblical stories. Thus, the bulk of talmudic-midrashic Aggadah does not stand by itself but rather serves the Bible, explicating and elaborating it, and also adapting it, as I have said, to present needs. For this reason rabbinic aggadot generally did not take the form of epic stories or extensive independent works. Since these rabbinic aggadot were most often told during the public homily which was linked to the reading of the scriptural lesson in the synagogue, they were automatically related to the relevant biblical stories. And thus the rabbinic aggadists saw no need to cast their expositions and comments in the form of complete, continuous stories, nor did they tend to retell the biblical stories themselves after the fashion of some of the apocryphal literature mentioned above. The sages were content to

create a basically exegetical type of Aggadah and to allow the Bible itself to provide both narrative continuity and basic background. Their exegetical annotations, whether long or short, serve mostly to clarify, embellish, and enrich the biblical narrative. And so the Aggadah is, in its own words, "the delightful part of biblical interpretation" (Ecclesiastes Rabbah II 8).

The sages who created and developed the Aggadah took upon themselves a double task. On the one hand, since they assumed that the meaning of Scripture was manifold, they felt it was necessary to try to extract the full range of implications not only from the contents of the biblical text but from every apparently superfluous word as well. The assumption that "one biblical statement may carry many meanings" (B. Sanhedrin 34a) led to their interpretation of every locution in the biblical text, often in disregard of its meaning in context. The sages' commitment to discover all the ramified teaching concealed in Scripture⁸ finds expression in their dictum: "Interpret and receive reward!"⁹ They were of the opinion that the Bible intended to impart moral and religious instruction, to teach us how to live, rather than to supply dry factual information of a geographical or genealogical nature, for example. Indeed, they express surprise at verses which seem to supply merely historical information: " 'I also gathered for myself silver and gold' (Ecc. 2:8). Does the verse merely inform us of Solomon's wealth? Rather, the scriptural passage refers to words of Torah! [i.e., to Solomon's vast learning]" (Ecclesiastes Rabbah II 8). And another example of this attitude: " 'Go up into this mountain of Avarim' (Num. 27:12), in another place you call it the mountain and the top of the peak, and so the same place is called by four names . . . What need have men of this [information]?" (Sifre Zuta, p. 318). When one finds lists of geographical names such as "and Kinah and Dimonah and Adadah" (Josh. 15:22), it is not good enough to state that Scripture merely "lists the cities of the land of Israel." Rather, these names are to be creatively interpreted in order to derive from them a moral lesson: "everyone who has anger [kinah] against his fellowman and keeps silent [domem], the One who inhabits eternity [ade ad] brings him to justice" (B. Gittin 7a). Similarly, concerning the Book of Chronicles, which is largely taken up with lists of names and genealogical tables, the sages asserted: "the Book of Chronicles was given only to be [creatively] interpreted" (Leviticus Rabbah I 3).

On the other hand, while the rabbinic creators of the Aggadah

looked back into Scripture to uncover the full latent meaning of the Bible and its wording, at the same time they looked forward into the present and the future. They sought to give direction to their own generation, to resolve their religious problems, to answer their theological questions, and to guide them out of their spiritual perplexities. Yet the sages also based this second aspect of their task on scriptural interpretation, for they believed that the Bible provided the answer—if not explicitly, then implicitly—to every contemporary problem.¹⁰ Thus, most aggadot have two levels of meaning, one overt and the other covert.¹¹ The first deals openly with the explication of the biblical text and the clarification of the biblical narrative, while the second deals much more subtly with contemporary problems that engaged the attention of the homilists and their audience. The aggadists who tell of Korah, the rebellious Levite, and his followers (see Num. 16, etc.), refer, in reality, to the "scoffers of this generation" who despise the sages and their teachings. The rabbis discuss Noah's coming out of the ark, but the discussion implicitly presents differing attitudes toward the liberation of Israel from foreign oppression: "Noah said, Just as I entered the ark only with permission [from God] so I will not come out except with permission. R. Judah bar Illai said, If I had been there, I would have broken it [the ark] and come out" (Genesis Rabbah XXXIV 4). Much of aggadic exegesis is, therefore, a kind of parable or allegory. The aggadists do not mean so much to clarify difficult passages in the biblical text as to take a stand on the burning questions of the day, to guide the people and to strengthen their faith. But since they addressed themselves to a wide audience—including simple folk and children—they could not readily formulate the problems in an abstract way, nor could they give involved, theoretical answers. In order to present their ideas in a more comprehensible and engaging fashion, the sages cast them in a narrative format and employed parables and other familiar literary means which appeal to all.

