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New Literary History, Volume 57, Number 2, Spring 2026, pp. 235-262
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



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Anti-Nicene Rabbinic Reading; or, Late-Style Midrash

Daniel Boyarin

Abstract: In this essay, I limn the bones (with some sinews as well) of a new approach to the theorization of the particular mode of responding to Scripture known as *midrash* between c. the first and seventh centuries AD. The fundamental structure of the argument is that our particular way of understanding “interpretation” is the product of a singular episteme or *mentalité*, one set in motion by Aristotle and essentially dominant until today, while midrash is the product of a significantly different theoretical understanding of language. The thesis, moreover, attempts to make a case for seeing midrash after the fourth century as a reaction against the theological epistemology of Christendom. Jewish thought undergoes a further epistemic shift in the early Middle Ages, rendering further midrash impossible and nearly unintelligible in Jewish intellectual life.

For Chana Kronfeld י"ח who is good for thinking
(together) with

DESPITE RIVERS OF INK SPILLED ON the conundrum, midrash, especially the late midrash of the talmudic period (fourth and fifth centuries AD) remains a mystery. It seems to be a mode of response to Scripture that pays no attention to what we perceive as the meaning of the texts in question. I advance here another historical and theoretical explanation of this seemingly alien practice of reading.

I begin with a word on a word, viz “interpretation,” since it is ambiguous, and I will be using it here in a specific sense. This word goes back to Latin *interpretatio*. Dictionaries give the following as glosses for the Latin:

explanation, exposition, interpretation
a translation, version
signification, meaning
an explanation of one expression by another

In modern English (and other modern languages), however, the word has more extended usages in addition to these. We speak of “interpretation” in reference to many responses to texts that are not at all an explanation of one expression by another. One might easily claim that “Bernstein’s interpretation of Beethoven’s fifth is brilliant,” and we would certainly not be referring to translation of the music into other expressions. We might refer also to a poem as an interpretation of another poem without claiming or suggesting that it is an explanation of the source poem in any way, shape, or form. In this essay, I shall be using the term to refer only to “an explanation of one expression by another.” To make and keep this clear, I shall be writing “interpretation by paraphrase” throughout. Paraphrastic interpretation refers, at least here, to statements of the form: “this means that.”

It is important from the outset to recognize clearly that all paraphrastic interpretation—insofar as it declares “this means that”—is allegorical, since “that” is not identical with “this” and allegory literally means “other saying.”¹ It involves the speech act of claiming “this can be said in other words.” In order to have a practice or even a possibility of paraphrase, there must be at least inchoately a notion of “meaning,” however it is conceived. What I am claiming, in short, is that Hazal—denoting for the present purposes, the Rabbis of the second great period of rabbinic intellectual culture, the third to the seventh centuries AD, the time of the Talmuds and Great Midrashim—do not operate with such a conceptual framework at all (or almost entirely not). They refuse by and large to engage in translation of the text into other words; they reject paraphrase or paraphrastic interpretation and do something else; what they do is the burden of this essay to elucidate as well as I can. I will use the term “paraphrastic interpretation” here to refer to any mode of response to a text that claims that a given bit of biblical (or other) language means something that is expressible in other language, i.e., “this means that.” I want to assert here that “this means that” is not the characteristic gesture of midrashic reading. Midrash almost always accomplishes its reading by recontextualizing the utterances of the Bible in new narratives and other discursive contexts and not by translating them into paraphrases of any type.

A longer and more detailed account of early midrash would have to show that certain rules of reading do not constitute exegesis although some are adjacent to it. There are certainly forms in early (tannaitic) midrash that are similar to exegesis; these forms disappear almost entirely later on. I am suggesting here that it was the ongoing reaction against Christian dogmatics that led to this ultimate rejection of virtually all paraphrastic interpretation. Richie Lewis has clarified this

point: “Just as myth does not deal with actual historical happenings but describes occurrences beyond normal cognition, so midrash does not deal with the straightforward linguistic meaning of the text for which it offers exegesis—but with determining its (ongoing) meaning in and for the life of the committed community.”² And again on the next page: “Midrash does not try to explain the mythic text.”³ These are premises which (independently arrived at) underpin and drive my theorization of midrash. It is in regard to the motivation for midrash that Lewis and I differ, not its practices. Comparison with my earlier work *Intertextuality* (listed in the notes) will show how much I have built on the earlier stages and how much I have expanded the theory as well as its history.

Typical of earlier midrashic interventions (second to third centuries) are statements of the form: “verse X; This is what Scripture says: verse Y [from a distant part of the Tanakh],” and the rest is up to the reader. The more radical forms typical of later midrash (fourth to sixth centuries, our concern here) do not connect the verse or part of it to its context at all but produce an entirely new context for the words by attaching them to other verses in altogether different scriptural locations, as we shall see below. Midrash is no more exegetical than a painting by Mark Rothko or a paragraph in *Finnegans Wake*, to take two well-known modern instances. In early work, I attributed that move on the part of Hazal to a rejection of a platonic dualist ontology and commitment to a one-level universe and text; there is no Logos behind the text in an ontologically flat universe—nothing “other” for the words to mean.⁴

In this essay I wish to revise my former thesis substantially. I suggest that its great and significant flaw is that while it explains well the rejection on the part of Hazal of allegory and with it exegesis *tout court*, it does little to explain the actual practices of midrash. In this revisionist argument, my point of departure is an extraordinary new book that provides a context within which to explain midrashic practices, that is, the practices of the narrative midrash, in a historically compelling way and as part of the ultimate “parting of the ways,” by which Christian thought and non-Christian rabbinic thought find a way of distinguishing themselves mutually toward the end of late antiquity. In this book, *Three Powers in Heaven*,⁵ Emanuele Fiano has thoroughly convinced that the Council of Nicaea and the trinitarian controversies that followed upon it were largely—if not exclusively—about a definite effecting of separation between what is “Judaism”—a Christian term⁶—and what is Christianity. The refusal of the practice of theology itself, not the contents of theology, is what renders “Judaism” a heresy.⁷ Fiano’s thesis thus makes sense of why heresy is described so often as Judaizing in this controversy; this is no longer mere shaming rhetoric to refer to heretics as Judaizers or even as Jews, but the very point and target of theological *akribeia*.

Building on this insight, Fiano shows the exact relevance to the question of the separation of Christianity from that entity that it named "Judaism":⁸

A reconstruction of key moments in the Trinitarian controversies shows them as a turning point not only in the formation of Christian dogma but also in the emergence of the rules governing theological exchange. The increasing cohesiveness and discreteness of this research tradition and of the discursive field underlying it led to the appearance of clearer partitions within the late ancient Christian-Jewish continuum. Each step toward defining clearer rules for thinking, speaking, and writing about God moved Christian culture closer to the dogmatic form in which it was to manifest itself at the turn of the fifth century. As it approached this form, the Christian intellectual tradition fell away from identification with Judaism. The Christian-Jewish continuum was eventually fractured as a result of transformations in the research methods and practices of Christian intellectuals. (3P 18)

I would go so far as to claim that Fiano has demonstrated the explanatory power of this thesis.

Building on Fiano's precise study, I now intend to present a new hypothesis, namely that Christian allegory is both made possible and necessitated by—beginning in the third century—the Christian intellectual practice called theology. The ultimate rabbinic eschewal of the practice of allegory, that is, of interpretation as paraphrase, as translation of the language of the text into other terms, is occasioned by their total rejection of theology, that is, of the possibility of propositional knowledge of and about God. The controversy between patristic and Hazalic intellectual practice is not ontological but epistemological, not about what is possible to assert or interpret but about what it is possible to know about God or the meaning of texts.

The founder of Christian dogmatics, Origen of Alexandria (c. 185 - c. 253 AD), is arguably the key figure in the development of the theological and hermeneutical practices of late antique Christianity. The problems of unity and truth in theology and hermeneutics were central issues for him.⁹ Indeed, he identified a lack of certainty as to correct dogma and *interpretatio* as the inescapable central flaws in philosophical and Jewish thinking. According to Origen, it was the direct instruction of the Logos during his time on earth as a human that authorized the Christian writer to articulate the basic principles of Christian systematic theology and just as much to intone with regard to Holy Scriptures: "This means that!, only that, and that for certain."

