INTRODUCTION

Hanne Trautner-Kromann

In this introduction I want to give the necessary background information for understanding the nine articles in this volume. I start with some comments on the Hebrew or Jewish Bible and the literature of the rabbis, based on the Bible, and then present the articles and the background information for these articles.

In Jewish tradition the Bible consists of three main parts:

1. *Torah* – Teaching: The Five Books of Moses: Genesis (*Bereshit* in Hebrew), Exodus (*Shemot*), Leviticus (*Vajikra*), Numbers (*Bemidbar*), Deuteronomy (*Devarim*);

2. *Nevi'im* – Prophets: (The Former Prophets:) Joshua, Judges, Samuel I–II, Kings I–II; (The Latter Prophets:) Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel; (The Twelve Small Prophets:) Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephania, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi;

3. *Khetuvim* – Writings: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, The Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles I–II[1].

The Hebrew Bible is often called *Tanakh* after these three main parts: *Torah*, *Nevi'im* and *Khetuvim*.

The Hebrew Bible has been interpreted and reinterpreted by rabbis and scholars up through the ages – and still is[2]. Already in the Bible itself there are examples of interpretation (*midrash*). The books of Chronicles, for example, can be seen as a kind of midrash on the

books of Samuel and Kings, repeating but also changing many traditions found in these books. In talmudic times,[3] dating from the 1st to the 6th century C.E.(Common Era), the rabbis developed and refined the systems of interpretation which can be found in their literature, often referred to as The Writings of the Sages. It consists of:
1. The *Mishnah* (*M*);
2. the *Tosephtah* (*T*);
3. the *Palestinian Talmud* or *Talmud Jerushalmi/Yerushalmi* (*PT* or *TJ*, or simply *Yerushalmi* or *y*);
4. the *Babylonian Talmud* or *Talmud Bavli* (*BT* or *TB*, or simply *Bavli* or *b*);
5. the *Targumim*, Bible translations in Aramaic;
6. the *Midrashim*, the many collections of Bible interpretation.

The Hebrew noun *midrash* derives from the verb *darash* – to seek, interpret. Midrash can be used in the sense of study and interpretation of a particular biblical verse, but also about the results of such interpretations, namely compilations or works of midrashic interpretations of the Bible. An example is *Midrash Rabbah*, which is a collection of midrashic interpretations of the Five Books of Moses and the *Five Scrolls*: The Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther[4]. However, *Midrash Rabbah* is not the only collection. There are many collections of midrashim on the Biblical books, covering a period of more than a thousand years[5].

It is impossible to give an exact definition of midrash, although many scholars have tried. Only a few of these attempts will be cited here: The two scholars Avigdor Shinan and Yair Zakovitch give the following description[6]: »Midrash is a mode of approaching a text – derived from a religious world view and motivated by various needs (historical, moral, literary, etc.) – which enables and encourages multiple and even contradictory meanings to be discovered in the text, while the intention of its author(s) is perceived as elusive». Thus, there may be many different meanings in the text which is considered holy by the interpreter. However, some of them can be particularly relevant to certain historical or moral situations and are therefore emphasized by the interpreter. Another scholar, Chaim Milikowsky, writes[7]:

> For the Rabbis there are two contexts for this desire to reveal the word of God, one exegetic and textual and the other homiletic and proclamatory. The Bible – the entire Bible – is the word of God, and midrashic exegesis is but the means by which the exegete-preacher can uncover the manifestations of God's message to the audience. The exegete is led by the text – and controlled by rabbinic ideology. Within these limits, though, very simply put, anything goes.

The midrashic interpretations are thus extremely diverse and, for example, do not present a clearcut characterisation of biblical persons. As Milikowsky also writes[8]: »... it must be noted that rabbinic literature was formulated, transmitted and edited over many centuries, in many different locales, and incorporates the pronouncements of hundreds of Sages». And a little later[9]: »Midrash is the Rabbis' reconstruction of God's word to the Jewish people and not the Rabbis' reconstruction of what happened in the biblical past». The rabbis are preachers, preaching their sermons to the people in the synagogue or in the *beit midrash* (study house). This fact also explains the often rhetorical or even exaggerated elements in their sermons – they wanted to keep the attention of their audiences.

