Text Immersion Project: Bereshit Rabbah,
Chapters 68-75:

Diana Fersko

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for rabbinic ordination

Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion
New York, New York

January 20, 2011

Advisor: Dr. Norman Cohen

Table of Contents

Introduction

The purpose of this project was to immerse myself in the words of Bereshit Rabbah. By closely studying the text and its surrounding literature, my goal was to improve my text skills while learning about this great midrashic work. Ultimately, I surpassed my goals, as through this project, I gained a deep appreciation for the brilliance, creativity, and expansive knowledge of the Rabbis while sharpening my own ability to decipher our sacred literature.

Each paper in this project is an attempt to express a different aspect of my learning experience. First, the initial paper describes the nature of the biblical material at hand, *Parashat Vayetse*. The paper then paints a broad picture of the manners in which Bereshit Rabbah approaches the *parashah*. The second paper addresses the themes of Bereshit Rabbah, and closely analyzes how the Rabbis observe the biblical themes, and then shift many of these themes to match the rabbinic agenda. Finally, the third paper is more encyclopedic in orientation. The paper lists the general background of the Midrash, and then catalogues some scholarly questions that still surround Bereshit Rabbah. I have chosen to closely examine two of those scholarly questions through this paper.

I would like to thank my adviser, Rabbi Norman Cohen, for his wisdom, patience and vision. I would also like to thank my classmate and *chevruta*, Carla Fenves, for her tirelessness, intelligence, and determination. They were both invaluable in encouraging me to complete this project and helped to make each moment of this experience full of meaning, richness, purpose, and learning.

Parashat Vayetse and *Bereshit Rabbah*, Chapters 68-75:

An analysis of the biblical material and the relationship between *Bereshit Rabbah* and *Parashat Vayetse*

Diana Fersko

Parashat Vayetse explores deception, distrust, trickery, competition, love, and the national origin of the People Israel through its central characters, Jacob, Rachel, and Leah. The parashah juxtaposes awesome dreams with practical matters of business. It depicts women whose worth is determined by their ability to procreate, but also shows these women to actively determine the future of the People Israel. It has been called "the Torah's greatest love story,"[1] but many of the characters feelings remain ambiguous and undefined. Faith in God is assumed throughout the parashah, and yet each character is more distrustful than the next. Full of contradictions and complexities, this iconic parashah serves as one of the cornerstones of our understanding of the biblical matriarchs and patriarchs.

This nuanced nature of *Parashat Vayetse* makes these verses ripe for midrashic thinking. Each contradiction, symbol, and significant phrase provide openings for rabbinic interpretation and expansion. But before we can delve into the mind of the Midrash, we must first better understand the biblical information on its own terms. Only after analyzing the biblical text can we clearly frame the departures and differences that midrash might reveal.

Parashat Vayetse begins with a dream. Jacob, who has just left Beersheba, arrives at a certain place (*makom*), where he lays down and dreams of angels, ascending up and down a ramp (*soolam*). In the dream, God delivers a patriarchal promise to Jacob, who then wakes up and recognizes the holy nature of the place in which he has just dwelt. Jacob makes a vow to God, asserting that if God fulfills God's promise, Jacob will be dedicated to God. Already, in just the first few verses of the text, the reader is left

[1] T. Eskenazi, A. Weiss, The Torah: A Women's Commentary, (URJ Press, New York, 2008), 157.

wondering about the meaning of the dream. Who are these angels? Why does God choose Jacob to serve as the conduit for this image-rich, theologically evocative dream?

After the dream, Jacob journeys to the people of Kedem where, almost instantly, he sees Rachel, daughter of his Uncle, Laban, and a fellow shepherd standing near a well. Jacob performs a kind of feat of strength by removing a rock from the mouth of the well, after which he promptly kisses his wife to be, breaking out in tears in the process. Jacob agrees with Laban to work seven years in exchange for Rachel's hand in marriage. However, upon their wedding night, Jacob realizes that Laban has provided Leah, not Rachel, as a wife. After another seven years of labor, Jacob is finally married to Rachel. How and why did Laban deceive Jacob? Was Leah party to the trickery? How did Leah, the eldest daughter, feel about being a substitute bride? What was the nature of the relationship between Rachel and Leah before this incident?

Immediately, Leah and Rachel begin to compete over child-bearing. Leah, who is described as having weak or soft (*racot*) eyes and being disfavored or hated (snoo-ah), quickly bears four sons. Whereas Rachel, who is described as beautiful of form and face (*y'fat toar* and *y'fat mareh*), remains childless. Eventually, between Leah, Rachel, and their handmaids, Bilhah and Zilpah, the twelve tribes of Israel are born. In a few brief chapters, a nation has sprung from Jacob's seed. Finally, Jacob determines to leave Laban's land. Notably, upon fleeing her father's home, Rachel steals Laban's household idols (*teraphim*). Laban pursues the family, catches them, and eventually, Jacob and Laban come to an agreement assuring their permanent separation.

This broad outline of the narrative of the Parashat Vayetse provides us with a sense of the content of the portion. But what are the meanings that we derive from this

content? What messages is the parashah pointing towards? Vayetse clearly plays with the themes of deception, trickery, and distrust. All of the main characters are involved in some sort of bargaining, suspicion, pretense, or dishonesty. Laban deceives Jacob by substituting Leah as bride instead of Rachel. Leah serves as an accomplice to this trickery, lying with (and lying to) Jacob under the guise that she is Rachel. Laban attempts to take advantage of Jacob as they negotiate the terms of Jacob's departure. Jacob deceives Laban in business. Rachel steals the teraphim from her father, and subsequently lies to him about their whereabouts. Clearly, the parashah is deeply interested in the concepts of deception, perception, and truth.

Secondly, the parashah dwells upon the competition for love and for children as an etiological story for the birth of a nation. Through Rachel, Leah, and their handmaids, Jacob fathers the twelve tribes of Israel. Inevitably, this emphasis on procreation leads to fierce competition between sisters. Leah is described as "disfavored" but fertile, while Rachel is loved but barren, at least initially. On the one hand, the women understand that child-bearing is their ultimate value as exemplified by Rachel's hyperbolic statement, "Let me have sons; otherwise I am a dead woman."[2] On the other hand, Leah conceives multiple children but still does not seem able to procure her husband's favor, "The Eternal saw my plight, yes, now my husband will love me[3]…the Eternal heard that I am despised and has given me this one too…Now this time, my husband will be attached to me."[4] The sisters even dispute when Rachel attempts to procure aphrodisiac mandrakes which she believes will lead her to bear a child. Leah ironically quips, "Isn't it enough

[2] Genesis 30:1.
[3] Gen 29:32.
[4] Gen 29:34.

that you took my husband, and now you want to take my son's mandrakes?"[5] Thus, Parashat Vayetse presents sibling rivalry as one of its central themes.

Finally, the parashah wrestles with the question of who is Jacob. Is Jacob a pious God-fearer who is granted the privilege of divine discourse? Is he a swindler imbued with so much hubris he even bargains with God? What are Jacob's feelings towards his wives? Does he in fact disfavor or despise Leah? What is the arc of this man who began as a shepherd and became a patriarch? The parashah plays with multiple, differing ideas of Jacob's persona.

Parashat Vayetse raises several questions about Leah, Rachel, and Jacob. By refusing to define the intentions, feelings, or motives of its central characters, the Torah portion leaves these questions unanswered and therefore open for speculation. Now that we have clarified a bit about the biblical material, we are ready to proceed with a study of the relationship between Bereshit Rabbah and Parashat Vayetse. The Midrash does not choose one single approach to the biblical material. Instead, Bereshit Rabbah interacts with the Bible in a myriad of different manners, each of which reveals a piece of the agenda or intention of the Rabbis.

Amplification of Meaning:

Bereshit Rabbah hones in on certain key biblical terms and amplifies their meaning to form a larger message. Often, these points reflect the Rabbis' historical and intellectual circumstances. One such example is the rabbinic treatment of the key word "*even*" (stone). The Bible ascribes special importance to this word through purposefully placed repetitions of the term. In fact, "even" becomes a motif for Jacob, recurring

[5] Gen 30:14.

multiple times throughout his narrative. For instance, in his dream, Jacob uses a stone as a pillow[6] and then transforms that stone into a monument.[7] Jacob pushes a great stone from the mouth of the well as he meets his beloved Rachel,[8] and affirms a pact with Laban, utilizing a stone as a marker.[9] In short, in each of these examples, the stone is connected to covenant. Jacob makes a covenant with God when he uses the stone as a marker of a holy place. Jacob believes he is about to enter a covenant, or marriage, with Rachel when he pushes the stone from the well. Jacob forges an agreement with Laban when he employs the stone as a sign of an economic and familial pact. Given Jacob's nature as a man in transition and a person on a journey, the stone is a remarkably fixed, permanent object. In this way, the stone stands in contrast to Jacob, thereby juxtaposing his peripatetic nature with the stone's stagnancy. This juxtaposition emphasizes that the stone, the symbol of a covenant, lasts forever. Although Jacob travels and undergoes change, the stone, and all if its implications, endures. By employing the structural tool of a motif for Jacob, the Bible expresses both the content and character of the Father of Israel.

