

## MIDRASH AND EXEGESIS – DISTANT NEIGHBOURS? \*

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Unlike the term exegesis with its Greek etymology and long academic history, the Hebrew term Midrash is a stranger in Academia. It has no European, non-Hebrew equivalent. This indicates that Midrash is something special. Most readers of this periodical will have some measure of acquaintance with it – many of them may be competent Midrashists – so there seems to be hardly any need to begin this article with an explanation and definition. The more so since it appears that it is very difficult to explain to outsiders what Midrash exactly is. Usually, it is only by experience that we come to understand what it means. However, the matter of definition happens to be a central issue for the following deliberations. So we have to try.

When an explanation of the phenomenon Midrash is asked for, the most common explanation is that Midrash is rabbinic exegesis of the Bible. Derived from the root *darash*, Midrash denotes something like the ‘search’ for the meaning of words and expressions from the Bible; in other words: exegesis. This first impression is confirmed by a superficial glance into the documents of rabbinic literature which contain Midrash. The Talmud and the numerous so-called Midrash collections all seem to a great extent to deal with biblical verses and their meaning. This is again confirmed by scholarly introductory literature, which also tends to explain and define the phenomenon Midrash in terms of exegesis and interpretation.

So it seems that everything is perfectly clear and simple. But those who have experience know better, and newcomers who start to read Midrash and try to understand what it wants to say, are in for some surprise. The first reaction of any educated European reader when trying to assimilate a piece of

Midrash is bound to be one of astonishment and surprise. An example will make this clear.

The following is probably the best known piece of Midrash in the world. It is recorded in the Mishnah (Berakhot I,5). It is a fact that the Mishnah contains very little Midrash, but sometimes it does. However, the passage in question is also included in the Passover Haggada, in which context it received a slightly different slant. It is this version which has become so widely known. I paraphrase a little.

Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah said: Although I am now already about seventy years of age, I was never privileged to find a valid reason why the Exodus should be discussed at *night*, until Ben Zoma propounded the following Midrash: It is said in the Torah "that you should remember the day of your departure from Egypt *all the days of your life*" (Dt.16,3). Now, "the days of your life" would imply merely during daytime, but "*all the days of your life*" means: including the nights.

But the other Sages said: If it said "the days of your life", it would refer to this world, but "*all the days of your life*" includes the days of the Messianic era as well.

It is a very well known passage and certainly nothing new to most readers. It only serves to remind us here of the inadequacy of the term exegesis when an explanation of the character of Midrash is needed. A very special interpretation is squeezed here from a very natural expression, and not only one interpretation, but two different ones at the same time. Nevertheless, in terms of Midrash it is a very common piece. It departs from the presupposition that every 'superfluous' word of the Torah conveys extra meaning. "The days of your life" alone would have sufficed, so "all the days of your life" should have an additional meaning: the nights, or: the days of the Messiah. Moreover, in Midrash the combination of various interpretations for one and the same expression is even more usual than a restriction to one only.

Another nice example could be taken from the Mishnah: In the tractate Sanhedrin (I,6) it is said that the Great Sanhedrin should have 71 members, and a Smaller Sanhedrin 23. Again, quite uncharacteristically, the Mishna sets out to prove that these numbers are given in the Bible, in other words: that the traditions concerning the Sanhedrin are based on the Written Torah.

I will not reproduce here in detail the way this proof is given. The number 71 is derived from the council of 70 elders mentioned in Numbers 11, where it says (vs. 16): "Gather unto Me seventy men of the elders of Israel". With the addition of Moses himself this makes 71. This is a rather straightforward operation. But the way the number 23 for the Smaller Sanhedrin is derived, is baffling in its complexity and is based on an ingenuous combination of at

least three different biblical passages, in addition to a number of preconceptions. Quite contrary to the purpose of this midrashic operation, the modern reader of this passage can only conclude that, whatever the 71, the number of 23 is certainly not based on any biblical notion, at least not in the sense implied by this Mishnah. So, when trying to explain the phenomenon Midrash in terms of exegesis, we have a serious problem.

