

Interpreting Midrash 1: Midrash and the History of Judaism¹

Jacob Neusner, *Judaism and Scripture: The Evidence of Leviticus Rabbah*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1986, pp. xxii + 641.

"What is Torah?" the Talmud asks, and answers, "the midrash (interpretation) of Torah" (B. Kidd. 49a-b). A definition of midrash is neither demanded nor provided. However, from this "definition" of Torah we can conversely infer two elements of a definition of midrash as interpretation, at least from a rabbinic perspective: It (1) attaches and attends to Torah (Scripture), and (2) is thought to partake itself of the qualities of Torah. These, of course, raise more questions than they answer, principal among them being: How does midrash attach to Scripture in such a way as to suggest to its audience that it is itself Torah while attending to Torah? But for now, the two elements of a definition of midrash just given serve to outline roughly the playing field that the interpreter of midrash wishes to observe.

From posttalmudic times until our own day, scholars have sought to interpret rabbinic midrash. This has been and remains a *doubly* hermeneutical task: How does midrash read its biblical text? How does the "belated" student of midrash read the midrashic text? Text and interpretation, along with mediating tradition, are as complexly intertwined in ancient midrash as in the history of its transmission and interpretation down to the present. To be sure: the past text of interpretation and the present interpreter of that text can neither be assimilated to one another nor fully disentangled from one another. But present critical interpreters of midrash can be asked to be self-conscious of their dialectical relationships with past texts and their interpretations, which they correctly seek but can never completely succeed in objectifying.

There is also the question of the whole and its parts. We inevitably interpret a particular midrashic passage by means of a set of presuppositions about its larger literary (not to mention social and historical) contexts, as we conceive them: the larger text ("book") in which a particular passage is found, the genre ("midrash") of rabbinic discourse to which we assign that text, and the encompassing corpus of texts in which that text and its genre are thought to reside ("rabbinic literature," with all its ambiguities). But what we presume about any of these contexts is only known from our study and interpretation of their constituent parts.

There is nothing novel in this circularity. But it poses some especially acute choices when applied to the study of rabbinic midrash in light of its collective, anthological nature: Is midrash to be described on the basis of select, exemplary passages drawn from a variety of textual locations or on the basis of discrete whole collections ("books") of such passages, the term midrash customarily being applied to both? Is midrash to be described in terms of aggadah (narrative) or halakhah (law), incorporating as it does both? Is rabbinic midrash to be described in relation to its "antecedents" in prerabbinic Jewish exegeses of

Scripture, its "parallels" in Greco-Roman paganism and early Christianity of its own time, or its "heritage" to medieval and modern methods of reading Scripture? Is midrash to be described in relation to the other branches of rabbinic discourse (mishnah, gemara, targum), or as a field unto itself?

Given the impossibility of pursuing all of these lines of inquiry, the scholar who wishes to interpret midrash must of necessity *choose* a vantage point from which to view what now appears to be not a single, clearly defined playing field, but a web of concentric, adjoining, and interlocking fields. There is no self-evidently "correct" choice here. Neither is there such a thing as reading a midrashic text (or any literary text) "in its own terms" as a way of determining that choice. We make our choices of vantage based on preliminary, preconditioned hunches that we may modify as the play, and our sensitivity to its different angles, advances. But we can only occupy one seat at a time and only switch between a limited number of seats over time, with each critically affecting the perspective from which, and the context in which, we view the play. We may move to a higher row so as to take in more of the play, only to find that we lose sight of its finer movements, and vice versa. Critical interpreters of midrash can be expected to recognize such choices of vantage as choices, and to admit that each such choice both permits and skews interpretation of the play.

Jacob Neusner, in *Judaism and Scripture: The Evidence of Leviticus Rabbah* (and other recent writings²), directly addresses three of these critical issues: How are the documents of rabbinic midrash to be interpreted within the context of the "canon" of documents that historically came to constitute the rabbinic Torah? How are the parts of a particular document of midrash to be interpreted in relation to their collective whole? What is the place of Scripture and its interpretation within midrashic documents and the Judaism to which they point?

Neusner's approach is what I shall call canonical-historical. His interest in midrash forms part of his larger program of interpreting the discrete documents of rabbinic Judaism as stages in the historical formation of the "canon" and the broader "system" of rabbinic Judaism to which those documents point: "I claim to contribute to the study of the history of the formation of the ideas of Judaism" (p. 18). To Neusner's great credit, he sets forth in *Judaism and Scripture* a coherent literary-historical method for the study of midrashic documents, applies it systematically to one such document, and draws general conclusions regarding the place of Scripture and its interpretation within rabbinic Judaism as represented by that document. He repeatedly claims that his interpretation of midrashic documents is based on inductive, objective observations of "irrefutable," "neutral," "perfectly self-evident" facts, being free from the a priori assumptions and intuitive judgments of others (pp. xviii, 15, 22). These claims remain to be tested.

For Neusner ancient rabbinic Judaism is represented to us by a series of "books" that successively reached closure, became "authoritative,"³ and took their place, as it were, on "the shelves of books of the rabbinic canon" (p. 98).

Each such book needs to be understood both in relation to the canonical context defined by the other books which it joined at the time of its closure, and in relation to the historical context of the life of Israel at that time. Thus, the Mishnah (ca. 200 C.E.), being the first rabbinic book on the shelf, is rabbinic Judaism's ordinary document (rather than Scripture), and is interpreted as a response to the humiliating consequences of two defeats at the hands of Rome (70 and 135 C.E.). Its salient quality, for purposes of our subject, is its cogent statement of Jewish law, arranged according to deeply "philosophical" divisions, which, like their constituent laws, are not derived exegetically from Scripture.

