

# From Sermon to Commentary

EXPOUNDING THE BIBLE  
IN TALMUDIC BABYLONIA



Studies in Christianity and Judaism /  
Études sur le christianisme et le judaïsme : 17

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IN TALMUDIC BABYLONIA



Eliezer Segal

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## Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction: Aggadic Midrash in Babylonia	I
1 A Chamber on the Wall	9
2 A Holy Man of God	17
3 Two Faces	21
4 Daughters of Zion	29
5 Cave of Machpelah	33
6 Amraphel and Nimrod	37
7 A New King	41
8 The Fish	51
9 Sevenfold	55
10 “From India Even unto Ethiopia”	63
11 Ahasuerus, a Clever King or a Stupid King?	67
12 “The Court of the Garden...”	69
13 Treasure Cities	71
14 Pithom and Raamses	73
15 Shiphrah and Puah	75
16 Coats of Skins	79
17 To Do His Business	81
18 Orpah and Harafah	85
19 Shobach and Shophach	89
20 Elishah and the Children	91
21 Staff or Goblet	93
22 King and Commoner	95
23 Ezekiel’s Cry	97
24 Mahlon and Chilion	101

25	His Eldest Son	105
26	Achan and Zimri	109
27	Ham and Noah	113
28	Sennacherib, Clever or Stupid?	117
29	Copper Precious as Gold	121
30	Non-Babylonian Examples	125
	<i>Therapeutic Leaves</i>	125
	<i>Seven Days</i>	126
	<i>“For It Is Great”</i>	126
	Conclusions	129
	Works Cited	141
	Indexes	153



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## Introduction

### Aggadic Midrash in Babylonia

In both the ancient rabbinic texts and the accepted usages of academic study, the term *midrash* encompasses a diverse range of meanings. Almost all these meanings share a historical component, limiting its use to a specific era of “late classical Judaism,” roughly coextensive with the era that produced the Mishnah and Talmuds.<sup>1</sup> As far as its substance is concerned, the decisive factor is its connection to scripture. Unlike other domains of the rabbinic oeuvre, *midrash* is restricted to items that relate explicitly to the text of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>2</sup>

In spite of the apparent consistency and precision of this definition, it becomes quickly apparent that its scope is still too general to serve all the needs of scholarly exactness.

For one thing, its connection with the Bible can take numerous guises. Standard classifications of *midrash* divide it into exegetical (*parshani*) and homiletical (*darshani*) types.<sup>3</sup> The former type, which is most recognizable when applied to the study of *halakhah* (legal discourse), involves detailed analysis of the meanings and implications of words and phrases; the latter type is characterized by the incorporation of biblical verses into rhetorically crafted sermons. The term *midrash* may be employed also with reference to the incidental citation of Scripture in the context of an otherwise non-exegetical discussion, or the redactional arrangement of material (including units that deal with non-biblical laws or narratives) according to the sequence of a biblical book.

It might be argued that subsuming these varied phenomena under a single terminological category demonstrates that the Jewish sages who produced *midrash* regarded them all as a single phenomenon. Nevertheless, a nuanced appreciation of the finer distinctions among various uses of *midrash* is crucial for explaining some incongruities in the development of rabbinic literature, particularly if we take into account the lengthy historical period during which the literature was produced and the fact that ancient rabbinic Judaism flourished in at least two major centres with vastly different cultural profiles.

Modern students of rabbinic literature were quick to take note of the profound differences that distinguish the sages of Babylonia from those of the Land of Israel in their treatment of aggadic *midrash*—*aggadah* being the component of



rabbinic literature that relates to the Bible from a non-legal standpoint. The differences have been described in both quantitative and qualitative terms. Not only is the Babylonian contribution to the genre conspicuous by its scarcity but what the Babylonian rabbis did produce appears excessively literalistic and unaesthetic, the product of a mentality that is incapable of appreciating rhetoric or poetic hyperbole.<sup>4</sup>

To be sure, there has not been universal agreement on the matter of the Babylonian Talmud's inferiority in the domain of *aggadah*. In their analyses of specific pericopes by means of refined methods of contemporary literary criticism, scholars such as Jonah Fraenkel,<sup>5</sup> Ofrah Meir,<sup>6</sup> and others have drawn our attention to subtle elements of literary sophistication that distinguish aggadic passages in the Babylonian Talmud. While some nuances that emerge from these studies might strike us as anachronistic when applied to a cultural setting that had very different standards of literary or rhetorical craftsmanship, the talmudic passages that fare best under such analysis tend to be narratives, whether legendary anecdotes involving the talmudic sages or extensive retellings of biblical episodes.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the conspicuous differences between Palestinian and Babylonian *aggadah* are most pronounced in units that are primarily midrashic—that is, the ones that focus on the interpretation and homiletical exposition of biblical texts. I suggest that at least some of the scholarly disagreements over the evaluation of Babylonian *aggadah* can be attributed to the types of literary corpus that formed the bases for their assessments.

Previous attempts to grapple with this phenomenon did not offer satisfying explanations and tended to treat the matter as an intangible cultural or psychological variation. In his perceptive investigation of the problem, Joseph Heinemann suggested that the difference might be rooted in the differing political and cultural climates of the two communities.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Jews in the Land of Israel were being subjected to a continual barrage of assaults on their religious values, whether through the aggressive inroads made by Hellenistic ideas or through systematic oppression by the pagan or Christian Roman empires. In this setting, weekly synagogue sermons played a vital part in raising the spirits of the common people and equipping them with the ideological weapons necessary to withstand challenges to their beleaguered faith. By contrast, the relative insularity and religious autonomy that were enjoyed by the Babylonian Jewish community, making for less competition from rival religions or philosophies, did not provide an ideal environment for the flourishing of midrashic preaching.<sup>9</sup>

Without denying the validity of these psychological and social factors, I find that the cultural contrast that they assume is questionable; Babylonian Jews were hardly immune to the claims of Zoroastrians, Christians, and other competing religious outlooks. I therefore believe that there is a need to explore addi-

- How might the interpretation have been incorporated into a homiletic discourse that was preached in the synagogue?
- Do similar interpretations appear in Palestinian midrashic compendia?
- If so, then how do those Palestinian traditions rate as exegeses or homilies?
- Are there grounds for supposing that one version evolved out of the other, or that both might be variants of a common prototype?
- Are there ideological, hermeneutical, literary, or other factors that would account for differences?

I hope that a rigorous and critical analysis in connection with these methodological questions will shed further light on the distinctive traits of the aggadic midrash in the Babylonian Talmud.

### Notes

- 1 The complications that arise when attempting to propose a more precise dating of the era are not directly pertinent to this discussion. It should be noted, for example, that some compendia that are widely accepted as part of the midrashic corpus stem from well into the Middle Ages (e.g., *Numbers Rabbah*).
- 2 Here, too, there are some rare exceptions to this definition, such as when midrash is applied to the interpretation of legal documents.
- 3 Strack and Stemberger, 261–62.
- 4 Eliezer Segal, “*Petihta*,” 165–204.
- 5 Fraenkel, 317–19, 448–56, etc.
- 6 Meir, *Poetics*. Her study is devoted primarily to what she designates “the homiletical narrative.” That term is used as well by Fraenkel, 287–302.
- 7 See also Rubenstein.
- 8 Joseph Heinemann, *Aggadah*, 163–79.
- 9 Shinan discusses Joseph Heinemann’s explanations, with new examples (16–22). He suggests four reasons for the centrality of *aggadah* to the Land of Israel: (1) the requirements of inter-religious polemics; (2) the rootedness of literary expression in one’s native soil; (3) the deplorable socio-economic condition of Palestinian Jewry, which encouraged *aggadah* as a form of escapism; (4) the fundamental psychological character of Babylonian teachers, whose intellectual acuity made them insensitive to the aesthetics of *aggadah*.
- 10 See Fraenkel, 27–38. As he hints there, this fact has been obscured by the ultimate emergence of the Mishnah as the sole repository of rabbinic teaching, a later phenomenon which was superimposed by traditional historiography onto earlier eras. See Eliezer Segal, *Case Citation*, 6–8.
- 11 The Babylonian sermon, delivered before lay congregations on Sabbaths and festivals, was known as the *pirqa*. A comprehensive survey of the evidence for this institution can be found in Gafni, 204–12. Evidence assembled there suggests that Babylonian sermons were focused largely on halakhic instruction, albeit at an elementary level. Gafni leans towards the view that their literary structure resembled that of the *she’iltot* as recorded in early ge’onic times.
- 12 Eliezer Segal, *Babylonian Esther*.
- 13 See Kanowitz, 1 (Rav): 23–52; 2 (Samuel): 19–32; Neusner, 2:188–240, especially his characterization of the material on 208–209. Stemberger (199, 201) notes the unusual fre-