Modern scholars have done more to define and describe the phenomenon Midrash than referring to exegesis alone. The names of specialists such as the late Joseph Heinemann and Arnold Goldberg<sup>1</sup> are among the best known in the field. Active scholars like Philip Alexander, Daniel Boyarin, James Kugel, Gary Porton, Alexander Samely, and David Weiss Halivni,<sup>2</sup> and many others, have published important studies in their search for the true nature of rabbinic Midrash.

I will first try to summarise the results of this research, which seeks to describe the phenomenon Midrash within its own framework, and then return to the question whether any reference to exegesis is at all helpful. Because the term Midrash has been attached to various literary forms and various kinds of messages, it is most useful first to make the distinction between form and content.

The midrashic form has been the object of very detailed and profound research by the late Arnold Goldberg from Frankfurt a.M. This resulted in a growing agreement among scholars that the following three basic elements should be discerned in the literary form Midrash: a Lemma – (an Operation) – and a Dictum. This means that Midrash should have:

- an explicit quotation of a biblical verse: the lemma
- an argument making the connection between lemma and dictum: the operation
- a rabbinic statement or a fact from the world of the Sages: the dictum

In the texts the Operation is not always there. Likewise the order of the three basic elements may vary. In fact, the most essential formal characteristic of rabbinic Midrash is the combination of an explicit biblical quotation with a rabbinic statement. A lot of analysing has been done on the many and various manifestations of the midrashic form, and it proved to be most difficult to domesticate the subject. It should also be admitted that the degree of abstraction of the formal definition just proposed (Midrash as the mere combination of quotation and statement) may entail some unjustified simplification. Yet it must be maintained that we should call Midrash only such rabbinic passages which combine a statement with a biblical quotation, or vice versa, a biblical quotation with a statement. All other rabbinic texts and sayings do not fall under the category Midrash.

Of what kinds of statements are we talking here? The rabbis made use of Midrash in their sermons and homilies, in which case we speak of Haggada. But for the Halacha too, the midrashic form became a very common way of expression. The well known sets of *Middot*, Hermeneutic Rules, are so many tokens of the ambition to derive the Oral Law from the Written one, or at least to relate the one to the other. In fact the midrashic form became most typical for the whole of rabbinic literature. The sources do not allow us to trace any clear evolutionary pattern from simple Midrash to later, more complicated forms, or Midrash focussed on lemma (quotation) to Midrash which emphasises dictum. It is true that its earliest document, the Mishnah, contains little Midrash. But the Midrash it does contain is already fully developed and not – as can be seen from our examples – an obvious representative of some early stage. In the rest of rabbinic literature hardly anything is said without reference to a verse from the Bible.

These references are introduced by a number of specific formula, such as: “From which verse is this derived” (*minnayin*), “Scripture says” (*talmud lomar*), “as it is written” (*ka-katuv, (ha hu) di-khtiv, she-ne’emar*), etc. This terminology betrays a great emphasis on meaning and suggests that indeed Midrash is all about interpretation, in our terminology: exegesis. But then, interpretation and exegesis of a very special kind.

This brings us to content. It is even more difficult to determine the message which the Rabbis wanted to convey by the literary form succinctly described just now. In the broadest sense the message of the Rabbis was the Torah, more specifically the Oral Torah which, in the rabbinic view, is the enterprise of making explicit what the Written Torah contains in allusion or hidden form. What, according to the rabbis, is the meaning of the Torah? This, of course, is a very profound and all embracing question. The Torah is God’s instruction which Moses learned from the “mouth of the Almighty”, *mi-pi ha-Gevura*. This fact lends the Torah such dignity and stature that it becomes incomparable to other texts, which merely stem from humans. The language of the Torah is divine, its specific wording and style are fraught with meaning. Nothing in the Torah is without meaning, even the smallest details merit attention and there are no superfluities. Even what is *not* there can be considered as meaningful: Not infrequently meaning is derived from the fact that something seems to be lacking from the text.<sup>3</sup> The Hebrew of the Torah is in fact a meta-language, spoken, as it were, with a heavy emphasis on every single word and every single syllable.

