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The Tapestry of Text: Examination of the Literary Foil in Rabbinic Treatment of Genesis Stories and Beyond

Michelle Werner
Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Ordination
Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
May 2006
Referee: Professor Edward A. Goldman

In loving memory

Of
My Father, Roy M. Werner z'l'

And
Bonnie Roth z'l'

וְהִרְבֵּיתִי אֶת־זַרְעֲךָ כְּכוֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וְנָתַתִּי לְזַרְעֲךָ אֵת כָּל־הָאֲרָצֹת הָאֵל
וְהִתְבָּרְכוּ בְזַרְעֲךָ כֹּל גּוֹיֵי הָאָרֶץ:

I will make your heirs as numerous as the stars of heaven, and assign to your heirs all these lands, so that all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your heirs. Genesis 26:4

Abstract

This study traces developments from the Bible-as-Literature through the interchange between modern literary criticism and the study of midrash. It looks at the work of Robert Alter, Michael Fishbane and David Stern. This trajectory shows that, while we reject the Bible-as-Literature approach, we acknowledge how it began the conversation.

The work of Michael Fishbane argues that intertextuality is an element of biblical literature itself. We outline the intellectual debate between literary critics and scholars of midrash. We see the original, essential appreciation which the Rabbis had for the text they interpreted, ultimately not found in literary criticism: the way they viewed text as text.

Informed by an examination of literary criticism, we propose an original extension of the rabbinic endeavor exploring the literary foil. We look at midrashim on *Lech Lecha*. We conclude that the midrashic treatment of this material shows how Lot and Hagar serve as literary foils for Abraham and Sarah. This allows us to see how we can understand that children serve as a foil for land. We join the Rabbis in reading the text as text. We emphasize this by showing the shortcomings of ideological reading.

Our understanding of the text can allow us to use midrash to regain connection with the sacred dimension of the text, and ultimately with the Sacred.

Acknowledgements

Teaching is thus more than the transmission of information or even the deepening of the students' humanity. It may also bestow an example of freedom and responsibility.

Michael Fishbane, The Garments of Torah, (120)

This project is the culmination of a labor of love and it could never have been realized without the guidance and care of my many teachers at the Hebrew Union College. I wish to thank them all.

I would like to thank two of them in particular. My thesis advisor, Dr. Edward Goldman, whose steady hand guided not only the preparation of this work, but also led me into the world of midrash and brought me to an understanding and appreciation of the Rabbis, our Rabbis. I had the privilege to work with him not only on this thesis, but to study with him over these past four years. He made these Rabbis and this literature speak a human tongue and brought their wisdom and compassion within my grasp. If I am strengthened at all in my ability to reach out to other Jews who search for meaning in our tradition, it is because I have found that meaning in our sharing. I am humbled at the prospect of being called Rabbi in their shadow, and in his.

I would also like to thank Dr. David Aaron whose teaching shows that questions feed the soul and answers kill the mind. Through my study with Dr. Aaron I have learned to savor the moment of engagement with the text. His passion for our tradition will light my path for all the years of my rabbinate and so much of what I hope to teach to others will be a result of what he taught me.

These two teachers in particular, and all the faculty of the Cincinnati campus, have been to me like a family on this journey. They have taken joy in my accomplishments and pride in my progress. They have shown me the example of freedom and responsibility and have shared with me the humanity of our tradition.

My life has also been blessed by a circle of faith, people who have surrounded me with love and encouragement at every step of the path which led me into this place and has brought me to the moment of pending departure. I thank many people, but particularly those who have stood by me for so many years, Susan Hahn, Bill and Nancy Nichols, Roger Bataillon, Suzette Slama, Judith McKinlay, Deborah Yael Graetz, Jason Roth, Julianne Pistone Pertz, and my mother, Fran Werner. I am also very grateful to my classmates whose presence enriched my life on a daily basis, all of them "are" my HUC, but I would particularly like to thank Charlie Cytron-Walker and Paul Jacobson. A simcha is not a blessing unless it is shared.

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Methodological Overview

We open this essay with an examination of the Bible-as-Literature approach. In the opening of *Midrash and Theory*, David Stern gives an overview of the development in the intellectual arena of what happened when midrashic scholarship met modern literary criticism. He acknowledges that this debate followed closely on the heels of the Bible-as-Literature movement. While we will join Stern in ultimately rejecting this approach, we begin our study here by examining what it brought to the discussion between literary criticism and the study of midrash. The Bible-as-literature movement was responding to the Source Critical school of thought which spent too much energy breaking the Bible into fragments and pieces. One of the strengths of the Bible-as-literature approach was the introduction of the notion that the Bible contained plurality of meaning and invited interpretation. One reason why it is essential to discuss the Bible-as-literature approach is that the strength of this approach is its call to see the literary aspect of the biblical text. We will see however that the shortcoming of this approach was that if failed to view the Bible as text.

The purpose of this essay is to transcend the debate about midrash and literary criticism. We argue here that the single most important and essential aspect of the rabbinic approach to Scripture is that the Rabbis grasped the idea of the text as text. We will see how the Rabbis understood that Torah could be seen to be saying more than one thing. We examine the contribution made by Michael

Fishbane to our understanding of the way in which the Rabbis saw their endeavor as being a continuation of the tradition which they had received and how they understood the notion of polysemy in a way which far exceeds that of some modern readers. Imbedded in their method was a strong sense of theology which is a crucial component of the midrashic undertaking.

An outgrowth of this intellectual development was an unparalleled interest in midrash by modern literary critics. This fervor was documented and examined by David Stern whose contribution we explore here. The input of modern literary critical approaches allow us to have a new set of vocabulary for articulating how the Rabbis interacted with their text. We will see that while this exchange brought a series of insights, at the end of the day, the Rabbis had a singularly different understanding of the text based on their appreciation of its sacred nature. The basic underpinning of this work is that the Rabbis understood the Torah as text. We explore how that perception impacted on their reading.

Our objective here is to undertake an analysis making use of some of the insights we have gleaned from our conversation with modern literary theory and also with our understanding of how we need to go beyond the constraints of these theories. We look at the midrashim on the parasha *Lech Lecha* in *Braishit Rabbah*. We look specifically at the midrashim which treat the differences which arose between Abraham and Lot (notably in Gen. Rab. 41) and those which deal with the interactions between Sarah and Hagar (notably in Gen. Rab. 45).

The analysis we provide here will be a way of appreciating the rabbinic endeavor and taking it further into an understanding of the literary device of the literary foil. This original dimension of the project is a way of informing ourselves with the insights gleaned from the exploration of modern literary criticism and marrying that with an appreciation for the essentially rabbinic objective. We see from this that we can understand Lot as a literary foil for Abraham, Hagar as a literary foil for Sarah. Ultimately, this will allow us to draw a larger comparison and this lets us see children as a literary foil for land. This helps us answer one of the questions which was the impetus for this exploration and that is how are we to understand why the matriarchs are barren.

With that as an initial question in the background, we conclude our project by exploring the shortcomings of ideologically based reading strategies which preclude the type of reading we have outlined above. They function, as we show, by failing to read the text as text. Therefore, what we are attempting to do is to take the best of the rabbinic approach to text and move it forward. This necessitates a critique of the shortcomings of the reading strategies which are ultimately less sophisticated and less satisfying than those which arise from fully grasping the rabbinic endeavor.

We conclude by showing how this type of reading, inspired by the rabbinic interaction with text, can lead to a true appreciation of midrash. That sensitivity

also characterized the reading strategies of modern thinkers Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber. Hopefully we can conclude from tracing this trajectory how we can continue to study midrash in a way that draws us into what Eugene Mihaly called a "prayerful" relationship with the text.

Chapter One

Bible-As-Literature: Insights and Limitations

In the opening of his book, *Midrash and Theory*, David Stern outlines what he calls "the encounter of midrashic scholarship with contemporary literary studies,"[1] In this introduction to his book, he gives an overview of the development in the intellectual arena of the discussion of what these two disciplines can bring to each other. He takes as his starting point the intellectual phenomena of deconstructionism and postmodernism, among others. He acknowledges early on that this debate "followed closely on ... the heels" of "the Bible-as-literature" movement, but he dismisses the importance of that debate to his subject at hand. Stern is quick to point out the limitations in the studies which resulted in examining the Bible as a literary document. "Essentially," he says, "the literary approach to the Bible was an effort to use the concept of 'literature' as a way of 'saving' the Bible, of reconstituting the wholeness of the biblical text, of recapturing a textual integrity and coherence that had been shattered by modern critical and historical study of the Bible."[2]

While ultimately we will agree with Stern's assessment of why it was necessary to move on from the Bible-as-literature approach, it is worthwhile to spend a little time seeing what that outlook originally brought to the debate and what we will glean from it for the project at hand. While we will ultimately conclude that there is definite significance in appreciating the literary aspect of the biblical text, the

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[1] David Stern, *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1996) 4.
[2] Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 4.

key shortcoming is that those who viewed the Bible-as-literature failed to view the Bible as text. We will argue here that the singularly most important and essential aspect of the rabbinic approach to Scripture is that they grasped the idea of text as text. What exactly we mean by the term text will be explained below. Nonetheless, the purpose of this essay is to transcend the current debate about midrash and literary criticism. We will attempt, here, to gain insight both from the Bible-as-literature approach and from the fruitful debate which ensued when midrashic literature met literary criticism.

It is important, therefore, to stop and see what exactly the Bible-as-literature approach made possible in our understanding of Scripture that had not been the case before. The Bible-as-literature movement, like all intellectual currents, did not emerge in a vacuum. Essentially, it was responding to the Source Critical school of thought which, the Bible-as-literature scholars felt, spent too much energy breaking the Bible into fragments and pieces.

As Tremper Longman pointed out in his book, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation*, these polarized approaches to the biblical texts came with agendas of their own and often made for strange bedfellows. He writes:

> Evangelicals commonly tend to atomize the text and to focus attention on a word or a few verses. Traditional critical scholarship displays the same tendency for a different reason, not believing that the whole text is original. The literary approach asks the question of the force of the whole. For this

> reason, many evangelical scholars have seen the literary approach serving an apologetic function.[3]

A central voice in the school of Bible-as-literature, and someone who spoke from a rich understanding of what could be gained by looking at Scripture in its entirety as a unit was the scholar Adele Berlin. Adele Berlin recognized that the impetus behind the literary reading was a move away from the atomizing and fragmenting urges of biblical scholarship. "But modern literary criticism" she asserted, "is not so much an intentional return to Midrash as a rejection of Source Criticism which, in its extremes, views the Bible as not much more than a scrapbook".[4] The field was divided into literary critics and biblical scholars and the many difficulties they encountered made them like "two nations divided by a common language." Michael Fishbane describes the split with its intellectual predecessors in the following terms:

> The dominance in modern biblical studies of a literary criticism which saw as its chief task the evolutionary reconstruction of the sources and traditions which comprise the received biblical narrative, and thereby the reconstruction of the history of Israelite religion and literature has only recently lost its grip. The vacuum has been enthusiastically filled by many efforts, the product of new literary procedures and assumptions.[5]

The two groups of scholars had two completely different points of view as to what created the biblical document as it has come down to us. Looking at similar

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[3] Tremper Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation: Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation. Vol. 3* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Academic Books, 1987) 60.
[4] Adele Berlin, "On the Bible-as-literature," in *Prooftexts*: vol. 2 No. 3. 1982. 325. A great deal of the debate about the nature of biblical literature as well as that surrounding the nature of midrashic literature was played out in the pages of the *Prooftexts* journal.
[5] Michael Fishbane, "Recent Work on Biblical Narrative" (book reviews) in *Prooftexts. Vol. 1 1981.* 99.

phenomena, they explained the evolution of the document in completely opposing ways. One man's slopping editing was another man's creative instinct at work.

> For Speiser, two stories similar in details and structure signal two different sources. For the literary critic, on the other hand, the issue of sources is irrelevant. They may or may not be different sources; the important matter is the shape of the text as it is before us. Narrative style, not a conflation of sources, explains doublets.[6]

"In fact," says Leland Ryken, in his essay, "Literary Criticism of the Bible: Some Fallacies," "the biblical scholar's definition [of literary criticism] is virtually the opposite of the literary critic's definition. Instead of assuming disunity and fragmentation, the literary critic assumes unity and pattern. ... The disagreement over the definition of 'literary criticism,' affects everything that biblical scholars and literary critics do with biblical literature. Most of all, it affects the questions that they ask of the text..."[7]

As a matter of fact, no two disciplines seem to be more in need of marriage counseling than literary criticism and biblical scholarship. Nonetheless, all the scholars agree, even those who agree to disagree, that much can be learned by allowing the two disciplines to benefit from the insights of one other. One way to go about understanding the Bible-as-literature movement is to examine those who objected to it and the debate that ensued around it.

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[6] Longman, *Literary Approaches,* 6.

[7] Leland Ryken. "Literary Criticism of the Bible: Some Fallacies" in Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis, editor. *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narrative* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974) 26-27.

The Bible-as-literature movement was met with critical opposition from biblical scholars and from those who did source criticism (and there was some overlap here), from those who felt it opened the door to an ideological free-for-all and from those who felt it demeaned the notion of Bible as Scripture (and there was some overlap here). Ironically, many of the scholars in the course of their criticism of one another were quick to point out that there was still room for mutual benefit if some of their key concerns could be addressed.

One of the key obstacles that Bible-as-literature had to overcome was a sort of apologetic approach to what could be considered literature. Some scholars felt that the Bible-as-literature understanding seemed to imply a notion that the Bible had no other relevance. This idea was most concisely indicated in the quote from David Stern, cited above. While Stern may seem critical of something he calls "reconstituting the wholeness of the biblical text," it remains clear that one of the basic premises of the Bible-as-literature approach was the unity of the text as a starting point.

One of the key points of contention between scholars was, of course, how to understand the Bible as a document from which any study could begin and what was meant by terminology which they supposedly shared, such as the term literary criticism itself. Biblical scholarship had long understood as its objective the dissecting of the biblical text. In his essay, , "Literary Criticism of the Bible: Some Fallacies," Leland Ryken cites Klaus Koch offering "the following biblical

scholar's definition of 'literary criticism': 'The literary critic ... attempts to discover the original writings, to determine exactly their date of origin, and to grasp the personality of the writer as much as is possible. This means he approaches the text with, so to say, a dissecting knife in his hand. ... Literary criticism is the analysis of biblical books from the standpoint of lack of continuity,..." [8] While the literary approach may have been uninterested in an almost archaeological aspect of the ancient text, for Source critics the situation was exactly the opposite:

> Use of different divine names, doublets, and other types of repetition and supposed contradictions are some of the criteria used to distinguish one source from another. The result of the study of sources is to move away from the final form of the text to its prehistory. The method is thus diachronic. Furthermore, it fragments the final form of the text into a number of sources. Both of these tendencies are resisted by modern literary approaches to the study of the Bible.[9]

As we can see from the outset, the two sets of scholars saw their missions as virtually mutually exclusive. In her book, *Reading Biblical Narratives,"* Yairah Amit describes literary criticism as a discipline which takes as its starting point the unity of the text which it is bound to examine. She is among the generation of scholars who felt that she could incorporate the insights gleaned from biblical scholarship, but nonetheless, she clearly sees herself as starting from a different point and working towards a different objective. She writes:

> Literary criticism, however, is based on text criticism and takes its conclusions into consideration. *This criticism is concerned with the text as a whole*, its unity, the time of its writing, questions about its author or authors, and the intentional changes that may be discovered in it. Literary criticism offers

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[8] Leland Ryken. "Literary Criticism of the Bible," 26.
[9] Longman, *Literary Approaches,* 23.

> assumptions about the original scope of the text and the various deliberate additions that were inserted into it in the course of its editing, which reflect the needs of later readers.[10] (my emphasis)

A dimension of this debate was played out in the pages of the *Prooftexts* journal. The scholars Adele Berlin and James Kugel, among others, debated the merits of the Bible-as-literature approach. Again we see that in placing herself in the Bible-as-literature camp, Berlin makes clear, even in her examination of what type of interpretation should be undertaken, that her basic premise is that the text has unity. She says, "The first is exegesis, ... the second is eisegesis,... *both are literary approaches which view the text as a unified whole,* divorced of its original context or development, and both are concerned with explaining the choice of words and the arrangement of pericopes.[11] (again, my emphasis)

In a similar vein, Berlin continues her argument, quoting the Israeli scholar, M. Greenberg. Unity goes hand in hand with the notion of meaning. Unlike those who want to argue that the Bible has some kind of sacred dimension, the Bible-as-literature approach is content to argue for some kind of literary dimension, some meaning as literature. In Greenberg's words, "This approach, too, makes the assumption that the text has meaning – that is was designed to convey a message;"[12]

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[10] Yairah Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001) 23. As the publication date of this book may indicate, the debate has softened in recent years with a greater tendency, notably of those doing literary criticism, to welcome research from both sides of the debate.

[11] Berlin, "On the Bible-as-literature," 325.

[12] Berlin, "On the Bible-as-literature," 326.

Singularly the most prominent scholar in the debate, the champion of the Bible-as-literature, is Robert Alter. While he has been left behind by those scholars who have entered into the Midrash and Literary Criticism debate, Alter still brings a contribution to this study. He brings an appreciation of the literary quality of the text, that is most specifically an understanding of how Scripture tried to achieve indeterminacy. For Alter, there is an inherently literary quality in the Bible and also something unique in the way it goes about formulating meaning, notably that inherent in the Bible itself, for Alter, is a sense of its quality as something that needs to be interpreted. In the Bible, he find, "the vigorous movement of biblical writing away from the stable closure of mythological world view and toward the indeterminacy, the shifting causal concatenations, the ambiguities of a fiction made to resemble the uncertainties of life in history." [13] Alter finds that while there is much in common between the Hebrew Bible and other Near Eastern epics, "The Hebrew writers, however, made a special virtue in this regard out of the newly fashioned prose medium in which they worked, and this deserves closer attention than it has generally received.[14]

One of the strengths of the Bible-as-literature approach, especially in the intellectual context in which it was developed, was the introduction of the notion that the Bible contained plurality of meaning and invited interpretation. In Alter's case, it might be possible to argue that this was an outgrowth of his familiarity

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[13] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981) 27.
[14] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 27.

with midrash, but in any event it represents a key component of what his outlook shares with the Rabbis. "Indeed," wrote Alter, " an essential aim of the innovative technique of fiction worked out by the ancient Hebrew writers was to produce a certain indeterminacy of meaning, especially in regard to motive, moral character, and psychology." [15]

Kugel's objection was that somehow this literary approach was at the cost of the sacred dimension of the biblical text. He said:

> ...what is nowadays called literary criticism of the Bible often consists of the imposition onto biblical texts of ideas about genre, form, and literary convention wholly foreign to the world of the Bible's creation; and second (a somewhat subtler point) that the very attempt to apply "the tools of literary analysis" to the Bible is- far from a neutral act- a statement about the nature and purpose of these texts, one which, at least in some cases, is at odds with (as best as one can tell) the circumstances of the texts' composition, as well as those of their being included in a canonized book called the Bible.[16]

Scholars advocating for the Bible-as-literature approach disagreed with Kugel's assessment that seeing the literary dimension detracted from the sacred aspect. Some, like Yairah Amit, felt that the shift from the Source critical scholarship would open new doors to a heightened understanding of the Bible as we have it.

> Some scholars who, consciously or otherwise, regard the biblical text as sacred, even while treating it as an object of study, would not only prefer to ignore the critical conclusions of biblical research but would happily adopt those literary synchronic approaches that analyze the existing text without asking questions about its history.[17]

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[15] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative,* 12.

[16] James Kugel, "James Kugel Responds," in *Prooftexts*: vol. 2 No. 3. 1982. 328. This and the citations above from Adele Berlin were part of the debate which took place in the "Controversy" section of the pages of the *Prooftexts* journal.

[17] Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives*, 22.

Not only did it view the text as a whole, but the Bible-as-literature critical approach went against the stated objective of source criticism and biblical scholarship by claiming that it could achieve its ends without addressing historical concerns, which had been the chief outcome of all of their fragmentary analysis. No one saw this more clearly than the biblical scholar, Michael Fishbane.

> At the root of the foregoing remarks is embedded the major claim of the endeavor called the "literary interpretation of the Bible"; and, indeed, this claim constitutes a virtual paradigm shift in the discipline. For what is clearly involved is a shift of concern away from a host of cultural-historical issues to which the text presumably refers in the direction of the text itself: the text as self-regulating universe of discourse, the text as a presentation of reality whose language and structures are correlated with each other, and not with any representation of reality beyond the formal bounds of its verbal onset and closure. This focus of concern does not at all obviate the possibility that an historical actuality may have occasioned the text, or that its details may also have extrinsic value for the historian of culture, institutions or religion. The claim simply advocates an engagement with the inner-textual dynamics of a narrative (or other genre) as they present themselves to consciousness, or as they may be analytically reconstructed.[18]

Historicity, he seems to say, may or may not be accurate, but it is not an issue. Nothing could have done more to distance the Bible-as-literature approach from that of Source criticism which had been solely invested in unearthing the historical from the textual, as its main endeavor. Alter defends why we do not ask biblical criticism for historicity. A key element of the debate concerning the historical nature of the Bible can be traced to the understanding of the nature of the literature as the Bible-as-literature scholars understood it.

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[18] Fishbane, "Recent Work," 100.

> The case of the Bible's sacred history, however, is rather different from that of modern historiography. There is, to begin with, a whole spectrum of relations to history in the sundry biblical narratives, as I shall try to indicate later, but none of these involves the sense of being bound to documentable facts that characterizes history in its modern acceptation. ... As odd as it may sound at first, I would contend that prose fiction is the best general rubric for describing biblical narrative. Or, to be more precise, ... we can speak of the Bible as *historicized* prose fiction. To cite the clearest example, the Patriarchal narratives may be composite fictions based on national traditions, but in the writers' refusal to make them conform to the symmetries of expectations, in their contradictions and anomalies, they suggest the unfathomability of life in history under an inscrutable God.[19]

It may appear historical but it is literature, Alter argues. Michael Fishbane agrees. As he put it:

> It may be that the biblical narratives give the presumption of historical truth, given their history-like form and the authorial authority which mark their presentations. But can one doubt the artificial literary character of many sequences of events when one can identify the similar archtechtonic structures organizing the "historical" content of many other narratives.[20]

This distinction about the exact nature of the biblical narrative is important because it clearly shows that while Robert Alter may never have seen the biblical text as a text, he was among the first to suggest that the Bible has the literary quality of what he called "historicized prose fiction." The notion that the Bible had a sense of itself as a literary construction, as Michael Fishbane reiterates, makes Alter the natural bridge into the next chapter of the intellectual debate. As Robert Alter put it:

> I do not think, though, that every nuance of characterization and every turning point of the plot in these stories can be justified in either moral-theological or national-historical terms. Perhaps this is the ultimate difference between any hermeneutic approach to the Bible and the literary approach that I am proposing: in the literary perspective there is latitude for the exercise of pleasurable invention for its own sake, ranging from the "microscopic" details

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[19] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 24.
[20] Fishbane, "Recent Work," 100.

like sound-play to "macroscopic" features like the psychology of individual characters.[21]

There is no question in any of the scholarship (or in my mind) that the Rabbis accepted as given the veracity of the events described in Scripture. What Alter does not get is that the Rabbis did not see the Bible-as-literature, but rather they saw it as text.

One of the key dimensions of Bible-as-literature as an approach, and part of the reason why it had such a hard time standing the test of critical scrutiny, is because the approach divests itself of any concerns of the historicity of the stories contained in the Bible. Alter's approach stresses the "prose fiction" element. Rather than see this as a problem, Robert Alter claims this can enhance the spiritual or religious dimension of the reading.

We can see from Israeli scholar Shimon Bar-Efrat an analysis of the dimension of character in the Bible in which it is clear that historicity is beyond the grasp of scholarship and since, for the Bible-as-literature movement, what matters is seeing the Bible as a piece of literature, the historical handicap is of little importance. As Shimon Bar-Efrat said in *Narrative Art in the Bible*:

> When discussing individuals who are considered to have existed in the past, like those in biblical narrative, it should be emphasized that we know them only as they are presented in the narratives, and it is to this alone that we can refer. We know nothing whatsoever about the real nature of the biblical characters, and we have no way of examining how accurately they are represented in biblical narrative. Although we can judge whether a particular

[21] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 46.

> character is convincing as a human being, we cannot know whether he or she is an accurate representation of a specific historical person. ...
>
> Moreover, a character in a work of literature is merely the sum of the means used in the description. Whereas in real life an individual exists whether or not someone bothers to describe him or her, in a work of literature it is the portrayal which creates the character.[22]

With unity as its basic understanding, the Bible-as-literature approach could further distance itself from Source criticism by explaining how literary phenomena can function for literary purposes such as character development or plot consideration. He spoke about the recurrent patterns in the literature which. from a literary perspective, were intended to invite one passage to speak to another.

> Nevertheless, I should like to propose that there is a series of recurrent narrative episodes attached to the careers of biblical heroes that are ... dependent on the manipulation of a fixed constellation of predetermined motifs. Since biblical narrative characteristically catches its protagonists only at the critical and revealing points in their lives, the biblical type-scene occurs not in the rituals of daily existence but at the crucial junctures in the lives of the heroes, from conception and birth to betrothal to deathbed.[23]

This is an element of what we will explore when we look at the literary use of the foil. No scholars, not even Alter, seem to speak directly about the interplay between one character and another in terms of the foil, As a matter of fact, Alter says:

> The Bible does not employ symmetrical double plots but it constantly insists on parallels of situation and reiterations of motif that provide moral and psychological commentary on each other ... Since the use of such parallels and recurrent motifs is ubiquitous in narrative literature, there is no special need here to elucidate its presence in the Bible, though it is an aspect of the biblical tale that always needs careful scrutiny.[24]

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[22] Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Sheffield, England: The Almond Press, 1989) 47-48.

[23] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 51.

[24] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 9-92.

As the Bible-as-literature approach developed, it seemed to open itself gradually to the insights provided by biblical scholars. As Adele Berlin indicates, the antiquity of the literature itself – once it was established that it needed to be viewed as literature -- presented a number of challenges which the other disciplines could help clarify.

> One should view the Bible as the ancient literature which it is (this is the shortcoming of some modern critics); and use modern literary competence as a tool for uncovering an ancient literary competence. Modern competence alone is not enough; it must be balanced by knowledge of philology, scribal practices, ancient near eastern history, literature, etc.[25]

Whether the Bible-as-literature movement set out to save the Bible from falling into disuse or whether it had some other agenda is also a topic of hot debate. Scholars like James Kugel who disagreed with the Bible-as-literature approach felt that the Bible had been able to defend itself for a pretty long time. In his opinion, focusing on the literary aspect somehow implied that the Bible could no longer pretend to its sacred status.

> What I wished to show was that the literary reading, which has been around since antiquity, is not now a mere "also" that has come to heighten our appreciation of the Sacred Writ, it is not simply "another dimension" of a great book, but rather the modern rival of an older reading, "The Bible as Scripture." Our new reading is the creation of a modern tradition of exegesis that brackets what used to be the most fundamental aspect of the Bible, the tradition of its divine character (and the reading(s) that that implied), and which therefore must now seek some redeeming value for it by turning it into a book-that-never-was, the theological book par excellence minus the theology, the Literary Bible.[26]

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[25] Berlin, "On the Bible-as-literature," 326.
[26] Kugel, "James Kugel Responds," 329.

The shift from sacred text to literary work was not an innocent one. Scholars generally agree that it was made possible in part by an enlarging of the area of acceptable schools and orientations of analysis, "the ists," so to speak. The questions provoked by this climate were central, "If meaning was not inherent in the author's intention or in the text itself, how are we to evaluate those different interpretations? One response is to say they are all equally valid. Meaning resides in the reader not in the text. The reader creates the meaning of the text."[27]

There is no reason to go into detail here about the specific cultural or intellectual events which brought about the advent of these specialized approaches to intellectual endeavors. But it is clear that this new type of intellectual inquiry was fostered by political and social changes, and that part of the resistance which greeted an intellectual movement such as the Bible-as-literature movement was due to perceived associations with a larger political shift in the intellectual climate. Nonetheless, the results were obvious: "The most frequent appeal to reader-response theory in biblical studies comes from those who might be called 'ideological readers.' Here I refer to those who read the Scripture with a definite, usually political, agenda. The two most prominent types of ideological readers today are liberation theologians and feminist scholars."[28]

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[27] Longman, *Literary Approaches,* 38.
[28] Longman, *Literary Approaches,* 39.

Despite the debate, critics and analysts began to see that the tide had turned and that the intellectual debate was bound to be opened to a variety of viewpoints. For them, the Bible-as-literature approach could only be strengthened by this new influx of perspectives and sensibilities.

> Even if we cannot regard the biblical story as a separate genre, the art of the biblical story is, in the words of the literary scholar Robert Alter, a "wonderfully complex art," which "offer such splendid illustrations of the primary possibilities of narrative," ...Moreover, since the biblical stories are ancient literature incorporated into a collection of works written over a period of at least six hundred years,... we modern readers must learn to identify the principles that informed their design.
>
> This, then, is a young and novel area of study, less than fifty years old, that analyses biblical texts as literary works and deserves to be studied and tested according to the criteria of literary criticism. The value of this scholarship and its contribution to biblical research is no longer in doubt. Tradition-minded readers enjoy discovering an added aspect of these stories, namely, the aesthetic one, while the historian who seeks to reconstruct the realities behind the narrative finds that in order to elucidate the historical core, it is necessary to observe the formal design. The last three decades have seen a number of new literary methods being applied to the biblical story, representing a variety or reading strategies, such as structuralist, poststructuralist, feminist, and deconstructionist, and there are probably more to come.[29]

Michael Fishbane analyses this phenomenon in his exploration of why the split with the search for historicity had such deep rooted political implications.