Bereshit Rabbah clearly observes the repeated use of the term "*even*" in Jacob's story. However, to the midrashic eye, the stone becomes much more than a mere rock, and embodies much broader meanings. For instance, the Rabbis wonder why the plural term "*avnei*" (stones) is initially used in the narrative of Jacob's dream, while just a few verses later the Bible refers to a singular, "*even*" (stone). Why would Jacob take multiple stones to place under his head and what is the justification for this apparent discrepancy

[6] Gen 28:11.
[7] Gen 28:22.
[8] Gen 29:2.
[9] Gen 31:45.

in the original text? R. Yehudah argues that, in his dream, Jacob took twelve stones, representing the twelve tribes.[10] As we know that Jacob will in fact serve as the tribal progenitor, R. Yehudah's opinion remains closely linked to the p'shat of the text. So R. Yehudah's opinion is aimed at Jacob's future and the future of the Jewish People. R. Nehemiah suggests a different tactic, and reaches for Jacob's past. He postulates that Jacob took three stones, one for each patriarch. R. Nehemiah's opinion imbues the stone with the meaning of Jacob's ancestry. Finally, an unattributed voice asserts that Jacob actually placed two stones under his head. If the stones became united as one, then Jacob could be assured that his lineage would be valuable, unlike the offspring of Ishmael or Esau and the respective nations that they foster. Here, R. Nehemiah reveals a piece of the rabbinic agenda by appropriating the p'shat of the Bible to drash on the clear superiority of Israel over other nations.

In the Bible, the stone clearly serves as a symbol for covenant. The Rabbis observe that concept and amplify it by expanding the meaning of the stone by associating it with both the history and future of our nation. The stone reaches to our past, Abraham and Isaac, and extends to our future, the twelve tribes. So while Bereshit Rabbah begins its discussion with a close *p'shat* reading of the text, observing the shift from plural to singular, the Midrash moves the meaning of "*even*" to a very different concept. Here, the Rabbis promote a portion of their agenda, a deep concern for the future of Israel.

Bereshit Rabbah applies a similar tactic to Jacob's vision of the *malachim* (angels). In the original, the *malachim* are described simply as "*V'hinei, malachei elohim olim v'yordim bo.*"[11] There is no further description of the intention, physical

[10] Bereshit Rabbah, 68:11.
[11] Gen 28:12.

appearance, or purpose for these celestial beings. In the Bible, they seem to be messengers of a sort, intermediaries between heaven and earth, linking the two realms. Once again, the Rabbis take an image and stretch its meaning. They suggest that the angels represent the Cohan Gadol[12] or Moses and Aaron.[13] Here, Bereshit Rabbah has connected the *malachim* with Temple worship and with the Sinai experience. To the rabbinic mind, Jacob actually foresaw both Sinai and the Temple. If the High Priest is equivalent to an angel or messenger, then the High Priest is the intermediary between heaven and earth. The priest is the access road to God. By connecting the *malachim* to the *Cohan Gadol*, the Rabbis are expressing their longing for a new Temple as well as evidence that cultic worship is the lens through which they still view their world. The Rabbi's dream, not Jacob's, is to see the Temple rebuilt. Clearly, these rabbinic agenda items of revelation and Temple worship are not located within *Parashat Vayetse*. Instead, the Rabbis have read the text eisegetically, infusing it with meaning compatible with contemporary rabbinic thinking and concern. So once again, the Rabbis have closely studied the *p'shat*, honed in on a vague term, and then amplified that term to connote a range of meanings different from that of the biblical text. Bereshit Rabbah observes the biblical material, and then expands, stretches, grows, and amplifies the meaning of a particular phrase or verse, pointing that verse towards themes critical to rabbinic times.

Bereshit Rabbah struggles with different theological concerns than the p'shat:

[12] BR, 68:12.
[13] BR, 68:12.

Bereshit Rabbah uses the biblical text as a way to discuss pressing rabbinic theological concerns. The Midrash shifts the focus of the biblical God – Israel relationship to a relationship reflective of rabbinic times and theological practices. For instance, *Vayetse* selects the mysterious verb, *vayifgah*, saying, "*vayifgah bamakom vayalen sham*."[14] As always, the Rabbis carefully read the text and notice that this verb is an extreme rarity. Why did the Bible choose this verb to describe Jacob's actions? Why not simply say "*holech*" or "*ba*"? Bereshit Rabbah seizes this unusual choice of words as an opportunity to make a theological claim. It asserts that the term '*vayifgah'* actually connotes prayer.[15] Jacob was praying. Furthermore, the Rabbis argue that the patriarchs actually established the three prayer services per day, with each service corresponding to an offering.[16] Abraham founded *shacharit,* Isaac founded *mincha,* and Jacob fixed *maariv*. In order to prove their claim, the Rabbis employ a verse from Jeremiah, based upon the root of *vayifgah*. They reference: *Neither lift up cry nor prayer for them, neither make intercession (tifga) to Me*.[17] The Rabbis utilize this oddly chosen word as an opening to insert their own theology. They anachronistically attribute cultic worship to the patriarchs in an attempt to extend their own worship style backwards in time. Furthermore, by associating Temple worship with the patriarchs the Rabbis are legitimating this form of worship as a historic rite of the People Israel while stressing the importance of the rebuilding of the Temple. As we know the Rabbis wrote Bereshit Rabbah in a post-Destruction milieu, so the theological need to assert the necessity of worship in general, and Temple inspired worship in particular, was critical.

[14] Gen 28:11.
[15] BR, 68:9.
[16] BR, 68:9.
[17] Jeremiah 7:16.

We do not know if the Bible intended to insert any theological meaning into the term *vayifgah* whatsoever. However, that lack of clarity only inspires rabbinic creativity rather than squelch it. Here, Bereshit Rabbah has infused a biblical term with rabbinic ideas, shifting the theological focus of the work.

Midrash digresses entirely from *p'shat*:

Thus far we have noted several instances where Bereshit Rabbah closely reads the *p'shat* of the Bible, and then uses that *p'shat* to discuss something different but related to the original text. However, sometimes, the Midrash wholly deviates from the *p'shat* of the biblical text, embarking upon relatively large scale diversions and digressions. In a sort of 'midrash within a midrash,' the Rabbis tell stories or parables that are almost wholly divorced from the original context. For instance, R. Judah b. Simon tells the following story: A Roman matron asks R. Jose: "In how many days did God create the world?" Rabbi Jose answers, "in six days." Whereupon the matron asks, "Then what has God been doing since then?" R. Jose offers, "God sits and makes matches between men and women." The matron asserts that matchmaking does not seem too difficult, and proceeds to match each of her slaves with another. Soon, chaos ensues and the matched men and women violently lash out against each other, protesting their forced union. [The Roman matron quickly realizes her foolishness and asserts that the God and Torah of Israel are the true path.] Ultimately, R. Berekiah states that now that the work of creation has ceased, God actually makes ladders, raising some up and putting others down. He further explains that some people go to their companion, whereas in other cases their

companion comes to them. Finally, the Midrash notes that Jacob went to his future companion, stating, "And Jacob went out."[18]

Now, it is fairly clear that the *p'shat* of the text, "and Jacob went out" has nothing to do with a Roman matron or God functioning as a ladder-making matchmaker. In this instance, Bereshit Rabbah has vastly digressed from the content and theme of the biblical material. It seems, in this instance, that instead of closely reading out of the biblical text, the Rabbis were determined to tell a certain story that complies with the rabbinic agenda, showing the foolishness of a Roman woman. By differentiating the matron's understanding of the world with the rabbinic understanding of the world, the Rabbis are declaring their belief that Rome is inferior to Israel. Israel is the carrier of truth about God and about the world, not Rome. The Rabbis insert this story in Bereshit Rabbah to push forward this assertion of national hierarchy. Only after detailing this mini-midrash, do the Rabbis tag their ideas with a biblical reference.

Bereshit Rabbah shifts the thematic foci of the Bible:

The main themes of *Parashat Vayetse* are not identical to the main themes of Bereshit Rabbah. Instead, the Rabbis alter many of the biblical themes so that they fit with the rabbinic conception of the world. For instance, the Rabbis of Bereshit Rabbah are unable to tolerate the obvious competition and tension between Rachel and Leah in the Bible. Therefore, the Rabbis attempt to nullify the rivalry between sisters.