When confronted with the task of conveying these endless riches of meaning to their audience, the Rabbis had to resort to an extreme form of literalism. Literalism is probably the best term under which we can summarise

the various ways by which the Rabbis strove to pass on the meaning of the Torah. They were convinced that every single letter of the Torah is the bearer of meaning, and therefore the attention given to the literal text should also be endless.

There are many passages in rabbinic literature which illustrate this conviction and the Rabbis were wont to emphasise it by many telling aphorisms and examples: "Turn it and turn it again, for everything is in it" is said of the Torah (Avot V,22). That even the smallest details are relevant is illustrated by the fact that the tiny difference between *dalet* and *resh*, or *he* and *chet* may turn a central verse into a blasphemy.<sup>4</sup>

Now all this is very profound, but also rather sweeping and unspecific. The following, however, is important. The fact that the language of the Torah is a meta-language and has infinite meaning, implies that the mode of Hebrew as an ordinary, everyday human language is included into the range of its functions. Apart from being the language of God and the language of creation, Hebrew is also a language of men. Now and then Rabbinic literature mentions the human aspect of biblical Hebrew and shows an effort to read it as normal language. This resulted in a saying which eventually became a very important axiom of Jewish biblical interpretation: *Dibra Tora ki-lshon bene Adam*: The Tora speaks like human beings do.<sup>5</sup> Everyday language and plain meaning are also aspects or modes of the infinite range of meanings of the Tora. Here and there the Midrash explicitly tunes in into this mode and says that a certain expression should be read *ke-mashma'ot*: in its literal sense.<sup>6</sup> So the essential literalism of rabbinic interpretation may eventually turn into a search for what we would call the 'literal meaning' of the text. In the course of history it was the term *peshat* which became the usual one for the aspect of the plain, literal meaning of the Torah. Only in those instances, when the Midrash is engaged in a search for the literal meaning, we are justified to call its typical variety of biblical interpretation, as is done so often, 'a kind of exegesis'.

A short digression is here in order. Although it is not necessary in this context to spend much energy on a precise definition of the term exegesis, it is nevertheless useful to recall what is commonly meant by the term. It is true that a great deal of theoretical reflection could be spent on it and that nowadays several different schools or types of exegesis can be specified, there still is a measure of general consensus. I would say that exegesis is the asymptotic attempt to understand an ancient text in such a way that we come as close as possible to the intention of its author and to what its first readers or listeners understood. As the old phrase goes: exegesis explains the text *e mente auctoris et auditorum*. We know that it is impossible ever to reach that

meaning for certain and that the history of its reception also plays its part, but we also know that the ambition to pursue true exegesis excludes various kinds of interpretations from the range of possibilities. An anachronistic reading of a text, explanations which go counter to the grammatical rules of the language in question, explanations based on changes in the text, all such manipulations are not allowed in exegesis. Midrash freely pursues 'non-exegetical' interpretation and warmly welcomes such interpretations, which our understanding of exegesis resolutely excludes. That is why we should be so very careful with the use of this term. Moreover, the exegetical enterprise is usually associated with modern critical scholarship. This creates a wrong impression when it is applied to Midrash.

But Midrash, as we saw, incidentally also includes a search of the literal meaning of the biblical text. So the bold statement that Midrash is *not* exegesis is also not warranted. The relation between Midrash and Exegesis is far from straightforward and simple.



All this notwithstanding, every experienced reader of rabbinic literature knows that – in spite of the overwhelming amount of non-exegetical Midrash – the rabbis had a very keen eye for the literal meaning of the Bible and were excellent hebraists. In fact they needed that knowledge in order to be able to depart from it. The Targumim, whatever their exact origin, inform us that rabbinic circles certainly understood the value of the literal meaning of the biblical text and that it could be established with a great measure of competence. It is possible to collect the written proofs of this fact from the Talmudim and the midrashic collections as well:<sup>7</sup> grammatical observations, statements on the meaning of words and expressions, and other fragments of correct exegesis. All in all the result is very modest in quantity, but it is certainly there.

