CHAPTER I

What is 'Midrash'?

In the context of a scholarly study, the question, what is *Midrash*, may appear to be trivial, if not irrelevant. For more than a century, *Midrash* has been the subject of intensive and extensive academic study and research. Its language and terminology have been analysed in detail. It has been exhaustively excavated as a mine of information relating to the religious beliefs and attitudes of the talmudic sages and to the political, social and economic conditions in which they lived. In more recent years, a new dimension has been added to the study of *Midrash*, through literary analysis. The phenomenon of *Midrash* has captured the attention of literary theorists, who have reinterpreted it in the light of the contemporary theory of intertextuality.[1] Consequently, this ancient corpus of specifically Jewish literature, which represents centuries of development as a living process in the ancient synagogues and schoolhouses of the Holy Land, retains its place in the forefront of modern scholarly interest.

Yet, despite this considerable and wide-ranging scholarly activity – or perhaps, in some measure, because of it – insufficient attention has been given hitherto, to one or two basic issues relating to the nature and the underlying rationale of the midrashic process. For example, what were the criteria upon which the selection of proemial and proof-texts was based? The early preachers frequently cite verses in support of their statements, or as the basis of a proem, with apparently scant regard

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[1] For a résumé of the work currently being done in this field, see *Midrash and Literature*, ed. G. H. Hartman and S. Budick, Yale 1986.

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for the plain meaning of their chosen text, or of the context
from which it was taken. In many cases, no word of expla-
nation is offered to justify the application of a particular verse
from Job to Noah and the Generation of the Flood, or a specific
quotation from the Psalms to Abraham or Moses. Have these
midrashic expositions been transmitted defectively, omitting
this crucial information which the compilers of midrashic texts,
or subsequent generations of copyists, took for granted?

Although it is generally accepted that the material preserved
in our extant midrashic works is derived from homilies and
expositions which were actually delivered to live audiences in
the ancient synagogues and study houses of the Holy Land, it is
extremely unlikely that these have been preserved in an un-
edited form. This is particularly the case with the *petiḥot* or
proems, which are a salient feature of the post-talmudic
midrashim. In its simplest form, the proem consists of a 'distant'
verse usually taken from the Hagiographa, which the preacher
proceeds to relate to the *seder* verse, i.e. the opening verse of the
weekly lection from the Torah according to the triennial cycle
of the Holy Land. Frequently, the proems are very brief,
containing little more than a germ of an idea, as will be seen
from a number of *petiḥot* discussed subsequently. In such cases,
we can safely assume that the living address on which the
literary *petiḥah* is based, was originally more expansive. We
cannot assume, however, that the congregants in the ancient
synagogues were so familiar with the Hebrew Bible that they
could recognise the source of a quotation instantly. Preachers
probably prefaced their biblical quotations with stock phrases
like כך אמר איוב, 'Thus Job said', or, in the case of Psalms
and Proverbs, אמר שלמה, אמרו בני קרח, 'the Sons of Qoraḥ
said', 'Solomon said'.

While this kind of simple device may have proved sufficient
for an audience to identify the source of a quotation, were these
early congregants able to recognise the relevance of the
preacher's quotation for his chosen theme? Did congregation
and preacher share an awareness of certain exegetical tradi-
tions, linking aspects of pentateuchal narratives with specific
sections of other biblical books, so that the mere mention of Job

in the context of a homily on the Flood, would have been
sufficient to indicate the relevance of the source for the theme?
Before attempting to answer this kind of question at length, as
we propose to do in the following two chapters, it is necessary
in our view, to begin by re-examining briefly the basic issue of
what is *Midrash* and how did the midrashic process operate?

In simple terms, *Midrash* is the oldest form of Bible interpre-
tation. For more than twenty centuries, the Bible has chal-
lenged the imagination and ingenuity of its interpreters.
Midrash represents the response of the earliest generations of
Jewish scholars to this challenge.