- quency of these disputes in midrashic passages of *b. Soṭah*. Albeck notes that there is no discernible methodological difference between Rav and Samuel as far as their talmudic scholarship is concerned (*Mavo la-talmudim*, 173).
- 14 The traditional chronology, as found in the *Iggeret rav sherira gaon*, dates Rav's death in the equivalent of 247 CE and Samuel's in 253/254. The reliability of Sherira's dates (including the one about Rav's return to Babylonia from the Land of Israel in 219) is examined thoroughly (and, for the most part, upheld) by Gafni, 239–65.
- 15 Notwithstanding a venerable and ingenious interpretative tradition, there is no reason to identify this Samuel with the “Samuel Yarḥina’ah” who cured Rabbi Judah the Prince (presumably in Tiberias) as related in *b. Baba Meṣi’a* 85b.
- 16 For purposes of this study, I have restricted myself somewhat narrowly to passages that conform to a definite formal pattern. I have excluded from it the many halakhic disputes that are formulated in the identical “Rav and Samuel, one says... one says” pattern. The classification into aggadic midrashic passages and halakhic ones was usually straightforward. Less obvious, however, was the exclusion of patterns that seemed almost identical in their format, including midrashic disputes ascribed to other sages. On this basis, for example, I have omitted the many passages for which the attributions are stated explicitly, “Rav says... Samuel says,” as well as traditions introduced by the formulas: “Rav and Samuel; and some say Rabbi Johanan and Rabbi Eleazar—one says... one says” (on *b. Berakhot* 17a and 17b and *b. Baba Batra* 3a) or “Rav and Samuel; and some say Rabbi Ami and Rabbi Asi” (on *b. Soṭah* 42b). Some other pericopes that appear initially to fit my classification were excluded nonetheless after I determined that the correct reading (unlike that in the standard editions) does not fit the pattern. This is true, for example, of *b. Soṭah* 11b in connection with Exodus 1:21: “he made them houses,” where the correct reading is evidently “Rav and Levi” (see Liss’s edition, 1:163 and n. 177). Spanish traditions of *b. Megillah* 12a introduce the pericope on ḥur (Esther 1:6) as a “one said... one said” dispute, but the reading might not be authentic. Similarly, although the passage in *Ruth Zuṭa* 4:6 ostensibly fits our pattern (Buber, *Ruth Zuṭa*, n. 4), comparison with parallel versions in *y. Kiddushin* 1:5 (60c), *Ruth Rabbah* 7:11, and *Midrash on Samuel* 18 (Buber, ed., *Samuel*); cf. *b. Baba Meṣi’a* 47a) demonstrates that the second name should be read as “Levi.” A Rav-Samuel dispute that is cited in Grünhut’s edition of the medieval *Midrash al yit-hallal* (Grünhut, ed., 1:22a and n. 4) is ultimately based on the talmudic story from *b. Sanhedrin*, where the opinions are introduced anonymously as *ikka de’amerei*. See Rabbinowicz, *Dikduke soferim*, n. 7. Jellinek’s text of *Midrash al yit-hallal* (6:107) conforms to the Talmud’s reading. See also: Eisenstein, 1:15–19.
- 17 A perceptive discussion of the problematic aspects of the “midrash-theory connection” and its peculiar motives can be found in Stern, 1–13.
- 18 Joseph Heinemann, “Proem,” 100–22.
- 19 Stein, 353–71; Bregman, 74–84.
- 20 Isaac Heinemann.
- 21 See Boyarin, *Intertextuality*.
- 22 The beliefs and values of “rabbinic Judaism” find expression in a remarkably consistent constellation of conceptual terms that are encountered routinely in midrashic works and have furnished the basis for the standard surveys; e.g., Schechter, *Aspects*; Kadushin; Urbach, *Sages*.



## 1 : A Chamber on the Wall

b. *Berakhot* 10b:

“Let us make a little chamber, I pray thee, on the wall” (2 Kings 4:10).<sup>1</sup>

Rav and Samuel—

One says: There was an open<sup>2</sup> attic,<sup>3</sup> and they built a roof for it.<sup>4</sup>

And one says: There was a large exedra,<sup>5</sup> and they divided it<sup>6</sup> into two parts.

It is well for the one who says “an<sup>7</sup> exedra”—this is what it says: “wall.”

However, according to the one who says “an attic”—what is “wall” [קיר]?

— That they put a roof on it [קירוה].<sup>8</sup>

It is well for the one who says “an attic”—this is what is written “עליית קיר”

However, for the one who says “an exedra”—what is “עליית קיר”?

The finest [מעולה] of chambers.<sup>9</sup>

To the best of my knowledge, there is no precise parallel to Rav’s and Samuel’s interpretations in any other rabbinic compendium. In some of those texts, however, the biblical narrative about Elishah and the Shunamite woman is expounded in diverse ways.<sup>10</sup>

In b. *Berakhot*, the dispute is appended to an extensive midrashic retelling of 2 Kings 20 and Isaiah 28.<sup>11</sup> A similar discussion is found in *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 5:6, and the comparison between the two traditions is instructive.

Both units are incorporated into expositions of verses from *Ecclesiastes*. The one in b. *Berakhot* opens: “Says Rav Hamnuna:<sup>12</sup> What is it that is written (*Ecclesiastes* 8:1) ‘Who is as the wise man, and who knoweth the interpretation of a thing?’ [פֶּשֶׁר דְּבָר]—Who is like the Holy One, who knows how to achieve a compromise between two righteous men, between Hezekiah and Isaiah!”<sup>13</sup>

The *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* pericope, on the other hand, opens with *Ecclesiastes* 5:7: “For in the multitude of dreams and many words there are also divers vanities: but fear

thou God.” This loosely structured homily discusses various remedies that can prevent the fulfillment of unpleasant decrees that would otherwise be portended by disturbing and undesirable dreams.

In connection with their respective themes, both the Talmud and the Midrash cite the story of King Hezekiah, to whom Isaiah had prophesied (Isaiah 38:1) “Set thine house in order: for thou shalt die, and not live.” As related in the biblical story, the king was not persuaded by the prophet’s vision to despair of his life.<sup>14</sup> He began to pray, instead, asking God to rescind the decree: “Then Hezekiah turned his face toward the wall, and prayed unto the Lord.”

The expression “towards the wall” is expounded as if Hezekiah was invoking or appealing to a specific wall that is mentioned elsewhere in the Bible: “To which wall was he casting his eyes?”<sup>15</sup>

One of the answers that is proposed for that question is:

b. Berakhot 10b:	Ecclesiastes Rabbah 5:6:
Rabbi Levi <sup>16</sup> says:	Rabbi Samuel bar Naḥman <sup>19</sup> says:
Concerning the matter of the <sup>17</sup> wall. He said before him: Master of the Universe! If for the Shunamite woman, who only made one small wall, you restored her son to life— [for] my grandfather who plated the sanctuary entirely with silver and gold, <sup>18</sup> how much more so!	It was to the wall of the Shunamite woman that he was casting his eyes, as it is written “Let us make a little chamber, I pray thee, on the wall.” He said to him: Master of the Universe: This Shunamite woman made one wall for Elishah and you restored her son to life. My ancestors <sup>20</sup> who have performed these great acts of praise, how much more so! <sup>21</sup>

Both versions thus make a powerful point about the efficacy of prayer and its ability to void a divine decree, even one that was explicitly ordained in a vision of one of Israel’s greatest prophets. The story of Elishah’s resuscitation of the Shunamite woman’s child provided a source of inspiration; even death is not necessarily final and can be undone with the help of sincere supplication. *b. Berakhot*, also cites Ecclesiastes 5:7, in connection with the futility of dreams. For good measure, it cites several additional rabbinic pronouncements about never relinquishing one’s reliance on the power of prayer.

The *b. Berakhot* version introduces thematic elements that are not found explicitly in *Ecclesiastes Rabbah*, notably an exchange between Isaiah and Hezekiah

in which the latter expresses his reluctance to father children after it has been revealed to him that some of his descendents will be unrighteous.<sup>22</sup>

The introductory verses from Ecclesiastes in both versions suggest that the expositions originated as *petiḥtot*,<sup>23</sup> although in neither instance are we able to determine with any degree of certainty which lection it was attached to.<sup>24</sup> The question of the reliability or unreliability of dreams, suggested by verse 5:7 and the *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* passage, would lend itself to discourses on biblical sections in which dreams play a prominent role. Some possible candidates include the following:

Genesis 21:1: “And the Lord visited Sarah as he had said.”

Genesis 28:12: “And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth.”<sup>25</sup>

Genesis 40:1,<sup>26</sup> where Joseph (later in the lection) interprets the dreams of Pharaoh’s imprisoned servants.

Genesis 41:1: “And it came to pass at the end of two full years, that Pharaoh dreamed.”<sup>27</sup>

Or perhaps Genesis 37:1, where Joseph’s dreams of greatness constitute one of the reading’s central topics.<sup>28</sup>

It is somewhat more difficult to identify a Torah lection that would provide an appropriate target verse for the homily in *b. Berakhot*, where the main theme is the reconciliation between Isaiah and Hezekiah.<sup>29</sup> The opening chapter of Isaiah, read as the special *haftarah* of “rebuke” on the first of the three Sabbaths preceding the Ninth of Av, is a possibility. Its opening words, “*The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz*,” lend themselves naturally to thoughts about the inevitability of prophetic oracles and the ability of prayer or repentance to counteract them.

If Rav’s and Samuel’s dispute over the architecture of Elishah’s room was originally linked to a homiletical exposition,<sup>30</sup> then the above-mentioned discourses about Hezekiah’s prayer are the only existing texts that suggest themselves.

Since the “wall” interpretation is presupposed by the homiletical expositions of Hezekiah’s prayer, it is also conceivable that the “roof” interpretation could have been proposed originally as an alternative or refutation of that assumption.<sup>31</sup>

It is equally possible, however, that Rav and Samuel were relating to an entirely different, and lost, homiletical context—or that their remarks are of a purely exegetical character and have no ulterior purpose. If that latter option is the correct one, then the exegesis seems to be going out of its way to overlook the obvious meaning and to create unnecessary difficulties.<sup>32</sup>

The exasperating character of this passage was expressed clearly by Rabbi Jacob Ibn Ḥabib in the commentary he composed (*hakkotev*) for his *‘Ein ya’aqov* compendium of Talmudic *aggadah*:

It would be well worth knowing what the basis is for the dispute between Rav and Samuel on this matter. For of what consequence is it whether it was an attic, and they built a roof for it, or an exedra? It is unacceptable to suppose that they are merely quibbling about the meanings of the words.

Underlying his puzzlement is the premise that talmudic teachers did not normally indulge in purely academic exercises in textual interpretation. Every interpretation should have a point: a moral lesson, a theological insight, or a halakhic nuance. But no such point is evident in this passage.<sup>33</sup>

It would be tempting to interpret the dispute between Rav and Samuel as having some symbolic connection with the biblical story of Hezekiah's prayer and Isaiah's prophecy. For example, their respective understandings of the physical structure of Elishah's chamber reflect differing paradigms of prayer, or holiness.<sup>34</sup> One possibility that comes to mind is that Rav and Samuel might have been metaphorically emphasizing different dimensions of worship, whether as a communal experience (represented by the vertical partition or its absence) or as an encounter with the divine (represented by the roof or its absence).<sup>35</sup>

Unfortunately, the Talmud itself is less than forthcoming in helping us to derive these lessons.

