Scholar and Advocate: The Stories of Moses in Midrash Exodus Rabbah

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Like any form of interpretive writing but in its own distinctive way, rabbinic midrash functions both as a response to elements of the text (exegesis) and as a medium through which the interpreters speak to their own context (cultural expression). One notable feature of aggadic midrash is the practice of telling extrabiblical stories about biblical figures. Even the telling of these stories represents both exegesis and cultural expression, as seen in the presentation of Moses in midrash Exodus Rabbah. In non-rabbinic Jewish portrayals of Moses from the Greco-Roman world, Moses was often an important vehicle for the expression of the Jewish appropriation of cultural Hellenism. In the Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael, the figure of Moses is elaborated only modestly, but he is clearly depicted within the framework of rabbinic thought. Exodus Rabbah follows and develops the trajectory of the Mekhilta but also highlights features of Moses that were prominent in earlier sources in light of shared cultural experiences and their common text (that is, Exodus). In Exodus Rabbah, Moses is depicted through numerous aggadic tales as a rabbinic scholar of Torah and as the advocate who successfully mediates between Israel and God. Although these stories freely describe Moses in anachronistic terms as though he were a sage from the era of the rabbis, they also reflect genuine responses to actual points of tension and meaning in the text. This approach enabled the sages of the midrash to appreciate the meaningfulness of the text as they saw their own situations acted out in the text through Moses, although this came at the expense of recognizing fully the points of difference between the world of the text and the world of the interpreters.

Key Words: Exodus, Moses, midrash, aggadah, Exodus Rabbah, Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael, Torah, scholar, advocate, mediator

INTRODUCTION

It has often been pointed out that rabbinic midrash functions both as exegesis and as cultural expression.¹ One may justly look at midrash and ask

questions of a hermeneutical sort, with the understanding that the midrash is responding to certain features of the biblical text. At the same time, although it is difficult to identify specific historical events that generated specific midrashic interpretations, it is possible to use “recurring patterns” that are found in numerous rabbinic texts to uncover the social-historical contexts to which the rabbis were responding. One of the most engaging aspects of midrash is the practice of expanding on the biblical narrative by telling creative stories and parables about the characters found in the text. It is worth considering what role these narrative expansions play in midrashic discourse in light of the two dimensions of midrash, exegetical and contemporizing. First of all, how can stories about the biblical characters (that is, rather than contemporary figures) connect the ancient text to the contemporary reader? Second, and even more perplexing, do creative stories about biblical characters operate in some way as exegesis of the biblical text? In this article, we will consider the function of these midrashic stories by examining the figure of Moses from the early rabbinic period up to the compilation of Exodus Rabbah, paying particular attention to how the narrative expansions about Moses serve not only as expressions of contemporary rabbinic values but also as a kind of textual interpretation.

In order to see how the rabbinic Moses took shape during the formative period of Rabbinic Judaism in antiquity, we will begin with a sketch of Moses as he was seen by early Jewish writers of the Greco-Roman period, with particular emphasis on how Moses was used as a vehicle for cultural values. Then we will consider the presentation of Moses in the first rabbinic commentary on the book of Exodus, the Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael, in order to see how the rabbinic Moses developed in continuity and contrast with other early portraits. Finally, we will examine in greater detail the depiction of Moses in the midrashic compilation Exodus Rabbah, which offers a full representation of Moses as seen by rabbinic Jews of late antiquity and the Middle Ages. Moses figures prominently in this document, as one would expect given his key role in the book of Exodus. What is surprising in Exodus Rabbah is how often it elaborates on the biblical account with an extrabiblical narrative about Moses. Our goal will be to show that these stories about Moses not only function to make Moses relevant to the readers of the midrash but also serve as a form of exegesis of the book of Exodus. In Exodus Rabbah, Moses emerges as a great man, although still a mere mortal, who studies and teaches Torah to Israel like a scholar and who also serves

(“contemporizing or ideological”) dimensions of midrash, Sarason also identifies a “performative” dimension, namely, those aspects of midrash that reflect the social practice of ritual Torah study, such as the discursive rhetoric of competing interpretations or the highly creative interpretations that seem to be aiming for novelty. See also Joseph Heinemann, “The Nature of the Aggadah,” in Midrash and Literature (ed. G. H. Hartman and S. Budick; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 49, on the overt (“deals openly with explication of the biblical text”) and covert (“deals much more subtly with contemporary problems”) dimensions of midrash.

as Israel’s advocate before God. This picture is developed through creative stories about Moses that in different but equally subtle ways point both to the biblical text and to the world of the sages.

**Moses in Early Non-rabbinic Jewish Sources**

Jewish writings from the early Greco-Roman period contain many different portrayals of Moses, but in most cases Hellenistic cultural ideas are clearly discernable. When Moses was depicted as holding a “biblical” office, such as king or prophet, the office was often interpreted according to a Greek model. Josephus’s Moses takes on the characteristics of a king along Hellenistic lines. Philo allegorizes Moses’ high priesthood into a symbol of the λόγος (Her. 182–85) and frequently portrays Moses as a Greek ιεροφάντης, “initiating priest.” The historian Artapanus identifies the lawgiver Moses with Mousaeus, who was the teacher of Orpheus and one of the founders of Greek culture (Artap. 27.3–4). In some instances, purely Greek roles were assigned to Moses, such as the military general of Josephus and the tragic hero of the Pentateuch described by Ezekiel the Tragedian, who presents Moses as the “chief symbol of this cultural liaison between Jews and Greeks.” Moses was seen to be the embodiment of Greek virtues, and for some (such as Philo) Moses even represented true philosophy.

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Moses’ role as Israel’s advocate and intercessor before God, as seen in the story of the golden calf, received special treatment in many Hellenistic Jewish sources. In texts such as *Jubilees* and the *Testament of Moses*, Moses intercedes for future generations within the context of God’s apocalyptic revelations for Israel; in the historian Josephus, Moses the intercessor is actually an idealized representation of the Jewish people constructed, at least in part, as a defense of the Jews before the Greek world. There were even some hints of Moses taking on a kind of divine status, which clearly reflects a Hellenistic frame of thought. To be sure, one cannot interpret all of these early Jewish writings as a unified whole. Still, most Jewish writers of the Greco-Roman period expressed their appropriation of Hellenistic culture at least to some extent through Moses.

**MOSES IN THE MEKHALTA DE RABBI ISHMAEL**

From these sources, we turn to the *Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael* (MRI), usually dated to the middle or end of the 3rd century A.D., which consists of nine tractates that deal exegetically with select portions of the book of Exodus. Although MRI focuses particularly on legal passages from Exodus and is often classed with the “halakhic midrash,” in reality about three-fifths of its contents are aggadic. MRI is a compilation of exegesis, much of which predates the final redaction, and yet it shows essential editorial coherence, especially in comparison with other so-called tannaitic midrashim.


Moses shares many features in common with other early Jewish portrayals, often reflecting common readings of the biblical text; but there are also aspects of MRI’s Moses that reflect the distinctive world of the rabbinic movement.