Nevertheless, Aggadah can, in a way, be seen as the "philosophical literature" of the rabbinic period, though the characteristics which prompt such a view take the form of popular philosophy which avoids theoretical, systematic discussions and austere abstract formulations. Such more purely philosophical characteristics are found indeed among the "sayings of the sages," usually manifest in the form of principles set forth in an aphoristic, pithy style. These principles take a different form in the two other types of Aggadah, that which expounds

the biblical narrative and that which tells of the lives of the sages themselves. Here, these philosophical principles and their actual meaning are generally not stated explicitly. Rather, they must be "read between the lines"; they may be inferred from the descriptive approach employed and from the general picture which emerges from these stories as told or retold by the sages of the Aggadah.

Aggadah ("lore") and Halakhah ("law") are two facets of the intellectual and spiritual work of the sages of the talmudic period. Though we must not ignore the qualitative difference between the Aggadah and the Halakhah, there is certainly a close link between these two patterns of rabbinic creativity. On the one hand the same sages who were most famous as creators and transmitters of Halakhah were also aggadists and homilists and there were very few Amoraim (at least in Palestine) who limited themselves exclusively to either Halakhah or Aggadah. Moreover, these two types of thinking are found together in intimate coexistence both in the two Talmudim and in the halakhic midrashim. Indeed, a talmudic discussion often inadvertently slips from rigorously analytical argumentation on some halakhic point into the lighter and more emotionally appealing aggadic mode of discourse. By the same token, Halakhah is not absent even from the most strictly aggadic midrashim. In some of them, the *Tanḥuma-Yelammedenu* Midrashim, for example, each section generally begins with an halakhic question, such as: "Let our master teach us [*yelammedenu rabbenu*]: If a court imposed a fast on the public in order to bring rain, and rain fell during that very day, must they carry on [with their fast until the end of the day]?" (*Tanḥuma*, ed. Buber, vol. 1, p. 94). Immediately following this question and a short answer concerning the halakhic point, the homilist develops an aggadic discussion which leads to the subject of the biblical pericope read on that day. It is not surprising that these aggadic midrashim, which derive their material principally from homilies which were preached before a general audience, deal with Halakhah only in passing. For the audience that rushed to hear the public sermon would not have been prepared to listen to involved, abstract halakhic discussions, which to them would have seemed dry and tiresome. This attitude on the part of the lay public is reflected in the comment of R. Isaac, who was also a famous homilist: "Formerly, when there was money about, a man would crave to hear a word of Mishnah and a word of Talmud, but now that there's no money about

word of Scripture and a word of Aggadah" (Pesikta de-Rav Kahana Ba-Ḥodesh, ed. Mandelbaum, p. 205).

In terms of their essential subject matter as well, there is a reciprocal relationship between Halakhah and Aggadah—a relationship which was described and illustrated with penetrating insight by H. N. Bialik.¹² Aggadic thinking nourishes the Halakhah, and Halakhah, in turn, gives Aggadah a kind of permanency by evolving from it legal norms, that is, permanent patterns and life forms. Thus, several halakhic points were determined on the basis of the aggadic principle that "all the people of Israel are of royal birth" (B. Baba Mezi'a 113b). Similarly, the Amora Rav grants to the Jewish day laborer the unilateral right to retract from his contract with the employer: "A worker may quit even in the middle of the day . . . [as may be shown from what is written in Scripture] 'For to Me the people of Israel are servants; they are My servants' (Lev. 25:55)—and they are not the servants of servants" (B. Baba Mezi'a 10a). Moreover, in the Mishnah itself, which deals entirely with strict matters of Halakhah—apart from the tractate *Avot*—aggadic comments are occasionally woven into the fabric of the halakhic context. For example, in Mishnah *Sanhedrin*, which deals principally with capital crimes and the manner of executing the various death penalties, we find aggadic gems:

How does one make witnesses in capital cases aware of the seriousness of their testimony? . . . Know that civil cases are not like capital cases: In civil cases a man [who gives false testimony in order to condemn the innocent] makes monetary restitution and thereby atones for himself [i.e., for the damage which his false testimony has done]. In capital cases—his blood and the blood of his offspring [i.e., of the innocent man who was wrongly condemned to death] are on him [i.e., on the hands of the false witness] until the end of time . . . For this reason, man was first created in a single individual, to teach you that anyone who causes one person¹³ to perish, Scripture considers him as if he had caused the whole world to perish. And in order to promote peace among men, so that no man shall say to his fellow: [my] father was greater than your father. And so that the sectarians shall not [have cause to] say: there are many powers in heaven . . . Therefore every one is obligated to say: The world was created for my sake. (M. *Sanhedrin* IV 5)