### Notes

- 1 Some texts (including MS Munich 95) insert a question: "What is 'a little chamber on the wall'?"
- 2 Current printings read פֶּרֶיטָה (unclosed), which is supported by MS Munich and others. However the *editio princeps* and *Yalqut shim'oni* have פֶּרֶיטָה, which has a similar meaning. MS Florence has no adjective at all.
- 3 On attics or upper chambers in talmudic sources, see Krauss, *Kadmoniyot*, 1:2:319–23 (which mentions the passage under discussion here) and Krauss *Talmudische*, 1:29, 33.
- 4 MS Florence reads only "an attic."
- 5 Krauss, *Kadmoniyot*, 1:2:421–24; Krauss, *Talmudische*, 1:52–53; Wissowa, 12:1581–583. Krauss points out that the Roman exedra had a decidedly different designation from the Greek. Whereas the Greek term referred to a colonnade at the entrance of a house, the Roman referred to a hall or large room inside it. Such halls, containing apses and benches, were more likely to be built in gymnasias or public buildings than in simple private dwellings. See also Jastrow, 64.
- 6 The expression "divided it" is missing in MS Florence.
- 7 Instead of "an," MS Oxford 366 has "a large."
- 8 Cf. Maharsha. The verb קִיַר which designates roofing in rabbinic Hebrew, is related to the noun *qorah*, "beam." Regarding the process of roofing in talmudic times, and the Hebrew terms associated with it, see Krauss, *Kadmoniyot*, 297–309; Krauss, *Talmudische*, 1:25, 29.
- 9 Margoliot cites several similar interpretations of 'aliyyah in the sense of *me'ulleh* (41). To his examples can be added *b. Ketubbot* 50b, also in connection with a dictum of Samuel (Hershler 1:373). However, cf. *b. Zevahim* 13b.

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mind that the *me'ulleh* midrash is not proposed by the *amora* himself; rather, it is the conclusion of a discussion by the Talmud's anonymous redactors. For the same reason, we should not attach much weight to Margoliot's argument that interpretations similar to the one that he ascribes to Samuel are adduced elsewhere by Rabbi Eleazar, a disciple of Samuel.

34 Ibn Ḥabib suggests that underlying their exegetical disagreement is a philosophical dispute concerning moral priorities. Which value ranks higher: bestowing fitting honours on a holy man or living within one's means? I find no warrant for this explanation in the words of the Talmud.

35 If we choose to dissociate Rav's and Samuel's dispute from the Hezekiah episode, then we could, following similar lines, interpret it in connection with different evaluations of Elishah's holiness: Was it defined by his direct relationship with God or by the acts of righteousness and kindness that he performed for people in need?

Margoliot (40-41) points to the similarity between this passage and the dispute between Rav and Samuel in *b. 'Eruvin* with respect to the meaning of the word *machpelah*. See the presentation of that passage below.





### 3 : Two Faces

b. Berakhot 61a [and b. 'Eruvin 18a]:

R' Jeremiah ben Eleazar<sup>1</sup> says: the Holy One created two faces [דוּפּוּצְפִי] διπρόσωπος] in the first man; as it says “Thou hast beset me [צַרְתָּנִי] behind and before” (Psalm 139:5).

“And the rib [הַצֵּלַע], which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman” (Genesis 2:22).

Rav and Samuel—

One says: a face [parṣuf].

And the other says: a tail.

It is well for the one who says “a face”—this is what is written: “Thou hast fashioned me [צַרְתָּנִי]<sup>2</sup> behind and before.”

However, for the one who says “a tail,” what is “Thou hast beset me [צַרְתָּנִי] behind and before”?

This dispute between Rav and Samuel is attached directly to the verse in Genesis, and appears to be concerned with the correct understanding of *ṣela'*, which denotes the item or limb from Adam's anatomy out of which God created the first woman.

In Palestinian midrashic literature, we encounter several variations on these interpretations. All of them are constructed as *petiḥtot* whose “external” verse is Psalm 139:5. The following version is from Genesis Rabbah 8:1:<sup>3</sup>

“And God said, Let us make man in our image” (Genesis 1:26).

Rabbi Johanan opened: “Thou hast fashioned me [צַרְתָּנִי] behind and before”...

Said R' Jeremiah ben Leazar:<sup>4</sup> At the time when the Holy One created the first man, he created him as an *androgynos*, as it states: “Male and female created he them” (Genesis 5:2).

Said R' Samuel bar Naḥman:<sup>5</sup> At the time when the Holy One created the first man, he created him *dio parṣufa* [δύο πρόσωπος], and he split him in two and made him backs on one side and backs on one side.

They challenge him: Is it not written (Genesis 2:21) “and he took one of his ribs [מִצַּלַּע עוֹתִי]?!?”

He says to them: From his side,<sup>6</sup> even as you say (Exodus 26:20) “And for the second side [וּלְצֵלַע] of the tabernacle.”

And Samuel says: He took one rib from between two ribs. It does not say “in its place,” but rather “and closed up the flesh in their place” (Genesis 2:21)<sup>7</sup>...

Says R' Samuel bar Tanḥum:<sup>8</sup> Also his praise occurs only at the end. Thus it states (Psalm 148:1–11) “Praise ye the Lord. Praise ye the Lord from the heaven ... he hath made a decree which shall not pass.... Praise the Lord from the earth ... Kings of the earth.”

Says R' Simlai:<sup>9</sup> Even as his<sup>10</sup> praising occurs only after that of the cattle, the beasts, and the flying fowl, so too his creation occurs only after the beasts, and the flying fowl. Initially it says “And God said, Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life, and fowl that may fly above the earth in the open firmament of heaven.” (Genesis 1:20). And after all of them: “Let us make man in our image.”

*Leviticus Rabbah* 14:1 (p. 295–99) and its derivative sources<sup>11</sup> contain expositions that are largely identical, until Rabbi Simlai’s concluding comments:

Says R' Simlai: Even as his fashioning occurs only after that of the cattle, the beasts, and the fowl, so too his “law” occurs only after the cattle, the beasts, and the fowl. This is what it says “This is the law of the beasts, [and of the fowl, and of every living creature that moveth in the waters, and of every creature that creepeth upon the earth]” (Leviticus 11:42). And after all of them: “If a woman have conceived seed.”

It is hard to decide which of these versions is the primary one, and it is conceivable that the original editor (or perhaps Rabbi Simlai himself) adapted the comment for use in both contexts. At any rate, some circumstantial considerations favour concluding that the *Leviticus Rabbah* version is earlier.<sup>12</sup>

Although the Palestinian texts incorporate the interpretations into *petiḥtot*, there are no *prima facie* grounds for assuming that they were generated by the *petiḥta* process—that is, by expounding the creation story from the perspective of Psalm 139:5. As many scholars have observed, the idea that the first man and woman were joined together in a single androgynous creature is legitimately suggested by the biblical text itself.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, it is found in Aristophanes’ famous discourse in Plato’s *Symposium*.<sup>14</sup>

At any rate, these discussions about the nature of woman’s creation are not integral to the *petiḥta*, which would have been perfectly coherent without those associations. At an earlier stage of development, perhaps, the *du-parṣufin* passage comprised a separate *petiḥta* attached to Psalm 139:5, although we no longer know which pentateuchal lection it introduced.

Even though it is not emphasized in the rabbinic texts, the interpretation is likely to stem from manifest exegetical problems posed by the biblical narrative. As is well known, the problems are inherent in the wording of Genesis 1:27: “in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them,” as well as in the comparison between that verse and 2:18–24. Assuming the separation

of an originally androgynous creature effectively accommodates the literal wording of this passage without resorting to “documentary” theories.<sup>15</sup>

The opinion that equates the *ṣelaʿ* with the *parṣuf* is easily accounted for by comparison with several statements in the Talmuds and Midrash that use the expression *du-parṣufin*, a formulation that occurs in virtually identical form in Plato. Accordingly, the explanation proposed by Rav or Samuel would imply that the original Adam had two faces or heads<sup>16</sup> and that one of these was removed to form Eve.

The “tail” explanation, however, seems to be unique, and its precise significance is difficult to fathom.<sup>17</sup> All other considerations being equal, the dispute could imply differing assessments regarding the personalities and spiritual capabilities of women.<sup>18</sup>

The same accusation that we can level against the Babylonian version of the passage—that it is of an academic and exegetical character and leads to no explicit moral or religious lesson<sup>19</sup>—is applicable to the Palestinian versions as well.<sup>20</sup> In both Palestinian variants, however, the passage’s incorporation into the larger proem becomes part of an intriguing homily about humanity’s place within the larger structure of creation.<sup>21</sup>

The *duparṣufin* tradition is also subject to eschatological exposition, as we observe in a remarkable midrashic passage. Rabbi Simlai is challenged by *minim* regarding the interpretation of Genesis 1:26. To this he responds as follows:<sup>22</sup>

In the past, Adam was created<sup>23</sup> from the earth and Eve was created from Adam. From now on, “in our image, after our likeness”—not a man without a woman and not a woman without a man and not the two of them without the divine presence.

This idea bears an interesting resemblance to the theology expounded in the gnostic Gospel of Thomas. Jesus promises his disciples that they will come to see their images as they existed prior to the creation of the material world:

Jesus said to them, “When you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below, and when you make the male and the female one and the same, so that the male not be male nor the female female; and when you fashion eyes in the place of an eye, and a hand in place of a hand, and a foot in place of a foot, and a likeness in place of a likeness; then you will enter [the Kingdom].”<sup>24</sup>

Scholars have understood that this view is based on the premise that sexual differentiation is part of the “fallen” state of humanity in which its original divine image has been diminished.<sup>25</sup> Those who merit the enlightenment of the gnosis will be able to undo the division and return to the purer spiritual state.<sup>26</sup> It would be most intriguing to speculate about the degree to which the rabbinic

and the gnostic Christian documents were drawing on one another or on common traditions or reacting to each other when proposing their respective interpretations of Genesis 1:26.

