

What  
Is  
Midrash?

by  
Jacob Neusner

Other Fortress Press Books  
by Jacob Neusner

The Foundations of Judaism: Method, Teleology, Doctrine

Vol. 1: *Midrash in Context: Exegesis in Formative Judaism*

Vol. 2: *Messiah in Context: Israel's History and Destiny in Formative*

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Vol. 3: *Torah: From Scroll to Symbol in Formative Judaism*

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*Judaism in the Beginning of Christianity*

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## Glossary

### INTRODUCTION TO TALMUDIC AND MIDRASHIC WRITINGS

The Mishnah is a philosophical law code, produced in the Land of Israel ("Palestine") in ca. 200 C.E. The first Talmud to the Mishnah was formed in the Land of Israel in ca. 400 C.E., and is called "the Talmud of the Land of Israel" or "the Jerusalem Talmud," and in Hebrew "the Yerushalmi." This Talmud covers thirty-nine of the Mishnah's sixty-two tractates. The second Talmud to that same Mishnah was created in Babylonia, which corresponds to present-day Iraq, around Baghdad, in ca. 600 C.E. and is called "the Talmud of Babylonia," and in Hebrew "the Bavli." Both Talmuds to the one Mishnah consist of a series of citations of Mishnah-paragraphs and systematic, carefully drafted explanations of words and phrases of the Mishnah—passage, followed by secondary expansions of principles of the Mishnah—passage.

A brief account of the writings between the Mishnah and the Bavli will place into context the authoritative and conclusive statement of the whole. The writings of the sages between the Mishnah and the Bavli, ca. 200 and 600 C.E., fall into two distinct groups, one beginning with the Mishnah and ending about two centuries later, in 400, with the Tosefta and close associates of the Mishnah; the other beginning with the Yerushalmi in ca. 400 C.E. and ending about two centuries later with the Bavli. The Mishnah, as we know, drew in its wake tractate *Abot*, a statement concluded a generation after the Mishnah on the standing of the authorities of the Mishnah. Attached to the Mishnah also is the Tosefta, ca. 300–400 C.E., a compilation of supplements of various kinds to the statements in the Mishnah. That brings us to Midrash- compilations. There were three systematic exegeses of books of Scripture

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or the written Torah tied to the Mishnah because, in passages, they may cite the Mishnah or the Tosefta verbatim and raise interesting questions about the relationship between the Mishnah or the Tosefta and Scripture. These Midrash- compilations are the *Sifta*, to Leviticus, *Sifta to Numbers*, and another *Sifta*, to Deuteronomy. These books overall form one stage in the unfolding of the Judaism of the dual Torah, oral and written, in which emphasis stressed issues of sanctification of the life of Israel, the people, in the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem in 70 C.E.

The second set of the writings, 400–600, that culminated in the Bavli stressed the dual issues of sanctification and salvation, presenting a doctrine of Israel's redemption by the Messiah in the model of the sage himself. The amplification of the Mishnah, which led to the first of the two sets of writings, defined the literary expression of the theological program at hand. It begins with the Yerushalmi, addressed to the Mishnah as oral Torah. Alongside, work on the written Torah was carried on through *Genesis Rabbah*, a reading of the Book of Genesis to interpret the history and salvation of Israel today in light of the history and salvation of the patriarchs and matriarchs of old, deemed to form the founders of the family of Israel after the flesh. A second important work, *Leviticus Rabbah*, assigned to about the next half century, ca. 450 C.E., read for the lessons of Israel's salvation the Book of Leviticus, which stresses issues of the sanctification of Israel. So Leviticus was reread for its lessons of how Israel's sanctification in the here and now led to Israel's salvation at the end of time. Finally, the Bavli addressed both Torahs, oral and written, Mishnah and Scripture, within one and the same document—the first of the writings of the Judaism of the dual Torah to do so systematically and extensively. The difference between the Bavli and the earlier writings, therefore, is that while the writers of the Yerushalmi systematically interpreted passages of the Mishnah, and the other documents did the same for books of the written Torah, the authorship of the Bavli did both. Alongside, there were some other treatments of biblical books important in synagogue liturgy, particularly the Five Scrolls (e.g., *Lamentations Rabbati*, *Esther Rabbati*, and the like). A remarkable compilation of scriptural lessons pertinent to the special occasions of the synagogue, *Pesiqta de Rab Kahana*, reached closure at the same time (the fifth or sixth century) as well.