Next are the documents of the third and fourth centuries, the "heirs" to the legal and intellectual authority of the Mishnah; they take up the challenge of relating mishnaic law to Scripture. These include our earliest midrashic collections (the *Sifra* and the two *Sifres*), which, according to Neusner, polemically attempt to demonstrate the Mishnah's scriptural underpinnings. These documents make their points by following not the order of the Mishnah, as does the *Tosephta*, but the order of Scripture. By so leading the way from Mishnah to Scripture they initiate scriptural commentary (or at least its literary crystallization) within rabbinic Judaism.

The next stage in midrashic discourse comes in the late fourth and early fifth centuries with *Genesis Rabbah* and *Leviticus Rabbah*, which, like their midrashic predecessors, frame their discourse around the order of scriptural verses, but unlike them are not interested in providing prooftexts for mishnaic law. Instead, they, like the Mishnah, are primarily interested in advancing arguments of their own, but now centered on Jewish history and theology rather than law.

While *Leviticus Rabbah* appears, on the surface at least, to be a work of biblical exegesis, it is in reality, says Neusner, a "syllogistic exercise" that employs Scripture to articulate a message autonomous of both Scripture and the Mishnah. The authors of this document had a socio-theological statement to make in response to the historical events of their time and chose *Leviticus* as the biblical book best suited to the expression of that statement. The canonical-historical significance of *Leviticus Rabbah* lies in its freeing of midrashic discourse, formally and topically, both from the Mishnah and from Scripture, even while employing the mode of the former and the facts of the latter to fashion an argument directed to Jewish society of the late fourth and early fifth centuries.

How does Neusner propose to demonstrate this? More specifically: Since *Leviticus Rabbah*, like all other documents of ancient rabbinic Judaism, is a redacted anthology, incorporating the views of named and unnamed sages of several generations, drawing upon traditions from antecedent collections, and having reached its extant form in several stages, how does Neusner discern its "single voice" (p. 58) within the chorus of rabbinic literature—the voice with which it utters in a particular way a particular message for its time?

According to Neusner, before we can discern the historical message of a document such as *Leviticus Rabbah* we must demonstrate that it is not merely a compilation but a composition, that is, that its authors assembled it according to a particular plan or logic.

If all we have is an anthology of materials on diverse topics, we also have no warrant for asking how the whole, reaching closure at a given moment, constituted a statement to its own time and place. For if no principle of selection and organization dictated how the document as a whole should reach closure and final form, then we cannot ask questions about the interplay of context and content. . . . If I can demonstrate cogency of form and logic of intelligible discourse, everything else follows. If not, we have no systematic statement to a concrete circumstance, only a scrapbook of sayings. So the issue is clearly drawn. (pp. 6-7)

In effect, if we cannot demonstrate the integrity of Leviticus Rabbah's literary plan we cannot use that document for historical purposes.

That literary blueprint is to be sought at the level of the document's literary structure as a whole—at the level of its final, canonical redaction—viewed autonomously of other documents with which it may share some of its constituent parts. For this is how the canon of rabbinic Judaism presents itself: a set of whole documents, each with its particular plan and program expressed through the literary and topical arrangement of its divisions and subdivisions. In the case of Leviticus Rabbah this structure is defined by a division into thirty-seven *parashiyot*, each in turn comprising from five to fifteen subdivisions, or what Neusner calls "paragraphs of thought," according to the printed editions. These paragraphs of thought, the basic building blocks of the document, are "objectively" classified by Neusner according to the formal (not hermeneutical) ways they have been attached by the document's framers to the lemmata of Leviticus. Using this measure, the bulk of Leviticus Rabbah's paragraphs of thought are assigned to one of four types: (1) those in which an intersecting verse from another part of Scripture is juxtaposed to the lemma (base verse), and through the interpretation of the intersecting verse the midrashic text makes its statement, either in relation to or independent of the lemma (40.1% of the total);⁴ (2) those in which the lemma itself is exegetically parsed by whatever method (30.9%); (3) those in which a syllogistic proposition is stated and accompanied by exemplifications which are drawn from but not limited to Scripture, including (if only by implication) the lemma;⁵ (4) those in which a series of miscellaneous items are connected, if only loosely, by a common theme and are then attached by association to the lemma (29.9%).

Neusner collapses these broad types into two opposing categories: On one side are "paragraphs of thought in which the exegesis of a cited verse is primary," while on the other are "those in which the basic purpose is to establish a proposition autonomous of any single proof text" (p. 25). While type 2 falls within the first category, type 3 falls within the second. Type 1, "the ubiquitous, and single most important, type of construction falls somewhere between . . . the exegetical and the propositional." However, here too, "the appearance of exegesis masks the substance of syllogism." For "the function of the base verse" is "to announce the overall theme or topic, which has triggered the selection of the intersecting verse," rather than to generate the exegesis of the intersecting verse, which yields the paragraph's message (pp. 25-27). Thus, Leviticus Rabbah's paragraphs of thought turn out to be more characteristically "propositional" than "exegetical." More importantly, the paragraphs of thought

follow a recurring pattern of order within the *parashiyot*: first a base verse/intersecting verse construction, then exegetical or syllogistic constructions, with miscellanies placed at the end. Since all but one of the thirty-seven *parashiyot* begin with a base verse/intersecting verse construction, it is this form which "defines what is fundamental to the document as a whole" (p. 40).