It is good to give here some random examples, which circle around the borderline between literal meaning and literalism.

— In Deut. 21,10-14 we find the rules how to act with a captive woman, who can be taken as a wife by her new owner only after a certain period of accommodation, and not immediately after the traumatic experience which brought her in the present situation. It says there: "She will shave her hair and *do her nails*" (vs.12)<sup>8</sup>:

*We-aseta et tsiporneha.* Rabbi Eliezer said: "Do her nails" means: cut her nails. Rabbi Aqiva said: "Do her nails" means: grow her nails.

Rabbi Eliezer said: The verse has two verbs, one related to the hair and

the other related to the nails. In case of the hair a form of removal is meant ("shave"), so in case of the nails we should also assume a kind of removal ("cut").

Rabbi Aqiva said: The verse has two verbs, one related to the hair and the other related to the nails. In case of the hair it is something that makes her ugly ("shave"), so in case of the nails it should also make her ugly ("grow").

But for rabbi Eliezer's opinion we have a proof from the following verse: "Mefiboshet the son of Saul came down to meet the king. He had not *done* his feet, nor had he *done* his moustache, nor washed his clothes" (II Sam.19,25[24]).  
(Sifre, par. 212; p.245-6)

We can only agree with rabbi Eliezer's opinion that "do" should be understood here as 'pare' or 'cut'.<sup>9</sup>

There are various stories in rabbinic literature of linguistic observations made by rabbis on their travels to other countries.<sup>10</sup>

— Rabbi Aqiva, for instance, learned in "Arabia" that people called a ram *yuvla* there, which explains that the *yovel* mentioned at the revelation at Sinai was identical with the ram's horn otherwise called *shofar*.

— When he went to "Africa" he heard that a certain coin was called *qesita*, a very rare word in the Bible (Gen. 33,19 = Joshua 24,32; Job 42,11).

— Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi heard in "the cities at the sea" the use of the verb *kara* in the sense of: to sell, which goes very well with its use in relation to Jacob's grave (Gen.50,5), better than its usual meaning: to dig.

The rabbis had a sharp eye for facts, numbers and chronology.

— They don't hesitate to tell us that the appointment of chiefs of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens in Ex. 18 resulted in a total of 78.600 officials, given the fact that the people of Israel counted 600.000 souls at that time (cp. Num. 11,22).<sup>11</sup>

— A careful chronology of the stories in Genesis learned them that Isaac must have been 37 years old when Abraham was commanded to sacrifice him.<sup>12</sup>

— An even more strict adherence to the literal wording of the text led the rabbis to the following observation: "Jephta was buried in the *cities* of Gilead" (Judges 12,7). How was Jephta punished for his rash oath that he would sacrifice to God the first person whom he would meet on his homecoming from battle? His punishment was that he died of a disease which caused his limbs to fall off separately one by one. That is why he was buried in several different places, "in the cities of Gilead".<sup>13</sup>

— Well known is the striking observation that the people of Israel expressed their willingness to obey God's commandments even before they

knew what would be expected of them. *Na'ase we-nishma*: "We will do and listen" (Ex. 24,7), instead of: We will listen first and then obey.<sup>14</sup> For the rabbis the order of these words is specifically meaningful, and they know very well how to exploit this fact.

— "A curse of God is a hanged man" (*qilelat Elohim taluy*; Deut. 21,23). Who is cursed by whom? Should we read here a *genitivus objectivus* or a *genitivus subjectivus*? Is the hanged man, in addition to his punishment, cursed by God as well? A good sense for the possibilities of the language allowed the rabbis to explain this expression in the sense that it is an affront to God when one of His creatures, created in His image, is hanging from the gallows.<sup>15</sup>



As these examples show, awareness of the literal meaning may lead to 'acceptable' exegesis, but it may just as well produce extreme forms of literalism. Clearly, there is no sharp distinction between literal meaning and literalism. But the fact that in some occasions it may lead us to a good and plausible understanding of the text, has not remained unnoticed.

