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978-0-521-46174-0 - The Midrashic Process: Tradition and Interpretation in  
Rabbinic Judaism

Irving Jacobs

Frontmatter

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The purpose of this book is to re-examine those basic issues in the study of *Midrash* which to some extent have been marginalised by current trends in scholarship and research. Irving Jacobs asks, for example, whether the early rabbinic exegetes had a concept of *peshat*, plain meaning, and, if so, what significance they attached to it in their exposition of the biblical text. He enquires if the selection of proemial and proof-texts was a random one, dependent purely upon the art or whim of the preacher, or rather if exegetical traditions linked certain pentateuchal themes with specific sections of the Prophets (and particularly the Hagiographa), which were acknowledged by preachers and audiences alike. As *Midrash* in its original, pre-literary form, was a living process involving both live preachers and live audiences in the ancient synagogues of the Holy Land, to what extent, he asks, did the latter influence the former in the development of their art and skills? The answers he provides to these, and other, questions, represent a fresh approach to the perennial problem of the rabbis' awareness of plain meaning, and to the significance which they attached to it.

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# THE MIDRASHIC PROCESS

*Tradition and Interpretation in Rabbinic Judaism*

IRVING JACOBS

*Former Principal, Jews' College London*



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*To my wife  
Ann  
whose unfailing support in all matters  
made this book possible.*

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## *Preface*

This book has long been in the making! It is based initially on the years of study and research at Jews' College, under the powerful influence of Professor Naftali Wieder, who left his indelible mark upon every student who had the privilege of studying under him. A number of chapters in this work are based directly on those contained in the dissertation which I wrote under Professor Wieder's guidance, for the PhD degree of London University, entitled 'The Book of Job in Rabbinic Thought' (1971).

I attach almost equal significance to the contribution made by the generations of students to whom I have endeavoured to teach *Midrash* during the past twenty-seven years. I argue in this book that the midrashic process was profoundly influenced by a vital interaction between preacher and audience in the ancient synagogues of *Eretz Yisrael*. I have no doubts that a similar interaction between my students and myself has influenced and enriched my understanding of the midrashic process.

A book is not produced by the author alone. The sheer effort of churning out various versions of the manuscript must be acknowledged. I am happy, therefore, to express my thanks to Mrs Adele Lew, Mrs Annette Nissim and Mrs Linda Ofstein for their invaluable assistance in completing this arduous task. I must also express my gratitude to Mr Alex Wright, religious studies editor, Cambridge University Press, and particularly to Mrs Sherry Begner, who have done much to facilitate the publication of this book. Thanks are due also to Mr Ezra Kahn



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*Preface*

and his colleagues of the Jews' College Library, for the willing spirit with which they accommodated my every need.

Two chapters of this book have already appeared in print. 'The Midrashic Background for James 2:21–23' was published in *New Testament Studies* (vol. 22, pp. 457–464). 'Elements of Near-Eastern Mythology in Rabbinic *Aggadah*' appeared in the *Journal for Jewish Studies* (vol. 28, pp. 1–11). I am grateful to the editors of both these journals for kindly granting me permission to incorporate those articles into this volume.

I complete this work and sign this preface on my fifty-fifth birthday. I do so, confident in the knowledge that the last word on *Midrash* has not yet been written. It is my fervent hope that those who may one day write it, will find my contribution useful.

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## *Abbreviations*

### JOURNALS AND TEXTS

<i>ANET</i>	<i>Ancient Near-Eastern Texts</i>
<i>ARN</i>	<i>Avot d'Rabbi Natan</i>
<i>BT</i>	<i>Babylonian Talmud</i>
<i>EJ</i>	<i>Encyclopaedia Judaica</i>
<i>HUCA</i>	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
<i>JE</i>	<i>Jewish Encyclopedia</i>
<i>JJS</i>	<i>Journal for Jewish Studies</i>
<i>JQR</i>	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i> (OS = Old Series; NS = New Series)
<i>JSS</i>	<i>Journal for Semitic Studies</i>
<i>MGWJ</i>	<i>Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums</i>
<i>PT</i>	<i>Palestinian Talmud</i>

### GENERAL ABBREVIATIONS

b.	<i>ben</i> (or <i>bar</i> = son of)
R.	Rabbi (Rav)