

15. On the late biblical and post-biblical writings and their sense of time see briefly G. von Rad, "The Divine Determination of Times," in his *Wisdom in Israel* (London: SCM Press, 1972), pp. 263-83, and S. J. DeVries, "Observations on Quantitative and Qualitative Time," in J. G. Gammie, *Israelite Wisdom* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1978), pp. 263-76.

16. Much has been written of late in an attempt both to add greater precision to the characteristics of "apocalyptic," "apocalypticism," and "apocalyptic eschatology," and to explore the genesis of this genre/set-of-concerns and its attachment to earlier institutions such as prophecy and wisdom. Two recent surveys of scholarship are: E. W. Nicholson, "Apocalyptic," in G. W. Anderson, *Tradition and Interpretation* (Oxford, 1979), pp. 189-213; and M. A. Knibb, "Prophecy and the Emergence of the Jewish Apocalypses," in R. Coggins et al., *Israel's Prophetic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 155-80.

17. In Barr's sense (d) cited above, n. 11.

18. See J. Tate, "On the History of Allegorism," *Classical Quarterly* (1934), 105-14.

19. "On the Migration of Abraham," 34:187-88, *Works of Philo*, trans. F. H. Colson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), vol. 4, p. 241.

20. This is a statement about perception, for of course history's "message" in 1000 B.C.E. was no more simple or complex than it was in Second Temple times: it was the contrast between Scripture's perception of the former period and the later inability to "make sense of things" in a similar manner that was crucial.

21. Patte, *Early Jewish Hermeneutic*, p. 72 (re. targum). This formulation should evoke the liturgical formula "The Lord is king (*melekh*), the Lord has ruled (*malakh*), the Lord will rule (*ymlokh*) forever." Of course these biblical phrases (found, inter alia, in Ps. 10:16, 93:1, and Exod. 15:18) are certainly being invoked to create a paradigm; yet how fortuitous that to the post-biblical ear the "present tense" slot is filled with a mere assertion of divine supremacy: the Lord "is king" but not, in external political terms, "kinging."

22. These great generalizations will suffer the inevitable exceptions without real damage—rabbinic use of Scriptural proof-texts to support messianic predictions or even personalities (Bar Kokhba), or targumic reference to political figures and events of its own day or alteration of the text to reflect present-day realities (see, e.g., Pseudo-Jonathan on Gen. 21:21 [wife and daughter of Muhammad], Exod. 26:9 [six orders of Mishnah], Num. 24:19 [Constantinople and Rome], and Deut. 33:11 [Yohanan], on which P. Kahle, *The Cairo Geniza*, 2d ed. [Oxford: Blackwell, 1959], p. 202; see also Dalman, *Grammatik des jüdisch-palästinischen Aramäisch*, 2d ed. [Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1905], p. 31.) While such occasional "reterralizing" or "actualizing" is to be found, it hardly is the bridge between the biblical past and our present: that is the point.

23. Eventually, of course, these contradictions came to be troubling, and the history of the Song's Jewish exegesis is one of a tightening of the allegorical correspondences until they came to embody a fairly consistent set of historical allusions to events in Israel's past. There was no unanimity among Tannaim even as to where and when the Song was uttered (see S. Lieberman, "The Song of Songs" [Hebrew] appended to G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* [New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1960], pp. 118-26), and even the individual interpretive lines distinguished by Lieberman (in *ibid.*) were not consistently applied to each verse (how could they be?). The targum later tried to pin down verses to historical events presented more or less chronologically, but with "flashbacks" to account for recalcitrant verses or ones with well-trenched interpretations that conflicted with the chronological scheme (cf. the remarks of R. Loewe, "Apologetic Motifs in the Targum to the Song of Songs" in *Biblical Motifs: Origins and Transformation*, ed. A. Altman [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966],

pp. 159-96). The same problem was handled with great deftness by A. Ibn Ezra through the stratagem of his multilevel exegesis, which allowed for a certain amount of judicious skipping over verses that would be problematic at the historical level and treating them in some other fashion: this preserved the impression of completeness. His historical retrospections at the end of each section (a feature also found in Sa'adya's commentary) were of similar effect. Somewhat later, the historical approach to the book's allegory was abandoned in favor of a Arabian dialogue between the individual soul and the Active Intellect, in Ibn Aqrin's commentary, ed. A. Halkin (Jerusalem: Mekitze Nirdamim, 1964), or, in similar fashion, in Maimonides' view (see *Guide of the Perplexed* pt. 3, chaps. 51, 54; also *Mishneh Torah* "Repentance" 10:2).

24. See J. Theodor and Ch. Albeck, *Genesis Rabbah* (Hebrew), (Jerusalem: Wahrmann Books, 1965), pp. 559-60; above translation based on Ms. Vat.

25. Even in the Mishna one finds instances of different, sometimes conflicting interpretations of the same verse for halakhic purposes. See, e.g., M. Rosh Hashana 1:9 and 2:9.

26. As in the *petur gerd* pattern mentioned above (n. 7). See I. Heinemann, *The Methods of Aggadah* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Magnes and Massada, 1970), pp. 57-58.

27. So Gen. 41:45 uses precisely this expression, "And Joseph went out over the land of Egypt," at this juncture in the Joseph story.

28. See above, n. 26. Moreover, even the insular midrash is capable of being recon- nected to its immediate context: in our case, for example, the story of Joseph's being freed from prison is connected in several sources to the earlier reference in the same Psalm 81 to "sounding the shofar" in order to conclude that Joseph was set free from prison on the day of the New Year (when the shofar was sounded); the removal of Israel's collective shoulder from the toil of slavery was, by a similar logic, also said to have taken place on the same day. See b. Rosh Hashana 10b.

29. The trouble with attributing these words to Pharaoh is that he is nowhere mentioned or alluded to in our biblical verse (Ps. 81:6), whereas Joseph is. The midrashist must therefore mentally be supplying some parenthetical note to cover for the chop- piness: "The [God] set it as a testimony in Jehoseph, upon [Joseph's] going out over the land of Egypt [which occurred thanks to the occasion on which Pharaoh exclaimed] 'A tongue I did not know I now hear!'" It is perhaps this difficulty that is responsible for the version of the story in the form recounted above, which seems to underlie the treatment of the Joseph story in *Sefer ha-Yashar*, ed. L. Goldschmidt (Berlin: Benjamin Harz, 1923), pp. 174-75, 177-78. For here Joseph begins by speaking Hebrew to Pharaoh and his advisers. They then object to his being made ruler because he cannot speak the seventy languages, indeed, not even Egyptian: "Lo, this man speaks only the Hebrew tongue! How can there be over us a vizier who does not also know our language?" (For this reason Joseph had originally been allowed only to sit on the third step of the seventy steps in front of Pharaoh's throne, as was customary for a commoner unlearned in the languages of the world.) However, the version in which "A tongue I did not know . . ." is spoken by Pharaoh and/or his advisers is by far the more common in the sources, thus, B. Sota 36b and parallels.

30. *Leviticus Rabbah* 23:10.

31. *Yalkut Shimon*, ad Psalm 81 (#831).

32. *Sefer ha-Yashar* (above, n. 29).

33. This is the effect created by L. Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1913), a masterful work of scholarship which, however, seems bent on submerging the exegetical function of midrash and turning it into mere tale-making, "legends." Yet one must in candor admit that long before Ginzberg this exegetical function was at times smothered as is evident from various retellings of biblical stories, pilyut, biblical commentaries, visual representations of biblical scenes, and so forth.

his going out over the land of Egypt, a tongue I did not know I now hear.' " Yet it is a curious fact about such fanciful explanations that they can become detached from their punch lines. However absurd (because tailor-made) the details of the explicative story may be, they eventually become part of the corpus of embellishments that accompany the written text and begin to take on a life of their own. Soon, someone retelling the events of Joseph's rise to power in Egypt might simply unfold the tale of the seventy languages, the angel's adding an extra letter to Joseph's name, and so forth, without ever mentioning (perhaps not even knowing) the verse that lies behind it all—in fact, this is precisely what happens in the case of our midrash³² and with dozens, nay, hundreds, of others. Literalists of the imagination turn fanciful exegesis into would-be history.³³ And so "legendizing" is in some sense the last stage of the midrashic process, midrash come home to roost, for by it exegesis becomes part of the text itself.