In later Jewish biblical exegesis, the Midrash and its specific ways of interpretation remained a dominant factor. Its character and influence remained as ambivalent and ambiguous as they ever were. Some circles eagerly made use of the more extravagant possibilities of the classical Midrash, such as the so-called *gematria*: the use of the numerical value of Hebrew letters and words. This was especially the case in kabbalistic and speculative traditions of Judaism.

Others expressed their indebtedness to the classical, authoritative sources by very different selections. By selecting the more literal potential of classic rabbinic Midrash and by underplaying its fantastic aspects, medieval biblical exegetes such as Rashi, David Kimchi and Abraham Ibn Ezra advocated the possibilities of Midrash in their search for the literal meaning. Here we find a line of 'rabbinic exegesis' which eventually became very influential in the history of biblical exegesis.

Already in the Middle Ages Christian scholars were aware of the ambivalence of rabbinic Midrash. *Littera et fabula* they found in it. When looking for the basic historical meaning of the *hebraica veritas*, Bible scholars incidentally made use of the knowledge of Jewish scholars. On the other hand their theological preconceptions induced them to denounce the rest as rabbinic fantasies. In the time of humanistic scholarship and the early national translations this ambivalence remained. In spite of a deep mistrust of Jewish belief, for

some time Jewish knowledge was considered essential for biblical scholarship. Hardly anyone nowadays is aware of the impact this rabbinic exegesis, as an offshoot of the Midrash, once had on the transfer of the knowledge of Hebrew and on biblical scholarship. And that is very understandable, because this aspect has become history. As I said, rabbinic Midrash was used in the search for the literal meaning of the Bible by Rashi, Kimchi, Ibn Ezra and others. The early Christian hebraists assimilated this knowledge into Christian exegesis. When scholarship progressed and the semitic sister languages and archaeology became the prime sources for Bible study, the Jewish origin of Christian hebraism sunk into oblivion. The new sources for the knowledge of Hebrew either confirmed, complemented or corrected the traditional notions, but the time that every Bible scholar was obliged to turn to the rabbis and their books was over. Midrash and exegesis separated after a short period of companionship.

But this should not be our last word on the interaction of exegesis and rabbinic Midrash. The creativity of the rabbis continues to inspire biblical scholarship, be it in ways very different from the one mentioned above. I very briefly mention three aspects.

1. There is still a host of interpretative ideas in the Midrash which merit to be examined on their exegetical potential. To be sure, many ideas taken from the Midrash have already appeared in the Latin folios of the 18th, and the – mainly German – tomes of the 19th centuries. Quite a lot of these have been forgotten, but it is worthwhile to resuscitate them. On the other hand, it is obvious that midrashists and modern exegetes alike tend to be drawn to the same passages and the same textual difficulties. They do not need to adopt each others solutions, but the fact that both are apt to react on the same textual signals is worthy of note.

2. Another kind of inspiration, not to be confused with scholarly, critical exegesis, is the fact that Midrash is the vehicle of Oral Tora. It has a very distinct theological message. It is possible for biblical exegesis to address the Midrash on this particular aspect: as one of the ways of mediating the biblical message. This is the way in which Midrash has functioned in traditional Judaism through the ages, and in which modern scholars may study the texts of the midrashic collections today as well.<sup>16</sup> In fact, Midrash, when properly understood and analysed, is a great source of inspiration for any kind of biblical theology.

3. Some schools of (post-)modern literary criticism have discovered the very special ways of Midrash and declared them to be a source of inspiration for reading literary works of art. I refer here to what might be called the 'Midrash and Literature' movement.<sup>17</sup> However this may be – and there is reason for reservation here<sup>18</sup> – the indomitable creativity of the midrashic reading of biblical literature is certainly worth to be studied in its own right as a fully self-contained and respectable form of interpretation of an ancient authoritative text. Readers and students of the Bible who have become weary and suspicious of the standard approaches of modern scholarship and their pretensions, may find new inspiration here.



