

Understanding Midrash

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Introduction

There is a growing hunger within the church to understand its Hebraic foundation, often call the Hebraic roots of the church. This does not imply in any way that gentile believers suddenly become Jewish, or that Jewish believers lose their ethnic and cultural identity in following Christ. But rather to bridge the gap between Jewish and Gentile believers as “one new man” in Christ, we must embrace the gifts and callings that each tribe, tongue, people, and nation adds to the body of Yeshua.ⁱ

So, *“What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of circumcision? Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God” (Romans 3:1-2, NKJV).*ⁱⁱ And, the Lord has made a covenant with the sons of Levi, *“Then you shall know that I have sent this commandment to you, that My covenant with Levi may continue, says the Lord of hosts. For the lips of a priest should keep knowledge, and people should seek the law from his mouth; for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts” (Malachi 2:4 & 7).*

Therefore, it is honoring to God and His chosen people, Israel, to acknowledge they have a unique gift and calling concerning studying, understanding, and teaching the word of God. Even to those who have not believed in Christ, their redemptive gift is irrevocable.ⁱⁱⁱ For this, I believe it is important for the church to understand the depth and wealth that are concealed in the teachings of the Jewish rabbinic sages called *Chazal*. Let us study these ancient writings with our veils removed and equipped with the knowledge of fulfilled prophesy, approaching the Lord with reverence and an expectation that He will grow the church in her understanding of His infinite and unsearchable mysteries.^{iv} For, *“It is the glory of God to conceal a matter, but the glory of kings is to search out a matter” (Proverbs 25:2).*

Background

There are four classical methods of biblical exegesis, i.e., interpretation used by the rabbis and Jewish scholars in reading the Hebrew Bible, the *Tanach*. These four methods together are called *Pardes* and are listed as follows: *Peshat*, *Remez*, *Drash*, and *Sod*. They can be remembered by their acrostic PRDS (pronounced paradise). *Peshat* is the only one of the four methods that interpret the text at face value, focusing mostly on linear interpretation. It is the most

straightforward and commonly applied method for reading and understanding the Bible. The other three methods, including *Drash*, look at hidden meanings within the text to discover moral, ritual, and spiritual purposes. *Sod* looks at the deep mystic, religious meanings construed from the text. These four methods were often used in correlation with each other.

The word *Midrash* comes from the Hebrew root *Drash*, which means to “study” or “investigate.”^v It is also the root of the word *Derasha*, which means “homily” or “sermon.” The first five books of the *Tanach* are called the *Torah* or *Chumash*, and mean ‘law’ or ‘instruction.’ They contain God’s 613 written commandments given to Moses and Israel through the Mosaic covenant. Accompanying the written law was the oral law, the *Mishna*. This narrative and its accompanying rabbinic commentaries, the *Gemara* comprise the two volumes of the *Talmud* (Jerusalem and Babylonian). *Talmud* means “teaching” or “study.”^{vi}

Midrash (plural, *Midrashim*) is the rabbinic sages, called *Chazal’s* methodical and thought-provoking process to teach the *Tanach* and the *Talmud*. The Encyclopedia Britannica says: “*Midrash* developed into a sophisticated interpretive system that reconciled apparent biblical contradictions, established the scriptural basis of new laws, and enriched biblical content with new meaning.” And the Jewish Encyclopedia says, “The term *Midrash* designates an exegesis which, going more deeply than the mere literal sense, attempts to penetrate the spirit of the Scriptures, to examine the text from all sides, and thereby to derive interpretations which are not immediately obvious.”^{vii} *Midrash* is vast and complex, containing multiple approaches. In one form it can conclude from comparing scriptural text to parables, very similar to the way *Rabbi Yeshua* taught His disciples. In another form, it can expand the biblical narrative to create a *Midrashic* story, thereby filling in missing gaps in scripture. The method of *Midrashic* study is incorporated into the *Gemara*, which is the rabbinic commentary on the *Talmud*.

For the *Tanach* however, these commentaries are included in separate or consolidated volumes within the *Tanach* and are referred to as *Midrash*. Our studies will focus on this latter part. However, there may be instances where it is appropriate to reference the *Talmud* for expansion of *Halakhic*, i.e., Mosaic Law related topics. One critical missing aspect of rabbinic *Midrash* is the absence of New Testament scripture. For purposes of these teachings, I will infuse, where applicable parables and narrative from the New Testament that further expand *Chazal’s* commentaries to give a complete picture.

Compilation of the *Midrash* occurred over many centuries, with some of the earliest writings dating back to around 400 B.C., and later writings dating from 10 A.D. to 1200 A.D.^{viii} Individual *Midrashim* were comprised of teachings from many different rabbis, woven together over time within the framework of the oral tradition. There is a beautiful coherence to the complex writings, and seeing so many brilliant minds working collectively and harmoniously together is not only awe-inspiring but is clear evidence of its divine inspiration. *Yeshua* was familiar with these writings and style of teaching and used them often with His disciples and the Jewish people. For example, the *Talmud* says in section *Mas. Yoma 85b*, “*But to save life one may take one down even from the altar. Now if in the case of this one, where it is doubtful whether there is*

any substance in his words or not, yet the service in the Temple which is important enough to suspend the Sabbath, how much more should the saving of human life suspend the Sabbath laws! R. Jonathan b. Joseph said: For it is holy unto you; i.e., the Sabbath is committed to your hands, not you to its hands."