NOTES

1. b. Ber 4b.
2. Either this fact did not bother the sages in question, for they surely knew of instances in the Bible where masculine verb forms are used for feminine nouns, and indeed of feminine nouns that have a masculine sense and are so treated—so that the form *qum* would actually be acceptable—or else they mentally revocalized the *qum* into *qumi*, an act which can be performed under duress without changing the consonantal text.
3. For were not Jeremiah's words the divine antidote to Amos's prophecy when he said: "I shall yet rebuild you and you will be restored, O virgin of Israel" (Jer. 31:4)?
4. This in itself was a hermeneutic centered problem; see J. A. Saunders, "Hermeneutics in True and False Prophecy" in *Canon and Authority*, ed. G. W. Coats and B. O. Long (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), pp. 21–41.
5. See E. E. Urbach, "When did Prophecy Cease?" (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 17 (1946), 1–11; also see D. L. Petersen, *Late Israelite Prophecy* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press for the Society of Biblical Literature, 1977), pp. 25–26.
6. See Urbach, "When Did Prophecy Cease?" and Urbach, "Halakhah and Prophecy" (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 18 (1947), 1–27; both these articles touch on the filiation of sage from prophet, a later rabbinic leitmotif. Thus, there was a single revelation at Sinai, from which stemmed not only the Mosaic teaching but the teachings of the prophets and the rabbis as well; see Exodus Rabbah XXVIII 6; also Tanhuma Yitro, 11. "Dearer are the words of sages than the words of prophets" (P. Avodah Zarah II 8). For the historical setting of this transition and parallels to the inspired interpreter outside the rabbinic tradition see D. Patte, *Early Jewish Hermeneutic in Palestine* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press for the Society of Biblical Literature, 1975).
7. Of course the dream or dream-vision which is interpreted as if it were a text is in itself a prophetic motif (thus Jer. 1:11–12), and the very means of interpreting the vision ("almond tree," *šaqed*, means I will be *šaqed*, "zealous") are precisely those found

in later Jewish exegesis. Indeed, the connection between Qumranic commentary (*pešer*), biblical dream-interpretation (*giron*), and the midrashic topos "Rabbi X interpreted the verse" (*pešer gešer*) was explored by L. H. Silberman in "Unriddling the Riddle: A Study in the Structure and Language of 1 Q P Hab," *Revue de Qumran* 3 (1961), 323–64, and shortly thereafter by A. Finkel, "The Pesher of Dreams and Scriptures," *Revue de Qumran* 4 (1963), 357–70. Silberman argued that the same technique of dream interpretation found, for example, in the Talmud (P. Mā'aser Šeni IV, end; parallel passages with modifications in Lam. R. I, 1, 16) characterize Qumranic exegesis of biblical texts, viz., atomization, metathesis of letters, substitution of roots, wordplay, etc. Similarly, such rabbinic exegetical tools as gematria and notarikon have their parallels in Greek dream-interpretation techniques. Apart from this important connection of interpretive devices and forms, the broader connection of dreams and texts, viz., the dream that gives rise to the text, may be traced in an unbroken line from biblical and classical instances through apocalyptic and pseudographic dreams and such signal events as Macrobius's commentary on the *Somnium Scipionis* into the dream-visions of medieval Latin, and on to more recent examples.

8. Here too Daniel's dream interpreting is reminiscent of rabbinic text interpreting, for the handwriting's message, apparently through a list of different weights ("a mina, a shekel, half-a-mina") becomes significant through a repronunciation of the consonantal text: *mind* becomes *menē* ("numbered"), *teqel* ("shekel") becomes *teqil* ("weighed"), and *pešā* ("half") becomes *pešā* ("divided"), with the secondary association of *pešā*, "Persia." All that remained for the interpreter to do was to supply the intervening text. See Silberman, "Unriddling the Riddle," p. 332.

9. See Patte, *Early Jewish Hermeneutic*, pp. 215–27.
10. B. Albrektson, *History and the Gods* (Lund: Gleerup, 1967).
11. This theme is approached in the writings of Mircea Eliade, especially *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1954), a writer curiously not treated in James Barr's important study, *Biblical Words for Time* (London: SCM Press, 1962), which correctly criticizes the common opposition of the Greek "cyclical" sense of time to the Hebrew "non-cyclical." Barr urges, among other things, that the whole notion of the "cyclical view of time" be broken down into more specific categories, such as a) the circular movement of earthly existence, b) the circular movement of heavenly bodies which measure time, c) the application to time of circularity as the example of uniform motion, d) time as a cyclical cosmic process, occurring once but returning to where it began, e) time as a cyclical cosmic process repeating itself infinitely, and f) time as a temporal cycle in which all historical events recur as before. See p. 142.
12. Again, Eliade, *Myth of the Eternal Return*.
13. See H. W. Robinson's chapter "Time and Eternity," with an appendix on Kobleth's radically different sense of time from that evidenced in other biblical books, in his *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), pp. 121–22; see also G. A. F. Knight, *Christian Theology of the Old Testament*, 2d. rev. ed. (London: SCM Press, 1964), pp. 87–137; T. C. Vriegen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), p. 347.
14. This view of time is manifest even in the form of the book itself, an "intellectual autobiography" of sorts (and one notably devoid of all historical allusion or concern with past causes), in which the man of wisdom is never permitted to rest, as it were, on his last *masbal*, but is constantly in motion, "I came back and saw," "Then I turned to consider," "Yet I saw furthermore," and so forth, sometimes contradicting what had just been concluded and, if not finally completing a perfect circle, then at least finding some contentment in the unresolved character of his aggregate wisdom, "All things having been heard . . ."

care of the verse in isolation. Now of course, as has already been stated, there are a great many midrashic interpretations which take on more than one line at a time, and even a whole type which seeks to interpret a series of consecutive references.²⁸ But the existence of such texts should not obscure the principle of insularity itself. A footnote sometimes appended to our midrash puts the point most graphically. Noting the unusual fact that the verse in question both begins and ends with the Hebrew letter *qyin*, it finds further support for the "seventy languages" interpretation, since *qyin* has the value of seventy in the Hebrew numerical system. But what more striking expression could there be of midrash's verse-centeredness? It is interested in what happens between the two *qyins*.

