Genesis Rabbah in Text and Context

Edited by
SARIT KATTAN GRIBETZ,
DAVID M. GROSSBERG,
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and PETER SCHÄFER

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Preface

This volume presents essays that emerged from an international conference about the late antique rabbinic commentary on Genesis, *Genesis Rabbah*, held at Princeton University in May 2013. Funding and support were generously provided by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and by Princeton's Department of Religion and the Program in Judaic Studies.

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Citations throughout the volume adhere closely to the SBL Handbook of Style (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999), and references to *Genesis Rabbah* typically refer to the text in Julius Theodor and Chanoch Albeck, *Midrash Bereshit Rabba: Critical Edition with Notes and Commentary*, 3 volumes (2nd printing; Jerusalem: Wahrmann Books, 1965), unless otherwise noted.

New York City, Ithaca, Princeton, and Berlin, 2016

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Abbreviations

AJS Review	*Association for Jewish Studies Review*
BDB	*Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*
BM	British Museum
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
DJD	*Discoveries in the Judaean Desert*
EH	*Ecclesiastical History*
EJ	*Encyclopaedia Judaica, Second Edition*
HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
JAAR	*Journal of the American Academy of Religion*
JAOS	*Journal of the American Oriental Society*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JECS	*Journal of Early Christian Studies*
JJS	*Journal of Jewish Studies*
JPS	Jewish Publication Society
JQR	*Jewish Quarterly Review*
JSIJ	*Jewish Studies: An Internet Journal*
JSJ	*Journal for the Study of Judaism*
JW	*Jewish War*
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
MGWJ	*Monatsschrift für die Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judenthums*
MT	Masoretic Text
NJPS	New Jewish Publication Society of America Tanakh
OTP	*Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols., ed., James H. Charlesworth
PG	Patrologia graeca = Patrologiae cursus completus: Series graeca (ed. J.-P. Migne; 162 vols. Paris, 1857–1886)
QG	*Questions on Genesis*
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature

Introduction: *Genesis Rabbah*, a Great Beginning

Sarit Kattan Gribetz and *David M. Grossberg*

The first lines of *Genesis Rabbah*, the rabbinic collection of exegetical traditions on the book of Genesis, make a bold and far-reaching declaration. The midrash inquires: what does the opening word of the Bible, "bereshit" (lit., "in the beginning") mean, and what does this word teach about the world's origins? By splitting the first word of Genesis into its components (*be-reshit*), reading it intertextually alongside two verses about Wisdom from the book of Proverbs, and using a parable about a king, a royal architect, and a blueprint, the midrash explains that God created the world *using the Torah.* The midrash commences indirectly with a verse from Proverbs, in which personified Wisdom, interpreted as the Torah itself, speaks:

Rabbi Hoshaya commenced, "Then I was beside him, like an *amon*; and I was [daily] his delight" (Prov 8:30) – … *amon* means "artisan": The Torah says, "I was the artisan-tool of the Holy One blessed be He." In the ordinary ways of the world, a mortal king who builds a palace does not build it according to his own knowledge but according to the knowledge of his artisan; and even the artisan does not build according to his own knowledge, but he has parchments and tablets in order to know how he will order the rooms and doors. So also the Holy One blessed be He looked into the Torah and created the world. And so the Torah says, "In the beginning (*bereshit*) God created" (Gen 1:1). And "beginning" means Torah, as it is written, "The Lord created me at the beginning (*reshit*) of his work" (Prov 8:22).[1]

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[1] *Genesis Rabbah* 1:1 (ed. Theodor-Albeck): ר׳ אושעיא פתח ואהיה אצלו אמון ואהיה שעשועים … אמון אומן התורה אומרת אני הייתי כלי אומנתו של הקדוש ברוך הוא, בנוהג שבעולם מלך בשר ודם בונה פלטין ואינו בונה אותה מדעת עצמו אלא מדעת אומן, והאומן אינו בונה אותה מדעתו אלא דיפטראות ופינקסות יש לו לידע היאך הוא עושה חדרים ופשפשים, כך היה הקדוש ברוך הוא מביט בתורה ובורא העולם, והתורה א׳ בראשית ברא אלהים ואין ראשית אלא תורה היך מה דאת אמר י״י קנני ראשית דרכו וגו׳. On this text, see Arthur Marmorstein, "The Introduction of R. Hoshaya to the First Chapter of Genesis Rabbah," in *Louis Ginzberg Jubilee Volume: On the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday, English Section* (ed. Saul Lieberman, et al.; New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1945), 247–252; Philip S. Alexander, "Pre-emptive Exegesis: Genesis Rabba's Reading of the Story of Creation," *JJS* 43 (1992): 230–245; Maren R. Niehoff, "*Creatio ex Nihilo* Theology in *Genesis Rabbah* in Light of Christian Exegesis," *HTR* 99 (2005): 37–64; Peter Schäfer, "Bereshit Bara Elohim: Bereshit Rabba, Parashah 1, Reconsidered," in *Empsychoi Logoi – Religious Innovations in Antiquity: Studies in Honor of Pieter Willem van der Horst* (ed. Alberdina Houtman, Albert de Jong, and Magda Misset-van de Weg; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 267–289; and Burton L. Visotzky, "Genesis Rabbah 1:1 – Mosaic Torah as the Blueprint of the Universe – Insights from the Roman World," in *Talmuda de-Eretz Israel: Archaeology and the Rabbis in Late Antique Palestine* (Studia Judaica 73; ed. Steven Fine and Aaron Koller; Boston: De Gruyter, 2014), 127–140.