One thing that I would like to make clear at the outset: I am not drawing a contrast here between "Judaism" and "Christianity," since many

Jews and Jewish groups adopted dogmatics, and even more so interpretation as paraphrase, including allegory. The contrast I am drawing here is one that I take to be a specific historical dialectic between theology on the one side together with its ancillary, paraphrastic interpretation, and the ways and means of Hazal on the other, specifically midrash at a particular time in Jewish/Christian history, namely the time we call Late Antiquity, the moment of patristics on the Christian side, classical Talmud and Midrash on the Jewish. We are talking about the fourth to the eighth centuries here, the centuries in which the great patristic traditions gelled and the Talmuds and the midrashim were composed and set as well. I am suggesting in this essay that patristic dogmatics and paraphrastic interpretation are historically *made* in order to differentiate and separate Christianity from Judaism and vice versa—via the rejection of those markedly Christian intellectual practices—at that particular historical moment. One might with a certain whimsical spirit name the Rabbis with whom I am dealing here, The Anti-nicene Rabbis.

As Mark J. Edwards has written, “from Paul to Clement allegory had been an indispensable tool for Christian expositors, all of whom, including Origen, were bound to hold that Philo’s canon was incomplete and that no interpretation of the Prophets could be authoritative unless it yielded testimony to Christ.”¹⁰ Philo, of course, was also an allegorist and seeker after the true spiritual sense of Scripture, so where precisely can the incompleteness be? In my view, Edwards here has produced words of great insight, but has lost the point of the insight by precisely reversing the cause and effect. Jesus, I suggest, is for Origen the source of correct interpretation, not the goal thereof. For Edwards there exists a necessary requirement in Christian hermeneutics to render the text as about Christ, and Philo’s reading must be incomplete, as he does not do so, while on my reading the point is rather that Christian readers have been instructed by Christ to read the Torah and the Prophets in a certain manner and know, therefore, the Truth, Truth that Philo denies. So we read in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 24:

27 And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scripture the things concerning himself. . . . 32 They said to each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?” . . . 36 As they were saying this, Jesus himself stood among them. 37 But they were startled and frightened, and supposed that they saw a spirit. 38 And he said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do questionings arise in your hearts? 39 See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have.” . . . 41 And while they still disbelieved for joy, and wondered, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” 42 They gave him a piece of broiled

fish, 43 and he took it and ate before them. 44 Then he said to them, "These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled." 45 Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. (NRSV)

In other words, I am suggesting it is not the interpretative *result* that must be reached but rather there is an obligation and opportunity to read the Hebrew Bible as Christ in the Gospel taught us to read it. The important point is that it provides us a guarantee then of the correctness of the reading. Just to clarify the point, or perhaps to overclarify it, if the Logos on Earth had taught us to read the Torah as *not* about him, it would have been just as powerful. That is what I mean when I say it is not the result, the content of the interpretation that matters, but only its source and guarantee. Were I to restate Edwards's point according to my understanding, it would read that "allegory had been an indispensable tool for Christian expositors, all of whom, including Origen, were bound to hold that Philo's interpretation was uncertain, because its Truth was not taught and guaranteed by the testimony of Christ, the Logos." This point is further elucidated by Susan Noakes, who writes, "[Luke] summons converts to look to Jesus's authority as the key to the correct reading of Hebrew scripture."¹¹ Jesus is the source of authority for the reading of the Tanakh as about him, not the goal of the reading!

In a very interesting passage, Origen connects the theoretical problem of "true" *interpretatio* with the general problem of epistemology. He finds a hermeneutics ungrounded in the teaching of the Logos on Earth to be the source of disagreement within "Judaism," precisely analogous to the problematic of philosophy itself:

Any teaching which has had a serious origin, and is beneficial to life, has caused different sects. For since medicine is beneficial and essential to mankind, and there are many problems in it as to the method of curing bodies, on this account several sects in medicine are admittedly found among the Greeks, and, I believe, also among the barbarians such as profess to practice medicine. And again, since philosophy which professes to possess the truth and knowledge of realities instructs us how we ought to live and tries to teach what is beneficial to our race, and since the problems discussed allow of considerable diversity of opinion, on this account very many sects indeed have come into existence, some of which are well known, while others are not. Moreover, there was in Judaism a factor which caused sects to begin, which was the variety of the interpretations of the writings of Moses and the sayings of the prophets.¹²

For Origen, obviously the written word alone gives rise to multiple interpretations and thus to multiple religious opinions and even sects, all

in good faith, similar to the good-faith disagreement and sectarianism of physicians and philosophers. What needs to be noted here is the non-polemical and non-pejorative cast of Origen's characterization of Jewish sectarianism. It is no more fraught—but no less, either—than the sectarianism of philosophy, or of medical science itself. Because there is no criterion with which to determine truth in *interpretatio*, sectarianism must needs arise in all good faith.

Origen exposes his solution to the conundrum of *interpretatio* in another place when he writes:

As to the secret meaning which these things contain, however, and the teaching that these strange words labor to express, let us pray the Father of the Almighty Word and Bridegroom, that He Himself will open to us the gates of this mystery, whereby we may be enlightened not only for the understanding of these things, but also for the propagation of them, and may receive also a portion of spiritual eloquence, according to the capacity of those who are to be our readers.¹³

I am taking this, of course, as more than just a pious wish for divine assistance such as any religious writer might invoke, but rather a specific plea for the Father through the Word to solve a theoretical problem in Origen's hermeneutical theology.

In yet another work, Origen articulates this clearly: "May you help with your prayers, that the Logos of God may be present with us and deign himself to be the leader of our discourse."¹⁴ It is the Logos present with us as the leader of our discourse who would guarantee us truth and insight in our interpretations:

In this way, *we can understand the Law correctly, if Jesus reads it to us, so that, as he reads, we may receive his "mind" and understanding.* Or is it not to be thought that he understood "mind" from this, who said, "But we have the mind of Christ, that we may know the things which have been given to us by God, which things also we speak"? And [did not] those [have the same understanding] who said, "Was not our heart burning within us when he opened the Scriptures to us in this way?" when he read everything to them, beginning from the Law of Moses up to the prophets, and revealed the things which had been written about himself.¹⁵

Only Christians who have been taught directly by Christ (who have the mind of Christ, as Paul had phrased it) can have the only one correct paraphrase of the Torah. And only Christians know the Father through the communicated knowledge of the Son. Jesus reads Scripture to Christians and guarantees through his knowledge of the Father that they will know exactly both divine nature and the correct *interpretatio* of Holy Writ. This explicitly singularized as *Christian* certainty was meant

to produce *homonoia* (unity of opinion), the precise project that Hazal eschewed and rejected. Although condemned in much of the Christian world soon after his death, Origen nevertheless set Christian thinking on its path, the path to Nicaea and for centuries beyond.¹⁶

I argue here that deeper analysis shows indeed that the distinction or even gap between the reading practices of Origen and those of, for instance, his rabbinic congener, Rabbi Yohanan, are not so much ontologically grounded at all but primarily and nearly entirely epistemologically founded. A neat epitome of this distinction has been given recently—in an entirely different context to be sure—by Katherine Bode, who contrasts, “an epistemological objection . . . (based on what is possible to *know* by computing or reading)” to “an ontological claim (about what entities are possible, or come to be, under what conditions).”¹⁷ My claim here reverses that order, moving from ontological to epistemological, arguing that what had been taken by me in former times and climes as an ontological distinction between the Fathers and the Rabbis ought now better to be understood as an epistemological dispute, not then about what exists but only what it is possible to know.

It is Fiano who has set the stage for this dramatic shift of scene. Fiano writes:

I pursue the subject of the parting of the ways under the rubric of intellectual culture, asking when Christianity and Judaism began to diverge qua intellectual traditions. I argue that the Trinitarian debates of the fourth century, which persisted within Christian-Jewish continuity from the viewpoint of beliefs about the divine, were uniquely crucial in the emergence of firmer demarcations between the two intellectual traditions. The Trinitarian controversies were the first war of words to unfold on a pan-Mediterranean stage. Thanks to their geographic scale, to the unprecedentedly thick web of literary exchanges in which they resulted, and above all to their novel embedment in the structures of the Roman Empire, these disputes had lasting effects on the religious landscape of late antiquity, and in particular on the shape of the Christian tradition. Ecclesiastical leaders' deployment of new methods for knowledge production, across doctrinal boundaries, gave rise to a method of inquiry that may be termed “theology.” (3P 17)

In my somewhat less than humble opinion, this explanation and this formulation are spot on and enable us, moreover, to make sense of a Hazalic tradition that completely rejects, as Fiano realized, that very method of inquiry that can best be termed “theology” and with it its ancilla, exegesis. To make the point punchily: if Christian theology and *interpretatio* were tools to finally and decisively separate Christianity from Judaism, they succeeded admirably, especially in the case of the Judaism of the classical Rabbis, which, to put it bluntly, had virtually no interest

in “theology” in the Christian sense, that is, the controversies about the inner structure of godhead.

