WHY DID CAIN KILL ABEL?
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Methodological Reflections on the Retelling of the Cain and Abel Narrative in Bereshit Rabbah

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Abstract This article begins with some reflections on the nature of the midrashic enterprise, focusing upon two major points. (1) Any attempt to delineate the character of any biblical figure as he/she is presented in rabbinic literature is mistaken in its basic presuppositions. (2) The Rabbis did not see the narratives they derived from their excavations into the biblical text as having the same level of facticity and historicity as they did the narrative of the Bible itself. An analysis of the »Our father Jacob never died« discussion in Talmud Bavli, Ta'anit 4b follows, and it leads to the conclusion that midrashic narrative is explicitly demarcated from the historical-literal reconstruction of past events. The remainder of the paper deals with the retelling of the Cain killing Abel story, or rather with the three different reconstructions of that story, in Bereshit Rabbah, and with the detailing of the method by which Cain killed Abel. One is presented as midrashic exegesis and the other as maximalist antiquarian exegesis, and the argument is made that these modes should be radically demarcated from each other.

As is evident from the title, this article will not attempt to detail or reconstruct the character of Cain or of Abel as they are presented in rabbinic literature. Indeed, I would argue that any such attempt is mistaken in its basic presuppositions.

At the most obvious and basic level, 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. The supposition that such a literature would necessarily present a single character delineation of Cain, of Noah, or of Abraham seems, to my mind, quite implausible.

More importantly, the search for a constructed character in midrashic literature, comparable to a constructed character in the Iliad or in a Jane Austen novel, misconstrues the radically different function of narrative in the former. Granted the chasmic dissimilarities between the ancient Homeric epic and the nineteenth century realistic novel, and granted that they have diverse objectives and designs, nonetheless both were generated to tell a story: the poetic and aesthetic intent is paramount. In midrashic literature, in contrast, the intent is to reveal the word of God; poetics is simply the instrument and medium.

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. Each midrashic moment is thus completely independent, and there is no larger aesthetic entity against which each independent component must be measured. Varying—and even contradictory—trajectories with regard to story, plot and motivation are all eminently acceptable. Cain can be seen one moment as a paradigm of the unrepentant murderer and another as a penitent petitioning God for forgiveness.[1]

Related to these musings on the atomistic nature of the midrashic enterprise is an even more important conclusion. The Rabbis did not see the narratives they derived from their excavations into the biblical text as having the same level of facticity and historicity as they did the narrative of the Bible itself. The stories found in the text of the Bible had, for the Rabbis, a one-to-one correspondence with actual events in the past;[2] this is not necessarily true for stories contained in rabbinic works.

I do not want to argue that all of the events detailed in rabbinic

literature which have no biblical warrant were not accepted as historically true. I have little doubt that stories of venerable antiquity were accepted and no one would think to doubt them. The crucial point here however is that this is true only for »stories of venerable antiquity,» an ambiguous phrase. Anyone who has read extensively in rabbinic literature knows that the overwhelming majority of midrashic additions to the Bible story-line are not presented as independent narrative, but in an exegetical mode.[3]

Thus, to my mind, the very fact that the history-type narrative found in midrash is connected formally to a midrashic exegetical operation and is presented in contrast to the biblical flow of events should convince us that the narrative does not make claims of facticity and historical veracity. Contrast the mode of representation found in midrash with the mode of representation found in Jubilees, or Artapanus, for that matter. These latter books flatten out the events depicted in the Bible together with the events not depicted in the Bible; indeed from reading their works one would not know which event had a biblical pedigree and which not.[4]

Let us now turn to a famous story found in the Talmud Bavli, Ta'anit 4b. While sitting together at a meal Rav Nahman asked Rabbi Yizhaq to expound on some subject. After some preliminary diversions, Rabbi Yizhaq said in the name of Rabbi Yohanan, »Our father Jacob never died.» Rav Nahman was taken aback by this claim and said, »But he was embalmed and buried»; how is possible to do such things to someone who has not died? Rabbi Yizhaq responds and says, *miqra' 'ani doresh*; »I am engaged in Bible elucidation», and he then cites Jeremiah 30:10, »Therefore fear not, my servant Jacob, says the Lord; be not dismayed, Israel: for I will save you from afar and your seed from the land of their captivity»; and continues, »Israel is compared to his seed; just as his seed is alive so too is he alive.»