### Notes

- 1 Albeck identifies him tentatively (*Mavo la-talmudim* 342) as a fourth-century Palestinian *amora*, a teacher of *aggadah*.
- 2 The rabbinic interpretations all read this verb as if it were derived from the root נִצַּר, “fashion,” thereby supplying the necessary verbal and semantic link to the creation story and particularly to the verb נִצַּר. Most conventional translations connect it to נִצַּר in the sense of “besiege” or “beset.” Others have suggested the root נִצַּר, “watch” or “protect.” See Briggs and Briggs, 2:493, 496; Brown, 848; Dahood, 3:287–88; Hakham, 2:532.
- 3 Ed. Theodor and Albeck, 54–55.
- 4 Thus in all the witnesses here, including MS Vatican 60 (Sherry). *Leviticus Rabbah* has R’ Samuel bar Nahman as the author of this statement, and the current text might well have been emended to bring it into line with the Babylonian Talmud. See Bacher, *Agada der palästinensischen Amoräer*, 3:583–87. (Our passage is discussed on 585 and in n. 6.)
- 5 In *Leviticus Rabbah*: Rabbi Simeon ben Laqish.
- 6 Indeed, this noun normally has the sense of “side” in both biblical and rabbinic Hebrew. See Brown, Driver, and Briggs, 854.
- 7 Cf. Targums, Theodor and Albeck. In *Carnal Israel*, Boyarin interprets Samuel as an assertion of woman’s subservience in the creation process (42–44).
- 8 Bacher, *Agada der palästinensischen Amoräer*, 3:748.
- 9 He was a second-generation, Babylonian-born *amora* who settled in Lydda; see Albeck, *Mavo la-talmudim*, 190; Bacher, *Agada der palästinensischen Amoräer*, 552–66; current passages are cited on 557–58 and 562). As will be seen below, he was involved in disputations with heretical groups.
- 10 That is, Adam’s, humanity’s.
- 11 *Tanḥuma*, *Tazria* 1; Buber, *Tanḥuma*, 3:33. b. *Eruvin* 18a preserves a similar interpretation in the name of R’ Ami: “‘behind’—with respect to the creation; ‘before’—with respect to punishment.” The original intent of the last segment is not clear. The Talmud rejects the possibility that it is referring to Adam’s punishment, since that comes after those of the serpent and of Eve. This objection would be equally valid if *pur’anut* were understood in the sense of “evil” rather than “punishment.” The Talmud’s conclusion, that Rabbi Ami is alluding to the order of victims of Noah’s flood in Genesis 7:23 (“man, and cattle, and the creeping things, and the fowl of the heaven”), is not quite satisfying either, since it seems an arbitrary choice of verse. It is possible that Rabbi Ami’s original statement was made with respect also to Leviticus 11:42.
- 12 (1) Although *Genesis Rabbah* 8:1 is structured as a proem to Genesis 1:26, this verse did not open a lection in any known rite; see Mann, 23–43; Joel, 130. (2) The connection with the theme of childbirth in Leviticus is less obvious; hence, it would have worked more successfully as a homiletic tour de force by joining biblical texts with no obvious thematic affinities. On the other hand, the transfer to Genesis requires much less ingenuity, given that the creation of the first man and woman is the manifest topic of most of the dicta in the passage. (3) All of the later *midrashim* (i.e., the *Tanḥumas* and the *Midrash on Psalms*) attach the homily to Leviticus.
- 13 See Skinner, 33; Cassuto, 57–58, 90–96, 104.  
The *Tanḥumas* derive the concept of a doubly created human from the two *yods* in נִצַּר (Genesis 2:7), as distinguished from the single-*yod* form of the verb that is used

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- 22 Genesis Rabbah 8:9 (Theodor and Albeck, 62–63); y. Berakhot 9 (12d) (cf. b. Sanhedrin 38b, Genesis Rabbah 22:2 (p. 206) and other parallels listed by Theodor and Albeck.
- 23 The homily is evidently based on the reading  $\eta\psi\epsilon\eta$  as a third-person nif'al form in the past tense; see Theodor and Albeck.
- 24 Koester and Lambdin, 117–30.
- 25 This Platonic way of reading the two creation accounts, one referring to the *idea* of humanity and the other to the actual human beings, was suggested by Philo and adopted by several later commentators. See literature cited in Ginzberg's *Legends*. The doctrine is also found in works such as the Gospel of Philip (Eisenberg, 131–51); "When Eve was still in Adam death did not exist. When she was separated from him death came into being. If he again becomes complete and attains his former self, death will be no more" (141). See also Boyarin, 44.
- 26 The scholars who champion this interpretation have emphasized passages such as logia 22 and 114, although their interpretation is not quite explicit in the text. See Schenke; Meeks; Eisenberg; Meyer, 554–70; Arai, 373–76; Pagels.



## 7 : A New King

b. *Eruvin* 53a, b. *Soṭah* 11a:

“Now there arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph” (Exodus 1:8).

Rav and Samuel—

One says: “New” literally.<sup>1</sup>

And one says: “New” in that his decrees were rendered new.

The one who says “New” literally—it is because it is written “new.”

And the one who says “New” in that his decrees were rendered new—since it is not written “and he died, and he reigned.”

And what is “which knew not Joseph”?<sup>2</sup>—That he resembled someone who did not know him.<sup>3</sup>

This exegetical debate between Rav and Samuel is found with virtually identical wording in *Exodus Rabbah* 1:8.<sup>4</sup>

As an explanation of the biblical narrative, the suggestion that this was anything other than a new Pharaoh in a fully literal sense is impossible to accept here.<sup>5</sup> The Talmud’s attempt to provide a textual basis for the interpretation is unconvincing. More importantly, the effort does not bear any obvious homiletical fruit. The Talmud does not derive from it any religious or moral lessons, although it would not have been difficult to do so.

A more satisfying variation on the same theme is to be found in several midrashic collections from the *Tanḥuma* family, including the standard *Tanḥuma*, *Shemot*, 5.<sup>6</sup> This passage has come down in diverse forms, including a genizah fragment published by Louis Ginzberg in *Ginze Schechter*:<sup>7</sup>

Tanḥuma	Tanḥuma, ed. Buber	Ginze Schechter
<p>“Now there arose up a new king over Egypt.” Said the Prophet: “They have dealt treacherously against the Lord: for</p>	<p>“Now there arose up a new king over Egypt.” Said the Prophet: “They have dealt treacherously against the Lord: for</p>	<p>Rabbi Simeon ben Laqish<sup>8</sup> introduced it [פִּתְחָה בָּרַ]: “They have</p>
>	>	>

> Tanḥuma	> Tanḥuma, ed. Buber	> Ginze Schechter
<p>they have begotten strange children: now shall a month devour them with their portions” (Hosea 5:7).</p>	<p>they have begotten strange children.”</p>	<p>dealt treacherously against the Lord: for they have begotten strange children.”! What is meant by “they have begotten strange children”?<sup>9</sup></p>
<p>To teach you that when Joseph died they violated the covenant of circumcision. They said: We shall be like the Egyptians.</p>	<p>That they would bear children but not circumcise them.</p>	<p>—Rather, [that they did not circumcise their children, and they grew them] <i>belurits</i>.<sup>10</sup> It is written: “And the children of Israel were fruitful, [and increased abundantly [<i>vayyishreṣu</i>]” (Exodus 1:7). Scripture made them “creeping things” [<i>sheraṣim</i>] because they drew out their foreskins<sup>11</sup> and grew <i>belurit</i>[s for them].</p>
<p>When they did this,<sup>12</sup> the Holy One transformed the affection with which they used to love them, as it says: “He turned their heart to hate his people, to deal subtilly with his servants” (Psalm 105:25).<sup>13</sup></p>		<p>“They have dealt treacherously against the Lord ... with their portions.” What is “shall a month [<i>ḥodesh</i>] devour them”?<sup>14</sup> [—These are the decrees that] are constantly being inflicted anew [<i>mit-haddeshim</i>] on Israel.</p>
<p>There arose the “new one” [<i>hadash</i>] and imposed [<i>hiddesh</i>] his new decrees against them. For this reason it is written “a new king.”</p>	<p>“Now shall a month devour them with their portions.” It is written “<i>hadash</i>.” Therefore: “Now there arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph.”</p>	<p>Another interpretation: “now shall a month devour them.”—This is the new one [<i>hadash</i>], as it is written “Now there arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph.”</p>

Only in Rabbi Simeon ben Laqish’s discourse in Ginze Schechter is the unit introduced explicitly as a *petiḥta*, although the structure of all versions evidently implies a *petiḥta*.<sup>15</sup> All versions agree that the “external” *petiḥta* verse is Hosea 5:7; however, the identification of the “local” verse (the beginning of the day’s scrip-

tural reading) is indeterminate. In the form in which it is cited in Ginze Schechter, the proem appears at first to be built around Exodus 1:1, since the expression “opened for it” implies that it is attached to the same verse as the previous unit, which is based on Exodus 1:1.<sup>16</sup> It is at any rate possible that a new *pisqa* should be inserted just before Rabbi Simeon ben Laqish’s proem<sup>17</sup> or even that the *petiḥta* to Exodus 1:8 was not preceded by a *pisqa*.<sup>18</sup> However, the actual rhetorical culmination does not cite that verse explicitly; rather, the unit seems to end only after the “Another Interpretation” has connected it to verse 8. If Exodus 1:8 is truly the target verse, then it would be difficult to accept the current *petiḥta* structure as original. The eighth verse into a biblical book is too far from the beginning of a lection to be the target of a *petiḥta* for verse 1 but too near to the beginning to constitute the opening of a new lection—even if we were to assume, hypothetically, that a division could have been introduced here in contradiction to any of the known divisions of the triennial or annual cycles.<sup>19</sup> An additional possibility, one that has no direct corroboration in the extant midrashic literature,<sup>20</sup> is that the original proem introduced Exodus 12:1–20. This lection, which is read on the Sabbath preceding the new moon of Nisan, begins “*This month shall be unto you the beginning of months [ḥodashim]*” and therefore provides a natural link to expositions on the *ḥodesh* in Hosea and the *melekh ḥadash* in Exodus 1:8.

If we prefer not to include the “Another Interpretation” unit as part of the original exposition, then the exposition has no real conclusion. Indeed, it is quite possible that the original homilist was not cognizant of the connection with Exodus 1:8 and the new king of Egypt. If this premise is correct, then we must conclude that the final section of Rabbi Simeon ben Laqish’s original *petiḥta* has not survived.

If we choose to attach the homily to Exodus 1:1, then we might plausibly speculate that it developed the theme of “*these are the names*” from Exodus 1:1 in the manner of the *Tanḥuma*, by drawing a contrast between the later generations of Hebrews, who were over-ready to blend into the majority society, and Jacob’s original children—especially during the lifetime of Joseph—who maintained their original Hebrew names, symbolic of their resistance to cultural and religious assimilation into the Egyptian mainstream.<sup>21</sup>

This homily, in all its varied forms, presents us with a very different perspective on the “new decrees” that formed the basis of the interpretation in the Babylonian Talmud and its derivatives. In at least two important ways, these traditions strike me as more coherent midrashic units:

- The exegesis is grounded in a textual feature, by the word *ḥodesh*, which is found in Hosea 5:7.
- It is incorporated into a thematic presentation that teaches a religious message that is of relevance to its audience.



homily reached them from the Land of Israel was limited to the interpretations of biblical verses that it contained. In this case, presumably, the only item from the original Palestinian homily that captured their attention was the exegetical question of whether the king of Egypt was “new” by virtue of his decrees or his person. Removed from its original context, this dispute (or, at least, the view that he was not literally a new king) strikes the reader as odd, and lacking a meaningful purpose.