Having started with this concrete example, it may be worthwhile to examine some of the variant forms in which it appears in different midrashic collections, for the variants are instructive. The most important and striking of these is the attribution of the sentence "A tongue I did not know I now hear" not to Joseph but to Pharaoh. In some ways attributing it to Pharaoh would be preferable; for in Joseph's mouth, the verb "hear" must be taken in its (rarer) sense of "understand," and the sense of the whole clause remains somewhat fuzzy. In order to make the attribution to Pharaoh possible, these versions add this twist to the story: Joseph appears in Pharaoh's court, speaks the seventy languages and then adds some words in Hebrew, the holy tongue (and presumably, therefore, not to be numbered among the seventy); whereupon Pharaoh, or Pharaoh's advisors, can exclaim, "A tongue I did not know I hear." Not only is Joseph the master of the languages of the nations, but he knows the holy tongue as well, which even Pharaoh does not; surely he is qualified to become vizier!²⁹ Moreover, it is interesting to note how some versions connect to this midrash Pharaoh's words when Joseph requests permission to return to Canaan to bury his father Jacob. In the Bible Pharaoh answers: "Go then and bury your father as he caused you to swear" (Gen. 50:6). These last words seem to imply that, were it not for the fact of Joseph's oath, Pharaoh would not have permitted him to go. But if so, why should Pharaoh be acting with such deference to oaths? It all goes back to the seventy languages incident:

The next day [after Gabriel had taught Joseph all the languages and had added the letter "H" to his name] in every language that Pharaoh conversed with him, he was able to answer him. But when he [Joseph] spoke to him in the holy

tongue, he did not understand what he was saying. He [Pharaoh] said: "Teach me! He taught it to him but he could not learn. Said he [Pharaoh]: 'Swear to me that you will not reveal [my ignorance].'" He swore to him. [Later] when he [Joseph] said to him, "My father caused me to swear . . ." (Gen. 50:5), he [Pharaoh] said: "Go out and be absolved of your oath [i.e., forget about it]!" Said he: "Then will I also forget about my [other] oath?" [Pharaoh] answered him: "Then go out, 'rise up and bury your father as he caused you to swear.'" (B. Sota 36b)

It should be noted that not all midrashic interpretations of this verse rely on the "seventy languages" story; another interpretation has it simply that God added a letter of His Name to Joseph's in order to indicate that Joseph had not succumbed to the temptations of Potiphar's wife as was alleged (here the word "testimony" in Ps. 81:6 is being emphasized; the extra letter actually testifies to Joseph's innocence).³⁰

Another point to be made about this example, and it is really our first point in a different guise, is the great versatility of this piece of midrash vis-à-vis larger compilations. Since it aims, first and foremost, at clearing up certain difficulties in a verse of Psalm 81, it would certainly be able to be incorporated into a collection of midrashic comments on that Psalm, as indeed it was.³¹ But, precisely because it is so self-contained and not tied to an overall integrative exegesis of Psalm 81, our midrash can also be lifted bodily out of this context and inserted elsewhere, most obviously into the Genesis account of the story of Joseph, but also in other places where a connection, no matter how discursive, suggests itself: in a verse in Ecclesiastes touching on wisdom, in the account of the dedication of the tabernacle when commenting on the sacrifice offered by one of Joseph's descendants (here the phrase "seventy shekels" reminds the midrashist of the seventy languages), and so on and so forth. The very insularity of midrash's verse-centeredness meant that one interpretive story could be combined with another and/or incorporated into many different collections.

Lastly, one should take note of a process that might be called the "legendizing" of midrash. As we saw, the whole story of the seventy languages and the extra letter in Joseph's name was created for the purpose of explicating the difficulties in Ps. 81:6. So much is that verse the point that, in whatever context our midrash might appear, that verse will always be able to function as its "punch line," namely, "And that's why it says in Psalm 81, 'He set it for a testimony in Joseph, in

hard toil," and we are probably right in supposing that these are God's words, spoken to the Israelites at the time He gave them the "testimony" (covenant). The general point of these verses thus seems to be that the God whose praise is being enjoined is He who made a covenant with the descendants of Joseph after the Exodus. He who said "I have freed his shoulder from the burden," and so on; that is why He ought to be praised. But the general point is most emphatically not what will interest the midrashist, but the troubling little details glossed over in this account; and it is the slightest of these, the fact that in verse five Joseph's name appears in an unusual spelling, *Yehosef* instead of the normal contracted form *Yosef*, that provides the midrashist with his point of attack. Now of course nothing would be easier than to explain this detail away as an insignificant variation—for does not the same contraction appear in other biblical names beginning *yeho* (thus Jonathan alternates with Jehonathan, Jonadab with Jehonadab, etc.)? But such is not the way of midrash. Instead, the circumstance of this unusual spelling suggests to the midrashist a whole scenario. He is reminded of how other Patriarchs' names were changed at key moments in their lives—Abram to Abraham, Jacob to Israel, and so forth—and it occurs to him that the spelling "Jehoseph" may in fact allude to a similar incident, previously unreported, in Joseph's life. The phrase "a testimony in Jehoseph" only seems to confirm this. For if the phrase were meant to indicate that God had set something as a testimony to or for Joseph, surely some other preposition would have been more appropriate! Then why in Jehoseph? Perhaps the point is precisely that extra *ho-* in Joseph's name; the testimony is "in Jehoseph" in the sense that it is in the name "Jehoseph." But if all this implies that God at some point changed Joseph's name to "Jehoseph" (establishing the extra *ho-* as some kind of "testimony"), what might the occasion for such a name change have been? The answer appears to be alluded to in the next (and also somewhat anomalous) phrase of our verse, "when he went out over the land of Egypt." For if the intention of this phrase were merely to indicate "during the time when Joseph was in Egypt," the verb "to go out" and the preposition "upon" or "over" would hardly have been used. Ah, but Joseph did go out of prison, was set free by Pharaoh so that he might become vizier over all the land—surely this must be the meaning of "went out over," being freed and indeed made ruler over Egypt.²⁷ And such therefore must have been the moment for Joseph's change of name, the time when he was let out of prison.

Moreover, it is striking to the midrashist that in Hebrew "Joseph" becomes "Jehoseph" through the addition of a single letter, the letter *heth* ("H"), for this is one of the letters found in the Divine Name, the tetragrammaton. What better proof that it was God, or one of His angels, that changed the name? In fact, the phrase "set it as a testimony in Joseph" can be read (because of the ambiguities of a vowelless, unpunctuated text) in another way: "he set it," Hebrew *šamó*, might also be pronounced *šemó*, "His Name"—that is, God's name, or part of it—was inserted "in Joseph" as a kind of witness or testimony at the time he was let out of prison.

The last phrase of our verse, "a tongue I did not know I hear," provides the means for pulling all this together into a cohesive scenario. For it occurs to our midrashist that one of the attributes of a proper wise man in Pharaoh's court must certainly have been some linguistic knowledge; indeed, the complete sage ought to have been acquainted with all seventy languages of the world. And so, here comes our midrash: when Pharaoh suggested to his advisors that the man who had just emerged from prison and had interpreted his dream, Joseph, be made vizier over all of Egypt, they objected. "He is unworthy, a mere slave, and he certainly does not know the seventy languages of the world—in fact, he does not even know proper Egyptian!" Pharaoh said: "Tomorrow we will put him to the test." That night, an angel visited Joseph and changed his name to Jehoseph (presumably to make him a "changed man," grant him new powers) and taught him not only Egyptian, but all the languages of the world. The next morning, returning to Pharaoh's court, Joseph exclaims, "The tongue(s) [it might better be read as a plural, and can be without changing the consonantal text] I did not know I now understand."

What is by no means unusual about this piece of midrash, but is the point of our citing it nonetheless, is how strictly it observes the boundaries of the verse in question. That is, we have here a perfect integration of the previously mysterious words "He set it as a testimony in Joseph, upon his going out over the land of Egypt, a tongue I did not know I understand." Every problem in the verse has been explained via the foregoing imaginative scenario, and yet the verse itself is not integrated into its context any better than before: we still do not know what all this has to do with the rejoicing invoked in the first four lines, nor yet how all this is to be connected with the lines that follow, but this is immaterial, for the midrashist's aim was from the beginning only to take

the allegory itself—"Granted, it is love song about God and Israel"—but single verses, isolated in suspended animation. If the precise wording of a verse suggested an interpretive tack that would violate the overall allegorical frame, the midrashist sometimes picked up the suggestion nonetheless.²² For the same reason, of course, midrashic collections do not scruple at assembling different solutions to the same problem in a verse, even though they may contradict one another: it is not that one is right and the others wrong, but that all are adequate "smoothings-over."

Thus, for example, Genesis Rabban assembles a host of opinions aimed at explaining away the apparent pleonasm of Gen. 21:1, "And the Lord remembered Sarah as He had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as He had spoken".