Now that Neusner has shown that Leviticus Rabbah evinces a clear-cut, formal plan at the level of its final redaction, he can listen for its topical message at the same level. Since each of Leviticus Rabbah's thirty-seven *parashiyot* deals with a single topic (e.g., "the greatness of Moses," "the children of Israel are precious"), with each paragraph of thought of each *parashah* taking up an aspect of that topic, the document can easily be outlined (albeit with substantial rearrangement) according to its topics. The majority of these topics fall into one of the following categories: (1) Israel is set among the nations, yet enjoys a relationship of love and favor with God; (2) Israelite individual and community are required to lead an inner life of purity, piety, and humility; (3) Israel will be judged by God with mercy, and redeemed because of its merits. Finally, these three categories are restated as a single, "simple proposition":

Israel is God's special love. That love is shown in a simple way. Israel's present condition of subordination derives from its own deeds. It follows that God cares, so Israel may look forward to redemption on God's part in response to Israel's own regeneration through repentance. (p. 91)

Note Neusner's parallel treatment of literary form and topical message. In each case a "taxonomy" of limited choices is uncovered, and then collapsed into (a) a single literary "logos," defined by the "paramount and dominant exegetical construction" (p. 72) of base verse/intersecting verse, and (b) a single syllogistic "topos," defined by the statement "Israel is God's special love," etc.

Next Neusner integrates "logos" and "topos" into a single strategy which defines Leviticus Rabbah as a whole: "everything stands for something else." Neusner calls this an "as if way of seeing things" (p. 73). Thus, what characterizes the formal structure of the paramount base verse/intersecting verse construction, that "we read one thing in terms of something else," one verse in terms of another, also characterizes the document's topical program, that priestly sanctification (in Leviticus) stands for national salvation (in Leviticus Rabbah). This holds as well for the document's two-fold historiography: (1) recasting Israel's scriptural past in mythical, transhistorical terms; and (2) translating Israel's historical present into that "paradigmatic framework of established mythic existence" (p. 91).

Next Neusner identifies the contemporary events which are understood in terms of Leviticus Rabbah's mythical rereading of Leviticus. These are "the legalization of Christianity in the aftermath of ferocious persecutions, followed very rapidly by the adoption of Christianity as the state's most favored religion [ca. 320]" (p. 101), and the apostasy of Julian (ca. 300) followed by the dashing of hopes for a rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. Neusner is aware that the rabbinic corpus, and Leviticus Rabbah in particular, is silent on these events, but he nonetheless finds the statement of the midrash intelligible as a response to these crises.

Neusner's most novel conclusion is that what characterizes the discourse of Leviticus Rabbah is not exegesis after all. Certainly Scripture is ever present, but as a source of "facts" which, along with stories, parables, and shared traditions, are employed by the framer-philosophers of Leviticus Rabbah for the exemplification of their propositions. Scripture generates neither the topics nor the order of their discussion:

Scripture contributes everything and nothing. It provides the decoration, the facts, much language. But whence the heart and soul and spirit? Where the matrix, where the source? The editors, doing the work of selection, making their points through juxtaposition of things not otherwise brought into contact with one another—they are the ones who speak throughout. True, the hand is the hand of Scripture. But the voice is the voice of the collectivity of the sages, who are authors speaking through Scripture. (p. 120)

In the end, however, Neusner acknowledges that "Leviticus serves as something other than a source of proof texts." Leviticus as a whole is made to yield a paradigm, albeit one "framed essentially independent of Scripture," which the authors of Leviticus Rabbah extend beyond the defunct realm of the cult to the endangered life of Israelite society (pp. 123-24). The exegesis which Neusner finally finds noteworthy in Leviticus Rabbah is not that of its parts, but of its whole: One whole book (Leviticus) is reread in terms of a syllogism imparted to the assembled paragraphs of another whole book (Leviticus Rabbah) by its ultimate framers. "So the basic doctrine of Leviticus Rabbah is the metamorphosis of Leviticus" (p. 104).⁸

This, Neusner's final conclusion regarding the relationship between "Judaism and Scripture," is clearly polemical: Whereas some (presumably Christians) perceive Judaism as "the religion of the Old Testament" (superseded by the religion of the New Testament), in fact "Judaism is Judaism" (p. 124). That is to say, Scripture's books found their "right and proper place" (ibid.) within rabbinic Judaism according to terms set by the Rabbis independently of their reading of Scripture. Stated differently: Scripture constitutes only one part of the "system" of Judaism, and neither defines nor generates that system as a whole. In the canonical-historical unfolding of Judaism it was Leviticus Rabbah which inaugurated this pattern.

Before proceeding to assess Neusner's interpretation of Leviticus Rabbah (and by implication other documents), let me indicate three areas of broad agreement: (1) Neusner is correct to ask interpreters of midrash to differentiate among the documentary contexts in which rabbinic midrash is expressed. (2) Given the collective, anthological nature of midrashic texts, he is correct to propose the application of literary and historical methods both to differentiate and to interrelate the parts of the document and their progressive combination into a redacted text, and to suggest for that text a social and historical context. (3) Neusner is also correct, given the above, to question the simplistic view of extant midrashic commentaries as unmediated readings of Scripture.