In order to best understand this midrashic shift in thematic focus, we must first observe the methodology through which the Bible conveys the competition in the first place. The Bible expresses this theme through two main structural devices: direct

[18] BR, 68:4.

description and intertextuality. As described in the earlier summary of the *parashah*, Leah and Rachel vie for the position of chief procreator quite directly. Leah believes child bearing will help her procure her husband's love, and Rachel claims that she will be like a dead woman if she is not able to give birth. So through direct description, the narrative overtly focuses on the tension between siblings. However, the Bible also employs a more subtle strategy to express its interest in sibling rivalry: that of intertextuality. Specifically, while Jacob's brother, Esau, is never explicitly mentioned in *Parashat Vayetse*, his imprint is all over its verses, and thus the residue of the rivalry between brothers still lingers.

To begin, God's promise to Jacob directly mirrors the promise Isaac made to Jacob just a few verses earlier. Isaac tells his son:

> And may El-Shaddai bless you and make you fruitful and multiply, so you become an assembly of peoples. And may God grant you the blessing of Abraham, to you and your seed as well, that you may take possession of the land of your sojournings, which God granted to Abraham.[19]

No more than ten verses later, God says these words:

> The land on which you lie, to you I will give it and to your seed. And your seed shall be like the dust of the earth and you shall burst forth to the west and the east and the north and the south, and all the clans of the earth shall be blessed through you and through your seed.[20]

Both statements are blessings, both promise an expansion of Jacob's seed, and both connect Jacob with the land. Clearly, God's pronouncement encourages the careful reader to recall Isaac's blessing, thereby linking Jacob's past competition with his brother with his current situation.

---

[19] Gen 28:3-4.
[20] Gen 28:14.

The text makes the connection between Jacob's past and the present narrative even more explicit by the linking of specific word choices. Isaac explains to his son, Esau: "Your brother has come in deceit (*b'meermah*) and has taken your blessing."[21] Through this direct statement, Isaac is revealing to Esau that Jacob has enacted this ultimate betrayal. In *Parashat Vayetse*, the exact same root appears in the word, "*reemeetahnee*"[22] when Jacob questions Laban about why he (Laban) has chosen to deceive Jacob and substitute Leah as a wife. Thus, once again the link between Jacob's previous sibling rivalry and the current sibling rivalry is strengthened.

Finally, the Bible seizes another moment to point to Jacob's past with Esau when Laban replies to the above query. Laban explains to his bewildered son-in-law, "It is not done thus in our place, to give the younger girl before the firstborn."[23] Here, Laban is subversively rebuking Jacob for his previous transgression. Jacob, the heel-grabber, already has placed himself, the younger, before the firstborn. Here, Laban is schooling Jacob in the importance of proper birth order. Leah is not merely the elder daughter, she is the "*bekhirah*," the first born daughter. Even though Esau is physically absent from the parashah, *Vayetse* pointedly connects him to Jacob's story. Jacob may be on a journey, but the text will not allow him to flee his past. So while the sibling rivalry between Leah and Rachel is quite explicit, the continued rivalry between Esau and Jacob is equally, if not more, present in the text.

Bereshit Rabbah is keenly aware of this intentional intertextuality. The Rabbis write:

---

[21] Gen 27:35.
[22] Gen 29:25.
[23] Gen 29:26.

> And all that night he cried out to her, "Rachel!" and she answered him. In the morning, 'and…look, she was Leah." He said to her, "Why did you deceive me, daughter of a deceiver? Didn't I call out Rachel in the night, and you answered me!" She said: "Is there a teacher without pupils? Didn't your father call you, "Esau," and you answered him! So did you too, call me and I answered you![24]

The Midrash recognizes that the discourse between Jacob, Leah and Laban is really a sort of repetition of the discourse between Jacob, Esau, and Isaac. The Rabbis underscore the repeated presence of Esau within this parashah.

While Bereshit Rabbah clearly recognizes the parallels between Rachel and Leah and Jacob and Esau, the Midrash attempts to dismantle the competition between sisters, painting them as equals. For instance, Bereshit Rabbah explains that:

> Each produced captains, each produced kings, from each arose slayers of lions, from each arose conquerors of countries, from each arose dividers of countries. The sacrifices brought by the son of each overrode the Sabbath. The wars waged by the descendants of both overrode the Sabbath.[25]

Here, Bereshit Rabbah is attempting to create equal standing between these two women by emphasizing the shared greatness of their progeny. Rather than recounting how many children each had and at what stage they were able to produce, the Midrash parallels Rachel and Leah's descendants, demonstrating their comparable statures. Both women are the matriarchs of our people, and both women should be remembered. The Rabbis harmonize the relationship between sisters, replacing the biblical focus of competition with a midrashic interpretation of equality.

The Rabbis also attempt to nullify the sisterly competition by asserting that the biblical text in no way portrayed either woman as negative. For instance, Leah, whose eyes were "*racot*" had only grown that way because she had wept so much for fear that

[24] BR, 70: 19.
[25] BR, 70:20.

she would have to marry her elder counterpart, Esau. The Rabbis expound: "She used to weep and pray, 'May it be Your will that I do not fall to the lot of that wicked man.' R. Huna said: Great is prayer, that it annulled the decree.'"[26] Lest the reader of the biblical text believe that Leah was someone weaker in appearance or spirit, the Rabbis rectify that false assumption by portraying Leah as righteous in intention and powerful in prayer. Leah's prayer changes the course of her life. Here, the Rabbis attribute tremendous influence to prayer. In the rabbinic post-destruction world of Bereshit Rabbah, emphasizing the efficacy of prayer to change the world suggests remarkable implications. Leah proves that the People Israel are still able to connect to God even without the Temple. They are able to shift the course of their lives not by power, not by sacrifice, but by prayer. So where the Bible features intense sibling rivalry, Bereshit Rabbah neutralizes such comparisons between sisters, suggesting that they are of equal merit, thereby shifting the biblical focus from competition to coexistence. Instead of pitting the women against each other, the Rabbis seize the vague biblical outline of Leah's character as an opportunity to impute the text with a critical rabbinic goal: the esteemed value of prayer.

However, the Rabbis proceed in quite the opposite manner regarding Jacob and Esau. They amplify the competition between brothers so that the battle is not merely over birthrights and blessings, but rather a competition between nations, Israel and Rome. A further discussion of the treatment of Esau and the rabbinic preoccupation with Rome will be found in the second paper. So while the Rabbis eliminate sisterly antagonism, they magnify brotherly competition.

[26] BR, 70:16.

Bereshit Rabbah also shifts the Bible's focus on the characterization of Jacob. As previously discussed, *Vayetse* portrays Jacob as a developing character. He is a man on a journey; a border crosser, a boundary mover, a liminal figure.[27] Jacob is not presented as a resolved or straightforward person, but rather as a flawed and problematic character, always wrestling with his reality. To the midrashic eye, however, Jacob is someone quite different. His character is quite developed, fixed, and certain. The Rabbis depict Jacob as the embodiment of the ideals of the People Israel. The device through which they suggest this theme is by showing Jacob to constantly be immersed in prayer and in the study of Torah. For instance, R. Nehemiah asserts that in the twenty-eight years Jacob spent in Laban's house, he never slept one night. Instead, Jacob recited the Book of Psalms over and over again, repeating the fifteen Shir Hama'alot. So where one might think Jacob to be frustrated and restless during his tenure at Laban's, he was actually marking his time through study and prayer.

Unlike Esau, a man whose strength rests in his physical body, Jacob uses his mind to navigate challenging situations. To the Rabbis of Bereshit Rabbah, Jacob is a perfectly pious patriarch, always praying, studying, and thinking rather than relying on physical force. Through Torah, Jacob trumps Laban. All of Jacob's swindling and bargaining become evidence for his crafty intellect rather than proof of his dubious moral rectitude. By asserting the value of Torah, mitzvot, and the power of the mind, the Rabbis have removed the biblical layers of ambiguity regarding Jacob's persona and replaced them with a *talmid chacham*.

[27] R. Alter, Genesis: Translation and Commentary (Norton and Company, New York, 1996), 149.

So we see that while the Midrash closely reads the biblical text, observing character delineations, it shifts these portrayals to better serve the rabbinic agenda. Based on this methodology, Rachel and Leah become equals and Jacob becomes an exemplar of study and prayer. Each of the biblical personae has been modified by the Midrash, making Jacob, Rachel, and Leah fit the rabbinic world view.

We will soon see that these shifts in characterization serve an even larger purpose. The Rabbis use these 'new' understandings of the biblical material to discuss the dominant themes of their worldview: the Temple, revelation at Sinai, the role of Israel, Exile and Redemption. For now, we have seen that the Rabbis utilize both the process of exegesis and eisegesis, looking deep within the text to draw out meaning, but also infusing that text with meanings of their own. Bereshit Rabbah amplifies biblical terms and phrases, addresses different theological concerns than the Bible, sometimes digresses from the *p'shat* of the text entirely, and shifts the thematic foci of *Parashat Vayetse*.