"And the Lord remembered Sarah as He had said" [refers to the promises of God] introduced [in the text] by [the verb] "say" [as, e.g., God's promise in Gen. 17:19]; "and the Lord did for Sarah as He had spoken," [refers to] what was introduced by "spoke" [as perhaps Gen. 15:18, introduced (15:1) by the root *dh-r*, "speak"]; R. Nehemiah said, "as He had said" means what He had said to her by means of an angel; "as He had spoken" means He Himself [i.e., Gen. 18:10 vs. 16:16]. R. Yehuda said "And the Lord remembered Sarah"—to give her a son; "and the Lord did for Sarah"—to bless her with milk [to nurse that son, as per Gen. 21:7]. R. Nehemiah objected: Had anything been announced about milk yet? But [if you wish to base the distinction on "remember" vs. "do"] let this verse teach us that God returned her to her youthful condition. [That would account for "remember"; then "do" would refer to granting her the child itself.] R. Abbahu said: [first] He made her respected by all, so that none should call her "barren woman" [as presumably Hagar did in 16:4, then he gave her a son]. R. Yudan said: she lacked an ovary; the Lord [first] fashioned an ovary for her [and then gave her a son].²⁴

Such countenancing of contradictory interpretations reflects on the essence of midrashic writings *per se*, which are not compositions but compilations of comments that are usually focused on isolated, individual verses. Consistency within individual sections of a midrash or even in larger units was apparently not an overriding consideration.²⁵

The verse-centeredness of midrash is so fundamental that one hesitates even to ask why it should be so: it just is the way midrash proceeds. And yet it does seem to correspond well to the way in which a text, familiar to the point of being largely known by heart, is carried about in the memory. How easy it was, if someone cited the beginning of a verse or some phrase within it, to produce the verse as a whole; a gifted memory might also easily supply the succeeding verse or

verses. This capacity notwithstanding, it was sometimes difficult to recall the larger context of the verse in question—"Is that what Abraham said to Abimelech, or what Isaac said?" "Is that in Psalm 145, or Psalm 34?" Midrash generally seems to be addressing its verse in the same relative isolation in which it is remembered: its focus is the word within that verse whose meaning one was never quite sure of, or that phrase which always did seem problematic—and it provides for the difficulty a pungent solution, often one that connects the verse to another, but also often without reference to the wider context. (Our midrashic compilations are in this sense potentially deceiving, since they seem to treat the whole text bit by bit; but, with the exception of certain patterns, these "bits" are rather atomistic, and, as any student of rabbinic literature knows, interchangeable, modifiable, combinable—in short, not part of an overall exegesis at all.) *Forever after*, one cannot think of the verse or hear it recited without also recalling the solution to its problematic irritant—indeed, remembering it in the study-house or synagogue, one would certainly pass it along to others present, and together appreciate its cleverness and erudition. And so midrashic explanations of individual verses no doubt circulated on their own, independent of any larger exegetical context. Perhaps in this sense it would not be inappropriate to compare their manner of circulating to that of jokes in modern society; indeed, they were a kind of joking, a learned and sophisticated play about the biblical text, and like jokes they were passed on, modified, and improved as they went, until a great many of them eventually entered into the common inheritance of every Jew, passed on in learning with the text of the Bible itself.

Much of this can be made more vivid in the presence of a concrete example. Let us consider the midrashic handling of a verse from Psalm 81, "Sing unto God our strength." The psalm begins easily enough: the first four lines urge listeners to join in God's praise, to "strike up song," "sound the timbrel," and so forth, connecting this with divine law, "Israel's statute it is, an ordinance from the God of Jacob." At the next line, however, the text becomes mysterious: "He"—presumably God—"set it as a testimony in Joseph when he"—perhaps Joseph, perhaps God—"went out over the land of Egypt, the tongue of one I did not know I hear." What all this might mean is still difficult for the modern exegete to sort out: the "speech of the unknown one" (or, alternately, the "unknown speech") seems actually to appear in the next line, "I have freed his shoulder from the burden, his hands are removed from

amongst the Dead Sea Scrolls) or the medieval *Sefer hayashar*: sermons, homilies, exegetical prayers and poems, and other synagogal pieces; and of course the great standard corpora of Jewish exegesis, tannaitic midrashim, exegetical parts of the Mishnah and the Gemara, collections of derashot (as individual bits of exegesis are sometimes called) arranged in exegetical, historical, or other fashions, medieval commentaries on the Bible and other texts—in short, almost all of what constitutes classical (and much of medieval) Jewish writing. It is proper that this should seem an overwhelmingly broad field of inquiry, for at heart midrash is nothing less than the foundation stone of rabbinic Judaism, and it is as diverse as Jewish creativity itself.

Midrash, then, is a kind of *recherche interprétative* of Scripture which finds expression in all manner of contexts. Beyond such a broad (and, alas, not particularly helpful) general pronouncement, there are perhaps two other points about midrash which ought to find their way into any introductory overview. The first is that midrash's precise focus is most often what one might call surface irregularities in the text: a good deal of the time, it is concerned with (in the broadest sense) problems. The missing "N" verse in Psalm 145, a theologically troublesome pronouncement of the prophet Amos, or, indeed, simply a perceived contradiction between passages (for example, two slightly different versions of the same law), or a word that does not seem to fit properly in its context, or simply an unusual word, or an unusual spelling of a word—all of these are the sorts of irregularities which might cause the reader to trip and stumble as he walks along the biblical path; and so over such irregularities midrash builds a smoothing mound which both assures that the reader will not fall and, at the same time, embellishes the path with material taken from elsewhere and builds into it, as it were, an extra little lift. Or—to use a shopworn but more appropriate image—the text's irregularity is the grain of sand which so irritates the midrashic oyster that he constructs a pearl around it. Soon enough—pearls being prized—midrashists begin looking for irritations and irregularities, and in later midrash there is much material, especially list-making and text-connecting, whose connection with "problems" is remote indeed; in fact, like many a modern-day homilist, the midrashist sometimes betrays signs of having first thought of a solution and then having gone out in search of the problem to which it might be applied. This notwithstanding, the problem-solving ap-

proach is helpful in understanding the focus of much midrash, and it is worthwhile for the beginner to keep in mind.

The second fundamental point, still more basic, is that midrash is an exegesis of biblical verses, not of books. The basic unit of the Bible, for the midrashist, is the verse: this is what he seeks to expound, and it might be said that there simply is no boundary encountered beyond that of the verse until one comes to the borders of the canon itself—a situation analogous to certain political organizations in which there are no separate states, provinces, or the like but only the village and the Empire. One of the things this means is that each verse of the Bible is in principle as connected to its most distant fellow as to the one next door; in seeking to illuminate a verse from Genesis, the midrashist is as likely to have reference (if to anything) to a verse from the Psalter as to another verse in the immediate context—indeed, he sometimes delights in the remoter source.