Neusner's specific methods and their results, however, do not necessarily follow from these points of agreement. This is particularly the case with Neusner's devaluation of exegesis as the hallmark of midrash and his replacing of it with socially directed, syllogistic argument. Does his characterization of midrash emerge empirically and self-evidently, as he so often asserts, from the "irrefutable facts" of the texts at hand, or do those facts, to borrow his metaphor, "serve only as the colors of the painter" (p. 123)? If I have posed this choice too starkly I have done so in Neusner's own style of continually confronting the interpreter of midrash with dualistic alternatives.

Two dualisms in particular recur: (1) A rabbinic document is either merely a compilation (or scrapbook), which is of little use to the historian of Judaism, or it is a composition (or system), which through a cogent program of form and topic makes a unitary statement addressed to the historical context of its framers. (2) A rabbinic document is either exegetical, in which case Scripture is paramount in defining its "timeless" program, or it is syllogistic, in which case its "timely" program derives primarily from the larger system of the Judaism of its framers, and only secondarily from Scripture, which it employs to demonstrate its argument (p. 19). In each case the latter alternative is expressly privileged over the former.

Underlying these two dualisms is a problematic understanding of the canonicity of rabbinic literature. Neusner approaches what he calls the rabbinic canon in much the same way as biblical practitioners of canonical criticism approach the Bible.⁷ The meaning of a passage is to be understood in relation to the message of the canonical book in which it appears (and not in relation to its history prior to its present canonical form and place), while the message of the canonical book as a whole is to be understood primarily in relation to those of the other books of the canon which it joins. In both cases, the canonical whole defines the principal context in which the parts were read and revered by the communities which preserved and transmitted them. If we are to understand the religious meanings of these writings we must therefore regard them from the perspective of the communities that regarded them as canon. While this is not the place to enter the debate over canonical criticism in biblical studies, the consequences of its transfer to the study of rabbinic documents cannot be avoided.

Neusner repeatedly presumes that as each "book" of the rabbinic "canon" reached closure it became "authoritative" and was placed on the canonical bookshelf.⁸ Unfortunately, we know very little about what kind of authority these books had at different times and for whom. Was the authority of halakhic texts the same as that of aggadic ones? In cases where we have parallel collections which contradict or differ from one another (e.g., Mishnah and Tosephta, Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds, two Mekiltas), how are we to conceive of their canonical authorities relative to one another?⁹ The biblical model cannot simply be applied here since we have no record of when, if ever, the rabbinic books were combined to form a single, closed authoritative collection, after which time their differences could be resolved or accommodated through exegesis.¹⁰ We simply do not know what a canon of rabbinic Oral Torah would have meant or looked like in the period Neusner discusses.

I am willing to go one step further to suggest that we need to exercise caution even in using the word "book" to refer to a rabbinic collection of this period, lest we presume that its function was to be read whole so as to impart to its "readers" a unitary message. If we entertain the possibility that these were not so much books to be read as fluid texts to be studied and taught (at what level and in what context we do not precisely know), we may free ourselves from the imperative to choose between cogent composition and mere scrap-book; documents can be located somewhere in between and still have historical significance.

Neusner's canonical-historical method, furthermore, leads circularly to an underestimation of the role of scriptural exegesis in *Leviticus Rabbah* in two ways: Neusner assumes that the earliest, "tannaitic" compilations of midrash were created as polemical responses to the authoritative syllogistic discourse of the *Mishnah*, and that *Leviticus Rabbah*, as successor to both the *Mishnah* and these earliest midrashim, adopted the former's preference for syllogistic argument and hitched it to the latter's pretense of scriptural commentary. But there is no historical basis for the *linearity* of Neusner's canonical-historical model. Even if we could establish that Neusner's books achieved closure in clear succession, it would not follow that each one's mode of discourse also succeeds those of its predecessors in linear progression.¹¹ For example, the *Mishnah* and the earliest midrashic collections may represent two complementary forms of discourse—code and commentary—which dialectically accompany and interpenetrate each other *throughout* their evolution in the history of Judaism. Neusner's presumed historical model of a rabbinical canon, with the *Mishnah* at its head, has contributed to his characterization of the place of Scripture in *Leviticus Rabbah*.¹²

Second, since, according to Neusner, the work of the final redactors was in selecting and ordering the paragraphs of thought to form whole *parashiyyot*, and the *parashiyyot* in turn to form a cogent document, the meanings of the paragraphs lie less in their relation to the scriptural lemmata to which they are formally "tacked" than in their relation to the larger wholes which they collectively constitute.¹³ For example: the syllogistic base verse/intersecting verse construction is important not for its exegesis of Scripture but for defining the "mode of thought" of the document as a whole because of its place at the head of the *parashiyyot*.¹⁴ Neusner repeatedly claims that his assignments of paragraphs of thought to broad taxonomic classifications constitute irrefutable facts upon which his picture of the whole rests. Yet I frequently found myself disagreeing with his characterization of a paragraph of thought, usually because he had underestimated the place of scriptural exegesis in its discourse.¹⁵ Are these simply different judgment calls, or is Neusner's assessment of particulars influenced by his a priori assumption that it is their relation to the whole that matters most?