Theme and Context:

How and why *Bereshit Rabbah* transforms the biblical themes to meet the rabbinic agenda

Diana Fersko

In the late Tannaitic or early Amoraic period, a work now known as Bereshit Rabbah emerged. This rabbinic creation, recognized as the largest, oldest, and most well known Midrash on Genesis, has been studied by scholars and students for centuries. However, much of its meanings and intentions remain a matter of supposition. Why is it that where the Bible writes of Jacob, the Rabbis see the People Israel? Why, when the Torah describes a well, does Bereshit Rabbah see an altar? Why do the Rabbis repeatedly rely on specific images and institutions as tropes? How are these tropes transformed into themes and why do these themes arise at the time that the Rabbis were writing? By closely exploring the text, we will investigate these questions and attempt to achieve answers.

In order to understand the motivations for the various rabbinic themes, we must first analyze the historical context in which Bereshit Rabbah was crafted, most conservatively sometime after the year 400 in the Land of Israel.[28] In this post-Destruction milieu, one major factor in shaping the lives of the Rabbis was the gradual Christianization of the Roman Empire. As the Empire became more and more Christian, the Jews became progressively marginalized. This marginalization included expulsion from government and military offices as well as prohibitions regulating the construction of synagogues.[29] As the Empire grew to define itself as a religious entity, Jews found themselves with two main avenues of response to this change. They could either proceed with "continued integration at the cost of conversion to Christianity"[30] or they could

[28] H.L. Strack, G. Stemberger, Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash, (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1996), 279.
[29] S. Schwartz, Imperialism and Jewish Society (Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2004) 195.
[30] Schwartz, Imperialism and Jewish Society ,179.

continue [their] adherence to Judaism."[31] This second alternative, of turning inward towards Judaism and thereby increasing Jewish identity, meant that Jewish communal organizations and social structures were in need of strengthening in order to maintain the existence of the Jewish people. So as the Roman Empire became more religiously identified, so did the Jewish community. This mounting Judaization can be seen all over the pages of Bereshit Rabbah.[32]

The very trend towards organizing and unifying the Jews of antiquity points to the notion that for the Rabbis, the reality was quite the opposite. In fact, fragmentation marked the period of Bereshit Rabbah. Political, social, and economic division was the rule rather than the exception. Without any kind of institution to centrally organize the Jews, one can scarcely call these Jewish subjects of the Empire a 'community.' While these Jews may have been "loosely bound together by a complex and varied religious ideology, they lack[ed] any sort of institutional centralization, especially after the end of the patriarchate, around 425 CE...In sum, it may be more useful to think about a late antique Jewish *world* than a society."[33] So while some liturgical and halakhic texts were in the process of being fixed and shaped, the Jews of antiquity were hardly one people with a shared identity. In this chaotic existence of discrete Judaism combined with progressive marginalization of Jews, we will soon see that the Rabbis are searching for a unifying narrative. The Rabbis are interested in institutions, ideas, and images that will unite the Jews and make them a People.

Given the clustering of discrete Jewish groups and the looming fear of annihilation, it is no wonder that the Rabbis of Bereshit Rabbah are preoccupied with

[31] Schwartz, Imperialism and Jewish Society ,179.
[32] Schwartz, Imperialism and Jewish Society ,179.
[33] Schwartz, Imperialism and Jewish Society ,180.

peoplehood. Each of its themes involves the notion that the People Israel are in fact, a people. The Rabbis uncover and create a narrative through the themes of Bereshit Rabbah that addresses the past, present, and future of Israel. When looking to the past, the Rabbis evoke the "sacred history of Israel," focusing on Israel in the wilderness, Israel as an enslaved people, the Temple cult, Destruction of the Temple, Exile, and the history of Israel under the four kingdoms. They assert, that their past replete with searching, wandering, suffering, and enslavement, is not a prologue for their future. Instead, the Rabbis of Bereshit Rabbah argue that the future of Israel is about Messianic Redemption, a return to Jerusalem, a triumph in the Land, and the superiority of Israel over all other nations. As a people who have endured the humiliation of Exile, displacement, and foreign rule, returning to the Land of Israel as a sovereign people, where the Jews would immediately rebuild the Temple, is the literal embodiment of Redemption, and represents the ultimate hope of the Jews.

As for the present of the People Israel, the Midrash is clearly enmeshed in its historical context as the Rabbis are preoccupied with Rome, Christianity, and Gnosticism. They also aggressively attempt to assert the importance of rabbinic institutions and governance such as the synagogue, the Sanhedrin, and the authority of the sages themselves. The Rabbis even go so far as to insert their values and theological claims into the text, reminding the reader that *mitzvot*, Torah study, prayer, and other non-violent behaviors are the defining characteristics of a pious Jew. Through the themes of Bereshit Rabbah, the Rabbis create a complete picture of the Jewish people, including their past, present, and future. The themes encompass what the Rabbis see as the historical, theological, and political truth of Israel.

Rather than examine each theme one by one, the Rabbis insert the themes of Bereshit Rabbah into each biblical citation. The Rabbis interpretation of Jacob at the well in Bereshit Rabbah serves as a strong example of this methodology. The Rabbis begin by focusing on the history of the People Israel as they interpret **Genesis** 29:2-3:

> AND HE LOOKED AND BEHOLD A WELL IN THE FIELD – this alludes to the well (which supplied Israel with water in the wilderness, Num, 21:17) AND LO, THREE FLOCKS OF SHEEP – Moses, Aaron, and Miriam; FOR OUT OF THAT WELL THEY WATERED THE FLOCKS – from there each one drew water for his standard, his tribe, and his family…AND THERE WERE ALL THE FLOCKS GATHERED; where they pitched their camps. AND THEY ROLLED THE STONE FROM THE WELL'S MOUTH, AND WATERED THE SHEEP: from there each drew [water] for his standard, his tribe, his family. AND PUT THE STONE BACK UPON THE WELL'S MOUTH IN ITS PLACE – during their journeys.[34]

This initial interpretation of Jacob at the well begins with a description of Israel's past as wanderers in the wilderness. In the Bible, the symbol of the stone is a motif for Jacob and is often associated with different types of covenant. Jacob sleeps on a stone before his dream in which he receives God's patriarchal promise. Jacob vows to God and uses a stone to mark the place of his oath. In the passage above, Jacob shifts the stone from the mouth of the well directly before meeting his beloved, Rachel, with whom he will enter into the covenant of marriage. By invoking the image of the stone here, the Rabbis urge us to recall Israel's particular past as a wilderness people, and to remember the importance of the everlasting covenant between the People and God. While that covenant may have originated in Jacob's time or even earlier, it still endures for the Rabbis.

Next, in the same midrashic passage, the Rabbis add another emphasis from Israel's collective history; Temple worship. They write:

---

[34] BR, 70:8.

> Another interpretation: AND BEHOLD A WELL IN THE FIELD symbolizes Zion; AND LO THREE FLOCKS OF SHEEP – the three Festivals; FOR OUT OF THAT WELL THEY WATERED THE FLOCKS – from there they imbibed the divine spirit; AND THE STONE…WAS GREAT – this alludes to the rejoicing of the place of water drawing.[35]

The Rabbis begin this discourse with a reference to Zion, a nationalistic term that asserts that Israel is one body. Next, the Rabbis infuse the original text with images of pilgrimage to Jerusalem and cultic worship. Through these cultic references, the Rabbis remind their readers as well as themselves of a time when there was a centrally unifying body, the Temple. The Temple was clearly of sociological significance in that it brought the Jewish People together to one specific geographic site for each festival, the holy city of Jerusalem. Additionally, the Temple holds obvious religious significance in that the Rabbis insist that the Divine Presence was manifest within the walls of the Temple. The Temple was the place where one could "imbibe the divine spirit" and perform religious rituals. The Rabbis are also revising history, insinuating that Temple worship was not only normative, but the dominant means of Jewish religious expression. So far, the Rabbis have summarized two major historical periods of the people Israel via Jacob and the well: Israel in the Wilderness and Israel and worship in the Temple. By emphasizing history, the Rabbis are stressing the shared nature of Israel's past, and reminding the present day People Israel of their commonalities rather than their differences.

Next, we see the Rabbis shift to their present day. In an attempt to assert rabbinic authority over the fragmented pockets of Jews in the Roman Empire, the Rabbis focus on rabbinic institutions that are meant to organize and unify the Jewish people.

> Another interpretation…AND LO THREE FLOCKS OF SHEEP – the three Courts of judgment, as we learned:[36] Three courts were there, one at the entrance

[35] BR, 70:8, A reference to libations on the altar during Sukkot.
[36] B.T., Sanh. 86b.