Perhaps the clearest demonstration of this is to be found in the midrashic exegesis of the Song of Songs, embodied in such collections as *Midrash Hazia* ("Song of Songs Rabbah"). For here is a book whose place in the Bible must rest on the allegorical reading of it as a song of love between God and his people; here, even if nowhere else, one would expect a consistent interpretive line: God is the "Lover" and Israel the "Beloved." Yet, while it is true that this exegetical path is generally followed, other persons or figures in the song also are interpreted to be God or Israel: King Solomon, or the "daughters of Jerusalem," or even features of the landscape. At the same time, the figure of the Beloved in the song is not consistently read as Israel, but sometimes is interpreted as representing individual Israelites, Sarah or other biblical figures. Indeed, on one occasion it seems that the Beloved is understood to represent not Israel, or even individual Israelites, but God! For the four verses in which the Beloved addresses the daughters of Jerusalem with the phrase "I adjure you O daughters of Jerusalem" (Song of Songs 2:7, 3:5, 5:8, 8:4) are interpreted in one tradition as corresponding to four oaths which "He" (God) "caused Israel to swear to" during the Exile. Now how can anyone maintain that the Beloved is allegorically both Israel and God, or that Israel is represented by more than one character in the same song? The fact is that such inconsistencies were apparently not troubling, for what the midrashist addressed himself to was not first and foremost the book as a whole, that is, not

Scriptural history apply to each man in his own life. That is, God acts now as He has always acted: His ways with the soul of man have simply been portrayed by God in external form in the details of Israelite history and law, but their important time is truly eternal and non-specific, hence continuous with our spiritual present. For the apocalyptic, Scriptural time and present time also re-become continuous, though in a rather different way: the broad strokes of divine activity in the biblical past are actually reappearing in the present day, and they will be such as to overwhelm all the messy, inconsequential details of the intervening years. God has acted and is acting now, or is just about to act. Now later, rabbinic Judaism might seem similarly eschatological, for it awaits with each passing day the arrival of God's anointed and the setting aright of history—in this sense it appears to have much in common with the apocalyptists. But this has nothing to do with the stance of its exegesis (though a considerable bit of its content deals with messianic themes). For midrash, as opposed to Qumranic *peser* and other "political" exegeses, generally views Scripture as a world unto itself, without direct connection to our own times; as one critic has phrased it, "God acted (in the past), will act (in the eschatological future), but is not acting in between."²¹ Messianism, however important it may be, never becomes the bridge between the biblical past and the midrashist's present.²² Such a bridge, if it exists at all, is the halakhic one: the Bible informs the present as the source of those practices which Jews undertake to adhere to. But there is no bridge between the Bible's time and our time: God has acted and will act, but for now His activity is suspended in a majestic state of kingship: He is responsible for everything, yet the ups and downs of political or daily life are conceded to His control without usually being held up to inspection. And if we are to designate the halakhic reading of Scripture as a bridge between the Bible and the present-day Jew, out of fairness one must add that the bridge has another (if anything, greater) lane going in the opposite direction. For in midrash the Bible becomes, as stated, a world unto itself. Midrashic exegesis is the way into that world; it does not seek to view present-day reality through biblical spectacles, neither to find referents of biblical prophecy in present-day happenings, nor to find referents to the daily life of the soul in biblical allegory. Instead it simply overwhelms the present; the Bible's time is important, while the present is not; and so it invites the reader to cross over into the enterable world of Scripture.

IV

Thus the midrashist has much in common with the other early exegetes mentioned, as well as a few things which distinguish him. Let not these common points be taken lightly, for together they point to important themes indeed: the idea of the Bible itself, that is, both the establishing of the special character of divine speech, and therefore the need for (inspired) interpretation, and the propounding—or rather the presuming—of the Scriptural Presumption, making the (still increasing) corpus of sacred books into a single, unified, revelatory pool. These traits may seem all too general, and so obvious as to bear no further insistence; but they are, as post-Renaissance exegesis was to learn, crucial to the Bible's very being; any exegesis which deviates from them undermines the Bible's unity and sacred character, until it in effect becomes a different book, or rather collection of books. This said, it will now be worthwhile to jump ahead several centuries and focus in on a more specialized and highly developed branch of this exegetical tendency, namely rabbinic midrash, biblical exegesis as it has come down to us in the literature of the tannaim and amoraim.

There are many recent works that seek to define midrash, and nothing would be gained here by attempting to reduce these efforts to a few sentences; though one might say more pointedly (and paraphrasing what a recent book had to say about definitions of irony) that, since these studies have already not defined midrash in ample detail, there is little purpose in our not defining it again here. Suffice it to say that the Hebrew word *midrash* might be best translated as "research," a translation that incorporates the word's root meaning of "search out, inquire" and perhaps as well suggests that the results of that research are almost by definition *recherche*, that is, not obvious, out-of-the-way, sometimes far-fetched. The word has been used to designate both the activity of interpretation and the fruits of that activity, and in Hebrew writings it was used extensively for the collective body of all such interpretations as well as in the name of certain collections of midrashic material (*Midrash Rabbah*, etc.). At bottom midrash is not a genre of interpretation but an interpretative stance, a way of reading the sacred text, and we shall use it in this broad sense. The genres in which this way of reading has found expression include interpretive translations of the Bible such as the early Aramaic *targumim*; retellings of biblical passages and books such as the "Genesis Apocryphon" (discovered

I have said, in yourselves; leave behind your opinion, [which is represented by] the country of the Chaldeans, and migrate to Haran, the place of sense-perception, which is understanding's bodily tenement. For the translation of Haran is "hole," and holes are figures of the openings used by sense-perceptions.¹⁹

But rather than simply assimilate all such tendencies into one (for it will be, on the contrary, most important to distinguish them), one ought rather merely to see in their very existence symptoms of a common urge. That urge, to connect one's own world with the world of Scripture, to find some way of dwelling, as it were, in biblical reality, points to something basic about the late and post-biblical "sense of time": that the present world was somehow discontinuous with the Bible's, and that the Bible's simple, "consequential" view of God's workings could not be extended in linear fashion to cover recent history. For the divine manipulation of events, so manifest, it seemed, in days of yore, had since the return from Exile become increasingly attenuated. What pattern could be discerned in the ups and downs of Judah's recent fortunes? Cyrus's edict and the return itself were a definite upturn, but these were followed by years of struggle and disappointment; the incompleteness of Israel's restoration and the flagging attempts to rebuild the Temple were certainly a downturn, though the latter effort did finally meet with success; now the heyday of Ezra and Nehemiah, now the Greek conquest; the eventual replacement of Ptolemaic rule with Seleucid tyranny; successful revolt, independence, degeneration, reconquest—how was all this to correspond to some divine order? History no longer seemed to hold the simple message it had once contained,²⁰ and we may not be wrong in supposing that the (in various senses) cyclical views of time embodied in works as varied as Ecclesiastes and apocalyptic represent both a common reversion from biblical consequentially to something less unilinear, and a desire nevertheless not to invalidate the truth of what had been, not to invalidate Scripture. (In some ways the perfect, indeed poetic, expression of this is Daniel's interpretation of the seventy years of Exile predicted by Jeremiah [mentioned above]; for the notion of "weeks of years" carries that peculiarly apocalyptic feeling for time being dealt out like a hand of cards, arrangeable into suits and subgroups—and yet Daniel's interpretation is manifestly aimed at bringing the present under the coverage of biblical prophecy, confirming Jeremiah's words as true—once-interpreted, and then pointing to the present as that predicted future.)

And so something paradoxical had happened to the Bible's unremitting sense of the *etnmdly* progression of events, the ever-new unfolding of the Divine Plan: that whole space of time which was biblical history became, as it were, bracketed. The Bible's time was *other time*, discontinuous with later events and yet, because of its special character, one which was constantly about to impose its mark on the present. Bible-time was forever looming. The reading of the Torah's history itself became cyclical, indeed, eventually an annual event: Creation, Exodus, Sinai, and Moses' death were regular occurrences, and at the end the accumulated roll of scroll was unwound from one spindle and rolled back onto the other as it was in the beginning. The Bible's own historicization of the cyclical agricultural feasts was now recyclicalized: the Torah's treatment of the harvest festival booths as a historical allusion, a reminder that "I caused the Israelites to dwell in booths when I took them out of Egypt" (Lev. 23:43), was itself only an incident in the liturgical cycle of Scriptural readings, the ever-returning series of exoduses and desert wanderings that mark a man's days.