There are basically two kinds of midrash, *Midrash Halakhah* (legal midrash[10]) and *Midrash Aggadah* (narrative midrash)[11]. However, since aggadah is very difficult to define, it is customary to say that any midrash that is not halakhic (legal) is aggadic. The *Haggadah shel Pesach*, the Passover narrative recited at the Passover meal, celebrating escape from the slavery in Egypt, is also an aggadic midrash, compiled from many different sources[12]. Another distinction is made between exegetical and homiletic midrashim[13]. An exegetical midrash, whether halakhic or aggadic, expounds the biblical text word by word or verse by verse, whereas a homiletic midrash gives devotional commentaries on a verse or a whole passage. Both homiletic and especially exegetical midrashim are often compilations of expositions by many different rabbis, so that these rabbis are quoted for their comments on the same verse.

This volume presents 9 articles, the first 5 of which focus on the destiny of Biblical characters as they are transformed into midrashic portrayals. In his article *The Strange Biography of Samson*, Yair Zako-

vitch shows how a popular story of the mythological hero Samson was transformed by the biblical storyteller into a mortal person whose strength came only through the spirit of God. The story was thus made to conform to a monotheistic system of belief. The author illustrates how this is done indirectly by what he designates *covert polemics*. Furthermore, he mentions *literary archaeology*, a term that »refers to the 'unearthing' of traditions which, having been deemed inadmissible by the Bible's writers, nonetheless continued their lives in the world of oral literature until, in the post-biblical period when the ideas and beliefs they conveyed were no longer viewed as threatening, they were written down»[14]. Thus traces of such old traditions can be found in later literature from the Second Temple period and in the Writings of the Sages[15]. Even Josephus Flavius, a Jewish hellenistic historian (ca. 38–100 C.E.), passed on such traditions. After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E., Josephus wrote the book *The Jewish War* on the war between the Jews and the Romans, and another book *Antiquities of the Jews*, a work that aims at enlightening non-Jews by retelling the biblical stories and thereby proving the antiquity of the Jewish traditions. Josephus makes use of stories from aggadic midrashim that are only known from his book. In this way old traditions are preserved that would otherwise have been forgotten.

The second article by Yair Zakovitch, *David's Last and Early Days*, illuminates the story of David in the books of Samuel and the first book of Kings with its optimistic beginning and tragic end. The author argues that the missing story of David's birth and childhood may be explained as the storyteller's desire to portray David as a male Cinderella. Again he shows that by making use of post-biblical literature new information can be gleaned. He refers to Hellenistic Jewish literature such as the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Bible, probably made in the third Century B.C.E. (Before Common Era) by the Greek-speaking Jewish community in Alexandria, who were no longer able to understand the Hebrew version sufficiently well. He also refers to the Psalms Scroll, apocryphal psalms from the Dead Sea Scrolls – found at Qumran in 1947 – dating from before the common era.

In his article *King David of the Sages* Avigdor Shinan shows how the multifaceted and not always positive portrayal of David in the Bible

was developed into the idealized figure of a glorious king, close to the Messiah, the sweet psalmist of Israel, a religious thinker, studying the Torah, a humble and kind person, in short a role model for the Jewish people. The rabbis felt the need to supply the missing details of David's birth and childhood in the biblical stories, and they therefore interpreted, *midrashized*, single words and passages from Chronicles, Psalms and Prophets in a midrashic way. Generally, they praised David, and his unique relationship to God was depicted in various practices that were key concepts in the world of the sages, such as observation of all commandments, prayers at all opportunities, and constant study of the Torah. Nevertheless, the rabbis could not totally ignore the embarrassing traits found in the biblical portrayal of David, which explains the cautious criticism that sometimes precedes the stories about his remorse, punishment, penitence, and God's forgiveness, thus making him a model for repentant sinners. The author offers explanations for both the positive portrayal and the critical. The sages were generally inclined to purge the biblical figures of sin in order to uphold the dignity of the founding fathers of the nation as a response to outside criticism and to Jewish sceptics. Their criticism was used for didactic purposes – to give the people of Israel models with whom they could identify, teaching them at the same time how to mend their ways. The ambiguous portrayal could also be explained as a way of tackling issues relating to the institution of the Patriarchate[16]. It claimed the right to rule the people of Israel by claiming lineage from David in opposition to groups that opposed the Patriarch. This conflict is depicted in the last part of the article, dealing with the many comparisons – more than 300 – between Moses and David in an attempt to decide which one of these towering figures is the more illustrious.