> of the Temple Mount, another at the entrance of the Temple Court, and the third in the Chamber of the Hewn Stones. FOR OUT OF THAT WELL THEY WATERED THE FLOCKS – from there they learnt the law; AND THE STONE WAS GREAT – this refers to the great Court in the hall of the Hewn Stones; AND THERE WERE ALL THE FLOCKS GATHERED – this refers to the Courts of Judgment in Eretz Israel; AND THEY ROLLED THE STONE – from there they learned the law; AND PUT THE STONE BACK – there they debated the law until it was clearly settled.[37]

The Rabbis ascribe value to their courts and to their authority to determine the law inside those walls. This assertion of the value of rabbinic courts is crucial particularly in light of the prevalence of Roman law-making bodies. The Rabbis desperately want Jews to recognize rabbinic authority and to utilize rabbinic courts. Preserving Jewish law and creating Jewish legal institutions is critical to the rabbinic pursuit, in that the Rabbis believe it will unify the Jews as a particular group, separate from the Romans, while hopefully safeguarding some sense of sovereignty. The Rabbis paint the Sanhedrin, or Chamber of the Hewn Stones, as the seat of legal authority and as the rightful heir to the Temple courts. So the Rabbis justify the legal lineage of the Sanhedrin by linking it to the Temple Court. The Rabbis are the inheritors of the Jewish legal system of the past and therefore believe they deserve the respect of the Jewish community.

The rabbinic mission would not be complete without further emphasis of rabbinic institutions, practices, and values. The Rabbis fill their Midrash with references to the Sanhedrin, halakha, the Beit Din, the synagogue, and to the reading of the Torah.

> AND BEHOLD A WELL IN THE FIELD symbolizes the Sanhedrin; AND LO THREE FLOCKS OF SHEEP – the three rows of scholars who sat before them. FOR OUT OF THAT WELL THEY WATERED THE FLOCKS – from there they learned the halakhah. AND THE STONE UPON THE WELL'S MOUTH WAS GREAT – this symbolizes the distinguished member of the Beit Din, who finally decides the law. AND THERE WERE ALL THE FLOCKS GATHERED – this symbolizes the scholars of Eretz Yisrael. AND THEY ROLLED THE STONE – from there they learned the halakhah. AND PUT THE STONE BACK

[37] BR, 70:8.

> UPON THE WELL'S MOUTH IN ITS PLACE – they debated the halakhah until it was clearly settled.[38]

This passage is clearly an attempt at self-legitimization. As mentioned, the Rabbis of Bereishit Rabbah lived in an uncertain time mired in internal fragmentation and the challenge of Christianity. Here, the Rabbis argue that rabbinic institutions, like the Sanhedrin are in essence predicted and referred to by the biblical text. Also, they emphasize, halakhah, the authority of Jewish law. As one of the most effective and provocative claims of Christianity was a rejection of Jewish law, the emphasis placed on halakhah is a polemic against Christianity. The Rabbis are reifying the value of Torah and of Jewish law, and refusing to recognize the Christian claim as legitimate. This entire conversation about law, as previously discussed, is also a reaction to the challenge of Roman Empire and its legal institutions. The Rabbis have an imminent need to define rabbinic courts as determinative and authoritative for Jews, as opposed to their Roman counterparts. Lastly, it is interesting to note that the scholars referred to in the passage are specifically living in the Land of Israel, not coincidentally the very place where Bereshit Rabbah was crafted. The Rabbis, who love to assert their supremacy over other nations, may in fact be relying upon the same tactic to remind us of the perceived hierarchy between Eretz Yisrael and the Diaspora. Lastly, the Rabbis emphasize the process of debate, a methodology with which any student of the Talmud is familiar. Perhaps this focus on debate is also a response to the Rabbis' historical circumstance. Bereshit Rabbah was written at a time when Jews were under constant threat of physical attack. The Rabbis, whose ancestors had witnessed the horrors of the Destruction of the Second Temple and the Bar Kokhba Revolt, probably felt strongly about advocating a non-

[38] BR, 70:8.

violent means of resolving conflict. Like Jacob, who used his intellect to maneuver through life, the Rabbis instruct their people to use their minds rather than their swords as a means for self-preservation. In this parashah, where Jacob encounters the well, the Rabbis encounter guidelines for themselves. They see the text as a reflection of their present day beliefs and as an opportunity to affirm their institutions.

Through eisegesis, the Rabbis continue to see these institutions reflected in the biblical scene of Jacob and the well.

> AND BEHOLD A WELL IN THE FIELD symbolizes the synagogue; AND LO THREE FLOCKS OF SHEEP, the three men called [to the reading of the Law]. FOR OUT OF THAT WELL – there they heard the Torah. AND THE STONE WAS GREAT symbolizes the Evil Instinct. AND THERE WERE ALL THE FLOCKS GATHERED – that represents the congregation. AND THEY ROLLED THE STONE – there they heard the Torah. AND PUT THE STONE BACK – as soon as they depart [from the synagogue] the Evil Instinct returns to its place.[39]

I have previously referred to the synagogue as a rabbinic institution. This terminology may be anachronistic. It seems that during antiquity, "some version of Judaism apparently now reemerged as an important feature of Jewish life, and…that Jewish religious life was organized in local, partly autonomous, and self-enclosed communities."[40] Many of these communities did in fact have synagogues, but: "It is obvious that neither the synagogue nor the community were rabbinic inventions."[41] In other words, the emergence of the synagogue was not a direct result of formal rabbinic efforts and only slowly, overtime did the synagogue become a rabbinic institution. In fact, the Rabbis occasionally describe this developing relationship with the synagogue in their own literature: "Rabbinic literature provides evidence of the rabbis' gradually

[39] BR, 70:8.
[40] Schwartz, Imperialism and Jewish Society, 180.
[41] Schwartz, Imperialism and Jewish Society, 238.

intensifying attempt to regulate synagogues and communities."[42] In light of this perspective, the discussion of the synagogue, as seen above, may be more an attempt to co-opt a pre-existing institution rather than to discuss a new rabbinic entity. The Rabbis are trying to export their brand of Judaism to all of the smaller cohorts of Jews and are using the synagogue as a means of spreading their message.

Of course, the rabbinic narrative of the People Israel would not be complete without an acknowledgement of the persecutions by other ruling nations and Israel's eventual rise above these nations. They write:

> AND LO THREE FLOCKS OF SHEEP, to the three powers[43]…AND THERE WERE ALL THE FLOCKS GATHERED – this symbolizes the wicked State [Rome] which levies troops from all the nations of the world…AND PUT THE STONE BACK – in the Messianic era the merit of the Patriarchs will avail.[44]

So while other nations have ruled and do rule over the People Israel, ultimately the People Israel will prevail due to the merit of the patriarchs, ushering in the Messianic era. As Jacob rolls the stone back over the mouth of the well, the Rabbis turn towards a hopeful representation of the future, begging their Jewish followers to believe in their world view.

The examples of the rabbinic interpretation of Jacob at the well, are not anomalous, but rather typical of the rabbinic approach. Through only two verses of Torah (Gen 29:2-3), the Rabbis reveal their vision of Israel's past, present, and future. Clearly, these biblical verses focus on entirely different issues than the subsequent rabbinic interpretations. Regardless of the *p'shat* of the text, the Rabbis are determined to create a

[42] Schwartz, Imperialism and Jewish Society, 239.
[43] Babylon, Media, Greece
[44] BR, 70:8.

drash that fulfills *their* agenda. The Rabbis employ the same methodology when discussing the biblical material on Rachel and Leah.

The rabbinic preoccupation with all things Temple-related continues as the Rabbis proceed with their discussion of Israel's past through the Leah – Rachel story:

> AND SHE CONCEIVED AGAIN, AND BORE A SON; AND SHE SAID: THIS TIME I WILL PRAISE THE ETERNAL. R. Berekiah said in R. Levi's name: This may be illustrated by a priest who went down into a threshing-floor: one man gave him a kor of tithe, yet he showed no gratitude to him, while another gave him a handful of non-sacred corn and he showed himself grateful. Said the former to him, 'Sir priest, I gave you a kor yet you evinced no gratitude, while this man gave you merely a handful, and you show yourself grateful to him.' 'You gave me of my own portion,' he replied, 'whereas this man gave me of his own.' Similarly, since the matriarchs thought that each was to produce three, when Leah bore a fourth son, she exclaimed, *THIS* TIME I WILL PRAISE THE ETERNAL.[45]

This piece of midrash achieves a few critical rabbinic goals. First, it reminds the reader of the prominence of the Temple, and parallels Leah's speech with priestly words. So we can see that according to rabbinic dogma, an unbroken line exists between the time of the matriarchs, the period of the Temple, and of course, the contemporary Rabbis. Second, the Rabbis simply describe Leah here as one of the matriarchs. They make no mention of Jacob's favoritism of Rachel or of the competition between the sisters. Instead, Leah is a matriarch equal to her sister in all ways. In an attempt to show their unity, time and again, Bereshit Rabbah stresses this equivalence between Rachel and Leah. For instance, the Midrash writes:

> NOW LABAN HAD TWO DAUGHTERS, THE NAME OF THE OLDER WAS LEAH, AND THE NAME OF THE YOUNGER WAS RACHEL. They were like two beams running from one end of the world to the other. This one produced captains and that one produced captains, this one produced kings and this one produced kings, this one produced lion-tamers and the one produced lion-tamers, this one produced conquerors of nations and that one produced

[45] BR, 71:4.