> Modern biblical studies, the offspring of continental Protestant scholarship, has been obsessed for two hundred years with the evidential value of the biblical text. The text was triumphantly proclaimed potential evidence for, and witness to, the historical events which they reported. No doubt regnant nineteenth-century historicist passions, together with diverse theological motivations, induced and sustained this concern with the historical reality "behind" the biblical text. Textual analysis was simply a means to the reconstruction of this reality; and, significantly, this reality was regarded as the meaning-reference and particular value of the textual content.[30]

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[29] Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives*, 13-14.

[30] Fishbane, "Recent Work," 99-100.

When the Bible became literature under the auspices of the Bible-as-literature scholars it had to cede this role as witness to a truth upon which were based, according to this new brand of scholars, any number of ills.

While the text lost its role as mine field for possible archaeological insights into the past, another transition was also underway. That was the intellectual debate which called into question what exactly the nature of a text was. This thinking gave way to theories such as the Reader-Response theory. In discussing the impact of this debate, Adele Berlin quotes Israeli scholar, Moshe Greenberg, "The purpose of this approach is not to make the Bible appear to be a literary masterpiece by modern standards, but to 'reconstruct the perception of text by an ideal reader living at the time when it had reached its present disposition'"[31] Scholars in other disciplines were rethinking fundamental notions such as how readers interact with text, do texts exist outside the minds of readers, do we need to preserve the illusion or continue to seek for the "true" meaning of a text and is a text merely what the author intended it to be? Michael Fishbane encapsulated this new notion: "Texts are hardly static collections of literary components; they are catalyzed into a lively and living dynamic by the reading process itself."[32] The importance of this intellectual shift can not be underestimated. As we will see below, what modern scholarship understood as a text, and the fragile way in which that depended upon the reader, does not at all correspond to the rabbinic notion of text. But the introduction of this idea allowed for far-reaching changes in

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[31] Berlin, "On the Bible-as-literature," 326.
[32] Fishbane, "Recent Work," 102.

the analysis of all literature, including the Bible. Moving meaning from the author's purview represented nothing short of an intellectual revolution. "In short," wrote Tremper Longman, "the meaning of a text resides in the conventional code, which has a public meaning, not in the author's intention or in the reader's preunderstanding. Reading is a 'rule-governed' process."[33]

The Bible-as-literature movement introduces a shift away from sources, away from using the Bible as a means. It took us back to looking at the written document of the Bible itself. This innovation, combined with the shift in the understanding of how reading and meaning interacted, unleashed a new wave of thinking about biblical literature. One reason why it is essential to discuss the Bible-as-literature approach is that the strength of this approach is its call to us to return to the text. As early as 1974, Kenneth R.R. Gros Louis collected a group of essays under the title, *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives.* In that volume, Kalman Bland contributed an essay entitled, "The Rabbinic Method and Literary Criticism," in which he said, "We are accustomed to being observers, not participants in the creative act which produces art. Yet this is precisely what is called for in reading Scripture as literature.[34]

Describing how this process works, Bland says:

> ... a restatement of the method for reading Scripture ... is in order. The art of biblical narrative consists of signals addressed to the sensitive reader. These signals function as agents which stimulate our intellect, our imagination, and

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[33] Longman, *Literary Approaches* , 32.
[34] Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis, *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974) 17.

> our capacity for empathy in order to engage us in a mutual act of literary creation with Scripture itself.[35]

Bland titles his article in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives,* "The Rabbinic Method and Literary Criticism." Clearly in trying to discern what it could do that was new, modern literary critics of the Bible came back to something that was very old. They returned to the creative exegetical techniques of midrash. This may be the impetus for the next chapter of literary and intellectual development, spearheaded by David Stern, which then sought to examine midrash itself as literature, and in the process to reclaim it from the deconstructionists and others. Nonetheless, scholars have agreed that as models for careful readers of the texts, readers who assumed unity and who respected the sacred element of the Bible, no one could surpass the Rabbis.

Questions such as these struck at the basis of what had been critical scholarship for at least two centuries. Without a firm link to historicity, analysis began to see that texts could be made to say any number of things. This shift in the paradigm moved not only the notion of the text and the purpose of critical inquiry but also the role of the reader to a more central place. Again, Michael Fishbane clearly understood the implications of the convergence of these intellectual and critical notions. He writes:

> And let us not for one moment ignore the implications which this reorientation to the inner-dynamic of a text presents for the question of where the meaning of a text is to be found. For the shift of concern away from attempts to ascertain the historical *Sitz im Leben* behind a text involves a correlative shift

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[35] Gros Louis, *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*, 21.

> in the location of textual meaning to the living interaction between text and mind.
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> The new *Sitz im Leben* is that of the reader's mind in creative interaction with the text. The text has no meaning -- or at best only a virtual one -- without a reader. This being so, an appreciation of the alignment between form and content is vital; for with it the reader has a means to access the elusive meaning of a text.

The debates around these intellectual concerns may have seemed esoteric or "ivory tower" from the outside. But actually they represented a fundamental shift in some very important social concerns. The Bible itself was moving from document of base to document of literature. Anyone who thinks these types of concerns have no impact in "the real world" need only look at the recent Supreme Court battles about displaying the Ten Commandments in government buildings, to name just one example. While the scholarly debate was polite and claimed to want to work towards mutual understanding, what was at stake was the situating of "the biblical as the basis for our society" in a larger frame. Was it literature, open to any multitude of examinations? Was a feminist or Marxist critique of it as "valid" as an analysis of what the examination of psalms might tell us about the historicity of the sacrificial cult?

In his essay, "Literary Criticism of the Bible: Some Fallacies," Leland Ryken clearly marks out the divide between biblical scholars and literary critics and explores why the need to come together and learn from each other.[36] He states that a basis for the division is the difference on the critical aspect of unity. As Adele Berlin had argued, the biblical scholarship known as Source criticism may

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[36] Gros Louis, *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives,* 24ff.

have hastened its own demise by overdoing fragmentation.[37] Ryken makes a strikingly ideologically based argument for unity. His first example is the subtitle of a book; he says: "The biblical view of history also provides plot unity to the Bible. The subtitle of C. A. Patride' *The Grand Design of God: The Literary Form of the Christian View of History* sums it up well."[38] His example shows that the issue of unity was of keen concern and ideological interest for Christian scholars. He tips his hand more obviously when he argues for the literary unity of the Bible; his understanding is that,"[i]ndividual parts and image patterns are continual reenactments of the unifying archetypal story of biblical literature, and they become a single literary structure moving from creation to apocalypse."[39] This type of discourse just hints at the true underpinnings of the debate which could perhaps be characterized not as "Who Wrote the Bible? but rather "Who Owns the Bible?" Nonetheless, Ryken's advice remains solid. Literary critics are indebted to biblical scholars. He outlines three reasons:

> The critic's indebtedness to biblical scholarship falls chiefly into three categories, First, he is dependent on the biblical scholar for his knowledge of the language of the Bible. ... Secondly, the critic is indebted to biblical scholarship for insights into the cultural milieu presupposed by the biblical writer. And thirdly, the critic is dependent on the scholar for his awareness of literary forms unique to the Bible or ancient Near East.[40]

In addition, Ryken demonstrates the value of the type of questioning of the text for which we can look to literary criticism. He says:

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[37] Berlin made this point in a footnote to her discussion with James Kugel. See *Prooftexts,* Vol. 2, No. 3. 325. note 4.
[38] Gros Louis, *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives* , 34.
[39] Gros Louis, *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives* , 35.
[40] Gros Louis, *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives* , 30.

> The disagreement over the definition of "literary criticism" affects everything the biblical scholars and literary critics do with biblical criticism. Most of all it affects the questions that they ask of the biblical text, and ultimately any criticism depends on how the text is questioned.[41]

Ryken, like Alter, sought to embrace and accentuate the artistically literary dimension of the Bible itself. In response to Source criticism, he acknowledges that "One of the fallacies that is prevalent is the assumption that everything in the Bible is literary in nature and amenable to the ordinary tools of literary criticism."[42] His approach understood that even though there was much to be gained from the Bible-as-literature outlook, still scholars had to realize that the Bible was composed of a number of different types of components. Not everything in the Bible was literature just because it was in the Bible, just as not everything in the Bible was sacred, as other scholars had found, nor was everything in the Bible original, as Source critics had discovered.

Still, he argued, the Bible should be considered literature because of its overwhelmingly literary character. It would be overstating it to say that the world of criticism waited for him to come along to define literature, but he reminded us of the definition of literature as:

> ...literature is a presentation of human experience. Its content is human experience, not primarily abstract thought, its formulation is presentational, ... Instead of developing abstract principles or accumulating factual information, the writer of literature present characters in action or concrete images and sensory descriptions. ...At the consciously artistic end of the narrative spectrum it is possible to discern three things: (1) a story that is carefully unified around one or more controlling literary principles (such as tragedy, comedy, satire, or heroism) (2) a plot that has structural unity and pattern,

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[41] Gros Louis, *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*, 37.
[42] Gros Louis, *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*, 24.

> and (3) a story that makes use of such narrative forms as foreshadowing, dramatic irony, climax, suspense, poetic justice, foils, image patterns, and symbolism. The criterion of artistry also opens the way for stylistic analysis of biblical oratory and epistle.[43]

Again, it is easy to dismiss this type of intellectual fervor as being irrelevant to anyone outside the hallowed halls of academe. While it is not fair to say that there was any earthshaking fallout, the debate itself still had impact beyond its narrow scope. In situating this debate in its larger context, Regina Schwartz speaks in terms of reappropriating, and even rewriting. She says:

> Added to the difficulty of situating these essays in the contemporary critical climate is another problem: that context -- complicated as it is -- is not the only one where we should locate *The Book and the Text*. There is another dimension: not contemporary but historical. If less well known to literary scholars, the history of biblical interpretation is not less central; for when we understand interpreting the Bible as an act of reappropriating, reconceiving, and rewriting, we have attached ourselves to a long and illustrious lineage of biblical interpreters. ... the authority for our interpretations; the relation of the text to the reader; the relation of the text to history; the political force of our interpretations; the question of the boundaries of the text and canon formation.
> ...That brings me to the third story that should be understood as another context for this volume: the story of institutions. Much of the history of biblical interpretation is part of the history of the Church and the history of Judaism, at once propelling major changes in those institutions and being propelled by those changes. But it may be less obvious ... that... the movement of biblical interpretation from religious institutions to the academy is both driven by our theological concerns and shapes those concerns.[44]

The Bible's shift from sacred document to academic text signaled for many that it risked losing its power as a basis for faith, truth and divine communication. Interestingly, most of those who embrace the Bible-as-literature movement

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[43] Gros Louis, *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*, 25-26.

[44] Regina Schwartz, *The Book and the Text* (Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1990) 3-4 and 12. These remarks come from the introduction by Regina Schwartz who outlines the deeper debate below these seemingly obscure academic discussions.

eventually rejected the post-modern tendency to allow it to be made to say anything and found their way back, some through the beauty, to the divinity of the biblical text. Among those who most eloquently expressed this understanding of the Bible (although there is no evidence that he had every rejected this in the first place), Michael Fishbane:

> I ask such questions precisely because I, for one, would not like to see the eventual sophistication of the literary study of the Bible obscure the religious truths which the Bible itself seeks to teach. I would rather hope that interest in the literary dimensions of texts might elicit new means of apprehending religious truths. From this perspective it would not be necessary radically to bifurcate historical and purely literary criticism and to foreclose the chance of a fruitful interplay between the two. Pure literary criticism, through its elucidation of conventions and the like, will provide historical literary criticism with a more responsible estimation of what, in fact, is "the historical" in "the narratological."...we should keep before us the fact that whatever else the Bible may be, it is presumptively a narrative theology of God's historical actions and reactions with His people Israel. It is this fact, after all, that give rise to the narratives in the first place, and so it is fitting that it is our recognition of the irreducibly religious nature of the text that should guard against the dematerialization of biblical texts into an enchanted series of mutually reflecting mirrors. [45]

Finally, scholarship did seem to agree that something could be gained by allowing the disciplines and approaches to interact. Fishbane articulates the singularly most important reason, because if this type of interrelation is stifled, the biblical communication will be cut off. The theological richness of the Bible can not be sacrificed to agendas or ideologies. He demonstrates that an accurate use of the strengths of literary analysis, used in the correct vein, can yield new and interesting results and he writes:

> It would be both important and constructive to consider the relationships between the modes and structures used in biblical narratives and the type of

[45] Fishbane, "Recent Work," 104.

> religious-historical universe they engender. For example, what kind of space is opened by biblical narratives and how does human action relate to divine action or intention? How does an invisible narrator generate narrative discourse? And how does this phenomenon bear on the authority and "truth" of what is reported? ... How do biblical narratives generate the same hierarchy of meanings (e.g. dependence of man, world, and time upon God) as do non-narrative modes like law? and, indeed, what is the religious import of the anthological nature of biblical narratives... . Finally, how does biblical narrative style and form purport to "witness" to historical acts of God, and also sponsor the sense that these narratives are but human responses to the numinous"[46]

The purpose of the biblical narrative was something dear to the hearts of the Rabbis who thought that it contained everything they needed in order to discern God's will and to discover what God wanted of them. No such clarity of purpose resided in the Bible-as-literature approach. Nonetheless, even Robert Alter understood that in the Bible, at least as the ancient writers were concerned, were essential clues for making sense of their historical reality and the idea of God's presence in this world.

> The ancient Hebrew writers, as I have already intimated, seek through the process of narrative realization to reveal the enactment of God's purposes in historical events. This enactment, however, is continuously complicated by a perception of two, approximately parallel, dialectical tensions. One is the tension between the divine plan and the disorderly character of actual historical events, or, to translate this opposition into specifically biblical terms, between the divine promise and its ostensible failure to be fulfilled; the other is a tension between God's will, His providential guidance, and human freedom, the refractory nature of man.[47]

He also demonstrated a concept which was going to become key in rabbinical literature and that was the relationship between language and God, and how language held a key with regard to approaching God or some kind of religious

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[46] Fishbane, "Recent Work," 103.

[47] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 33.

activity. In his exploration of how literature functions, in an essay entitled, "How Convention Helps Us Read," Alter describes the barrenness motif, which will be of particular interest to us later on. As he shows, an element of the barrenness motif can often be a foil. The loved, barren wife is often (as in the case of Sarah, Rachel and Hannah, for example) tormented by the presence of a fertile, but unloved other wife.

> The annunciation type-scene begins with the plight of barrenness of the future mother hero, ... In some versions, the distress of the barren wife is accentuated by the presence of a fertile, less loved co-wife. After the fact of barrenness, the annunciation to the barren woman is enacted through the promise or prediction...
> ... This tripartite schema of initial barrenness, divine promise, and the birth of a son, may seem simple to the point of tedium, but a rapid review of the different uses to which the schema is put from Genesis to Kings will suggest how various a single type-scene can be, how supple an instrument of expression the convention can prove.[48]

While his explanation of the type scene is not completely applicable to the subject at hand here, it will be below, and it shows what depth of understanding of Scripture can be achieved by using the literary lens.

Alter offers a definition (or approaches one) of what a text means in "How Convention Helps Us Read" where he criticizes the search by form-critics for *Setz-em Leben*. "The most influential approach to recurrent patterns in biblical literature," he says, "has been the concept of," what is roughly translated as "'class.' 'genre' or in some instances 'sub-genre,'" which, he notes" became a key to form-criticism analysis. But through the hypothesis... Gunkel and his followers

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[48] Robert Alter, "How Convention Helps Us Read" in *Prooftexts*. Vol. 3. No. 2 May 1983, 119-120.

have sought to determine the so-called life-setting of the various texts,..." This endeavor he characterizes as, "a line of speculation that six decades of investigation have shown to be highly problematic."[49] In grappling with the notion of the relation between a literary convention and the milieu in which it operates, he says, "...a literary convention may in some instances reflect certain social or cultural realities but is bound to offer a highly mediated, stylized image of such realities: in the literary convention, culture has been transformed into text,..."[50] Nonetheless, he eventually falls short in his analysis because he does not grasp what the post-modern critics found so enchanting in Midrashic literature, and that was the rabbinic notion of what a text was. At the end of his book, Alter unceremoniously lumps all those who approached this type of question as some sort of "textual folliests"(my language) and he confuses notions of the critical text, source criticism and other types of critics with those doing the type of work which followed his.[51]

What then can we learn from the Bible-as-literature approach? What we might say here is that if nothing else, this movement signaled a badly needed shift from Source criticism, which, as Adele Berlin hinted, had perhaps as an avenue of inquiry brought about its own demise. The key shortcoming of Alter's approach is that he never saw the text as a text. He seemed to think that if he introduced the word "text" into his book in chapter 7 that he could somehow encompass the

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[49] Alter, "How Convention Helps Us Read," 119.
[50] Alter, "How Convention Helps Us Read," 119.
[51] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, see particularly Chapter 8.

entire school of documentary hypothesis and textual criticism.[52] Nonetheless, in responding as he did to those critical approaches, he unwittingly pinpointed the shortcomings of their analysis. Documentary hypothesis in whatever form it takes really does not provide a plain-sense solution for how the Bible as we have it came to be. Some of Michael Fishbane's insights distinguish between inner-textuality and possible levels of redaction. It is beyond the scope of this essay to address that issue in depth, but for our purposes it helps to understand how Robert Alter's sense of the Bible as a whole *had* a sense. He sees the Bible-as-literature approach as a way to rediscover an enchantment with the literature. Adele Berlin, again quoting Moshe Greenberg, reminds us of just what delight and treasure might ensue from this approach:

> In his quest for significance... the holistic interpreter partially resembles the theological exegete seeking timeless truth. In the historical controls he imposes on himself, he resembles partly the historical-analogic exegete. Resembling both, he compounds his risks; he must beware of reading into his texts private or modern significances on the one hand, and overrating his historical-literary judgment on the other. What lures him into this double jeopardy? The chance that he may discover the cause of (and thus corroborate) the initial veneration of the Scriptures; that he may experience the editor-canonizer as a fellow intelligence, whose product became a classic not (perversely) in spite of its character but (deservedly) because of it.[53]

Regina Schwartz argues, rightfully so, that this is as it always was until Source critics came along. As she says:

> In one sense, all this volume demonstrates is that the Bible is now being subjected to the same theoretical questions we ask of other texts. But in

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[52] For a look at how Robert Alter treats the notion of text, see Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 131ff.

[53] Berlin, "On the Bible-as-literature," 326.

> another sense, doing just that signals a radical departure from business-as-usual in biblical studies, another genuine rupture in the history of interpreting the text. It has happened before. ... My own sense is that in the course of the critical-historical Bible scholarship that ensued, that authority was reinscribed, albeit in a disguised fashion. Whether the approach was historical or philological, the Bible was the focus of sustained, loving attention. Efforts to determine the cultic setting of psalms, to date the book of Daniel, to attribute various verses to various hands and to correlate those hypothetical authors with events in ancient history, did not so much as pose a challenge to the Bible's authority as they presupposed that authority, for only a commitment to the centrality of the Bible could authorize that exhaustive activity.[54]

What is important for our purposes is that the unity of the text was a given for the Rabbis. While the sophistication of their reading is, in some circles, only now beginning to be appreciated, one thing we can say about them is that they certainly were not Source critics.

For whatever failings it may have or with whatever "apologetic" objective may be attributed to it, Robert Alter's approach did start from an acknowledgement of the impact which biblical literature has played on literature as we know it. It tries to help us appreciate how the Bible, using so little, and using it sparingly, achieved so much. In that, he is a good stepping stone into an examination of "What the Rabbis were up to." Alter himself understood the distinction between his understanding of Scripture and his understanding of how the Rabbis understood scripture- he wrote:

> The difference between the two is ultimately the difference between assuming that the text is an intricately interconnected unity, as the midrashic exegetes did, and assuming it is a patchwork of frequently disparate documents, as most modern scholars have supposed. With their assumption of interconnectedness, the makers of Midrash were often as exquisitely attuned

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[54] Schwartz, *The Book and the Text*, 13.

to small verbal signals of continuity and to significant lexical nuances as any "close reader" of our own age.

There are, however, two essential distinctions between the way the text is treated in Midrash and the literary approach I am proposing. First, although the Midrashists did assume the unity of the text, they had little sense of it as a real narrative continuum, as a coherent unfolding story in which the meaning of earlier data is progressively, even systematically, revealed or enriched by the addition of subsequent data. What this means practically is that the Midrash provides exegesis of specific phrases or narrated actions but not continuous *readings* of the biblical narratives: small pieces of the text become the foundations of elaborate homiletical structures that have only an intermittent relation to the integral story told by the text.

The second respect in which the midrashic approach to the biblical narratives does not really recognize their literary integrity is the didactic insistence of midrashic interpretation.[55]

While Alter and the Bible-as-literature scholars of his school never understand the Bible as text, and they never seem to grasp exactly what is meant by the term, they do imply that they get the rabbinic notion of Torah as text. " Literary criticism becomes true to Midrash," writes Adele Berlin, "only when it reads its own literary values into the text. To be sure, the line between modern literary *peshat* and *derash* is sometimes indistinct, but the same can be said of some cases of rabbinic *peshat* and *derash.*"[56]

Alter therefore provides a model for the later work of this essay, what we will call, "an imaginative following in their footsteps."

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[55] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative,* 11.

[56] Berlin, "On the Bible-as-literature," 325.

Chapter Two

Suspended Simultaneity and the Rabbinic Reading Strategy

In the last section, we looked at the scholarly approach to biblical studies, Bible-as-Literature. While eventually we showed the shortcomings of this approach, we should acknowledge, as we will see later, that it did open some critical doors. Probably the most well-known of scholars of this approach is Robert Alter. Alter's argument, ultimately, is that the biblical writers were producing literature and this argument can be seen most pointedly in his book, *The Art of Biblical Narrative,* in the chapter entitled: "Characterization and the Art of Reticence." Here he argues that the deliberate choices of revealed or hidden insight into a character were the means by which the Bible conveyed character.[1] This, in a nutshell, according to Alter, argues that the Bible is literature.

The main problem with this approach is that it understood the Bible as a collection of literary units specifically about character. It focuses on the element of character and is only tangentially interested in the language itself as language. As we will see below, the crucial difference here is between the notion of a body of literature and the notion of a text. Alter's argument, which we are rejecting, is that the Bible is literature. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that we are rejecting the notion that the Bible is merely literature and we are also going to disagree with the implications which ensue from understanding the Bible in this way. Scholars like Michael Fishbane, and others such as David Stern, take us to the next level of our understanding by introducing the idea of the biblical text as a

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[1] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981) 114ff.

text. Michael Fishbane's approach shows that reading the text as a text – not as a collection of stories or literary units but as a text - will sensitize us to the rabbinic understanding of the Bible as a text, a text which invited, and in fact had already been subject to, interpretation.

Michael Fishbane argues most conclusively that the Bible itself underwent a process of emendation which gave us the finished product we have today. He argues that reading the biblical text today with the knowledge provided for us by modern biblical scholarship, we see that the text was subject to emendation and elaboration. He demonstrates this point by noting that even the smallest inclusions of glosses or formulaic terms show that for those involved with the text prior to the rabbinic period, the text itself was in no way fixed.

> As often as not these explanatory glosses are introduced by formulaic terms, [he writes,] thus underscoring the professional background of the scribal insertions. Moreover, even by such meager evidence, it is clear that the authoritative text being explicated was not considered inviolable but subject to the invasion of a tradition of interpretation which rendered it more comprehensible.[2]

One of Fishbane's most important contributions to the study at hand is his appreciation for the notion of the way in which rabbinic interpretation of the Bible followed from activity which was both an outgrowth of the tradition as the Rabbis received it and, at the same time, a break with the immediate past which preceded them. Scholars addressing this issue link this change in perspective to the rabbinic understanding of the times in which they lived and to the nature of

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[2] Michael Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) 5.

the received text which they had before them. As David Aaron writes, "it is clear that the rabbis recognized the tension between the need to interpret so as to revitalize their religion and the need to establish the impression of continuity." [3]

Singularly the most important element of the rabbinic approach to the Torah, and the one which is central both to their thinking and to our study, is the idea which evolved: that is to say that the Torah could be understood to be saying more than one thing. According to Alan Mintz, this intellectual development was a key component of the Rabbis' coping mechanism as they tried to make sense of the world in which they lived while still hanging on to their theology. Mintz wrote:

> The Rabbis, in contrast, were conscious of living in an age in which the channel of prophecy had been closed and the Holy Spirit exiled from its earthly abode. Religious authorities could no longer expect to be made the direct recipients of divine revelation. Only one source remained through which to discover God's will: sacred scripture. The Temple was destroyed but the text remained. According to the rabbinic theory of the text, there existed in addition to the plain words of the scribal text a vast reservoir of latent supplemental meanings which, in the form of an oral Torah, had also been revealed at Sinai. By using certain authorized hermeneutical procedures, it was possible for the Rabbis to release these meanings, especially those which the pressures of contemporary events made it most necessary to release.[4]

Stricken by the destruction of the Temple and seeking only to make sense of their world, the Rabbis engaged in an act of pure ingenuity and will -- they engaged in interpretation. "One of the features that emerges prominently is the

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[3] David Aaron, "Language and Midrash" in Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery-Peck, editors, *Encyclopaedia of Midrash: Biblical Interpretation in Formative Judaism. Vol. 1.* (Leiden: Brill: 2005) 408.

[4] Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) 49-50.

fact that for inner-biblical exegesis there is no merely literary or theological playfulness. Exegesis arises out of a practical crisis of some sort- the incomprehensibility of a word or a rule, or the failure of the covenantal tradition to engage its audience." [5] The earnestness with which they approached their task was a direct result of the seriousness of the situation in which they found themselves. They had to find something in Scripture that conformed to their belief that the truth and their theology were contained in their sacred document. At the same time, it also had to enable them to establish themselves as the link between the pre-destruction world and the future "Reading and interpreting," wrote Mintz, "are activities that are distinct from lamentation and consolation. They depend not upon the authenticity of experience but upon will and imagination, the will to recover meaning from the text and the imagination of exegetical ingenuity, ..."[6]

In order to achieve this end, the Rabbis had to base themselves on a certain number of key beliefs. They had to view what they were doing as a continuation of what had come before them, while at the same time acknowledging that with the destruction of the Temple their world had changed for all time. They also had to have a very unique understanding of the language of Torah itself, an understanding which necessitated seeing Toraitic language as an act which by its nature was different than other language as they knew it. The ultimate goal of this intellectual fervor was to introduce the notion of multiplicity of meaning, made

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[5] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah*, 16.
[6] Mintz, *Hurban*, 51.

essential by the mere fact that plain sense meaning no longer worked in their changed world. As Michael Fishbane makes clear: "...interpretation is not simply a repetition... but a profound transformation of... meanings. Accordingly, in the ritual scenario of sacred interpretation there is something akin to the well-known dynamic of 'violence and the sacred text': for an exegetical violence is done to the plain-sense of the sacred text for the very sake of saving and serving its acknowledged sanctity." [7] No single change is more crucial to understanding rabbinic literature than this one. In his essay, "Language and Midrash," Dr. David Aaron explains:

> In essence, the philosophy of language that underlies all of Rabbinic thought conceptualizes the act of interpretation- according to a set of rhetorical and conceptual rules- as an extension of God's *written* language. "Just as a hammer that strikes a rock may itself be shattered into many fragments, so may a verse yield many meanings." (B. San. 34a)
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> These tools, when struck against the "rock" of Torah, shatter into many "pieces," thereby providing a generative model of interpretation. In this sense, the graphically *written* text yields the *oral* "text," which itself would eventually be written down. By "generative" we mean that the graphic text of Torah does not yield a finite set of meanings with regard to any given verse. Instead, the written document, by virtue of the Rabbinic philosophy of Torah language, may yield an unending array of meanings, all of which are rooted in the writing itself, but none of which can stand for the singular sense of the word, or verse, or letter under consideration. [8]

As we will see below and in subsequent chapters, this polysemous nature of the text is what appealed to modern literary critics. There is a very big difference, however, between how they understood the multitude of meanings and how the Rabbis understood them. Both ways of reading, however, challenge the modern reader who expects to see the written word have a fixed meaning. In fact the

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[7] Fishbane. *The Garments of Torah,* 39.
[8] Aaron, "Language and Midrash," 405-6.

rabbinic penchant to read creatively, flying in the face of context, plain meaning and plain sense, constitutes to this day the element which renders midrash so inaccessible to the untrained reader. That they were willing to engage in this way with the text is a sign of the importance which they attributed to their task. "A modern reader may believe the surface (ordinary) meaning of a verse to be univocal," writes David Aaron, "but the sages sacrifice the determinacy of ordinary speech for the generative indeterminacy of a divine writing that requires ongoing interpretation."[9] "In this sense," he continues, "the most distinguishing characteristic of Rabbinic hermeneutics is the mythological principle that the meaning of the Torah lies behind the surface of the words and that the meaning can only be discovered via the Rabbinic method of exegesis." [10]

What, then, can be said about the "Rabbinic method of exegesis"? Imbedded in the method itself was the solid foundation of their theology. The fusion of the language itself and the theological component of the way in which it was understood constitutes the foundational rock of midrashic activity. The Rabbis saw the Torah in suspended simultaneity. They understood viscerally the notion of divine authorship and they proceeded with certainty in the belief that the way to cope with their changed world lay within the text. The hermeneutic methods themselves were built upon these foundational beliefs. As David Instone-Brewer explained in the *Encyclopedia of Midrash*:

> The hermeneutic methods used by Judaic exegetes to interpret Scripture provide an insight into their theology of Scripture. ... The theology that

[9] Aaron, "Language and Midrash," 406.
[10] Aaron, "Language and Midrash," 410.