Here then is the crucial factor in the mentality of all early exegesis: for when what happened in Scripture happens again and again, unfolds over and over, it is because the Bible is not "the past" at all. For it to be the past, its sense of time would necessarily need to be continuous with our own, and we would have to live amid a series of similarly God-dominated events, so that the whole flow of time from Abraham to now could make for one simple, consequential, story. Once this is no longer the case, biblical time becomes "other," a world wholly apart from ours, and yet one which is constantly intersecting our own via the strategies just seen. The Bible's last authors and editors, however much they were convinced of God's Providence and absolute domination of history, had seen in the hallowed texts of the past far more than mere records of God's doings or transcriptions of His past pronouncements; they had seen Scripture, and it is this view that was transmitted to the Bible's first exegetes.

Having noticed these common features, it is nevertheless important to point out significant differences between the midrashic approach to Scripture and some of the other approaches mentioned, specifically with regard to their respective senses of time. Thus, for the allegorist, as we have seen, Scriptural time re-becomes continuous with the present in the sense that those events of the soul portrayed in

and travel under the earth back to where it will rise again. Even the flow of a river's waters, which to other minds has presented itself as the model of an ever-changing, ever-unique universe, to Koheleth is only another instance of that which is beyond change: the rivers flow as they have always flowed and ever to the sea, for "what has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done again."¹⁴ Here is not the place to rehearse the various possible influences on this book's author in his rather unique conception of things, other than perhaps to note the circumstance that his is, as stated, a late book, probably no earlier than the fifth or fourth century before the common era. And—here is the point—as such its sense of time is not nearly so unique as is sometimes claimed. For much "wisdom literature," especially that of later vintage, bears the same stamp.¹⁵ Time itself seemed to be changing at the end of the biblical period, and there was growing stronger in Israel a type of writing still more striking in its sense of return: apocalyptic.

Apocalyptic books—and here are intended not so much the "apocalyptic elements" in such biblical books as Zechariah or Joel as that body of self-contained, often pseudonymous "apocalypses" (= "revelations"), testaments, and similar writings that sprang up at the end of the biblical period—such works as these conceive of God's activity in history as at once more pervasive and more remote than that portrayed in earlier biblical histories. "He who calls the generations in advance" (Isa. 41:4) has arranged all beforehand, and it is this order, and specifically the "last things" in history, that the apocalypticist discloses behind the veil of mysterious symbols and allusive numerology. He himself lives at the time of the "last things," and it is his intense appreciation of his own times as the unfolding of a previously planned sequence that often leads him to detailed descriptions of the present and the immediate future in the form of pseudonymous "predictions" uttered by this or that hoary character long before.¹⁶ This might strike one as all too linear a sense of things, but it is the well-known characteristic of this literature that "Endzeit wird Urzeit," and that in coming to a close history will recapitulate or reenact the time of the beginning. Here is something not only circular,¹⁷ but sometimes cyclical as well: for it is as if even God is not quite free to act as He will but must forever intervene only as He has in the past, adopting the same forms of cataclysm and release. Moreover, the typological interpretations of Scripture which characterize some of these works,

in which events of biblical history become models or types of the great eschatological events which were either already occurring or just about to occur, are a still more vivid instance of this same way of thinking. Indeed, these three salient characteristics of this literature, i.e., eschatological concerns, pseudographic forms, and the typological use of Scriptural history, all seem to embody a single, overall effort, that of projecting the biblical past onto the present, and so endowing the present with precisely the same divinely ordered quality that the past had, at least as witnessed in biblical texts.

There were, beside impending consummation, other ways for the present to achieve some biblical glow. Such an anodyne feature as the archaizing Hebrew of the book of Esther, or the "anthologizing" Hebrew style of the Qumran *hodayot*, or in general all the archaizing details and manners of so many post-biblical compositions, attest to this same desire to dress up present reality in biblical trappings; indeed, this is certainly an element in the halakhic reading of Scripture as well, and especially in the willingness of later Jews to assume upon themselves biblical strictures of purity and other details applying originally only to the priesthood.

The allegorized Bible of Alexandrian Judaism in its own way accomplished the same thing. For however much the allegorizing of Homer and Hesiod had served apologetic purposes, excusing offensive incidents and descriptions and helping to attribute to these ancient authors philosophical teachings of a later age,¹⁸ the principal accomplishment of the allegorization of the Bible undertaken by Philo of Alexandria and his predecessors was the *de-particularization* of the text. Those little details of family and tribal history, geographical references, personal names, and so on that dot the Pentateuchal narrative were the prime target of Philo's activity precisely because their very existence in the Book of God called for some interpretation; taken literally, they seemed (however true) all too trivial, too particular, for the great divine utterance. And so, for Philo, the Bible in its highest form was a book of all times and places: the incidents of Israel's history become events of the soul, ever enacted anew in the spiritual life of man, and Near Eastern geography becomes a spiritual *mappa mundi*, allowing God's commandment to Abraham and company in Ur to become, in Philo's retelling:

Quit then your meddling with heavenly concerns, and take up your abode, as

affresh to the interpreter; proper understanding is inseparable from prophecy itself. To just such an interpreter ought to be revealed the "correct" sense of Jeremiah's plain speaking about the endurance of exile and domination (Jer. 25:11-12, 29:10); the "seventy years" meant seventy groups of seven years each (Dan. 9:24). Elsewhere, after interpretation is revealed, Daniel offers thanks to God—but it is a cryptographer's praising:

Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise, and knowledge to those who have understanding; he reveals deep secrets and mysterious things; he knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with him. (Dan. 2:20-22)

And when at last he is ordered to cease, we are not surprised at the form the order takes: "But you, Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book until the time of the end."

The inspired interpreter, successor to the great prophets, already possesses Scripture, even though those acts of exclusion and pinning-down known as the canonization are not yet complete.⁹ This is to say that he not only possesses sacred texts, but that holiness is attributed to them in their entirety: the "ancient words" have been received as Scripture. "Great are the deeds of the Lord, scrutinized by all who delight in them" tells us much about the early stages of Scriptural Authority, deeply instilled before the definition of the final canon. But the midrashist as such does not exist yet—or we might say more cautiously that the proto-midrashist coexists with others, who, while they share his reverence for the Text, will ultimately turn in a different direction.

III

It is something of a commonplace that Israel's God is a God of history. Of late the excesses in this line of thought have come under just attack—it is certainly true that "historical thinking" can be found in Israel's neighbors' speculations about the gods, as it is equally true that elements of "cyclical thought" are apparent in Israelite institutions and writings¹⁰—nevertheless it is striking to observe the extent to which, especially in relatively early biblical texts, God's power is seen to manifest itself uniquely in one-time events that, having happened, change things forever: "You were slaves in Egypt, I led you out; now you are free men." This is so much our own sense of time that it is difficult

for us even to conceive of another, in which all that is real partakes of the returning and the repeating, and everything unique and *einmalig*, everything which cannot gain its reality from the great rounds, is therefore inconsequential.¹¹ But this other view of time (and truly it is not a single one but a spectrum of views), these understandings of time in which events of the world are not so strictly segregated in contemplation from the ever-returning, are indeed widespread in the world and in human history,¹² so much so that the sense of time characterized as "biblical"—on which is based not only the oft-cited conviction that history itself, "how things come out," is uniquely the product of the single, all-powerful Will, but along with it that peculiarly Israelite feeling of *consequentiality*, the unflagging consciousness of how events in the past create the present—such a sense of time appears in the broad perspective not only somewhat atypical but rather strange. So much is everyday reality the precise reflection of its Creator's whims that there is no inertia, nothing need necessarily keep going—the sun might stop in its tracks if such were desired (Josh. 10:12-13), or rivers or seas turn to dry land; at God's direction

The bow of the mighty falls slack, while weaklings are girded with strength; sleek men are hired out for bread, but the formerly hungry are well-stocked forever.