Nevertheless, there is also a great distance between the world of the Aggadah and that of the Halakhah. The latter is compared to bread and the former to wine: " 'They shall flourish like grain' (Hos. 14:8) this refers to Talmud, 'and blossom like the vine' (*ibid.*) this refers to

terized as man's chief nourishment without which existence is impossible; but, like wine, Aggadah "wears a smile" (Pesikta de-Rav Kahana, Ba-Hodesh, p. 223). Similarly, the sages interpreted "'the kidney fat of wheat' (Deut. 32:14)—these are halakhot, which are the substance of Torah; 'and of the blood of the grape' (ibid.)—these are haggadot, which captivate the heart of man like wine" (Sifre to Deuteronomy, 317). Man does not live by bread alone; wine has something that bread lacks—there is no joy without wine and one does not sing songs except over wine.¹⁴ And indeed, Aggadah is "song"; it is poetic creation which has a vitality and a liveness which elevates and inspires the soul. Aggadic creativity partakes of the power of productive imagination; it embodies not only religious and moral values, but also artistic and aesthetic values of beauty and symmetry.

Not all the sages of the Halakhah were entirely at ease with the fertile imagination exhibited in the Aggadah. This reservation, which however was expressed by only a few of the greatest Amoraim particularly in Babylonia, is by and large a reaction to the large measure of freedom that the aggadist permitted himself. He is accused of saying "whatever occurs to him and whatever he perceives in his mind" (Mevo Ha-Talmud, ascribed to Samuel ha-Nagid). Similarly, "notions derived from scriptural passages that are called Midrash and Aggadah are largely conjecture; there are some which are so and some which are not" (Rav Sherira Gaon).¹⁵ The aggadists are said to "invert and re-invert [the meaning of] the verses"; they interpret one way and then the exact opposite "and we learn nothing from it" (P. Ma'aserot III, end, 51a). "Halakhot and legal traditions, these are the fine flour [solet], and the words of the haggadot—refuse [pesolet]" (R. Samuel ben Hofni).¹⁶ Unlike the teachers of the Halakhah, who transmit basic legal traditions which they personally received from their own teachers thus creating a reliable chain of tradition linking one generation to the next, the teachers of the Aggadah are not limited to transmitting what they heard from their own teachers. The aggadist adds, deviates from, changes, or permutes the traditions he has received according to his own devices and the dictates of his own will, and no one (for the most part) takes him to task. Moreover, whereas halakhic discussion and argument over opposing traditions are directed to one aim—clarifying the matter under discussion until it is possible to make a single legal ruling that is authoritative—in the Aggadah there is no ruling that decides among the various opinions. Furthermore, the pronouncements

of earlier authorities do not necessarily carry more weight than those of later authorities; "for aggadic comments are unlike legal traditions; rather, each one interprets according to the dictates of his own heart, that is, what might be or could be said and it is not a conclusive statement. Therefore, one may not base [legal decisions] on them [i.e., on aggadic comments]" (R. Hai Gaon, in *Ozar Ha-Ge'onim*, Haggigah, p. 59). And even concerning principles of faith—except for the most fundamental principles such as the belief that there is but one God and that the Torah represents His word—we find extreme differences of opinion; for example, whether or not there is recompense in this life for the observance of the commandments (B. Kiddushin 39b)¹⁷ and whether the final redemption will occur at a predetermined date or whenever Israel will be truly and totally repentant (B. Sanhedrin 97b; P. Ta'anit I 1, 63d).¹⁸ Indeed, the very belief in the coming of the messiah was open to question to such an extent that the Amora R. Hillel went so far as to claim: "Israel will have no messiah, for they have already enjoyed him [i.e., he already came] in the days of Hezekiah" (B. Sanhedrin 99a).¹⁹

Unlike the fixed and reliable Halakhah, which reaches unequivocal decisions as to both general rules and specific issues, Aggadah, as a way of thinking, is fluid and open; the wellsprings of its innovative vigor and its spirit of independent creativity were never blocked off. Moreover, alongside the Aggadah of the sages, folk Aggadah continued to develop and flourish. There was also a proliferation of aggadot originating in sectarian circles—sects which were rightly considered a threat to the very existence of Judaism. It is no wonder then that occasionally an extremely negative view was taken of this sort of Aggadah—particularly that found in some of the apocryphal literature. For example: "One who writes down Haggadah will have no share in the world to come, one who preaches it will be singed [in the fires of gehenna] and one who listens to it will receive no reward" (P. Shabbat XVI 1, 15c).²⁰