In Chaim Milikowsky's article *Why Did Cain Kill Abel? How Did Cain Kill Abel? Methodological Reflections on the Retelling of the Cain and Abel Narrative in Bereshit Rabbah*, it is argued that the rabbis' narratives, gleaned from their interpretations of the biblical texts, were not considered factual and historical at the same level as the biblical stories themselves, which they perceived as corresponding to actual events in the past. The main purpose of the midrashic interpretations of the Bible was to reveal the messages of God in all their manifestations.

Therefore, even contradictory interpretations of the same text were very much acceptable. The author then tries to extract the message from the retelling of the Cain and Abel story in *Bereshit Rabbah*, which does not give us the homiletic context. According to Milikowsky, no contextual reference is at hand because this work is a sourcebook for midrashic exegesis of Genesis, a sort of handbook for preachers, to be used in their own new contexts. In contrast to the first question of *why* Cain killed Abel, based as it is on a textual problem and therefore solved by midrashic exegesis, the second question of *how* is based on the quest for factual information of the weapon used, what is here called antiquarian exegesis. Milikowsky argues for the possibility of distinguishing between various types of rabbinic biblical exegesis, one midrashic and one antiquarian, and states that some of the ancient exegetes used the antiquarian method in order to find the facts of past events, not in order to find the messages of God.

In *The Attempted Murder by Laban the Aramean: An Example of Intertextual Reading in Midrash*, Karin Hedner-Zetterholm gives an explanation of the development of the minor figure of Laban in the Bible into a wicked person and major enemy of the people of Israel in the midrashic and targumic traditions. She argues that one reason for this development is most probably the wish of the rabbis to present Jacob in the most favorable light and excuse his shortcomings by emphasizing Laban's deceitful behavior toward him. Another reason is the interaction between the rabbis and the biblical texts. The rabbis explained the inconsistencies and filled in the gaps of the biblical texts both with information from other passages and with material from their own cultural and ideological background. According to her this interaction is a more important reason than the preconceived ideas which they read into the text. Thus their interpretations are rather results of a dialogue with the text.

The midrashic type of interpretation is not only found in what is normally known as Jewish sources but also in what is generally considered the main Christian source, namely the New Testament. Magnus Zetterholm argues that the New Testament is basically a collection of Jewish writings. The author supports this claim in his *'And Abraham*

Believed': Paul, James, and the Gentiles, where he argues that James, the brother of Jesus, and the apostle Paul interpreted the same biblical verse, both using the midrashic system, but with contradictory results. This is explained as the need of Jesus-believing Jews to re-interpret the Torah in order to provide continuity between the Jewish religious traditions and the belief in Jesus from Nazareth as the Messiah, but it also reflects the debate concerning the salvation of the Gentiles.

The last three articles in this volume focus on theoretical, technical, and methodological aspects of midrash.

In his article *Oneirocritics and Midrash. On Reading Dreams and the Scripture* Erik Alvstad discusses the rabbinic view of the nature of dreams, using the special word oneirocritics, which refers to the discourse on or discussion of how dreams are interpreted. There are close similarities between midrashic interpretation of the Bible and the rabbinic dream interpretation, and some of the hermeneutic rules of aggadic midrash were probably derived from ancient rules of dream interpretation. By giving examples of dream interpretation from Talmud and Midrash, Alvstad shows that it is the interpreter, not the dreamer, who gives the dream its significance. He also argues that there is an analogy between dream-text and Scriptures: both can communicate to humans – by way of rabbinic interpretation – what would otherwise not have been known, but whereas every single letter and dot in Scriptures had great significance, only some parts of the dreams were meaningful.

In her article *Mystical Midrash* Marianne Schleicher treats the rare phenomenon of mystical midrash by first describing midrash and mysticism and then stating the differences between Jewish mysticism and traditional Judaism. Only Kabbalah, the mystical tradition emerging in the 12th century, provides examples of mystical midrash. One such example is the work from the 13th century *Sefer haZohar*, a mystical midrash on the Torah, the Book of Ruth, and the Song of Songs. The purpose of mystical midrash was to reach the esoteric teaching of the biblical books – their spiritual sense. The traditional four modes of interpretation, called **PaRDeS**, an acronym of ***P**eshat* (contextual), ***R**emez* (hint, symbolic), ***D**erash* (acontextual) and ***S**od* (secret, mystical), were at that time all in use, compared to earlier where only de-

rash had been used. The author argues that there are no real mystical midrashim in later forms of mysticism such as lurianic Kabbalah and Hasidism. In conclusion she defines mystical midrash as the act of interpretating the Torah in order to enter a meditative or ecstatic state of union with God.