This brief introductory midrash posits that Torah dwelled with God prior to the creation of the world and served as the plans for God's creation. This argument is made through intricate midrashic interpretation, pairing two unrelated biblical verses that share a common root, *reshit*, with a third text about Wisdom that uses the obscure word *amon*. Closely interpreting the biblical text, the midrash suggests, is the first step to making sense of God, the created world, and history, and it is this interpretive enterprise to which the remainder of *Genesis Rabbah* devotes itself. The midrash also implies that the traditions within *Genesis Rabbah*, as interpretations of the opening book of the Torah, themselves already existed alongside God from the very beginning of time. Burton Visotzky has read the two types of materials the architect in the parable uses, tablets and parchments, as signifying the Written and Oral Torah: "Without both the written Mosaic Torah scroll, and its oral Torah of *midrash* on the *pinax*, there would be no universe."[2] The word "Torah" in this text, therefore, encompasses the most expansive sense of the word, as God's Wisdom; its textual sense, as the Bible; and its interpretation through midrash.[3] *Genesis Rabbah*, the parable thus suggests, may be a new midrash, but its wisdom is as primordial and generative as the Written Torah. Through this opening interpretation, *Genesis Rabbah* boldly declares that it, like the Torah itself, is a beginning, a pioneer and an archetype for expressing the divine will. And, *Genesis Rabbah* is, in fact, innovative in many ways. In this introductory essay, we explore *Genesis Rabbah* as "A Great Beginning," the approximate translation of its Hebrew title, *Bereshit Rabbah* (lit., "A Great 'In the Beginning'"). Although, as we will discuss in what follows, this title is a medieval innovation, it is a surprisingly apt characterization of this important midrash as a novel rabbinic composition and of the significance of its scholarly study as a key to understanding rabbinic Judaism in its late antique context.

Genesis Rabbah, which dates to the amoraic period, is the first work of rabbinic midrash on the book of Genesis. Earlier, tannaitic, works of midrash were organized around the books of Exodus (the *Mekhilta*), Leviticus (the *Sifra*), Numbers (*Sifre Numbers*), and Deuteronomy (*Sifre Deuteronomy*), presumably owing to these biblical books' focus on judicial issues.[4] It is for this reason that

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[2] Visotzky, "Mosaic Torah as the Blueprint of the Universe," 140.

[3] The word *midrash* is derived from the Hebrew root *d-r-sh* (to search or inquire in general terms, and to investigate a passage of scripture in particular). The term can refer either to a single interpretation of a verse or an edited collection of rabbinic exegetical interpretations, such as *Genesis Rabbah*. On the term's early usage, see Paul Mandel, "The Origins of *Midrash* in the Second Temple Period," in *Current Trends in the Study of Midrash* (Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 106; ed. Carol Bakhos; Leiden: Brill, 2006), 9–34.

[4] Scholars have reconstructed additional tannaitic midrashim as well, including *Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai*, *Sifre Zuta*, *Midrash Tannaim*, and *Sifre Zuta Devarim*, on which see Menahem Kahana, "The Halakhic Midrashim," in *The Literature of the Sages, Second Part* (ed. Shmuel Safrai, Zeev Safrai, Joshua Schwarz, Peter J. Tomson; Assen: Van Gorcum and Fortress, 2007), 3–103.

these earlier works are known as halakhic ("judicial" or "legal") midrashim. But there is no work of midrash from the tannaitic period on the book of Genesis. Through its creative interpretations of this biblical text, *Genesis Rabbah* explores theological ideas and relates to its religious and cultural contexts in ways that the earlier collections of rabbinic traditions – the tannaitic midrashim, the Mishnah, and the Tosefta – did not. Its organization around the rich narratives of the book of Genesis and the exegetical style of its interpretations allowed its authors to exercise a creative freedom unseen in earlier rabbinic genres.