At first sight, it appears that the midrashic statement denying Jacob's death is being derived from Jeremiah 30:10. However, if we look at the subject a bit more exhaustively, we will find a fascinating distinction between the biblical deathbed scenes of Abraham and Isaac, on the one hand, and that of Jacob, on the other. In the former scenes, three verbs are used to describe their deaths, *gevi'ah, mitah,*

'asifa 'el 'amav; expired, died and was gathered to his people. Regarding Jacob, however, only two verbs appear, expiring and being gathered to his people. For the midrashist, the absence of any verb from the root *mitah*, »to die», in the description of Jacob's death cannot be by chance, but must be understood as communicating to us the Bible's message that Jacob did not die.

Rabbi Yizhak's statement to Rav Nahman was made—according to our story—in a completely neutral context, that is, outside of any context whatsoever. Consequently, Rav Nahman understood this claim as being functionally parallel to a claim such as »Elijah did not die». The characteristic position of rabbinic Judaism is of course that Elijah never died but is still alive; indeed, according to the Rabbis, he is the heavenly recorder of human deeds. Rav Nahman therefore asked Rabbi Yizhak: But Jacob was embalmed and buried, so how can you claim he did not die. Rabbi Yizhak's response, *miqra' 'ani doresh*; »I am engaged in Bible elucidation», and the citation of Jeremiah 30: 10, does not come to tell us the source of his previous statement, for as we have just seen, its source is the absence of any mention of death in Jacob's deathbed scene. What he is doing is saying the following: »You have misunderstood me; my statement that Jacob did not die is not to be understood as a literal-historical depiction of historical facts, but as midrash.» Midrash comes to tell us a story placed in the biblical text by God, having no necessary relationship to the actual historical events, but whose purpose is to give us a message from God. It is that message which is being explained to Rav Nahman by Rabbi Yizhaq's citation of Jeremiah; God's exclusion of any mention of Jacob's death is a promise found midrashically in Genesis and explicitly in Jeremiah: for Rabbi Yizhaq, Jacob's non-death is a promise that his seed shall exist forever.

This midrash and its surrounding narrative are important because they give what we desperately need in reading midrash, a cultural and theoretical context. The original misunderstanding by Rav Nahman and the final exposition by Rabbi Yizhak show us, as clearly as possible, that midrashic narrative is explicitly demarcated from the historical-literal reconstruction of past events. 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.

With this introduction let us now turn to two complementary analyses of parts of the retelling of the Cain and Abel narrative in Bereshit Rabbah.[5] The first will serve to exemplify the position just presented and the second will show the limitations of these conclusions.

Many have remarked that the Bible does not tell us why Cain killed Abel. Nonetheless, a very plausible reading of Genesis 4:8 would place it in the context of the immediately preceding verses, which tell of Cain and Abel's sacrifices, the acceptance of Abel's sacrifice, and the non-acceptance of Cain's sacrifice. I doubt if many — in truth, if any — readers of verses 1-15 in Genesis 4 would begin a new narrative at verse 8, and claim there is no relationship between the non-acceptance of Cain's sacrifice and his killing of Abel.

This is exactly what happens in Bereshit Rabbah:

> And Cain spoke unto Abel his brother, etc. (Gen 4:8). About what was the discussion? »Come,» said they, »let us divide the world.» One took the land and one took the movables. This one said »The land you stand on is mine,» and this one said »What you are wearing is mine.» This one said »Strip» and this one said »Fly.» Out of this Cain rose up against his brother Abel, etc. (Gen 4:8). R. Yehoshua of Siknin said in R. Levi's name: Both took land and both took movables, but about what was the discussion? This one said »In my area the Temple will be built,» and this one said »In mine»; for thus it is written, »and it came to pass, when they were in the field»: now »field» refers to nothing but the Temple, as is said, »Zion shall be plowed as a field'» (Micah 3:12). Out of this Cain rose up against his brother Abel, etc. Yehudah beRabbi said: Their discussion was about the first Eve. Said R. Aibu: The first Eve had returned to dust. Then about what was their discussion? Said R. Huna: An additional twin was born with Abel; this one said »I will have her» and this one said »I will have her.» This one said »I will have her, because I am the firstborn,» and this one said »I will have her, because she was born with me.»[6]

Three different reconstructions of the »story» of Cain's killing of Abel are offered here: the killing was preceded by a quarrel about money,[7] it was preceded by a quarrel about honor,[8] or it was preceded by a quarrel about women. There is neither mention nor even the smallest hint of any previous event which may serve to help explain Cain's murder of Abel;[9] the events in the field are sufficient in and of themselves.