In addition to underestimating the exegetical engagement of *Leviticus Rabbah* with Scripture, Neusner also underestimates the midrash's *internal* exegetical dynamic. First, Neusner often misses the way in which exegesis is unfolded through the editorial juxtaposition of neighboring paragraphs of thought. Neusner's approach leads him to focus on the parts in their relation to the whole, but not on the more *local* interrelation of the parts to one another,

that is, at a level above the paragraph of thought but below the *parashah* as a whole. This will be illustrated in an example which I shall examine shortly. Second, even *within* a given paragraph of thought (that is, at a level below Neusner's smallest canonical sub-unit) traditions have been juxtaposed in ways that at first appear to be disjunctive, but as the paragraph unfolds turn out to be dialectically conjunctive. Neusner often misses this level of exegesis in considering the juxtaposed traditions to be simply exemplifications of a proposition or miscellanies joined by a common topic and then "tacked" onto the lemma. In cases where a tradition appears in an earlier or contemporary rabbinic source, Neusner does not adequately examine how, at the local level, it has been worked into its context in *Leviticus Rabbah*. Instead, he is mainly concerned with whether such shared materials contribute to the overall program of the document. "The whole is what matters, not the origin of some of the parts" (p. 49).

Let me now illustrate these criticisms by discussing in detail one representative textual passage. *Leviticus Rabbah* 1:10, 11, and 12 comment on the tent of meeting in *Leviticus* 1:1. Although, according to Neusner, they contain some exegesis, what they share is the common theme of the tent of meeting, which joins them to one another and to that verse.¹⁶

The lemma, *Lev.* 1:1, reads: "[And the Lord called Moses and spoke to him] from the tent of meeting."¹⁷ Next the midrash juxtaposes a proposition attributed to R. Eleazar (late third century): "Even though the Torah [earlier] had been given to Israel at Sinai as a fence [restricting their actions], they were liable to punishment on account of [violating] it only after it had been repeated for [taught to¹⁸] them in the tent of meeting." At issue here is why the Torah was given once from Mt. Sinai and then again in the tent of meeting. R. Eleazar's interpretation presumes the rabbinic legal principle that the first time a law is given it is as a warning, and only after the second articulation does it demand punishment for its violation.

An illustrative *mashal* (parable) is then presented: A royal decree was "written and sealed and brought to the province. The inhabitants of the province became liable to be punished on account of violating the decree only after it had been proclaimed to them in a public meeting¹⁹ in the province." Similarly, Israel was liable for violations of the Torah only after it had been repeated in the tent of meeting.

However, like many a *mashal* this one does more than just exemplify the proposition; it is also in tension with the proposition and the lemma. In the *mashal* the decree, written in private, was not binding until promulgated in public before those who were subject to it. In the case of the Torah, however, this order is reversed: The Torah was first given publicly at Sinai, and then repeated/taught privately to Moses in the tent of meeting, after which he was to communicate it to the people. Should not the Torah have been repeated publicly to the whole people, as suggested by the logic of the *mashal*?²⁰ This tension, here planted, will bear its fruit in the midrash's next paragraph (1:11).

The midrash continues by citing *Song of Songs* 3:4: "Until I had brought him into my mother's house and into the chamber of my teaching (*horati*)

[lit.: parent²¹].” The seemingly redundant parallelisms of mother/parent and house/chamber are taken to refer to sequential events: “‘Into my mother’s house’ refers to Sinai,” while “‘and into the chamber of my teaching’ refers to the tent of meeting, from which (*mishsham*) the Israelites were commanded through instruction (*hora’ah*).” Thus, the bond between Israel and God is consummated in two stages, at Sinai and at the tent of meeting. But the midrash now makes a deeper point, going beyond the earlier one of warning and punishment: Beginning with the tent of meeting the Israelites are no longer commanded directly by divine speech but through humanly mediated instruction and decision.

What is the relation of these points to the biblical lemma with which the midrashic passage began? Neusner, classifying this paragraph of thought as a “syllogism,” finds here a general *proposition* simply *exemplified* by a parable and a prooftext:

I cannot see any problem but one: What has the stated proposition to do with the present [scriptural] context? In fact, the theme is the tent of meeting, that alone. We may expect an anthology of materials on the tent of meeting, none of which bears any distinctive relationship to what happens there, so far as Lev. 1:1 ff. will tell us. (p. 156)

Without reading too much into the midrash we can recognize more scriptural exegesis and more intertextual unfolding here than Neusner allows for.

The midrash is sensitive to the awkward announcement that God spoke to Moses “from the tent of meeting,” as though God were inside the tent of meeting and Moses outside.²² The expression “from the tent of meeting” occurs only in Lev. 1:1, whereas “in the tent of meeting” is the more common expression for what occurs at the tent of meeting (e.g., Num. 1:1). What are we to make of this strange and unique notion that God addressed Moses *from* the tent of meeting?

Our midrash interprets the problematic preposition “from” in two ways. First, treating the phrase atomistically: “From there (*mishsham*) [the tent of meeting] Israel was commanded with instruction.” That is, Israel received the commandments of the Torah “from the tent of meeting” through the mediation of Moses and his successors.²³ Implicit in this interpretation is a second, temporal reading of the preposition “from”: “From the tent of meeting” [and ever after] Israel’s relation to revelation is mediated by teaching.