I sum up what I regard as the main issues I have touched upon:

— The term Midrash should be reserved for the specific quotation literature of the rabbinic sources of classical Judaism. Decisive is its literary form: the combination of rabbinic statement and biblical quotation. All other rabbinic and non-rabbinic texts should better not be called Midrash.

— Great caution is needed in the use of the term exegesis in relation to Midrash. For the modern mind exegesis is something connected with critical philology and history. In principle Midrash is something completely different and could more aptly be called 'a kind of theology' than the usual designation as 'a kind of exegesis'. In fact, the association of Midrash with exegesis implies a great injustice towards Midrash. Despite all appearances, Midrash is not exegesis, nor a 'kind of exegesis', although it does contain elements of biblical exegesis.

— Although Midrash has certainly played a role in the origin and history of modern biblical exegesis, this particular role is a matter of the past. The relation between Midrash and modern exegesis now has become merely platonic, a source of inspiration and, possibly, admiration as an example of textual sensitivity; as a vehicle of rabbinic theology; and – eventually – as a model for a new post-modern system of hermeneutics.

NOTES

\* This article is based on a Faculty Lecture given at the Faculty of Theology of Lund University on March 25, 1999.

1. Isaak Heinemann, *Darkhe ha-Aggada* (1950) and A. Goldberg, "Die funktionale Form Midrasch", *Frankfurter Judaistische Beiträge* 10 (1982) 1-45.

2. An earlier attempt was A.G. Wright, *The Literary Genre Midrash* (New York 1967). For more recent studies see e.g. Gary G. Porton, "Defining Midrash", in: Jacob Neusner (ed.), *The Study of Ancient Judaism I* (New York 1981), pp.55-92. Idem, *Understanding Rabbinic Midrash. Texts and Commentary* (New York 1985). Idem, "One Definition of Midrash", in: J. Neusner (ed.), *Midrash as Literature: The Primacy of Documentary Discourse* (Lanham, New York and London 1987), Appendix: pp.225-226. Philip S. Alexander, "The Rabbinic Hermeneutical Rules and the Problem of the Definition of Midrash", *Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association* 8 (1984), pp.97-125. James L. Kugel, "Two Introductions to Midrash" in: G.H. Hartman, S. Budick (eds.), *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven and London 1986), pp.77-103. David Weiss Halivni, *Midrash Mishnah and Gemara. The Jewish Predilection for Justified Law* (Cambridge, Mass. and London 1986). Alexander Samely, "Between Scripture and its Rewording: Towards a Classification of Rabbinic Exegesis", *Journal of Jewish Studies* 42 (1991), pp.29-67. G. M. G. Teugels, "Midrash in the Bible or Midrash on the Bible? Critical Remarks about the uncritical Use of a Term", in: G. Bendorfer, M. Millard (eds.), *Bibel und Midrash* (Forschungen zum Alten Testament 22) (Tübingen 1998), pp. 43-63. Albert van der Heide, "Midrash and Exegesis", in: J. Frishman, L. Van Rompay, *The Book of Genesis in Jewish and Oriental Christian Interpretation. A Collection of Essays* (Louvain 1997), pp.43-56. A 'Forschungsgeschichte', up to that moment, by Brigitte Kern is to be found in her monograph on Pesiqta Rabbati 30 and 29/30 (*Frankfurter Judaistische Studien*, Band 7 (1986), pp. 42-57). That these attempts at description and definition of the phenomenon were not always immediately successful is reflected in Kugel's often quoted ironical statement (p.91): "Since [previous] studies have already not defined midrash in ample detail, there is little purpose in our not defining it again here."

3. E.g.: When an explicit numeral is lacking, any noun in the plural can be considered as a specific indication of two items.

4. This point is made for the last letter of the famous verse Dt. 6,4, which would turn *echad* into *acher*, or for the minuscule spot of ink which would turn *hallel* - 'to praise' into its opposite *challel* - 'to desecrate'; see e.g. the beginning of Midrash Tanchuma.