The Origins of the Late Midrash

“Of the gods we know nothing,” declared Protagoras. Despite rumors that he was an atheist, it seems he wasn’t. He simply denied the possibility that short-lived and epistemologically challenged humans could understand anything of the nature of divinity. I submit now that Hazal held a very similar view of matters and it is this point that explains a lot of what seems most odd to us now in their linguistic and literary practices. If Origen is indeed the founder of Christian theology, and considered the difference between Christianity and Jews to be rooted in intellectual practices, one dogmatic and one skeptical, I consider amoraic (post third-century) Midrash¹⁸ to be exemplary of and best explained by this form of skeptical anti-epistemology, identified as such, and as specifically Jewish, by Origen.¹⁹ If Origen’s and his Nicene disciples’ project was to mark the difference between Judaism and Christianity definitively as a matter of intellectual practices, theology and correct *interpretatio*, Hazal were co-conspirators from the other side, eschewing knowledge of God and the utilization of exegesis as a path to truth *tout court*.

The thesis that I wish to propose here is that Hazal refused—or even refuted (at least in their opinion)—the two principles of intellectual practice that Christian thinkers had received from Origen: exact and detailed knowledge of the Father and the singular, correct, divinely guaranteed *interpretatio* of Scripture. What I hypothesize here is that it was precisely the antithesis to Christian dogmatic thinking and hermeneutic theory, as methods and practices, not the contents or results of either, that motivated Hazal in their responses to both godhead and holy texts. If the Christian intellectuals, the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, defined Christianity by its homonoia (singleness of mind and aspiration to singleness of Truth in theology and hermeneutics), then their contemporaries, Hazal, would implicitly define their own practices as polynoiac and counter-hermeneutic. I suggest that this was a matter of principle and not a kind of surrender to Realhermeneutik. Not out of accident or inability, as some historians would have it,²⁰ nor even out of tendentiousness, as others would, but intentionally and consciously, Hazal dismissed the idea of the Torah ever having a knowable single meaning or God having a knowable nature other than his effects in the tangible world. Many minds (*polynoiia*), rather than one (*homonoia*), was their anti-epistemological ideal.

Hazal had instead instantiated a practice of knowing something about God through direct contact with, almost a caressing of the text, “knowing” in the biblical sense. They opposed the idea that one could know God via abstract thinking, the thinking about God: theology. The rejection of *interpretatio* goes right along with the rejection of correct doctrine about the nature (*phusis*) of God; no theology, no paraphrase. John David Dawson has remarked that, “any effort to understand Christian figural reading as fundamentally a matter of texts and the presence or absence of meaning, rather than a matter of rendering God’s historical performances intelligible, is doomed to theological irrelevance, however much contemporary theoretical sense it might make.”²¹ And indeed, Hazal, I suggest, rendered themselves theologically irrelevant precisely by rejecting theology *tout court*.

Another way of making this point might be to say that Hazal not only spurned allegory (whether “Jewish,” viz. Philonic, or christological, viz. Origen et al.) owing to their rejection of a two-tiered ontology, as I had surmised nearly four decades ago, but *furthermore* developed midrashic reading of the Prophets and Writings as a dramatic antithesis to the thesis of any certain Truth in studying the nature of God and any “correct” paraphrase of Scripture, thus manifesting—if not adopting—a sort of Protagorean skepticism. (One can only imagine how delightful it was for me to discover through the agency of Gerald Bruns,²² that for Philo—who, I am arguing, was a *bête noire* for Hazal—Protagoras was descended directly from Cain, the inventor of sophism. If Philo be Plato, Hazal be Protagoras.)

The great nineteenth-century Reformed German-Jewish scholar Abraham Geiger (1810–1874) had a different explanation of midrash than mine. He accused midrash as being “the product of a “höchst getrübtter exegetische Sinnes” [exceedingly turbid exegetical sense].²³ Geiger’s theory was that originally Hazal knowingly and deliberately distorted the meaning of verses in order to force them to fit their Pharisaic halakha, and then forgot how to read entirely, producing the alleged turbid sensibility of which Geiger speaks.²⁴ I beg to differ. I find a story of the development of aggadic midrash according to which, far from being a narrative of descent into intellectual murkiness, rather leads to a sense (and sensibility) of midrash as both clear and luminous. In place of decadence, I suggest rather that once Hazal rejected the idea of a divine teaching of the meaning of the text in their response to Christian dogmatics, they abandoned the idea of knowing the text’s significance entirely beyond the simple meaning of the words. It is meanings beyond the “simple meanings” of the text that Hazal entirely eschew, and midrash aggada is certainly *not* their analogue to any form of Patristic reading

(*Lectio sacra*) but something else entirely, as we shall see below. I do not deny, however, that there is occasional overlap, especially Patristic comments that look much like midrash. One could counter Geiger by declaring that Hazal did not have a turbid or disturbed exegetical sense; they had no exegetical sense whatever, and exegesis was not their project.

As opposed to Origen and his company, for Hazal, even God is not the teacher of the true meaning of his text but one of the participants in midrash:

It is written: And his concubine betrayed him [Judges 19:2]. Rabbi Eviatar said: He found a fly (in his food). Rabbi Yonatan said: He found a hair (on her vulva, which was considered extremely dangerous during intercourse by them then). Rabbi Eviatar ran into Elijah the Prophet. He said to him, "What is the Holy Blessed One doing right now?" He said, "He is busying Himself with the story of the concubine in Gebeah." "And what does He say?" He said to him: "Eviatar my son says thus and Yonatan my son says this."²⁵

It is tough indeed to imagine a more radically skeptical statement about knowledge, whether of a historical performance or a text. It is so radical that a later author in the Talmud has walked it back, saying that God cites both of his "sons" because he has found a way to reconcile their views! It is not only the author who has no certain knowledge of what happened or what his text intends, but even the Auth-r Themself. As opposed to Origen insisting that they can interpret the Torah correctly because the Son has explained it for them, for these Rabbis, even the Father cannot—or at any rate does not—provide *interpretatio*. God participates with the other sages who are studying the text in the Supernal Yeshiva, participating in the same mode of discourse as they are: producing more and more Torah, not a singular correct *paraphrase* of Torah. Unlike Origen, who understood that "Wisdom" is the Logos that guarantees the meaning of the text, for Hazal it is the actual writing, black marks on white parchment, that is "Wisdom." Even the Holy Blessed One can only participate, as it were, in the discussions of the Rabbis themselves. He seems, moreover, to enjoy it. The product of such withdrawal is not, as it's usually phrased, a plethora of interpretations that we just don't have tools for deciding between, but rather a kind of askesis on the part of Hazal: midrash is not exegesis. Its typical propositions are not in the form of "this means that." Hazal's practice of reading, I suggest, moreover, is a direct reflex of Ben Sira's (Ecclesiasticus) insistence that Wisdom is tantamount to Torah, and nothing else. Wisdom is not the Logos, just *logoi*, no Word made Flesh, but only the material words on the pages. In this pivotal section of my essay, I will lay out evidence and readings I have gathered to flesh out and render more

plausible the above account I have offered; that is, my hypothesis that Hazal countered Christian dogmatics and *interpretatio* with intellectual practices that specifically were based on denial of knowledge of the very things that Origen and his myriad followers and descendants asserted as the foundation of Christian intellectual practice, namely knowledge of the essence of God and instruction from the Logos directly as to the correct *interpretatio* of Scripture. As further underpinning the claim that it was *not* specifically the particulars of Christian dogma that were being rejected but dogmatics itself, I would offer that midrash was as much a rejection of the methods of a Philo—entirely innocent of Christological tendencies—and, therefore, at least as much about intellectual methods or practices, the abjuring of claims to *any* certain knowledge, as it is about the content of any specific dogmas.

To exegesis, I suggest, Hazal just said “no.” While the sharpest explicit formulations of this stance are found in the Babylonian Talmud, and indeed, perhaps in its latest layers, this orientation is to be found in Palestinian midrash aggada as well, by which I refer to the later amoraic levels of midrashic response to the narratives of the Torah, Prophets, and Writings.