Genesis Rabbah is also the first exemplar of a new rabbinic genre that emerged around the fifth century, which scholars label aggadic ("narrative") midrash. Earlier works of midrash were focused on judicial concerns, even as they contained aggadic material. In contrast, the main interests of *Genesis Rabbah* are aggadic. Following *Genesis Rabbah* in this genre of aggadic midrash are *Leviticus Rabbah*, *Lamentations Rabbah*, and the *Pesiqta of Rav Kahana*, all of which are generally dated to around the fifth century C. E.[5] These four works originated in Roman Palestine and are often referred to collectively as the "classical Palestinian midrashim." The subsequent centuries saw the production of books of aggadic midrash organized around other books of the Hebrew Bible as well. Scholars have grouped aggadic midrashim into two distinct genres: "exegetical midrash" proceeds verse by verse to provide interpretations and expansions relevant to each verse, and at times related to each word in the verse, and it is into this category that *Genesis Rabbah* fits, while "homiletical midrash" preserves thematically-oriented homilies or homiletic material related to the verses or sections of the Bible under consideration, which might have corresponded to the weekly lectionary read in the synagogue.[6]

The textual relationship of *Genesis Rabbah* to other works of aggadic midrash, especially *Leviticus Rabbah*, and to the Palestinian Talmud, remains a matter of scholarly investigation, in large part because rabbinic texts are complex and

[5] On the dating of these works, see Günter Stemberger, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrasch, Ninth Edition* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2011), an earlier edition of which was translated as H. L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash, Second Edition* (trans. and ed. Markus Bockmuehl; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996). On the dating of *Genesis Rabbah*, see Chanoch Albeck, *Einleitung und Register zum Bereschit Rabba, Second Printing* (Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1965), 94–96. The dating of these works is, of course, imprecise and always somewhat tentative.

[6] For an overview of the genre and midrashim, see Marc Hirshman, "Aggadic Midrash," and Myron B. Lerner, "The Works of Aggadic Midrashim and the Esther Midrashim," in *Literature of the Sages, Second Part*, 107–132, 133–230; Avigdor Shinan, "The Late Midrashic, Paytanic, and Targumic Literature," in *Cambridge History of Judaism Volume IV: The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period* (ed. Steven T. Katz; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 678–698; and Joseph Heinemann, "The Nature of the Aggadah," in *Midrash and Literature* (ed. Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 41–55.

multi-faceted works, and their transmission history is difficult to trace.[7] The named rabbinic texts, whether *Genesis Rabbah* and *Leviticus Rabbah*, the Mishnah and the Tosefta, or the Bavli and the Yerushalmi, are not authored works in the ancient or modern sense but rather anthological collections of traditions organized according to particular rubrics (a biblical text, for instance, or the six orders of the Mishnah) and sometimes set within larger interpretive frameworks (such as the *gemara* of the Talmuds). Individual units of tradition were preserved, adapted, and transmitted from generation to generation and occasionally gathered into collections, which themselves were preserved, adapted and transmitted.[8] This temporal process means that traditions can appear in multiple variants within each collection and between collections, and that the contents both of the individual traditions and of the collections themselves changed over time. It is clear, for instance, that *Genesis Rabbah*, *Leviticus Rabbah*, and the Yerushalmi share significant amounts of material. What is less clear is the precise level of dependency and primacy of each collection to the others and of each individual tradition to its variant versions. Even if the general scholarly consensus of the chronological order of these three works (Yerushalmi, *Genesis Rabbah*, *Leviticus Rabbah*) is correct, we still cannot necessarily assume that specific variants found in more than one of these collections ought to be placed in this same chronological order. Much the same could be said of all of the works within the classical rabbinic corpus.

Genesis Rabbah is also a pioneering work in that it introduced a new form of interpretation known as the "petihah," or in Aramaic "petihta," which is

[7] See Ofra Meir, "The Redaction of Genesis Rabbah and Leviticus Rabbah" [Hebrew], *Te'udah* 11 (1996): 61–90; Hans-Jürgen Becker, *Die großen rabbinischen Sammelwerke Palästinas: Zur literarischen Genese von Talmud Yerushalmi und Midrash Bereshit Rabba* (Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum 70; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1999); ibid., "Texts and History: The Dynamic Relationship between Talmud Yerushalmi and Genesis Rabbah," in *The Synoptic Problem in Rabbinic Literature* (ed. Shaye J.D. Cohen; Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 2000), 145–158; Chaim Milikowsky, "On the Formation and Transmission of Bereshit Rabba and the Yerushalmi: Questions of Redaction, Text-Criticism and Literary Relationships," *JQR* 92 (2002): 521–567; Burton L. Visotzky, *Golden Bells and Pomegranates: Studies in Midrash Leviticus Rabbah* (Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum 94; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2003), 31–40.