In comparison with other early Jewish portrayals, MRI does less to portray Moses in terms of Hellenistic cultural ideals. Moses is not seen as a general, philosopher, or statesman; he is said to be king over Israel, and he is also referred to as the “shepherd of Israel” (beshallah, ch. 7, pp. 166–67), but these phrases are both biblical in origin and are applied to Moses with little elaboration. When Moses is depicted more creatively, he is not simply Hellenistic in a general way but distinctively rabbinic: when Moses calls to the elders of Israel in Exod 12:21, he is assembling a court (חתן; pisha, ch. 11, p. 57); and when Moses and the people of Israel sing to the L ORD in Exod 15, Moses begins and Israel repeats in a way that probably reflects the liturgical practice of rabbinic Judaism. The same tendency can be seen in Moses’ personal qualities. MRI does not speak of the “virtues” of Moses; rather, he was the greatest one in all Israel, who is praised particularly for his wisdom (חכמה), piety (חסד), and meekness, since he treated Joshua as his equal and showed respect for the elders (and even for Pharaoh). All of this is not to deny the impact that the Greco-Roman world had on early rabbinic Judaism. For example, Aristotelian thinking about classification had a broad influence on the intellectual world of late antiquity and thereby left its mark on the Mishnah. But the impact of Hellenistic thought on the rabbis was less overt than was true for most other forms of early Judaism, and this is reflected in MRI.

On a few occasions in MRI, Moses performs a miraculous wonder, which probably has some cultural connection to the extensive interest in

17. MRI, beshallah, ch. 6, p. 156. References to MRI are based on Lauterbach’s edition.
19. MRI, beshallah, ch. 1, p. 121; shirata, ch. 9, p. 213; vayassa, ch. 7, p. 251.
20. MRI, beshallah, ch. 1, pp. 119–20 (Moses takes care of the bones of Joseph); beshallah, ch. 3, p. 140; bahodesh, ch. 9, pp. 341–42 (Moses pacifies the people, Eccl 7:19 is applied to him).
21. MRI, bahodesh, ch. 9, p. 342 (Num 12:3 is cited; Isa 61:1 is applied to Moses); amalek, ch. 1, p. 257 (Moses treats Joshua as an equal at Exod 17:9, “Choose for us men”); pisha, ch. 11, p. 58 (Moses respects elders); pisha, ch. 13, p. 70 (Moses shows respect for the kingship of Pharaoh, just like Joseph does in Gen 41:16).
22. See Jacob Neusner, Judaism as Philosophy (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991). As another example, Azzan Yadin, Scripture as Logos: Rabbi Ishmael and the Origins of Midrash (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 168–75, shows how the Greek concept of the logos found expression in MRI and Sifre Numbers in a manner similar to what is found in Clement of Alexandria. For Clement, the logos (Christ) is the instructor who clarifies the hidden meaning of Scripture, thus revealing itself, because the logos is the author of Scripture; in the “Rabbi Ishmael” midrashim, Scripture itself (הכתוב) is an intentional teacher that reveals the true halakhic meaning of Scripture (תרשיד).
23. The community at Qumran represents another Jewish group from this period for whom Hellenism was a less pronounced influence. Unfortunately, the texts found at Qumran do not contribute significantly to our understanding of Moses (but see p. 4 n. 10).
Moses’ wonder-working ability found in Hellenistic Jewish authors. Still, most of what is found in MRI regarding Moses’ miracles closely follows biblical paradigms. In one case, Moses is said to have opened the eyes of the Israelites when they were encamped by the sea, so that they could see the squadrons of angelic beings ready to protect them against Pharaoh’s army (beshallah, ch. 3, p. 141). This is of course reminiscent of Elisha, and the Midrash quotes 2 Kgs 6:17 to make the connection explicit. In another remarkable passage, Moses raises Joseph’s coffin from the bottom of the Nile by casting into the water a golden tablet with the divine name inscribed on it (beshallah, ch. 1, p. 120). Michael Fishbane suggested that this story was based on the ancient myth of Isis gathering the mangled body of Osiris, a myth known to Plutarch among others. It is certainly true that the magical use of the divine name reflects the wider cultural interest of late antiquity in magic. At the same time, MRI explains the story through Elisha’s raising of an ax head from the water (2 Kgs 6:5–6), and because the details of the two stories, apart from the use of the divine name, are so close (an object is raised from water by means of throwing another object in), and because we have already seen that Elisha was a model for Moses’ miraculous activity in MRI, it is likely that the Elisha story was the primary source for this miracle tale.

Perhaps the most important thing that can be said about the wonder-working Moses in MRI is that he is definitely human and not divine. The Midrash discourages amplifying Moses at God’s expense (bahodesh, chap. 2, pp. 299–300; ch. 4, p. 311), and it states clearly that neither Moses nor Elijah ascended on High (bahodesh, ch. 4, p. 310). MRI offers a list of things that were difficult for Moses to understand. It explains that the sea would not part for Moses but only for God. Moreover, several references are made to the fact that Moses prayed too long at inopportune moments. In MRI, Moses is a great figure, but he is also a person with flaws. There are no hints of a divinization of Moses.

One final aspect of Moses that MRI emphasizes is his role as a teacher of Torah. The centrality of Torah for Israel’s history and identity is a defining characteristic of MRI. Torah is said to be the subject matter of numerous scriptural verses, including Num 21:19 (Torah is an inheritance), Prov 3:8 (Torah is health), Prov 3:18 (Torah is a tree of life), Prov 4:2 (Torah is good

27. MRI, pisha, ch. 2, p. 11 (things difficult for Moses to understand); beshallah, chap. 5, pp. 151–52 (the sea would not part for Moses); beshallah, ch. 4, p. 143, 148; ch. 6, p. 156; vayassa, ch. 1, p. 226 (Moses prayed too long).
28. MRI cites Exod 7:1 once, interpreting it to mean that Moses was appointed as a “judge” over Pharaoh (pisha, ch. 1, p. 1). For “God” (אלהים) meaning “judge,” see MRI, bahodesh, ch. 4, p. 312.
teaching), Prov 4:22 (Torah is life), Prov 8:22 (Torah is a possession), Song 2:14 (Israel’s appearance is lovely in the study of Torah), Ps 29:11 (Torah is strength), Ps 99:4 (Torah is strength), and Isa 55:1 (Torah is water). MRI talks about the merit of Torah, the obligation of Torah, and the study of Torah. When Israel camped by the water, they engaged in Torah (vayassa, ch. 2, p. 231). The Lord provided manna for those who engaged in Torah (vayassa, ch. 6, p. 249). Amalek came against the people of Israel because they separated themselves from Torah (vayassa, ch. 7, pp. 250–51). God caused Israel to wander for 40 years to keep them engaged in Torah (beshallah, ch. 1, p. 116).