> underlies these methods is an implicit belief in a single authorship of Scripture together with the assumption that it was written with an exactitude that did not allow for any contradiction or ambiguity. From the way they treat Scripture, it is clear that they regarded it more highly than a human document such as a legal or philosophical treatise that merely *aims* at coherence. They assumed it was utterly impossible for there to be any contradictions or even any lax use of language in Scripture. [11]

As this makes clear, the Rabbis understood both the text and the language of the text to be different than ordinary language. Rather than despair, they looked into the text itself to find the religious direction which their circumstances called for. "In general, the hermeneutic rules were viewed as necessary for decoding the Bible, seen as containing the revealed word of God, a language comprehended as different from that in which people normally communicate." [12]

Many aspects of the midrashic system of hermeneutics seem to fly in the face of common sense, plain reading. And with good reason. Inherent in the approach to the text adopted by the Rabbis was the sense that the Bible would and should be read midrashically. While it may seem that they function with neither rhyme nor reason, "[e]ven at its most apparently far-fetched or flamboyant moments, midrashic interpretations tend to be situated on genuine textual cruces or irregularities, 'bumps' in the plain surface of Scripture a fact that militates against the worst excesses of unbridled polysemy" writes David Stern. As he demonstrates, however, "there appears to be a kind of underlying 'deep

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[11] David Instone-Brewer, "Hermeneutics, Theology of" in Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery-Peck, editors.*Encyclopaedia of Midrash: Biblical Interpretation in Formative Judaism. Vol. 1.* (Leiden: Brill, 2005) 293-295.

[12]Instone-Brewer, "Hermeneutics, Theology of," 268.

structure' in midrash that both produces and governs multiple interpretations under specific exegetical conditions." [13]

Techniques such as *al tiqre,* for example, are by definition reading strategies which declare that the rabbinic interpretation is not bound by the text itself. As Michael Fishbane says so clearly:

> A profound theology ...is supposed here. It hints at a dimension of ritual praxis which undoubtedly enlivened the concrete commitment to the *mitzvot* in ancient Judaism. But from the present hermeneutical perspective, what is more to the point is that the biblical justification of the foregoing rabbinic theology is in effect no biblical justification at all – so much as it is a midrashic one. In the *al tiqre* hermeneutic, the exegetical imperative is not to read Scripture as received but as revised. Midrash is thus not so much a rewritten Bible, the manner of the book of Jubilees or psuedo-Philo's.... It is rather a re-read Bible: readerly collusion and all. And if this is so, one may wonder (here and elsewhere) about scriptural authority for the midrashic instructions. Indeed, one may even feel a bit like Alice, who objected to Humpty Dumpty's imperious substitution... If so, remember the retort: "When *I* use a word it means just what I choose it to mean- nothing more nor less." [14]

As Michael Fishbane is quick to demonstrate, however, the mission and purpose of this rabbinic act of reading was to strengthen the understanding of the divine nature of the text itself.

As we will see below when we examine the recent fracas that has arisen since post-modern literary criticism met midrash, nothing in the rabbinic approach in any way meant to imply that the author of the text as it had been received was somehow exorcised from the picture. For the Rabbis, the very purpose of the

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[13]David Stern, *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press: 1996) 26.
[14] Fishbane. *The Garments of Torah,* 26.

approach was an outgrowth of the nature of this text. Again, Fishbane shows us that this understanding is imbedded in the hermeneutic itself:

> The hermeneutical issue may be sharpened. Granting that no rabbinic midrashist would even intend his interpretative act to dispossess the scriptural authority of the Bible, one must ponder all the more just how the sages asserted their exegetical authority over the text- to echo Mr. Dumpty's retort. The answer for the case at hand... lies, I think, in the word *kivyakhol*- - translated earlier by "as it were."[15]

No singular aspect could better encapsulate the difference between the modern literary critics and the Rabbis, whose approach they so embraced, than this singular understanding -- that of mastery in authorship, that reverence with which the Rabbis approached their object of interpretation. Heroic is what Fishbane calls it, and faced with the crisis in their world, perhaps there is no better word. The hermeneutic device *kivyakhol* serves to acknowledge that the Rabbis were aware of the way in which their interpretation pushed and stretched the biblical text. As Fishbane says:

> ...The use of *kivyakhol* in classical midrash is in fact no poor man's piety but the heroics of rabbinic hermeneutics. It provides a way of becoming master of the text and its theology while simultaneously acknowledging the independent authority of Scripture. ... it functions to indicate that *if* one reads the biblical passage midrashically, such and so is the sense of what *can be* construed. ...it serves to introduce a reading of Scripture built by a midrashic construction. [16]

What we see emerging from this is a sense of what the Rabbis meant by a text. I have described the key component of their understanding of the text, that was its aspect of suspended simultaneity. All of the text existed as one for them. There was no unfolding nature, no narrative progression. In contrast, however, only so

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[15] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah*, 26.
[16] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah*, 26-27.

much of its truth lived on the surface and embedded in it was the very essence of polysemy and multiple meaning. There is no way to underestimate the shift in religious sensibility which this represents; it is what makes the Rabbis rabbinic. And it, more than any other notion, signals how they simultaneously declared their own continuity while forging ahead with their innovative tactics of interpretation. The word shifted from voice to text, and they believed themselves to hold the key for unlocking all that the text contained. Their notion of the text as text is singular and will be of central interest to us here. Fishbane sums up this shift, reminding us as he does so, that at its core there must have been for the Rabbis a sense both of urgency and profound sorrow, as well as a reverberating notion of the sanctity of their enterprise.

> The fact remains that we begin to see in these initial centuries the dignification of the written word of God with an aura nearly commensurate in mystery and power with the living divine voice which it replaces. In a word, so to speak, the increased esoteric sanctity of the text *as text* at this time, and the transfer to it of the regimen of priestly holiness and safeguards, correspond quite remarkably with the displacement of the living divine presence by a textual record of that presence. The powerful and empowering aura of a sanctified Torah text thus concealed a profound absence at its deepest core. [17]

Even though the Rabbis have a sense of the rupture which had occurred in their world, scholars today studying their work are quick to demonstrate that there are key elements of continuity which also characterize the rabbinic enterprise. The Bible text itself shows signs of having been subjected to redactional imprint, clarifying rejoinders, and a host of intertextual conversational markers. This sets the rabbinic endeavor in a larger context of continuity, which is combined with

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[17] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah*, 37.

their solely unique appreciation for the text as text. One of the premises of Michael Fishbane's work is that this redactional development has been overlooked, or "there has been a tendency to forget," as he puts it.

> With the closing of the corpus of Scripture, [he writes] however, and the establishment of a fixed canon deemed prior in time and authority to rabbinic exegesis, there was a tendency to forget the exegetical dimensions of Scripture and to see Scripture solely as the source and foundation of later interpretation. Religious and political reasons among the ancient Pharisees aided this forgetting; and the pseudepigraphical techniques of inner-biblical exegesis have served to obscure this matter yet further. It has therefore been one aim of this essay to reverse this forgetting for the sake of a historical anamnesis. The most characteristic feature of the Jewish imagination, the interpretation and rewriting of sacred texts, thus has its origin in the occasional, unsystematized instances of exegesis embedded in the Hebrew Bible, examples of which it has been my effort to recall. [18]

It is beyond our scope here to delve into these redactional or intertextual elements in depth, but it is important to mention their existence because they demonstrate that the idea of interpretation was part of the cultural framework and, as Fishbane says, it is necessary, "to suggest some of the ways by which the foundation document of Judaism, the Hebrew Bible, not only sponsored a monumental culture of textual exegesis but was itself its own first product."[19]

The idea of engaging with the text in this way is central to Judaism and has characterized much of Jewish practice throughout the ages. For Fishbane, this began with the early scribes whose imprint, for him, shows that the Jewish way to relate to the sacred text is to expound upon it. "[B]y retaining the old together with the new," he writes, "the scribes have insured that future readers would be

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[18] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah*, 18.
[19] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah*, 4.

forced to a realization not far removed from their own: that they are latecomers to the text, who must read it with the guidance of an oral- now written- exegetical tradition." [20]

To make his point, Fishbane quotes, "a Jewish mystical text from thirteenth-century Spain" in which the specific nature of Torah as a text unlike any other is clearly spelled out. In the mystical text, its author explains:

> If a man looks upon Torah as merely a book presenting narratives and everyday matters, alas for him! Such a torah, one treating with everyday concerns, and indeed a more excellent one, we too, even we could compile. More than that, in the possession of the rulers of the world there are books of even greater merit, and these we could emulate if we wished to compile some such torah. But the Torah, in all of its worlds, holds supernal truths and sublime secrets.... The world could not endure the Torah if she had not garbed herself in garments of this world. Thus the tales related in the Torah are simply her outer garments, and woe to the man who regards that outer garment as the Torah itself, ...[21]

As we have seen, an important dimension of appreciating the rabbinic approach to Torah is understanding how it represented a continuation of tradition, an appreciation that Torah itself was a result of intertextual exegesis to some extent and how the face of the written word incorporated a notion that invited interpretation. Nonetheless, the rabbinic mission, coalescing as it did around the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E., ushered in an era infused with new urgency and demanding a level of innovation which marked a turning point in Jewish history. That innovation lives and breathes in a single word: midrash. "Still," writes Rivka Kern-Ulmer, "Rabbinic exegesis, especially in midrash,

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[20] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah*, 6.
[21] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah*, 34.

represents a unique initiative of the rabbis of late antiquity, since midrash is a hermeneutic discourse *per se* and as such cannot be easily compared to any other genre of literature." [22] The rabbinic understanding of the nature of the text of Torah remains one of their lasting legacies in Jewish thought. An appreciation of this sensibility should suffice to enable us to appreciate the sophistication and subtlety with which the Rabbis engaged in this fight for their intellectual survival.

> As is trenchantly clear here, Hebrew Scripture is ontologically unique literature: not because of its aesthetic style or topics of concern- which are judged weak in comparison with contemporary medieval romances and epics- but precisely because such externalities are merely the first of several garment-like layers concealing the deeper and less-refracted aspects of divine truth whose core, the root of all roots, is God himself. [23]

By its very nature, midrash was doing something unparalleled to right the rabbinic world. Again, it is Michael Fishbane who reminds us, that it is in the very hermeneutical manipulations themselves that the rabbinic will to right their world can be seen.

> Indeed the markings...are nothing if they are not also the signs of hermeneutical desire: the imaginative shaping of the letters of Scripture in accordance with the theological will. Midrashic projection thus seems to qualify as a majestic mimesis, an exegetical tracing of thought along the curve of God's letters for the sake of divining human desire. Slowly, one reading after another, the words of Scripture are re-formed and re-united into a new corpus: Midrash. [24]

The historical context surrounding this change includes the understanding that, "the prestigious literary canon of divine teaching had become a *closed literary*

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[22] Rivka Kern-Ulmer, "Hermeneutics, Techniques of Rabbinic Exegesis" in Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery-Peck, editors.*Encyclopaedia of Midrash: Biblical Interpretation in Formative Judaism. Vol. 1* (Leiden: Brill, 2005) 71

[23] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah,* 35.

[24] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah,* 31.

corpus – one culturally reopened only through human textual exegesis." This strengthened the rabbinic imperative to search for and find new ways of understanding and only the most naïve reader would conclude that they did not know what they were doing:

> The early Pharisees fully comprehended this paradoxical and dialectical fact, and began to search the Scriptures in every possible way for every possible prolongation of the original divine teachings in new times. Thus, the entirety of Scripture was spread out before the sages as the exoteric content which could be verbally recombined, analogically juxtaposed, or even harmoniously synthesized in myriad ways to make the old written Torah a "living Torah" again. [25]

The Rabbis, according to Fishbane, saw themselves as following in the footsteps of elucidating Scripture as it had been given to them. He sees their efforts as stemming directly from their understanding of their role as guardians of the meaning of the sacred text. To this end he writes:

> Moreover, this dignification of interpretation in Pharisaic literature highlights another feature of ancient Judaism (and is a root cause of early Jewish polemics): the realization that there was no pure teaching of Revelation apart from its regeneration or clarification through an authoritative type of exegesis. The rabbinic guardians of the Torah claimed to be its true teachers, their oral exegesis the only valid password to the written text. [26]

In approaching the biblical text which lay before them, the Rabbis were apt to apply their hermeneutical techniques to points in the text which posed certain types of problems for them. What was most important to them was looking for what they needed to find and finding what they knew they were looking for... their theology. They may have entered the field through textual anomalies, but they

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[25] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah*, 37.
[26] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah*, 4.

never lost sight of their theological imperative. The link between textual marker and theological discovery was crucial:

> Inspirational hermeneutic theology views Scripture as though it contains hidden or spiritual meanings that are not obvious to the causal uninspired reader. The presence of hidden meanings is indicated by apparent contradictions or apparently insignificant mistakes or strange spellings or by apparently superfluous words. [27]

Nonetheless, while the Rabbis may have been in some instances challenged or intrigued by the same textual dimensions as modern readers for example, there is no evidence that they understood the text in the literary fashion which we saw with the Bible-as-Literature readers. There is ample evidence, however, that they saw the text as historic, that is relating the actual events which were the collective history of the people.

This key notion of rabbinic reading introduces another paradox which is central to their approach to Torah. The Rabbis saw text and believed in its historicity but they also saw it as atemporal. The history was what was contained in the Torah, while the aspect of atemporality was germane to the way in which they understood that any passage of text could be used to elucidate any other -- in other words how they viewed the text as text. As David Stern tells us:

> From the second axiom derives the equally typical midrashic habit of viewing the Bible atemporally, of explaining Scripture through Scripture, and of connecting the most disparate and seemingly unrelated verses in order to create new and overreaching nexuses of meaning: in short, intertextuality that is elevated in midrash to a level of a virtual exegetical principle. [28]

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[27] Instone-Brewer, "Hermeneutics, Theology of," 316.
[28] Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 29.

As we have shown, grappling with text was a fundamental Jewish undertaking. Nonetheless, there was a clear break in the way in which the Rabbis went about this business of making sense and this was a direct result of the exigencies of their times. "The text, in sum, was the ground on which the grave issues raised by the Destruction had to be joined. ... The only possible response to catastrophe was reading. And the text which had to be read, the text which on no account could be avoided, was like the Destruction itself, the most unyielding." [29]

With the destruction of the cultic base for religious expression, not only did the interpretation of text become an act of survival for continuity, it also became a religious and sacred act. "Interpretation ... partakes of the sanctity of Scripture," writes Michael Fishbane, "even as it further reveals it: for the role of interpretation is neither the aesthetic illumination nor aesthetic judgment, but rather the religious duty to expound and extend, and so to *reactualize* the ancient word of God for the present hour." [30] Building on their notion that the religious duty was in the interpretative act itself, the Rabbis quickly came to the conclusion that everything they needed must by necessity be contained in the text itself. "[W]ith their exegetical procedures- the rabbis would say, *precisely because of their exegetical procedures* – the early Pharisees revealed unexpected possibilities in the original divine communication. It was gradually claimed that 'all

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[29] Mintz, *Hurban,* 50.
[30] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah,* 38.

is in it' (*Mishnah 'Abot* V. 25) – or better, that all could be recovered from it if one but had the appropriate hermeneutical key." [31]

It is important to reiterate that there are two main reasons why Bible-as-literature does not correspond to a rabbinic treatment of the text. First, the Bible-as-literature approach separates the meaning of biblical literature from its historic veracity. This idea would have been unfathomable for the Rabbis for whom the veracity of the text was a given. Secondly, Bible-as-literature has as its central concern the analysis of character to which the analysis of plot and language are secondary. For scholars of the Bible-as-literature, the issue of plot is ascribed to some ultimately unknowable redactor. We can only compare this with the completely different approaches proposed by literary critic Northrop Frye and historiographer Hayden White for example, for whom plot is not only not innocent, but rather completely ideologically charged. For Bible-as-literature scholars, the solution is to go deeper into character, ascribing political or personal motivations or conflicting feelings. They do this, however, without the textually based hermeneutics of the Rabbis whose methodology was based on the belief that key indicators in the text itself signaled when and where it was appropriate to make this kind of creative foray.

To sum up, therefore, we have shown thus far that the Rabbis saw themselves as working on a continuum and following a path which connected their efforts

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[31] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah,* 38.

with those which had preceded them. Their emphasis, however, was on expressing their theology and working in concert with it. Rather that apologize for forcing their imprint on the text, they saw it as part of their mission to look for and find their theology in the text. This determined the hermeneutical techniques they employed and the conclusions they drew from those interpretive acts. In addition, there was an ingenious shift in their understanding of their actions. For them, devastated by the loss of the structure of the cult, the act of interpretation and study took on religious significance and became in and of itself a religious act. While they were continuing in a path laid out for them by their collective history, the urgency of their times meant that their actions took Judaism in a direction which was unique in the history of the development of the religion itself. Part of what emboldened them to do this was their specific view of the Torah language itself, and their techniques were closely aligned with and a window into their theology.

It is important to point out here that their ability to find polysemy was so deeply grounded in their theology that there is no way to mistake it by arguing that they thought the text could be made to say anything. As David Stern explains:

> This divine sanction for Scriptural polysemy also differentiates the midrashic concept of polysemy from its post-structuralist counterpart, indeterminacy. ... What differentiates midrash from indeterminacy is not its style but rather the latter's formal resistance to closure, its final revelation of a perspective that, as Hartman writes, "may be, precisely, the absence of one and only one context form which to view the flux of time or the empirical world, of one and only one method that would destabilize all but itself, of one and only one language to rule understanding and prevent misunderstanding." [32]

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[32] Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 22.

Central to the rabbinic enterprise, of course, was the sacred dimension, the purpose itself for study and exegesis. Turning the text only made sense as a means to the end of knowing God.

> To know Torah, to read and follow the divine blueprint, is, in this sense, a way to come to know the mind of the divine architect, and ultimately, to imitate Him and construct a human experience modeled after God's creation of the world. From this perspective it is possible to understand why midrash is not merely an act of literary interpretation but a path towards holiness. [33]

It must be remembered that in the context in which this intellectual war was waged, the Rabbis were fighting for their authority and their continued role in shaping the Judaism of the future. No confluence of crises had every struck the Jewish people as had the events surrounding the year 70 C.E. Confronted with an almost impossible mission, they developed their ideology and by sheer-force ingenuity created a system which both attested to their continuity and allowed them to reshape the future with their interpretive techniques at the center.

> At its core, this principle of interpretation developed as part and parcel of the central mythology of early Rabbinic Judaism: the Oral Torah. The Oral Torah emerged as a response to the historical crisis that lay before the rabbis in the centuries following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. ... they needed to portray their own religious vision as having continuity and divine authority. In order to achieve this, the sages had to find a way to authenticate their teachings vis-à-vis the Written Torah, even as they recognized that their innovations were nowhere to be found in the surface meanings of the text. [34]

"Instead," writes David Aaron, of trying to make themselves into prophets of the new age or religious reformers, "they opted for a system of interpretation, a hermeneutic, that promoted a sense of continuity while making innovation

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[33] Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 29.

[34] Aaron, "Language and Midrash," 403.

possible." [35] The procedures contained in their hermeneutics were often means for what Michael Fishbane calls, "some relatively radical theology." [36]

Earlier in this work, we alluded to the question of just "What the Rabbis were up to." Now that we can understand why the Bible-as-Literature approach described above can not avail us in answering that question, the time has come to take head on the question of what exactly were the Rabbis doing. A few components of the rabbinic enterprise are crucial to the examination we are undertaking here. The first is that the Rabbis obviously did not have the benefit of hindsight. They did not know what we know about Jewish literature which followed. (This despite the Talmudic idea that everything that followed Sinai was known and given at Sinai). Nonetheless, because we see a rupture between biblical literature, rabbinic literature and post rabbinic literature, it is easy to forget that they did not. They knew they were not writing Torah, but the Rabbis understood themselves as following in the footsteps of their tradition. At the same time, their understanding of the text with which they were interacting was radically different that any notion of it which had preceded them. David Stern explains:

> Torah, then, is not identical with God, its relationship to Him is, one might say, metonymic rather than metaphoric, a matter of extension rather than resemblance. The study of Torah, the activity of midrash, does not therefore constitute an act of directly interpreting God as though the text itself were literally divine. Instead, one could almost call midrash the interpretation of Torah as a figure or trope standing for God. [37]

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[35] Aaron, "Language and Midrash," 403.
[36] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah,* 23.
[37] Stern, *Midrash and Theory,* 28.

The Rabbis had moved on to uncharted territory in their unique way of viewing the surface of text and their understanding that other meaning lay beyond that. "We can," writes David Aaron, "reduce the midrashic philosophy of the Torah's language to the following principle: *The surface meaning of the written text of the Torah does not exhaust what God intended to convey when he revealed his words through his prophet Moses.*" [38] For rabbinic thinking, this event in itself was unique in human history. It is not difficult to follow their reasoning to its natural conclusion. "Unlike other languages that emerged in history within a given civilization, Hebrew was created by God, not only to function as a language but to serve as a tool for the creation of the world. " [39]

The central component of their understanding of Torah and its relation to God is what I have called suspended simultaneity and what David Stern, using a term coined by James Kugel, calls, "the omnisignificance of Scripture." This is the idea that the surface of the Torah itself provides the clues which elucidate meaning, therefore, by extension, no word is superfluous and no anomaly can be disregarded. David Stern puts it thus:

> To begin with the positive side, the near identification of Torah and God provides the Rabbis with the basic axioms of midrashic hermeneutics: first, the belief in the omnisignificance of Scripture, in the meaningfulness of its every word, letter, even (according to one famous report) scribal flourish; second, the claim of the essential unity of Scripture as the expression of the single divine will. From the first axiom proceeds the common midrashic technique of atomization, whereby verses and phrases, sometimes even

[38] Aaron, "Language and Midrash," 403.
[39] Aaron, "Language and Midrash," 409.

single words, in Scripture are broken up into smaller units, when are then exploited in isolation for hermeneutical significance. [40]

Highlighting that aspect of omnisignificance and Rabbinic treatment of language, David Aaron writes, "...one must recognize... that the rules of common logic that normally govern colloquial discourse are transformed by virtue of the Rabbinic conceptualization of the Torah's language. ... Words within Scripture are understood to be different from words written (or spoken) in other contexts." Perhaps the very nature of the surface meaning of language could no longer be considered trustworthy just as the very face of life itself could no longer be counted upon to be comprehensible. Whatever the cause, the very fabric of linguistic interplay was disregarded and replaced with a new way of understanding the language of Torah intertextually. "This principle implies that all of the words of Scripture are, in some sense, relevant to one another, even though they may not be part of the same syntactical unit." This aspect of midrashic interplay with the Torah text is the one most jarring for modern readers, who " ...expect meaning to derive solely from syntactical units that display a cogent structure (a sentence, a paragraph, a chapter, or a unit sustained by a thematic element)." Reaching over this breach represents our only hope of entering into the midrashic mindset. "In order to appreciate midrashic thinking, one must start by grasping the writer's assumptions regarding

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[40] Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 29.

the unique characteristics of Torah's language. They are what give him license to think as he does. [41]

We must never lose sight of the fact that, difficult as it may be for us to grasp, the Rabbis saw what they were doing in light of continuity, from biblical scribes and beyond. The situation in which they found themselves threatened the very essence of their understanding of the fundamental core of Judaism, God's love for the people Israel and the covenant. In fact, as Alan Mintz explains, catastrophe in Jewish tradition is understood in terms of how any act of history impacts upon this central belief:

> Catastrophe in Jewish tradition is best understood not in terms of physical and material devastation; a destructive event becomes a catastrophe when it convulses or vitiates shared assumptions about the destiny of the Jewish people in the world. In premodern times this means specifically the terms of the covenant between God and Israel. The responses to catastrophe in Hebrew literature involve attempts first to represent the catastrophe and then to reconstruct, replace, or redraw the threatened paradigm of meaning, and thereby make creative survival possible. [42]

The rabbinic response, as we have seen, had several purposes to accomplish, such as providing continuity while introducing radical change. At the same time, the Rabbis transformed Judaism into a religion where study of Torah and observance of mitzvot became simultaneously the way to understand what God wanted of the people and the very thing God wanted.

> After the destruction of the Second Temple, the paradigm put forward by the Rabbis of the midrash was largely continuous with the Bible's: the Destruction was viewed as a corrective moment in the ongoing relationship between God

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[41] Aaron, "Language and Midrash," 402.
[42] Mintz, *Hurban*, 2.

> and His people rather than as its end. To the biblical view the Rabbis added the study of Torah and the observance of the mitsvah system as principal means of reconciliation with God, as well as the idea of a final redemption- certain of execution yet indefinitely deferred- to take place at the end of historical time rather than within it. The great task that faced the Rabbis was to validate this paradigm through revealed text of Scripture. [43]

What we have tried to demonstrate thus far is the very nature of midrash itself. It is a genre of literature which both reflects Jewish continuity at a time when it broke with its Toraitic past, and is, in some regards, unlike anything we have seen since. [44] It is based on an appreciation that the Torah text upon which it expounded is a text. One of the most radical innovations of midrash is that the text itself could legitimately be seen to have multiple meanings. The Rabbis positioned themselves as the holders of the keys which opened the doors to interpretation. Armed with this sense of the pivotal role midrash plays in the development of Judaism, we move now to exploring the intellectual outpouring which came forth when modern literary criticism met midrash. Like its intellectual predecessor, the Bible-as-literature approach, this intellectual ferment was made possible by a meeting of a modern technique with the ancient text. As we have seen in this chapter, the contribution made by the Rabbis to this development was their understanding of the text as a text. As we will see in the next chapter, multiple meanings – the work of the Rabbis -- does not lead to any meaning/ no meaning at all -- as proposed by the deconstructionists. As David Stern points out, there has often been something of a misplaced sense on the part of the

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[43] Mintz, *Hurban,* 4.

[44] For an examination of the way in which Midrash is the root of but different than the Jewish literature which followed, see *The Midrashic Imagination: Jewish Exegesis, Thought and History,* edited by Michael Fishbane (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993)

modern literary critics of being able to write back into (and perhaps over) rabbinic interpretive acts to foreshadow their own. Early in his book *Midrash and Theory,* he sets as his mission:

> ...to investigate one aspect of midrash that has frequently been proposed as an antecedent or counterpart of the concept of indeterminacy as it has figured in post-structuralist literary theory, namely, its conception of Scriptural polysemy and its consequent habit of presenting multiple interpretations for Scriptural verses or phrases. As I hope to show, multiple interpretations in midrash bears little connection to the notion of indeterminacy; nonetheless, indeterminacy may still remain a significant category for understanding our reading of midrashic discourse. [45]

Just as the Bible-as-literature approach opened some critical doors, so too we will be able to glean certain things from exploring what came out of the sometimes cacophonous debate between the literary critics and the midrashists. Two important elements remain constant and crucial to the way the Rabbis and the midrashic scholars who studied them saw the textual object of their study. First of all, growing out of "[t]he other side of the equation between God and Torah, however, is the refusal of midrash to make the identification of Torah and God literal. This side can easily be seen if one compares the midrashic position with mystical, quasi-Gnostic conceptions of Torah as the name of God and of Scriptural exegesis as the unfolding of the essence of that name." [46] This deeply engrained understanding can only be attributed to a core belief in the text as a text.

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[45] Stern, *Midrash and Theory,* 16.
[46] Stern, *Midrash and Theory,* 29.

Secondly, the Rabbis start, on the one hand, with an assumption of an author and, on the other hand, with a belief that even multiple meanings have meaning. It is important to stress that we see this in their approach to analyze the very language itself as language. In describing, for example, how they understood the Gezerah Shava, the *Encyclopaedia of Midrash* explains:

> They also expected a phrase or a word to have the same meaning in every place it occurred. It is particularly significant that they do not normally attempt a philological survey when they use a method such as *Gezerah Shava,* because they are not attempting to find out if a word or a phrase has a consistent meaning or to find out the boundaries of its semantic field. They start with the assumption that a divine legislator would always use language in a strictly consistent way, so only one other example is sufficient to establish the meaning of that word or phrase. Therefore they regarded the writing of Scripture as directed word for word by a divine author. [47]

What the Rabbis taught us, and what we will bring forward in this study is what Michael Fishbane describes when he talks about the way in which Martin Buber read Scripture. He refers to it as, a "particular *mode* of reading the Bible...." This mode for Fishbane is one which "unfailingly engages the reader at the very depths of his humanity, and challenges him to draw ever-new distinctions." This challenge is the one which we will pursue as this study advances. And, like Buber, we will learn this from our examination of midrash. We do this because, as Fishbane so beautifully asserts:

> For the truth of midrash is not the truth of historical information or textual analysis. It is the truth of the power of scriptural words to draw a reader into an authentic relationship with the mystery of the world- a world constituted by speech and the face-to-face relations which *Gesprochenheit* demands. To have taught us this, allusively, is Buber's enduring legacy. Beyond all dogmatism and fixed commandments, the Bible is for Martin Buber the

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[47] Instone-Brewer, "Hermeneutics, Theology of," 295.

rescued and ever-hearable speech of the living God. It is a Teaching which simply points out an ongoing way. This is also the teaching of midrash. [48]

[48] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah*, 98.