The following passage from *Pesikta rabati* (15:17) presents an alternative use of similar ingredients, one in which they are combined into a statement of eschatological hope rather than of chastisement:<sup>22</sup>

“And the Lord spake unto Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt saying, This month [ḥodesh] shall be unto you the beginning of months: it shall be the first month of the year to you” (Exodus 12:1–2).

Rabbi Berakhiah<sup>23</sup> in the name of Rabbi Judan the son of Rabbi Simeon:<sup>24</sup> The Holy One said to Israel: My children, here you have a new kind [ḥiddush] of redemption in the time to come.

In the past I did not redeem one nation from the midst of another, but now I shall redeem a nation from the midst of a nation.

This is what is written “Or hath God assayed to go and take him a nation from the midst of a nation” (Deuteronomy 3:34).

Rabbi Joshua bar Nehemiah<sup>25</sup> in the name of Rabbi Ḥanan ben Pazi:<sup>26</sup> “a nation [goy] from the midst of another nation.”

“A people [‘am] from the midst of a nation” is not what is written, but “a nation [goy] from within a nation.”<sup>27</sup>

For these were uncircumcised and these were uncircumcised.

These grew *belurits* and these grew *belurits*.

If so, then the standard of justice would never have allowed Israel to be redeemed from Egypt.

Samuel bar Naḥman says: Were it not that the Holy One had bound himself by an oath, Israel would never have been redeemed from Egypt.

What is the reason?

“Wherefore [lakhen] say unto the children of Israel, I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will rid you out of their bondage, and I will redeem you with a stretched out arm, and with great judgments” (Exodus 6:6).

“Lakhen” means nothing other than an oath, as you say “And therefore [lakhen] I have sworn unto the house of Eli...” (1 Samuel 3:16)

The message of this homily seems very straightforward, although its formal structure and homiletical occasion are obscure and, apparently, incomplete.<sup>28</sup>

Whatever might have been its original form, the *Pesikta rabati* passage is an instructive counter-example to the other *Tanḥuma-yelammedenu* homilies with which it shares several elements, notably the references to *belurit* and uncir-

cumcision as indicators of assimilation into the heathen ethos and a hermeneutical play on the root *ḥadash*. With those elements, the *Pesikta rabati* constructs a homily that is the reverse of the *Tanḥuma-yelammedenu* ones. Instead of reproaching the people<sup>29</sup> for their readiness to adopt foreign customs, he consoles them with reassurances that redemption will eventually come, in spite of their own conspicuous lapses, because God's promises are unconditional and irrevocable.

This passage illustrates the flexibility with which an accomplished preacher could mold exegetical elements to his will and thereby place them at the service of a homiletical theme of his choosing. The contrast to the laconic presentation in the Babylonian Talmud is self-evident.

### Notes

- 1 Margoliot observes that the expression *mamash* is characteristic of Rav, who also demonstrates a general preference for literal interpretation (51–52). See the extensive list of passages that he cites in support of his claim.
- 2 The “Salonica” printing in *b. 'Eruvin* (according to Rabbinowicz, *Dikduke soferim*, n. 2) had “Says Rav Joseph: That he resembled.” Rabbinowicz correctly observes that this error was probably occasioned by the mention of Joseph in this passage. In Liss’s edition of *b. Soṭah* [1:143 n. 48], the reading is attributed to “the Spanish printing and one manuscript in ‘Eruvin.” I am unaware of any surviving pages from these passages in either tractate (see Dimitrovsky). However, the reading is attested in MS Parma 3010 to *b. 'Eruvin*. On the identity of Rabbinowicz’s “Salonica printing” (which afterwards came into the possession of the Frankfurt a.M. municipal library and perished in World War II), see his preface to *Dikduke soferim* on *b. 'Eruvin*; Rabbinowicz, *Ma' amar*, 32–35 [= *Dikduke soferim* to *b. Berakhot*, 53]. Subsequent studies make it virtually certain that the tractate was actually printed in Fez. See: Neubauer, 700; Adler, “Talmud Printing,” 81–84; Adler, “Talmud Incunables,” 3; 378, n. 27; Friedberg, 143–44 (and cf. 132); Mehlman, 43–46; Dimitrovsky, 44–45; Heller, 269–76; Friedman, 18–19; 33–35; and cf. Tedghi, 78.
- 3 The reading here follows most witnesses in *b. Soṭah* and *b. 'Eruvin* as well as *Exodus Rabbah*, where this interpretation is introduced in response to a challenge to the view that “his decrees were rendered new.” Later printings of *b. Soṭah*, on the other hand, treat the question generically. See the extensive discussion in Liss, *b. Soṭah*, 1:142–43, n. 48.
- 4 See also *Tanḥuma 'Shemot*, 3 [Kensky, 164]; Buber, par. 7 (p. 4); Townsend, 6.
- 5 At the most, we would have expected the Talmud to cite Psalms 105:24 (which is adduced for a similar purpose by the *Tanḥuma*; see below): “He turned their heart to hate his people, to deal subtilly with his servants.” At any rate, the plural form “their” refers to the Egyptians as a whole and not specifically to the king.  
As several traditional commentators have observed (see, e.g., ‘Eṣ yosef to the ‘Ein ya’aqov), the disputing positions are not quite symmetrical. Even if we allow that the verse refers literally to a new pharaoh, we must still assume that he changed his attitude radically by disregarding the friendlier treatment of the Hebrews in previous years and the gratitude that Egypt owed to Joseph, their great benefactor.
- 6 Variants are listed by Kensky, 257–58; parallel versions are listed there on 532–33.
- 7 Ginzberg, *Ginze Schechter*, 62–63. The fragment in question, which Ginzberg entitled “A new recension of the *Tanḥuma* to *Shemot* and *Va'era*,” is TS–129.
- 8 He belonged to the second generation of Palestinian *amora'im*; see Albeck, *Mavo la-talmudim*; Albeck, *Agada der palästinsichen Amoraer*, 1:340–418.

invariably an individual representative of the (heathen) nations of the world. For the semantic history of *goy*, see Ben-Yehudah, 2:718. On the homiletical use of rabbinic word meanings, see Isaac Heinemann, 112–17; instances with *goy*, including our current passage, are discussed on 113–14.

- 28 It is incorporated as a discourse on Exodus 12:1, which is undoubtedly a lection that would have been expounded in the synagogue. It is the special reading for the Sabbath preceding the new moon of Nisan by virtue of which it is incorporated into *Pesikta rabati*. By contrast, Deuteronomy 3:34 does not open a new section according to the known rites. (The nearest sections begin with 3:23 and 4:25. See Joel, 131–32.) Similarly, Exodus 6:2 opens a section in both the triennial and annual cycles. To focus the proem as far into the section as verse 6 would not be in keeping with the conventions of this genre, although it is not entirely impossible to imagine that the homilist could have dealt with verses 2–8 as a single integrated unit. In its current form, though, it is built around three biblical texts, all of which are from the Torah. This violates the rules for a standard *petiḥta*. Although exceptions to the rule can be found in midrashic literature, *petiḥtot* should be built on the interplay between verses from different sections of the Bible. At any rate, the passage in its current form is not explicitly structured as a *petiḥta*.

By the same token, it does not demonstrate any other common homiletical structures, such as the posing of a halakhic question (“*yelammedenu rabbenu*”) or a “messianic peroration.”

- 29 Whether one sees the reproach as directed primarily at the ancient Hebrews or at their contemporary descendants.



## 9 : Sevenfold

b. Rosh Hashanah 21b:

This passage has come down to us in two principal versions:

MS Munich 95	Standard text
<p>“[The words of the Lord are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth], purified seven times over” (Psalm 12:6).</p>	<p>“[The words of the Lord are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth], purified seven times over” (Psalm 12:6).</p>
<p>Rav and Samuel both say:<sup>1</sup></p>	<p>Rav and Samuel—One says:</p>
<p>Fifty gates of understanding were created in the world, and all of them were given to Moses<sup>2</sup> except for one, for it says (Psalm 8:6) “For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels.”<sup>3</sup></p>	<p>Fifty gates of understanding were created in the world, and all of them were given to Moses except for one, for it says (Psalm 8:6) “For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels.”</p>
<p>Rav and Samuel—One says:</p>	
<p>Ecclesiastes sought to be like Moses our Master, as it says: “Ecclesiastes sought to find out acceptable words” (Ecclesiastes 12:10).<sup>4</sup></p> <p>A heavenly voice issued and said to him: “and that which was written was upright, even words of truth” (ibid.). “And there arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses” (Deuteronomy 34:10).</p> <p>And one says: Among the prophets there did not arise—among the kings there did arise.<sup>5</sup></p> <p>Then, how am I to uphold “Ecclesiastes sought to find out acceptable words”? &gt;</p>	<p>“Ecclesiastes sought to find out acceptable words” (Ecclesiastes 2:10). Ecclesiastes sought to be like Moses our Master.</p> <p>A heavenly voice issued and said to him: “and that which was written was upright, even words of truth” (ibid.). “And there arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses” (Deuteronomy 34:10).</p> <p>And one says: Among the prophets there did not arise<sup>6</sup>—among the kings there did arise.</p> <p>Then, how am I to uphold “Ecclesiastes sought to find out acceptable words”? &gt;</p>

> MS Munich 95	> Standard text
<p>Ecclesiastes sought to adjudicate cases that are in the heart without witnesses and without admonition. A heavenly voice issued and said to him “and that which was written was upright, even words of truth”: “At the mouth of two witnesses, etc.” (Deuteronomy 17:6).</p>	<p>Ecclesiastes sought to adjudicate cases that are in the heart without witnesses and without admonition. A heavenly voice issued and said to him “and that which was written was upright, even words of truth”: “At the mouth of two witnesses, etc.” (Deuteronomy 17:6).</p>

As R' Rabbinowicz noted correctly,<sup>7</sup> the text of the printed editions is incoherent, since the dispute between Rav and Samuel is not over the Psalms verse but over Ecclesiastes 12:10. Their comment on Psalms is found (introduced as “Rav and Samuel both say”) in *b. Nedarim* 38a, and it was probably transferred to *b. Rosh Hashanah* from there.<sup>8</sup>

At any rate, the version in the printed editions, with just a single set of “Rav and Samuel—One says ... One says” and no “both say,” is supported by all five of the Genizah fragments to our passage.<sup>9</sup> This fact supports the hypothesis that, for all its bizarre features, this tradition is nevertheless the original one for the current *sugya*.