The first of the two sets of writings, from the Mishnah to the Yerushalmi, exhibits no sign of interest in or response to the advent of Christianity. The second, from the Yerushalmi forward, appears to respond to and counter the challenge of Christianity. The point of dif-

ference, or course, is that from the beginning of the legalization of Christianity in the early fourth century to the establishment of Christianity at the end of that same century Jews in the Land of Israel found themselves facing a challenge that, prior to Constantine, they had found no compelling reason to consider. The specific crisis came when the Christians pointed to the success of the church in the politics of the Roman state as evidence that Jesus Christ was king of the world, and that his claim to be Messiah and King of Israel had now found vindication. The Judaic documents that reached closure in the century after these events attended to questions of salvation—for example, doctrine of history and of the Messiah, authority of the sages' reading of Scripture over against the Christians' interpretation, and the like—that had earlier not enjoyed extensive consideration. Now to some definitions of the words used in this book.

**AGGADAH**—See Halakhah and Aggadah.

**ALLEGORY**—Telling a story in regard to one matter, while intending a message concerning another matter; reading one thing into another.

**CANON**—The official or authoritative books of a religious system; the holy books selected from a broad number of possibilities and given the status of revealed truth.

**DEAD SEA SCROLLS**—Writings found near the Dead Sea from 1947 onward, now assigned to Essene Judaism and often called "the Essene library of Qumran" for the nearby village of Khirbet Qumran. These cover both texts of the Hebrew Bible and apocryphal books and also documents of the community itself, governing its life and stating its theology.

**DUAL TORAH**—The Judaism of the dual Torah maintains that at Sinai God revealed the Torah, or revelation, to Moses, for formulation and transmission in two media, writing and memory. The *written Torah* corresponds to the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament. The *oral Torah* was handed down from prophets to sages until it reached the authorities named in the *Mishnah*. Because those authorities are set in a direct line of transmission of revelation from Sinai, their teachings—the *Mishnah* and related writings—fall into the category of the oral Torah.

**HALAKHAH AND AGGADAH**—*Halakhah*, a word that means "law," refers to how things are done. The word "*aggadah*," "lore," comes from the root verb meaning "to tell, to report, to narrate"; accordingly, *aggadah* commonly means "narrative or story." It bears the secondary meaning of "fable."

**HEBREW BIBLE**—The part of Holy Scripture called by Christianity "the Old Testament" and by Judaism "Tanakh."

**INTERTEXTUALITY**—The theory that diverse texts are to be read in light of one another.

**MIDRASH**—*Midrash* corresponds to the English word "exegesis" and carries the same generic sense. So far as the writers of the Yerushalmi or the Bavli read and interpreted the *Mishnah*, they engaged in a process of midrash, and so too for Scripture. But the word "midrash" bears a more limited meaning.

namely, "interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures for the purpose of discovering a pertinent rule (in the *Mishnah*) or theological truth (in Scripture)."

**MIDRASH HALAKHAH AND MIDRASH AGGADAH**—*Midrash halakhah* means "to derive a rule or a law from a verse of Scripture." One important exercise is to show the relationship of a rule of the *Mishnah* to a statement found in Scripture, thus proving that the oral Torah restates principles sustained by the (now more authoritative) written Torah. Another exercise will derive a rule not found in the *Mishnah* from a verse of Scripture. The previously mentioned works, *Sifra* to Leviticus, *Sifra* to Numbers, and the other *Sifra*, to Deuteronomy, all fall into this category. *Midrash aggadah* means "interpretation of a biblical story." Important parts of *Genesis Rabbah* and *Leviticus Rabbah* contain midrash aggadah—amplifications of scriptural stories. The relationship of the Bavli as a document to these two genres of writing is simple. The Bavli's and Yerushalmi's writers included sizable passages of both categories of writing: midrash halakhah and midrash aggadah. But while the Yerushalmi's writers produced a major treatment of the *Mishnah* and only episodic statements focused upon Scripture, the Bavli's writers, as is clear, built considerable systematic statements out of both types of writing, as it worked its way toward a massive and encyclopedic restatement of both components of the Torah, written and oral.