The midrash begins with an exegetical question: »About what was their discussion?» and indeed there is a clear and obvious problem with the biblical text here.[10] Genesis 4:8 reads, »And Cain said to his brother Abel, and it came to pass while they were in the field—and Cain rose up onto Abel his brother and killed him,» but the Bible does not tell us what Cain said to Abel.[11]

Let us now look at the next passage in Bereshit Rabbah:

> And Cain rose up, etc. (Gen 4:8). R. Yohanan said: Abel was stronger than Cain, for why does Scripture say »rose up»—it can only be to teach us that he [Cain] lay beneath him. He [Cain] said to him, »We two are in the world: what will you go and tell our father?» At this he was filled with pity for him; straightway he rose against him and slew him.[12]

Here also the starting point of the midrash is an exegetical question: why does Scripture say »rose up»? It is worth lingering a minute to compare the exegetical starting points of these two midrashic passages. The exegetical starting point of the first passage—the Bible tells us »And Cain said to Abel,» but does not tell what he said—is, from our vantage point, much more troubling than the exegetical starting point of the second passage—why does Scripture say »rose up»? After all, were we asked this latter question, we would reply that this is simply the biblical idiom: often the verb *va-yaqam* (and he rose up) serves to introduce an action—in our instance *va-yahargehu* (and he killed him)—without it itself denoting a specific action.

From the midrashic perspective, however, there is no real difference between these two exegetical starting points, inasmuch as both flow from the basic presuppositions which underlay the entire corpus of Midrash Aggadah. The entire Bible, as noted above, is the word of God. There can of course be nothing superfluous in this word of God,[13] and aesthetic considerations have no role to play in what is considered superfluous. Thus, if the exact same meaning could have been presented by the sentence *va-yaharog qayyin 'et hevel 'ahiv* (»and Cain killed his brother Abel»), the word *va-yaqam* (»and he rose up») seems to be superfluous. But since there can be nothing superfluous in God's word, this seeming superfluity simply means that the midrashist must search what God has hidden in this word so that the midrashist can come and reveal it to the world. R. Yohanan determined that there must have

been an actual physical rising-up,[14] and this means that Cain at one time had indeed been under Abel. Similarly, though in a slightly different vein, the midrashist must determine what God wished him to deduce from the fact that the Bible tells us that Cain said something to Abel, but did not tell us what he said.

Note then the identical midrashic structure of the two passages from Bereshit Rabbah quoted above — in both we have an exegetical starting point and in both the scrutinization and contemplation of this exegetical starting point generate a new plot-line, unhinted at in the biblical narrative. The scrutinization of the missing words of Cain in Genesis 4:8 leads a number of Sages to reconstruct varying quarrelsome conversations between Cain and Abel and the scrutinization of the seemingly superfluous »and he rose up» leads Rabbi Yohanan to reconstruct that Cain rose up from being previously under Abel.

It is worth emphasizing just how radically new this rabbinic retelling of the Cain and Abel story is. According to the standard reading of the biblical Cain and Abel story, Cain killed Abel after his sacrifice was rejected by God. He was so overcome by jealousy that one day he jumped on him and killed him in a murderous rage. Abel is pure righteousness; Cain pure evil.

Contrast this to the rabbinic Cain and Abel story. There is no connection to the acceptance and non-acceptance of the sacrifices of Abel and Cain. A quarrel between Cain and Abel regarding money, honor or women gets out of hand and degenerates into the death of Abel. Indeed, following the position that the quarrel was about possessions, it was Abel, the owner of the movables, who made the first fractious demand »Strip,» before Cain, the owner of the land said »Fly.» There is no murderous intent on the part of Cain, but simply a quarrel between brothers which unfortunately unfolds with the tragic death of Abel. Indeed, Cain is almost killed by Abel during this quarrel, and only by a trick rises up and kills Abel. Abel is no longer a passive righteous victim, but a willing participant in an ugly rancorous brawl.