Notwithstanding its general coherence, the reading in MS Munich still suffers from a basic structural asymmetry. The standard pattern for talmudic disputes requires that the disputants propose conflicting interpretations for the same text.<sup>10</sup> In the present instance, however, although Rav and Samuel have opposing readings of the narrative facts, those readings do not necessarily arise from their interpretations of the same verse or word.<sup>11</sup> In light of these considerations, it is probable that the *lectio difficilior* of the majority of witnesses is primary, and that the tradition in MS Munich represents a conscious (but not completely successful) secondary attempt to overcome its deficiencies. Either way, the *sugya*'s chief structural problem arises from the redactor's insistence on presenting the dispute as a narrowly exegetical one. This tendency is typical of Babylonian midrash.

As far as the content of this passage is concerned, the central dispute is over whether Solomon/Ecclesiastes was permitted to achieve the same level of spiritual understanding as Moses.<sup>12</sup> “Understanding” might refer here to the ability to fathom the deepest meaning of the Torah. The intriguing question of what was included in that unattainable fiftieth gate is not spelled out here; and if we are to judge solely from the information provided, the allusion is not to a particular item or area of religious lore but to essential intellectual limitations of the human condition. The second opinion in the dispute holds that Solomon

was Moses' equal with respect to intellectual mastery of the Torah, and that whatever limitations Scripture ascribes to him have to do with supernatural access to the thoughts of defendants and litigants.<sup>13</sup>

The discussion, as described thus far, is of considerable interest but ultimately strikes us as uncomfortably vague and full of loose threads.<sup>14</sup>

The full significance of this exegetical dispute does not come to light until we compare it with the Palestinian *petiḥtas* for Numbers 19:1, the Torah section that introduces the law of the “red heifer” and constitutes the special pentateuchal reading for the first of the two Sabbaths preceding the new moon of Nisan.<sup>15</sup> The earliest extant versions of these *petiḥtas* are probably the ones that are preserved in *Pesikta derav kahana* 4: 2–3:<sup>16</sup>

R' Tanḥum bar Ḥanilai<sup>17</sup> opened: “The words of the Lord are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times” ...

R' Ḥanan bar Pazi<sup>18</sup> interpreted the biblical text in connection with the section on the heifer, which contains seven sevens: seven heifers, seven burnings, seven sprinklings, seven launderings, seven impure ones, seven pure ones, and seven priests.<sup>19</sup> If a person should say to you: Some are missing—Say to him: Moses and Aaron were also included.

“And the Lord spake unto Moses and unto Aaron, saying, This is the ordinance of the law” (Numbers 19:1).

Rabbi Isaac opened: “All this have I proved by wisdom: I said, I will be wise; but it was far from me” (Ecclesiastes 7:23).

It is written: “And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding exceeding much, etc.” (1 Kings 5:9).

R' Levi and the Rabbis:

The Rabbis say: He gave him wisdom in proportion to all of Israel. Said R' Levi: Just as the sand is a barrier for the sea, so was wisdom made into a barrier for Solomon.

The matter states: If you have acquired knowledge, what are you lacking? If you lack knowledge, what have you acquired?<sup>20</sup> ...

“Who is as the wise man?” (Ecclesiastes 8:1) [ ... ]

This is Moses, regarding whom it is written: “A wise man scaleth the city of the mighty” (Proverbs 21:22).

“And who knoweth the interpretation of a thing?” That he interpreted the Torah for Israel.

“A man's wisdom maketh his face to shine.”

R' Mani of She'av and Rabbi Joshua of Sikhnin<sup>21</sup> in the name of R' Levi: Regarding each and every thing that the Holy One would speak to Moses, he would declare its impurity and its purity. But when he reached the section “And the Lord said unto Moses, Speak unto the priests the sons of Aaron, and say unto them, There shall none be defiled for the dead among his people” (Leviticus 21:1), he said before him: Master of the worlds, if he should

become impure, how will he become purified? And he did not reply to him.

At that very moment, the face of our teacher Moses became pale. This is what is written “*and the boldness of his face shall be changed*” (Ecclesiastes 8:1).

But when he reached the section about the red heifer, the Holy One said to him: Moses, the same speech that I spoke to you, “*Speak unto the priests the sons of Aaron, and say unto them*”; and you said before me: Master of the worlds, if he should become impure, how will he become purified? And I did not reply to you—Well, this is the means of his purification: “*And for an unclean person they shall take of the ashes of the burnt heifer*” (Numbers 19:17).

Which is this?—“*This is the ordinance of the law.*”

Although these Palestinian homilies are by no means identical to the Babylonian dispute between Rav and Samuel, it is reasonable to assume that they supply the dispute’s original context (or at least, for one of the opinions found there), in a discourse about the red heifer, designed to be delivered on the Sabbath when the relevant Torah section is read in the synagogue.<sup>22</sup> From the *petiḥta*, we learn also the content of the elusive fiftieth gate of understanding, which was mentioned in Rav’s and Samuel’s first comment: the rationale behind the rite of the heifer’s preparation, which constitutes rabbinic literature’s quintessential instance of a biblical ordinance that cannot be reduced to a humanly understandable explanation.<sup>23</sup> In the Palestinian *midrashim*, the “*sevenfold*” is not applied to the forty-nine gates of understanding but to specific sevens that occur in the procedures for preparing and applying the purifying ashes.

Psalm 12:6 is expounded in the Palestinian traditions with reference to the red heifer and there is found as well a mention of Moses’ initial ignorance concerning the means of purification from corpse-impurity. However, the specific interpretation about defining the limits of Moses’ understanding might well be unique to the Babylonian Talmud.<sup>24</sup> In the Babylonian Talmud, it is Ecclesiastes 12:10 that teaches that Solomon failed to achieve perfect understanding; the Palestinian homilies, though, cite the more explicit 7:23.

The explanation that Solomon sought the ability to adjudicate cases without the due process of testimony and admonition appears here as a post facto invention of the anonymous redactors and would not normally be treated as integral to the original dispute. In this case, however, it is intriguing to note that in Palestinian midrashic compendia, this tradition is associated with Solomon’s judgment of the two harlots in 1 Kings 3:16–28; it is entirely likely that the author of our present pericope is alluding to such traditions.<sup>25</sup>

This factor suggests a different reconstruction of how the Babylonian Talmud’s dispute between Rav and Samuel came to be. The first opinion is revealed

as rooted in Palestinian proems to Numbers 19; whereas the second originated in a midrashic retelling of the judgment of Solomon, most likely in the context of a proem to Ecclesiastes or Song of Songs.

Both Palestinian midrashic traditions touch on topics of considerable theological importance, involving the relation between wisdom and prophecy or the rationality of the Torah's commandments as embodied in the archetypal figures of Solomon and Moses. But the laconic statements in the Babylonian Talmud provide no thematic development beyond narrow interpretations of the cited verses. By choosing to focus exclusively on the midrashic interpretations of selected biblical texts, the Talmud's editors have produced an awkward and incomplete unit whose homiletical purposes have been all but obliterated.

### Notes

- 1 This wording is also found in MS Oxford 366 and the editio princeps of 'Ein ya'aqov.
- 2 Some texts add: "at Sinai." Others add: "our master."
- 3 As explained by Rashi, the concept of "fifty gates of understanding" was derived midrashically from these two verses from Psalms on the understanding that "seven times over" means  $7 \times 7$ , totaling forty-nine. After we have made allowances for the one level by which Moses was kept "lower than the angels," this produces the number fifty. Additional sources that refer to units of forty-nine or fifty, or other numbers, in connection with discourse about the Torah are assembled in Ginzberg, *Legends*, 6:284, n. 25.
- 4 MS Munich alone has this sequence. In other traditions: "'Ecclesiastes sought to find out acceptable words'—Ecclesiastes sought to be like Moses." Cf. the Targum to Song of Songs 1:2 (Alexander Sperber, *Bible in Aramaic*, 127): "Said the prophet Solomon: Blessed is the name of the Lord who has given us the Torah through the agency of Moses the great scribe, inscribed upon two tablets of stone, and six orders of Mishnah and Talmud transmitted orally; and he would speak of them face to face like a person who kisses his fellow out of the greatness of his affection."
- 5 The phraseology here appears to be modeled on the tannaitic midrash: "'And there arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses'—In Israel there did not arise, but among the nations of the world there arose; and who is it?—It is Balaam son of Beor." *Sifre* on Deuteronomy 357:10 (Finkelstein, *Sifre*, 383 and 512–13 n. 21; Hoffmann, 227; *Deuteronomy Rab-bah* 20:1. See also Urbach, "Homilies," 542–43; Ginzberg, *Legends*, 6:125, n. 727.
- 6 Some texts add "but."
- 7 *Dikduke soferim*, nn. 100.
- 8 Although two additional witnesses read "Rav and Samuel both say" (rather than "One says") after the citation from Psalms 12:6, MS Munich remains unique in introducing the dispute later on. This situation gives the impression that some of the manuscripts were incompletely emended, but that their prototypes resembled the text of the printings. Rabbinowicz infers that Rashi's reading was as in MS Munich, although I fail to see how he deduced this. On the contrary, Rashi's long-windedness could perhaps be regarded as evidence that he had before him the difficult reading of the printed editions. Hananel's commentary provides no clues to his reading either. If the standard reading is the correct one, then perhaps it came into existence because, at an early stage of the transmission, the words "Rav and Samuel, one says: Ecclesiastes sought" were somehow omitted; and later scribes tried to remedy this incomprehensible situation by emending "both say" in



24 See Ginzberg, *Legends*, 3:216; 4:130; 6:283–84, n. 25. Rashi to b. Rosh Hashanah 21b equates the forty-nine gates of understanding with forty-nine hermeneutic possibilities. Evidently, he is trying to harmonize the talmudic text with interpretations that are more common in midrashic literature.