Along these lines, MRI sometimes portrays Moses as Israel’s instructor in Torah. Moses was the teacher of Joshua, and Joshua was Moses’ student (amalek, ch. 1, p. 257). Likewise, Moses was the teacher of all Israel, and Israel was his student (amalek, ch. 3, p. 274). When Moses raised his hands in the battle with Amalek (Exod 17:11), Israel was strong in the words of Torah (amalek, ch. 4, p. 283, 285). When Moses went into the tent to talk with Jethro (Exod 18:7–8), he was leading his father-in-law into the house of study (בֵית הַמֶּדְרֶשׁ) to guide him and draw him near to Torah (amalek, chap. 3, p. 278). Exod 18:16 says that Moses settled disputes between Israelites by making known to them God’s statutes (חוקי האלהים) and his laws (תורותיו), which is interpreted by MRI as Moses rendering halakhic decisions (הוריות), as on matters of cleanness and uncleanness (amalek, ch. 4, p. 282–83). Torah as God’s life-giving revelation was a vital part of early rabbinic theology as seen in MRI. As the one who delivered the Law at Sinai, Moses could be seen as the ultimate teacher of Torah to Israel.

The Moses of MRI is without doubt a rabbinic Moses, as seen especially in his teaching of Torah in the house of study. In general, he is not portrayed as an idealized Greco-Roman figure, although there are aspects of MRI’s Moses that tie him into the broader Greco-Roman world, such as his wonder working. At no point, however, does MRI ever suggest that Moses is divine or semidivine. The ideology of rabbinic Judaism is modestly present in MRI’s depiction of Moses, but all in all Moses is not a primary vehicle through which MRI expounds its teachings.

Moses in Exodus Rabbah

From the relatively modest presentation found in MRI we turn to the extensive treatment of Moses given in Exodus Rabbah. Midrash Exodus Rab-


30. Merit (beshallah, ch. 7, p. 163), obligation (pisha, ch. 17, p. 104), and study (pisha, ch. 18, p. 111–12; Amalek, ch. 4, p. 283, 285).

31. According to R. Joshua as reported in vayassa, ch. 3, p. 235, the gathering of each day’s portion of manna every day (Exod 16:4) may be fulfilled if a person studies but two halakhot in the morning and two halakhot in the evening.
Exodus Rabbah is in fact made up of two distinct parts. The first part (ER I) is an exegetical midrash in the style of Genesis Rabbah on the first 14 parashiyot of Exodus (chs. 1–10), and the second part (ER II) is a homiletical midrash on parashiyot 15–52 of Exodus (chs. 12–40) that belongs to the category of Tanhuma-Yelamdenhu literature. ER II is not a sustained exegetical treatment of Exod 12–40 but rather focuses on the beginnings of the liturgical reading portions according to the triennial reading cycle of the land of Israel. Both units within ER borrowed extensively from the primary aggadic sources of Rabbinic Judaism up to the time of their final compilation. The editors, in turn, seem to have recast the materials that they inherited and probably added new sayings and stories of their own. Although precise dates cannot be established either for the parts or for the whole, a likely time frame for the final compilation of ER would be the 10th or 11th century.32

Exodus Rabbah represents the continuing reflection of the rabbis of late antiquity and the Middle Ages on the significance of Moses. Some trends that already appeared in MRI are simply carried forward in ER with only

32. Recent scholarship on ER has focused primarily on one or the other part of the completed work. Because ER II does not make use of complete sugyot of the Babylonian Talmud, as ER I does, Hanoch Albeck suggested that ER II is older than ER I (Hanoch Albeck, Ha-Derashot be-Yisrael [Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1954], 125 [Hebrew]). Because ER II seems to borrow from tannaitic literature, Talmud Yerushalmi, and early amoraic midrash, and also contains some Greek and Latin words, Moshe Herr dates the compilation of ER II to the 9th century (Moshe David Herr, “Exodus Rabbah,” Encyclopaedia Judaica (2nd ed. Jerusalem: Keter, 2007), 6:624). As for ER I, Albeck suggested that it was written to be the exegetical companion to MRI, because ER I covers the beginning of Exodus and leaves off essentially where MRI begins. Albeck considered the Babylonian Talmud to be an important source for the compiler of ER I (Albeck, Ha-Derashot, 125), although Avigdor Shinan doubts that the compiler of ER I had access to the Talmud as a complete work (Avigdor Shinan, Midrash Shemot Rabbah Chapters I–XIV [Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1984], 19 [Hebrew]). The editor of ER I also made use of aggadic traditions known to us from the Tanhuma midrashim (Albeck, Ha-Derashot, 125; and Shinan, Midrash, 20). Moreover, there are abundant parallels between ER I and Genesis Rabbah, Leviticus Rabbah, Song of Songs Rabbah, Pesiqta de Rab Kahana, Midrash on the Psalms, and Talmud Yerushalmi (Shinan, Midrash, 20). Based on the evidence we have, it appears that ER I not only used but also “recycled” older aggadic traditions, shaping them to fit the needs of the ER context (see Marc Bregman, The Tanhuma-Yelamdenhu Literature [Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2003], 171–72 [Hebrew]). The exact date of the final composition of ER I is the subject of some disagreement. On the one hand, because ER seems to be employed by the aggadic work Dibre ha-yamim shel Moshe (which may be dated to the 11th century), Shinan argues that ER I most likely comes from the 10th century (Shinan, Midrash, 23). On the other hand, Bregman suggests an 11th-century date for ER I, on the grounds that ER I uses midrashic materials derived from the school of Moshe ha-Darshan, who lived in the 11th century (Bregman, Tanhuma-Yelamdenhu, 171). Bregman also argues that, where material from ER I is found both in Tanhuma and in the Babylonian Talmud, ER I tends to follow the Talmudic version, thus indicating a later date for the composition of ER I (that is, the 11th century) when the Babylonian Talmud had exerted definitive influence in the land of Israel (Bregman, Tanhuma-Yelamdenhu, 171). The earliest author who knows ER as a completed work is R. Azriel of Gerona in the early 13th century, and then (through Azriel) Nahmanides in his commentary on the Torah ca. 1260 (Shinan, Midrash, 22–23). But one cannot assume that the final compilation was not made until this time; the 10th or 11th century is very plausible for the completed ER (see the cautionary comments of Saul Liebermann on dating works by their first named appearance (Saul Liebermann, Midrash Debarim Rabbah [2nd ed.; Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1964], 21–22 [Hebrew]).
modest elaboration. In other instances, Moses is described in terms that show significant developments in rabbinic thought. This is particularly true of the depiction of Moses as a Torah scholar. But perhaps the most interesting feature of ER’s Moses is the emphasis on Moses as the mediator who pleads on behalf of Israel before God. This is a characteristic of Moses that was prominent in some early Greco-Roman sources, and though it was not emphasized by MRI, it reappears as a major motif in ER. The stories about Moses in ER clearly illustrate how narrative expansions on biblical characters can address contemporary concerns and insights. At the same time, many of these stories also reflect thoughtful readings of the biblical text.

From Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael to Exodus Rabbah

Many basic characteristics of Moses already present in MRI appear similarly in ER. Like MRI, ER has little interest in the chronological details of Moses’ life: Moses is said to be 12 years old when he was taken from the house of his father (ER 5.2), and he is also said to have stayed for 6 months in Midian after the events of Exod 5:10, leaving his wife and children there when he returned to Egypt (ER 5.19). The scarcity of this sort of information shows that, in spite of its greater emphasis on the person of Moses, ER is still not intended to be a “biography” of Moses. Following MRI, ER continues to maintain that Moses was a mere mortal, even pointing out some of his struggles and flaws. One explanation of the need for the burning bush is that Moses did not want to cease from his work when God first began speaking with him (ER 2.5). ER 15.14 points to Exod 3:11 (“Who am I”) as evidence that Moses was not at first willing to redeem Israel. Moses spoke in an inappropriate way to God in Exod 4:1, questioning God in a manner similar to the slander of the serpent in Gen 3 (ER 3.12). Moses argues with God about his calling (ER 6.1) and becomes angry with God (ER 6.2). As in MRI, Moses is accused of praying too long at the crossing of the Red Sea (ER 21.8), and the Midrash makes clear that the waters would not part for Moses but only for God (ER 21.6). God’s rebuke of Moses and the people in Exod 16:28 is taken to mean that Moses

33. For ER I, we are using the edition of Avigdor Shinan, Midrash Shemot Rabbah Chapters I–XIV (see n. 32). For ER II, we will cite according to Mosheh Mirkin, Midrash Rabbah (11 vols.; Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1992), vols. 5–6. In translating into English, we have generally followed S. M. Lehrman, Midrash Rabbah: Exodus (3rd ed.; London: Soncino, 1983), although we have occasionally reworded the translation based on the Hebrew in view of the specific context of our discussion.

34. As one might expect, these chronological observations arise from the treatment of specific verses in the exegetical part of ER (that is, ER I). ER II has nothing to say on these matters. In MRI, vayassa, ch. 6, p. 249, there is a discussion of the date of Moses’ death in connection with the question of how long Israel ate manna.

35. There is disagreement between sages in ER 3.1 as to whether Moses did the right thing in hiding his face from God in Exod 3:6.

36. In ER 6.1, however, Moses receives mercy from God, on the grounds that he had only argued with God out of his concern for Israel’s suffering. Other passage where Moses talks back to God include ER 3.4 and 16.3.
had forgotten to tell them the commandment of the Sabbath (ER 25.12), and remarkably Moses is said to have been excommunicated in connection with the incident of the golden calf (ER 42.3). The excommunication of Moses is grounded in the use of the verb “go down” (ירד) in Exod 32:7, which ER takes to be a technical term for excommunication. This unfortunate circumstance is explained on the analogy of an ambassador who was sent in good faith on a mission to the king when his province was still in the king’s good graces. While the ambassador was on his way, the people of the province publicly offended the king, and the news of their offense reached the king before the ambassador did. As a consequence, when the ambassador arrived he was immediately punished for what his people had done. The vulnerable and even flawed Moses of ER is an authentic representation of the biblical Moses, but ER describes Moses’ hardships and shortcomings in terms that clearly reflect the social world of the rabbis (e.g., his excommunication).

Also like MRI, the personal qualities of Moses in ER are usually described through biblical terminology. Moses was able to ascend the mountain of the LORD (Ps 24:3) because he possessed all the attributes of Ps 24:4, clean hands, a pure heart, and so on (ER 4.1). Moses is wise to care for the bones of Joseph (ER 20.19), and he is the true source of wisdom for Joshua (ER 31.3). The attributes of Moses are also explained through Ps 85:10 (“Kindness and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other”): Moses is righteousness because he executed the LORD’s righteousness (Deut 33:21); he is faithfulness because he was trusted in all the LORD’s house (Num 12:7); and he is kindness (חסד) because he acted kindly in bringing back the bones of Joseph (Exod 13:19). Not surprisingly, Moses is identified by ER as “righteous” (צדיק, ER 23.3); but what is perhaps most characteristic of Moses in ER is that he is “meek” (עניו, ER 6.2, 42.6). The meekness of Moses is a reflection of God’s gentle attitude, in

37. The rebuke of Exod 16:8 is directed at Moses and is in the second person plural, thus implying that Moses shared in the guilt. Cf. ER 25.10 and Lev. Rab. 13.1 on the four things that Moses is said to have forgotten. At ER 41.6, God is said to have given the Torah to Moses as a gift (i.e., without Moses having to learn it in the conventional way), because Moses kept forgetting what he had learned, being unable to memorize all of the Torah in only forty days.

38. The conclusion of the parable is not given in ER, presumably because it was readily available in another source known to the compilers of ER. But the sense of the ending is clear enough from the context.

39. ER 5.10. Some of these attributes are applied to Aaron as well; for example, Aaron is peace, based on Mal 2:6.

40. The meekness of Moses is grounded in the biblical text at Num 12:3: “Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all men that were on the face of the earth.” Moses’ meekness is also suggested by his hesitation at his initial calling and his early reliance on Aaron. Moses in the biblical text does occasionally become angry (Exod 32:19, Num 16:15), but according to ER it is out of character and subject to further explanation. For example, God was not pleased at Moses for breaking the tablets, until Moses explained his reasoning: if the Passover lamb was forbidden to foreigners (Exod 12:43), then the tablets, which are the work of God, must surely be forbidden to idolaters. God may be thought of as disapproving of Moses at first because he assumed that Moses acted out of anger (as the biblical text states) but afterward approving
that God first revealed himself to Moses in a quiet and persuasive way so as not to alarm him (ER 3.1; cf. 45.5). According to ER 2.2, Moses once dealt kindly with a runaway lamb, and it is because Moses showed compassion to the flock of man (that is, Jethro’s flock) that he was given the task of tending the flock of God (that is, Israel). In a culture that emphasized the authority of the teacher, it was important to emphasize that Moses himself was a kind and compassionate authority figure. As in MRI, the language used in praise of Moses is biblical, but in ER special emphasis is placed on his meekness.

Moses as Torah Scholar

The clearest example where the portrayal of Moses in ER reflects a development in rabbinic thought beyond the time of MRI is found in the depiction of Moses as a scholar of Torah. MRI had presented Moses as a Torah scholar in relatively simple, albeit distinctively rabbinic ways. ER places greater emphasis on this aspect of Moses, and in doing so it shows how the theology of Torah and Torah study had evolved from the tannaitic period to late antiquity and the Middle Ages.

There are numerous aggadot involving Moses in ER that express the rabbinic ideology of Torah, many of which originated after the redaction of MRI and reflect more developed ideas and practices. Moses learned Torah directly from the mouth of the Almighty (ER 50.2), repeating after God as God instructed him (ER 41.5). Moses neither ate bread nor drank water while receiving the Torah (Exod 34:28), although he did eat the bread of Torah and drink the water of Torah (cf. Deut 8:3), studying day and night in order to teach Israel that they must labor in Torah day and night (ER 47.5; cf. 47.6). In response to the question of Job 36:22, “Who is a teacher like him?” (that is, like God), ER answers that it is Moses, who taught (מורה) Pharaoh and urged him to repentance (ER 12.1). Moses is referred to as ‘our teacher’ (רבינו) four times in ER (1.24, 5.2, 30.24, 50.2), which is a title otherwise reserved for rabbinic sages, especially Judah the Patriarch.

41. Exod 31:18 says that God was “speaking with him,” that is, God was reciting the Law and Moses was repeating. Similarly, it is deduced from Deut 10:10 (“I stood on the mountain”) and Deut 9:9 (“I sat on the mountain”) that Moses first learned Torah on the mountain standing, and then went and sat down to repeat what he had learned (ER 47.8), following a rabbinic pattern. The order of events is reversed vis-à-vis the biblical text, perhaps according to the principle that “there is no earlier or later in the Torah” (for example, see MRI, shirata, ch. 1, p. 203).