As Hazal themselves informed us in one central midrashic text:

“To go in all of His ways”; these are the manners of The Place [=God]. “Hashem [=The Name] is merciful and gracious” [Exod. 34:5]; And it says: “And it shall be that all who will call in the Name of the Lord will be saved” [Joel 3:5]. How is it possible for someone to call the Name of the Lord; rather Lord is called merciful, you also be merciful; and the Holy Blessed One is called gracious, you too be gracious, for it says, “Merciful and gracious is Hashem etc.” [Psalms 145:5], and give free gifts!

“And to cleave to Him” [Deut. 30: 19–20 and passim²⁶]. And how is it possible for a human to arise to the heavens and to cleave to fire, for after all, it is written: “Your God is a consuming fire” [Deut. 4:24] and it says, “His throne is flaming with fire” [Daniel 7:9]. Rather: Cleave to the Sages and their disciples, and I will count it for you as if you had gone up on High and taken it, and not as if you took it without a struggle but as if you made war and took it. And similarly it says, “You went up on high; you took a prisoner” [Psalms 68:19]. The makers of midrash on narratives say: “If you desire to get to know Him Who Spoke and the World Was, learn the aggadic midrash, for from that you will come to know Him Who Spoke and the World Was.”²⁷

This text, oft-cited in later rabbinic literature, thematizes my claims virtually categorically. If you want to know God, study the midrashic stories; don’t reason and theologize.

In an important recent article, Adam Afterman has shown that mystical union with God, contemplated by Philo and developed in medieval

Jewish thought, was rejected by Hazal, as explicitly in this text being discussed here. Note also that in his allegorical *interpretatio* of Genesis 3, Philo explicitly rejects the views of those who believe that something (perhaps the only thing) that can be known about God is through observation of his works! If my hypothesis here is right, this midrash constitutes a virtual *rejection rejectionum*. It was on this very verse—"And to cleave to Him"—that Philo depended to anchor his doctrine. Hazal, I would venture, when they ask this question and give their answer, are directly countering views such as Philo's as well as Christian theological tradition, thus bearing out the pattern that I have outlined in this essay. Afterman's compelling thesis is that,

the Neoplatonic scheme of elevation, illumination, and unio mystica, absorbed later into the three monotheistic traditions, has an important precedent and possible source in Philo's allegorical commentary on the Torah. Philo's interpretation of the biblical commandment to "cleave" to God as mystical union is a fascinating moment when "theistic union" was born out of a synthesis of Platonism and Philo's Judaism. It is through his commentary on the biblical commandment to "cleave" to God that Philo introduces his understanding of henōsis as mystical union with God. It seems that Philo's discussions of henōsis might have had an impact on Plotinus and the entire Neoplatonic tradition of henōsis and consequently on a wide range of medieval Jewish, Christian, and Arab articulations of the idea and experience of unio mystica.²⁸

Later on, yes, in the medieval period, but not for the classical late-ancient Rabbis, Hazal who produced the Talmud and Midrash. For them: no knowledge of God, no theology; no *interpretatio*. We don't have the Mind of God, but you will come to know Him, say Hazal, through (not despite) that very skepticism by telling and retelling and even inventing new stories out of the strung-together fragments of the old ones.

What is critical here is the understanding that Hazal rejected entirely the enterprise of theology proper (speculating and arguing about the nature of God or even imagining that knowledge of the essence of God is available to humans), and that that is perhaps the sharpest difference between fourth-century Christianity and the fourth-century Jewish form of life. It is a matter of intellectual culture, as Fiano so unpredictably puts it, that "while Christians reproached Jews for their failure to believe in Christ, Hazal's rejection of Christology was deployed on a different plane: irrespective of theological outcomes, Jewish thinkers saw as misguided the kind of speculations that their belief forced Christian intellectuals to embark on" (3P 19). It was not, according to this determination, the alleged repudiation of the doctrines of a second divine person and even of the Incarnation, and not even the suffering and death of the Messiah

(all of which can be found in unimpeachable non-Christian Jewish sources before and after),²⁹ that motivated the separation of Christianity as a separate entity, but rather the very fact of the creation by the Fathers of the Church of the intellectual research tradition with regard to the essence of the Divine. In other words, it is not the *content* of theology (“outcomes”) but the very practice thereof that marks the separate identities of the two communities, the Fathers and Hazal. And it was the patristic practice seeking such separation that led to this “parting.”

The upshot of Fiano’s compelling explication should be clear enough. If “theology” be defined—at least in its original historical context—as precisely an intellectual practice, a set of practices, that were invented for the purpose of distinguishing that which is Christian from that which is Jewish, then it is incoherent to refer to Jewish theology at all. Jewish theology, as it develops from the early Middle Ages, represents on this reading perhaps the first historical instance of the capitulation of Jews to those Christian ways of thinking that had been invented precisely, it seems, to produce a Christian identity distinctly “other” to that of Jews. Indeed, as Fiano clarifies, it was not so much which position one held with respect to the relation of the Father to the Son that marked one as Christian but the fact that one took a position at all, while those defined now as Jews took none (3P 6). In fine, he writes:

It was hardly the views about Christ articulated during the Trinitarian disputes that caused the Christian-Jewish continuum to break: based on the background of second Temple Judaism, none of the theological options explored by Christians would have caused particular scandal to a contemporaneous Jew on account of its articulation of divine reality. Nevertheless, by definitively and cohesively disengaging from earlier modes of inquiry and argumentation that functioned as bridges between the proto-rabbinic and proto-Christian intellectual elites, the production of a theological field on the part of believers in Jesus was largely responsible for the separate constitution of Christianity and Judaism as intellectual traditions. (3P 182)

I, for one, at least find this completely convincing.

Post-nicene (Amoraic) Midrash as Anti-*paraphrase*

The refusal of a theological field on the part of Jewish unbelievers in Christian doctrine was, I reckon, largely responsible for the separate constitution of “Judaism” and Christianity as intellectual traditions and especially the production of midrash as the key intellectual practice and response to Scripture of Hazal. Another way of thinking this is that if

by realizing that the Christian search for the true doctrine of God and the single correct *interpretatio* were originally projects for driving the Jews away, then it is hardly surprising that Hazal spurned such practices root and branch. Now it is specifically in what might be called the Post-nicene era (fourth - fifth centuries) that midrash shifts from an earlier form in which it maintains more of a connection with exegesis (albeit already founded on the notion that all verses in the Torah, or even the Tanakh, are context one for the other). It is in the latter period, and, I suggest, in response to the epistemic shifts surrounding Nicaea, that midrash shuns *paraphrase* nearly entirely and does something entirely other with Holy Writ.

This premise leads then to the following conclusion: if indeed theology is a specific Christian practice in its very essence, it is even more clearly incoherent to refer to Jewish theology (at least before the Middle Ages). There is a further very elegant support for this statement. Daniel Abrams, in an article published in the *Harvard Theological Review*, showed that there were distinctly different and opposing speculations about Metatron or the Shekina all in mainstream medieval rabbinic writings.³⁰ Now it happens that these speculations parallel nearly precisely the three major positions regarding the relation of the Father to the Son in Christian theology of late antiquity. It seems that it didn't occur to anyone among the Jewish thinkers to anathematize any of these *opinions*, however. We just don't know, and while it may be stimulating to speculate, there can be no absolute Truth value to any such utterances. In parallel fashion, midrash, especially late midrash, abandons any possibility or hope of truth in exegesis and contents itself with (or even glories in) recording the different, ever proliferating, ways of reading. We just don't know what Scripture means.

This is not, however, a nihilistic skepticism. In contrast to Origen and his followers, we cannot seek the "correct" *interpretatio* of the text, so we don't interpret but do something else entirely. The purpose of reading is not to interpret the words but to experience them through the making of new text, new Torah. In the final move of this revisionist theoretical assay, I will provide a direct contrast between Origen's approach to a particular text and that of the midrash, bringing out the practices and ambitions of the latter through the counterpoint.