Clearly, the challenge of interpreting the Bible was not
perceived in identical terms throughout the last two thousand
years. For the great masters of the middle ages, like Rashi and
Ibn Ezra, who laid the foundations of modern Bible scholar-
ship, Bible exegesis was the pursuit of *peshat*. They saw it as
their task to establish the plain meaning of the biblical text,
primarily through a process of defining precisely the gram-
matical functions and structures of its language. This does not
imply that the scholars of the talmudic period, who were
capable of producing tolerably literal Aramaic translations of
biblical texts, and who developed mishnaic Hebrew as a
superb medium for their halakhic, midrashic and liturgical
compositions, were incapable of appreciating the plain
meaning of the biblical text.[2] Nor were they unaware of the
'mechanics' of its language, even though they did not develop a
comprehensive technical terminology to describe them. On the
contrary, as we shall endeavour to prove, they acknowledged
plain meaning – *as they perceived it* – to be the boundary within
which the midrashic process was obliged to function.

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[2] However, this is an issue which has provoked considerable scholarly discussion and
debate. See, for example, J. Z. Lauterbach, *Peshat*, *JE* vol. 9, pp. 652f; L. I.
Rabinowitz, *Peshat*, *EJ* vol. 13, pp. 329–31; M. H. Segal, *Parshanut Ha-Miqra, S'qirah
al Toldoteha v'Hitpathuta*, repr. Jerusalem 1980, pp. 7–9; E. Z. Melamed, *Mephar'shei
Ha-Miqra*, Jerusalem 1978, vol. 1, pp. 5–8; B. J. Gelles, *Peshat and Derash in the
Exegesis of Rashi*, Leiden 1981, pp. 1–8; also the literature cited by R. J. Loewe in his
study, 'The Plain Meaning of Scripture in Early Jewish Exegesis', in *Papers of the
Institute of Jewish Studies*, vol. 1 (ed. J. G. Weiss), Jerusalem 1964, pp. 140ff; and most
recently, D. Weiss-Halivni, *Peshat and Derash*, Oxford 1991.

However, the determining factor in early Jewish scriptural
exegesis, was the rabbis' perception of the Bible itself. They saw
it as the revealed word of God, not only in terms of its eternal
validity, but also with regard to the uniqueness of its language,
which transcended the ordinary medium of human communi-
cation. In the context of this 'Divine Language', the most
common-place terms and expressions – even particles of speech
indispensable to the functioning of Hebrew – were to be
regarded as 'containers' of deeper meanings, which the inter-
preter was required to unlock.[3] Consequently, the main chal-
lenge of the Bible, as perceived by the ancient Jewish exegetes,
was to decode its messages, to reveal the inner significance of
the text.

This might involve the most extrinsic forms of exegesis,
which seem to transcend any concept of plain meaning, but
were perceived by the rabbis as functioning within the permiss-
ible parameters of the text. This can best be illustrated by an
unusual device developed by the early rabbinic exegetes, to
which we will refer fairly frequently in the course of our sub-
sequent discussions, climatic exegesis. This is based on the
assumption that a scriptural expression, regardless of its usual
connotation, or plain meaning, can absorb a new and quite
unrelated meaning from the context or climate in which it
occurs. A particularly good example of this device is preserved
in *Leviticus Rabbah* 23:2 (p. 528) where, following on the asser-
tion that God experienced the utmost difficulty in releasing
Israel from Egypt because of their total assimilation, the *Amora*,
R. Shemuel b. Nahmani declared:

[3] The best-known example of this type of exegesis, particularly in the realm of
Halakhah, is provided by the early *Tanna*, Naḥum of Gimzo, who interpreted every
את and גם in the *Torah* as a ריבוי (an amplification or extension of the scope of the
text) and every אך and רק as a מיעוט (a limitation). This method was adopted and
propagated by his pupil, the outstanding exegete of the Yabneh period, R. Aqiva
(see *Genesis Rabbah* 1:14 and the parallels cited by Theodor in his edition, p. 12). As is
well known, this extrinsic treatment of the language of Scripture was not without its
opponents, notably R. Aqiva's colleague and chief antagonist in halakhic debate,
R. Ishmael, who insisted that the language of the *Torah* functioned in the same way
as human speech (דברה תורה כלשון בני אדם; see, for example, *Sifrei Numbers*
15:31, 112 (p. 121); also *Genesis Rabbah* 1:14).