Did the Rabbis believe in the historicity and facticity of these two additional plot-lines, the quarrel and the near-death of Cain? As I detailed above, to my mind the answer is a resounding no. For the Rabbis, these new narratives were generated out of the biblical text by the means of

markers and hints that God placed in that text, so that future generations could generate them. It is the words of the biblical text which generate God's message—or better yet, God's messages[15]—not the events which these words represent.

Of course, once we have made the giant step of separating the word of God from the historical events that the Bible presents, then it becomes incumbent upon us to try and determine just what was, for the Rabbis, the message of God in this new story that the midrashist has revealed by his contemplation of the word of God. When biblical exegesis remains focused on the literal-historical explication of the biblical story, as is often the case in ancient Christian exegesis of the Antiochene school[16] and in the works of medieval Jewish commentators such as Ibn Ezra and the Rashbam (R. Samuel b. Meir),[17] then there is no overwhelming requirement to presume that there is a message from God in the exegetical conclusion. Of course, for these commentators God's word is found throughout the Bible and no event would be retold in the Bible if there were no ultimate significance implicit in it, but the determination of the specific details and facts of any historical event portrayed in the Bible does not presume that there is a message in that fact or detail. But for the non-literal exegete, whether a midrashist or an allegorist, there are no details or facts to be determined: all there is is signification and consequent illumination.

What then is the message to be gleaned from this radical retelling of the story of Cain's killing of Abel which we find in Bereshit Rabbah? The first point to be noted—and it is a very important one—is that Bereshit Rabbah itself does not help us. As is well known, much of the midrashic material in Bereshit Rabbah has no conceptual or homiletic context: all we have in these cases is the citation of the biblical text and the midrashic derivation drawn from it. Agreeing with the consensus of scholarship that much of midrash has an original oral homiletic context, it is nonetheless true that in Bereshit Rabbah, the earliest and most classic of the *midreshei aggadah*, the homiletic context—which would generally also include a conceptual and thematic context—has not been transmitted to us by the editors.[18] Consequently, we must realize that our efforts will be tentative at best with regard to this sort of question.

The most noticeable point about the rabbinic re-telling of the Cain and Abel story found in the passages quoted above is that Abel is no longer a paradigm of righteous innocence, but also shares some blame for the final horrific outcome. Cain no longer personifies primeval evil, but is simply caught up in a whirlwind of events and eventually kills his brother. Is the intent here simply the desire to assert that for fratricide —or any homicide—to take place there is no need to presume that the murderer is evil and to show how easily killing can result from a commonplace quarrel? Perhaps. Or perhaps there is a polemical overtone here, inasmuch as Cain as a personification of a force opposed to Creation became a supra-divine figure in some Gnostic theologies.[19]

There is a good chance we cannot recover what was the original homiletic-didactic context of this rabbinic retelling of Cain's killing of Abel, as we cannot recover with any degree of surety the original context of many rabbinic additions to the biblical narrative, but I remain nonetheless convinced that this inability to recover context should not elicit the conclusion that these Rabbis had a self-consciousness of creating history. The formulators of these narratives—that Cain and Abel quarreled about possessions, about honor, or about women, that Abel almost killed Cain—did not see themselves as antiquarians presenting facts about the historical Cain and Abel to their audiences,[20] but as theologians, not so much speaking about God, but speaking God's message to His people. The message may be irrecoverable, but that there was a midrashic message and not the presentation of a historical fact is not.

The second passage from Bereshit Rabbah at which I wish to look is quite small and deals with the simple question, how did Cain kill Abel.

> With what did he kill him? R. Shimon said: He killed him with a staff; »And a child by my bruising» (Gen. 4:23) [indicates] something which inflicts a bruise. The Rabbis said: He killed him with a stone; »For have I slain a man by my wounding» (ib.) [indicates] something which inflicts wounds.[21]

Before moving on to the differentiation we wish to establish between this Bereshit Rabbah passage (the »sticks and stones» passage) and the two passages quoted above (the »quarrel» passages), elements of this passage must be elucidated and especially its use of Genesis 4:23 as a proof-text for Cain's slaying of Abel.