And in the New Testament, we read, "Then He [Yeshua] said to them, what man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath" (Matthew 12:11-12). "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27).

Midrashic Structure

Midrash exists to two major forms: *Halakhic* or *Halakha* which incorporates the body of legal teachings derived from the *Tanach* and the *Talmud*, i.e., study of the Mosaic Law, and *Haggada* which is the interpretive and homiletic storytelling derived from the *Tanach's* biblical narrative. Included in this category are also stories about the rabbis, historiography, proverbs, and parables that are metaphoric. The word *Halakhah* is derived from the Hebrew root *Halak*, which means "to go," "to walk," or "to travel." *Midrash Haggada*, a subset of *Haggada* generally correlates directly to a biblical verse or topic and incorporates interpretations of the biblical text. Interpretations are simply the rabbi's attempt to explain the meaning of the text without projecting their meaning into it.

Midrash Haggada typically incorporates several systematic elements into its methodology: A *Mashal*, which is the *Midrashic* story; a *Nimshal* which is an explanation of the *Mashal*; and a rabbinical question characteristic of *Chazal*: "*Lama Li*," which translates: "Why do I need this word, verse, or phrase?" Or, "What does the *Mashal* add to my understanding of the text, and what would be missing if I read the text without the aid of this *Mashal*?" These are attached to the biblical story from the *Tanach*, which is called the *Akeda*. Elements of the *Akeda* can be pulled directly into the *Midrashic* narrative.

The *Mashal* can either a parable or an expansion of the biblical story that fills in missing gaps. It is usually introduced with a phrase like: "To what might this thing be compared?" Or, "This may be compared to?" The *Nimshal* can also be in parable form or can be an expansion of the biblical story. It is usually introduced with the word "thus." There can be more than one *Mashal* or *Nimshal* in a *Midrashic* narrative. Other elements may include rabbinical questions that directly challenge the narrative, sometimes rhetorical, or a proof-text called a *Petihta*, which is a verse from another part of the bible that is used for commentary.

Conclusion

The *Midrashic* method of biblical study is very different from contemporary western teachings. Surprisingly, early Fathers of the Christian church drew considerably from the teachings of *Chazal*, particularly areas dealing with the moral code. Some familiar names are the Basilius of Cappadocia, Hieronymus, and Chrysostomus.

Midrash is not a quest for knowledge, but rather a quest to understand the intent or meaning of the biblical text. It is at the very core and essence of Jewish thinking, like a student who is constantly asking questions and seeking to understand the unsearchable depths of God's wisdom. It exhaustively explores both the literal meaning of the text and its homiletical possibilities with the assumption that the Bible contains an unknown number and possibly infinite levels of meaning. It attempts to reconstruct the reason behind conflicting interpretations. Its writings contain poignant and figurative language, even playing on words to convey the complex understandings uncovered in the biblical text. It is framed in open dialog, discussion, and debate, using every conceivable combination and permutation within the linguistic realm of the *Tanach*. It compares biblical narrative and deduces alternatives through contextual contradictions, thereby expanding our understanding beyond the surface translation of the text.

The study of *Midrash* is, however, just a tool. If we are not careful, it can be over-analyzed, and in some instances, the mysteries of scripture remain hidden. But it is a powerful tool that establishes a methodology that I believe will help us explore God's written word, moving our thinking to one that is more closely aligned with that of the biblical authors. This so we can further understand His revealed nature through scripture, and our relationship with Him, and bring us to a place of knowing Him more deeply and intimately. It should transform our thinking from an earthly perspective to a divine one, this transformation being crucial to God's necessity in partnering with us to establish His kingdom.

Amen!

ⁱ Revelation 5:9.

ⁱⁱ All Scripture quotations are taken from the New King James Bible (NKJV) unless otherwise noted, Thomas Nelson Inc., 1982.

ⁱⁱⁱ Romans 11:29.

^{iv} Isaiah 40:28.

^v Peters, Mimi. *Learning to read Midrash*. Urim Publications, ISBN 965-7108-57-8.

^{vi} Hackett, Lou. *Judaism, Talmud and Midrash*. Encyclopedia Britannica.

^{vii} Jacobs, Joseph and Horovitz, S. *Origin of the Midrash Historical View*. Jewish Encyclopedia, The unedited full-text of the 1906 Jewish Encyclopedia.

^{viii} Rodkinson, Michael L. *Babylonian Talmud, Book 10: History of the Talmud*. M1. 1918.