Chapter Three

Midrash meets "Lit Crit:" Reclaiming the Rabbinic Understanding of Torah as Text

As the erudition of Michael Fishbane made clear, we were able to demonstrate that the gap between biblical literature and rabbinic literature was really one of continuum rather than disjuncture. Fishbane showed that the Bible itself underwent internal exegesis and that the Rabbis understood what they were doing as a continuation of a fundamentally religious act; "... the foundation document of Judaism, the Hebrew Bible, not only sponsored a monumental culture of textual exegesis but was itself its own first product," [1] Fishbane asserted. The Rabbis were able to align themselves with a type of activity in which their endeavors were but a further step along this unbroken continuum. As Daniel Boyarin explains, "The rabbis certainly saw in themselves, in the most important sense, the legitimate continuation of history and their writings are the very embodiment of a transhistorical, absolute, and universal system of values. [2]

As we showed earlier, the Bible-as-Literature movement, which began the conversation between modern literary criticism and rabbinic literature, had as its objective an aim to redeem a biblical text which it saw as in danger of falling out of relevance. The discourse between midrash and literary criticism was itself based on a completely different premise, and a more complex understanding of how texts function.

> In contrast, the midrash-theory connection was less an attempt to "save" midrash than it was an effort to find a genealogy, a precursor, for theory itself. As an interdisciplinary linkage, this connection presumed that midrash was in

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[1] Michael Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) 5.
[2] Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and The Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press,1990) 8.

> some sense an embryonic form of theory, a mode of interpretation that must be understood alongside other modes of interpretive method and practice. [3]

The idea of midrash as literary criticism and a precursor of modern critical theory led to a very extended discussion about the nature of midrashic text. By examining certain aspects of this discussion we will see a number of conclusions gleaned from modern literary criticism and the way in which these assertions provide different insights into midrash. That said, the differences outshine the similarities, as we shall see.

Modern critical theory did allow readers of midrashic literature to understand that, like the literary output of every civilization, rabbinic literature was a product of the circumstances out of which it grew. The implications of this understanding grow out of the modern literary approaches which we will explore below. Nonetheless, if one thing distinguished rabbinic literature from other types of literary output, it was the way in which this literature linked itself to the notion of Jewish survival. If the Bible-as-Literature approach sought to save the Bible from irrelevance, modern understanding of rabbinical literature has encouraged us to see that through their relationship with the text, the Rabbis sought to save the religion itself. Through rabbinic literature, the Rabbis sought to reinvent Judaism and this is of interest to us in the context of the discussion between literary criticism and midrash because the way in which they did so was by the very way in which they

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[3] David Stern, *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1996) 4.

interacted with their central text. As David Stern explains in his analysis of how the Rabbis read the Book of Lamentations:

> The very survival of Judaism in the aftermath of the Destruction precluded the possibility of taking the verse in its plain sense. In the face of this impossibility, the Rabbis used midrash. Rather than deny history, they turned to interpretation to save the meaning of Lam. 4:11. In a single midrashic act, they confirmed the veracity of Scripture and countered the despair that Jews themselves must have felt after the Destruction. And by making this verse, Lam. 4:11, the very source of their hopelessness, describe the very condition for hope in the aftermath of the Destruction, the Rabbis salvaged a meaning in Torah from the catastrophe they had suffered. [4]

Of particular note here is the way in which the rabbinic impulse to transform and redeem used not theme but the very text. This understanding of text makes clear the sophistication of what the Rabbis were up to. As we will see, modern literary criticism introduced a new way to conceptualize the midrashic endeavor. Michael Fishbane's insights enabled us to fully grasp the way in which midrash was a continuation of something begun in the Bible itself. And further insights from the field of literary critical scholarship opened avenues for appreciating and articulating the way in which rabbinic thought actually treated the text itself.

> [As Daniel Boyarin] suggest[s]... the intertextual reading practice of the midrash is a development (sometimes, to be sure, a baroque development) of intertextual interpretive strategies which the Bible itself manifests. Moreover, the very fractured and unsystematic surface of the biblical text is an encoding of its own intertextuality, and it is precisely this which midrash interprets. The dialogue and dialectic of the midrashic rabbis will be understood as readings of the dialogue and dialectic of the biblical text.[5]

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[4] David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1991) 40.
[5] Boyarin, *Intertextuality*, 15.

Modern literary critical theory brought from its understanding of literature a heightened sensitivity to the interplay of various forces within texts. This way of looking at literature included a fresh understanding of the functioning of literature itself. This new approach, an outgrowth of modern literary critical theory, laid the groundwork for what will allow us to understand how the Rabbis understood the text.

As we will see, however, the discussion between modern literary critical theory and modern scholarship of midrashic literature developed in such a way as to make clear that modern scholars *of midrash* perceived the limitations of just how much help theory could provide in advancing the study of midrash. The scholar most at the forefront of this understanding is David Stern, whose approach to the study of midrash includes an appreciation of the input of literary criticism, but also is based on a reclaiming of midrash from the clutches of the theorists. "My purpose here, however," he intones, early on in his book *Midrash and Theory,* "is to ask not what midrash can do for literary criticism, but what theory has done to midrash."[6] With this slightly tongue-in-cheek approach to the rocky road which has been the relationship between rabbinic literature and modern literary criticism, David Stern invites us into what has been an on-going debate between literary theorists/critics and scholars of rabbinic literature. "The truth is that the new literary approach to midrash was not the beginning of the modern study of midrash." Stern reminds us. "Nor had midrash been neglected or suppressed before its discovery by the literary scholars and critics ... In fact, the recovery and

[6] Stern, *Midrash and Theory,* 1.

rehabilitation of midrash ... has been one of Wissenschaft's major projects."[7] The Rabbis did not wait for literary criticism, Stern implies, and while there is something to be gained by this recent intellectual development, the importance of what the Rabbis were trying to do did not depend upon it.

That said, the question we need to ask ourselves is what did Midrash gain by its sudden popularity in the hallowed halls of academe, and how can the insights from these disciplines help us in our study of midrash. It is true that there is much to be learned by availing ourselves of the literary critical techniques, if for no other reason than because they offer us a language or terminology which opens new windows into our understanding of midrash. Nonetheless, the infusion, one might say invasion, of the midrash by literary criticism might cause us to run roughshod over some basic concepts and ideas. Stern reminds us as he writes that "the initial impetus for the linkage came primarily from literary theory. For some time, in fact, literary studies in America had been in the process of what one critic called its 'dehellenization.'" The process pushed "the literary profession" to "reopen the question most basic to its discipline: What is literature?" [8] Without skipping a beat, the modern literary critics saw what they could gain by availing themselves of what Stern calls, "the typical midrashic predilection for multiple interpretations."[9] Literature as a technical term is a Western Hellenized concept. This idea or term presupposes that the body of work produced perceives itself as using language in a certain way, that it is not

[7] Stern, *Midrash and Theory,* 7.
[8] Stern, *Midrash and Theory,* 3.
[9] Stern, *Midrash and Theory,* 3.

science or theology, history or something else. These distinctions are very Western, very modern and even the post modern rebellion of these constraints never challenged their existence.

As David Stern aptly points out, the Rabbis really did not need modern literary criticism to achieve their ends, but if nothing else, the result of the conversation between the two was simultaneously a new appreciation for midrash and perhaps also a vocabulary with which to express that appreciation.

> What [this book] offers, though, [Stern wrote early on in his *Midrash and Theory]* is not so much a definitive answer or resolution as a stance – an attempt to forge what is, I hope, an approach that is both responsible and responsive, true to the literary integrity of the classical Jewish literature and yet open to our desire for this literature to mean something to us. Precisely in order to make midrash speak to us in contemporary language, I have sought in this book to develop a way of talking about midrash that uses theory as a bridge, as a means of spanning the distance between the classical sources and ourselves.[10]

What attracted modern literary theory to midrash was in fact the way in which it viewed the text and the way in which it used language. While the developments in modern literary theory may have given us new tools to appreciate this phenomenon, even the most cursory encounter with midrashic literature will show how basic this use of language is.

> Thus, the transgressive character of midrash – the nonchalance with which it consistently violates the boundaries between text and commentary—was certainly one source of the powerful fascination that midrash commanded among post-structuralist theorists. Moreover, the interdisciplinary linkage between midrash and theory could itself claim some of that same transgressiveness. [11]

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[10] Stern, *Midrash and Theory,* 2.
[11] Stern, *Midrash and Theory,* 4.

As David Stern shows, however, in what can only be termed as a reclaiming of midrash from the clutches of the theorists, what they came seeking to find in the literature was something of their own agenda. What he attempted to do was to introduce us to the creative and regenerative, one might even say "reconstructive" way in which the Rabbis interacted with their text so that their efforts might serve as a model for us.

> I would propose that it is precisely here that the midrash-theory connection can teach us: not by showing how to reclaim the substance of midrash or its methodology of reading, but by serving as a model for how theory can actively engage the classical "normative" tradition, and once having engaged it, find the tradition more valuable and meaningful in its own right. For is the search for selfhood that led literary scholars to midrash so different in the end from the desire of laypersons to have these texts *do* something for them by revealing part of the mystery, the perplexity, of their existence as Jews? In both cases, what was and continues to be sought is a way to reclaim these texts for ourselves. [12]

The literature itself understood the purpose of polysemy as being a key to its sacred mission. It did not, as the theorists hoped it would, open the door to an effacing of meaning.

> Early on, however, they found that the midrashic literature resisted many of the categories and phenomena that post-structuralist theory had initially seemed to open up for them. For example, the notion of indeterminacy was not as helpful as many had first supposed it would be for understanding midrashic polysemy, ... in this way, the act of studying midrash from the perspective of theory itself became a process of distancing, even of disillusionment with theory's imperializing claim that it could comprehend and subsume all writing. [13]

As David Stern shows, however, the modern literary theorists provided a useful vocabulary, even if it was up to Stern himself to build a bridge which actually

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[12] Stern, *Midrash and Theory,* 11.
[13] Stern, *Midrash and Theory,* 11.

served as a means of connection. The intellectual fervor which ensued brought new insight along with new interest in the rabbinic undertaking and provided avenues for appreciation.

> Still, the vantage point that theory offered from which to view midrash, along with its value as a lexicon of critical terminology and conceptual categories, was revolutionary. An entirely new vision of the field was revealed. In a short time articles and books appeared using narratology, rhetorical criticism, and semiotics to analyze midrashic texts; other studies sought to apply such critical notions as intertextuality... [14]

The conversation was not without its downsides as Geoffrey Hartman suggested. Midrash, in a sense, was losing its identity and slowly becoming merely a precursor of theory or a form of criticism. It was up to scholars intent on reclaiming midrashic integrity to redress the situation.

> The problem we face, strangely enough, is not that we cannot define Scripture but that having gradually redefined fiction in the light of Scripture we now find it hard to distinguish between them. We see both within a global definition of what textuality is; and the same merging occurs as we recover a knowledge of midrash, so that literary criticism and midrashic modes begin to blend into one another. [15]

As David Stern pointed out, the key distinction was a central one. It was between scriptural polysemy and post-structuralist indeterminacy. What for post-structuralists is a liberation from a confining canon and an intellectual strait-jacket -- the notion that there was no set meaning contrasted dramatically with the rabbinic understanding of the sacred dimension of looking into the text for meaning -- even if that resulted in finding meanings.

> The divine sanction for Scriptural polysemy also differentiates the midrashic concept of polysemy from its post-structuralist counterpart, indeterminacy. By

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[14] Stern, *Midrash and Theory,* 5.
[15] Geoffrey H. Hartman "The Struggle for the Text" in Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick, editors. *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986) 12.

> indeterminacy... I refer to the concept as it has been subtly characterized by Geoffrey Hartman, as being close to the process of commentary itself, "the taking away, modification, elaboration of previous meanings." [16]

The distinction went directly to the root, to the very definition of midrash itself. As Daniel Boyarin made clear, the rabbinic interaction with the text was what characterized the distinction. The Rabbis looked for the gaps in a text in the hopes of finding something there, not in the hopes of filling the gaps with their own imaginations. The difference was based on the understanding of the text as sacred.

> Were I to attempt to define midrash at this point, [Boyarin writes] it would perhaps be radical intertextual reading of the canon, in which potentially every part refers to and is interpretable by every other part. The Torah, owing to its own intertextuality, is a severely gapped text, and the gaps are there to be filled by strong readers, which in this case does not mean readers fighting for originality, but readers fighting to find what they must in the holy text. [17]

Nonetheless, what was gained by the interaction between midrashic literature and modern literary theory was an appreciation of what the two systems may have shared as motivations for such dissimilar endeavors. In this view, the actions of the Rabbis, while not modern per se, became intelligible to modern thinkers. They were doing something important to preserve an understanding of a world whose sense seemed to be slipping away.

> To some extent, Rabbinic exegesis, like the interpretive ideologies of Western culture, is motivated by an anxiety about the loss of meaning or presence (an anxiety that has led Western thinkers to substitute for genuine presence a metaphysics of presence or, as Derrida has argued, a covert theology) – hence the ubiquitous concern of midrash to prove the relevance of Torah to

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[16] Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 22.
[17] Boyarin, *Intertextuality*, 16.

> every conceivable circumstance, to make it embrace every aspect of life. But more than fearing that the divine guarantee behind Scripture's meaning may have been lost, the Rabbis were haunted by the worry, the deeper fear, that *their* tradition of interpretation, the entire body of practice and exegesis expressed in the oral Torah, may *not* have represented the authoritative, the one and only divinely sanctioned heritage of the biblical revelation.[18]

Viewed this way, the rabbinic approach to text became more sympathetic and more worthy of the intellectual calisthenics that it sometimes required. If nothing else, a clearer appreciation of its brilliance and the extent of its audacity comes through. If we can conclude that any good came of this conversation, as I think we must, then the single most important outcome was an articulated understanding that texts in and of themselves have no one set meaning. How modern readers could learn from the Rabbis to celebrate textual polysemy opened doors for rabbinic literature to be more widely appreciated.

> The typical midrashic predilection for multiple interpretations rather than for a single truth behind the text, its irresistible desire to tease out the nuances of Scripture rather than use interpretation to close them off, and, most of all, the way midrashic discourse mixes text and commentary, violating the boundaries between them and intentionally blurring their differences, flourishing precisely in the grayish no-man's-land between exegesis and literature—all these features that once had seemed ... to be the most problematic and irrational aspects of midrash now became its most intriguing, fascinating qualities. [19]

If the movements of modern literary criticism, and all its offshoots such as post-modern literary criticism, structuralism and reader-response theory, brought anything to the discussion, they brought a real sense of this notion: by exploring the ways in which readers create meaning in text by interaction between reader and text, these theories helped show what it was about rabbinic literature that

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[18] Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 31-2.
[19] Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 3-4.

made it so distinctive. Similarly, as Daniel Boyarin points out, modern literary criticism opened new doors into our understanding of the functioning of the text itself. "Now, if the term 'intertextuality' has any value at all," he wrote, "it is precisely in the way in which it claims that no texts, including the classic single-authored works of Shakespeare or Dostoevsky, for example, are organic, self-contained unities, created out of the spontaneous, freely willed act of a self-identical subject. [20]

We can see how Boyarin informs his reading of midrash with modern literary criticism in his description of how the text works which colors his definition of the subject itself:

> The sovereign notion informing the present reading of midrash is "intertextuality." This concept has several different accepted senses, three of which are important in my account of midrash. The first is that the text is always made up of a mosaic of conscious and unconscious citation of earlier discourse. The second is that texts may be dialogical in nature- contesting their own assertions as an essential part of the structure of their discourse- and the Bible is a preeminent example of such a text. The third is that there are cultural codes, again either conscious or unconscious, which both constrain and allow the production (not creation) of new texts within the culture. [21]

The approach of David Stern, Daniel Boyarin and others like them, enable us to see different elements at work in midrashim and to watch and understand with a new vocabulary a whole set of phenomena at play. Stern's approach particularly, which we will follow below (and try to take further), is "an attempt that is both

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[20] Boyarin, *Intertextuality,* 14.
[21] Boyarin, *Intertextuality,* 12.

responsible and responsive, true to the literary integrity of classical Jewish literature and yet open to our desire for this literature to mean something to us."[22]

As we have intimated, the history of the exchange between modern literary theorist and midrashic literature involved serious soul-searching among literary critics who sought to understand how Western literature had absorbed and calcified its Christian and Greek origins to produce an earlier type of literary criticism in which no polysemy was tolerated. As Susan Handelman pointed out in her book, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory :*

> One of Christianity's central interpretive axioms was the distinction between "spirit" and "letter." The severity of this differentiation justified the Church's overthrow of the authority of Rabbinic law, the divine text of the Jews, as mere "letter." ... Despite the separation of theology from hermeneutics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, interpretation theorists and especially literary critics have continued to think about literal and figurative language in a way that is still dependent upon Greek ontology and its Christian extension. [23]

The implications for this imposed axiom was the degree to which it controlled the questions which interpreters asked of the text. Often in the modern literary debate, this is summed up as simply the difference between Hebraic and Greek thought. While it is not necessary for us to examine the truth of this claim, because ultimately we are not interested in how modern literary criticism was an outgrowth of its Greek and Christian heritage, it simply behooves us to call attention to the way in which this understanding has impacted the evolution of the

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[22] Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 2.
[23] Susan A. Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany : State University of New York Press, 1991) 15-6.

canon of Western literature, an evolution which is characterized by the low regard in which it held the rabbinic literature.

> The space-time polarity may be compared to our previous distinction between Greek and Hebrew thought in terms of seeing and hearing. The spatial is what is seen; time is a function of inner hearing. Hebraic time is an epistemological mode. Inevitably, the Jews are the people of *history,* of time-wandering in space, exiled from place, but rooted in time, a time in which linear chronology is overcome by contemporaneity.[24]

Handelman and other critics such as Wolfgang Iser trace the history of this aspect of Western literary critical development. As Iser points out, as early as the nineteenth century, the literary endeavor was attempting to fill a void left by religion, social structures and science. In this way, we can almost sense the literary world trying to attempt something much like that which had been attempted by the Rabbis centuries earlier. Their assumptions of course were considerably different, but their notion that a text could be used to help make sense of the world is not unlike the idea most dear to the hearts of the Rabbis.

> In the nineteenth century, the critic was a man of importance largely because literature promised solutions to problems that could not be solved by the religious, social, or scientific systems of the day. Literature in the nineteenth century, then, was deemed to be of functional importance, for it balanced the deficiencies resulting from systems which all claimed universal validity. ... These conflicting systems, ranging from theological to scientific, continually encroached on one another's claims to validity. [25]

The rabbinic approach to literature, as Handelman points out, was one that embraced certain notions which were never a part of Western literature, based as it was on Christian thought. It makes sense, therefore, that when Western

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[24] Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses*, 36-7.
[25] Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) 6-7.

literary thought moved away from some of the premises which it had inherited from its Greek and Christian origins, then an interest in rabbinic thought naturally ensued.

> However, I would maintain that Christian thought is predominantly lexical and metaphorical, whereas, the Rabbinic mode may be characterized as metonymical and prepositional. Not only is there an entirely different concept of *literal* and *metaphorical* in each tradition, but the idea of multiple meaning within the text is different. Furthermore, the coexistence of different interpretations and the proliferation of meanings can be seen as an extension of the prepositional mode of thought, which allows for the coexistence of two different predicates simultaneously, and for the retention of differences on a semantic level. [26]

Still, we can not assert often enough the central question which David Stern's work invites us to keep in mind, "...ask not what midrash can do for literary criticism, but what theory has done to midrash." [27]As much as modern literary criticism may have gained from its new appreciation of rabbinic literature, the aspects of polysemy in midrash did not lead to the absence of meaning so dear to the modern literary scholar. Rabbinic encounter with the literature was based on a belief, not an absence. The sacredness of the text and the sacredness of the act of exegesis went hand in hand. As Stern so aptly points out, the faith of the Rabbis may have been based on illusion, but it was, nonetheless, the foundation upon which they built their exegetical construction.

> Polysemy in midrash, then, is to be understood as a claim to textual stability rather than its opposite, an indeterminate state of endlessly deferred meanings and unresolved conflicts. In fact, midrashic polysemy suggests more than just textual stability; it points to a fantasy of social stability, of human community in complete harmony, where disagreement is either resolved agreeably or maintained peacefully. [28]

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[26] Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses*, 55.
[27] Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 1.
[28] Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 33-4.

What we can understand from this is how true to their own Jewish trajectory rabbinic literature remained. It is interesting to note this intellectual development because, strange though it may be to say, it shows how Jewish the Rabbis were and how consistently the Jewish intellectual development followed its own path. As Stern points out, this was a native form of Jewish creativity based on a religious system that took at its core the belief that through their endeavors they could make sense, that truth in fact did dwell in the text itself. The literary study of midrash highlighted how, in fact, midrash was a literary creation. This creation was possible only because of the rabbinic understanding of the text.

> In contrast, the new literary study of midrash aimed to demonstrate that midrash *was* a literature of interpretation, that its literary character was intrinsically bound up with its exegetical dimension. More than that, it sought to show how midrash could be viewed as the embodiment of an authentic, native Jewish creativity, which, it was now understood, was in no way inimical to the exegetical tradition within Judaism; to the contrary, midrash became the paradigm for exegesis as a creative religious and imaginative act. This recognition was, arguably, the single most important contribution of the midrash-theory connection. But what was most remarkable about this new perception – the ability to see the process of interpretation not only as the method but also as the very essence of the literary nature of midrash -- ...[29]

What this demonstrated was that midrash was not merely interpreting but was actually creating and reinventing Judaism. Handelman reminds us that the truly radical nature of this endeavor was appreciated by very few scholars. One who did grasp the way in which rabbinic thought literally reached into the Jewish text to reinvent meaning was Simon Rawidowicz. What Rawidowicz calls "The

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[29] Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 8.

Second House," is none other than the construction of meaning by the Rabbis, based on the foundation of Torah but by no means confined by either its surface meaning or its prior interpretation by the tradition.

> Suffice it to add here the comments of one of the few scholars in the field of Judaic studies to recognize and admit the radical nature of Rabbinic revisionist interpretation, Simon Rawidowicz. In Rawidowicz's view, the Rabbis of the period from Ezra to the completion of the Babylonian Talmud created, in effect a "revolution from within," and sought to reshape their home. The oral law they created should not be seen as a secondary commentary that simply explains, particularizes, and clarifies the written law. ...
>
> The Rabbis of the Second House, that is, freely reshaped and recreated the materials they had inherited from the First House, the written Scriptures, in an interpretive battle born of the tension between continuation and rebellion, tradition and innovation, attachment to the text and alienation from it. Their work, he asserts, is a model for all interpreting because it teaches man how to "uproot and stabilize simultaneously; to reject and preserve in one breath; to break up and build – inside, from within, casting a new layer on a previous layer and welding them into one mold (which became later the great problem of Jewish thought and being)." [30]

As Handelman shows, this ability is what truly distinguished them as model interpreters. To see them only as thinkers who were able to maintain that a text could have more than one meaning is to reduce them to bad modernists. To see them as creators of an imaginative Judaism which understood text as text, thinkers who fully grasped text as text, and who could recreate in the presence of incredible tension, this is to begin to understand the contribution of the Rabbis.

It is not difficult to see, however, why modern literary theory loved midrash. They sought first of all to see in it "an embryonic form of theory, a mode of interpretation that must be understood alongside other modes of interpretative

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[30] Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses*, 41-2.

method and practice." [31] Likewise, "its irresistible desire to tease out nuances of Scripture rather than use interpretation to close them off... mix[ing] text and commentary, violating the boundaries between them," [32] these attributes accounted in no small way for the appeal of midrash to the literary critic. The exact evolution of this intellectual renaissance was perhaps more startling in the non-Jewish intellectual environment where scholars were breaking down a wall that Judaism had never built. Again it is Handelman who shows us how the overarching influence of Greek thought on Western literature was responsible for the development of the idea of anti-polysemy.

> The tendency to *gather* various meaning *into a one* is, as we have seen, characteristic of Greek thought in general: its movement towards the universal, the general, the univocal. The Rabbinic tendency, by contrast, is towards differentiation, metaphorical multiplicity, multiple meaning. One needs to search the forms, shapes, patterns of words, and their varying connections within an expansive text; there is no confinement of meaning with ontology of substance. (This liberation from the ontology of substance is, of course, precisely Derrida's intent.)
> Whereas for the Jews, God manifested Himself through words in a divine text, for the Greeks theophany was visual, not verbal – a direct, immediate appearance of the gods. [33]

The ins and outs of that dispute, some of which was carried out on the pages of the *Prooftexts* journal, need not be recorded here. What is interesting to note is that while the examination of rabbinic literature produced a flurry of interest among modern literary theorists, they were able to take more from the debate than they gave.

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[31] Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 4.
[32] Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 4.
[33] Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses*, 33.

> Perhaps it could be said that Western literature has always been plagued by the appearance-reality conundrum because of the conflict between the foundational world view of Greek philosophy and the insights of art. The delusions of appearance, the ambiguities of being, the contradictory rather than solidly logical and substantial nature of being and time, are issues in art from its earliest beginnings to the present – and Shakespeare, of course, is one who examined these issues most penetratingly. One of the reasons, no doubt, why we are at present witnessing the coronation of metaphor as the new philosophical idol is because the metaphorical view of reality, as delineated in the last chapter, celebrates ambiguity, contradiction, and occurs precisely on the borderlines of ontology when something simultaneously both is and is not. Metaphor is alternative metaphysics. [34]

It is important here merely to record this intellectual development and to show how an understanding of what the Rabbis were attempting can be found among the Rabbis themselves. The result of the debate in and of itself will allow us to take this inquiry further as we see how the theoretical developments of this intellectual enquiry did in fact provide a new vocabulary for understanding the radical innovations of rabbinic thought. As we will see, several aspects of modern literary criticism, particularly reader-response theory which we will explore below, opened new avenues for articulating what the Rabbis were up to. David Stern makes this clear when he sums up that, despite the differences, there is still room to learn from the exchange. He writes:

> In this chapter, I wish to investigate one aspect of midrash that has frequently been proposed as an antecedent or counterpart of the concept of indeterminacy as it has figured in post-structuralist literary theory, namely, its conception of Scriptural polysemy and its consequent habit of presenting multiple interpretations for Scriptural verses or phrases. As I hope to show, multiple interpretation in midrash bears little connection to the notion of indeterminacy; nonetheless, indeterminacy may still remain a significant category for understanding our reading of midrashic discourse. [35]

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[34] Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses*, 35.
[35] Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 16-7.

Jewish scholarship did insist, however, that even if something fruitful could be gleaned from the process of exploring midrash in conjunction with literary theory, that would only be possible in an environment which insisted upon the integrity of the rabbinic endeavor. Jewish scholarship was quick to show how, while the techniques might demonstrate some overlap, modern literary theory with all its modern trappings could never be more than rabbinic literature without a soul. The Rabbis' undertakings were not mere intellectual forays; they were a quest to transform, redeem and save. Reader response theory came to show the role the reader plays in making sense of a text. Its premise was, however, that the text itself had no meaning of its own. Handelman shows, "[t]he boundaries between text and interpretation are fluid in a way which is difficult for us to imagine for a sacred text, but this fluidity is a very central tenet of much of contemporary literary theory." [36] Nonetheless:

> ...Scriptural exegesis, midrash, is not identical with literary theory or simply reducible to it. What a theoretical reading of midrash can contribute is precisely an understanding of the difference between midrash and theory, between (for one thing) the role midrash played for the Rabbis, which was to maintain the presence of Scripture (and thereby of God) in their lives, and the function that theory fulfills, which is to strengthen our acts of reading and to deepen (sometimes by undermining) our understanding of them. The difference separating these conceptions is at least one sign of the distance that interpretation has traveled in the course of history. [37]

It is not possible to understand midrash without fully grasping the nature of the rabbinic endeavor and the way in which they understood the text. They had a divinely inspired mission and they were in search of their divine Author. David

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[36] Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses*, 41.
[37] Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 38.

Stern, who has added so much to our understanding of how the mashal functions in rabbinic literature, reminds us in no uncertain terms that midrash can not be understood without an appreciation of its purpose, which, according to Stern, was one of life and death, the life of Torah versus the death of Judaism.

> The nature of that narrative, as told in the mashal, has already been related: it begins with a crisis and is followed by an effort at recuperating or salvaging the text – saving not only its meaning but its value, its felt importance in the life of the reader. What makes midrash different from other kinds of interpretation is that its subject, the text, is the Torah, and its reader not just *a* reader but the Jew who is the recipient of the covenant that the Torah embodies. For this kind of reader, midrash makes the Torah bearable, livable. Rather than primarily determining the Torah's meaning, or its multiple meanings, midrashic interpretation seems often more concerned with maintaining the Torah's presence in the existence of the Jew, with bridging the gap between its words and their reader, with overcoming the alienation, the distance of Torah, and with the restoring it to the Jew as an intimate, familiar presence. The midrashic interpreter in this sense is literally a translator: one who carries the text across a divide, who negotiates the space between the text and its comprehension. [38]

Rabbinic technique, unlike some forms of literary criticism, did function within the confines of a system determined by their purpose. "Even at its most apparently far-fetched or flamboyant moments," Stern writes, "midrashic interpretations tend to be situated on genuine textual cruces or irregularities, 'bumps' in the plain surface of Scripture, a fact that militates against the worst excesses of unbridled polysemy." [39] Clearly this can not be said about the output of modern literary criticism which often seemed to want to argue that as a text had no meaning of its own, it could only be said to contain whatever meaning a given reader found in it. The nature of the rabbinic output, as Rawidowicz showed, was elevated by

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[38] Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, 44-5.
[39] Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 26.

the tradition to a par equal to the text which it supposedly intended to elucidate. The Rabbis had a very specific understanding of their base text, and a belief that the act of interpretation itself was holy. Likewise, the interpretation they created was understood by them as engaging in a very specific way with the text. Rawidowicz's term for this is *interpretatio,* by which he means something like a reinvention of Jewish meaning through the act of interpreting. Rather than de-constructing in any way, Jewish interpretation according to this understanding was re-constructing, and thus insuring its own survival.