> conquerors of nations, this one produced dividers of countries and that one produced dividers of countries.[46]

By eliminating competition and hierarchy between sisters, the Rabbis may be suggesting a similar model for their contemporary community. Why exist in separate, possibly competing factions instead of as a unified front? Rather than live in discrete communities more vulnerable to Roman incursions, we should remember that we are all descendants of Rachel, Leah, and Jacob and should unite under the banner of their legacy. In Bereshit Rabbah, the Rabbis remind its readership that the Jews are past the point of tribal separations and of Northern and Southern Kingdoms. Instead, all Jews must stand equally together, as do Rachel and Leah in the rabbinic reading of the biblical text. By minimizing the competition between Rachel and Leah, Bereshit Rabbah has attempted to excoriate internal Jewish hierarchy and infighting and to promote equality for all Jews.

The Rabbis overlay the biblical text with their own values and agenda once again when discussing why Leah's eyes were "*racot*" (weak).

> THE EYES OF LEAH WERE WEAK…What is the meaning of weak? They had been weakened on account of weeping, for people had assumed, 'This is the stipulation: the older daughter will be for the older son, [Esau], and the younger daughter for the younger son, [Jacob]." So she wept, saying, 'May it be God's will that I not fall into the domain of the wicked Esau. Said R. Huna, "Great is prayer for it nullified the decree, and not only that, but she came before her sister.[47]

The Rabbis eisegetically insert prayer into the biblical text, and ascribe prayer the power to alter the course of life. Leah, through her non-violent act of calling out to God, has saved herself from interacting with a horrible foreign nation, Edom, identified with Esau. She has transformed her future and the future of the Jewish people by marrying Jacob, all through the simple act of prayer. Here, the Rabbis make the assertion that prayer can

[46] BR, 70:14.
[47] BR, 70:16.

change lives; that prayer is the mechanism to interact with God and to take the future into one's own hands. Clearly, this message is timely and compelling for the Rabbis of Bereshit Rabbah. Through their words they are attempting to convince the public that prayer is a potent form of Jewish expression and that living under Roman rule might be averted by calling out to God, not by taking up arms.

The Rabbis cast their eyes towards the future of the Jewish people, imbuing their message with both hope in a Messianic future.

> AND LEAH CONCEIVED, AND BORE A SON: Rabbi Jose b. Hanina said: Names fall into four categories: some have fair names while their deeds are foul; others have ugly names while their deeds are fair; some have ugly names and their deeds are foul; and others have fair names and their deeds are fair: e.g., Esau, whose name denotes, he does [oseh] (the will of God), yet actually he did not; Ishmael, whose name implies he obeys [God – shomea el], yet he did not obey. Others have ugly names while their deeds are fair; the children of Exile, *The children of Bakbuk, the children of Hakupha, the children of Harhur,*[48] yet they were privileged to go up and rebuild the Temple.[49]

Here, Bereshit Rabbah observes that naming speeches are an important feature of Rachel and Leah's story. They use this device as a launching pad to discuss the names of other characters who serve as stand-ins for other nations. Just as Jacob embodies Israel, Esau exemplifies Rome. Israel has been called all sorts of horrible names, the children of Exile, Bakbuk, children of Hakupha, and children of Harhur, are just a few. However, despite this nasty name calling, Israel will return to their land, to Jerusalem, and rebuild the Temple. Of course, the implication here is that Israel will be able to rebuild once again. Israel will be redeemed while the other nations, those with ugly deeds, will be destroyed. In other words, just as a name may not truly suggest the character of a biblical figure or of a nation, the political reality may also not be what it seems. In the rabbinic vision of the future, Israel will rise above all others in triumph.

[48] Ezra 2:51.
[49] BR, 71:3.

Rather than introduce and expand each theme individually, the Rabbis intertwine many of the themes in a single discussion of a biblical verse or phrase. In other words, the themes are not progressively developed throughout the Midrash. Instead, they are stated multiple times in different ways with no real ordering to them. However, despite this apparent non-systematic sequencing, the text does in fact hold together. The Rabbis have a specific agenda and point of view that serves as the glue for the work. The Rabbis are weaving a story, really a history, of the People Israel into each exegetical strand of Midrash. They see Israel's past in the wilderness, at Sinai, with Jacob at the well, in the Destruction of the Temple and subsequent Exile as the foundation for their narrative. They assert that present day Israel, as the Rabbis conceive and define it, are the legitimate inheritors of those biblical and historical circumstances. The Rabbis see their own institutions and values reflected in the biblical text and assert that their system is the true inheritor of Israel's past. Lastly, they create a narrative of hope for the future, demanding that Israel will survive and asserting the certainty of Messianic Redemption. So while the themes of Bereshit Rabbah do not grow and change throughout the Midrash, the themes do serve to successfully frame the rabbinic account of Israel's past, present, and future.

Bereshit Rabbah:

Scholarly Questions and Conclusions

Diana Fersko

Introduction:

Bereshit Rabbah is an early extant exegetical midrash written and edited in the Land of Israel. Scholars have devoted many articles and publications to this work. However, despite all of the scholarly attention, many questions still remain about the work, as academics vacillate between knowledge and conjecture, understanding and mystery. As we explore what we know and what we still want to know about this didactic rabbinical work, perhaps we will discover the world view, sociological and cultural challenges of its authors.

Name:

Even the naming of Bereshit Rabbah is subject to scholarly supposition. The work has been called, Bereshit de Rabbi Oshayah Rabbah, Bereshit Rabbah de 'Rabbi Oshayah, and Baraita de Bereshit Rabbah. As the Midrash begins with the words, "Rabbi Oshaya patach…" some scholars, particularly in the Medieval Period falsely attributed the entire work to him. However, in both Halakhot Gedolot and the Shulchan Arukh, the work is referred to as Bereshit Rabbah, and that moniker has become accepted and agreed upon. Still, speculation remains about the term Rabbah. If the text is truly named Bereshit Rabbah, 'the Great Genesis,' then the work is not truly 'great,' meaning large, in comparison to the biblical text. Instead, some scholars suppose that the epithet contrasts with a smaller, now unknown commentary on Genesis. Thus, the term 'Rabbah' does not refer to the content of the work, but rather to its size.[50] Ultimately, most scholars attribute the term "Rabbah" to the first mentioned tradent in the text, R. Oshayah Rabbah.

[50] H.L. Strack, G. Stemberger, Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash, (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1996), 276-277.

Language:

Bereshit Rabbah is primarily written in mishnaic Hebrew, and is very similar in style to the Palestinian Talmud. The text is also interspersed with Aramaic and utilizes Greek expressions and phrases.[51]

Major Structural Forms:

Bereshit Rabbah is an exegetical midrash with some homiletical material included. The midrash quotes consecutive biblical words or verses, and then comments on those words or verses. The comments are at times short and direct, and at times lengthy and full of aggadic material. The Midrash is divided into one hundred *parashiyot*, an area which we will continue to explore later.[52] The most noteworthy structural element of Bereshit Rabbah is its *petihtaot*. The nature of the *petihta*, or proem, is a source of much scholarly inquiry, to which we will address in this paper. There are two-hundred and forty-six *petihtaot* in total in the work the majority of which begin with a verse from *Ketuvim*, Writings, and an unattributed rabbinic comment. The Midrash also repeats substantive pieces of material in relatively close proximity to that material's initial mention.[53]

Editions:

Bereshit Rabbah was first published in Constantinople in 1512 and subsequently

[51] Encyclopedia Judaica, Macmillan Reference, USA, 2006, 448.
[52] H.L. Strack, G. Stemberger, Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash, 277.
[53] Encyclopedia Judaica, 448.

in Venice in 1545 after which it was reprinted innumerable times.[54] For the purposes of this Text Immersion Project, I have relied upon the Theodor-Albeck critical addition[55], begun in 1903 by Theodor and completed in 1936 by Albeck, and regarded as "one of the finest such works of modern rabbinic scholarship."[56] The primary manuscript for their critical edition was Vatican 30.[57] I have also employed the use of the H. Freedman's translation from the Soncino series.

Sources:

Bereshit Rabbah draws on some Greek and Aramaic translations of the Bible. It also relies upon the Mishnah, but scholars debate about whether it was familiar with the Tosefta.[58] The Midrash clearly knew of the Palestinian Talmud in some form, as there are many overlapping passages between the two works. Bereshit Rabbah may have also been influenced by earlier midrashic collections including the *Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael*, *Sifra*, and *Sifrei*. There is also scholarly supposition that Bereshit Rabbah drew from several sources which are no longer extant.