Genesis 4:23-24 are universally acknowledged to be enigmatic verses. Suddenly, with no context, Lamech speaks to his wives of the killing of a man, of a child, and of the avenging of Cain and of Lamech himself. The phrase *ki shiv'atayim yuqqam qayyin* (»for Cain will be avenged sevenfold» [Genesis 4:24]) connects directly to an earlier verse, where God says to Cain, *lakhen kol horeg qayyin shiv'atayim yuqqam* (»therefore, whoever kills Cain vengeance will be taken against him sevenfold» [Genesis 4:15]). This complex of motifs—the mention of killing together with the parallelism between Cain and Lamech—led to the formation of the well-known tradition that Lamech killed Cain as well as his own child, and then tells his wives that he will not receive any retribution for many generations. This aggadic narrative is found in the relatively late midrashic composition *Midrash Tanhuma* (Bereshit, 11), and also in several early Christian works.[22]

The basic presupposition of this exegetical tradition is that the killing mentioned by Lamech in Genesis 4:23 is a killing which Lamech himself performed: he admits to killing Cain and his own child. This does not conform to the meaning of Genesis 4:23 implicit in the »sticks and stones» passage: it applies Genesis 4:23 to Cain and uses it to determine how Cain killed Abel. If both sides of an argument concerning the manner of Abel's death use Genesis 4:23 as a prooftext, clearly the basic presupposition is that the killing mentioned by Lamech in Genesis 4:23 is the slaying of Abel by Cain.

Indeed, Bereshit Rabbah on Genesis 4:23 states explicitly that Lamech killed no one. Lamech's statement to his wives is a rhetorical question—»For have I slain a man by my wounding and a child by my bruising?»; he is asserting to his wives that he did not kill anyone, and therefore will not be punished.[23]

The genesis of the exegetical conclusions concerning the manner of Abel's death in the »sticks and stones» passage is radically different from the exegetical conclusions concerning the nature of quarrel between Cain and Abel found in the »quarrel» passages: the former contains no exegetical starting point similar to those found in the latter. There is no inkling of a problem, whether midrashic or more straightforward, in the biblical text which was contemplated, scrutinized and excavated in order to determine the hidden, midrashic story and God's attendant message.

The starting point is not an exegetical problem, but a request for information: with what did Cain kill Abel? From our perspective, the lack of specific information in the Bible—or in any text, for that matter—about a specific subject leads us to conclude that the author felt there was no need for us to be given that information and we, on our part, feel that there is no obligation to try to find out more about that subject. Thus if the Bible does not tell us how Cain killed Abel in the verses which depict that slaying, there is no need or purpose in our combing other verses to try to unearth the truth about the matter. Similarly, if the Bible does not tell us how old was Isaac at the time of the Binding (Genesis 22:1-19) or the identity of the man who gathered wood on the sabbath day (Numbers 15:32), we feel no obligation to try to ascertain the »missing» information.

In general, the logic, content and context of a verse, or of any text, can be defined by a minimalist method or by a maximalist method. To put it a bit schematically, the minimalist method, the by-far dominant position for many years, strongly objects to the addition of any details to the text, while the maximalist method, which was much more acceptable in the ancient world than it is today, does not object to the addition of any details, as long as they do not contradict the text. Christopher Pelling describes this distinction splendidly in his article on truth and fiction in Plutarch's *Lives*: the additions in the *Lives* not found in his sources are »not fiction or invention, but creative reconstruction.»[24] Similarly, Russell distinguishes between »imaginative creation» and »the 'discovery' of what requires to be said in a given situation … [which] is somehow already 'there' though latent».[25]

The discovery and detailing of the instrument by which Cain killed Abel is a perfect example of this maximalist logic: we feel no need to ascertain how it happened, but the exegetes cited by Bereshit Rabbah did. The exegetical logic implicit here is expressed explicitly at the outset of a rabbinic exegetical work devoted to just such matters: the rabbinic chronography *Seder Olam* asserts in its first paragraph »Does not Scripture come to clarify and not to render obscure?» (*lo' ba' ha-katuv li-stom 'ela' le-pharesh*), and then continues for thirty chapters to ascertain the dates and durations of events for which the biblical account gives no explicit chronological information by means of all sorts of inferences and deductions.[26]