> Hence it should become clear that the Oral Law is not to be viewed either as mere commentary on the Written Law or as a kind of distortion of it. It represents as an *interpretatio* the creativity of Israel during a considerable number of centuries in its second attempt to crystallize its essence for itself. ... As was said before, its creators not only elevated it to the degree of the text, but were sometimes not afraid to hint at a kind of "if not higher," or "if not more" for this, Israel's second beginning. [40]

One of the obstacles which arose when modern literary critical theory met midrash was that critical theory relied on an illusion of meaning giving unity which it hoped to deconstruct—in order to show that there was no meaning. The Rabbis on the other hand embraced the notion of what has been termed the omnisignificance of Scripture, that is to say they understood the text as having hyper-meaning, the opposite of no inherent meaning.

> To begin with the positive side, the near identification of Torah and God provides the Rabbis with the basic axioms of midrashic hermeneutics: first, the belief in the omnisignificance of Scripture, in the meaningfulness of its every word, letter, even (according to one famous report) scribal flourish; second, the claim of the essential unity of Scripture as the expression of the

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[40] Simon Rawidowicz, *Studies in Jewish Thought,* edited by Nahum N. Glatzer (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1974) 56-7.

> single divine will. From the first axiom proceeds the common midrashic technique of atomization, whereby verses and phrases, sometimes even single words, in Scripture are broken up into smaller units, which are then exploited in isolation for hermeneutical significance. From the second axiom derives the equally typical midrashic habit of viewing the Bible atemporally, of explaining Scripture through Scripture, and of connecting the most disparate and seemingly unrelated verses in order to create new and overarching nexuses of meaning: in short, intertextuality that is elevated in midrash to the level of a virtual exegetical principle. [41]

This contrasts sharply with the reader-response theory, which Wolfgang Iser sums up, as, "... the suspicion that the uniform meaning of the text – which is not *formulated* by the text—is the reader's projection rather than the hidden content."[42] While reader-response theory may have helped articulate a new way to understand reader engagement in the process of textual decoding, it fell horribly short of allowing us to characterize the quality of engagement which the Rabbis brought to the text. As Handelman shows, modern theory enabled us to speak in a new way about the age-old process. The searing brilliance of rabbinic thought, however, was the sacred dimension they attributed to that act itself, an act which Handelman claims was continuous and contingent upon study. She writes:

> One needs to approach Rabbinic thought from within, for the elaboration of abstract rules is not a process which for the Rabbis was separate from the concrete instance which gives them rise. The text which gives rise to the interpretation is so intertwined with the interpretation that one cannot really separate the description of the process, the rules which govern the process, from the process itself.
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> ... There is a whole set of philosophical assumptions inherent in this very process of abstraction which recent literary critics such as Barthes and Derrida have uncovered. ... The Rabbis did... engage in systemization and historical ordering. But these processes remained *secondary,* not primary.

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[41] Stern, *Midrash and Theory,* 29.
[42] Iser, *The Act of Reading,* 17.

> Primary was the direct engagement in the continuing process of the text. The elaboration of the hermeneutic rules and so forth were tools through which the primary process of intertextual interplay could be carried even deeper. There is, then, no ultimate outside point of view. The text continues to develop each time it is studied, with each new interpretation, for the interpretation is an uncovering of what was latent in the text, and thus only an extension of it; the text is a self-regenerating process. [43]

David Stern completes this thought by reminding us explicitly how the impetus for this rabbinic approach was their understanding that through the study of Torah itself the student could approach the divine.

> To know Torah, to read and follow the divine blueprint, is, in this sense, a way to come to know the mind of the divine architect, and ultimately, to imitate Him and construct a human existence modeled after God's creation of the world. From this perspective, it is possible to understand why midrash is not merely an act of literary interpretation but a path toward holiness. [44]

This dimension of how the Rabbis understood the nature of the text with which they engaged is central. Even though modern literary criticism tries to show that midrash itself is literary, this only goes so far when we are forced to recall the sacred nature of the interpreting act for the Rabbis. The midrashic texts are literary works in their own right, but their composite nature leads me to believe that whoever put them together never meant to imply an element of unity or oneness of purpose which the Rabbis believed to exist even in the multiple interpretations of Torah. The midrashim as they have come to us today are literary composites to be sure. But just as an encyclopedia seeks to be comprehensive, no one would argue that the editor of an encyclopedia was producing a work meant to be read with the expectation of literary unity. I do not

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[43] Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses*, 49.
[44] Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 29.

say this to negate the artistry of the arrangement of midrashic components as they are put together to form the literary body we now have, but the point is crucial to our appreciation of the rabbinic endeavor because the Rabbis saw in Torah what I have called "suspended simultaneity," a unity that defied all literary unity. Literary unity sees the text as being moved by its beginning, middle and end. The Rabbis saw Torah as "suspended in simultaneity" without a beginning, middle and end. It is clear to me that they understood what they were producing midrashically as illuminators of that "suspended" document, not a suspended text in its own right. One aspect which makes the point clear is that from the rabbinic standpoint, midrash was of no value without Torah. As Handelman shows:

> According to the Rabbinic view, the written Scriptures are intentionally incomplete and are meant to be accompanied and supplemented by the oral Torah, simultaneously given to Moses; this oral law explains, elaborates, and interprets the obscurities and ambiguities of the written text. The text and its interpretation, then, are not seen as two separate entities, but as twin aspects of the same revelation. [45]

If they were creating literature of equal stature with Torah, nonetheless Torah remained necessary by virtue of its sacred status.

Hartman suggests, the text itself demanded its interpretation by its inherent "frictionality," something internal to the text itself: "I would like to assert that Scripture can be distinguished from fiction by its frictionality: Not only its respect for friction, which exists also in literary texts, but its capacity to leave traces,

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[45] Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses*, 31.

which incite and even demand interpretation of what it has incorporated." [46]

Hartman compares the sterility of the output of literary criticism per se when he reminds us of the dynamic, living notion of the text which the Rabbis retained and which modern literary criticism could only hint at hoping to rediscover in their own corpora of literature.

> While midrash might be viewed as a type of discourse with its own rules and historical development, and while we cannot assume that its only function was exegetical, little is more important today than to remind secular literary studies of the richness and subtlety of those strange rabbinic conversations which have been disdained for so long in favor of more objective and systematized modes of reading. ... the proper task of midrashic or non-midrashic exegesis is to keep the Bible from becoming literature. Becoming literature might mean a material still capable of development turning into a closed corpus, a once-living but now fossilized deposit. [47]

What Hartman termed "frictionality" might be understood as the tensions within a text which are the points of entry which beckon an active reader into the reading process. If reader-response theory is responsible for anything it is for the development of such approaches as that proposed by New Criticism. As Iser explains:

> A revealing example of this development is to be seen in New Criticism. This marks a turning-point in literary interpretation to the extent that it rejects the vital elements of the classical norm, namely, that the work is an object containing the hidden meaning of a prevailing truth. New Criticism has called off the search for meaning – known as the "extrinsic approach." [48]

New Criticism explored the way in which nothing is a text is innocent. Every dimension of the text is a result of the techniques of emplotment by its author and the forces of history, society and politics which play on him as he makes his

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[46] Hartman, "The Struggle for the Text," 13.
[47] Hartman,"The Struggle for the Text," 9.
[48] Iser, *The Act of Reading,* 15.

emplotment choices. As Boyarin remarks, this was as true of the Rabbis as any other creators of literary interpretation and this even impacted the way they produced one of their most creative signature literary devices, the mashal.

> Their own intertext- that is, the cultural codes which enable them to make meaning and find meaning, constrain the rabbis to fill in the gaps of the Torah's discourse with narratives which are emplotted in accordance with certain ideological structures. The type of midrashic parable called the mashal is only the most explicit of these structures, but it can be taken as a prototype- a privileged example- of all midrashic narrative interpretation. [49]

The ultimate conclusion of New Criticism is to determine that the study of text should be the study of the influences of these forces. While New Criticism, and its premise that no text had inherent meaning, is a direct outgrowth of the modern literary theory which gave birth to it, if there is a Jewish version of this phenomenon it is that which is described in the following terms by Rawidowicz:

> The men of *interpretatio* -- from Ezra till our own days, since the days of the *ma'amad Sinai,* according to Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi – have preserved Israel's thought from "Karaization," from being stifled through limiting literalism and fear-filled *peshatism.* ... *Interpret or perish* is the voice Israel hears incessantly since Sinai; still earlier, since its beginning, since the covenant with Abraham while still *holekh arirl* (Gen. 15:2), in that hour of his fear of cessation, of non-survival, because of the lack of an heir – the fear of almost every generation in Israel since the "father of the nation." [50]

Interpret or perish, claims Rawidowicz, was the ultimate commandment which came down to Israel. How then are we to understand the nature of the text as the Rabbis conceived of it? Handelman answers:

> At this point we can move on to the Rabbinic concept of language and meaning which has at its center the concept of the divinity of the text. The Biblical text is not, according to the Rabbinic view, a material thing located in

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[49] Boyarin, *Intertextuality,* 16.
[50] Rawidowicz, *Studies in Jewish Thought,* 79.

> a single space and circumscribed by a quantifiable time. The text ultimately is not even that authoritative and divine document which was given to Moses at a particular time and place, but, claims the Talmud, "The Torah preceded the world" (*Shab.* 88b). If the world of space and time had not yet been created, then in what manner did the Torah exist? ...in the Rabbinic view the Torah is not an artifact of nature, a product of the universe; the universe, on the contrary, is the product of Torah. [51]

The very act of interpretation is the essence of what it means to be Jewish, argue scholars such as Handelman and Rawidowicz. Put another way, for the Rabbis, Torah was a text, a simultaneous suspension of truth which was intentionally incomplete and whose completion through study and exegesis constituted the ultimate fulfillment of purpose for the life of the Jew, as well as his survival.

> What did God give to Moses and Moses bring to Israel? A "text" for *interpretatio;* not a finished, independent, self-sufficient text, but one which is open and has to remain open to *interpretatio*, more than that, one which demands *interpretatio,* obliges Israel to go on interpreting, thus discovering in the process of learning the Torah the duty of *interpretatio*; also of *interpretatio* as a secret of the account Israel was able to give of itself in history. [52]

The sacred dimension of this single most Jewish act was the way in which it both enabled the human to imitate God and also provided the vehicle through which the post-Destruction Jew could approach God. "For the Rabbis, however, the primary reality was linguistic; true being was a God who *speaks* and creates *texts,* and *imitation deus* was not silent suffering, but speaking and interpreting."[53]

As we will see below, one of the most obvious ways in which the Rabbis could perform this sacred act of interpretation was through the creation of the mashal.

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[51] Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses*, 37.
[52] Rawidowicz, *Studies in Jewish Thought*, 56.
[53] Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses*, 4.

> In my view, it is the model that accounts for *most* meshalim in Rabbinic literature. Here the mashal is an allusive narrative told for an ulterior purpose; it draws a series of parallels between a fictional story and the actual, "real life" situation to which the mashal is directed. ... Neither a secret take with a hidden meaning nor a transparent story with a clear-cut moral, the mashal is a narrative that actively elicits from the audience the application of its message – or what we would call its interpretation. [54]

This is what we mean when we speak of engaging the text. While modern literary theory may provide help in terms of a terminology or a vocabulary in which to couch this activity, they can never approach the impetus. Midrash was never intended to find whatever personal meaning a reader might bring to a text. The text itself was conceived of in a very unique way by the rabbinic interpreters; it was understood almost as a replacement for the Temple – it was the earthly site of the dwelling place of God.

> Understood this way, the object of midrash was not so much to find the meaning of Scripture as it was literally to engage its text. Midrash became a kind of conversation the Rabbis invented in order to enable God to speak to them from between the lines of Scripture, in the textual fissures and discontinuities that exegesis discovers. The multiplication of interpretations in midrash was one way, as it were, to prolong that conversation. [55]

Ironically, while we will be forced to completely disagree with Wolfgang Iser's notion of the text, we can still appreciate the way in which reader-response theory characterizes the engagement of the reader in the process. In some ways, it is not unlike the investment made by the rabbinic interpreters.

> As is evident from the variety of responses to modern art, or to literary works down through the ages, an interpreter can no longer claim to teach the reader the meaning of the text, for without a subjective contribution and a context there is no such thing. Far more instructive will be an analysis of what actually

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[54] Stern, *Midrash and Theory,* 44.
[55] Stern, *Midrash and Theory,* 31.

> happens when one is reading a text, for that is when the text begins to unfold its potential; it is in the reader that the text comes to life, and this is true even when the 'meaning' has become so historical that it is no longer relevant to us. In reading we are able to experience things that no longer exist and to understand things that are totally unfamiliar to us; ... [56]

Rawidowicz echoes this notion when he explains the specific way in which Israel interacted with the text. The interpretive act is for him an essential element in spiritual development. This spiritual notion clearly characterizes the rabbinic relation with the text, a relationship which distinguishes it from anything found in modern literature.

> *Interpretatio* is a fundamental phenomenon in the world at large in the sphere of religious, political, and social ideas. An adequate grasp of this phenomenon is essential for the evaluation of the decisive battles in the spiritual life of ancient and modern civilizations. It was of still greater relevance for the evaluation of the development of Israel's thought in ancient times and its transitions from them to modern times, especially for the understanding of the relation between the "text" of Israel's beginning and the accumulated interpreting work that followed. [57]

It was Daniel Boyarin who articulated how in fact we could characterize the Rabbis as readers:

> In place of the hero of the spirit in communion with the true timeless essence of the heroes of the Bible, I will imagine the rabbis as readers doing the best they could to make sense of the Bible for themselves and their times and in themselves and their times- in short, as readers. [58]

We began this inquiry by looking at the Bible-as-Literature approach from which we asserted that we were eventually going to depart. The Bible-as-Literature

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[56] Iser, *The Act of Reading,* 19.
[57] Rawidowicz, *Studies in Jewish Thought*, 50.
[58] Boyarin, *Intertextuality,* 14.

approach, as we saw, simply did not see the Bible as a text. We have reached the point in our study when perhaps it is necessary to explore exactly what it means and what it meant for the Rabbis to see the Bible as text. Ironically we will do this again by means of a modern approach which we will ultimately reject. This is the approach provided by the Reader-Response theory. The reader-response technique, as we have seen, realigned the process of engaging with a text and shifted the paradigm so that in its view, the reader was the center of the process and it was through the act of reading that the reader produced meaning. What reader-response theory showed was that there had never been value-free reading and that a certain type of engagement between reader and text had always been a dimension of the reading process. How this came to inform our understanding of midrash, however, was made clear by Daniel Boyarin who stressed that it was this type of reading in which the Rabbis were engaged.

> I wish to discredit the opposition between reading which is value-free and concerned with the difficulties of the biblical text and that which is unconcerned with those difficulties and speaks to the needs of the moment. It is clear, then, that I am not denying the reality of the ideological concerns on the part of the rabbis nor that these ideological concerns may have often had an effect on the interpretative choices they made. I am asserting that we will not read midrash well and richly unless we understand it first and foremost as *reading* , as hermeneutic, as generated by the interaction of rabbinic readers with a heterogeneous and difficult text, which was for them both normative and divine in origin. [59]

No meaning, these theorists argued, was inherent in the text itself; meaning grew out of the act of reading. This was the dimension of their approach which electrified the encounter between midrash and literary criticism because it is from

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[59] Boyarin, *Intertextuality,* 5.

this understanding that we get the notion, so central to rabbinic thinking, that there is no one meaning in the text itself. As Iser shows, "For the critic, meaning is to be equated with such norms, and if they are to be extracted from the text as things in themselves, then, clearly, meaning is not something produced by the text." [60]

Again what thinkers like Boyarin brought to this discussion was the understanding that the type of reading in which the Rabbis had been engaged was reading as it had always been.

> In place of these approaches, I will follow much current thought in proposing that all interpretation and historiography is *representation* of the past by the present, that is, that there is no such thing as value-free, true and objective rendering of documents. They are always filtered through the cultural, socio-ideological matrix of their readers. [61]

To make this clear, Boyarin uses the example of the photographer and the painter. He writes, "...today we hold that the photographer, no less than the painter, produces a representation in which the very image is generated by what the culture encourages and constrains her to see." [62] Iser's words describing the relationship between reader and text as experiential can be seen as attempting to characterize the type of engagement which rabbinic interpretation brought to the sacred text:

> Such a meaning must clearly be the product of an interaction between the textual signals and the reader's act of comprehension. And, equally clearly, the reader cannot detach himself from such an interaction; on the contrary, the activity stimulated in him will link him to the text and induce him to create the conditions necessary for the effectiveness of that text. As text and reader thus merge into a single situation, the division between subject and object no

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[60] Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 5.
[61] Boyarin, *Intertextuality*, 12.
[62] Boyarin, *Intertextuality*, 12.

> longer applies, and it therefore follows that meaning is no longer an object to be defined, but is an effect to be experienced. [63]

Nevertheless, while these modern insights into the text and this shaking up of the way text is viewed brings into our intellectual debate a new notion of the text itself, it does not really capture the essence of what the Rabbis experienced when they engaged with text. For this, we must turn to Rawidowicz whose appreciation of the rabbinic endeavor encapsulates both the radically creative dimension of the reader's part and the sacred reverence which the Rabbis believed characterized the text itself. Bayit Sheni, his term for rabbinic creation, like the Second Temple itself, both is and supercedes the original. But just as the Second Temple came to restore what had been possible during the time of the First Temple, and at the same time went beyond it, so too the Rabbis are understood to be re-constructing in such a way as to infuse their endeavors with history and legitimacy while they simultaneously struggle for the very survival of their enterprise.

> In brief, the *Bayit Sheni* is not a commentary by an *interpretatio* of the highest order. *Bayit Sheni* is second only in time, it is first in essence, in its own particular essence. I dare say *Bayit Rishon* and *Bayit Sheni* are two beginnings of a system of thought and mode of life. This means that Israel has two beginnings or the *interpretatio* achieved by the *Bayit Sheni* may serve as a model for the *interpretatio* in the sphere of thought at large. [64]

As Rawidowicz makes clear, the realm of this construction was the text, both the foundational text *(Bayit Rishon)* and the created text (*Bayit Sheni*). This ultimately is what we mean when we attempt to answer the question of how the Rabbis saw the text.

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[63] Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 9-10.
[64] Rawidowicz, *Studies in Jewish Thought*, 52.

> For our problem it is of great importance to see in this persistent effort of the creators of the Oral Law to elevate it to the status of the Written Law a decisive moment in the struggle to give the *perush* an equal status with the "text" it interprets, insofar as they share the same origin. Equality of origin and time for the *perush* with the "text" means absolute equality of value (irrespective of the distinction in the degree of their validity). This equality of value is bound to lend to the *perush* an autonomy, a self-sufficiency sui generis. [65]

If modern literary criticism falls short in its ability to really explain how text works in terms of how the Rabbis understood the text, it does, nonetheless, help us to see how texts work in general and these insights will make us better readers of the rabbinic texts. One idea which modern literary criticism brings to the understanding of text is the notion of the cultural repertoire, that is the idea that language itself has a way of functioning within a culture, a way which had not been understood in these terms until modern criticism articulated them. Iser describes the phenomenon like this:

> The repertoire consists of all the familiar territory within the text. This may be in the form of references to earlier works, or to social and historical norms, or to the whole culture from which the text has emerged...[the implications are] (1) that the reality evoked is not confined to the printed page, (2) that those elements selected for reference are not intended to be a mere replica. On the contrary, their presence in the text usually means that they undergo some kind of transformation, and, indeed, this is an integral feature of the whole process of communication. ... but they are always in some way reduced or modified, as they have been removed from their original context and function. ... their original context must remain sufficiently implicit to act as a background to offset their new significance. [66]

Modern literary criticism brought ideas such as the cultural repertoire which provided ports of entry into the sometimes impenetrable rabbinic literature. By sensitizing modern readers to how language functions in a culture, this new idea

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[65] Rawidowicz, *Studies in Jewish Thought*, 53.
[66] Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 69.

of rabbinic literature permits us to understand this transformative mission in the culture of post-Destruction. It is scholar Wolfgang Iser to whom we owe our understanding of how the cultural repertoire functions in literature. His analysis comes to help us place midrash within the culture that produced it and also sensitizes us to the aspects of midrashic literature which may not be the result of individuality, but rather the outgrowth of the timeframe in which it was written.

> Perhaps now we can draw a few general conclusions about the function of the literary repertoire. The field of action in a literary work tends to be on or just beyond the fringes of the particular thought system prevalent at the time. Literature endeavors to counter the problems produced by the system, and so the literary historian should be able not only to gauge which system was in force at the time of the work's creation but also to reconstruct the weakness and the historical, human impact of that system and its claim to universal validity. [67]

For an appreciation of what an idea like this might mean when applied specifically to rabbinic literature, we need look no further than the words of Daniel Boyarin, who wrote:

> The biblical narrative is gapped and dialogical. The role of the midrash is to fill in the gaps. The materials which provide impetus for the specifics of the gap-filling are found in the intertext in two ways: first in the intertext provided by the canon itself, the intertextual and interpretive interrelations which exist and which can be made to exist between different parts of canon, and second, within the ideological intertextual code of the rabbinic culture. The midrash is not, then, a reflex of that ideology but a dialogue with the biblical text conditioned and allowed by that ideology—and as such is not different from any other interpretation. [68]

We have done much, I hope, to articulate how the conversation between different aspects of modern literary theory allow us to understand midrash in different

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[67] Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 73.
[68] Boyarin, *Intertextuality*, 17.

terms and to see also how the scholars of midrash argued for an understanding which took into consideration the text as well as the act of midrash. One of the key reasons why modern literary theory could not hold sway over midrashic literature was because of the usual presumption of the act of reading which a theory like the reader-response theory uses as its base. Here is Wolfgang Iser's synopsis of how we can understand the way in which text came into being and the forces at work in it:

> And so literary texts were construed as a testimony to the spirit of the age, to social conditions, to the neuroses of their authors, and so forth; they were reduced to the level of documents, and thus robbed of that very dimension that sets them apart from the document, namely, the opportunity they offer us to experience for ourselves the spirit of the age, social conditions, the author's neuroses, etc. It is a vital feature of literary texts that they do not lose their ability to communicate; indeed, many of them can still speak even when their message has long since passed into history and their meaning no longer seems to be of importance. This ability cannot, however, be deduced from a paradigm that regards the work of art as representing particular, prevailing thought systems or social systems. [69]

The act of reading as described by Wolfgang Iser is as follows:

> The gap cannot be bridged just by a "willing suspension of disbelief," because – as had already been pointed out – the reader's task is not simply to accept, but to assemble for himself that which is to be accepted. The manner in which he assembles it is dictated by the continual switching of perspectives during the time-flow of his reading, and this, in turn, provided a theme-and-horizon structure which enables him gradually to take over the author's unfamiliar view of the world on the terms laid down by the author. [70]

But this has nothing to do with the type of text which the Rabbis were encountering. On the one hand, as Boyarin reminds us, "[t]he text of the Torah is gapped and dialogical, and into the gaps the reader slips, interpreting and

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[69] Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 13.
[70] Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 97.

completing the text in accordance with the codes of his or her culture." [71] On the other hand, the Rabbis were not reading a novel, hoping to determine how it would come out in the end. They were engaging with a text which they held in its entirety in their minds at all times.

How then, are we finally to understand what the rabbinic notion of the text was. In what way can the modern literary theory's definition of a text help us and how must we move past it to finally and fully appreciate not the reader response theory, but something which perhaps we should call the Rabbi-Text theory.
To get at the answer to this question, we need to understand that literary criticism distinguishes a text from a document. The document is the physical object, black on white. The text is that which is contained on/in it – suspended in its entirety, a dynamic process which is completed when it encounters a reader. This definition is significant both in its usefulness to our study of midrash and also in a crucial way in which it helps us grasp the fundamentally different type of reading/ engaging/interpreting in which the Rabbis were involved. Iser talks about the role of the critic in the reading process and ultimately concludes that the critic himself is finally only a reader bringing his own subjectivity into play with the text. In describing the process of reading, Iser talks about what he calls the "moving viewpoint." He writes: "The lack of the availability of the whole work during the act of comprehension, which is brought about by means of the 'moving viewpoint', is the condition that necessitates consistency-building on the part of the reader..."[72]

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[71] Boyarin, *Intertextuality*, 14.
[72] Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 16.

This is critical to our understanding of rabbinic conception of the text because this is exactly what the Rabbis did not do. Rabbinic hermeneutics demonstrate that the key to interpretation was to hold the entirety of the text in one's mind at any given moment. This is both because of their aim and as a result of their conception. For them the text was not about deciphering the plot or story to get at the truth which according to Iser lives inside literature. Rather the whole of the text was suspended, as it were, for their purview of it in its entirety. Clearly the way in which they quote and play with text shows that no one whose wisdom has come down to us through the ages was reading or interpreting the text for the first time. None of them was interested in how this most recent parasha changed the set idea of the literary corpus. Rather, they were constantly reading the whole as a whole and reading all the parts as related to any other part and to the whole. This was not a text but THE text. Their certainty that it contained sacred insight into the will of God—their certainty of that fact – is their most lasting legacy. "The Author of the Book (and indeed the Author of the world)," writes Boyarin, "has chosen at the time of creation—at the time of writing about creation—to hide the interpretation, but He, through His prophets, has revealed something of this truth later on." [73] This divine element accounts for the central aspect of the rabbinic notion of the text and for their understanding of their mission as readers.

Using the insights elaborated by literary criticism, we are able to fully grasp the profundity of the notion that for the Rabbis Torah was a text. That is to say the

[73] Boyarin, *Intertextuality*, 17-8.

language of Torah functioned differently than other types of discourse. Infused with all that we have gleaned from literary criticism, we can see what it means to read like the Rabbis. In the words of Daniel Boyarin:

> I come to propose a reading of midrash which is in keeping with the intellectual, critical, and theoretical movement of our times. ... I *will* claim that midrash is true reading of the meaning of the biblical text, a reading which is sensitive to literary values, echoes, contradictions, intertextuality in all of its senses within the Bible. Midrash is a reading of the "plain sense of things," but only if we recognize that the plain sense grows and changes throughout history and that this is the Bible's underlying meaning. However, I will also accept the characterization of midrash as the product of a disturbed exegetical sense, but only if we recognize that all exegetical senses are disturbed, including most certainly our own. [74]

The explanation of a text and the sophistication of the theory about the relationship between text and reader posited by post-modern literary criticism enhances our understanding because it allows us a more complete explanation of how a text functions, how elements like cultural repertoire work in a text, and how multiplicity of meaning might provide us with new insights into the subtlety of the rabbinic text. Nonetheless, this theory leaves us unsatisfied, and this for two reasons. First, because it highlights the unfolding way in which a reader interacts with the text, which does not characterize how the Rabbis interacted with text. The Rabbis are not readers in this sense because they understood the whole of Torah as a whole and because they were never interested in narrative development, plot development, "what was going to happen." Secondly, they did not think the text could be made to say anything. Heaven forefend! They understood the text to include a way to find God, to see what had been revealed.

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[74] Boyarin, *Intertextuality,* 18-9.

As Boyarin describes them, "The rabbis are the Goethes of Judaism, who with their gigantic creative abilities understand the 'reality' of the salvation history and communicate this reality with their legends, the aggada." [75]This more than any other perception of the rabbinic undertaking distinguishes them from any other readers in history.

> This story of midrash, [writes Boyarin,] quite reverses the narrative of hermeneutic that is presupposed by the historical school. As we have seen, their assumption is that the text is clear and transparent at the moment of its original creation, because it speaks to a particular historical situation, and it becomes unclear, owing to the passing of time and that situation. In contrast to this, our conception of midrash is one in which the text makes its meaning in history. [76]

As we will see below, this modern literary understanding of the text and its functioning was developed by David Stern in his analysis of the mashal in rabbinic literature. Our endeavor here will be to take this understanding of the contribution of modern literary criticism including Stern's analysis of the mashal and attempt to move it forward into a different type of literary analysis of the rabbinic treatment of certain midrashim. The mashal as a literary construct is an element which, like Stern's sense of his overall project, bridges the gap between the world of literary critical debate and a true appreciation of the rabbinic interpretation of text. The mashal is the perfect mode for the Rabbis because of the way in which its use of language is fraught with the tensions which hermeneutics show us are at work in the Bible itself.

> ... the parabolic narrative is often so concise it is like a skeleton or a sketch rather than a fully fleshed-out tale. Because all but the most necessary details are excluded, everything that *is* said draws the most intense attention. In this

[75] Boyarin, *Intertextuality*, 9.
[76] Boyarin, *Intertextuality*, 17.