42. Cf. ER 16.2, where Moses teaches ( yalda) Israel the laws of the Nazarites; and ER 30.10, where Moses teaches (힘ם) the “able men” appointed as rulers in Exod 18:25.

43. See ER 2.5, 24.4, 34.1, 43.1. The aggadic tradition in ER 24.4 attributed to Rabbi (רבי) through R. Abba is assigned to “our great Rabbi” through R. Aha in Tanhuma (besallah), and simply to R. Hiyya the Great in Tanhuma B (besallah, 4.17). In this instance, it is the attribution in ER that is closest to what is found in MRI (vayassa, ch. 1, p. 225). In any case, it is clear that ER associates Moses “our teacher” with “our teacher” Judah the Patriarch. As has been often stated, the attributions of traditions to early sages in late midrashim like ER cannot necessarily
Moses is often seen making *qal va-homer* (*a fortiori*) arguments in rabbinic fashion (for example, 19.3, 46.3).\(^{44}\) In addressing Moses’ relationship to Aaron, *ER* describes Moses as a teacher (*רב*) and Aaron as a targumist (*תורגמן*); or else Moses is the preacher (*דורש*) and Aaron is the speaker, who makes the sermon audible to the congregation (*אמרא*).\(^{45}\) With regard to Torah, Moses was the ideal student, teacher, halakhic authority, and preacher. In historical terms, rabbinic ordination probably developed and justified itself through the belief that to be ordained was to share in Moses’ prophetic authority.\(^{46}\) While the core rabbinic ideology of Torah was already established by the redaction of *MRI*, this ideology grew and found new expression in later times as shown by *ER*’s aggadot concerning Moses.

Two specific points of growth in the ideology of Torah as seen in *ER*’s presentation of Moses are particularly worthy of mention. The first is Moses’ role in teaching Torah in the life to come. A clear expression of this idea occurs at *ER* 2.6, which comments on the repetition of Moses’ name in Exod 3:4:

“Moses, Moses.” It was he who taught Torah in this world, and he will teach it in the world to come. For Israel in the time to come will go to Abraham and say to him, “Teach us Torah”; and he will reply, “Go to Isaac who studied more than I did”; and Isaac will say, “Go to Jacob who attended on scholars more than I did”; and Jacob will say, “Go to Moses who learned Torah from the mouth of the Almighty”; as it is written: “They go from strength to strength; each one will appear before ʾelohim in Zion” (Ps 84:7). The word ʾelohim refers here to great men, such as Moses, as it is written: “See, I make you as God (ʾelohim) to Pharaoh.” (Exod 7:1)

*ER* 2.6 goes on to identify the textual detail that triggers this aggadah: “R. Aba b. Kahana said that he whose name is repeated will inherit both worlds.” In other words, the first mention relates to this world, and the second mention, far from being simply redundant, relates to the world to come.\(^{47}\) A similar phenomenon, this time relating to God’s activity, can be seen at *ER* 21.3, where the repetition of the word *I* in Deut 32:39 shows that God hearkens to the sincere prayer of the obedient both in this world and in the world to come. In order to explain and justify this interpreta-

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\(^{45}\) See *ER* 3.17, 8.3. The biblical texts under discussion are Exod 4:16 and 7:1. *ER* does not see in these verses any suggestion of the divinization of Moses but rather explains the God-Moses-Aaron relationship on the analogy of the text-preacher-speaker dynamic of the Jewish synagogue (see Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, 158).


\(^{47}\) Cf. *Gen. Rab.* 30.4. This handling of repetition stems from the midrashic concern that no details in the text be seen as unnecessary or superfluous. This concern underlies many instances of midrashic exegesis, but it is not a firm “rule” that is always enforced; see Alexander Samely, “Between Scripture and Its Rewording: Towards a Classification of Rabbinic Exegesis,” *JJS* 42 (1991): 65–66.
tion, the Midrash relates the first half of Isa 65:24, “Before they call I will answer,” to this life, and the second half, “while they are yet speaking, I will hear,” to the life to come. Then, the Qal verb “I will hear” is read as a Hiphil form, “I will cause to hear/make known,” indicating that God will actually join with them in their study: “Each one will arise and make known his learning, and God will sit, as it were, and join in with them.”

Thus, when Moses is envisioned as teaching Torah to Israel in the world to come, he is simply following the pattern established by God.

The idea that Torah offers rewards both in this life and in the life to come goes back at least to the period of Tractate Avot. But ER reveals a deeper reflection on this theology to the point where the reward of the afterlife is envisioned as Torah study, as Eccl. Rab. 5.11.5 says: “Whoever has labored in the Torah in this world is not left alone to sleep in the world to come, but he is taken to the study house (בית מדרש) of Shem and Eber, of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and of Moses and Aaron.” In ER, Moses is the chief teacher of Torah in the hereafter, next to God himself.

A second point of development in the ideology of Torah as seen in ER’s Moses touches on the relationship between the Written Torah and the Oral Torah. Jacob Neusner gives three examples of how Judaism in the late 4th century developed in response to the political triumph of Christianity: the expression of an eschatological teleology symbolized by the Messiah, the myth of the Dual Torah, and the compilation of verse-by-verse exegetical commentaries on Scripture.

48. God’s participation in this study session in the world to come is supported by three additional proof texts: Mal 3:16, “Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another; the LORD heeded and made known (his learning) to them” (Qal verb שמע read as a Hiphil); Isa 30:20, “but your eyes shall see your teacher”; and Isa 54:13, “All your sons shall be taught by the LORD.” According to Lev. Rab. 35.3, God even performs a commandment (Lev 19:32, to honor the elderly) as a model for Israel, in contrast to mortal kings, who make decrees but do not keep them.

49. A plausible date for Avot would be the middle of the 3rd century A.D. (Neusner, Introduction, 572). Avot 6.7 says: “Great is the Torah, for it gives life to them that practice it both in this world and in the world to come.” In ER, Moses was promoted for the sake of Torah in this world (ER 47.3), and he will eat the bread of Torah in the world to come (ER 47.5).

50. The study house of Shem and Eber is mentioned often in rabbinic literature, for example, Gen. Rab. 63.6, 10. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan at Gen 24:62 and Targum Neofiti 1 at Gen 25:22 refer to the study house of Shem. See also b. Mak. 23b, which mentions “the court (בית דין) of Shem.” The word tent could be understood as “house of study” (see b. Ber. 16a and Rashi’s commentary), so that the phrase “tents of Shem” in Gen 9:27 could be taken as a reference to Shem’s academy.