This maximalist exegetical logic is not midrashic exegesis; on the contrary, it is antiquarian in nature, and in a sense even anti-midrashic. It is not involved in the theological search for God's message concealed in the biblical text which the midrashist must reveal, but in determining the facts of the past event. These facts can at times have a secondary utilization in a homiletical-theological context, but the character of the inquiry itself rarely has any such context. The exegete wishes to determine that it was a staff that killed Abel and that Isaac was twenty-six years old at the time of the Binding, not because there is any theological illumination in these historical facts, but simply because he is convinced that the biblical author wishes him to do so — that is his only theological context.

In this paper I have presented the demarcation between midrashic exegesis and maximalist antiquarian exegesis in very stark terms, and indeed I think that in theory they are radically detached from each other. In practice, however, especially since we do not have the original words, and often not even contexts for specific exegetical traditions found in various midrashic works, it is quite difficult to determine if a specific exegetical tradition is of one sort or the other. Indeed, this is exactly what we saw above in the misunderstanding about the »Jacob did not die» tradition. Rav Nahman thought Rabbi Yohanan's statement was maximalist antiquarian exegesis, and attacked it, and Rabbi Yizhaq responded by telling Rav Nahman that it was not maximalist antiquarian exegesis, but midrashic exegesis. Similar examples, where we the readers cannot determine which type of exegesis the exegete had in mind are, unfortunately, legion.

Nonetheless, there are markers which help us determine which type of exegesis is meant, and it is the presence of these markers in the two complexes of exegesis in Bereshit Rabbah about the Cain and Abel story which generated this paper. The »quarrel» passages contain classic instances of midrashic exegesis: the scrutinization and contemplation of their exegetical starting point — the missing conversation and the superfluous getting-up — generate new plot-lines, unhinted at in the biblical narrative. In contrast, the »sticks and stones» passage contains no exegetical starting point and no midrashic exegesis; it consists of a search for factual information about a past event, and the successful resolution of this search.[27]

Bereshit Rabbah is, like every other classic rabbinic work, not a homogeneous document which can be attributed to a specific period and social grouping, but an anthological compendium of highly disparate sources.[28] It should not surprise us, therefore, that in the space of a few paragraphs very different modes of exegetical writings will be juxtaposed. This is exactly what happened here.

Notes

1. This is not to deny that often various pieces of midrashic exegesis are conceptually related to each other. Indeed, we shall see one such example in the discussion below. My point is that such relationships are not requisite. Much of what I wrote in the last two paragraphs applies only to midrash, that is, those parts of rabbinic literature which are involved in the exegesis of the biblical text. Rabbinic non-biblical narrative, i.e. stories about post-biblical Jewish and non-Jewish characters or folk-narratives having no specific named character at their center, are governed by some of these considerations, but obviously not by any exegetical context.

2. That we find a passage in rabbinic literature which claims that the events told in the book of Job never took place and the entire book is only a parable (Talmud Yerushalmi Sotah 5:8 [20d], Bereshit Rabbah 57:4 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 615), Talmud Bavli Baba Batra 15 a) simply proves this point.

3. Let me note that I am dealing with early rabbinic midrash here, not late works like *Tanhuma* or *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer*, where story-line is more often a dominant element of the text.

4. I deal with these matters in my forthcoming edition of *Seder Olam* (presently in press at the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities). In the second chapter of the introduction I point out that *Seder Olam* is unique in the rabbinic corpus in that its justification is the determination of the facts of the past, and radically opposes the dominant tendency of rabbinic biblical exegesis.

5. As we shall see, there is more exegesis than narration in this retelling; indeed, I am not sure that the term »narrative» should be applied to the passages we will be discussing.

6. Bereshit Rabbah 22:7 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, pp. 213–214).

7. As many commentators have noted, the division of the world between Cain and Abel with one taking the land and the other taking the movables is predicated upon the fact that Cain brought his sacrifice from produce (land) and Abel brought his from sheep (movables).