> conciseness, the mashal's narrative resembles that of the Bible, in which, in Erich Auerbach's famous description, virtually nothing is foregrounded while the entire background is fraught with meaning. Indeed, this point of resemblance may be one of the stronger lines of continuity between the biblical and the Rabbinic literary traditions. [77]

In his analysis of the functioning of the mashal, Stern reminds us of the difference between other types of literary modes and the mashal:

> In the exemplum, excess or redundancy serves as a guarantee that the narrative's meaning will be understood without ambiguity. By reducing all openings for doubt or question in a narrative, redundant features simultaneously eliminate the possibility of plural readings, and reiterate a single meaning through multiple narrative options.
>
> The mashal, in contrast, operates through a technique that is the opposite of redundancy: it deliberately gives the impression of naming its meaning *insufficiently*. It uses ambiguity intentionally. Yet the mashal achieves this appearance – the appearance of ambiguity – not by being authentically ambiguous but by shrewdly incorporating suggestive openings for the questioning of meaning; in this way it artfully manipulates its audience to fill these openings so as to arrive at the mashal's correct conclusion. [78]

Stern's analysis of the mashal will show the nature of the rabbinic act of interpretation. As he says:

> The narrative of the mashal is therefore itself about interpretation. It provides a model for the interpretive activity, and thus does more than solely fulfill a rhetorical function. The narrative assumes a cognitive value of its own, telling us something in its own right: about the inherently paradoxical character of interpretation, and about the extreme conditions under which such interpretation becomes necessary. In our mashal, those conditions are the historical events surrounding the destruction of the Temple, as symbolized in the motif of the bridal-chamber and its destruction. [79]

As we saw at the very outset of this essay, while they may have engaged in narrative expansion, the Rabbis did not do so for the purpose of character

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[77] Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 51.
[78] Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, 15.
[79] Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, 41.

development, or to get inside the character's head. They always did so with an objective to finding their theological purpose. According to Handelman, this was achieved in a particular way by the Rabbis who themselves saw association and juxtaposition as a means to give birth to meaning. In this way, rabbinic thought is the antithesis of literalism. As she describes it:

> As we have seen, in Rabbinic thought, the relation of the word to the thing is not a relation of substitution to begin with. Rather, the relationships underlying the logic or Rabbinic (or prepositional) interpretation – and psychoanalysis – are continuity, juxtaposition, and association. Here resemblance never effaces difference, *as if* never becomes *is*, the literal is never cancelled. Say the Rabbis, "No text ever loses its plain meaning." (*Shab.* 63a; *Yev.* 24a) [80]

To find their meaning they use the technique which we will explore here – that is the very act of expanding an understanding by means of juxtaposition. "The play of doubleness against duplicity," writes Stern, "is a critical factor in the mashal's narrative poetics. [81] Traditionally – or overtly—they did so through the use of the mashal. In the mashal, argues Stern, lives rabbinic ideology.

> What is trivial about the mashal is its fictionality, a fictionality legitimated or "saved," as it were, by the exegetical instrumentality of the mashal. ... in order to appreciate their view that the mashal is a didactic literary form, a story with a message. But the real object of that message is not exegesis per se; it is an ideology, a worldview – specifically, the ideology of Rabbinic Judaism. [82]

I will be suggesting also that they did this through implication by means of examining the characters in relationships which we can designate by the term literary foil. Literary foil is a comparison of the biblical text to which the Rabbis, accustomed to articulating by means of comparison, would have been sensitive. I

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[80] Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses*, 55.
[81] Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, 9.
[82] Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 41.

do not assert that they actually overtly made these comparisons, or that the mashal is the equivalent of the literary foil, but just as we have taken from other dimensions of modern literary criticism to understand the rabbinic undertaking, so too, I would like to posit, this can be a fruitful and instructive exercise.

Most narrative theory exists to decode how stories function once they have been produced; therefore they are interested in plot, character, meaning, and so forth. The Rabbis did not take the biblical text as stories, and they never explained "how it had been produced." Therefore they do not ask these types of questions. According to Susan Handelman, this can be attributed to the very nature of their way of thinking. According the Handelman, the relationship between time and narrative unfolding is itself distinctive in rabbinic thought:

> ...Hebrew thinking moves in time while the Greeks take space as their dominant thought form. The Greco-European concept of time is "rectilinear:" time is conceived as a straight line, a series in succession. Western time is determined by the solar cycle, whereas the Jewish year is based on a lunar cycle, time rhythms rather than time cycles or time lines. Instead of conceiving of time in terms of the circle, based on solar movement, Hebrew time is conceived in terms of rhythmic alternation, based on the phases of the moon. "For us, the turn of the year is the time when the annual cycle is at an end; in Hebraic time, it is when the beginning of the year returns. ... Time is a rhythm which is a ceaseless return of the same time-content." Hence time is something qualitative defined by its content. [83]

The Rabbis understood the text as text, that is to say as language that functioned by its own rules. As Handelman argues, their thinking was characterized by a particular relationship which is a return to the same content, in other words, by comparison. To demonstrate this we need to look no further than their

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[83] Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses,* 36.

hermeneutics which they thought would unlock the mysteries of the language and the theologically dense resolutions which they concluded arose from the hermeneutic process which they applied to the language.

What I propose to do now is to take all that we have gleaned from the discussion between literary criticism and midrash and return to David Stern's initial question. "...to ask not what midrash can do for literary criticism, but what theory has done to midrash." [84] Armed, as it were, with a new understanding of the rabbinic notion of text and a heightened sense of some of the tensions at work within a text which we gathered from our exploration of modern literary theory, we can begin to ask a larger question about aspects of structure in text for it is in structure where comparison resides. Much of modern literary criticism is instructive for the understanding it brings to how midrash functions but also somehow falls short because modern literary criticism is specifically undoing a belief which, as readers of midrash, we do not hold while at the same time it is deaf to the basic premise upon which midrash is built.

As we saw, an examination of this sometimes fruitful, sometimes frustrating, conversation between midrash and modern literary criticism involved a number of steps. We discussed briefly what modern literary criticism was trying to accomplish. We did not, however, have the time, nor was it necessary, to trace in any great length the historical and intellectual development which led modern

[84] Stern, *Midrash and Theory,* 1.

literary criticism to break with its past. We benefited, however, from taking from the modern literary critical understanding some of its notions about the functioning of language, ideas such as the cultural repertoire and the role of the reader in the creation of meaning. Whether midrash needs this understanding to make it more interesting to those outside the specialized field or whether the discipline of literary criticism is just useful because it gives us a new vocabulary to discuss some phenomena, the fact is that a new appreciation of midrashic literature has arisen and this in turn has created a climate where new ways of understanding midrash emerges. In any event, modern literary criticism is helpful in formulating for us language about how a text functions. This is crucial for our discussion because the single most important characteristic which we owe rabbinic literature is their understanding of the text as text. What the exploration of modern literary criticism has provided us is a way to fully grasp the importance of the surface of a text, that is to say its language, as the field on which the tension is played out. The tension which results from the rabbinic approach to text is one which is conceived of and articulated through comparison and the register in which this is first audible is linguistic. The most striking example of this is *gezerah shava.*

> The second of R. Ishmael's Thirteen Middot, *gezerah shava,* is even more overtly linguistic. The gezerah shava is an analogy between two laws based on identical *expressions* in the Biblical text. Literally, the words mean *similar injunction* or *a comparison with the equal,* they connote *philological measure.* In this case, the analogy between two different laws is dependent not on the inner content of the laws themselves, but on purely linguistic similarities. [85]

[85] Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses*, 57.

This same approach to the workings of the world explains how they would create a cycle of time in which the hour was not a fixed entity. Rather than be a fixed unit, the hour responded to the demands of agriculture as an outgrowth of God's creation and the "sense-making" aspect of the world. Instead of seeing these rabbinisms as quirks of an idiosyncratic few, we can see them as outgrowths of a deeply unified conception of the universe. This is not to dismiss the political overlay which may have come into play in the debate as to who set the calendar, but it can be seen as further indication that those who settled the calendar issues did so as part of a larger, unified conception of which the notion of God in time was the core.

This sensitivity to the interplay between the specifically literary dimension of midrash and the core beliefs which were played out in the tensions which inhabited those dimensions will enable us to do a type of informed literary analysis of certain midrashim which is neither an exact outgrowth of what the literary scholars did when they discovered midrash nor something explicitly undertaken by the Rabbis. We will be looking structurally at midrashim to see how we can find meaning on a larger scale of the type of comparison which in literary circles comes from examining the use of the literary foil.

Literary criticism takes as such a given the literary device of the literary foil that it is difficult to find even more than the most cursory definition of it in most analyses of literature. One of the ways in which it plays out in literature is in what is usually

described in the background-foreground relationship. As Iser explains, "The background-foreground relation is a basic structure by means of which the strategies of the text produce a tension that sets off a series of different actions and interactions, and that is ultimately resolved by the emergence of the aesthetic object." [86] The purpose of the background is to impact on our understanding of the foreground.

The relationship between the components of a given comparison, while using this foreground-background technique also took on a theological overlay at the hands of the Rabbis. David Stern explains:

> Roitman's theologized formulation suggests a possible direction in which to look for a model or explanation for the concept of polysemy in midrash. In contemporary criticism, textual meaning is often described spatially, in terms of its position either "behind" the text (the traditional logocentric view) or "in front" of it (from the perspective of deconstruction). In the case of Rabbinic Judaism, the divine guarantee of meaning in Scripture might be described more accurately as coming from above, not in the sense of divine effluence or emanation but literally from on high, from the top of Mount Sinai, where, the Rabbis claimed, God gave Moses not only Scripture, "the written Torah" or Pentateuch, but also an "oral Torah," passed on by mouth from generation to generation. That oral Torah effectively comprised everything in Rabbinic Judaism not explicitly stated in the written Torah. As revealed in its totality at Sinai, it included every multiple interpretation of Scripture, including, as one celebrated saying states, "the very words a disciple of the sages will speak before his teacher." [87]

Even hallmark literary critic Northrop Frye, who wrote extensively on Shakespeare, just takes for granted the use of the foil (like Hotspur and Falstaff for Harry). His tacit argument that the literary foil requires no definition means

[86] Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 95.
[87] Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 26-7.

that he shows how it works without even remarking "that it works." To understand the use of the literary technique of meaning through comparison or juxtaposition, we have to turn to the Rabbis themselves. In this instance, it is as though the Rabbis, rather than the literary critics, are giving us the language which would enhance our ability to articulate how characters interact in a play by Shakespeare. The literary foil is *gezerah shava* writ large and by examining how the smaller unit of the mashal functions for rabbinic literature, we may be able to see how we can apply these insights gleaned from literary criticism to expand our analysis and say something about what is, for all intents and purposes, the presence of the literary foil in Torah which is analyzed as such – although obviously not in those terms – by the Rabbis, ever the literary readers.

Chapter Four

The Rabbinic Endeavor and the Literary Foil

We have spent considerable time navigating the conversation between modern literary theory, in several of its incarnations, and midrashic literature. The purpose of this was to show conclusively, and I hope we have done so, that modern reading strategies help us differentiate between elements of rabbinic literature that are literary, and which can be understood differently thanks to the input of these theories, and elements of rabbinic literature that are, well, ... rabbinic. It is through the use of the various literary lenses that we should be able to see the dimensions of the rabbinic endeavor which are theological, spiritual, reconstructive which, I am arguing, stem from the Rabbis' viewing of the Torah text as a text. Modern literary criticism helped sensitize us to the notion that cultural tensions may have been in play which determined *how* rabbinic literature interacted with its text, but, with few exceptions, they simply fall short of explaining *why*.

David Stern's treatment of the mashal, on the other hand, shows us two very important things about midrashic literature. First, the mashal comes to show that a midrash is a textual mirror designed to illuminate for us the way in which the Bible is a text. By mirroring, the mashal shows both the simultaneity of all the parts and also transforms the verbal (unfolding) into a visual (fixed). Its purpose is to make transparent the structural dimension of the story it is clarifying, almost as an x-ray shows the structure of the human form. Secondly, only one artifact can have this kind of simultaneous structure, that is the antithesis of an unfolding structure, in other words – a text. A story has an unfolding structure. A narrative

has an unfolding structure. A text – like the bones on an x-ray – has a fixed structural framework.

Our objective now is to undertake an analysis making use of some of the insights we have gleaned from our conversation with modern literary theory and also with our understanding of how we need to go beyond the constraints of these theories. We will be looking at some of the midrashim on the parasha *Lech Lecha* in *Braishit Rabbah*. What we will see definitively is that insights which the Rabbis gleaned from their interaction with the text reveal how they clearly understood the text as text, not as story, not as history, not as allegory, but as text. In each of the instances which we will examine, we can see that their foray into the biblical text and the midrashic gold which they mined there was theological and meaning-giving. This is true on the macro level of their interpretive act as well as on the micro level, that which people are more accustomed to examining when they look at midrash.

We will look first at the mashal which opens the rabbinic treatment of parasha *Lech Lecha* and then we will explore the material which treats the relationship between Abraham and Lot and that which treats the relationship between Sarah and Hagar. [1] I plan to demonstrate that Lot and Hagar can be seen to serve as literary foils to Abraham and Sarah, respectively. In expanding what we know

[1] We should note that we will be dealing with a part of the text in which Abraham and Sarah's names have not yet been changed from the original Abram and Sarai. Nonetheless as this is not germane to our discussion, and for simplicity's sake, I will refer to them as Abraham and Sarah throughout.

about them through their rabbinic lens, the Rabbis were appealing to this literary device, although obviously not in these terms, in order to draw theological conclusions about the text. They were not interested in Lot or Hagar per se, nor in Lot or Hagar "as people." What they draw from the text even at this level shows their notion of the text in action, the text as text which, in the act of interpreting, advances theology.

At the very outset, they set off from the surface question of why Abraham. They are not so much interested in expanding the character of Abraham to make him a fit ancestor in the way in which, for example, George Washington's cherry tree vouches for *his* honesty. Their point, it seems to me, is more clearly that at a time of uncertainty, when it might seem that God has left the land, then as a Jew, what one needs to do is seek God and demonstrate that one is available to find and be found. Obviously, this is not in the peshat of the biblical text which is ostensibly commenting on why God picked Abraham to leave *his* country. It seems to be addressing the concern which would have corresponded to the Rabbis' situation, the feeling that God *had* left *His* country.

Our examination will take us through a few of the midrashim from the treatment of the parasha *Lech Lecha* because they serve as examples of a phenomenon which is much more wide-spread in the literature and which perhaps could come from examining any number of instances in Midrash. Also our examination of these smaller units will allow us to see that we can draw these conclusions about

what I have called the rabbinic endeavor without concerning ourselves with the overlay which has been imposed upon the literature by the literary compilation process which produced the literary homilies we have today, although I am certain we can see it at work on that level as well.

Looking at the treatment of the opening mashal (Gen. Ran. 39:1), followed by an examination of how Lot and Hagar can be understood as foils for Abraham and Sarah respectively, will allow us to draw a larger comparison, and this is the comparison of land to children. This comparison is mentioned, albeit almost in passing, by Judith Baskin.[2] She sees it as part of her larger argument about what barrenness might mean to women in the rabbinic world by trying to read the literature as somehow historic. As she herself says, "Biblical exemplars of the attributes the rabbinic interpreters believed were most appropriate for women, as well as glimpses of the real women who shared their everyday lives, are revealed in the relaxed and unpredictable arena of aggadic texts." [3] I think it is ultimately more true to the rabbinic endeavor to see it as being much more central to rabbinic thought and theology than as a window into their attitudes towards women or reflections on their personal experiences.

What we will also see from this analysis is that the types of reading strategies and literary interpretations that come with their own agendas, the "*ists*," of the

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[2] Judith Baskin, *Midrashic Women: Formations of the Feminine in Rabbinic Literature* (Hanover: Brandeis University Pres, 2002) 119ff.
[3] Baskin, *Midrashic Women*, 7.

academic and political arena, be they femin*ist*, fundamental*ist*, Mar*xist* or other, render themselves incapable of the type of analysis I am suggesting because their agenda precludes this type of insight. Those who look only to see what the "women" are doing, and look at the Bible as a story of a world sadly in need of a corrective dose of their political outlook, look at Hagar, for example, as "an oppressed person." When we examine these types of interpretations what we see are their agendas at work, a direct result of the way in which they blur the distinction between text and history. This is clear when we note that all the many tomes with these types of agenda will be made up of chapter after chapter about Hagar and include not even so much as a cursory reference to Lot. Like the other approaches to the Bible as literature – or political treatise – which we have rejected, an ideologically based reading of the Bible does not allow for reading the Bible as a text because these approaches are only interested in ferreting out a specific agenda or ideology of the Bible as literature. It is difficult to find a treatment of the patriarchal narrative whose main thrust is not showing/ denouncing the biblical literature for its archaic patriarchal ideology. An example of this type of reading can be found in *Daughters of Abraham: Feminist Thought in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam,* where we read: "The Jewish Bible is a thoroughly realistic text. The book of Genesis, for example, is quite clear that relations between the sexes are problematic and fraught with suffering. It tells the story of a holy family that is dysfunctional, and in which husbands and wives are

often at war."[4] Even Judith Baskin recognizes this phenomenon to some extent as she writes in the introduction to her book:

> Based on a hermeneutics of suspicion, feminist theologians assume that Judaism's traditional texts and their interpretations reinforce male hegemony and justify the traditional roles to which women have been assigned. ... the feminist theologian utilizes her studies of received texts from the past for purposes of religious reconstruction in the present and the future. ...[Baskin's goal, as she herself defines it, is] ... to understand how women are portrayed in the aggadic midrash of late antiquity and, where possible, to suggest why. [5]

These approaches look at language as carriers of ideology and find isolated words which demonstrate how the Bible itself created the society in which we live. The Bible, they seem to argue, is responsible for all the ills of our known world, for the oppression of women, for homophobia, for social inequality and so forth. Rather than see the Bible as a text whose meaning transcends its surface, as the Rabbis did, these critics want to freeze the Bible in its literal meaning or in the meaning which has been given to it by subsequent readers with agendas of their own. These readers seem less concerned with its historicity, what in fact it *can* tell us about the world in which it was created, and more concerned with its value as conveyor of a code of values or belief. Their analysis revolves around seeing the characters as "proto-people" whose main importance is the way in which they acted upon each other, and in this aspect these approaches resemble all that we have found unsuccessful in the Bible-as-Literature approach. A direct result of our seeing the text as a text with an expanding structure will both require

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[4] Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John Esposito, *Daughters of Abraham: Feminist Thought in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001) viii (Forward).

[5] Baskin, *Midrashic Women*, 8.

us and enable us to see the relations to the parts in a way that, in my opinion, will leave this limited and limiting approach behind and invite us into the rabbinic discussion and allow us to take *it* to a new height.

Looking for the "women-people" or applying any other agenda to the interpretive process makes it impossible for us to see the text structurally. While many of these approaches, like the one outlined by Baskin, examine Abraham's relationship to Sarah, few if any touch upon his literary relationship to Lot. Similarly they look at Sarah's relationship to Hagar as well as the individual plight of each "woman." Even if they approach an analysis of the dynamic between Sarah and Hagar, it is to see it as laden with the political concerns they bring to it. In her essay, "Settling at Beer-lahai-roi," Amy-Jill Levin argues that:

> [c]omplicit or not, Sarah and Hagar are both placed in sexual servitude by others. In each case, the giver appears in an ambivalent if not negative light. Although Abraham benefits financially from his willingness to allow Sarah to enter the harem, he is reduced in Pharaoh's eyes for his deception (Gen. 12:18-19). In like manner, while Sarah (the giver) expects benefit by Hagar's giving birth, she loses status when this other Egyptian recognizes her own value.
>
> The events that unfold forcefully depict the shifting of status positions between mistress and slave. When Hagar conceives, "her mistress became light (*qll*) in her eyes" (Gen. 16:4). The reference has a two-fold resonance: weighty in her pride and her pregnancy, Hagar clearly contrasts Sarah's lack.[6]

Even Baskin characterizes the relationship between Sarah and Hagar in these terms: "No common cause is found in midrashic adumbrations of the troubled biblical saga of Sarah and Hagar. Here the midrash privileges Sarah's central

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[6] Amy-Jill Levine, "Settling at Beer-lahai-roi" in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John Esposito, editors. *Daughters of Abraham: Feminist Thought in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001) 22.

role in the history of the Jewish people and invokes the right of a mistress over her servant, impugning Hagar for her insufferable behavior and gentile origins." [7] Feminist critic Amy-Jill Levine articulates explicitly what she hopes will come from her analysis. Speaking specifically of how she wants to find the outcome she is seeking by examining the relationship between Sarah and Hagar, she writes:

> Just as the stories of Sarah and Hagar are incomplete, just as the characters remain open to allegorical interpretation and empathic reclamation, so too this feminist study concludes not with an assertion proclaiming "this is what the text means" but rather with an invitation to look for ever-new meanings. Sarah and Hagar, characters in scripture, remain apart. But their sons, and their daughters, can and do come together in tradition to work for the common good.... Christians, Muslims and Jews, daughters of Sarah and Hagar, may yet bring peace to the family of Abraham. [8]

Nothing could be more clear. By reading the Bible as a story, not as a text, Levine and others can see historical tension at play, political agendas at work, as well as possible real-world implications to be drawn. Whatever merit this approach may have, it is the antithesis of seeing the text as a text. It is virtually impossible to find a scholarly approach of this nature which posits that the role of one character is to serve in some literary relationship to another, or if they are in relationship to one another it is not the relationship of the foil.

Expressed in literary terms, we could say that some of these approaches violate the text by indiscriminately maneuvering the relationship between foreground and background because of their beliefs about the relationships of these component

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[7] Baskin, *Midrashic Women*, 11.
[8] Levine, "Settling at Beer-lahai-roi," 26.

parts. Just making the background into the foreground and vice versa precludes seeing the text as a text. I will suggest that while it might not be the intention of the biblical author(s) to construct a literary text, we take a step toward joining the Rabbis in following in their intellectual footsteps by undertaking this type of reflection.

Robert Alter seemed on the brink of a similar realization, but he was too mired in the Bible-as-Literature approach. In *The Art of Biblical Narrative,* he suddenly acknowledges in chapter seven that newer field of literature which engages with the Bible as text.[9] In a few short pages, he acknowledges the Documentary Hypothesis without credibly challenging its assumptions about how text comes to be. He then attempts to co-opt a Bible-as-text approach simply by referring to the Bible as a text, but without addressing any of the concerns of what that means, and without any notion of what he means by the term "text," which seems different than how we have defined it here. The outcome of this approach, which I am arguing against, is seeing the text as a cultural artifact of one era and trying to impose upon it the cultural values of another era. As such, it is a much less sophisticated approach than that undertaken by the Rabbis themselves.

If there is a purpose to an undertaking such as the one I am proposing, it can be found in the words of Alan Mintz which we looked at earlier. In *Hurban* he wrote:

> Catastrophe in Jewish tradition is best understood not in terms of physical and material devastation: a destructive event becomes a catastrophe when it

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[9] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books: 1981) 131ff.

> convulses or vitiates shared assumptions about the destiny of the Jewish people in the world. In premodern times this means specifically the terms of the covenant between God and Israel. The responses to catastrophe are then to reconstruct, replace or redraw the threatened paradigm of meaning and thereby make creative survival possible. [10]

It seems that it only makes sense to attempt to understand the rabbinic endeavor if we look at how their actions address this issue of creative survival. Mintz' treatment of the motif of destruction in biblical and rabbinic literature takes an approach which, in fact, crystallizes the text into a text. It for this reason, even though the material he treats is not the same as ours, that we should briefly review his work here. The question this will bring us to ask is: How does viewing the foil structure contribute to the conversation of recreating or understanding differently the covenantal promise? If nothing else, it corresponds to what Mintz calls our redrawing of the paradigm because it is through this interpretive act that the Rabbis were able to address the dissonance between world actuality and their cherished beliefs. The type of intellectual gymnastic and the spiritual twist which sprang up speaks to the timeliness – and timelessness – of rabbinic literature. Their world, like ours, was one in which the search for truth and the challenge to hold onto belief was a sacred – albeit not always easy – undertaking.

In *Hurban*, Mintz seems to be doing something similar to what I am going to attempt. He says that a different type of clarity will become possible if we "step

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[10] Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) 2.

back and survey the canvas as a whole." [11] The transformative act is summed up by Shaye J.D. Cohen in his treatment of the shift from Scripture to Midrash. In his article, "The Destruction: From Scripture to Midrash," he writes, "Lamentations is dominated by bitterness and despair, Lamentations Rabbati – by consolation and hope. In order to promote its cheerful message while simultaneously maintaining its stance as a commentary on the biblical book, the midrash is forced occasionally to reinterpret, even to reverse the message of Lamentations." [12] In his analysis of Lamentations, which appeared in the same volume as Cohen's, Mintz argues that the poets of Lamentations were still "professing allegiance to the conditional terms of the covenant." [13] According to his analysis, the "awareness of sin," which he characterized as Deuteronomic tradition, is "secondary to the experience of abandonment and the horror of destruction." [14]

His analysis shows how literary choices, in this case "[i]ndividual dramatic figures," are used to "emblemize the experience of victimization, and then ... to represent the struggle for theological reconciliation." [15] He argues that this is done by analyzing it in literary terms, when we look at "person and point of view" and other rhetorical devices. Mintz' analysis of the text of Lamentations is particularly relevant because his approach represents a transitional one in which we see, as it were, the text emerging from Scripture and the rabbinic grappling

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[11] Mintz, *Hurban,* 2.
[12] Shaye J.D. Cohen, "The Destruction: From Scripture to Midrash" in *Prooftexts* Vol. 2 No. 1 January 1982, 22.
[13] Mintz, *Hurban,* 3.
[14] Mintz, *Hurban,* 3.
[15] Mintz, *Hurban,* 3.

with Scripture as text. He describes what for him is the "ministry of language," when he says:

> It is the fact of the incommensurability that drives the poet to his own desperation. He perceives his calling as requiring him not only to document and memorialize the catastrophe but also console and heal its victims. And this he must do through the only means available to him: the ministry of language. [16]

This type of analysis, while different in context, content, theme and particularities to the one I am proposing, is in critical ways very similar. An understanding of the way in which literary devices function to house theological themes, such as the centrality of the covenantal promise or the eternal hope of reconciliation, this is the contribution made by the work of Alan Mintz. What I would like to suggest is that if we take the literary device of the foil and we infuse it with the rabbinic ideology with which they so freely looked at Torah, it can offer us another way to view how their treatment of the midrashim articulated their concerns, what Mintz calls the centrality of the promise and the eternal hope for reconciliation.

Mintz points out that the shift, probably as most scholars see it, is from the Deuteronomistic world view which Mintz claims worked "in anticipation of a national catastrophe" to the "immediate aftermath of the fall," as described in Lamentations.[17] Without challenging head on the assumptions about dating Deuteronomy or why a body of literature which anticipates a national catastrophe

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[16] Alan Mintz, "The Rhetoric of Lamentations and the Representation of Catastrophe" in *Prooftexts* Vol. 2 No. 1 January 1982, 7.
[17] Mintz, *Hurban*, 3.

would have been written, for me the more important shift is from one of sin: "if this happened we must have done something wrong," to a belief which Mintz states as "... no matter how much Israel should be found wanting, the Temple Sanctuary and the Davidic Monarchy would remain inviolable." [18] This, probably more than any other statement, sums up the theological leap which the Rabbis were attempting to make.

This shift in world view probably more than any other explains why we are rabbinic Jews today. The search for order in the face of cognitive dissonance is the gift of our Rabbis and a search which can speak to us today. The literary tools, rather than being imposed upon our literature, are isolated so that we can see how much we share. I liken this to the types of medical advances from which we benefit. Despite the fact that the Rabbis did not have x-ray machines they still had skeletal structures and were aware of them even if they knew them differently than we do. Similarly, the literature which they examined had back bones and skeletal articulation. We have a different set of vocabulary for the exercise, but the search is the same. The theological treatment of the text as text is articulated by Mintz in these terms:

> The text indicates that at a certain moment in the depths of castastrophe (sic) the pain that derives from the immediate experience of starvation, humiliation, and loss of life gives way to a deeper and more abiding pain: the pain that derives from the breakdown of those structures of meaning that until now have guaranteed the significance of suffering, that is, the ostensible cancellation of the covenant. [19]

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[18] Mintz, *Hurban,* 3.
[19] Mintz, "The Rhetoric of Lamentations," 9.

Of interest to note from our perspective is that this textual indicator which encapsulates the moment of cancellation of the covenant, that which will be repaired by the Rabbis, is articulated, according to Mintz, in images of barrenness and women's suffering.

If we look then at the treatment in *Braishit Rabbah* of the parasha *Lech Lecha*, we see that it opens with the exegetical verse, "And God said to Abraham, 'Lech Lecha – Go, get yourself from your land, etc." [20] The midrash opens with Rabbi Itzhak who quotes from Psalm 45, "Listen, daughter, and see (consider) and incline your ear; forget your people and the house of your father" (Ps. 45:11) (Gen. Rab. :12 [T.-A.p.365 l.5]).

On the surface, there is a connection between what the speaker of the psalm asks of the daughter and what God asks of Abraham: "Forget your father's house." Ultimately, the mashal will lead us to the following verse of the psalm. But before we get there we should remark on how the whole of the psalm provides many points of connection with the midrash. The psalm is described as a *shir yedidot*, a love song. The opening of the psalm describes a situation linking speaking and writing, and the poem is addressed to a king. The psalm therefore identifies itself as a text, a literary construct, just as a mashal does by the telltale language with which it presents itself. As our analysis will show, the mashal

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[20] All translations are my own unless otherwise noted and are based on the Hebrew version found in J. Theodor and Ch. Albeck, *Midrash Bereshit Rabba: Critical Edition with Notes and Commentaries* (Jerusalem: Shalem Books, 1996).

demonstrates that the relationship between God and Abraham is one worthy of a love song, resonating with the opening notes of the psalm.

The description attributed to the king by the psalmist simultaneously uses language ordinarily used to describe God while at the same time recognizing that the gifts of this earthly king come from God. The king is described as one who has been given an earthly blessing. The blessing reminds us of that which God has promised to Abraham, that nations will bless him and be blessed through him (Gen. 22:16). At the same time, the language used to describe the king in the psalm is reminiscent of language used to describe God as king, with reference to an everlasting throne (v.7). The king is described in godly terms as one who loves righteousness and hates wickedness (v.8). The mashal will use this comparison of God like the earthly master of the house to make its comparison.

The address to the king breaks in verse 11 – perhaps this abrupt break is what caused the Rabbis to view this as a textual bump in the psalm! Up until this point there has been mention of many *banot*, many daughters or princesses, and suddenly one is singled out. Something about her simplicity and beauty evokes the notice of the king who will be attracted to her. She, her royal status revealed, will be led to the king in his palace and their offspring will succeed the ancestors. This resonates thematically with that which is being promised to Abraham in exchange for what is being asked of him in the opening verse. Some hidden

royalty must be assumed in the nature of Abraham and when God notices it, it will be revealed.