**MISHNAH**—A corpus of laws, organized by topics, in sixty-two tractates, divided into six principal divisions, on agriculture; appointed times; women or family; damages and civil law and government; holy things concerning the everyday conduct of the Temple and maintenance of its buildings; and purities, on the process of cultic contamination (such as is specified in Leviticus) and the removal of that uncleanness. The document was produced in ca. 200 C.E. and the relevant divisions, in particular the second, third, and fourth, were quickly adopted, as the basis for the government Patriarch, and of the Jews of Israel (Palestine) by their ethnarch, Judah the ruler of the Jews of the exile. Ongoing amplification and commentary to the *Mishnah* produced two *Talmuds*—one in the Land of Israel, the other in Babylonia—each serving that same basic law code as an extended compilation of rulings and analytical discourse.

**PARABLE**—Figurative speech which may contain an element of allegory or metaphor, or elements of both; bearing a "deeper" level of meaning than the surface-level meaning.

**PARAPHRASE**—A translation of a passage from one language to another in which the original is given not word for word but in other language, meant to amplify and explain the original, conveying its sense rather than its exact formulation.

**PESHAT**—An interpretation or explanation of a verse of Scripture, in which a given statement (e.g., of a prophet) is identified with an event or personality in the present time.

**RABVAH**—Augmented, larger, e.g., *Genesis Rabbah*, the compilation of exegeses of the Book of Genesis which augments and clarifies its meaning.

**RABBINIC**—From "rabbi," meaning, "my lord," hence, in our own language, simply "mister." "Rabbi" was a title of honor employed in Aramaic and

Hebrew. It was accorded to many of the Judaic sages represented in the Mishnah and the Talmuds and Midrash-compilations and came to apply to the Judaism defined by those authorities and set forth in those writings, hence, "rabbinic Judaism." In this book, that Judaism is called "the Judaism of the dual Torah" (see Dual Torah).

SAGES—Holy men—lawyers—philosophers—theologians who formed the authority of the Judaism of the dual Torah and composed its writings and staffed its institutions.

SIFRA—The rabbinic commentary to the Book of Leviticus.

SIFRE—The rabbinic commentary to the Book of Numbers and to the Book of Deuteronomy.

TALMUD—As a generic term, "Talmud" refers to a systematic commentary to the Mishnah produced between ca. 200 and 600. There are two Talmuds: one written in the Land of Israel and redacted at ca. 400 C.E. called "the Talmud of the Land of Israel or the Talmud of Jerusalem," and in Hebrew "the Yerushalmi"; the other redacted at ca. 600 C.E. called "the Talmud of Babylonia" or in Hebrew "the Baveli."

TANAKH—The Hebrew word for the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, made up of the letters T, N, and K, which stand, respectively, for *Torah* or Pentateuch (the Five Books of Moses), *Nebim* or Prophets, and *Ketubim* or Writings.

TANNAITIC—Pertaining to the teachings or authority of a Tanna, an authority of the first and second centuries C.E. who contributed to the formation of the Mishnah and related writings; "Tanna" means "one who repeats," as in the oral formulation and transmission of a memorized tradition.

TARGUM—Translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Aramaic; plural: Targumim.

TAXON—A classification, a category; plural: taxa.

TOSFOTA—The rabbinic compilation of supplementary rules, augmenting the Mishnah.