Redaction:

Scholars make claims about the Bereshit Rabbah's redaction based upon the sources from which the Midrash draws. As the majority of attributed sages are from the Land of Israel, the historical allusions point towards the Land of Israel, and the language of the text reflects the same culture, there is little doubt that this text was redacted in the Land of

[54] Encyclopedia Judaica, 449.
[55] J. Theodor, Ch. Albeck, Midrash Bereshit Rabbah (Wahrmann Books, Jerusalem, 1865 Edition).
[56] Encyclopedia Judaica, 449.
[57] Encyclopedia Judaica, 449.
[58] Encyclopedia Judaica, 448.

Israel. In terms of its dating, based on historical references and quoted sources, scholars are convinced that the text must have been redacted after 400 CE and was probably concluded no later than the first half of the fifth century.[59] We do not know who the redactor was or whether there were in fact multiple redactors.

Major scholarly questions:

Even with all of the information above, many scholarly questions linger about the nature of Bereshit Rabbah. For instance, what was the relationship between the Palestinian Talmud and Bereshit Rabbah. How did the two works influence each other? Why, if they offer some of the exact same passages and were redacted during the same time period, did they mature as separate works? Scholars also wonder about the nature of Bereshit Rabbah itself. Is the work simply an anthology of rabbinic material, or is it a more holistic piece crafted to put forth a specific message? Scholars question how the parashiyot are divided. Is this division connected to the Triennial Cycle? In a related question, academics have spent much time examining the purpose of the *petihtaot*. Were these proems introductions to sermons or were they sermons themselves? What was the purpose behind these proems? Scholars also wonder about why the Midrash would repeat itself. If we agree with the theory that Bereshit Rabbah is the product of multiple layers of redaction, which every scholar I have read does, than why would these redactors leave duplicate material? What were the goals of the redaction process, was there an intentionality behind each redactors' efforts? If so, did each redactor share the same goals and methodologies? We will investigate two areas of these academic issues in the following pages.

[59] H.L. Strack, G. Stemberger, Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash, 279.

Exploration of Two Key Outstanding Scholarly Issues:

A. As mentioned, one of the continuous scholarly debates about the text has to with categorizing the text as a whole. Is Bereshit Rabbah merely an anthology of atomistic comments on particular words, phrases, and verses? Is it merely a listing of rabbinic opinions, intended to serve as a kind of warehouse for rabbinic thought? Is the work simply a catalogue of individual comments on separate topics? While the work is published as a whole book, perhaps it consists of discrete rabbinic thoughts strung together by its redactors. The fact that the work is exegetical in nature might easily lead us to conclude that Bereshit Rabbah is more encyclopediac in style. The Midrash does offer multiple rabbinic opinions which may conflict with each other or do not even relate one to another. Upon closer reflection, however, categorizing the work is not a simple task.

In truth, obvious linkages exist between various sections of the text. Mainly, the text holds together through repetition and reinforcement of various themes. The Rabbis, through their varied opinions, paint a picture of the people Israel's past, present, and future. They focus on Israel in the wilderness, Mt. Sinai, the Second Temple, and Exile. By constantly reminding the readers or listeners of Bereshit Rabbah of their common history, the Rabbis are attempting to transform a mass of somewhat disparate Jewish people into one nation. The Rabbis also stress the importance of their own institutions and values; emphasizing Torah study, synagogue life, the Sanhedrin, and the system of *mitzvot*. In terms of the future of Israel, the Rabbis envision messianic redemption, the rebuilding of the Temple, and triumphant national self-rule. The Rabbis stress the oppression, and yet the inferiority of foreign ruling nations, all in an effort to underscore

the need for unity amongst the Jewish people. Purposefully, the Rabbis return to each theme mentioned above over and over. It is no accident that time and again the Rabbis revisit the same thematic concepts. Instead, the themes hold the Midrash together, suggesting that it may be one fluid piece. Jacob Neusner refers to these thematic connections as "cogent units of discourse."[60] A discourse, as Neusner sees it, is "a complete discussion of a particular problem, with a beginning, middle, and end. Such a unit of discourse constitutes a composition exhibiting traits of reflection by both careful organization and planning."[61] In other words, a discursive unit is a clearly thought-out body of material aimed at conveying a message. While Neusner's statement about the majority of sections carrying a complete "beginning, middle, and end" may be a bit of wishful thinking, his assertion that these discursive units are intentionally woven together by theme is absolutely born out by the text. For instance:

> Bar Kappara taught: No dream is without its interpretation. AND BEHOLD A LADDER symbolizes the stairway;[62] SET UP ON THE EARTH – the altar, as it says, *An altar of the earth thou shalt make unto Me;*[63] AND THE TOP OF IT REACHED TO HEAVEN – the sacrifices, the odor of which ascended to heaven; AND BEHOLD THE ANGELS OF GOD – the High Priests; ASCENDING AND DESCENDING ON IT – ascending and descending the stairway. AND, BEHOLD, THE ETERNAL STOOD BESIDE HIM – *I saw the Eternal standing beside the altar*.[64] [65]

Clearly, the theme of the Temple, is the focus of this passage. Throughout Bereshit Rabbah, the Rabbis present dozens of ideas about the images in this passage. For instance, the ladder becomes a symbol of Nebuchadnezzar, a reference to Jacob himself,

---

[60] J. Neusner, Midrash in Context, (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1983), 70.
[61] Neusner, Midrash in Context, 80-81.
[62] A stairway that leads to the top of the altar in the Temple.
[63] Exodus 20:21.
[64] Amos 9:1.
[65] BR, 68:12.

and an indication of what is to come at Sinai just to mention a few rabbinic ideas. Rather than begin with the word "*soolam*" (ladder) and then list its divergent interpretations, Bereshit Rabbah is clearly organized by theme. Above, every single rabbinic interpretation involves the same larger theme: cultic worship. The Rabbis, through layers of redaction, are in effect making an argument that the Temple is present in each word of the original Genesis text. Neusner's conjecture, that Bereshit Rabbah is structured in "cogent units of discourse" is undoubtedly supported by the textual evidence at hand. Scholar Ofra Meir agrees with Neusner, claiming that the text is divided into meaningful thematic units.[66] These cohesive units are essentially the opposite of an anthologized text. So if Neusner and Meir are correct, Bereshit Rabbah does, in fact, exist as a unified work.

We know that Bereshit Rabbah was shaped over time. It contains both tannaitic and amoraic material, crafted by multiple authors and redactors. Ultimately, this text stands at the crossroads of anthology and cohesive text; as it is an exegetical work with multiple redactorial overlays. The redactor has taken numerous and divergent rabbinic opinions and contoured the material in such a way that they read as a unit. Bereshit Rabbah is arranged to highlight the thematic similarities of the material and downplay differing rabbinic opinions. So while this text may have begun more in the style of an anthology, with the help of a redactorial hand, Bereshit Rabbah was shaped into a cogent body of material.

B. The second major outstanding scholarly issue has to do with the nature of the *petihtaot*. There are several levels of questions surrounding these mysterious proems. First of all, scholars wonder about the purpose of the *petihta*. Why do they exist? Are

[66] Meir, Ofra, "The Redaction of Genesis and Leviticus Rabbah," [Hebrew] Te'udah 1996, 61-90.

the *petihtaot* stand alone sermons or openings of larger sermonic offerings. Are they mini-sermons in and of themselves or introductions to more sustained homiletical pieces? To answer all of these questions, we must analyze each of the *petihtaot* found in *Parashat Vayetse*. We need to determine if the *petihtaot* are related thematically to the content of the exegetic body of each chapter or are they arbitrary insertions, only linked to the original text based on the biblical verse. We will soon explore whether or not these openings are thoughtfully integrated into each section to elicit a specific thematic beginning. The second level of questioning has to do with the historicity of the *petihtaot* in Bereshit Rabbah. Were they original to the text or added later? Is there a uniform answer to this question or were some proems original while others were added? Why do some chapters have several *petihtaot* while others have none? Were these *petihtaot* intended to add further divisions to the triennial Torah reading cycle?