The midrash on Genesis 12:1, found in *Braishit Rabbah* 39:1, enters directly into a mashal, a comparison to one who goes from place to place and sees a certain building "*doleket*," "lit up," either illuminated or on fire. In the mashal, Abraham says, "Do you say... (Say?) that this building is alight and there is no operator/ governor? The owner/master of the building peeks out at him and says, "I am he who is master of this building." "Thus, just as Abraham our father said," continues the mashal, "'Do you say that this world is without an overseer?!' The Holy One, Blessed be He, peeked out to him and said, 'I am He who is Master of this world.'" (Gen. Rab. 39:1)

The comparison is very telling, even in its ambiguity, because Abraham can be understood to be saying, "Look, the world has gone amuck. Where is the overseer?" or "Look, the world is so aglow that it is not possible that there is no overseer." This kind of duality is very characteristic of the rabbinic debate about God's role in the world. Is God invisible even if His handiwork is visible or did God create the world and leave it to go so horribly awry. The answer to this enigma will depend on how we read the Rabbis -- or on how the Rabbis read the text. But the point is made through the comparative structure of the mashal.

The midrash continues by citing the following verse of the psalm, "So shall the king desire your beauty" (Ps 45:12); in other words, says the midrash, to make you beautiful in the world. The mashal takes the sensual language of the psalm and charges it with a theological meaning not found in the psalm itself. We might be accustomed to this type of language being used to describe the Israel-God relationship with Israel as God's bride and beloved. But this notion of God's finding that kind of beauty – which in this case we have to assume refers to a type of spiritual or inner beauty – in Abraham is quite unusual.

The midrash continues to "seal" as it were this interpretation by continuing with the words of the psalm in describing the relation as filial loyalty – "Because He is your Lord" and "you must bow down to Him (Ps. 45:12)." Therefore do His bidding, that is, follow His decree and leave your father's house (Ps. 45:11). The midrash indicates that God found something unique in Abraham which led Him to want to make Abraham His emissary (Gen. Rab. 39:1).

We also see that the midrash identifies "the one" as someone going "from place to place." He is already in motion, already searching. The process has already begun and God's appearance provides direction and guidance. This reinforces the rabbinic reading which credits Abraham with "starting the ball rolling." According to Simi Peters, who analyzed this midrash in detail in her work, *Learning to Read Midrash,* "The midrashic answer to our original question, 'Why

Abraham' is that God chooses Avraham because Avraham has already chosen God." [21]

The Rabbis themselves may have been intrigued by the implication that Abraham began the journey before being called, which does appear to read against the text. They address this question in what is now paragraph *bet* in *Braishit Rabbah* 39, the literary composite which we have preserved for us (Gen. Rab. 39:2). Here they liken Abraham to a vial of perfume, thus able to disseminate his fragrance but only potentially. It is, according to this comparison, only when God issues the call, and opens the vial, that the travel begins. The comparison to the vial of fragrance shows that the beauty can not be appreciated until the vial is opened and the fragrance permeates the world.

As we have seen, the comparative structural dynamic which the mashal brought to our understanding of the original text is priceless. We can work with the Rabbis and go beyond their own analysis by exploring the comparison between Abraham and Lot. The presence of the potential for this type of analysis did not completely escape the Rabbis. In paragraph *daled* of chapter 39 of *Braishit Rabbah*, the Rabbis clearly state that Lot, whose is named in the Genesis text, "just tags along" (Gen. Rab. 39:13 [T.-A. p.378 l.4]) The word they use is *tapal* (tet-peh-lamed) which means something added on, clearly not part of the original

[21] Simi Peters, *Learning to Read Midrash* (Brooklyn: Urim Publication, 2004) 46.

or central part of a thing. Even for the Rabbis this seemingly superfluous inclusion of Lot required some kind of explanation.

It is their analysis of the ensuing disagreement between Lot and Abraham which is of interest to us here for it is in the way in which Lot is so unlike Abraham that he fulfills his role as a literary foil. (Gen. Rab. 41:3 [T.-A. p.390 l.4]) In *Braishit Rabbah*, the Rabbis quote Genesis 13:2, stating the abundance of Abraham's wealth. They expound this verse with a reference to Psalms, in this case, Psalm 105:37. Again the larger context of the psalm makes clear why it is a telling verse with which to expound the point they are making. Psalm 105 sums up the fulfillment of all that God has promised. It specifically refers to the offspring of Abraham (v. 6) and to "His covenant, the word which He commanded for a thousand generations," (v. 8) which we learn is specifically "the covenant made with Abraham" (v. 9). This covenant, the psalm spells out, is in fact the promise of the land. Interestingly, it is not these verses the Rabbis quote, but verse 37, which says, "He brought them out with silver and with gold; and none among the tribes stumbled." In a sense by using the verse this way, the midrashic reading seems to be telescoping all of history, as though it might be said to imply in Abraham's increase in wealth was the whole of the history of the people.

The midrash continues by telling us that Abraham traveled. And then, separately, in a further paragraph, separated semantically from this Abrahamic experience, is the further rejoinder that Lot also went with Abraham. (Gen. Rab. 41:3 [T.-A.

p.390 l.7]) The Rabbis prove their point with four biblical citations of Lot's name being tagged on to Abraham's demonstrating that Abraham's abundance came from something within him, while Lot's gain was by association with Abraham and due to no merit of his own. Analyzing the role of Lot as second fiddle in this way is exactly what characterizes him as a foil. The degree to which his gains are to no merit of his own highlights the way in which Abraham's merits are in fact inherent, hidden perhaps, revealed by God to be sure, but within Abraham himself.

Character differences between Lot and Abraham are made explicit in the midrashic treatment of the material on Genesis 13:7ff (Gen. Rab. 41:5 [T.-A. p.392 l.3]). Here the two men separate because the difference in their outlooks has impacted even the way in which their herdsmen act on their behalf. Again, it is the rabbinic treatment of these materials which makes the distinction palpable. According to Rabbi Berekiah, who spoke in Rabbi Judah's name, Abraham was respectful of the land and muzzled his animals. Abraham's herdsmen, upon seeing the behavior of Lot's herdsmen as they let the animals eat unrestrained, immediately accuse them of robbery; they know the implications of allowing the animals to go about unmuzzled. Lot's men point not to the abundance of the land, but rather to the fact that God has not fulfilled His promise to Abraham and, therefore, they are justified in assuming the land, because, they argue, it will be theirs soon enough (Gen. Rab. 41:5 [T.-A. p.392 l.3]). Their challenge is not only to Abraham, but to God. In this way, even down to the herdsmen we see the

comparison between Abraham and Lot at play. It is exactly on this point that Abraham's faith, although nuanced at times, is unshaken. Lot demonstrates in this instance as in so many others that it is exactly on this point that he parts company with Abraham. Lot is the foil because the darker he looms in the background, the brighter shines Abraham in the foreground.

The Rabbis spell out this relationship. They take Genesis 13:8, in which Abraham says, "Let there be no strife between you and between me, between my herdsmen and yours, for we are kinsmen" and they explain it first with the explanation that there was strife and then with the clarification concerning how we are to understand that Abraham and Lot were brothers. The foil relationship in this instance is made clear by the fact that the Rabbis reiterate the peshat. The text itself made explicit that there was strife between Abraham and Lot. Lot really does not serve any purpose except to highlight the more noble qualities of Abraham.

At the conclusion of their treatment of the separation of Abraham and Lot, the comparison becomes even more apparent (Gen. Rab. 41:7 [T.-A. p.398 l.9]). By his choice of land, by his choice of city, as by all his actions, Lot shows that he is no match for the righteousness of Abraham. In paragraph 8, the Rabbis tussle with this issue as they provide one interpretation which says that God was angry with Abraham for failing to turn Lot's life around. Yet another interpretation says

that God was angry with Abraham for taking Lot in the first place (Gen. Rab. 41:3 [T.-A. p.395 l.1]).

It should be apparent by this point that Lot can be seen as a foil for Abraham. I trust it is also apparent that the analysis which allows us to draw this conclusion comes from engaging with the text as a text in the same way in which the Rabbis did. The analysis of Lot's character is hardly earth-shattering. He is for all intents and purposes a flat character. But it is exactly in this way in which it makes sense to see him as a literary foil. As we will see below, in the larger scheme this sets up the global comparison of land to children. Abraham is promised land; Lot is his foil. Sarah is promised children; Hagar is her foil. On a theological level, what these schematic renderings show is that land is a foil for children. And this, as we shall see below, is why the matriarchs are "barren."

Before we begin our analysis of the relationship between Sarah and Hagar, we should spend a moment clarifying. It is very common in modern analysis of the biblical text to look at the question, which the Rabbis themselves ask, why are the matriarchs barren. Judith Baskin, in her book, *Midrashic Women: Formations of the Feminine in Rabbinic Literature,* calls her chapter, "'Why Were the Matriarchs Barren?' Resolving the Anomaly of Female Infertility." [22] Her analysis begins by arguing that "The barren wife presented a challenge to rabbinic Judaism's comfortable conceptualizations of women as expansive houses and

[22] Baskin, *Midrashic Women,* 119ff.

fruitful vines." [23] It is an interesting assertion. First of all, the matriarchs were not barren. We would have a hard time being their descendants if they were! They all had trouble having children, and that is why children can be seen to serve as a foil for land. But they do in the end all have children. Secondly, the matriarchs are not just "barren" in *rabbinic* literature, as Baskin implies; their situation is the same in biblical literature and it is in seeing the role of this truth in the text that we can appreciate how the Rabbis read the text and how they read the text... as text.

The rabbinic treatment of the relationship between Sarah and Hagar begins in Chapter 45 of *Braishit Rabbah* (Gen. Rab. 45:1). The fact that it begins a separate unit can be seen by the fact that it is opened by a petikta verse expounding Genesis 16:1. The petikta verse takes us to Proverbs 31:10ff, which are the famous lines of the *Eishet Hayil* poem. It is not possible to conclude whether in rabbinic times this blessing was already used by men to speak of their wives (and it is highly unlikely) or whether its appearance here led to that custom, but it makes a lovely *kesher.* The first thing we learn about Sarah here, as we are about the enter into this very difficult material, is that she was a woman of great valor.

The Rabbis point out in the subsequent midrashic comments about this verse that the difficulty in conceiving children can not necessarily be attributed to

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[23] Baskin, *Midrashic Women*, 119.

Sarah. According to the rabbinic reading of Genesis 16:1, the superfluous word *lo* "to him" indicates that the problem of conception is not hers (Gen. Rab. 45:1). The verse then continues with a conjunction, which immediately links in our mind the idea that Hagar's presence in the text is linked to this situation. They explain Hagar's presence as resulting from the fact that even Pharaoh was able to discern the merit of Abraham and Sarah. For this reason, according to the midrash, Pharaoh gave his daughter to Abraham, saying, "better that she should be a handmaiden in that house than a mistress in another house" (Gen. Rab. 45:1). To make their point, the Rabbis refer to Psalm 105:10, the very same verse which they used to explain why Abraham was chosen. They take the verses (10-12) to mean that Abraham was the king and that the daughters of two kings stood before him and in this interpretation Sarah, according to the Rabbis, is the queen led into the palace.

If we reflect on this for a moment we will see the fluidity with which the Rabbis have made use of this material. *We* might require one "meaning;" it might be *our* need to have the King be God *or* Abraham *or* some earthly being. But for the Rabbis the richness of the interpretation comes from the fact that any of these can be accurate, or they can all be telling us something different at once. The parts are playing off each other in any number of ways, all of which enhance our reading of the biblical text and help it to show what the Rabbis want it to show. I think it is particularly intriguing that they chose this psalm and this verse with which to make their point. The verse which demonstrates that Abraham has

inherent merit and royal worth is exactly the same verse which will show us that characteristic in Sarah.

In paragraph three of Chapter 45, the Rabbis explain Genesis 16:3, "So Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her maidservant, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan and she gave her to Abram her husband to him as a wife" (Gen. Rab. 45:3). The biblical verse certainly invites explanation with its insistence on clarity of who gave whom to whom, when and under what circumstances. The rabbinic understanding of the inclusion of the detail of the ten years comes to explain that "the time without (outside) the land was not included in the count" (Gen. Rab. 45:3). In this subtle way, they link the land and the offspring. Neither promise is fulfilled and therefore both Sarah and Abraham are tested in their faith.

In paragraph four of Chapter 45, the Rabbis address head on what it means that Hagar conceives so easily and why the matriarchs are barren. The opening passages of the paragraph read as follows:

> And Abraham came to Hagar and she conceived. R. Levi bar Hiyya said, "From the first encounter, she became pregnant. R. Eleazar said, "In all the world, never has a woman gotten pregnant from the first encounter." It is written: "And they became pregnant, the two daughters of Lot, by their father" (Gen. 19:36). R. Tanhuma said, "they mastered themselves and brought forth their unchasteness and thus they became pregnant as though it were the second time. R. Hanina bar Pazzi said, "The thorns 'spring up' even if they are neither planted nor sewn, from themselves they sprout out and grow straight up. Yet how much pain and how much effort to make wheat grow and still it does not come up (Gen. Rab. 45:4).

The Rabbis then take the question head on, asking, "Why are the mothers barren?" "R. Helbo in the name of R. Yehoshua: Because that the Holy One, Blessed be He, desires their prayers and their whisperings" (Gen. Rab. 45:4). The Rabbis note that it is remarkable how much of the scriptural text revolves around the experience of a people who has been commanded to be fruitful and multiply and for whom that seems to be such a difficult task. They make the divine will explicit when they put the words in God's mouth, "Why did I make you barren?"

The Rabbis offer a number of solutions about how there can be a "positive spin" on the situation and how, since women are disfigured during pregnancy, a man might benefit from having a barren wife. They suggest that this was the case for Abraham. This dimension of their discussion is not of particular interest to us here because it does not address the way in which Hagar serves as a literary foil for Sarah. It is of interest to Judith Baskin because it is from this material that she will attempt to reconstruct what she thought characterized the Rabbis' view of women. [24] More germane to our discussion are the thoughts attributed to Hagar which ensue. What the Rabbis devise is almost a mashal without the introductory language. They use Greek loan words and posit that "*mitroniot*/ ladies used to come and ask after Sarah's well being" (Gen. Rab. 45:4) and she, presumably in perfect form because she was not incommoded by pregnancy, told them, "Go and ask after the well-being of the *aluvah*, the humbled servant." From this show

[24] Baskin, *Midrashic Women* , 132-3.

of concern, Hagar concludes that Sarah is not what she seems. The passage continues:

> Hagar used to say to herself, Sarai, the mighty lady, her inner self is not as she outwardly appears. She appears to be righteous, but she is not righteous. If she were righteous, look how many years she has not conceived. I, on the other hand, in one night, I became pregnant. And Sarah said to this, "With this one should I deal! Rather I will go and deal with her master" (Gen. Rab. 45:4)

This exchange provides an example of the rabbinic technique of narrative expansion. There are many different ways in which the Rabbis make use of this technique. One scheme for exploring the different modes at work is outlined by Simi Peters. [25] She points out in her rendering of this material that the term narrative expansion is "a modern invention, a useful label for the midrashic stories that 'expand' the biblical narrative." [26] In her handling of this material we see yet another instance of modern literary technique being employed to enrich our reading of midrash. Among the categories she describes, we would have to see this narrative expansion as one "that enriches the biblical text. ... In these cases [she writes] the midrashic story appears to be neither necessary to our understanding of the biblical text, nor contradictory to them. A midrash of this type is compatible with the verses it addresses and enriches our reading of them, but we would not have trouble understanding the plain sense of the biblical story without it." [27]

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[25] Peters, *Learning to Read Midrash* , 99-102.
[26] Peters, *Learning to Read Midrash* , 99.
[27] Peters, *Learning to Read Midrash* , 102.

What I would like to posit is that this midrashic expansion in which the inner workings of Sarah's reactions and Hagar's thoughts are revealed serves to allow us to see Hagar as a foil for Sarah. There are a number of surface attributes which demonstrate this relationship, notably that we are told explicitly for how long Sarah has been barren and in the same breath told in no uncertain detail that Hagar conceived in the first encounter. While the ten year sojourn is biblical, the whole idea that Hagar conceived immediately is midrashic. In the biblical text, Sarah's reaction and the way in which she decides to deal with her is immediate. In the midrashic treatment, Hagar's reading of Sarah is that she is not as righteous as she seems, compared implicitly with the rabbinic iteration that Sarah is an *Eishet Hayil*. The true darkness of Sarah's character, according to Hagar, is the only explanation for the punishment which has been delivered upon her, her inability to conceive. The Rabbis have already shown early in the midrash that they consider Sarah to be a true woman of valor. Hagar's interpretation of Sarah as unrighteous can only serve to show us *her* true darker side.

Were we treating this exchange as between people, peoples, politics or other, we would look at this in a certain way, the way in which scholars such as Baskin have done. Baskin argues that, "As these passages compassionately delineate, the barren wife doubtless felt great shame and endured reproach for disappointing her husband at home and in the eyes of the world. That the rabbis were aware of her pain is evident in their exegeses of the biblical passages in

which such women appear." [28] She then goes on to quote this very passage from Genesis Rabbah. What is more in keeping with the rabbinic endeavor, it seems to me, is an interpretation of this exchange which mirrors that which has occurred between Abraham and Lot. There is no way in which the Rabbis would have hinted that they agreed with Hagar's analysis of Sarah's situation. The theological impetus for the situation is that God's promise is hidden. Baskin hints at this when she says:

> More convincing are rabbinic explanations that connect fertility to the operation of divine providence and the unfolding covenantal narrative of the relationship between God and Israel. Biblical and rabbinic sources are convinced that conception is granted by the grace of God and this presumption informs a number of rabbinic passages about the ultimate success of the matriarchs in conceiving and bearing children. [29]

Baskin probably comes closer than any other scholar when she sees the larger picture of the experience of all the women as being indicative of theological implications. She writes, "The childless matriarchs were exemplars of the efficacy of prayer and they became important metaphors for consolation and comfort." [30] Here we see that to make her point she shows that the matriarchs fill a literary role; they become metaphors. The change she is articulating resonates with that proposed by Alan Mintz, and parallels the shift from biblical Scripture to rabbinic reading. She claims that this can be seen explicitly when "the repeated fulfillment of the prayers of the childless become prophetic consolation texts, pointing to the

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[28] Baskin, *Midrashic Women,* 131.
[29] Baskin, *Midrashic Women,* 133.
[30] Baskin, *Midrashic Women,* 136.

ultimate restoration and flowering of the nation and Land of Israel."[31] But the picture is enlarged, I am arguing, and we get a truer sense of the magnitude of this dynamic when we see the whole as the Rabbis did, which can only be achieved by linking the relationship between Abraham and his foil Lot, that of Sarah and her foil Hagar, and the ultimate relationship of land and its foil children. Seen in this way, the text read as text transcends its role as history of the people and transforms itself into the text which embodies the hope for fulfillment of God's promise.

[31] Baskin, *Midrashic Women*, 137.

Chapter Five

Reading with the Rabbis... Praying the Text

We began this inquiry with a critical examination of the Bible-as-Literature approach to reading the Jewish Bible. The impetus of that movement was to save the Bible as a literary relic because, the approach implied, it was in fear of becoming irrelevant otherwise. As I hope we showed in the last chapter, the limits of this approach were more an outgrowth of the imposition of Western literary ideology on our reading than of our texts themselves.

Our efforts then turned to an appreciation of how the Jewish Bible was read by the Rabbis, what in fact was the characteristic which made midrashic reading rabbinic. We saw that crucial to the rabbinic treatment of the Bible was their notion that the text spoke polysemously and that the language it used could be understood in what we have called here suspended simultaneity. This very idea of multiple meanings intrigued modern literary critics even though they never seemed to grasp or address what the simultaneity meant for the Rabbis. What ensued from their approach was the struggle by Jewish scholars to reclaim midrashic literature from the "hands" of postmodernists, who were determined to look back in time and find their own ancestral lineage. Finally we saw the narrow field of vision which results from reading the Bible with a slant, and compared that with the more expansive view which results from really sharing the scope of the rabbinic vision. While we began with the Bible-as-Literature approach, our aim, ultimately, was to use that as a backdrop to examine the way in which the Rabbis approached the biblical text. It is clear that the literature they produced, the midrashim which we have examined, ostensibly were created to explicate the

biblical text, but even the most cursory reading of midrash has shown that the midrashic endeavor was something much more profound. While we explored how modern literary theory responded to midrash, our goal was, and remains, to see how an appreciation of midrash and ultimately the study of midrash can provide an avenue into the creative and spiritual richness which we can glean from engaging with its legacy. If there is any hope for us as modern readers of our ancient texts it will reside in our ability to learn from midrashim and from the rabbinic endeavor which produced them.

None of the intellectual developments we have outlined here happened in a void. The path of this trajectory is paralleled by political and intellectual developments across the board. I would be remiss in my duties if I did not clearly delineate why I think the work we have undertaken here is important – and important Jewishly. Our texts can be a source of meaning as we struggle to define who we are as Jews and how to be Jewish, as well as how to find meaning in our Judaism. This entails reclaiming our Jewish heritage including our Jewish texts, sometimes, as we have seen, by wrestling them out of the hands of ideologically based readers, readers of all stripes.

This is not an empty-intellectual pursuit. As Jews, we seek to make meaning in our world. In this we are not unlike our rabbinic ancestors. While everyone does this, our task in doing this as Jews has been profoundly impacted by our history.

As Eugene Mihaly wrote in his treatise about making midrashic literature come alive for contemporary students:

> But this continuum of the Jew never disappears. It never loses its essential identity. If our view is penetrating enough, we perceive an unbroken, continuous thread which leads us back to Hillel and Sinai and Abraham. It is this thread, the Jew's response to, and his transformation of, the environment, the permanent Torah – imbedded in a thousand concrete details, shrouded in countless transient myths, stretched by strands added in every generation and discovered by our arduous probing of endless minutiae – it is this soul of the Jews that we would find and appropriate – and prayerfully apply – in our study of ancient rabbinic texts. [1]

As open-ended readers who attempted what Alan Mintz so aptly referred to as creative survival, the Rabbis, our Rabbis, spoke directly to how what we need to do can be done. "The result has never been nor will it be," wrote Eugene Mihaly, "a rigid uniformity. The range of responsible, authentic choice is very wide." [2]

> Midrash, if we study it on its own terms, seriously and in the light of its historic setting – without preconceived prejudice or value judgments – reveals to us the Jewish mind and soul in what is perhaps their most creative stage, certainly the stage most influential and crucial in the development of the faith of our fathers as well as our own. [3]

Our mission, therefore, consists in finding a way to study midrash on its own terms and to learn from it how its approach to sacred text allowed our ancestors to marry creativity and the development of faith.

We have not discussed here how underlying much of the Rabbis' treatment of Scripture was the battle they waged with the encroaching philosophies of their

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[1] Eugene Mihaly, *A Song to Creation: A Dialogue with a Text* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1975) 32-33.
[2] Mihaly, *A Song to Creation,* 19.
[3] Mihaly, *A Song to Creation,* 32.

day. Because of the nature of the literature which has come down to us, some, if not all, of that type of analysis would be in the realm of speculation. Nonetheless, even taking that into consideration, it is possible to see the traces of their world debate. The intellectual currents against which *we* as Jews must "swim" are just as difficult to discern at times. Often in feminist criticism, for example, we might see (although not quoted in this essay) such phenomena as the Christian reading of Hagar. Mention is almost never made by non-Jewish, feminist scholars of midrashic interpretation of the Jewish Bible. The implication is that Judaism stopped where Christianity began and the intellectual trajectory backwards (the one which they impose) goes from feminism through Christianity to Judaism. This, I argue, is a false and misleading intellectual imposition.

While our focus here has been midrash and midrashic reading of text as text, we could see Judaism's continued commitment to this intellectual outlook had we followed the path forward through Rashi, Ibn Ezra or Nahmanides to name but a few of the most well known Jewish scholars through the ages whose work continues that which was begun by the rabbinic readers. A different kind of trajectory could be obtained by following Jewish scholarship and the interpretive tradition down to our own age, as we will see below in Michael Fishbane's discussion of Buber and Rosenzweig. "Many centuries would pass," wrote Eugene Mihaly, "before a student could view the literature of the Rabbis from a new, postmedieval vantage point and thus come to appreciate the true meaning

and significance of the contribution of the Rabbis. "[4] While the type of inquiry we have undertaken here may have been intellectually satisfying sixty or a hundred years ago, now it is poignantly imperative. The sensitive relationship between the course of study undertaken here and the impact of history on the endeavor was something we found in the example of the way in which Martin Buber taught, like the Rabbis, how the interchange with the text could be a source of meaning and comfort. We find this account of Buber's stance in Fishbane:

> And so Buber taught this teaching repeatedly – but never so humanly as when he taught the Bible and the Psalms in Germany in the 1930s. In what has been recognized as a heroic act of spiritual resistance, Buber engaged in *Bibel lesen* and enacted dialogical steadfastness in the dark turmoil of history.[5]

To articulate a specifically Jewish appreciation of this continuum, we see Mihaly's words:

> Torah emerges dialectically, not as a series of suspended, theoretical absolutes which may be recorded for all times, but as an ongoing dialogue within the religious consciousness of a community – a dialogue between a past and a future, the moorings and the reach. [6]

What then are we proposing? I would like to navigate a way forward which honors the traditionally Jewish undertaking initiated by the Rabbis. It is essential to appreciate the magnitude of their accomplishment, an invitation to reengage with them and their methodologies.

> When we today—with the aid of the techniques of literary criticism, a knowledge of history, and an awareness of the dynamics of human behavior – read a rabbinic text, we discern considerably more than the obvious literal

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[4] Mihaly, *A Song to Creation,* 28.
[5] Michael Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) 89.
[6] Mihaly, *A Song to Creation,* 17.

> meaning of the Hebrew or Aramaic words. As we approach a midrashic passage, we hear the Rabbi of the first or second or fifth century, ...[7]

"No matter how much of the detail of classic Judaism we ultimately accept or reject, as long as we choose within the context of our historic continuum -- as aware conscious Jews -- the essential will be present. " [8] Their goal, ultimately, was to transform the act of the study of Torah into something sacred by which the very act itself provided the avenue to getting close to God. Our goal is to reach out and grasp that continuum. The basic premise of this act is the acknowledgement of the sacred nature of the Torah itself. My contention is that many of the literary critical approaches which we have examined here require us to abandon the notion of Torah as sacred; Torah for them must become torah, *a* text. For the Rabbis, Torah was The Text. "*Torat hayyim*—a living Torah:" wrote Eugene Mihaly is "not a literature alone but also a here –and –now experience."[9] The legacy of the Rabbis is their ability to grasp Torah as both sacred and living. This notion can and should speak to us today. By understanding what they were trying to do and appreciating it, as Mihaly says, "on its own terms, seriously and in the light of its historic setting – without preconceived prejudice or value judgments" we will allow it to reveal "to us the Jewish mind and soul in what is perhaps their most creative stage, certainly the stage most influential and crucial in the development of the faith of our fathers as well as our own. " [10]

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[7] Mihaly, *A Song to Creation,* 29.
[8] Mihaly, *A Song to Creation,* 19-20.
[9] Mihaly, *A Song to Creation,* 17.
[10] Mihaly, *A Song to Creation,* 32.

Barry W. Holtz opens this conversation and seems to be heading in the direction we are proposing here. He makes a good first step, but his analysis will ultimately be unsatisfactory. As we will see below, it is in returning to the work of Michael Fishbane that we can begin to find a model which invites us to read with the Rabbis. In "Midrash and Modernity:" Barry W. Holtz asks "Can Midrash Serve a Contemporary Religious Discourse?" [11] Holtz sets out to do something that he calls "the reappropriation of tradition," and he says: "Midrash offers a fresh perspective on the issue of interpretation because its assumptions about the limitations and logic of the interpreted text seem so different from the history of Western literary criticism." [12] Holtz recaps the exchange between midrash and literary criticism much as we have done, asking how the study of midrash can contribute to the study of interpretation which has been such an important part of recent decades.

We must conclude that through the intellectual insights of recent decades we have gained considerably in the way in which we need to understand the very act of interpreting. What we learn from our study of midrash, however, is what *we* can learn from the Rabbis, not what *they* need to learn from *us*. It is impossible to fully appreciate midrash without understanding that it was – and is—a didactic tool. Its whole method and raison d'etre is to teach and it does this on a number of levels. It teaches deep theology through parable. As we have shown it can

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[11] Barry W. Holtz, "Midrash and Modernity: Can Midrash Serve a Contemporary Religious Discourse?" in Jack Wertheimer, editor. *The Uses of Tradition: Jewish Continuity in the Modern Era* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992) 377ff.
[12] Holtz, "Midrash and Modernity," 378.

also be seen to draw wider comparisons through which it disseminates the message of *nehemta*, enduring hope. It teaches that preaching is a sacred and pastoral learning exchange. We have addressed some of these concerns and perhaps at times alluded to others. But I think we can conclude that the purpose of midrash is to teach: it is to teach valuable lessons and value lessons. It comes to show, prove, demonstrate that God has not abandoned the people and, as Eugene Mihaly points out, it was the scientific analysis of its day:

> The student in the ancient academy searched for the truth in the most reliable source available to him, his sacred Scriptures. He utilized the finest tools at hand, the "scientific" methodology of his day – intricate hermeneutics, the subtle rules of exegesis formulated by the masters of his age: Hillel, Rabbi Akiba, Rabbi Yishmael, Rabbi Eliezar, and Rabbi Meir. [13]

Therefore it is fruitful and interesting to note what we can learn by studying midrash and what its methods can show us about the way we interpret. But we should not confuse what we learn from studying it with something we presume it needed to learn from us. "Midrash, as many have pointed out," wrote Holtz, "when looked at as a whole does not seek to find THE interpretation of a scriptural passage, it does not assume that there is one right reading exclusive of all others, rather it seems to delight in the very multiplicity of explications generated." [14] We have seen over and again, and Holtz reiterates:

> Thus in the milieu of contemporary culture, particularly in the world of the academy, midrash offers a comforting, in fact inspiring, model for the importance and weight of the enterprise of criticism. It becomes the model for the way that a contemporary literary theorist might see his or her own work, No longer mere explication, no longer second-order, criticism in the midrashic mode becomes the EQUAL of literature. (his emphasis)

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[13] Mihaly, *A Song to Creation*, 31.
[14] Holtz, "Midrash and Modernity," 378.