Whether or not the building blocks of this passage (R. Eleazar’s statement, the *marshal* and its moral, Song of Songs 3:4 and its interpretation) originated in interpretation of Lev. 1:1, it is clear that they have been juxtaposed so as to create a subtly unfolding, creative interpretation of a textual irritant in that verse. The midrash is neither syllogistic nor anthological in ways that Neusner employs those categories in describing this passage, but deeply exegetical, with respect both to its reading of Scripture and to the combination of its own parts.²⁴

The midrash continues its treatment of the tent of meeting in the next paragraph (1:11), beginning with a statement attributed to R. Joshua b. Levi (early third century): “If the nations of the world had known how valuable the tent of meeting was to them, they would have sheltered it with tents and

ballustrades” (rather than destroying it, as they did the Temple). This is then explained by allusion to a mocking midrashic motif already well attested in the earlier “tannaitic” collections: When God thunderously revealed the Torah at Sinai, the nations were seized with panic in their camps for fear that He was about to destroy the world.²⁵ Citing Deut. 5:23, our midrash explains that humans cannot hear God’s voice and live. How is it then that Israel heard the divine voice and lived? To resolve this tension the midrash introduces a teaching attributed to R. Simon (R. Joshua’s student): Israel alone heard God’s voice and lived, citing Deut. 4:33, since that voice issued in two modes, one for Israel as life and one for the nations as poison. We are next brought back to the interpretation of the lemma through the citation of a “tannaitic” teaching (*detane R. Hiyya*) found verbatim in the Sifra, the antecedent rabbinic commentary on Leviticus: “‘From the tent of meeting’ teaches that the voice of God was cut off and did not extend beyond the tent of meeting.” This statement responds to the awkward preposition “from.” Employing the hermeneutical principle of *mi’ut*, it interprets “from” (*min*) as bearing a sense of limitation or exclusion: The divine voice was not heard outside the tent of meeting.

Now in the Sifra this interpretation has nothing to do with the nations. There it distinguishes Moses from everyone else: Moses alone heard the divine voice.²⁶ Only in its new context in Leviticus Rabbah, juxtaposed with R. Simon’s teaching and the allusion to the nations’ panic during the theophany, does it signal a change in the nations’ access to revelation. When we now read the Sifra citation in conjunction with R. Joshua b. Levi’s opening statement, we understand why the nations should have protected the tent of meeting which protected them from the divine voice. Likewise, R. Simon’s teaching, now linked to the lemma, takes on new meaning: The same divine voice was a source of death to the nations when it was unmediated at Sinai, and a source of life to Israel when it was contained, we might say domesticated, in the tent of meeting and (now alluding back to 1:10) mediated to the people by Moses and his successors.²⁷

We thus see that the formerly unresolved tension between public and private revelation, raised implicitly by the *marshal* in 1:10, has now been resolved to Israel’s advantage, and, in bittersweet sarcasm, to the nations’ disadvantage. Torah, unlike the royal decree, was repeated within the confines of the tent of meeting for good reason!

Having come this far, it is logical for a Jewish student of this midrash to ask: But what is the relation of Israel and the nations to the divine voice *now* that there is no longer a tent of meeting to contain and mediate it? The midrash by supplementing its physical understanding of “from the tent of meeting” with a temporal one obviates this problem: From [the time of] the tent of meeting, the nations have been cut off from the unmediated divine voice, while Israel still hears it via the mediation of its teachers. Thus, the midrash subtly substitutes “teaching” for the physical tent of meeting, which itself stands for the destroyed Temple.

Neusner misses both the relation of this passage to Scripture and its meaning (which to his credit he admits), because of his failure to appreciate the way its editorial juxtaposition of traditions works: “As noted above, the larger context of Lev. 1:1 makes no impact upon the exegesis of the passage, which is

focused upon the theme, the tent of meeting, and not on the meaning of the place or tent in this setting" (p. 157).

But Neusner misses more than just the hermeneutical interplay within this paragraph of thought and between it and its predecessor. In missing these inwardly focused hermeneutical maneuvers he misses something significant in this passage's outward historical thrust. It is in the dynamically creative editorial juxtaposition, and thereby adaptation, of our passage's building blocks that the tent of meeting is made for the first time in its (extant) history of interpretation to speak of Israel's relations with the nations vis-à-vis revelation.²⁸ This transformation is accomplished through the transformation of the "shared" statement from the Sifra in its transfer to a new redactional context.²⁹ The explicit citation of this tradition serves not only to connect R. Joshua b. Levi's and R. Simon's statements to the lemma, but more importantly to resolve the earlier tension between the public (universal) and private (Israelite) sides of God's revelation. All of this is accomplished without any adaptation of the form of the Sifra statement to the stylistic conventions of Leviticus Rabbah as a whole. The new meaning of the tent of meeting is hermeneutically generated within the paragraphs of thought, between the paragraphs of thought, between them and Scripture, and between our text and an earlier text which it intersects. It is discerned through engaged study of the text at what I have called its local level.

My point by now should be clear. It is not simply that I disagree with Neusner's interpretations of particular passages; discerning the exegetical strategies of midrashic texts is no simple matter and critical scholars will respectfully disagree regarding how much to read into a particular text. Rather, my point is that Neusner's underlying method of canonical-historical study has, because of its presuppositions about the nature of rabbinic "books" and "canon," predisposed him to underestimate and flatten the role of exegesis in midrashic discourse, thereby undercutting the "irrefutable facts" of his taxonomy of the whole, built as it is on an assessment of the relation of the midrashic paragraph of thought to its scriptural lemma. Neusner may think that he practices what one literary critic calls "a hermeneutics of the innocent eye,"³⁰ but no hermeneutics of midrash is innocent which ignores the intertextual creativity (and complexity) of midrash's own hermeneutics.