Moses: ‘Write these words. Based on the words given orally [לִבְּשֹׁנַי, literally, “upon the mouth”] I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.’” ER 47.1 says:

“Write these words (Exod 34:27).” It is written, “Were I to write for him so many of my laws, they (my people) would be regarded as a stranger” (Hos 8:12).\(^{52}\) When God revealed himself at Sinai to give Torah to Israel, He communicated it to Moses in order: Bible, Mishnah, Talmud, and Aggadah, as it says, “And God spoke all these words” (Exod 20:1). Even the question a pupil asks his teacher God told Moses at that time. After he had learnt it from God, God told him to teach it to Israel. Moses said: “Lord of the Universe! Shall I write it down for them?” God replied: “I do not wish to give it to them in writing, because I foresee a time when idolaters will have dominion over them and will try to take Torah away from them, and Israel will be despised by idolaters. Only the Bible will I give them in writing, but the Mishnah, Talmud, and Aggadah I will give them orally, so that when the idolaters come and enslave them, my people will remain distinct from them.” He said to the prophet, “Were I to write for him so many of my laws, they (my people) would be regarded as a stranger.” “Therefore, I will give them the Bible in writing, but the Mishnah, Talmud, and Aggadah I will give them orally.” “Write” (Exod 34:27)—this is Scripture; “Based on the words given orally” (Exod 34:27)—this is Mishnah and Talmud, which distinguish Israel from idolaters.\(^{53}\)

Most of the core elements of this aggadah were present in the Talmud Yerushalmi version: the distinction between Written and Oral Torah, the mention of “Mishnah, Talmud, and Aggadah,” the exegesis of Exod 34:27, and the idea that even questions raised later by attentive students were revealed to Moses at Sinai. This theology of the Dual Torah—Written and Oral—ascribes to rabbinic commentary, discussion, and application of the biblical text the same divine origin as is recognized for the scriptural Torah.\(^{54}\) Part of the motivation for this theological reflection might be to strengthen the claim for rabbinic authority among Jews who were in need of this convincing. The major thrust of the text, however, is clearly focused on external pressures. When the idolaters (lit., “worshipers of stars”) come into power and begin to oppress Israel, it will be the Oral Torah from Sinai that will make Israel distinct. But why is it only the Oral Torah that can

\(^{52}\) This understanding of the verse obviously differs from most modern translations. Because the verb (“be regarded”) is plural but the noun “stranger” is singular, the Midrash understands the intended subject to be the “people,” which in Hebrew is a collective noun and can be construed grammatically as either singular or plural.

\(^{53}\) Cf. ER 46.1, 47.3, and 47.7. Based on 46.1, one might get the impression that Mishnah and Aggadah were actually written on the new set of tablets given in Exod 34. But the aggadah at 46.1 is only meant to express the idea that Mishnah and Aggadah were given at Sinai; ER 47.7 makes clear that these additional pieces of Torah were given orally.

\(^{54}\) The word “Torah” in its scriptural sense can refer both to the Pentateuch specifically and to the whole Tanakh (Hebrew Bible). The prophets and the biblical sages to come also received their teaching at Sinai (ER 28.6; cf. Tanhuma, Yitro, 11).
serve this function? And why does this concept become important in the 4th century?

The reason Oral Torah was needed to distinguish God’s people was that Christianity, having become an imperial power in the 4th century, claimed possession of Israel’s Scriptures and even argued that the Jews had forfeited their status as Israel when they failed to recognize the significance of Jesus as interpreted by the Church. Rabbinic sages, beginning in the 4th century, defended their belief in the continuation of “physical Israel” by appealing to the Oral Torah, that is, rabbinic teaching. God made his covenant at Sinai with Israel on the basis of both Written Torah and Oral Torah, and both are essential for identifying the true Israel. The belief that rabbinic teaching was in harmony with Scripture certainly goes back to the period of MRI and before (cf. Sifra). But the myth of the Dual Torah arose in response to Christian political power and the Christian claim to be “Israel” on the basis of Israel’s Scriptures.55 As is evident from the popularity of this aggadah (for example, see Lev. Rab. 22.1 and Eccl. Rab. 1.10.1, 5.8.2), this theme continued to be of significance throughout the Middle Ages. In ER as in other midrashim presenting this myth, the revelatory status of both Written and Oral Torah is affirmed by claiming that both were revealed to Moses at Sinai.

Moses as Israel’s Advocate

One final dimension of Moses in ER, a dimension deeply connected to the Jewish historical experience, is Moses’ role as Israel’s advocate before God. This theme had been important for Jewish authors in the Greco-Roman period, but it received only slight attention in MRI.56 ER pays careful attention to Moses’ mediatorial role, especially in relation to the incident of the golden calf. The sages of ER reflect deeply on the significance of what Moses did for Israel by pleading to God on their behalf, even as they struggle to explain through numerous analogies how such a thing could have been possible at all. As ER 51.4 points out, as soon as Moses pleaded for mercy on behalf of Israel, God forgave them, as is summed up by the remarkable statement that God made to Moses in Num 14:20: “I have pardoned, according to your word.”

Perhaps the first interesting point to be noted in discussing Moses as mediator in ER is that God is often portrayed as quite willing to be persuaded. According to ER 42.9, what could God possibly have meant by saying, “Let me alone!” to Moses, except that God wanted Moses to intercede for Israel and was simply baiting Moses to do so. This is explained through the analogy of a king who took his son into a room to punish him but said, “Let me alone,” so that the son’s teacher standing outside the room would come in and intercede for the boy (cf. also ER 44.10). Because it is unlikely that God really needed Moses’ permission to punish Israel, the Midrash

55. As noted by Neusner (Formation of Judaism, 106–7), rabbinic writings from this period tended to reply to such challenges without dignifying the opposition with an explicit response.
56. See MRI, pisha, ch. 1, pp. 7–8; beshallah, ch. 4, p. 147; vayassa, ch. 7, p. 251.
suggests that God’s motivation was to draw Moses into the situation as a mediator. ER even distinguishes God from his anger against Israel. According to ER 41.7, when Deut 9:19 says that Moses feared the “anger” and “hot displeasure” with which the LORD “bore wrath” against Israel to “destroy” them, these words are understood as the names of four out of the five “angels of destruction” who assailed Israel at the time of the golden calf (the fifth being “annihilation” from Ps 106:23). The three Patriarchs appeared to oppose the angels’ “wrath,” “destruction,” and “annihilation.” This left God to stand up against “anger” (as it says in Ps 7:6: “Arise, O LORD against thy anger!”), and Moses to turn away “hot displeasure” (חמה, see Ps 106:23). Although this is by no means the only portrayal of God’s judgment, here God assists Moses in defending Israel against these “angels of destruction.” In other words, God could be seen as favorably predisposed toward Moses’ mission of reconciliation.

Several analogies are used by ER to explain Moses’ role as mediator, reflecting several different conceptions of what precisely Moses accomplished. In one instance, the phrase from Ps 106:23, that Moses stood “in the breech” (בפרץ), is read in the sense that Moses stood “against the one causing the breech” (בפורץ), that is, Satan. This is likened to a teacher who rescues his pupil, the prince, from condemnation in his father’s court by pushing the accuser outside of the court and taking the accuser’s place, only now pleading for mercy instead of accusing. Following another analogy, when Moses broke the tablets he was like the high official of a king who snatched the pen out of the king’s hand before he could sign a verdict of condemnation against his own son. The breaking of the tablets is also compared to a situation in which a king sent his agent to deliver a document of engagement to a woman, but when he arrived the woman had already committed adultery, and so he destroyed the document to keep the woman from facing judgment as a married person (ER 43.1). In ER 43.4, God says that he cannot forgive Israel because he has already vowed to destroy those who sacrifice to other gods (Exod 22:20). Moses replies that because God has granted to him, as a scholar, the right to absolve vows (cf. Num 30:2 and b. Hag. 10a), God should validate Moses’ authority by absolving his own vow. As a result, God stands before Moses, while Moses sits as an elder, and Moses absolves God of his vow made at Exod 22:20. In each of these analogies, Moses intercedes for Israel before God, but for each analogy—the court scene, the verdict desk, the engagement, and the vow—the activity of Moses is seen in a slightly different light.