25 As reported succinctly in *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 10:17 and *Song of Songs Rabbah* 1:10 (ed. Dunsky, 2): “Rabbi Meir says: They [i.e., the two “harlots”] were spirits. And the Rabbis say: They were sisters-in-law. Rabbi Simon in the name of Rabbi Joshua says: They were actual harlots, and he issued his judgment without witnesses or admonition.”

A more elaborate statement of this theme is found in the later collection *Midrash on Psalms* 72:2 (ed. Buber 324; trans. Braude 1:558–59):

And [concerning] Solomon he also said: “Give the king thy judgments, O God, and thy righteousness unto the king’s son” (Psalms 72:2). It does not say “my judgments” but “thy judgments.” Said David: Master of the Universe, grant thy own wisdom to the king’s son. Even as you judge without witnesses and without admonition, so let Solomon judge without witnesses and without admonition. The Holy One said to him: Thus shall he do; as it says (1 Chronicles 29:23): “Then Solomon sat on the throne of the Lord.” ... So what is “on the throne of the Lord”?—That he passed judgment like his Creator, without witnesses and without admonition. And thus did he adjudicate the case of the two harlots.

See Ginzberg, *Legends*, 4:130; 6:263–64 n. 25. The halakhic requirement of admonition (i.e., that witnesses must warn perpetrators of the legal consequences) should apply only to cases involving capital or corporal punishment, whereas Solomon’s judgment here was essentially over a child-custody dispute. See m. *Sanhedrin* 5:1; t. *Sanhedrin* 11:1 (ed. Zuckerman, 431); b. *Sanhedrin* 8b, 80b; *Genesis Rabbah* 34:14 (ed. Theodor and Albeck, 325); and additional sources cited in Zevin, 11:291–314. In *Song of Songs Rabbah*, therefore, Maharzu observes that the “admonition” does not strictly fit the context there. However, in this b. *Rosh Hashanah* pericope, where the reference is not to a particular case but to Solomon’s aspiration to general wisdom, the expression is appropriate.



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# Indexes

## Sources

### HEBREW BIBLE

#### Genesis

1:1	135
1:3	135
1:20	22
1:26	21-24
1:27	22
2:7	24
2:8	70
2:18-24	22
2:19	25
2:21	21, 22, 25
2:22	21
3:21	79
5:2	21
5:32	135
7:23	24
9:22	113
9:24	113
9:25	113
10:8	38
10:10	38
14:1	37, 38
14:10	135
14:17	135
18:6	18
18:8	18
19:15	103
21	127
21:1	11, 34, 135
21:1-34	127
22:1-24:1	34
23:9	33
28:11	135
28:12	11
34:2	113
39:11	81-83
40:1	11
41:1	11
42:18	128
44:18	87
44:32	87
47:11	74

48:18

53

48:22

135

49:24

81-83

49:27

34

#### Exodus

1

71, 73

1:1-8

44

1:1

43, 48, 49

1:7

42

1:8

41, 42-44, 49,

127

1:15

75, 76

1:21

8

2:4

76

5:18

53

6:2-8

50

6:2

50

6:6

45

6:14

136

7:12

92

9:24

136

12:1-2

45

12:1-20

43

12:1

50

12:36

71

12:38

52

12:44

98

15:1

92

17:5

136

26:20

21

30:12

105, 106

31:2

77

32:16

136

37:1

135

#### Leviticus

7:12

110

11

26

11:42

22, 24

14:2

29

14:56

29

17:3

137

18

19

19

19

19:1-2

17, 18

21:1

57

23:23

127

24:2

136

#### Numbers

4:25

136

5:11

83

10:29

76

11:5

51, 53

11:10

52

11:16

136

12:1

38

12:7

110

19

59

19:1

57, 58

19:17

58

21:10

51

32:1

52

#### Deuteronomy

1:1

125, 127

3:23

50

3:34

45, 50

4:25

50

27

137

30

137

32

137

34:10

60

#### Joshua

7:19

109

7:20

111

7:25

109, 110

#### 1 Samuel

2:9

83

3:16

45

17:16

85

17:23

86

17:43

86

25:1

77

2 Samuel		11:13	97	Ruth	
1:24	137	31:3	48	1:1-2	102
7:9	90	47:12	125-27	1:1	103
10:18	89			1:2	101, 102
17:19	85	Hosea		1:9	85
17:4	87	14:2	110		
21:16	85	5:7	42-44, 48, 49	Lamentations	
21:22	86			3:9	117
1 Kings		Psalms		4:15	30, 31
3:16-28	58	1:1-3	135	Ecclesiastes	
4	65	3:2	89, 90	1:12	95, 96
4:24	63, 64	12:6	57, 58	2:10	93, 95
5:9	57	20:3	18	5:6	9
7:45	121, 123	50:23	109, 110	5:7	10, 11
9:19	72	68:30	65	5:8-9	137
2 Kings		72:2	61	7:1	76
2:21	92	72:11	65	7:23	57, 58
2:24	91	72:19	65	8:1	9, 57, 58
3:27	105, 106	78:27	52	10:1	20
4:9	17, 20	80:1	110	12:10	58
4:10	9	80:21	103	Esther	
18:32	117, 119	90:9	38	1:1	63, 64
20	9	92:8	48	1:3-4	126
Isaiah		105	48	1:5	67, 69, 126,
1	11	105:24	46		127
1:1	11	105:25	42	1:6	8, 69, 70
3	30	106:16	52	1:20	126
3:16-24	29	137	98	Daniel	
3:16	30	139:5	21, 22	3	92
3:17	29, 30	148:1-11	22	Ezra	
11:1	48	149:6	137	8:27	121, 122
14:14	38	Proverbs		1 Chronicles	
14:15	38	6:16-19	29	2:26	109
27:6-13	49	8:31	117-19	4:22-23	102
27:6	48, 49	14:34	105, 106	4:22	101, 102
28	9	15:4	127	19:16	89
36:17	117	21:22	57, 136	20:6	87
38:1	10	23:29-35	114	20:8	87
38:21	92	27:22	85	29:23	61
41:16	49	29:3	81	2 Chronicles	
49:14	30, 31	30:20	51	4	102
49:16-24	30	Song of Songs		4:16	121
Ezekiel		4:5	77	8:4	72
5:7	105	4:12	51	8:6	72
8:16	97	4:15	125		
11:1	97				

## Aramaic Targums

Genesis	
3:21	79
2:21	24
9:24	114
23:9	34

## Esther

1:5	68
1:2	98
1:20	128

## Greek Versions

Hosea	
5:7	48
1 Chronicles	
2:26-27	110

## RABBINIC LITERATURE

## Mishnah

Sukkah	
5:4	98
Megillah	
3:4	60
3:5	127
Soṭah	
8:1	89, 90
Sanhedrin	
5:1	61
'Avodah Zarah	
1:3	47
Avot	
4:1	83
5:5	19

## Tosefta

Shabbat	
6:1	47
Megillah	
3:3	60
3:6	127
Soṭah	
3:19	39
6:7	54
Sanhedrin	
9:5	110
11:1	61
'Avodah Zarah	
3:6	47

## 'Arakhin

2:5	121-23
-----	--------

## Tannaitic [Halakhic]

Midrash	
Mekhilta of Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai	
[Exodus; by pages in ed.	

## Epstein-Melamed]

85	39
117-8	136
Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael [Exodus]	
Piṣṣa	
5	54
Shirata	
6	39
Vayyasa'	136
Sifré Numbers	
78	76, 103
87	53, 54
Sifré Deuteronomy	
37	117-19
322-323	137

## Other Tannaitic Works

Baraita de-Melekhet Hammishkan	
3	136
Avot deRabbi Natan Version A	
31	119
Avot deRabbi Natan Version B	
20	119
45	111

## Palestinian Talmud (Yerushalmi)

Berakhot	
1:1 (2c)	65
4:4 (8b)	14
9 (12d)	27
Pesahim	
4:4 (31a)	114
Sheqalim	
6:2 (50a)	125, 127

## Sukkah

5:6 (55b)	121-23
Ta'anit	
4:8 (68d)	54
Megillah	
3:7 (74b)	127
Ketubbot	
2:4 (3d)	19
4:2 (5c)	87
Nedarim	
9:11 (41c)	137
Ḳiddushin	
1:5 (60c)	8
Sanhedrin	
1:4 (19c)	136
6:3 (23b)	111
10:2 (27d)	14
10:2 (29b)	19
Horayot	
2:6 (46d)	84
Niddah	
2:3 (50a)	114
Babylonian Talmud	
Berakhot	
10b	9-11, 14, 17, 18, 138
17a-17b	8
61a	20, 21, 138
61b	25, 138
Shabbat	
28a	136
62b	29, 90, 138
97a	92
127b	19
130a	54
151a	84
'Eruvin	
18a	21, 24, 138

## Language

## HEBREW AND ARAMAIC WORDS

- 'aliyyah 14  
 androgynos 21  
 'avor 136  
 belurit 42, 45, 47  
 bitan 69  
 Cushite 38  
 darash 30  
 DGY 53  
 dio parşufa 21  
 duparşufin 23, 25, 26  
 exedra 9  
 goy 45, 49, 50  
 ḥadash 42, 43, 46  
 harafah 87  
 harifot 85  
 ḥiddush 45  
 ḥodesh 42, 43, 45  
 Hur 70  
 'ikken 109, 110  
 ḵiton (κῶθων) 31  
 KPL 33  
 lakhen 45  
 machpelah 15, 33, 34  
 mamash 82  
 miskenot 71  
 omnah 111  
 parşuf 21, 23  
 pesharah 14  
 peshet 14  
 pisqa 43  
 pur'anut 24  
 qir 9, 14  
 qiruha 14  
 qorah 12  
 QRY 12  
 sela' 21, 23  
 seron seron 31  
 she'er 52  
 shekhem 135  
 shereṣ 42  
 tehom 73, 74  
 tevel 117  
 tiqrah 14  
 vadai 83  
 ἄνδρῶγον 25  
 δυο πρόσωπος 21  
 ἔφηβοι 47  
 ἔχως, ἐχίως 111  
 ἀρρῶχον 31  
 πρόσπα δύ' 25  
 θεραπεία 125  
 אסתנדרא 99  
 דאמר מר 72  
 כדאמר אינשי 72  
 אנודנו 93  
 וייצר 24  
 חמיתה 127  
 חסיל 48  
 יערה 30, 31  
 יצר 24  
 כתנת 80  
 ככלי 80  
 ממש 53  
 נצר 24  
 צור 24  
 פתח בו 41  
 קודר 93  
 שפח 29