Neusner is right in arguing that each midrashic document has to be taken up and studied both individually, so as to discern its particular textual and ideational preferences, and in relation to its literary and historical contexts, so as to understand the significance of those preferences. But determining those preferences and defining those contexts are not as methodologically simple as Neusner suggests in asserting that we must interpret a midrashic document from its outside in, searching for the broadest patterns of the whole by which to define the place and meaning of its parts.

By focusing our attention instead on the finer local workings of the text, we might not be successful, as is Neusner, in assimilating its diversity of form and content to a unitary plan and program of the whole, nor in reducing it to a univocal voice which can be historically located as a "pointed reply" to a

particular set of events. What we may hope to discern is the *interrelation* of the text's inwardly directed, exegetical, intertextual thrust and its implicitly outward, historical, social thrust. It is through this dialectical interplay of centripetal and centrifugal "forces" that midrash dynamically mediates between scriptural text and historical time. This is a level of investigation that, as I hope to have demonstrated, is not well served by the antithetically posed and privileged alternatives of "exegesis" and "syllogism," and "compilation" and "composition."

Certainly, the inward and outward thrusts of the passage I have examined can be reductively assimilated to what Neusner discerns as the central "mode of thought" ("we read one thing in terms of something else") and "substance of thought" ("Israel's salvation depends on its moral condition") of Leviticus Rabbah as a whole. But since such mode and substance, once reduced as Neusner must to correlate them with one another, are hardly unique to Leviticus Rabbah, his attempt to correlate them with *specific* historical events fails to convince.

The real danger of Neusner's approach is that in assimilating the parts to the whole, he neglects how the text at its local level did its social work as a text of study and teaching.³¹ This context of social function, which has to be culturally and historically located and interpreted, should be no less significant to the historian of Judaism than the putative *events* which the book as whole is said to address. To put it differently: Neusner's canonical approach leads him to a preoccupation with how the Torah ideology of the Rabbis was *stated* by the framers of a particular book as a syllogistic proposition addressed to a particular time, but not with how that ideology was effectively (and perhaps affectively) *communicated* through a particular document's media of midrashic discourse (no less the creation of editorial "framers") to those whom the Rabbis wished *over time* to draw ever deeper into their way of viewing the world, *as into timeless Torah itself*. The latter requires us to begin our investigation of a midrashic text at its most local level, the level at which as rabbinic Torah it was studied and taught, and to proceed slowly outward in search of its patterns of preference to its whole, even though this too is not hermeneutically innocent. Otherwise we risk, to invert a well-worn metaphor, not seeing the individual trees for our attention to the particular forest among forests.

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NOTES

1. This is the first of a two-part review essay. In a future issue of *Prooftexts* I shall discuss David Weiss Halivni, *Midrash, Mishnah, and Gemara: The Jewish Predilection for Justified Law* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1986) and Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick, eds., *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986). A fuller treatment of many of the themes of this essay will be found in a book that I am presently completing, which examines literary and historical models for the interpretation of midrash as applied to a particular midrashic text: *From Tradition to Commentary: Rabbinic Interpretations of Deuteronomy in the Midrash Sifre*.

2. Neusner's other writings on midrash include: *A History of the Mishnaic Law of Purities. VII. Negaim, Sifra* (Leiden, 1975); *Midrash in Context: Exegesis in Formative Judaism* (Philadelphia, 1983); *The Integrity of Leviticus Rabbah: The Problem of the Autonomy of a Rabbinic Document* (Chico, Cal. 1985); *Comparative Midrash: The Plan and Program of Genesis Rabbah and Leviticus Rabbah* (Atlanta, 1986); *Ancient Judaism and Modern Category-Formation: "Judaism," "Midrash," "Messianism," and Canon in the Past Quarter-Century* (Lanham, Md., 1986). Here I focus on Judaism and Scripture since it is the most systematic statement and application of Neusner's views on our subject. However, this is not a detailed review of Neusner's translation of and commentary on Leviticus Rabbah found in that volume, except for the small sample treated below. I should note that my own book, *Enosh and His Generation: Pre-Israelite Hero and History in Postbiblical Interpretation*, Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series 30 (Chico, Cal., 1984), is criticized by Neusner in an Appendix to *Comparative Midrash*, pp. 198-202. In what follows, page references to *Judaism and Scripture* are generally given in the body of the text within parentheses.

3. "Leviticus Rabbah may serve as further evidence on the condition of that form of Judaism that produced it and adopted it as authoritative" (p. 6).

4. The percentage figures for this and the following types are from *Comparative Midrash*, p. 100. There Neusner acknowledges that his base verse/intersecting verse construction is too broad and divides it into two: the base verse/intersecting verse construction proper (12.5% of the total), and what he calls the "intersecting verse/base verse construction," in which "the base verse is read in light of the intersecting verse, which itself is not unpacked" (27.6%). Between *Judaism and Scripture*, *Comparative Midrash*, and *Integrity*, Neusner is highly inconsistent in his delineation and description of the types of construction and in his assignment of Leviticus Rabbah's paragraphs of thought to them.

5. In *Comparative Midrash* Neusner drops his syllogistic category and assigns its items mainly to types 2 (exegetical) and 4 (miscellanies). Therefore, it is not assigned a percentage of the total.

6. Contrast James Kugel's comment that "midrash is an exegesis of biblical verses, not of books." *Midrash and Literature*, p. 93.

7. The influence of biblical "canonical criticism" is implicitly acknowledged in *Comparative Midrash*, p. x, n. 3.

8. See n. 3 above.

9. The canonical and textual authority of most of these books, but especially of the aggadic midrashim, remain fluid (to be generous) until our day.