## For Further Reading

Two sizable bibliographies serve readers as a base for further study: (1) Lee Haas, "Bibliography on Midrash," in *The Study of Ancient Judaism*, ed. Jacob Neusner (New York: Ktav, 1981), 193-106. She provides an extensive account of Midrash-editions as well as studies of and commentaries upon them. (2) Joseph M. Davis, "Bibliography on the Story in Ancient Judaism," in my *New Perspectives on Ancient Judaism*, Studies in Judaism (Lanham, Md.: Univ. Press of America, 1987) 3:185-218. Nearly all of Davis's five hundred bibliography entries are pertinent to the meaning and uses of Midrash in the narrative framework.

See also Gary G. Porton, "Defining Midrash," in my *Study of Ancient Judaism*, 1:55-94; idem, *Understanding Rabbinic Midrash: Texts and Commentary* (Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav, 1985)—a first-rate anthology with an excellent introduction.

These bibliographical studies and introductions provide ample accounts of the available translations of Midrash-compilations as well as introductions to that mode of biblical exegesis.

This book comes at the end of a somewhat protracted set of researches of mine and draws upon translations and analytical ideas that I have worked out in my various publications.

## WORKS BY JACOB NEUSNER

### Issues of Literary Criticism

*Canon and Connection: Intertextuality in Judaism*, Studies in Judaism (Lanham, Md.: Univ. Press of America, 1986). This book addresses the theory that all canonical documents of the Judaism of the dual Torah, including Midrash-compilations, may be read in light of all others, without paying atten-

tion to the context defined by the particular documents' respective interests and theological concerns. I argue with contemporary representations of the Torah-literature as seamless and bounded only at the outer edges by the canon as a whole. I test that view against the documents themselves and find it difficult to adduce literary evidence in favor of this theological proposition.

*Midrash and Literature: The Primacy of Documentary Discourse*, Studies in Judaism (Lanham, Md.: Univ. Press of America, 1987). This book contends with the position of James Kugel that the principal and generative setting for Midrash is the discrete biblical verse and argues to the contrary that a given Midrash-exegesis is to be interpreted to begin with in the context of the Midrash-document that presents the Midrash-exegesis. This work goes over the same problem as my volume on *Intertextuality*, but in dialogue with Kugel's definition of Midrash.

### History and Context of Midrash in Rabbinic Judaism

*Midrash in Context: Exegesis in Formative Judaism*, vol. 1 of *The Foundations of Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983). This and the next work form a constructive program, one on history, the other on literature. In *Midrash in Context* I present a theory on where, when, and why the sages or rabbis who defined the Judaism of the dual Torah undertook the labor of making Midrash-compliations and Midrash-exegeses. That theory is expanded in *Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: Exile and Return in the History of Judaism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987) in the larger context of the Judaic response to the triumph of Christianity after Constantine.

*The Workings of Midrash: Major Trends in Rabbinic Bible Interpretation* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987). This book continues the constructive exercise of saying what Midrash is, rather than what it is not, and I here examine the three principal trends of rabbinic Bible interpretation, and spell out, with ample illustrations, the workings of each. These are, specifically, exegeses that yield propositions; propositions that yield exegeses; and narrative representations of biblical themes and topics. In this way I have tried to organize all of the diverse data of Midrash into an intelligible pattern. *The Workings of Midrash* does not duplicate *What Is Midrash?*

### Monographs

1. *Aphrahat and Judaism: The Christian Jewish Argument in Fourth Century Iran*. Leiden: Brill, 1971. Compares Judaic and Christian exegesis in their polemical context.
2. *Development of Legend: Studies on the Traditions Concerning Yohanan ben Zakai*. Leiden: Brill, 1970. Studies the formation of the traditions on Yohanan, including the Midrash-traditions assigned to him.
3. *A History of the Mishnaic Law of Purities*. VII. *Negaim*. Leiden: Brill, 1975. Shows the traits of an early rabbinic compilation of exegeses.
4. *The Integrity of Leviticus Rabbah: The Problem of the Autonomy of a Rabbinic Document*. Brown Judaic Studies. Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985.
5. *Comparative Midrash: The Plan and Program of Genesis Rabbah and Leviticus Rabbah*. Brown Judaic Studies. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986.