The verse of the Torah says of the Paschal lamb, "You shall not eat thereof anything raw or boiled in water but only roasted with fire" (Exod. 12:9, translation mine). Origen reasons, "if the lamb is Christ and Christ is the Logos, what is the flesh of the divine words if not the divine Scriptures," and then what is eating them, if not studying those divine words of the Torah?³¹ Origen understands by the three ways in

which the Paschal lamb might be consumed three kinds of readers: the first, a literalist who, like unto an irrational animal, violates the law by eating the text raw; the second, a “flaccid, watery, limp” moralizing reader, who eats the law boiled, and a third, the one who eats the Paschal text as it ought to be eaten, cooked in fire. And as for the one who reads the Torah cooked in fire, declares Origen:

Clearly, the best readers are those who “roast” the meat of the lamb (Exod. 12:9a), that is, read the Word in Scripture “with fire.” To read with fire means that the Word, through the reading of the text, becomes a speaker in the reader, and the reader receives the Word as the voice of God. For example, Jeremiah received the words of God, who says, “Behold I have placed my words in your mouth as fire,” and those who receive the lamb through reading “say, as Christ speaks in them” (2 Cor. 13:3), “Our heart was burning in the way as he opened the Scriptures to us” (Luke 24:32).

Note that per Origen, the simple meaning of the text, namely that one should eat a lamb roasted in fire, as Hazal and other Jews take it, constitutes eating the text raw! The allegorical reading completely displaces the plain meaning of the text and the corporeal practice it enjoins. Midrash eschews not only allegory and a discourse of the true meaning, but renounces “meaning” altogether and eats its Paschal Lamb—adopting for the moment the Origenist figure—raw, i.e., roasted, just as the text says.

I would like to discuss this theory of midrashic reading in the context of some recent work on poetic reading and translation/not-translation, especially in the work of my colleague in emeriticity as she was for decades in the Department, Professor Chana Kronfeld (the dedicatee of this essay). In a groundbreaking essay, Kronfeld subsumes many Jewish textual practices under the rubric of “intertextuality”:

Translation is indeed a prototypical Jewish intertextual practice, alongside radical allusion, pastiche, parody, and specifically Jewish rhetorical practices that undergird the history of Hebrew and Yiddish literature. These strategies include the genre of the anachronistic midrash (Hebrew) or *Medresh* (Yiddish), a nonliteral radically rewritten rendition of a biblical story or gloss on a biblical verse that speaks to and from the postbiblical exilic context of its composition and the poetic figure of *Shibbutz*, the *Mussivstil* or mosaic-like insertion of biblical quotations into a poem in surprising, at times irreverent combinations and contexts, developed in dialogue with classical Arabic and Persian rhetoric but perfected parodically in Yiddish poetry and plays.³²

I do not wish (as the Talmud says) to contest what my teacher has written but to expand upon it. Kronfeld, as do other scholars, speaks of the radically rewritten verses of one kind of midrash as somehow in

the same genus as the “mosaic-like insertion of biblical quotations,” and locates origins of the latter in the liturgical poetry in Hebrew of the early Byzantine period, the *piyyut*. I want to do two things here to develop her account further: first, to shift a letter from lower case to upper case, namely “mosaic-like” to “Mosaic-like,” and secondly, to argue for the midrashic origins (that is before the *piyyut* and arguably a major source for its poetics).³³

Indeed, the genre of radically rewritten narrative or verse belongs to one very important genre of rabbinic response to Scripture, but not to the one that I am treating here. Kronfeld describes it concisely when she writes, “a culture that entrusts translation with improving our understanding of the source text, without feeling the need to provide one definitive and authoritative rendition.”³⁴ It must be said, however, that this is a fine description of a certain genre that we call midrash, but not for the dominant practice of midrash in later antiquity, the mosaic style which, I contend here, we must understand as a sort of spiritual practice, the production of Mosaic text, text on the same level of sacrality as the Torah of Moses. It does not improve upon the Torah’s text—how could it?—but in the moment of its making, it is simply equivalent—in value, not in meaning, to the Torah itself. This is, I propose, even greater and more radical than improving and interpreting the biblical text. Let me explain.

I put forth (with fear and love) here a literary connection between the midrash of later late antiquity (fourth to fifth centuries) and another genre of Christian literature being produced in the Greek East at almost exactly the same time as the Great Midrash (Midrash Rabbah and its congeners). A somewhat neglected genre of literary production, called *cento*, based on older literary models, becomes much more prominent in the centuries in which the most radical form of midrash was developing.³⁵ Cento is a practice of composing new literary texts out of fragments quoted from earlier or even ancient texts. Recently, Marie Okáčová well defined cento as “patchwork poems fashioned out of separate lines or half-lines appropriated more or less verbatim from the great bards of the past, in the context of antiquity, typically, though not exclusively, from Homer and Virgil, and stitched together into various stories quite different from those related in the canonical model texts.”³⁶ In early modernity, Robert Burton, in his famous *Anatomy of Melancholy* (in the voice of Democritus), wrote: “as a good housewife out of divers fleeces weaves one piece of cloth, a bee gathers wax and honey out of many flowers, and makes a new bundle of all, *Flori/eris ut apes in saltibus omnia libant* [as bees in flowery glades sip from each cup], I have laboriously collected this cento out of divers writers.”³⁷

In contrast to most earlier writers who have considered cento as pastiche or bad literature and midrash as mere homily or bad reading, following the latest scholarship in the field, I am going now to briefly reconsider the cento in the cultural world in which midrash was produced and conjecture how it might help us to understand that world better.

Cento as a literary term comes from the Latin word: “A *cento* is a patchwork quilt. This Latin loanword, derived from the Greek *κέντρον*, meaning ‘goad,’ ‘prick,’ ‘needle,’ and thus metonymically ‘a piece of needlework,’ is first used as a metaphor for speech by Plautus.”³⁸ Although the Greek etymology given here is somewhat controversial, there is no doubt that by Late Antiquity in both Latin and Greek, the word meant a patchwork fabric or quilt, and thus metaphorically a literary document made up entirely of quotations, by definition out of context from earlier works.³⁹ It should be noted that the cento infuriated the Fathers of the Church, in much the same terms that midrash was attacked by figures such as Geiger. Jerome, writing about Proba’s very Christian cento on Virgil, is exemplary. Proba made her cento, because, as she writes, “I would like to demonstrate that Virgil wrote about Christ’s sacred gifts,” about which the Father wrote, “Puerilia sunt haec, et circulatorum ludo similia docere quod ignores, immo, ut cum stomacho loquar, ne hoc quidem scire quod nescias (Jerome, Ep. 53.7)” [These things are childish, and like the play of the common people, to teach what you do not know, or rather, to speak with a stomach, not to even know what you do not know].⁴⁰ It is owing to (so I hypothesize) the nearly ubiquitous millennium-long adoption of patristics-derived norms of exegesis that our minds are so colonized by nearly unconscious norms that render midrash unintelligible to Geiger and nearly everyone else in his time and place, indeed to most Jewish sages after the eighth century or so.

In particular, this comparative undertaking seems most apposite to seeing the late-ancient midrash in the light of the most distinguished cento surviving from late antiquity, the *Homeric Cento* of none other than the Empress Eudocia (408 – 450 AD), the very well-educated daughter of an Athenian Professor and wife of the Emperor Theodosius. M. D. Usher remarks that, “the Homeric cento, which perhaps originated as a spoof on rhapsodic exercises in the schools, becomes, in Eudocia’s hands, a serious poetic medium.”⁴¹ As for the cento, this means that “in the course of imitation a collage of quotations predominates which usurps the authority and splendor of the pre-texts and thereby stabilizes their normativity. In the course of innovation the formal collage principle dominates the pre-texts quoted.”⁴² An ancient author [Pseudo-Plutarch] on Homer wrote explicitly that cento poets “propose non-Homeric

themes and fit Homeric verses to them, transposing them and *stringing them together*.”⁴³

A perhaps less historically relevant but nonetheless elegant and illuminating comparison would be of midrashic cento to the production of music in the contemporary (with us!) practice of sampling in hip-hop, well known as a technique of making new music by taking bits and pieces from already existing records and combining them into new compositions. Even less than, for example, *Finnegans Wake*, is there a temptation to see the new music as an exegesis or even interpretation of the older samples, and I suggest this comparison, much like the quilting metaphor that seems to lie at the bottom of even the term “cento,” will help us to understand why midrash is not at all exegesis, neither turgid or crystal-clear but a different practice altogether.⁴⁴ Before I end up producing a cento myself, I will move forward now in my disquisition on the meaning of all this for the understanding of midrash. In the next section, we will find that exact metaphor that I have emphasized here, that of “stringing,” used in midrashic descriptions of midrash itself.