Moses is frequently portrayed as making arguments on Israel’s behalf, at times showing great ingenuity. At ER 42.1, Moses asks God to forgive Israel on the grounds that they had worshiped the LORD (Exod 4:31), to

57. Most English versions translate like the RSV, “Arise, O LORD, in thy anger”; the preposition ב can mean either “in” or “against.”

58. E.g., at ER 43.2 it is said that God himself sent forth the “angels of destruction” to punish Israel for the sin of the golden calf. It is Moses, then, who arises to turn back God’s wrath and reconcile Israel to their father in heaven by pleading for them.
which God responds that Israel has now worshiped the golden calf (Exod 32:8). Again, Moses calls to mind the young men of Israel who sacrificed to the LORD (Exod 14:5), but God reminds him that they also sacrificed to the golden calf (Exod 32:8). Finally, Moses appeals to God’s statement at Exod 20:2, “I am the LORD your God.” At first, God objects that Israel has made the calf its god (Exod 32:4), but Moses eventually averts the punishment, showing that “with patience a ruler may be persuaded” (Prov 25:15). Moses can be even cleverer than this. When God suggests that he will make a great nation out of Moses (Exod 32:10), Moses argues that God must not destroy Israel but must keep his promise to the patriarchs, because a document verified by three people (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) is better than a document verified by one (ER 44.9). On one occasion, Moses suggests that Israel intended the golden calf simply to be God’s assistant, who would cause the moon to rise so that God need only concern himself with the sun; when God points out to Moses that the golden calf could not possibly do this because it is not real, Moses asks God why, if it is nothing, he is so upset that they made it (ER 43.6–7)! Elsewhere, Moses reminds God that the commandments were given to him alone, and not to all of Israel (the “your” in Exod 20:2 is singular). Moses therefore takes on himself full responsibility for observing the Torah, together with all of the righteous (ER 43.6). Moses even contends that it is God’s fault that Israel built the golden calf, because they learned idolatry in Egypt where God had sent them (ER 43.7). ER paints Moses as bold in argument with God in trying to win mercy for Israel.

Much more could be said about Moses as Israel’s advocate in ER. But the main question we wish to ask is why does this theme, nearly absent from MRI, appear so prominent in ER? What would have been the main point of interest in these stories for Jews in late antiquity or for those who compiled ER in the 10th or 11th century? Just as with the myth of the Dual Torah, it is probable that Jewish interactions with the broader Christian world raised concerns that were partly addressed through these aggadic expansions to the character of Moses.  

It was, we may suggest, the hostility against Jews that surfaced within the largely Christianized societies of late antiquity and the Middle Ages that encouraged the rabbinic elaboration of the Moses story in the ways we have seen. We noted above that the Greco-Roman interest in Moses as intercessor likely had roots in the animosity sometimes expressed toward Judaism in that cultural context.  

59. This is not to suggest that every aggadic development must be rooted in specific historical experiences, or that only historical experiences related to Christianized society affected rabbinic thought. Carol Bakhos (Ishmael on the Border: Rabbinic Portrayals of the First Arab [Albany, NY: SUNY, 2006]) shows how the emergence of Islamic political power shaped midrashic portrayals of Ishmael (on ER, see especially pp. 89–92).  

60. The connection between ER and the Testament of Moses regarding their depictions of Moses as intercessor for Israel was made by R. Bloch, “Quelques aspects de la figure de Moïse dans la tradition rabbinique,” in Moïse l’homme de l’alliance (ed. H. Cazelles; Tournai: Desclée, 1955), 124–27.
ian rabbis of the amoraic period downplayed the conflicts between Moses and Israel and emphasized Moses’ role as savior of the people because they wanted to portray Moses in a positive light for non-rabbinic Jews.\(^\text{61}\) As an additional factor, this tendency in 4th-century Palestinian Judaism could be explained as a way to counter Christian condemnations of ancient Israel (and thereby the Jews) that tried to highlight how Moses himself had censured Israel (that is, the Jews) harshly. The development of this response could have begun as early as the 4th century, but it would have found many more occasions for expression in later times, especially in the 11th century, around the time of ER’s final redaction as a complete “document.”

The 11th century was the era when the Roman Catholic Church achieved a new kind of supremacy in Europe.\(^\text{62}\) Christianization in much of Europe reached its fullest expression, such that, as Leonard Glick puts it, “To be European was to be part of Christendom—to possess a Christian soul and a Christian destiny. ‘Christian’ became another word for ‘person.’”\(^\text{63}\) Christian polemics against Judaism included the charge that the prophets themselves had testified to the corruption of the physical Israel.\(^\text{64}\) When hostility against the Jews turned into violence in the 11th century, the Jews often found that even political authorities who were more positively inclined toward the Jews (including many bishops) were unable to intercede successfully on their behalf with the mobs and other forces at work that were devastating Jewish communities.\(^\text{65}\) In this context, it is the Moses who pleaded (successfully) with God to avert disaster who is of primary significance. Moses in ER is a heroic figure: bold, shrewd, and self-sacrificing. He is, of course, an extraordinary figure in the biblical text (e.g., Deut 34:10–12), but it is his remarkable ability to save Israel from disaster that may have been particularly meaningful for medieval readers of ER.

**Conclusion**

In general terms, it is certainly true that rabbinic midrash represents both textual interpretation and the expression of rabbinic values. But not every midrashic document balances these concerns in the same way. In some works, like Sifra or Genesis Rabbah, there is an abundance of detailed textual interpretation, and the ideological dimension of midrash is bound up formally with biblical exegesis. In other works, such as Leviticus Rabbah or Pesiqta de Rab Kahana, the starting point is usually a short selection of biblical text taken from the lectionary reading, and the discourse of the midrash moves with greater freedom vis-à-vis the biblical text. ER does contain contextual exegesis in the most basic sense, such as when it describes the


\(^{63}\) Ibid., 86.


sense of עני נטייה ("meekness") in Num 12:3 or when it explains what it means for Moses to be אלחם ("God") in relation to another person (as in Exod 4:16 and 7:1). But in general, ER’s interaction with the biblical text is creative and expansionistic. Is there any way in which the stories about Moses in ER can be seen as biblical interpretation?