A childless woman ends up with seven, and she who had many is left alone. The Lord kills or gives life back, sends down to the grave or brings up; The Lord can make rich or make poor, can humble or lift up again. (1 Sam. 2:4-6)

In such a world, *causes* do indeed become an obsession. It is easy enough to accept gratefully that the sun shines or the rains come or Israel triumphs; but in darkness or drought or defeat, how can one simply be patient, wait for things to get better, when there is obviously a reason, a sin unatoned, a violator of *hærem* in one's midst? And so one does atone, and search in one's midst and in one's past; and if, in spite of all effort, conditions do not improve, what conclusion is available other than that atonement has not been sufficient, or that sinners continue even now, undetected, or that past infractions have so accumulated as to cause God's long-restrained wrath to run a lengthy course?

It is remarkable, and often remarked upon, that the book of Ecclesiastes, a relatively late biblical book, shows very little of this sense of *consequentiality*.¹³ For its author, the sun rises because that is simply part of the ongoing round of things (Eccles. 1:5); it rises only to set

spoken directly to Jeremiah?—and Jeremiah does not simply pass them along, but “eats” them: they nourish him, equip him for his office (“for I am called by thy name”), and presumably they will be related to his mission only in the way our food is related to what we do and say: they give him the force to speak and act. But how significant it is that in Ezekiel God’s speech has already become a text; and the very act of eating God’s word now demands impossible obedience and self-control, swallowing up an actual scroll and then not (in both senses) “spitting it back,” but digesting the twice uneatable thing, a scroll, and one of lamentation and mourning and woe, to find it—how obedience pays off—not bitter, but sweeter than honey.

In exile, and all the more afterward, the divine word was increasingly a text, and it became the more hallowed the more the parchment yellowed and turned brown and cracked. For the word that had been lively in Israel’s midst was now, in the restored province of Judea, disputed; self-appointed prophets and omen-seekers teemed, and some dreamed of a time when “every prophet will be ashamed of his vision when he prophesies; he will not put on the hairy mantle in order to deceive, but he will say, ‘I am no prophet, I am a tiller of the soil’” (Zech. 13:4–5). Coupled with this was its apparent opposite, actually a corollary, the hope for true prophecy’s restoration, when Elijah would return to earth (Mal. 4:5) or the divine spirit would be showered forth on the nation as a whole, “your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions” (Joel 3:1). For the true word was now remote, a thing of books.⁵ Indeed, it is noteworthy that the scroll motif had undergone one final, still more telling, modification:

Again I lifted my eyes and saw, and behold a flying scroll! And He said to me, “What do you see?” I answered, “I see a flying scroll; its length is twenty cubits, and its breadth ten cubits.” Then He said to me, “This is the curse that goes out over the face of the whole land; for every one who steals shall be cut off henceforth according to it, and everyone who swears falsely shall be cut off henceforth according to it. I will send it forth, says the Lord of hosts, and it shall enter the house of the thief, and the house of him who swears falsely by My name; and it shall abide in his house and consume it, timber and stones.” (Zech. 5:1–4)

Here the prophet is not even given to touch the divine word, it does not enter his mouth even in the form of food, but he sees it passing by, a giant scroll—what greater literalization of “the word of God in

action”?—to which he can only bear witness: its mission will be to destroy the house of thieves and perjurers, to avenge the transgression of that which is also (and most often) written, the Decalogue. But if this text represents in some form the disappearance, or mediation, of the prophet’s own powerful speech, it also has a positive side: for here is Scripture as Actor, the written word which flies like an angel to carry out God’s decrees and indeed, like the “angel of the Lord” in earlier writings, is even able to wreak physical destruction on those who have incurred the divine wrath.

In such a world of potent texts—sub specie divinitatis—God’s human intermediaries become by necessity students of old scrolls, manipulators of documents, *soferim*, bookmen and copyists. And it would not be long before reading was no longer simply reading. For the words of God, whose simplicity and straightforwardness were once so obvious that one had to be blind and deaf not to perceive them (as per Isa. 6:10; or, as Amos expressed it, “When a lion roars, who is not fearful? And when the Lord God speaks, who can but prophesy?” Amos 3:8), now were felt to require careful study and inspection in order to be understood. The same alphabetical psalmist who exults in the world of Scripture (Ps. 119) also endlessly prays for “proper perception and knowledge” to understand it, aid in penetrating its “mysteries”: “Give me understanding so that I may live,” “Give me understanding according to your word.” Nothing was obvious. God’s deeds, that is, the accounts of them, had to be “scrutinized [Jerusalem] by all who delight in them” (Ps. 111:2). Those who were to do the interpreting were very much the successors of the prophets—the new bearers of the divine word—and like prophets depended on something like divine inspiration in order to receive God’s word.⁶

This is represented most clearly in the first part of the book of Daniel, whose principal theme is interpretation. Daniel is of course a “reader” of dreams (dreams are like texts)⁷—but how striking that, unlike Joseph, he is required not just to interpret the meaning of the dream, but to retell the dream to the dreamer in the first place (Dan. 2)! Later (Dan. 5), Daniel is called upon not only to interpret the message written on the wall of Belshazzar’s palace, but first and foremost to decipher its undecipherable writing, and so be able to speak the mysterious prophecy.⁸ Both features represent the same basic idea: interpretation begins by the interpreter reproducing the text itself, for the latter, whether dream or scribbling, is itself a gift from God granted

mother, uh, is a bad pig"—such is the obvious meaning of the words. But *mev, est*, and *mala* all have other, less common, meanings, and so "No, you dunce," the teacher roars, "it says *Mev, Mater*, 'Go, oh mother,' *sus est mada*, 'the pig is eating the apples.' Now let's not hear from you again until you learn to hold motherhood in greater respect!") Yet what is a joke in high school is the foundation stone of rabbinic exegesis, and here is the point which we hope eventually to approach: there is often something a bit joking about midrash too. The ultimate subject of that joke is the dissonance between the religion of the Rabbis and the Book from which it is supposed to be derived—and (at least a good part of the time) more precisely the dissonance between that book's supposedly unitary and harmonious message and its actually fragmentary and inconsistent components. Midrash, the perfect expression of rabbinic theology, is thus bound to be at the same time somewhat ironic and yet terribly in earnest. *Qum beulat yisra'el* is indeed amusing, the gallows humor of the prisoners of the Text; and it is the heartfelt hope of a people.

II

The midrashist's biography could safely begin at the end of the biblical period, in the last few centuries before the common era. But his true genealogy goes back much further, to the time of Israel's great prophets, and it is perhaps best to glance at these remoter origins before considering his personal existence proper. The beginnings of the Israelite institution of prophecy are themselves sufficiently diffuse, and disputed, as to defy summary. Recent research has focused on the fact that, on the one hand, those figures whom the text styles as "prophets" (though even here terminology is various) are sometimes strikingly different in function, and that, on the other hand, the office of prophet can be shown to overlap with other functions in Israel previously felt to be rather distinct from it: priest, judge, wisdom-teacher, royal counselor, and so forth. Prophecy in the north was different from prophecy in the south, and prophecy at its origins (if one can even speak in such terms) was different from prophecy in its heyday, the "classical" prophecy of Israel's great writing prophets. But what is perhaps most relevant to our subject is that even classical prophecy was no constant, and that during part of its very height, in the period before the Babylonian exile, it already bore some of the signs characteristic of the turn it was to

take during and after that Exile. The prophet's speech had always been powerful, effective; it could be said of him what was said of the soothsayer Balaam ben Be'or, "those whom you bless are blessed, and those whom you curse are accursed" (Num. 22:6). In Israel this was representative of the prophet's special connection with God: his words were one with the divine will, and he could therefore be depended upon to announce God's plans and preferences in the affairs of his people. But once uttered, his words had an afterlife: for divine decrees or punishments sometimes required time before they were enacted, and he who wished to know what was God's will might not only harken to the words uttered by the prophet "from within thy midst" (an act, however, increasingly complicated by the retrospective contemplation of false prophecy),⁴ but he might also scrutinize the words of prophets of old, those men now hallowed by tradition and known to have spoken God's word in truth. Prophets themselves echoed their predecessors or contemporaries and sometimes quite consciously structured their words around a well-known earlier message. One celebrated instance is the echoing of a verse of Jeremiah's, "Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart" (Jer. 15:16), in the book of Ezekiel (Ezek. 2:7-3:3). It is also a model, however grotesque, of what the word of God was becoming:

"And you [Ezekiel] shall speak My words to them [the people of Israel] whether they hear or refuse to hear; for they are a rebellious house. But you, son of man, hear what I say to you: be not rebellious like that rebellious house; open your mouth, and eat what I give you." And when I looked, behold, a hand was stretched out to me, and lo, a written scroll was in it; and He spread it out before me; and it had writing on the front and the back, and there were written on it words of lamentation and mourning and woe. And He said to me, "Son of man, eat what is offered to you: eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel." So I opened my mouth, and He gave me the scroll to eat. And He said to me, "Son of man, eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it." Then I ate it; and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey.

Like a child at mealtime, Ezekiel is urged to "eat what is offered to you," and his compliance in the face of what looks to be a thoroughly undigestible meal makes him a model of obedience, the very opposite of the "rebellious" subjects he is to address. But what is so striking is the meal itself: the word of God! Already in Jeremiah's verse one could sense some of the diffuseness that the prophetic scenario had taken on: God's words just appear, "were found"—words spoken of old?

pose circulated widely, for everyone is troubled by an alphabetical psalm that is missing one verse—R. Nahman bar Isaac is said to have appended another, still more striking, observation: the very next verse in the Psalm, which should follow the missing “N” verse and in effect now takes its place, also talks about falling, but, instead of saying that Israel has fallen and will rise no more, it says that God supports all those who fall. It is, Rabbi Nahman says, as if David not only foresaw Israel’s downfall, but then also perceived that it would indeed only be temporary and, peering into the far distant future, glimpsed Israel’s eventual restoration; now he proclaimed: “The Lord lifts up all who are fallen.”

This is wonderful midrash, not only in the apparent erudition and cleverness that inform these remarks, and not only in the way that, in solving one problem (the missing “N” verse), another (Amos’s dire words) is also put to rest or at least defused, but still more generally in the way that this very act of exegesis celebrates the canon, the unity and univocality of all of Scripture, and allows it to speak directly to Judaism in its present situation. About all this we shall see more presently. But, to begin, it seems appropriate to touch on the one brief remark in our passage that has so far been neglected, the anonymous comment that in the West (i.e., in Palestine, as opposed to the Babylonian centers of Jewish learning) Amos’s verse is in effect repunctuated to read: “She has fallen and will no more; rise, O virgin of Israel.” This is also typically midrashic, though somewhat less subtly erudite, one might say, than the rest of our passage. In fact, it entails a grammatical difficulty, for the word “rise” (*qum*), although it is fine in Amos’s original meaning, here would probably best be modified slightly to fit the new sense, that is, turned into *qumi*, the feminine imperative “rise!”² But, grammar notwithstanding, the change from

She has fallen and will no more rise, the virgin of Israel

to

She has fallen and will no more; rise, O virgin of Israel

seems a most fitting pars pro toto for the whole midrashic enterprise. For, left alone, the first verse (and others like it) might have sounded the death knell of Israel’s religion. Israel’s God, the same God that controls her political destiny for all time, had sent prophets to inform the people of His will; their words were binding, for God’s decree

“shall not return to Me empty-handed, but will accomplish what I have wished” (Isa. 55:11). In other words, the sentence is final: Israel is to rise no more. Yet how might a Jew living in his homeland centuries after this decree was uttered and seeking to cling to the way of his fathers, a Jew whose whole sense of himself and his people was so much defined by Scripture and bound up in that “Israel,” somehow square this verse with his own religiosity and his hopes for the future (indeed, with other prophecies, prophecies of redemption, which, it was his firm belief, were yet to be fulfilled)? It is striking what he does not do. He does not argue that the words spoken by Amos are to be understood in the context of their times, hence that the phrase “will no more rise” might really mean “will not rise again for now,” not right away (though this is a defensible reading); nor does he seek to limit its applicability on valid geographical grounds (for “Israel” here means the Northern kingdom and does not apply to Judah, to the Jews); nor yet does he invoke the divine prerogative of annulling evil decrees and sending further word, as in the messages of hope and comfort contained in Isaiah and Jeremiah. His solution is both less realistic and less relativistic: he goes at once to the text itself and—since the written text contained no punctuation or vowel-marks—simply repronounces the same words in such a way as to get them to say exactly the opposite of what Amos intended: a message of despair becomes that ungrammatical clarion call, “Arise (masculine imperative) O virgin of Israel!” Now here is a question which is crucial to our whole subject: what has our exegete accomplished thereby? Is it not obvious to him that he is doing an injustice to the text, twisting it around to say its opposite? Some students of midrash would argue—correctly, I think—that in the midrashic view divine words have an existence independent of circumstance and immediate intention, that, in short, a text is a text, and whatever hidden meaning one is able to reveal in it through “searching” simply is there, part of the divine plan. Yet such reasoning, while it is obviously a correct reading of rabbinic attitudes (and one that finds specific expression in the medieval period), seems on its own far too sober in the present circumstance. “Arise O virgin of Israel”!³ It reminds one of that bygone favorite of high-school Latin teachers,

Mea mater sus est mala.

(A normal sixteen-year-old, asked to translate, blushes slightly: “My

It takes a John M. Woolsey of the United States District Court of the Southern District of New York, attentive to "all questions of law and fact involved," to decide in 1933 on legal grounds that Ulysses "may . . . be admitted into the United States" for it must also "always be remembered that" the author's "locale was Celtic and his season Spring"

(James Joyce, *Ulysses* [New York: Random House, 1934], ix-xiv).
84. Cf. Rabbah's pedagogic practice in B. Shabbat 30b.

Two Introductions to Midrash

I

There are a number of alphabetical psalms in the Bible, that is, psalms in which each line or group of lines begins with a new letter of the Hebrew alphabet. One such is Psalm 145—yet for some reason, at least in the Masoretic text, the verse that should start with the Hebrew letter "N" (nun) is missing. Did the verse somehow get lost in transmission? Rabbinic tradition has a different answer: David, the author of the Psalms, purposely omitted it.

Why is there no nun-verse in Psalm 145? Rabbi Yohanan explained that it is because Israel's (as it were) downfall begins with that letter, as it is written, "She-has-fallen [nafelah] and will no more rise, the virgin of Israel" (Amos 5:2). But in the West (i.e. Palestine) the sages resolve [the problematic message of that verse by dividing it up differently] thus: "She has fallen and will (fall) no more; rise, O virgin of Israel!" Rabbi Nahman bar Isaac said: [Though David omitted the nun-verse because it would have invoked Israel's downfall,] nevertheless David reconsidered and, in divine inspiration, added the next verse, "The Lord lifts up all who are fallen, and straightens up all who are bent."¹

Those who are familiar with rabbinic exegesis certainly can follow the drift of these remarks, but for the uninitiated a bit of explanation is due. The fact that the "N" verse is missing has, in the mind of Rabbi Yohanan, been imaginatively connected with another circumstance: it so happens that one of the direct pieces of prophecy in the whole Bible, Amos's blunt statement that Israel's fall will be irreparable and eternal, also begins with the same letter. This, R. Yohanan argues, is no mere coincidence. It is as if David, writing long before Amos but knowing what was to come, had purposely kept silent at "N" because of Amos's dread words. To Yohanan's remark—which one might sup-

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