'Had God not bound Himself by an oath, Israel would not have been
redeemed from Egypt! [As is implied in the following verse], "Where-
fore (לכן) Say unto the Children of Israel: 'I am the Lord and I will
bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians (Exodus
6:6).'" Now the expression לכן connotes an oath, as it is said, "And
therefore (ולכן) *I have sworn* unto the house of Eli ... (I Samuel
3:14)".'

There are, however, many examples of midrashic exegesis
which illustrate both the early rabbinic exegetes' awareness of
plain meaning and their hermeneutic approach to the biblical
text. While a number of these will be cited subsequently, it may
be useful at this juncture, to analyse a few examples taken from
well-known contexts.

(a) In the narrative of the *Aqedah*, related in Genesis 22, a
comparatively rare term is used for the knife which Abraham
took to slaughter his son, מאכלת. This expression occurs only
four times in the Hebrew Bible, twice in Genesis 22 (verses 6
and 10) and again in Judges 19:29 and in Proverbs 30:14. The
earliest midrashic commentary to the Book of Genesis, *Genesis
Rabbah*,[4] records two views on the significance of this term:

R. Ḥanina said: 'Why is [a knife] called מאכלת? Because it renders
food fit to be eaten.' The Rabbis said: 'Abraham's knife was so
designated, because all the benefits which Israel enjoys in this world
are on account of the merit of that knife.'

Despite the terseness of his comment, R. Ḥanina has pre-
sented his listeners with an effective definition of a rare term.
Without recourse to grammatical terminology – which, in all
probability, he did not possess – he has identified מאכלת as a
present participle of the *hiph'il* of אכל, 'to eat', with the
meaning of 'causing to eat', or simply, 'feeding'. Thus מאכלת
is an implement which feeds, or allows food to be eaten,
through the ritual act of slaughter. While modern gram-
marians might take issue with this,[5] R. Ḥanina has none the
less addressed himself to the plain meaning of this term and has

[4] 56:3, p. 598.
[5] As מאכלת is usually taken as a feminine noun of the *maqtal* form (compare ממלכה
and מלאכה).

offered a plausible explanation for designating a knife as
מאכלת.

The anonymous rabbis cited in the same passage did not
dispute R. Ḥanina's explanation; they too understood מאכלת
to be an implement which feeds. However, they were looking
beyond plain meaning to the inner implications of this term in
its specific context. According to their view, Abraham's knife
was called מאכלת to indicate its significance for the fate of all
future generations of his descendents. Abraham's knife would
'feed' them in perpetuity with the benefits of his singularly
meritorious deed.

(b) At the point when Abraham is about to slaughter Isaac,
the angel intervenes, crying, 'Abraham, Abraham ...' (verse
11). This repetition of the patriarch's name provoked the
following two comments, recorded once again in *Genesis
Rabbah*:[6]

R. Ḥiyya taught: '[This repetition implies] affection and urgency.'
R. Eliezer said: '[This was addressed to Abraham] himself and to
future generations, implying that there would be no generation
without [a man] of the calibre of Abraham.'

Both the early teachers cited here were reacting to the same
phenomenon, the repetition of a word in a text where any
apparently superfluous term, or even a single letter, was
intended to convey a message. However, R. Ḥiyya recognised
that, in this instance, the repetition was to be interpreted in the
light of its context. It was an effective means of expressing
urgency at the crucial moment in a tense and dramatic situ-
ation, while at the same time, indicating God's especial affec-
tion for Abraham, which his supreme act of love had inspired.
R. Ḥiyya's explanation of the phenomenon, therefore, is
clearly in line with the plain meaning of the text as he per-
ceived it. R. Eliezer, on the other hand, has interpreted the
phenomenon in keeping with the broader concept of the Bible
as the revealed word of God, which was intended to convey a
message of both specific and eternal relevance. Thus, God
addresses Himself both to Abraham in the immediate context

[6] 56:7, p. 602.

of the *Aqedah*, and to all future generations of his descendants, for whom that singular event would have eternal significance.