## TALMUDIC TERMINOLOGY

- "Another Interpretation"  
 43  
 baraita 69, 75, 76, 84, 101,  
 103, 110, 121, 122  
 darshani 1  
 ikka de'amerei 8  
 mamash 46, 84  
 midrash 1, 138  
 miracle inside a miracle  
 91, 92  
 Our rabbis taught 110, 121  
 parshani 1  
 perush 138  
 peshet 138  
 pisqa 90  
 Rav and Levi—one says ...  
 one says 8  
 Rav and Samuel—  
 One says ... and one says  
 4, 6, 8, 9, 17, 21, 29, 33,  
 37, 41, 51, 63, 67-71, 73,  
 75, 79, 81, 85, 89, 93, 95,  
 97, 101, 105, 109, 113, 117,  
 121, 125, 126, 137  
 Rav and Samuel; and some  
 say Rabbi Ami and Rabbi  
 Asi 8  
 Rav and Samuel; and some  
 say Rabbi Johanan and  
 Rabbi Eleazar—one  
 says ... one says 8  
 Rav says ... Samuel says 8  
 Said the Prophet 41, 48  
 tana 18  
 Yelammedenu rabbenu 50,  
 125

## Biblical Figures

- Aaron 45, 48, 57, 58, 60, 77, 92  
 Abraham 33, 38, 105, 110  
 Achan 109-11  
 Adam 21-27, 33-35, 79  
 Ahasuerus 63, 64, 67-69, 119, 138  
 Ahithophel 89  
 Amraphel 37, 38, 88  
 Azariah 92  
 Benjamin 87  
 Beth-ashbea 103  
 Bezaleel 77  
 Calcol 109, 110  
 Caleb 77  
 Canaan 113, 114  
 Chilion 101-103  
 Cush 37, 38  
 Dara 109, 110  
 David 60, 61, 77, 86, 87, 89, 90, 103, 121, 137  
 Doeg 89  
 Ecclesiastes 56  
 Elimelech 102  
 Elishah 9-13, 15, 17, 19, 91, 92, 138  
 Elisheba 75-77  
 Ephron 33, 34  
 Ethan 109, 110  
 Eve 21, 23, 24, 26, 27, 33  
 Ezekiel 97, 98, 125  
 Gehazi 18, 19  
 Gershonites 136  
 Goliath 85-87  
 Ham 48, 113, 114  
 Hamor 113  
 Hananiah 92  
 Hannah 125  
 Harafah 85, 86  
 Hebrew midwives 75, 76  
 Heman 109, 110, 111  
 Hezekiah 9-15, 17, 92, 118  
 Hobab 76  
 Hosea 44  
 Isaac 34, 105  
 Isaiah 9-12, 17, 30, 92  
 Jaazaniah the son of Azur 97  
 Jacob 35, 43, 48, 83, 84, 135  
 Jashubilehem 101, 102  
 Jethro 76  
 Joash 101-103  
 Jochebed 75-77  
 Jokim 101-103  
 Jokin 101  
 Jonathan 137  
 Joseph 41-44, 46, 48, 49, 67, 81, 82-84, 87, 110, 111, 135  
 Joshua 101, 102  
 Judah 81, 87  
 Mahlon 101-103  
 Mesha 105, 106  
 Miriam 75-77  
 Mishael 92  
 Moses 14, 17, 30, 38, 45, 48, 51, 52, 56-60, 68, 75-77, 102, 110, 121, 125, 136, 137  
 Naomi 85, 86, 87, 102  
 Nebuchadnezzar 38, 97, 98  
 Netaim 103  
 Nimrod 37-39, 88  
 Noah 24, 113-15, 135  
 Ofrah 86  
 Orpah 85-87  
 Pelatiah the son of Benaiah 97, 98  
 Pharaoh 41, 44, 68, 71, 76  
 Potiphar's wife 83  
 Puah 75, 76  
 Rabshakeh 119  
 Rahab 13, 102  
 Ruth 85, 86, 101  
 Samuel 77  
 Sarah 11, 18, 33, 34, 125, 135  
 Saraph 101-103  
 Saul 87, 137  
 Sennacherib 117-19, 138  
 seventy elders 136  
 Shechem 113  
 Shiphrah 75, 76  
 Shobach 89, 90  
 Shophach 89, 90  
 Shunamite woman 9, 10, 13, 17, 18, 19, 138  
 Solomon 13, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 63-65, 72, 93, 95, 96, 122, 138; tribe of 77, 87, 136  
 Vashti 25, 127  
 Zerah 109, 110  
 Zimri 109-1113



## Authors and Titles

- Aderet Eliyahu 60  
 Adler, E. 46  
 Ahai of Shavha:  
   see She'iltot  
 Albeck, Ch. 8, 13, 18, 19,  
   24, 31, 34, 38, 46, 47, 49,  
   54, 60, 65, 84, 96  
 Albrecht, K. 128  
 Alkabetz, S. 127  
 Alon, G. 47  
 Andersen, F. 48  
 Aptowitzer, V. 77  
 Arai, S. 27  
 'Arukh (by R' Nathan ben  
   Jehiel) 73, 110  
 Asheri (R' Asher ben Jehiel)  
   122  
 Ashkenazi, R' Besalel:  
   see Shittah Mequbbeset  
 Bacher, W. (B.Z.) 13, 18,  
   19, 24, 31, 46, 48, 49, 54,  
   84, 127, 134, 135  
 Baer, Y. 25  
 Batten, L. 123  
 Baumann, H. 25  
 Becker, H-J 19  
 Bekhor Shor, J. 79  
 Ben-Yehudah, E. 50, 111  
 Boling, R. 110  
 Boyarin, D. 8, 24, 27, 137  
 Braude, W. 25, 31, 49  
 Braun, R. 103  
 Bregman, M. 8  
 Briggs, C.A. 24  
 Buber, S. 8, 68, 87, 90, 114,  
   123  
 Cassuto, U. 24  
 Chronicles, Book of 38,  
   88, 90, 102, 103, 111, 134  
 Cooke, G. 99  
 Curtis, E. 90, 103, 110  
 Dahood, M. 24  
 Dan, J. 139  
 Delcourt, M. 25  
 De-Vries, B. 54, 138  
 Dimitrovsky, H. 46  
 Edel, J. 53  
 Ehrlich, A. 99, 128  
 Eidsel, R' Solomon:  
   see Maharsha  
 'Ein Ya'aqov (by R' Jacob  
   Ibn Habib) 11, 13, 15, 19,  
   25, 53, 90, 103  
 Einhorn, R' Z.W.:  
   see Maharzu  
 Eisenberg, W. 27  
 Elboim, J. 115  
 Eliade, M. 25  
 Elijah ben Solomon  
   Zalman of Vilna:  
   see Aderet Eliyahu  
 Elmslie, W. 47  
 Epstein, J. 84, 93, 103, 122  
 'Eṣ Yosef (by R' Henokh  
   Zundel ben Joseph)  
   18-20, 46, 53, 72, 74, 77  
 Eusebius 25  
 Exodus Rabbah 49  
 Feldblum, M. 93  
 Field, E. 19  
 Finkelstein, L. 137  
 Fisch, S. 99  
 Fishbane, M. 138  
 Fox, H. 93  
 Fraade, S. 137  
 Fraenkel, J. 2, 7  
 Frankel, I. 139  
 Frazer, J. 25  
 Freudenthal, J. 25  
 Friedberg, Ch. 46  
 Friedman, S. 46  
 Friedmann, M. 31  
 Funk, S. 99  
 Gafni, I. 7, 8  
 Geiger, A. 134  
 Geiger, B. 93, 99  
 Ginzberg, L. 25, 27, 34,  
   38, 41, 46-48, 53, 54, 65,  
   74, 114  
 Goldschmidt, E. 137  
 Gospel of Philip 27  
 Gospel of Thomas 23, 26,  
   27  
 Greenberg, M. 99  
 Greenstein, E. 139  
 Grossfeld, B. 79, 128  
 Habib, R' Jacob Ibn: see  
   in Ya'aqov  
 Haggadah, Passover 137  
 Haggadot Ha-Talmud 13  
 Hakhnam, A. 24, 128  
 Halivini (Weiss), D. 139  
 Hallevy, E.E. 13, 19  
 Hammer, R. 119  
 Hananel 19  
 Hanhart, R. 128  
 Hartum, A. 128  
 Heinemann, I. 6, 38, 50,  
   74, 77, 87  
 Heinemann, J. 2, 7, 8, 49,  
   77, 84, 115  
 Heller, M. 46  
 Henokh Zundel ben  
   Joseph: see 'Eṣ Yosef  
 Herr, M. 47  
 Hezekiah bar Manoah:  
   see Hizzequini  
 Hirshman, M.G. 13, 14  
 Hizzequini (by R' Hezekiah  
   bar Manoah) 79  
 Horovitz, H. 103  
 Ibn Ezra, A. 48  
 Ibn Janah, Jonah 48  
 Issachar Ber ben Naftali  
   Cohen: see Mattenot  
   Kehunnah  
 'Iyyun Ya'aqov (by R' Jacob  
   Reischer) 19, 20, 35, 53,  
   54, 60, 74, 77, 99  
 Jaffe, R' Samuel: see Yefeh  
   'Anaf; Yefeh To'ar  
 Jeremias, A. 25  
 Joel, I. 14, 24, 35, 50  
 Jonas, H. 26  
 Josephus Flavius 84  
 Justin (Gnostic writer) 26  
 Kadushin, M. 8  
 Kahana, M. 137  
 Kanowitz, I. 7, 135  
 Kasher, M. 34, 73, 103  
 Kister, M. 111  
 Koester, H. 27  
 Kohut, A. 73, 93, 99  
 Krappe, A. 25, 26  
 Krauss, S. 12, 31, 47, 72,  
   80, 87, 90, 93, 111, 127  
 Kugel, J. 84