Interestingly, Chapter 68, the first Bereshit Rabbah chapter that addresses *Parashat Vayetse*, begins with five consecutive but clearly separate *petihtaot*. Each petihta is attributed to one or more rabbis and each begins with a verse either from Proverbs or Psalms. Each follows the convention of "Rabbi X *patach*…" followed by the *petihta* text, followed by a rabbinic comment on that text which leads to the verse at hand, in this case **Genesis** 28:10. This concise form of the *petihta* typifies Bereshit Rabbah. As Bereshit Rabbah showcases the beginnings of the *petihta* as a structural element, it makes sense that a brief, more nascent form of the *petihta* would be featured here. If these brief *petihtaot* are merely introductions to a no longer extant piece, why include five such introductions? Why not one, and for that matter, why not more than five? After analyzing the *petihtaot* of Chapter 68, the answer is clear. With the

exception of the fourth *petihta*, all of these proems treat the same theme: foreignness and the superiority of Israel over outsiders. *Petihta* one, two, and three each achieve this goal by discussing Esau, the ultimate symbol of Rome and of the atrocities of foreign rule. The fifth *petihta* provides a lengthier, aggadic piece on the subject of outsiders, detailing a story about a Roman matron who foolishly believes she can do the work of the God of Israel. Each *petihta* deems foreigners as wicked or unwise outsiders who are clearly inferior to the People Israel. So these *petihtaot* fit together thematically, showing that they are in fact not randomly gathered, but thoughtfully placed. They function to form thematic boundaries within the larger textual framework. Furthermore, the theme of group unity, the importance of lineage, and the patriarchal family are all emphasized in the ensuing Midrash, making these *petihtaot* an appropriate thematic preamble as they highlights the importance of tribal insularity and avoidance of foreigners. For example, this chapter stresses that the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob instituted the three prayer services of the day. One family forged the foundation of our prayer. In discussing the stones the Jacob uses as a headrest, the Rabbis insist that these stones represent the twelve tribes of Israel that will surely spring from Jacob's line. The Rabbis muse: "From Abraham there came forth Ishmael and the children of Keturah; from Isaac there came forth Esau. As for me, [Jacob], if these two stones join, I will be assured that nothing worthless will come forth from me."[67] Here, the Rabbis are contrasting the patriarchal family with the dreaded 'other.' Unlike Abraham and Isaac, who both produced foreigners in addition to their Israelite children, Jacob will produce the ultimate Israelite insiders: the twelve tribes. The theme of the *petihtaot*, that outsiders are inferior and foreign, is clearly expanded upon within the ensuing midrashic material in the chapter.

[67] BR, 68:11.

From this evidence, we can deduce that *petihtaot* may be to frame or introduce an upcoming midrashic theme.

Surprisingly, only one other chapter in the *Parashat Vayetse* section of Bereshit Rabbah bears *petihtaot*, Chapter 70. Chapters 69, 71, 72, 73, 74, and 75 simply begin with a biblical verse from the *parashah* and then move to rabbinic comments. Either the redactor did not place *petihtaot* in these chapters for some undetermined reason, or there were no original *petihtaot* to pull from. Another possibility is that Chapters 68 and 70, which have *petihtaot*, reflect the divisions of the original Triennial Cycle. If Chapters 68 and 70 do in fact begin parashiyot according to the Triennial Cycle, than logically the other chapters would not have original *petihtaot* as they would not function as the beginning of a new parashah. Lastly, a final possibility remains that the extant *petihtaot* do not simply serve to introduce a single Bereshit Rabbah chapter, but rather introduce the chapters that follow that do not carry original proems. In other words, perhaps the *petihtaot* for Chapter 68 encapsulates the main theme of Chapter 69 as well. Similarly, if this hypothesis is true, than the *petihtaot* for Chapter 70 would introduce themes developed throughout Chapters 70-75. We will analyze the latter example as a text case for this theory.

The internal patterns of the *petihtaot* vary slightly in Chapter 70. The first *petihta* of Chapter 70 follows a relatively normal pattern, beginning with the biblical text, citing a verse from Psalms, making a rabbinic observation, citing another verse from Psalms, and then making another rabbinic observation. Oddly, the *petihta* never returns to the biblical verse. Because the maneuvering from *petihta* text to the text of the parashah is part of the art and excitement of the *petihta* in itself, it is quite strange that this petihta

does not actually reach **Genesis** 28:20. The second *petihta* of Chapter 70 also deviates from standard form. To begin, it cites two verses from **Chronicles** as the *petihta* text instead of from **Psalms** or **Proverbs**. Second, the *petihta* also cites a verse from **Numbers** before it finally arrives at Genesis 28:10. So this second *petihta* has some unusual citations compared to the others. While the two *petihtaot* may not be unified in form, they are still connected by theme. Since the biblical verse, "And Jacob vowed a vow…," both *petihtaot* offer ideas about the precise nature of a vow. Once again, the *petihtaot* stand as a clear unit, connected by a common theme. This theme, of promises and vows, is in fact born out in Chapter 70. The Rabbis extend the conversation about vows to a conversation about laws and law-making. If a vow, or oath, is a type of contractual agreement, than it makes perfect sense for the Rabbis to expand the topic of this *petihta* into a discussion of the rabbinical courts and decision making. As in Chapter 68, the *petihta* theme is carried through the midrashic chapter. However, the theme does not extend to Chapters 71-75. Instead, the text shifts to issues of child-bearing, the importance of prayer, and a number of other, unrelated themes. So the theory that the *petihta* text for a given chapter actually introduces several, thematically-linked chapters is not born out in this case.

While the *petihtaot* remain a fundamental element of Bereshit Rabbah, much of their function remains a mystery. They seem to introduce thematic units, but the question of why some chapters contain these proems while others do not, remains unanswered. This exegetical Midrash, shaped by layers of redaction, remains one of the most widely-read Midrashim ever crafted. As such, much scholarly attention has been paid to its form and function. The division of chapters, the existence of internal repetitions, the

relationship between this work and contemporaneous works, the nature of the Midrash itself, and of course, the role of the *petihtaot* all remain as major topics of scholarly supposition. This iconic works demands analysis and will continue to receive such attention for years to come.

Addendum: The Petihtaot of Chapters 68-75:

Chapter 68:

■*Petihta 1*: attributed, **Prov.** 3:23, rabbinic comment, biblical verse **Gen** 28:10
■*Petihta 2*: attributed, **Ps**. 121:1, rabbinic comment, biblical verse **Gen** 28:10
■*Petihta 3*: attributed, **Prov.** 12:13, rabbinic comment, biblical verse **Gen** 28:10
■*Petihta 4*: attributed, **Prov.** 19:14, rabbinic comment, **Gen** 24:50, **Judg**14:4, rabbinic comment, **Gen** 24:63, rabbinic comment, **Gen** 28:10
■*Petihta 5*: attributed, **Ps**. 68:7, lengthier aggadic piece, **Ps**. 75:8, rabbinic comment, **Gen** 24:63, rabbinic comment, **Gen** 28:10

Chapter 69: None

Chapter 70:

■*Petihta 1*: **Gen** 28:20, attributed, **Ps**. 66:13, rabbinic comment, **Ps**. 132:2, rabbinic comment
■*Petihta 2*: attributed, **1 Chron** 29:9, rabbinic comment, **1 Chron** 29:10, rabbinic comment, **Num** 21:2, rabbinic comment, **Gen** 28:20

Chapter 71: None

Chapter 72: None

Chapter 73: None

Chapter 74: None

Chapter 75: None

Bibliography

Primary Sources:

JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh, (The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1999 Edition).

J. Theodor & C. Albeck, Midrash Bereshit Rabbah Vol. 2 (Wahrmann Books, Jerusalem, 1865 Edition).

H. Freedman, The Midrash Rabbah, Vol. 1 (Soncino Press, New York, 1983).

Secondary Sources:

Encyclopedia Judaica, Macmillan Reference, USA, 2006.

H. Albeck, "Mavo," Midrash Bereshit Rabbah (Wahrmann, 1865 edition of Theodor-Albeck), Vol. 3, 1-138.

R. Alter, Genesis: Translation and Commentary (Norton and Company, New York, 1996).

M. Bregman, "Midrash Rabbah and the Medieval Collector Mentality," Prooftexts 17:1 (Jan., 1997).

T. Eskenazi, A. Weiss, The Torah: A Women's Commentary, (URJ Press, New York, 2008).

M. Fishbane, Biblical Text and Texture: A Literary Reading of Selected Texts (Oneworld, New York, 1998).

T., Frymer-Kensky, Reading Women of the Bible (Random House Inc., New York, 2004)

J. Heinemann, "*Ha-Petihtaot be-Midrashei ha-Aggadah, Meqoran ve-Tafkidan*," Proceedings of the Fourth World Congress of Jewish Studies 2(1969): 43-47.

Ofra Meir, "The Redaction of Genesis and Leviticus Rabbah," [Hebrew] Te'udah (1996), 61-90.

J. Neusner, Midrash in Context: Exegesis in Formative Judaism (Fortress Press, Atlanta, 1986).

J. Neusner, Genesis and Judaism: The Perspective of Genesis Rabbah: An Analytic Anthology (Scholars Press, Atlanta, 1986).

I. Pardes, Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993).

S. Schwartz, Imperialism and Jewish Society (Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2004).

H.L., Strack, G., Stemberger, Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash, (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1996).