(c) *Exodus Rabbah*, the first part of which is an exegetical *midrash* like *Genesis Rabbah*, and may be of a similar age, records the following exposition of Moses' first encounter with the family of Jethro, narrated in 2:16–19:[7]

> 'Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters …' Does not God hate idolatry, yet He granted Moses refuge with an idolater?! However, our Rabbis have said that [originally] Jethro was a priest to idolatrous worship, but realising that it was without substance, he rejected it and considered repenting even before Moses' arrival. Consequently, he summoned his fellow-citizens and said to them, 'Until now I have served you, since I am now old, choose another priest!' Thereupon he arose, brought forth all the trappings of idolatry, and gave them everything. They arose and excommunicated him, so that nobody associated with him! They would not do any work for him, and they would not tend his sheep. He asked the shepherds to tend his sheep, but they refused, so that he was obliged to employ his own daughters. 'And they came and they drew water' – this indicates that they were coming [to the well] early, for fear of the shepherds!
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> 'And the shepherds came and drove them away' – Is it possible that he was the priest of Midian, yet the shepherds were driving away his daughters?! This indicates that they had excommunicated him, and drove away his daughters like a divorced woman.

The passage appears to be purely an apologia, defending Moses' close association with an idolatrous priest, who would play an influential role in the life of the future leader and teacher of Israel. In reality, however, the anonymous aggadist was functioning within the parameters of plain meaning. He had focused his attention – and that of his listeners – on a serious problem presented by the text, for which no solution is offered in the biblical narrative. It had long been acknowledged by early Jewish exegetes that Jethro's title כהן, did not simply connote a religious functionary. He was a ruler or governor of the Midianites, a notion which was widely popularised in talmudic times and is no less acceptable today as a

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[7] See *Exodus Rabbah* 1:32.

plausible interpretation of Jethro's role.[8] How was it possible, therefore, that his daughters were required to perform the menial task of tending his flocks and how could the shepherds have dared to assault their ruler's children? Our unknown exegete was clearly aware of this problem, for which he has endeavoured to provide a solution, by his reconstruction of the background to the biblical narrative.

(d) A seminal source for our discussion regarding the early rabbinic concept of plain meaning and its relationship to received traditions regarding the interpretation of a biblical passage, is *BT Shabbat* 63a. *Mishnah Shabbat* 6:4 records opposing views on the question of bearing arms on the Sabbath as an accessory to male attire. R. Eliezer (b. Hyrkanos) permitted the practice on the grounds that weapons may be regarded as an adornment. His colleagues, on the other hand, forbade it, declaring that weapons are intrinsically ignoble in function and purpose. Consequently, they are destined to be 'recycled' in the messianic age, as predicted by the prophecy of Isaiah (2:4): 'and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks'. In the ensuing discussion among the *Amora'im* on these opposing views, the question was raised:

> On what did R. Eliezer base his view that weapons are to be regarded as an adornment for a man? On the verse, 'Gird your sword upon your thigh, O mighty one, your glory and your majesty (Psalm 45:4)'. R. Kahana said to Mar, the son of R. Huna: 'This [verse] was written with reference to the words of the *Torah*!' He retorted: '*A verse does not lose its plain meaning* (אין מקרא יוצא מידי פשוטו).' R. Kahana said: 'When I was eighteen years old, I had already learned all the Six Orders [of the *Mishnah*], yet I did not know that a verse does not lose its plain meaning until now!'

The midrashic exegesis of Psalm 45 is the subject for special study in a later chapter.[9] Consequently, at this point, it is sufficient to note that there is adequate evidence both in *BT*

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[8] On Jethro's role as a ruler and a judge in early sources, see R. Eleazar of Modi'in's interpretation of Exodus 18:1 in *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, Yitro, Massekhta d'Amaleq* 1, p. 190, also *Targum Onqelos* to Exodus 18:1 and Josephus, *Antiquities* 1, vii, 2.

[9] See pp. 95ff.

Shabbat – where this discussion is recorded – and in other
rabbinic sources, notably the Babylonian *Talmud*, to show that
this psalm, with its description of the physical attributes and
attire of a royal prince, was treated as an allegory alluding to
the sages and their pursuit of *Torah* learning. Our main
concern here is the precise implications of the maxim which
Mar, the son of R. Huna, cites.