8. Such is the way I prefer to characterize the quarrel 'In my area the Temple will be built,' but it is also possible to call it a quarrel about religion.

9. Later midrashists seem to have been uncomfortable with this severing of the two parts of the Cain and Abel story: thus we find in Midrash Tanhuma, Bereshit 9, that after following the story line of Bereshit Rabbah, i.e. that the quarrel was about the division of the world, Cain says to God, »if you would have accepted my sacrifice as you accepted his, then I would not have been jealous of him.»

10. Indeed, many medieval Jewish Bible commentators endeavor to resolve it in various ways.

11. I am referring here to the Masoretic text; various early versions and translations have Cain saying to Abel »Let us go out to the field», and many modern translations follow this reading.

12. Bereshit Rabbah 22:8 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 214). I cite the passage without the Aramaic apothegm at its end, presumably an editorial addition.

13. Some of these ideas are well expressed by Kugel and Boyarin: Kugel 1990a; Kugel 1998; Boyarin 1990.

14. This supra-literalness is very typical of midrashic exegesis.

15. The multivocality of God's word is an important element in the corpus of Midrash Aggadah (though a matter of contention in earlier generations), but we will not be dealing with it here.

16. For some recent studies of this interpretive school, Young 1989, pp. 182–199; Simonetti 1994; van Rompay 1997, pp. 103–123; Young 1997.

17. Though there is a superficial similarity between these types of commentary and the modern critical-historical commentary, it should be obvious why I do not include the latter here: for the majority of the these latter commentators, there is no presumption that God's word is found in every part of the Bible.

18. For many years now I have been of the opinion that Bereshit Rabbah was generated in order to serve as a sourcebook for midrashic exegesis of Genesis, a sort of handbook for preachers, and I have presented this position in various conversations with friends and scholars. This seemed to me to be the most reasonable explanation why there is so little conceptual and homiletic context in Bereshit Rabbah: the editor collected raw material, knowing that every preacher will use this material in his own homiletic context, and these new contexts may differ radically from the context in which the passage was originally formulated. Very recently this hypothesis was presented in print by David Stern, not about Bereshit Rabbah, but about Vayyiqra Rabba, that it was put together as a source book for preachers and teachers. See Stern 2001, p. 31. Inasmuch as just about every individual passage in Vayyiqra Rabba does have a thematic context, I see no reason to apply to it the sourcebook theory; the desire to save for posterity midrashic-homiletic material is more than sufficient to explain its creation, just as the desire to save for posterity halakhic sugyot is more than sufficient to explain the creation of the Babylonian Talmud.

19. See Iranaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 1.31.1.

20. There is no reason to speculate that for the Rabbis and their audiences Cain and Abel were not historical personages.

21. Bereshit Rabbah 22:8 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 214). On »killed with a stone», see Kugel 1998, pp. 152–153.

22. See Kugel 1990b, pp. 91–103.

23. See Bereshit Rabbah 23:4 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, pp. 224–225) and commentaries for discussions of the nature of this threatened punishment. I do not know if the »Lamech killed Cain» tradition is early and was purposely omitted from early midrashic literature, only to be resurrected in the later Tanhuma literature, or did it only develop in the post-Bereshit Rabbah era. I suspect that the former possibility is the correct one.

24. Pelling 1990, p. 38.

25. Russell 1967, p. 135. See also Wiseman1981, pp. 375–389; Kennedy 1989, p. 205; Ray 1986, pp. 67–84.

26. It determines, e.g. the date of the building of the tower of Babel, the duration of Abraham's stay in Egypt, the date of Abraham's war against the four kings, the duration of Abraham's sojourn in the Land of the Philistines, and many, many other events.

27. It is also worth noting that the only Sage mentioned in the »sticks and stones» passage is a tannaitic figure, while all the Sages mentioned in the »quarrel» passages are amoraic. In my introduction to Seder Olam I demonstrate that non-midrashic exegesis is much more common in the tannaitic period than later, and so this differentiation also conforms to our conclusion.

28. That at times an editorial harmonizing point of view is evinced does not negate the force of this assertion, not for Bereshit Rabbah and not for all other classic rabbinic compositions.

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