The Fire Next Time

As I have been adumbrating until now, the biggest contrast between Patristic reading, whether declared as allegorical, typological, or literal, known as “*interpretatio*,” is that while all such reading practices treat the text as an object to be decoded and translated, midrash of the sort that I am discussing here treats the text as a subject, a subject that continues to create itself—with the participation of certain human partners, as we shall see; it is here that the context of the serious Christian cento, despised, I remind, by the Church Fathers, becomes most germane. In *interpretatio*, there is a hierarchy; the secondary text, the *interpretatio*, is ancillary to the primary text, Scripture. In midrash, as in cento of the Eudocian kind at any rate, the new text produced is not in any way a servant of the original one—hence the fury and contempt that both Christian cento and rabbinic midrash have aroused. In the patristic version it is precisely the appropriation of Homer or Virgil that has infuriated the Fathers, at least Jerome; in the midrashic version it is the appropriation of the Hebrew Bible that kindles the severity, a severity so perfectly rendered by Geiger.

We will see this point made explicitly in the following story from the midrash on the Song of Songs—and in my view and on my interpretation (!), this text is *the* key text for unlocking the mystery of midrash—both in self-reflective antiquity and for analytical modernity:

Ben-Azzai was sitting and making midrash, and fire was all around him. They went and told Rabbi Akiva, "Rabbi, Ben-Azzai is sitting and interpreting, and fire is burning all around him." He went to him and said to him, "I heard that you were interpreting, and the fire burning all around you." He said, "Indeed." He said, "Perhaps you were engaged in the inner-rooms of the Chariot [theosophical speculation]." He said, "No. I was sitting and *stringing the words of Torah [to each other]*, and the Torah to the Prophets and the Prophets to the Writings, and the words were as luminous [smekhim, cf. or sameakh, luminous light] as when they were given from Sinai, and they were as sweet as at their original giving. Were they not originally given in fire, as it is written, 'And the mountain was burning with fire' (Deut. 4:11)?"⁴⁵

Rabbi Akiva suspects his disciple of engaging in theosophical speculation, namely of "being engaged in the inner rooms of the chariot," which can be none other than the form of claimed knowledge of God articulated in Chariot (or Throne) speculation as witnessed in the Hekhalot literature nearly contemporaneous with this midrashic text.⁴⁶ Ben-Azzai, however, in the incident we are presently studying, defends himself. He wasn't engaged in speculating on the inner life and structure of the godhead (as in mystical hermeneutics or theology) but in "stringing the words of Torah [to each other], and the Torah to the Prophets and the Prophets to the Writings, and the words were as sweet as when they were given from Sinai, and they were as luminous as at their original giving."

In short, I claim that this text is revealing exactly what midrash is *not*; it is not any kind of translation or *interpretatio*; rather, it is the use of sacred language to produce more sacred text. The text articulates quite precisely what this practice of midrash *is*, a practice of making new Torah by recombining strings of the language of Scripture in order to produce more and more Torah, not only a mosaic text, but a Mosaic one. It has the very potential, moreover, to reproduce the experience of having received the words of the Torah, given in fire, at Mt. Sinai, hence the fire dancing around while Ben-Azzai made midrash. The verb for "stringing" [חרן] in rabbinic Hebrew is same word as the word for beads, so it (pretty literally) means picking up beads of language and making new strings of language out of them by attaching them to other ones. There is, moreover, another clue in the etymology, for this word is used in Hebrew poetics to mean rhyming, so bits of biblical language are attached to other bits of biblical language that sound like them (share words) and new text is made. The fact, as Haun Saussy has reminded me, that in Aramaic and Hazalic Hebrew, the word *shirim* (songs, as in Song of Songs!) also means bracelets, might certainly have enriched this midrashic perception as well. This practice makes no claim whatever to be interpreting the beads of language that it strings together, any more

than *Finnegan's Wake* claims to be a paraphrase of all the bits and pieces of language that *it* strings together and puns upon. This concatenation—literally the making of a catena—itself is midrash as performed in the text in which citations (stringings) of the Song of Songs are deployed very skillfully in order to describe the praxis of midrashic reading. The essential moment of this most exquisitely uninterpretative and anti-interpretative of the forms of midrash is the stringing together of parts of the language of the Torah, the Prophets, and the Holy Writings, forming new linguistic strings out of the old, and thereby recovering the originary experience of receiving Torah itself; Torah itself the Wisdom, not a meaning thereof. The Rabbi was making new Torah in accordance with the methods of midrash, stringing text to text and building new text as he strung. While doing this, he and the listeners had a visual experience indicating communion with the experience of revelation, a kind of mystical experience indeed—but not the one that the Hekhalot mystics enjoyed, as the text assures us immediately.

As noted, Rabbi Akiva becomes suspicious that perhaps his colleague was engaging in forbidden or dangerous theosophical speculation and comes to investigate. He phrases his investigative question in the language of Song of Songs 1:4, “The King brought me into His chambers,” the verse that gave rise to the mystical practice known as “being engaged in the inner-rooms of the Chariot.” And Ulrika Björk has reminded me (on the occasion of her response to the first version of this paper at Lund University): this worry of Rabbi Akiva’s echoes nicely with the other famous account in the Talmud of interaction between this student-teacher pair where they both ascend, as it were, to God’s chariot and while Ben-Azzai is struck dead for an error of mystical seeking, Rabbi Akiva, who presumably knows the limits of appropriate knowing, “ascends in peace and descends in peace.” This matches Rabbi Akiva’s concern here that Ben-Azzai is engaged in the inner rooms. Here, however, Ben-Azzai answers that it was not that verse, that is, not a verse and practice that relate to theological/theosophical speculation or experience, that brought him into communion with God but rather the application of another verse of the same Song, “your cheeks are lovely with jewels, your neck with beads” (Song of Songs 1:10). The word for beads means that which is strung together into chains, the very linguistic source of the naming of the practice as “stringing”! Accordingly, Ben-Azzai’s “defense” is that he was engaged in precisely the same activity as that exemplified by Rabbi Akiva’s midrash itself—linking “words of the Torah to words of the Holy Writings,” as Rabbi Akiva linked the words of Exodus to the words of the Song of Songs. In order to recover the erotic visual communion that obtained between God and Israel at Mt. Sinai, Ben-Azzai

engages not in a mystical practice, nor in an allegory or *paraphrase* of any kind but in a reading practice in the most palpable sense, the practice of midrash. This practice is accompanied by the visual experience also beheld at the giving of the Torah and particularly by the appearance of fire. This will be then a hermeneutics of recollected experience and visual perception and a way to know God that eschews ratiocination and speculation about that which cannot be known.

So much for theory, now a sample of the practice. Let us begin with a very simple but compelling and illuminating example. In the Talmud Tractate Pesachim, the Talmud asked:

Our Rabbis have taught: Who recited the sequence of psalms of praise (Psalms 113–118) [known in Hebrew as Hallel=Praise]?⁴⁷

The answer to this perfectly simple seeming question (of by whom and when the practice of reciting this sequence of Psalms was instituted) is surprising, however:

Rabbi Eliezer said Moses and Israel, when they stood on the bank of the Red Sea, they said “Not for us Hashem; not for us” [Psalms 116:1] and the Holy Spirit responded and said to them, “For my sake, for my sake, I will do” [Isaiah 48:11]

In order to understand what is going on here, one must realize that the first verse cited is indeed somewhere in the middle of the Psalm sequence known as Hallel, so more or less relevant to answering the question “who/when”—but not really, as we will see—but the second verse cited is from an entirely different context in the Tanakh, namely the Prophet Isaiah. What we end up with when those two verses are strung together, however, is a perfectly coherent colloquy between Israel and the Holy Spirit; they say that God should save them from peril not for their sake but for the sake of God’s reputation as a loyal and saving God, and a verse plucked from an entirely different context in the Bible is made to answer their prayer with the Holy Spirit agreeing, as it were, “For my sake; for my sake, I will do it that my honor will not go to another god.” This is a perfect miniature cento. Neither of the verses constitutes an exegesis or even an illumination of the other verse; neither is primary and the other secondary. But by being strung together, a new third text is created out of the two. This new text, new narrative, of a dialogue between God and Israel becomes canonical in its own right, and is applied by different Sages to a long string of historical events in which Israel was in dire danger; the genius who first paired those two verses strung a bead from Psalms with a bead from the Prophet, made

new Torah, on the same authoritative and literary level of what we see on the written pages of the Tanakh. Undoubtedly fire flickered around that genius too.