As we have seen, while this is how midrash might inspire criticism, it tells us much more about criticism than about midrash. That midrash might inspire and validate the work of the modern critic is really not a concern of midrash itself.

Holtz seems to make the leap that interpreting the text is equal to literary criticism. While that may inspire and uplift literary critics, it diverges from what appears to be the mission of the authors of midrash or those who compiled the midrashim into the literary homilies we have today. The authors of midrash and the literary compilers were, it seems to me, less interested in "producing literature" than they were in engaging in the sacred act of navigating life by searching for answers to their world situation. The depth of their searching makes clear that they remained certain that the answers were contained in the sacred text which they had received. It is not possible – and certainly not possible here – to address the question of why the biblical and rabbinic civilizations produced text. But I think we can argue conclusively that the Rabbis entered into the interpretation of their text with a sense of its sacredness and with a companion sense of the sacredness of their act. No matter how inspiring the analysis of literature might be for literary critics and no matter how much the study of midrash might add to their endeavor, the two activities can never be equated.

Holtz acknowledges this distinction in his examination of the argument as it is made by George Steiner. Holtz says: "The vision of the exalted role of criticism is

not one that is universally embraced..." [15] As Holtz points out, for Steiner "viewing midrash and 'criticism' as coterminous is a dangerous misunderstanding." [16] In Steiner's own words, what is occurring today is a "'radical misconception of the functions of interpretation and of hermeneutics.'" [17] While I think what we have shown throughout leads to a perfect accord with Steiner's assessment, it is still worth noting how Holtz' argument provides a stepping stone toward the point that midrash can provide a bridge. For Holtz, midrash can be an avenue for someone trying to do what the Rabbis were doing, that is to say, make sense of the world. While he acknowledges that the study of midrash is not easily undertaken, he suggests a bridge which will enable midrash to become more accessible. He says, "we might create a bridge between midrash and the lives of people seeking religious meaning." [18] What I hope we will show below, and by way of conclusion, is that rather than seeing midrash as needing a bridge, we can rejoin the Rabbis by seeing midrash *as* a bridge, and through its study make the necessary spiritual steps to rediscovering the sacredness both of the text we study and of the act of study, in Holtz' words, something that could enrich "the lives of people seeking religious meaning."

One of the problems which Holtz addresses, and one which must be addressed if we are to overcome the obstacles of engagement, is the way in which the

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[15] Holtz, "Midrash and Modernity," 380.
[16] Holtz, "Midrash and Modernity," 380.
[17] Holtz, "Midrash and Modernity," 380.
[18] Holtz, "Midrash and Modernity," 382.

rabbinic notion of the text separates the modern reader from the rabbinic endeavor. He writes:

> As academics, we are able to look at the rabbinic approach to Torah from the outside. We can say, "Yes, that is the way the rabbis read." But what about the reader we might be teaching, the Jew who says, "I want this text to live in my own life, but I don't believe the rabbinic assumption about the nature of the scripture"? How do we enable that inexperienced reader to connect with the experience of reading midrash? [19]

Holtz raises the issue of how midrashic literature itself, by its very nature, makes it difficult for us to enter into. He points out how the hermeneutic methodology implies a concept of the text, every jot, tittle and bump is an occasion for comment and every textual anomaly an indicator of hidden significance. He misses one important point, however, and that is the way in which, when studied on its own terms, when we enter into the rabbinic endeavor, a new outcome can emerge. For Eugene Mihaly, the key is to study the text in a way that he termed "prayerfully." Mihaly described the phenomenon in these terms:

> Yishmael carried on a dialogue with the verse, too, and Akiba built intricate structures on each jot of every letter. ... on into our own day and beyond – our hopes and dreams, our farthest, most imaginative reach—they are all in a classic Jewish text when we study it prayerfully, as Torah. [20]

But it seems to me that we have perhaps been hampered in our appreciation of the text as text, which is what is required here, by our many efforts to make the text speak as novel, as film script, as commentary on modern life, as psychological vignette, in other words as anything but text. Holtz' reading falls short in this way. Holtz reminds us that the values which the midrashic text

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[19] Holtz, "Midrash and Modernity," 385.
[20] Mihaly, *A Song to Creation*, 19.

assumes as given, e.g. sons are better than daughters or women are defined by their ability to give birth, are not values we find it desirable to embrace. While he simply raises these as the issues which might make it difficult for non-specialized readers to really enter into the text (those he described as having "an already built-in level of commitment"), he fails to offer a solution. [21]

For me, the solution is presented by the Rabbis themselves. First of all, it is rarely asked (I certainly have not found evidence of it) whether the Rabbis "believed" their own arguments. Did they really think the gezerah shava of "et" "proved" the expansiveness of heaven. Put another way, have we become such literal readers that we are no longer capable of fully embracing the way in which the reading act for them was, or at least may have been, of a different nature.

For an explanation of how we might really understand the nature of the rabbinic engagement with the text, we turn again to Michael Fishbane. Fishbane offers an analysis of what are, for all intents and purposes, the reading strategies of Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber. In describing the phenomenon, he writes:

> For this reason, the intertextual patterns of creation-revelation-redemption are essentially prooftexts of life-patterns. Put differently, life is not so much an enactment of scriptural truths as Scripture is an inscription of human experiences. The classical relationship between text and commentary is thus reversed. Indeed, in Rosenzweig's understanding, the phrase "as it is written" actually introduces a commentary on life – since study of Scripture is a fundamental means of seeking "the word of man in the word of God." [22]

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[21] Holtz, "Midrash and Modernity," 391.
[22] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah*, 107.

Clearly in his examination, Fishbane is exploring the way in which Rosenzweig and Buber as modern readers read the Rabbis. As such, their ability to transcend that divide is telling for us. The strategies they describe can help us read with the Rabbis. For the Rabbis, the act of reading, it seems to me, was ultimately pastoral. It was theological. It was religious. It was more like prayer and less like work. And clearly, it was anything but literal. This is partially because, as I understand it, one aspect of this interpretive act was the act itself. In a world without a Temple cult and where study itself had been outlawed, this undertaking was a combination of civil disobedience, spiritual rally and religious expression. In and of itself, the result of the midrashic exploration may have had no particular importance, but like piyyutim, or the outgrowth of any other religious creation, midrashim became beautiful, creative, thoughtful because they were done with a sacred objective.

Therefore to really respond to Holtz' implied and explicit problems that might arise from trying to invite contemporary Jews into this endeavor, again, we need to look back to the Rabbis. Many of the problems we may have about the values the Rabbis held (sons vs. daughters, etc) are, we should note, not specific to the Rabbis. These issues interlace the biblical text as well. The Rabbis can help us go beyond this because they view the text as text. Seeing the Rachel-Leah midrash from Tanhuma (as Holtz does) as pro- or anti- feminist comes from seeing the material treated as being about women and an unfolding narrative. [23]

[23] Holtz, "Midrash and Modernity," 385.

A more insightful way to interact with the text, and one truer to the spirit of midrash would be that described by Michael Fishbane, when he writes about:

> ... the "oral Torah" of living experience. Accordingly, to engage in abstract speculations about Scripture and predetermine what is either "believable" or "essential" is to produce empty "platitudes." The validity of an interpretation only arises in and through the experience of study when, for each person in individual and ever changing ways, the inchoate teaching of the text...becomes true Instruction... [24]

The Rabbis, as we have been arguing throughout, see the text as a whole and I think we could agree with Fishbane that they struggled with it to understand it as "true Instruction." We could just as easily have undertaken an analysis of the foil relationship between Rachel and Leah, because it is very similar if not identical to that between Sarah and Hagar. The presence of God as the ultimate Visitor, as the most intimate confidante of the birth-er of the people, this is a message of sustaining comfort. That God looked into Leah and saw such deep compassion is more important than whether or not Leah is having sons or daughters. And this is the Rabbis' reading; they read that compassion in or into the text. From this we see that on a very profound level children function as a foil for land, in the largest rabbinic reading. All the struggle of the human existence as it is portrayed in Torah, seen through the lens of the rabbinic reading, is a way to grapple with the reality in which the covenantal promise has not been fulfilled and in which the situation of the day is giving rise to deep theological searching.

This is not to say, however, that the text functions merely allegorically. An allegory works on the level in which its ideas are extrapolated from its language;

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[24] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah*, 108.

the rabbinic endeavor argued that the meaning dwelled within the text in a way as ubiquitous as the way in which the Shekhinah dwelled in the land. Fishbane addresses the issue of how the text works on this level when he explains:

> Accordingly, we may say that the *Remez* involves the determination of significance by means of factors independent of, and external to, the textual surface (the *Peshat).* Thus to the extent that texts represent personal or historical experiences, or posit certain phenomenal realities, these representations and propositions are interpreted by means of something (facts, words, or ideas) *outside* it. [25]

For Fishbane, and as Fishbane understands Rosenzweig, reading is seeing one's life situation in the text. But this act involves seeing something that he calls "more than human." As Fishbane points out, this was the reading expectation which the Rabbis brought to the text. And because of this belief and their hermeneutical ideology, they found this "more than human" in their grammatical analysis of the text. Fishbane draws this analysis from his explication of Rosenzweig's analysis of the Song of Songs. What we see clearly from this is the fundamental assertion of the intimate link between life and text. Of that analysis, he writes:

> This passage recalls our opening citation by virtue of the conjunction it evokes between life and texts; and by virtue of the assertion that Scriptures are a human witness to what is "more than human." Indeed, a close grammatical analysis of Scriptures is hermeneutically apposite to an understanding of life precisely because of the fundamental grammaticality of our human existence. [26]

I see in this a qualitative difference between *Remez* and allegory. Allegory, it seems to me, is about reading the text to make sense of life, but without really

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[25] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah,* 116.
[26] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah,* 105-6.

ultimately finding anything important to say about the text except as a medium for the comment on life. What Fishbane calls the "hermeneutically apposite" reminds us of the intrinsic nature of the text itself.

What this shows us is a degree of sophistication of reading on the part of the Rabbis which far exceeds the type of reading offered by Holtz in his attempt to decide whether the rabbinic reading in Tanhuma of the relationship between Rachel and Leah is pro- or anti- feminist. Thus, it is not we who need to apologize *for* the Rabbis, but rather we should apologize *to* the Rabbis. Our paucity in reading strategy is what distances us from sharing their delight.

Again, Fishbane reminds us that the level on which we need to see the Rabbis at work is the very way in which they unraveled the smallest detail of Toraitic text to make it speak volumes about the human condition. Fishbane points to examples where they do this both with the seemingly inconsequential "and" as well as with what he calls the "theme-words." Again, he is explicating Rosenzweig's reading strategy as he writes:

> Thus the conjunctive 'ands' of Genesis 1, which link the various days of creation, are the grammatical correlative of the human awareness that each thing "after its own kind" can emerge into the light of day – can be seen and affirmed in its own right. The light of the first day is therefore no unique event, and certainly no statement of the natural becoming of the elements. Rather, for Rosenzweig, this light is an attribute of the perceiving human consciousness which comes to know and affirm the elements as creations, as manifestations of God's ever-present love. The attentive reader of Scriptures will therefore push beyond the narrative language of the text to theme-words like *tov* or arch-words like 'and' and hear as revelation what he also knows

> from his experience of love: that the hour of any day may reveal the light of God so that things are seen and affirmed for what they are.[27]

Fishbane sees in this an appreciation for the sacred nature of the text. He argues that through his analysis he has shown the development of the idea that the text was sacred. We can agree with him that the Rabbis approached the text as sacred. He explains:

> For classical Judaism, then, the notion of sacrality which adheres to the biblical text by virtue of its source in divinity was gradually protected, qualified, and even extended by hermeneutical systems which reopened the closed text. This led to paradox after paradox until, remarkably, the very sanctity of biblically derived actions hung by hermeneutical threads of one length or another, and until the very sanctity of the biblical text was itself hermeneutically established. [28]

This, it seems to me, encapsulates the rabbinic reading strategy and defines the rabbinic endeavor. Fishbane draws this appreciation from his exploration of two modern readers who sought by their interpretive strategies to reconnect and read with the Rabbis: Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber. To qualify the type of engagement typically associated with Martin Buber, Fishbane uses language which incorporates the notion of the living Torah, active reading and the dimension of the sacred. He says of Buber: "For him, this text is a document which embodies the living spirit of the encounter between God and persons in time—the meetings and the responses." [29] The deeply theological imperative which for these readers, and a reader like Fishbane, characterize their reading strategies is apparent in Fishbane's simple assertion, "This is no mere rhetorical

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[27] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah*, 103.
[28] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah*, 123.
[29] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah*, 83.

ploy." As he understands Rosenzweig, and as he seems clearly to be reading himself, joining oneself to this reading strategy becomes a metaphysical act. He describes:

> This is no mere rhetorical ploy. Rosenzweig is insistent "that the distinction between immanence and transcendence disappears in language." ... and the hermeneutics of reading must therefore serve to recall man to the word of God that summons him into existence. One may therefore say that the horizon of textuality is just this divine-human speech resounding within the text. [30]

Reading with the Rabbis, reading the text as text, taking midrash on its own terms, all these are aspects of the strategy which move the reader, any reader, toward appreciating the divine in the text. As Fishbane makes clear, this is a direct result of a particular type of engagement with the text and one which involves the type of scrutinizing hermeneutic of which the Rabbis are our finest example. His eloquent description of this moment is as follows:

> Thus in the sacred moment when a portion of Scripture is heard as a voice calling to one's deepest self, the tenses of lived temporality converge into the *nunc stans* of eternity. One may therefore only know a text word by word; but in the depths of each word there is the proof and promise of eternal life.[31]

This is partially, argues Fishbane, because of the nature of the text itself and the undeniable assertion that this text needs a reader. In Fishbane's terms, Scripture represents traces of speech, and a certain kind of active listening in which the reader allows the text to interact "becomes," what he calls, "his call for dialogue with the eternal partner." This, he argues, is a result of the very nature of biblical Scriptures:

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[30] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah*, 106.

[31] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah*, 109-110.

> For biblical Scriptures is no mere book, but the written traces of speech. For this reason it is not a *Schrift* for the eyes but a *Miqra* (Reading) for the ears. In re-citing its words, the reader arouses the in-scription from its monologic silence so that the voice of the texts becomes his call for dialogue with the eternal partner. [32]

One of the issues we have been addressing here is the way in which the study of midrash can present modern readers with an avenue to experience a meaningful relationship with the text and can find the act of study to be spiritual, "prayerful," as Mihaly says. The key to developing this relationship stems from appreciating and integrating the sophistication modeled for us by the Rabbis. This is clearly something they did well and which we can describe or articulate thanks to the contributions made by modern literary theory. What this leads us to is a true understanding of the limits of literal readings by any individual or group of readers. In Fishbane's terms this requires taking "the textual artifact seriously." For me, this entails not taking the text as an excuse for interpreting what one hopes to find, but rather meeting the text, in this case the midrashic text, as seriously as the Rabbis took both the biblical text that they interpreted and the midrashic text that they produced. Taking "the textual artifact seriously" is Fishbane's prescription for dealing with the text on the level of peshat. As Fishbane points out, this is the first step in permitting the reading relationship to develop. He makes this clear when he says:

> The *Peshat* thus focuses on the givenness and autonomy of the text, on its independence from the words of interpretation. The words of the text are all we have. And so the first task of teaching and interpretation is to take the textual artifact seriously. This means recognizing the essentially dualistic relationship the interpreter has with the text. Its words are not his words, nor

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[32] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah*, 106.

> its thoughts his own – at least not initially. A text-dialogue must acknowledge the independent integrity of both text and interpreter. The text must be allowed to open the relationship without any preconceived tendentiousness. [33]

We need to acknowledge what we bring to the text that prevents us from taking the artifact seriously. The text has an integrity which we violate when we demand that it conform to our articulated or unarticulated values. On a humorous note, this is akin to what Rabbi Ishmael said of the hermeneutic approach of Rabbi Akiva. As Fishbane remarks: "We recall the words of Rabbi Ishmael, who chided Rabbi Akiva: "Indeed, you say to the text, 'Be silent until I interpret'" (literally, 'until I give the midrashic interpretation'). That is, he accused the sage of not letting the text present itself." [34]

But throughout his examination and ours, we have been leading towards a way of entering into relation with the text. We have, I hope, seen that the Rabbis as readers approached the text with such awe that they were able to meet it in what Martin Buber would qualify as an I-Thou encounter. Fishbane's characterization of Buber's genius shows that its literary and religious dimensions are intimately linked. He describes this encounter-engagement as both deeply personal and compelled by hermeneutic imperatives. Of Buber, he says:

> Characteristic of Martin Buber's literary and religious genius was the way he filtered traditional teachings through the depths of his soul. ... Buber considered it a hermeneutical imperative to hear the words of ancient texts and transform them through the power of a personal and engaged receptivity.[35]

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[33] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah*, 115.
[34] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah*, 115.
[35] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah*, 81.

The Rabbis were able to see the text as Thou-text; we might call it divinely inspired; I think they might call it divinely constructed. Nonetheless, this permitted them and us to appreciate it *as constructed*, and this liberated them from the types of literalism or ideologically charged narrowness which plague modern readers today. By reading with the Rabbis, we too should be able to see the text as constructed. According to Fishbane, bringing students to this is the role of the teacher. He is explicit in arguing that this can only occur by destroying all the preconception we carry with us. As he says: "... in our revaluation of *Peshat* all interpretative construction is preceded by the destruction or suspension of all preconception before the textual given. The teacher must lead the student through such a dialectical process."[36]

We achieve this, it seems, by using that which modern literary theory has brought to our understanding of the interpretive act. We learn through the contribution of the insights of modern thinkers that, "... recognition of the human construction of meaning leads (by another dialectical turn) to the insight that the text itself is a constructed form. "[37] That is to say, it is not reported; it is not "actual" therefore whether, as in Holtz' example, we are given components which describe women as having sons or daughters or whether, in what we have looked at here together, women have children at all, it is not the same way as we should react to a story about real people in China abandoning baby girls. The text, we must

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[36] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah*, 116.
[37] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah*, 116.

understand, is a text. Seeing text as text allows us to appreciate the Rabbis as readers and teachers who engaged with the text in a relationship that can only be characterized as I-Thou.

This brings us to the purpose for undertaking an approach such as this one. It is through this type of interaction with the text, taking it as Thou-text, that we can move toward interacting with it "for the sake of life." This, according to Fishbane is the raison d'etre for *Derash*. It is through this interpretive act that the text nourishes the reader. In Fishbane's words: "This brings me to the second level of *Derash*, the moral level where a text teaches for the sake of life. "[38] This is what Fishbane hopes will grow out of the academy of our age, something as creative and fruitful and life-giving as that which grew out of the academy of old. For Fishbane, the teacher and scholar have distinct roles to play and while they are complementary, they are separate. But both play a vital role:

> Teachers and scholars thus have a maieutic role as midwives to levels of experience and fact embedded in texts. The moral task of the teacher is to explore modes of textual expression for the sake of a fuller human creativity; while the moral task of the scholar is to recover repressed or forgotten layers of culture for the sake of our fullest human memory. [39]

Midrash is the confluence of what Fishbane describes as teacher and scholar. It is through the study of midrash that the two tasks can merge. As Fishbane describes Buber's legacy as teacher, he explains to us how Buber sought the Thou in the text and how everything about his interpretation led him to believe it

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[38] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah,* 118.
[39] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah,* 119.

was there. As Fishbane frames Buber's and Rosenzweig's reading strategies, he does so in terms of an active searching for a speaking voice, a meeting of the Thou. He says:

> Now this "Jew of antiquity," thought Buber, has left us a literary witness to his life of hearing the call of the hour – the Hebrew Bible (or *Miqra* – which in rabbinic Hebrew means "calling out"). "Is it a book we mean? – asked Buber and Rosenzweig. "We mean a voice; and do we believe our task is to read? We believe our task is to listen for the spoken word. We want to reveal the word in the moment of its utterance." The task of Bible study is thus to penetrate the language of the Bible and to attend to its "spokenness," ...[40]

What, we might ask, would make this possible for us? As Fishbane makes clear, this can only be possible for us when we take all that modern learning has brought to the table and bring it into contact with our own inner depths and the world of our own life experience. In this way textual and historical study becomes intimately personal:

> The enhancement of our human being through textual and historical study has a more personal dimension. I mean the attempt to locate the dynamics of the text in one's own experience. At the level of *Derash* the probing hermeneutic strives to go beyond soundings in the archaeology of the imagination, and to intuit a spiritual correspondence between the dynamics of a text and one's own memory. The result, when it happens, is a reciprocal deepening of understanding. The words of a text help to illumine personal experience, and life-experience helps one to penetrate the human issues of the text. [41]

By entering into reciprocity with the text, and by this I mean by reading the Rabbis with the Rabbis, we can raise the act to the level of the sacred.

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[40] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah,* 83.

[41] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah,* 119.

Rabbis as teachers understand multiplicity in text. According to Fishbane, they also understood the multiple levels on which the text functioned. While they may never have used the acronym *Pardes*, they clearly understood that the text invited discovery of its deeper meaning. They were aware of the way in which communication in the ordinary sense of the word required compromise, but they felt certain that the type of engagement which one could attain with the text was something far beyond what ordinary language usage could contain. Giving birth to this understanding is the role of the teacher:

> Out of silence and separation words create speech-events which provide a habitation for consciousness on earth. But words alone are polyvalent – rife with ambiguities and alternating nuances. For the sake of communication, context and contracted sense are necessary. Social convention thus crowds out creative ambiguity. Poets therefore perform a prophetic task. Breaking the idols of simple sense, they restore the mystery of speech to its transcendent role in the creation of human reality. Teachers may continue this prophetic mission in the service of *Sod.* Mediating a multitude of interpretations, they resist the dogmatization of meaning and the eclipse of divine lights of speech. From this perspective, the ultimate task of teaching and interpretation is to transcend the idolatries of language. It is a sacred task that condemns hermeneutical arrogance in all its forms—and guards the shrine of speech in the wilderness of power, banality, and desire. [42]

Rediscovering the sacred in the sacred text is the rabbinic endeavor. Finding hope in a world gone awry, this is what the Rabbis felt compelled to do by the sheer act of hermeneutically disciplined, theologically charged reading. The reason to study midrash is as a vehicle to reconnect with the sacred dimension of both the sacred text and the Sacred. This ultimately is the task which Michael Fishbane has set for himself and the path on which we have journeyed with him in our quest to try to read with the Rabbis, to see the text as text, to take the

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[42] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah,* 120.

artifact seriously, and to understand so that we might emulate the way in which all our teachers, the Rabbis, the midrashists, the modern literary critics, Buber, Rosenzweig, *et al*, have striven to see the sacred in the text. Michael Fishbane tells us that the question that has propelled his mission, the reason he has set out, as it were, to slowly remove the garments of the Torah, is because he himself has been asking.

> All this said, let me now pose the question that has been in my heart all along. Can the notion of a sacred text be retrieved? Indeed, is the notion of a sacred Scripture at all retrievable in an age of desacralization and dehierarchization; in an age of atrocity and disenfranchisement; and in an age where a text can be reduced to a microfiche or floppy disc? Possibly; and to mark this possibility I shall retrace the four fold structure of textual sanctity discussed earlier – only in reverse.
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> As suggested earlier, it is arguably one of Judaism's greatest contributions to the history of religions to assert that the divine Reality is communicated to mankind through words. The literary form in which this is realized is, of course, the Bible. [43]

Ultimately the relationship we are suggesting for the individual seeking to take the best of the rabbinic endeavor and use it as an avenue for engagement with the sacred text is one that can only be described in the terms which have come to our tradition through the words of Martin Buber. We seek a relationship of I-Thou. "In our own times," writes Michael Fishbane, "when the cultural value of Scripture is not all self-evident, Buber's biblical teachings may provide a similar renewal. Or at least this was his hermeneutical hope." [44] And so is it ours.

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[43] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah,* 128-29.

[44] Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah,* 90.

Epilogue

I remember perfectly the day this project was born. I was sitting in my class on Commentaries and I saw that Rashi based his explanation of the relationship between Hagar and Sarah on that which we read in *Braishit Rabbah*. Hagar was offering her understanding of why Sarah had been so unlucky in conceiving, while she, Hagar, was not. The material contained in the commentary came from Chapter 45 of the midrash which we have examined here.

I found myself pulled into the inquiry. People have always complained so bitterly that the Bible is a book by and about men, only interested in preserving its own patriarchy... at least that is what someone might think if he or she had never read the Bible, had never studied Midrash and had never looked into the post-Rabbinic commentaries. It seemed to me that the literature which had come down to us had to be asking different questions and answering them in different terms than those which we had been accustomed to ascribing to them.

I set out originally to explore the question "Why the matriarchs are barren," and in posing this question in this way, I found myself in good company, most especially in the company of the scholar Judith Baskin. But I soon found that I had to frame the question more in terms of "what exactly is this biblical literature that has come down to us and what can we learn from the way in which our Rabbis approached it – how does midrash speak." I soon saw that while I was interested in narrative, literary function, literary devices and the like, if I really wanted to enter into the

rabbinic endeavor, I had to suspend my conceptions about how literature worked and enter into their realm and way of thinking. It was a moment of true homecoming.

Again I found that I was swept up in an intellectual whirlwind that I had not known existed. I entered into the debate between Daniel Boyarin and Susan Handelman and watched as Jewish scholarship redefined itself in contrast with modern literary trends. Submerged in intellectual uproar, modernity and post modernity were combating the idea that words could contain meaning in themselves. Perhaps this was a natural outgrowth of life in a world where meaning seems so often to be challenged by the mere act of living and where common sense is often a commodity in short supply. I found a soul mate in David Stern whose navigational skill helped me participate in the act of reclaiming midrash. Finding common ground between modern literary appreciation and rabbinics was a second homecoming.

Studying rabbinic literature in this way is humbling. We appreciate nothing about the Rabbis if not the unparalleled way in which they held all of our tradition in their minds. One can not help but sense that the reverence in which they held all the facets of Judaism, Judaism as they knew it to be sure, but our shared religion nonetheless, constituted an infusion of the religious, the sacred, the imperative and the creative. In their grappling with their world and our shared literature, we see them struggling to rediscover God in their lives. Studying the midrashic

treatment of the issue of why the matriarchs are barren seemed like part archaeology, part theology and part literary analysis. Their insights included a mix of humor, psychology, ideology, but often a component of compassion as well. If they really had no regard for women and were only concerned with preserving the patriarchal superiority of their regime, why would these matters even have concerned them? If they were so serious, why would they have recorded their own good laughs.

What came to me was an understanding that ultimately it is not the bankruptcy of their reading strategy which should alarm us, but the bankruptcy of our own reading strategies. While in this project, we looked most critically at feminist ideological readings of biblical literature and midrash, it goes without saying that any literal approach which robs Torah of its sacred dimension as text should be viewed with suspicion. Ultimately the opposites are "text as text" and any literalist reading.

In this essay we have alluded to the ideologically-based slight of hand which I have called exchanging the foreground for the background. It can be argued that, while this is an action of limited value, there can be a purpose to looking at our cultural heritage in a different light. But while women's voices have been excluded from much of our record, this is not a reason to discredit the subtlety with which our predecessors sought to invite us into the Tent of Meeting where meaning abides. Many of the sins committed in the name of tradition have been

perpetrated by ideologues with different agendas who came long after our Rabbis. For some reason in common parlance it is typical to confuse the Rabbis with Orthodoxy, and that is a sorry mistake. We, as Reform Jews, as women and men, as scholars and active readers, we are their rightful heirs. This thesis is nothing if not a celebration of the gift which they so lovingly preserved.

Often when we speak of the way the Rabbis interacted with the text, we talk of bumps on the surface. How then can we characterize what they did for us and what we owe them. Michael Fishbane is so very right when he calls his book on hermeneutics *The Garments of Torah.* The Rabbis, as I understand them, saw our tradition as a finely woven fabric, made of delicately spun threads. Like any piece of fabric, the whole of the fabric only hangs together if you do not pull the threads apart. To trace the play of any single thread, you run your fingers over the surface; that is what I see them doing with our text. The fact that our world is often clothed in cheap, uniformly spun, machine made polyester, this is our poverty, not theirs.

Eugene Mihaly saw in the Rabbis an appreciation of a dynamic in Torah, an expansiveness that allowed us to be rooted and to reach out beyond ourselves; "the moorings and the reach," he called it. In Psalm 104 and in our daily prayer we are reminded of God, clothed in glory, wrapped in a robe of light, spreading out the heavens like a garment. We are created in God's image, our tradition tells us as much. The work offered here is a culmination, but also a beginning. My

hope is that it will remind us to emulate this image, appreciate the garment of God's goodness that surrounds us. It behooves us as well to fully appreciate those geniuses, God's tailors of meaning, our Rabbis.

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