In the last article, *From Misprision to Travesty: Harold Bloom's Use of Rabbinic Sources*, Inge Birgitte Siegumfeldt discusses the connection between Jewish Studies and literary criticism. She severely criticizes Bloom's claim that he has used aspects of the rabbinic tradition in his own work, showing that the complicated rabbinic system of interpretation cannot be used indiscriminately, and demonstrates that certain aspects of Bloomian theory derive from a misreading of the rabbinic sources. Bloom claims that Jewish thought was a major source of inspiration for his literary theory of rivalry: the 'agonistic' struggle which in his view characterizes literary production, namely the idea that reading and writing involve a kind of contest between the writer and the fathers of the canon. Central here are the two Bloomian notions: the »anxiety of influence» – the fear of being merely a product of one's literary tradition and not a writer in one's own right and »creative misprision», that is, inventive reading which adds something new or something different to the read text. Siegumfeldt argues that Bloom's proposition is that Jewish writers engaged in a sustained creative misreading of their precursors, and that this is a misunderstanding of the nature of their activities. Also his use of Kabbalah is a distortion of this intellectual culture. She concludes by pointing out that »Bloom's attempt to ascribe a radical, competitive individualism to what is essentially a body of collective authorship reflects a serious misconception of the nature of rabbinic exegesis...».

There is much more to be said about Midrash than the articles in this short book can present. However, I do hope it will inspire you to further readings of or on Midrash. The bibliography below and the references within the articles to a vast and varied literature on this subject should provide a good start.

Notes

1. This order of the biblical books is somewhat different from the order in the Christian traditions.
2. For a very good introduction to reading Jewish texts, see Holtz 1994.
3. Roughly consisting of the tannaitic and amoraic period. The tannaitic period is named after the sages, the *tannaim* of the first two centuries, the amoraic period is named after the *amoraim* of the following centuries.
4. The collection of midrashim (plural of midrash) on the First Book of Moses is called *Bereshit Rabbah* or *Genesis Rabbah*, the collection on the Second Book of Moses is called *Shemot Rabbah* or *Exodus Rabbah*, and so on.
5. See Stemberger 1991: 233–246 for presentation and discussion of the Midrash genre.
6. As cited in Hedner-Zetterholm 2002:7.
7. See his article in this volume p. 80.
8. Ibid. p. 80.
9. Ibid. p. 82.
10. See Halivni 1986.
11. It should be noted, however, that Midrash Halakhah also contains some aggadic material, and Midrash Aggadah likewise contains some halakhic material.
12. Aggadah is the Aramaic form of the Hebrew haggadah.
13. Again, the boundaries between these two are not clearcut. Thus *Genesis Rabbah* and the first part of *Exodus Rabbah* are exegetical midrashim, while the second part of *Exodus Rabbah* is a homiletic midrash.
14. See his article p. 23.
15. The Second Temple period designates the historical period between the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem in the sixth century B.C.E. and the destruction of it in 70 C.E.
16. After the destruction of the Second Temple, the patriarch, or *nasi* (leader) in Hebrew, was the official ruler and representative of the Jewish people, and he was recognized as such by the Roman authorities.

Bibliography

Halivni, David Weiss 1986: *Midrash, Mishnah, and Gemara. The Jewish Predilection for Justified Law*. London.

Halivni, David Weiss 1991: *Peshat and Derash. Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis*. Oxford.

Hedner-Zetterholm, Karin 2002: *Portrait of a Villain. Laban the Aramean in Rabbinic Literature*. Interdisciplinary Studies in Ancient Culture and Religion 2. Leuven – Dudley, MA.

Holtz, Barry W. (ed.) 1984: *Back to the Sources. Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*. New York.

Stemberger, Günter 1991: *Introduction to the TALMUD and MIDRASH*. Scotland.