We have taken פשוטו – like its cognate expression פשט – in
the usual sense of 'plain meaning', which was accepted already
in the middle ages.[10] However, this is not universally accepted
by modern scholars. Loewe, for example, suggests that in
talmudic sources, פשט connotes authoritative rather than
plain meaning.[11] Weiss-Halivni, on the other hand, argues that
the term connotes extension, continuation, hence context.[12] Is
it possible, therefore, to determine with any degree of cer-
tainty, what this crucial expression actually means here?

We should perhaps begin by asking what was the point at
issue between the two *Amora'im*? It is inconceivable that either
R. Kahana or Mar, the son of R. Huna, was unfamiliar with
the simple meaning of the Hebrew terms in Psalm 45:4, for
reasons we have stated above. Moreover, judging by Mar, the
son of R. Huna's unquestioning acceptance of R. Kahana's
assertion that the psalm is to be treated as an allegorical
description of the *Torah* and its sages, we can assume that he
was equally aware of this exegetical tradition, which was in
vogue in Babylon.

The point at issue between them, we would suggest, was the
implications of the traditional interpretation of a biblical
passage for its plain or simple meaning. R. Kahana had
assumed that the only meaning which might be legitimately
attached to a passage – or a verse – was that assigned to it by
tradition. The traditional exposition totally displaced its plain
meaning. Consequently, the term חרב in Psalm 45:4 no longer
connoted a sword. It had been completely divested of its plain

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[10] See Weiss-Halivni, *Peshat and Derash*, pp. 79ff.
[11] 'The Plain Meaning of Scripture', p. 158.
[12] *Peshat and Derash*, pp. 53ff.

The midrashic process

meaning and was purely an allegorical symbol for halakhic acumen, the cut and thrust of dialectical argument.

Mar, the son of R. Huna, on the other hand, insisted that plain meaning has an independent integrity and, therefore, cannot be obscured by traditional interpretation.[13] Consequently, as the text speaks of a sword in the most positive terms, it provides adequate scriptural support for R. Eliezer's view that such a weapon may be regarded as an adornment and not simply as an ignoble instrument of destruction.

However, Weiss-Halivni seeks support for his contention that פשט connotes extension or context from the use of the cognate Aramaic phrase פשטיה דקרא, which occurs notably in the Babylonian *Talmud*.[14] In a number of instances where this phrase is employed, the suggested 'plain meaning' of the text in question, would hardly be acceptable to the modern reader. For example, *BT Ḥullin* 6a records how R. Meir sent a disciple to purchase wine from the Cutheans (i.e. Samaritans). He encounters an old man who challenges him with Proverbs 23:2, 'and put a knife to thy throat, if thou be a man given to appetite'. The text continues:

To what does the *peshat* of the text relate? To a disciple sitting in the presence of his master. As R. Ḥiyya taught, 'When thou sittest to eat with a ruler, consider well him that sitteth before thee; and put a knife to thy throat if thou be בנל נפש (lit.: "a man given to appetite").' If a disciple knows that his master is able to give him a

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[13] See Rashi's comment on this maxim in *BT Yevamot* 24a: 'Even though we may expound a verse midrashically, it cannot totally lose its plain meaning.' This source is of special significance as it cites the one case in the whole of Scriptures where this maxim does not apply, Deuteronomy 25:6. Referring to the child of a levirate marriage the text states: 'And it shall be that the first-born that she beareth shall succeed in the name of his brother that is dead, that his name be not blotted out in Israel.' According to its simplest meaning, the verse implies that the child should be given the name of its father's deceased brother. However, on the basis of a word analogy (גזרה שוה) with Genesis 48:6, 'they shall be called after *the name of their brethren* (על שם אחיהם)', the operative term שם is taken as a reference to the property of the deceased. In connection with this, Rava declared that contrary to the general rule of אין מקרא יוצא מידי פשוטו, the word analogy here has totally divested the verse of its plain meaning, leaving no residual obligation to name the child after the deceased (see Rashi, *BT Yevamot* 24a; see also *BT Yevamot* 11b).

[14] For a full review of all the relevant sources where this phrase occurs, see Weiss-Halivni, *Peshat and Derash*, pp. 63ff.