One way to understand the interpretive dimension of these stories is to consider some features that midrash shares in common with other forms of interpretation. In many kinds of textual interpretation, a primary task for the interpreter is to clarify difficulties in the text. Likewise with midrash, the exegetical dimension is partly grounded in the fact that many midrashic interpretations originate out of problems in Scripture, such as discrepancies or unexpected grammatical forms. As David Stern observes, a midrash may give multiple interpretations for the same passage precisely because it is responding to a textual problem for which multiple solutions emerged out of the exegetical conversation. Many of the creative narratives involving Moses in ER may be seen as responding to problems in the text on a broader level, such as Moses’ ability to turn away God’s wrath, which is not easy to reconcile with the traditional view of God as an all-powerful sovereign. The problem in this case is not narrowly linguistic but theological; yet, it is still textual in the sense that the problem in view is the identity and consistency of God in the Torah. The various aggadot in ER on this topic attempt to explain, in essence, what happened in those exchanges between God and Moses. Perhaps when God said to Moses “Let me alone,” this indicates a hidden desire on God’s part to forgive Israel. Perhaps a distinction should be made between God and his wrath. Perhaps Moses’ success in making arguments with God reveals a divinely ordained power in dialectical reasoning. The inclusion of multiple stories reflects the fact that many different solutions were proposed for this dilemma. Within the context of ER, it is not one single view that resolves the difficulty but a multiplicity of views intersecting one another. To the degree that these midrashic expansions address a genuine theological problem in the text, they may justifiably be categorized as biblical interpretation, albeit at a broad conceptual level.

Another feature that midrash shares in common with other forms of interpretation is the necessary interface between the text and its interpreter. All commentary to some extent represents a dialogue between text and reader. The narrative expansions in ER sought to find and express

69. See Daniel Boyarin, Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 11–19. According to Boyarin, texts do not simply convey a complete package of communication; rather, they have “gaps” that need to be filled in by the reader, such that the meaning found through interpretation represents a cooperative effort on the
what was enduring for Jewish readers about the biblical Moses. In Scripture, Moses is the instrument through whom God creates his covenant with Israel at Sinai, and it is “Mosaic” revelation that dominates the rest of the Pentateuch. The idea that Moses functioned as a “continuous channel of the divine will” is already present in the biblical tradition (for example, Exod 33:7–11 and 34:34–35), as is the idea that Moses established a covenant involving future generations (Deut 29:14–15; cf. ER 28.6). The stories in ER depicting Moses as a teacher reflect these dimensions of the biblical text. Likewise, the biblical connection between Torah obedience and life (e.g., Lev 18:5, Deut 4:1), refracted through later Jewish belief in the afterlife, was explained through the stories about Moses and Torah study in the world to come. In some sense, we can see in the narrative expansions to Moses in ER the rabbinic version of a dialogue that always takes place when readers interpret texts.

Of course, it is also true that not all interpretation is precisely like midrash. What rabbinic midrash does with Scripture represents its own distinctive combination of perspectives and procedures. Considering ER in particular, even if we are able to see an exegetical dimension to the invention of stories about Moses, the obvious fact remains that there are many other ways of interpreting a text that are more straightforward. In addition to noting how ER is like other forms of interpretation, one must also point out what is distinctive.

The most striking feature about the midrashic interpretation of Moses found in ER is the pervasive anachronism. The authors of ER felt complete freedom to portray Moses as if he were a rabbinic sage of their own day living out the narrative of Exodus. Rabbinic midrash was of course not the only form of creative historiography in the ancient world that described its characters in anachronistic terms. In classical Greek and Latin literature, authors of epic and drama regularly made their heroes serve as mouthpieces for their own values or philosophical ideas. Still, the anachronism part of the text and the reader. If this is true for texts in general, it is certainly true for biblical narrative, which is often abrupt, leaves much unexpressed, and invites interpretation through its complex characters; cf. the discussion of Genesis 22 in Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (trans. Willard Trask; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 1–23.

71. In addition to the aspects of text and reader, Steven Fraade (*From Tradition to Commentary*, 17–20, 27–28, 62–68) has pointed to a third aspect of midrashic commentary, namely, the mediation of a received tradition. This aspect is especially prominent in midrash, due to the collective voice with which midrash speaks. ER does not address the reader as a single interpreter engaged in the activity of textual interpretation. Instead, the anonymous voice of ER transmits to the reader a tradition of interpretation on the book of Exodus, with the expectation that readers will engage in the study of the text (Exodus) in their own context in conversation with the tradition. The conversation in ER, therefore, faces in three directions: toward the text being interpreted, toward the world in which the “authors” of ER lived, and toward the traditions of the rabbis.

72. See Isaac Heinemann, *Darkhei ha-Aggadah* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1954), 36–37 [Hebrew]. Heinemann cites Virgil’s Aeneas as an example of an epic hero portrayed anachronisti-
involved in ER’s depiction of Moses is strikingly overt even by ancient standards. Moreover, midrashic sources occasionally object to a point of anachronism, thus indicating that the sages were on some level aware of what they were doing.\textsuperscript{73} This confirms the sense that many have expressed in the past that aggadic midrash represents a form of literature the essential character of which is figurative rather than historical.\textsuperscript{74}

How, then, did the authors of ER understand the world of the Bible in relation to their own time and history? It is very likely that they considered the events of Exodus to be historical. The text of Exodus, however, was not seen as bound by the historical context of the past but spoke through rabbinic tradition to the present.\textsuperscript{75} Perhaps the sages of the midrash viewed biblical time as categorically different from the time in which they lived, as if the events of Scripture did not belong to the distant past of this world as we know it, but occurred in some “other time” that is not necessarily continuous with our history and yet intersects with our history through midrash.\textsuperscript{76} The readers of ER learned how to follow the paradigms of Scripture by seeing themselves within the story and watching their own situations acted out in the biblical text through Moses.\textsuperscript{77} This element of anachronism helped readers of ER to connect with the biblical text in a transformative way, but it also had the potential to obscure the differences between the world of Scripture and the world of the readers.\textsuperscript{78}

The midrashic expansions to Moses in ER are without question ideological and “eisegetical.” The sages highlight and embellish various as-

cally through whom the author speaks to his present context. On “creative historiography,” see ibid., 15–20.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 37–38. E.g., Gen. Rab. 63.6: “Were there then synagogues and houses of study in those days?” Gen. Rab. 46.4: “Had then reasoning by analogy (גזרות שוות) already been given to Abraham? Surely not!” There is some tension in aggadic literature between anachronistic and realistic tendencies, but the anachronistic is usually given free expression.

\textsuperscript{74} Attempts to describe aggadic literature as not necessarily historical, potentially insightful, but not to be relied on for binding decisions goes back to the period of the Geonim (e.g., Rav Sherira Gaon, 10th century); see Joshua Levinson, “ Literary Approaches to Midrash,” in \textit{Current Trends in the Study of Midrash}, 192–204.


\textsuperscript{78} As with Greco-Roman myths, one may ask whether the rabbis actually believed in their aggadot. Although it is impossible to know for certain, it is likely that many had at least some belief in the reality of the aggadah in a far off time and place (similar to biblical time), believing in whatever way was necessary for the stories to be useful. See David Stern, \textit{Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies} (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 91–93; and Paul Veyne, \textit{Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths: An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination} (trans. Paul Wissing; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).
pects of Moses that were significant for their context, especially Moses as revealer of Torah and mediator with God. In doing this, they freely brought their own historical context into the biblical account. But much of the aggadah on Moses in ER still reflects a genuine engagement with the text’s own discourse. Although not exegesis in the strict linguistic sense, these stories in ER represent readings of the problems and importance of Scripture, which unite the text and reader through the rabbinic tradition.