I have picked out another somewhat longer text that I find particularly apposite to further illustrate midrash of this kind:

We have learned [in a tannaitic source]: Rabbi Meir used to say, “When Israel stood by the Sea, the tribes were vying with each other; this one saying I will jump into the Sea first and that one saying; I will jump into the Sea first. The Tribe of Benjamin jumped ahead and entered the Sea first, as it says [in a verse]: “There Benjamin the youngest leading them” [Psalm 68:27], Don’t read it: leading them [*rodem*], but read [*rad yam*] went into the Sea! And the princes of Yehuda were pummeling them with stones, As it says, “there the great throng of Judah’s princes, Princes of Yehuda stoned them” [reading the Hebrew *rigmatam* which means “great throng” as if it were pointed *ragmutam* (=stoned them)].

Therefore, Benjamin the righteous was privileged to serve as host to the Divine Presence, [since the Temple was built in the territory of Benjamin,] as it is stated in Moses’ blessing for the tribe of Benjamin: “And of Benjamin he said, The beloved of the Lord shall dwell in safety by him; and the Lord shall cover him all the day long, and he shall dwell between his shoulders” (Deut. 33:12).⁴⁸

This marvelous midrash goes on but I will stop here in citing it, since there is already much to say about this exemplary instance of rabbinic stringing of beads of language—not *paraphrase*! Rabbi Meir strings together a verse from Deuteronomy with a verse from Psalms and performs paranomastic magic of various points (literally, “points,” the vowel signs added to the text in the Byzantine era, and this is important for Hazalic re-creation) to indirectly make the verses lively and even exciting and to point to, pointed in a kind of meaning made not by paraphrasing anything. Let’s go through it step by step. Rabbi Meir feels that it is the youngest of the brothers who bravely and faithfully jumped in the water first, stimulating his elder brothers to follow him. We get this by manipulating the language of a verse in Psalms, whose literal translation is something like “there is the little tribe of Benjamin, leading them, there the great throng of Judah’s princes,” to read “the little tribe of Benjamin (or perhaps, ‘young Benjamin’) entered the water, the tribe of Judah stoned him.” So far, some fine punning puns, but what comes next is what lifts this up into a sublime expression, for the fact that Benjamin jumped into the water first explains why he has been privileged to have the Holy Temple built in his portion of the Land. Where we might read that Benjamin, as it were, rests between God’s shoulders, the midrash reads it that God, as it were, rests between the shoulders of Benjamin, again almost punning and reversing the meanings from Benjamin

dwelling [**shkhn**] between the shoulders of God to God's Presence on Earth [the **Shekhina**] resting in the bosom of Benjamin, materialized as the Temple built in Benjamin's realm! A coherent thought is expressed without it being claimed that it is the *meaning* of the verses; the verses having been rendered as luminous/happy as when they were given on Mt. Sinai and exuding, as a flower its fragrance, the previously unexpressed thought, to wit that Binyamin was rewarded by its hosting of the holiest place on earth, owing to its courage and faith in jumping into the water first at the Red Sea despite it (his) being the youngest and smallest of all of the brothers (the tribes). Finally, it needs to be pointed out that the next verse but one in the Psalm itself explicitly mentions the Temple, thus triggering this stringing of these beads together.

Perhaps the closest form to this is the near-contemporary cento, but no Roman writer ever claimed that new divine voices were encountered in the making of cento. As in the later medieval and Yiddish usages of this style, it was used either for religious poetry, even that certainly not claimed to be a new experience of the Revelation of the Torah, or for critical and parodic purposes. Although, as Kronfeld has pointed out elegantly, even these latter-day usages of mosaic style could be used to parody the notion of the single correct meaning, as found in by-then both Christian and Jewish sources as dominant. My suggestion is that the Rabbis of the early Byzantine period proposed it as a serious alternative and challenge to reading as exegesis *tout court*. Now my strong claim is that anything this complex, layered, and sophisticated is not accidental or an inept attempt to draw a moral from a text that refuses to yield one otherwise, or even to interpret a somewhat opaque verse. It is not getting to a meaning of the text that is at play here, but producing more and more Torah with these beads of language.

I have endeavored to invent a counter Geiger (or Geiger counter, forgive me) via this exposure of the complexity, sophistication, and even beauty the above midrash (and many, many others) manifests. Claiming that Hazal were turbidly minded exegetes is something on the order of claiming that Picasso couldn't draw because his cubist figures didn't look like real people.⁴⁹

Inconclusion

Hazal rejected theoretical knowledge of God out of a deeply skeptical approach that rejected theology and, with it, *paraphrase*. Instead of knowledge about God, they imagined a kind of knowing with God, knowing in the biblical sense, as it were. As the theoretician Fred Moten distinguishes

in a quite different context between observation and observance, one could with only a small amount of violence claim that Origen engages in *observation* while Hazal engage in *observance*. And Bruns has made the same point in different language: “earlier I remarked that it is difficult to know what sort of concept of part-and-whole guides midrashic interpretation; the rabbis seem not to have any recognizable sense of wholeness. Now we see that they imagined themselves as *part* of the whole, participating in Torah rather than operating on it at an analytic distance.”⁵⁰ An entirely different metaphor might run to precisely the two meanings of interpretation in music: a professor or dramaturg of an opera interprets the story as being about incestuous sex and another interprets it as being about the origins of German culture; that’s the sense of “interpretation” as translation into different words. On the other hand, the conductor—and the Heldentenor and the soprano—interpret in a quite different sense, not translating it or telling us what it is about but by making the music. Origen and his followers “interpret” in the first sense, while Hazal “interpret” without translating, without telling us what the text “means,” that is, more in the second sense. I trust it is clear that no value judgment is being advanced by me here. It is indeed the case, as Paul had it, that Hazal come to the text and don’t see beyond it. But instead of facing Scripture blindly, as he had it, Hazal walk around in it, making ever more and more Torah, playing Scripture like chamber music or a symphony. Of midrash we could say what is said about the Latin cento: “The readers of the Latin centos are therefore expected to approach these verse jigsaw puzzles with profound knowledge of Virgil’s poetry; otherwise, they cannot relish the unique interplay of meanings, which contributes to the richness and complexity of the narratives told.”⁵¹ Hazal centoize the Hebrew Bible; they don’t exegete it or explicate it. And if and when they are very, very adept at chaining verses and creating midrash, they experience the raw words, that Origen ascribes to them, as incandescent, as happy, as sacred as they were on the day they were given at Mt. Sinai.

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NOTES

I wish to thank my dear friend of these decades in Berkeley, Professor Chana Kronfeld, for all the conversations and specific critiques that led to many of the observations here (I dare not call them insights), and also to Professor Ishay Rosen-Zvi, functioning as an anonymous reader for *NLH*, who contributed many critical (in both senses) comments that led to final formulations here (nonetheless I assert responsibility for all that is written here, good or bad). A second anonymous reader for this journal was very helpful with sharp and constructive critical remarks, most of which I have put into practice. This essay

was first presented as a paper at Lund University where Professor Ulrika Björk and others made some crucial remarks regarding its final formulation. Professors Haun Saussy, Jonathan Boyarin, Elliot Wolfson, and my student, Professor Kyra Sutton are also to be acknowledged for good. In an expanded and adapted form, this text will be recontextualized itself insha'Allah in my book-in-progress, *Midrash: an Archaeology* for the series, Keywords in Jewish Study, at Rutgers University Press.

1 Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 89; Morton W. Bloomfield, "Allegory as Interpretation," *New Literary History* 3 (1972): 301–17.

2 Richie (Shmuel) Lewis, "The Myth of the Torah," *Rabbinic Study Circles: Aspects of Jewish Learning in Its Late Antique Context*, ed. Marc Hirshman and David Satran, *SERAPHIM: Studies in Education and Religion in Ancient and Pre-Modern History in the Mediterranean and Its Environs* (Brill, 2020), 146.

3 Lewis, "The Myth of the Torah," 147.

4 Ishay Rosen-Zvi, "The Mishnaic Mental Revolution: A Reassessment," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 66 (2015): 36–58. For a much earlier attempt on my part to explain this phenomenon in materialist terms, see Daniel Boyarin, "The Bartered Word: Midrash and Symbolic Economy," *Aporemata: Kritische Studien Zur Philologiegeschichte*, ed. Glenn W. Most (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), 19–65; for a recent discussion of that attempt, see Agata Bielik-Robson, "To Refute God Himself: Talmud as Metaphilosophy," *Talmud /and/ Philosophy: Conjunctions, Disjunctions, Continuities*, ed. S. B. Dolgopolski and James Adam Redfield (Indiana University Press, 2024), 34–38.