10. The earliest listings of the authoritative books of rabbinic literature are found in gaonic texts of the ninth and tenth centuries, with Leviticus Rabbah not included.

11. The same can be asked concerning thematic linearity. Neusner states (p. 108) that whereas "the Mishnah's system, whole and complete, remains reticent on the entire [messianic] theme . . . our document finds ample place for a rich collection of statements on the messianic theme. What this means is that, between the conclusion of the Mishnah and the closure of the Talmud and Leviticus Rabbah, room had been found for the messianic hope." Given the substantial differences between the natures of these documents, such historical conclusions are methodologically dubious.

12. Neusner's statement (p. 3) that the Mishnah immediately became the "authoritative law code, the constitution, along with Scripture, of Israel in its land" is probably an exaggeration. Similarly, his characterization of the relation of the "tannaitic" midrashim to the Mishnah is an oversimplification, and runs contrary to his own conclusions in *Purities. VII*, referred to in n. 2 above.

13. In some statements Neusner implies that the principal work of the final redactors of Leviticus Rabbah was their selecting and ordering of the paragraphs of thought to form the *parashiyot*. Yet in other places he claims that these redactors

themselves created or reshaped most of the paragraphs of thought in accordance with their formal and topical preferences. Are the paragraphs of thought mainly the creative products of the final redaction or of an earlier, precanonical stage of redaction? His failure to offer a clear answer to this question undermines the application of his canonical-historical model. For Neusner's inconsistent formulations on this question see pp. 16, 19, 40, 50, 54-56, 58, 81, 97.

14. According to Neusner's revised taxonomy (n. 4 above) only 12.5% of the "paragraphs of thought" are properly of this type; hardly "ubiquitous." The use of this construction at the beginning of the *parashiyot* can be explained in rhetorical terms without claiming that it defines the document as a whole.

15. For Neusner's own uncertainty see nn. 4-5 above.

16. Neusner's classification of these three "paragraphs of thought" as "syllogistic compositions" appears on pp. 31, 38. However, he additionally classifies 1:11 and 1:12 as "exegetical compositions" (pp. 27, 38). It is not clear which parts of 1:11 and 12 are syllogistic and which exegetical, or whether the categories overlap to such an extent as to be meaningless. In *Comparative Midrash*, where Neusner's translation and interpretation of these passages is reprinted verbatim, he classifies 1:10 and 1:11 as "exegetical" and 1:12 as "miscellanies" (pp. 98, 99, 101).

17. Translations of Leviticus Rabbah are Neusner's unless otherwise stated.

18. The Hebrew *nishnet* could have both meanings.

19. S. Lieberman (*Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* [New York, 1962], p. 200) correctly translates the loanword *dimosyah* (Greek: *dēmosia*) as "public place."

20. Neusner misses this tension, listing this *meshal* as one which "serves much as does a proof text" (p. 45). Similarly, see David Stern's treatment of this passage in *Midrash and Literature*, p. 118. Cf. Numbers Rabbah 12:4 where it is said that because God thought it unbecoming to address Israel in public He had the tent of meeting made.

21. The biblical Hebrew *horati*, meaning "the one who bore me" (from the root *hrh*), is construed to mean "my teaching" (from the root *yrh*).

22. Note how the Pseudo-Jonathan, Neofiti, and Fragmentary targumim transpose the phrase: "God called to Moses from the tent of meeting and spoke to him [upon entering]." Similarly, Rashbam ad loc. For other midrashim attentive to the difficulty of the preposition "from," see Sifra Vayyiqra Perek 2:10-12, to be discussed below; Sifre Num. 48; and Numbers Rabbah 14:21.

23. I understand *mishsham* to be a paraphrase of "from the tent of meeting" in the lemma.

24. I use the word "exegetical" in the common sense of "interpretive," and not in the literal sense of "leading out from" Scripture, which would be hermeneutically meaningless.

25. I follow Margulies's text according to MSS Vatican and London: *nitrazin betokh*. Neusner mistranslates, "they rushed out of their camps." For the motif of the physical shock of revelation see Sifre Deut. 313, 343 (abbreviated in Mekilta Bahodesh 1); Mekilta Bahodesh 2, 9; T. Arak. 1:10; B. Shabb. 88b. Tanhuma Terumah 9 and Tanhuma Terumah (ed. Buber) 8 state that the divine voice extended into the dwellings of the nations.

26. The Sifra context stresses that not even the elders, the priests, Aaron, or the ministering angels heard the divine voice.

27. Leviticus Rabbah 1:12 continues by contrasting the prophets of Israel with those of the nations: "From [the time of] the tent of meeting," prophecy ceased among the nations. Only in the world to come will everyone again behold and hear God.

28. Detecting an "outward historical thrust" is not the same as identifying specific historical events or circumstances which a text is said to address.

29. Other parts of this paragraph of thought, such as the sayings of R. Joshua b.

best and R. Simon, may have undergone similar transformations through their repositioning, but we cannot know since the sources from which they were drawn are not available to us.

30. F. Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago, 1980), p. 10.

31. This is my provisional presupposition: that midrash, like the other branches of rabbinic discourse, was a form of study, a branch of the rabbinic curriculum, and that the literary crystallizations of that discourse were similarly created for use in a context of study or instruction. I shall return to the question of the didactic functions of rabbinic midrash in my discussion of Halivni's book. For now I should emphasize that asking how a midrashic text might have functioned socially is different from asking what social or preliterary setting lies behind such a text.