5. In rabbinic literature usually directed against fanciful interpretations of the combination of absolute infinitive and finite verb: Sifre be-Midbar, par.112 (ed. H.S. Horovitz, p.121) and Sanhedrin 64b; Berakhot 31b and parallels; later denoting the idea that divine revelation is couched in terms understandable to all: Maimonides, Mishne Tora, H. Yesode ha-Tora I,9-11.

6. W. Bacher, *Die exegetische Terminologie der jüdischen Traditionsliteratur*, I (Leipzig 1899), p.190-192; II (Leipzig 1905), p.221-222 (reprint Darmstadt 1965).

7. A nice collection of 'exegetical' Midrash is offered by Israel Frankel, *Peshat in Talmudic and Midrashic Literature*, (Toronto 1956).

8. The text goes on: "(13)... She shall spend a month time in your house lamenting her father and mother. After that you may come to her .. and she shall be your wife."

9. The ancient versions also translate in this sense. Yet we have to bear in mind that rabbi Aqiva is not just a bad exegete. He had a very respectful motive: he obviously wanted to diminish the chance of marriages with strange, captive women. They could better look ugly.

10. The following examples are taken from Rosh ha-Shana 26a, in which context (fol.26b) we also meet the famous "maid of Rabbi's household", who knew better Hebrew than her learned masters.
11. Mekhilta, Yitro 2 (ed. H.S. Horovitz/I.A. Rabin, p.198–9); Sanh. 18a; etc.
12. Bereshit Rabba 56,8 (ed. J. Theodor/Ch. Albeck, p.605; see the variants and the Vilna edition, fol.114b).
13. Bereshit Rabba 60,3.
14. Shabbat 88a.
15. Sanhedrin 46b.
16. A good example is Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington and Indianapolis 1989).
17. See e.g. Susan A. Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses. The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany 1982). José Faur, *Golden Doves with Silver Dots. Semiotics and Textuality in Rabbinic Tradition* (Bloomington 1986). Geoffrey H. Hartman, Sanford Budick (eds.), *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven and London 1986). Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington and Indianapolis 1989).
18. As I showed above, the use of the term Midrash for texts which do not exhibit its specific quotation form is very questionable. Likewise, to my mind 'non-rabbinic', or even 'non-Jewish' Midrash are contradictions in terms.

## SAMMANFATTNING

I ljuset av de befintliga texterna blir den vanliga definitionen av midrash som "en sorts rabbinisk exeges" speciellt problematisk. Som framgår av några exempel uppvisar midrash mål och bevekelsegrunder som är ganska annorlunda än den som vanligen associeras med (modern) exeges. Modern forskning har fastställt att det mest utmärkande draget hos midrash är kombinationen av ett rabbiniskt uttalande med ett bibelcitat. Rabbinerna insisterade på denna kombination utifrån sin övertygelse att Torahn, given till Mose av den allsmäktige, på något sätt innehåller all tänkbar sanning och vishet. Denna övertygelse om Torahns obegränsade antal betydelser medför emellertid att även människans uttrycksätt ingår som en av dess funktioner. Exempel visar att rabbinerna mycket väl visste hur man tolkade Torahn i dess bokstavliga betydelse, även om de sällan gjorde det. Denna aspekt av "rabbinisk exeges", som fördes vidare av vissa medeltida judiska exegeter, utnyttjades av kristna hebraister och bibelvetare under ett tidigt stadium av den moderna bibelvetenskapen tills studiet av semitiska språk och arkeologi tog över. Även om midrash hade stor betydelse för den moderna bibelvetenskapens ursprung och framväxt tillhör detta nu det förflutna. Idag är relationen mellan midrash och modern exeges uteslutande platonisk. Midrash har blivit en källa till inspiration och, kanske, beundran för sin känslighet för detaljer i texten, som uttrycksmedel för rabbinisk teologi och – inte minst – som modell för ett nytt postmodernt hermeutiskt system.