5 Emanuele Fiano, *Three Powers in Heaven* (Yale University Press, 2022). Hereafter cited as *3P*.

6 Boyarin, *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion*, Key Words for Jewish Studies (Rutgers University Press, 2018).

7 Cf. Lewis, "The Myth of the Torah," 148.

8 For which point (the naming), see Boyarin, *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion*.

9 For extended earlier treatment of these issues, see Boyarin, "Origen as Theorist of Allegory: Alexandrian Contexts," in *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*, ed. Rita Copeland and Peter T. Struck (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 39–54. Some language from that earlier publication has been adopted here and modified seriously in itself and in its context to suit a very different argument. See Origen's *Contra Celsum*.

10 Mark J. Edwards, *Origen Against Plato*, Ashgate Studies in Philosophy & Theology in Late Antiquity (Ashgate, 2002), 36–37.

11 Susan Noakes, "Gracious Words: Luke's Jesus and the Reading of Sacred Poetry at the Beginning of the Christian Era," in *The Ethnography of Reading*, ed. Jonathan Boyarin (University of California Press, 1992), 52.

12 Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 3.12. Translation from Henry Chadwick, ed. and trans., *Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge University Press, 1965), 135.

13 Origen, *The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, trans. R. P. Lawson, Ancient Christian Writers 26 (Newman Press, 1957), 151.

14 Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation (The Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 228.

15 Homiliae in Jesu Nave 9. 8., cited in Robert Heine, "Reading the Bible with Origen," in *The Bible in Greek Christian Antiquity*, ed. Paul M. Blowers (University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 142.

16 See Alain Le Boulluec, *La Notion d'hérésie dans la littérature grecque IIe - IIIe siècles* (Études Augustiniennes, 1985), and now, too, Le Boulluec, *The Notion of Heresy in Greek Literature in the Second and Third Centuries*, trans. Nicholas Moore and David Lincicum (Oxford University Press, 2022).

- 17 Katherin Bode, "What's the Matter with Computational Literary Studies?" *Critical Inquiry* 49, no. 4 (2023): 509–10.
- 18 As I write, a closely related thesis about the Babylonian Talmud is being produced by Christine Hayes.
- 19 For a captivating alternative explanation of the origins of midrash, see Lewis, "The Myth of the Torah," 143–49. I will add a discussion of this seductive theory (which I ultimately do not accept) in the longer version of this essay in the book.
- 20 Cf. Gerald L. Bruns, "The Hermeneutics of Midrash," *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (Yale University Press, 1992), 113.
- 21 John David Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity* (University of California Press, 2002), 6.
- 22 Bruns, "Allegory as Radical Interpretation," *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (Yale University Press, 1992), 96.
- 23 Abraham Geiger, "Das Verhältniß des natürlichen Schriftsinnes zur thalmudischen Schriftdeutung," *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift für jüdische Theologie* 5 (1844): 81. I wish to thank Professor George Yaakov Kohler for helping me with this reference and, together with his colleagues, for hosting me beautifully on the occasion of the first presentation of the earliest version of this paper.
- 24 See also Kohler's partial translation of this important text in Geiger, "The Relation of the Natural Meaning of Scripture to Its Talmudic Interpretation (1844)," trans. Kohler, in *Modern Jewish Theology The First One Hundred Years, 1835–1935*, ed. Samuel J. Kessler and Kohler (Jewish Publication Society, 2023), 83–90, without, however, our sentence being included in the translated extract.
- 25 Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Gittin 6b.
- 26 For the complete list, see Adam Afterman, "From Philo to Plotinus: The Emergence of Mystical Union," *The Journal of Religion* 93, no. 2 (2013): 181.
- 27 Sifre Deuteronomy, Portion of Ekev, paragraph 69.
- 28 Afterman, "Philo to Plotinus," 178–79.
- 29 Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New Press, 2011).
- 30 Daniel Abrams, "The Boundaries of Divine Ontology: The Inclusion and Exclusion of Meṭaṭron in the Godhead," *Harvard Theological Review* 87, no. 3 (July 1994): 291–321. For a more complex and detailed study of these points, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Literature* (Princeton University Press, 1994), chap. 5 throughout and especially 223 ff.
- 31 Origen, *Treatise on the Passover; and, Dialogue of Origen with Heraclides and his fellow bishops on the Father, the Son, and the Soul*, ed. and trans. Robert J. Daly (Catholic University Press, 1992), 5 ff.
- 32 Chana Kronfeld, "Beyond Untranslatability," *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 138 (2023): 761.
- 33 Aaron Mirsky, *Yesode Šurot Ha-Piyuṭ Šemiḥatan We-Hitpathutan Šel Šurot Ha-Širah Ha-Ereš-Yisre'elit Ha-Qeduma* [The Origin of Forms of Early Hebrew Poetry] (Magnes Press, 1985).
- 34 Kronfeld, "Beyond Untranslatability," 762.
- 35 M. D. Usher, *Homeric Stitchings: The Homeric Centos of the Empress Eudocia* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998); Scott McGill, *Virgil Recomposed: The Mythological and Secular Centos in Antiquity*, Society for Classical Studies American Classical Studies (Oxford University Press, 2015).
- 36 Marie Okáčová, "Centones: Recycled Art or the Embodiment of Absolute Intertextuality?" Kankanien Revisited (March 2009): 1, http://www.kakanien.ac.at/beitr/graece_latina/MOkacova1.pdf.
- 37 Robert Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), cited in Theodor Verwey and Gunther Witting, "The Cento: A Form of Intertextuality from Montage to Parody," in *Intertextuality*,

ed. Heinrich F. Plett, *Research in Text Theory* [*Untersuchungen zur Texttheorie*], vol. 15 (de Gruyter, 1991), 170.

38 Usher, *Homeric Stitchings*, 1.

39 A very important discussion of this genre can be found in Okáčová, "Centones."

40 On Proba and her Vergilian cento, see Zoja Pavlovskis, "Proba and the Semiotics of the Narrative Virgilian Cento," *Vergilius* 35 (1989): 70–84, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41592467>. Pavlovskis makes the significant point that in patristic writing they preferred to render Virgil a good Christian through *allegorical* readings of his writings, while Proba seeks the same aim by centoizing his writings. I think that this distinction alone supports the distinction I am making in this writing between patristic and rabbinic reading. See too, on Proba's cento, Elizabeth A. Clark and Diane F. Hatch, "Jesus as Hero in the Vergilian 'cento' of Faltonia Betitia Proba," *Vergilius* 27 (1981): 31–39. For an exemplary edition of this text, see Clark and Hatch, *The Golden Bough, the Oaken Cross: The Virgilian Cento of Faltonia Betitia Proba* (Scholars Press, c. 1981).

41 Usher, *Homeric Stitchings*, 28.

42 Verwey and Witting, "The Cento: A Form of Intertextuality from Montage to Parody," 174.

43 Cited and translated in Usher, *Homeric Stitchings*, 29, emphasis mine. The original Greek text is to be found in Plutarch, *Essay on the Life and Poetry of Homer*, ed. and trans. J. J. Lamberton and Robert Keaney (Scholars Press, c1996), 310–11.

44 Remarks made by Professor Fred Moten in a seminar at the University of California, Berkeley in April of 2025 led me in this striking and surprising direction, music made entirely (or nearly so) out of citations of other music and joined into new compositions. There is not a small library on this form of composition at the ends of the last millennium and beginnings of the current one. For those motivated to carry out further investigation of this practice and think about its relations with cento and midrash, see Adam Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*, New Perspectives in Music History and Criticism (Cambridge University Press, 2000). I wish to thank here my adult grandson, Ephraim Boyarin, for bibliographical and musicological advice in this matter as I began following up on Fred's comment.

45 Shir Hashirim Rabba Parasha 1; translation and emphasis mine.

46 Ra'anán Boustán, Martha Himmelfarb, and Peter Schäfer, eds., *Hekhalot Literature in Context: Between Byzantium and Babylonia*, Texte und Studien Zum Antiken Judentum, (Mohr Siebeck, 2013).

47 Babylonian Talmud, Pesahim 117a.

48 The text is drawn from Bavli Sotah 36b-37a.

49 In the expanded version of this text for the book, several other examples will be adduced and analyzed.

50 Bruns, "The Hermeneutics of Midrash," 115.

51 Okáčová, "Centones," 4.