6. *The Foundations of Judaism. Method, Teleology, Doctrine*. Vols. I: *Midrash in Context: Exegesis in Formative Judaism*; II: *Messianic in Context: Israel's History and Destiny in Formative Judaism*; III: *Torah: From Scroll to Symbol in Formative Judaism*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983-85. [The *Foundations of Judaism*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987. Abridged edition of the trilogy.]

7. *The Oral Torah: The Sacred Books of Judaism. An Introduction*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985.

8. *Scriptures from the Oral Torah: Sanctification and Salvation in the Sacred Books of Judaism*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987.

9. *The Workings of Midrash: Major Trends in Rabbinic Bible Interpretation*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987.

10. *From Tradition to Imitation: The Plan and Program of Pesiqta Rabbati and Pesiqta de Rab Kahana*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987.

### Translations

1. *The Talmud of the Land of Israel: A Preliminary Translation and Explanation*. Vols. IX-XII, XIV-XV, XVII-XXXV. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1982-89. Translates all of the Midrash-exegeses in the Talmud of the Land of Israel.

2. *The Talmud of Babylonia: An American Translation*. Brown Judaic Studies. Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1984-85. Translates the Midrash-exegeses for these listed tractates: Vols. I: *Berakhot*; VI: *Sukkah*; XXIII.A: *Sanhedrin 1-3*; XXIII.B: *Sanhedrin 4-8*; XXIII.C: *Sanhedrin 9-11*; XXXII: *Arakhin*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986. Fresh translation of M. Margulies's text and systematic analysis of problems of composition and redaction.

4. *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary on Genesis* (A New American Translation). Vols. I: *Parashiyot 1-33*. *Genesis 1:1-8:14*; II: *Parashiyot 34-67*. *Genesis 8:15-28:9*; III: *Parashiyot 68-100*. *Genesis 28:10-50:26*. Brown Judaic Studies. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985.

5. *Sifra: The Judaic Commentary on Leviticus* (A New Translation). *The Leper, Leviticus 13:1-14:57*. Brown Judaic Studies. Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985. Based on the translation of *Sifra Parashiyot Negaim and Mesora in A History of the Mishnaic Law of Purities*. VI: *Negaim*. *Sifra* (with a section by Roger Brooks).

6. *Sifre to Numbers* (An American Translation). Vols. I: 1-58; II: 59-115; III: 116-61, trans. William Scott Green. Brown Judaic Studies. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986.

7. *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan* (An Analytical Translation and Explanation). Brown Judaic Studies. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987.

8. *Pesiqta de Rab Kahana* (An Analytical Translation and Explanation). Vols. I: 1-14; II: 23-28 (with an *Introduction to Pesiqta de Rab Kahana*). Brown Judaic Studies. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987.

9. *Sifre to Deuteronomy*. Vols. I-II. Brown Judaic Studies. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987.

10. *Sifra. An American Translation*. Brown Judaic Studies. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988.

**Edited Anthologies**

1. *Goodenough's Jewish Symbols: An Abridged Edition*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1986. On the expression of Midrash-exegesis in art.
2. *Torah from Our Sages: Pirke Avot* (A New American Translation and Explanation). Chappaqua, N.Y.: Rossel, 1983, 1986.
3. *Our Sages, God, and Israel: An Anthology of the Yerushalmi*. Chappaqua, N.Y.: Rossel, 1984.
4. *Genesis and Judaism: The Perspective of Genesis Rabbah*. An Analytical Anthology. Brown Judaic Studies. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986.
5. *Christian Faith and the Bible of Judaism*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1987.
6. *Reading Scriptures: An Introduction to Rabbinic Midrash*. With Special Reference to *Genesis Rabbah*. Dallas: Rossel, 1987.
7. *From Testament to Torah: An Introduction to Judaism in Its Formative Age*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1987.