This opposition is directed primarily against the writing down of aggadot, for by being recorded in graphic form they take on an authoritative character which by their true nature they do not possess. For the creation of Aggadah is fundamentally oral in character. It was related primarily within the context of the public homily, which was preached every sabbath, in every locality. The oral transmission of the Aggadah also preserved its vitality. For the homilist does not merely

recite exactly what he heard. Rather, he adapts the material to the requirements of his homily and to the needs of his audience. In this way the Aggadah remains flexible, dynamic, and relevant to its own time. This aspect is reflected in the midrashic comment of R. Eleazar ben Azariah. Though he refers to "words of Torah" in general, his comment is an apt description of the multifaceted nature of the Aggadah:

"The words of the wise are like goads and like nails well planted" (Ecc. 12:11). Why are words of Torah compared to a goad? To tell you, just as the goad directs the heifer along its furrow in order to bring forth life to the world, so words of Torah direct the heart of those who study them from the paths of death and unto the path of life. But, you might think, that just as the goad is movable [and liable to change], so words of Torah are liable to change? So Scripture adds "like nails." But, you might think, that just as the nail [neither] decreases nor increases, so words of Torah [neither]²¹ decrease nor increase. So Scripture adds "well planted." Just as the plant grows and increases, so words of Torah grow and increase. (B. Hagigah 3b).

Translated by Marc Bregman

NOTES

1. Wilhelm Bacher, *Die exegetische Terminologie der jüdischen Traditionsliteratur* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1905), pp. 33-37.
2. See Yom-Tov L. Zunz and Chanoch Albeck, *Ha-Derashot be-Yisrael* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1954), p. 250, no. 1; Elimelech Epstein (A. A.) Halevi, *Sha'arei ha-Aggadah* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1972), p. 2.
3. Mevo Ha-Talmud, ascribed to R. Samuel Ha-Nagid (printed in most editions of the Babylonian Talmud after Tractate Berakhot).
4. See S. Assaf and E. E. Urbach, "Aggadah," *Ha-Encyclopedia ha-Ivrit* vol. 1 (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Encyclopaedia Publishing, 1966), p. 353: "It is common practice to give a negative description of the Aggadah: that part of the Oral Torah which is not Halakhah."
5. Halevi, *Sha'arei ha-Aggadah*, pp. 4ff.
6. Cf. Lamentations Rabbah, ed. Buber, to Lam. 2:2 (p. 191) and see G. Vermes, "The Qumran Interpretation of Scripture in its Historical Setting," *The Annual of the Leeds University Oriental Society* 6 (1969), 91ff.; F. F. Bruce, *Biblical Exegesis in the Qumran Texts* (London: Tyndal Press, 1960), pp. 50ff.
7. Joseph Heinemann, *Derashot bezibbur be-Tekufat ha-Talmud* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1970), pp. 10ff.
8. See Isaak Heinemann, *Darkhei ha-Aggadah* (Givatayim: Magnes and Massada, 1970), pp. 9ff.
9. "Are then interpretations [midrashot] plain truth [amanah]?! Interpret and receive reward," P. Nazir VII 2, 56b according to the reading of R. Isaiah ha-Aharon (circa 1500 C.E.); see also Saul Lieberman, *Shki'in*, 2d ed. (Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1970), pp. 81-82.
10. Note the admonition of Ben Bagbag: "Turn it over [the Torah] and turn it over again, for everything is in it" (M. Avot V 22).

11. See Halevi, *Sha'arei ha-Aggadah*, p. 10.
12. Chaim Nachman Bialik, *Halachah and Aggadah*, trans. L. Simon (London: Education Department of the Zionist Federation of Great Britain and Ireland, 1944).
13. Concerning the variant reading, "causes one person from Israel," see E. E. Urbach, "Kol Ha-Mekayyem Nefesh Ahat," *Tarbiz* 40 (1971), 268ff. and the literature cited there.
14. Cf. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Theology of Ancient Judaism* (Hebrew), vol. 1 (London and New York: Soncino, 1962), pp. 11ff.
15. See Isaac Weiss, *Dor Dor ve-Dorshav* (Vilna: Romm, 1904), pt. 4, p. 152; Moshe David Herr, "Mahutah Shel ha-Aggadah," *Maḥanayyim* 100 (1966), 63ff.
16. See Simcha Assaf, *Tekufat ha-Ge'onim ve-Sifrutah* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1955), p. 283.
17. See E. E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1975), pp. 441ff.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 683.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 681.
20. See Louis Ginzberg, *Al Halakhah ve-Aggadah* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1960), pp. 220, 295, n. 3.
21. The text of the Babylonian Talmud has been emended according to the reading of Tosefta Sotah VII 11, ed. Lieberman, p. 194.