[8] This matter has been studied most rigorously in connection to the redaction of the Babylonian Talmud. See Shamma Friedman, "A Critical Study of *Yevamot X* with a Methodological Introduction" [Hebrew], in *Meḥqarim u-Meqorot* (ed. H.Z. Dimitrovsky, New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1977), 277–441; David Weiss Halivni, *Midrash, Mishnah, and Gemara: The Jewish Predilection for Justified Law* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 38–65; Shamma Friedman, "A Good Story Deserves Retelling: The Unfolding of the Akiva Legend," *Jewish Studies – An Internet Journal* 3 (2004): 55–93; David Weiss Halivni., *The Formation of the Babylonian Talmud* (Introduced, Translated and Annotated by Jeffrey L. Rubenstein; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Moulie Vidas, *Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014). And see nn. 18 and 33, below.

characteristic of the midrash aggadah genre broadly.[9] In this form, exemplified in the text discussed above from the first lines of *Genesis Rabbah*, a seemingly unrelated verse from elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible is cited. The verse is then interpreted in several surprising ways until the flow of the interpretations leads back to the verse from the book of Genesis that stands at the heart of the pericope.[10] This form suggests that aggadic midrash might have originated in synagogue settings or in rabbinic houses of study as sermons or homilies on the weekly readings from the Torah.[11]

The petihah is also integral to the organization of the collection. Printed editions of *Genesis Rabbah*, including the 1878 Vilna edition, typically have 100 sections, though manuscripts vary between 97 and 101 sections. The sections are reasonably consistent across the manuscripts, each beginning with an interpretation of the same biblical verse as the midrash proceeds through the book of Genesis.[12] Almost all of the sections contain at least one petihah. Approximately half of the sections line up with an "open" or "closed" section of the Torah (these are verses in the Torah scroll that are traditionally written with a space following the verse, apparently indicating the end of a section; either the space continues to the end of the line, as in the last line of a modern paragraph, which is called a closed section, or it separates between one verse and the subsequent verse on the same line, called an open section). It is uncertain whether the sections of *Genesis Rabbah* were originally all supposed to line up with open and closed sections of the Torah, or perhaps with the cycle of Torah readings as carried out in Roman Palestine in Late Antiquity, or based on some other organizing principle, for example according to the theme or content of the verses themselves.[13] Regardless of the initial reasoning, the petihot serve as an organizational and structural backbone for *Genesis Rabbah*.

Genesis Rabbah is also unique among rabbinic compositions because, on the one hand, it is considered to be an early text, the first example of midrash

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[9] Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 244: "The Petiḥah is occasionally found in halakhic midrash (but always doubtful)."

[10] There are several variations on the form of a petihah. See Albeck, *Einleitung und Register zum Bereschit Rabba*, 11–19.

[11] Although the written texts we have today likely do not preserve the precise style used to convey these interpretations to a synagogue audience.

[12] See the table in Albeck, *Einleitung und Register zum Bereschit Rabba*, 97–102.

[13] On the organization of *Genesis Rabbah* into sections, see Albeck, *Einleitung und Register zum Bereschit Rabba*, 97–102; Joseph Heinemann, "The Structure and Division of Genesis Rabba" [Hebrew], *Annual of Bar-Ilan University Studies in Judaica and Humanities* 9 (1971): 279–289; Ofra Meir, "Chapter Division in Midrash Genesis Rabbah" [Hebrew], *Proceedings of the Tenth World Congress of Jewish Studies* 3.1 (1990): 101–108; Abraham Goldberg, "Baʿayot ʿarikhah ve-siddur bivere'shit rabbah u-ve-va-yiqra' rabbah she-terem ba'u ʿal pitronan," in *Meḥqerei Talmud III* (ed. Yaakov Sussmann and David Rosenthal; Jerusalem: Magnes, 2005), 130–153; Shlomo Naeh, "On the Septennial Cycle of the Torah Readings in Early Palestine," *Tarbiz* 74 (2004): 43–75.

aggadah, yet on the other hand it is not mentioned by name before the geonic period. In contrast, the Mishnah and perhaps even the Tosefta seem to have been considerably stable textual forms already in the classical rabbinic period; and the *Sifra* and *Sifre* (and perhaps the *Mekhilta* as well[14]) are cited as known collections already within the Babylonian Talmud. The name of the rabbinic commentary on Genesis, however, is not at all fixed even as late as the redaction of the Babylonian Talmud, and is instead referred to variously in geonic works and manuscripts as *Bereshit of Rabbi Hoshaya* or *Baraita de-Bereshit Rabbah*, among other attested names.[15] Even the significance of "Rabbah" in the title is uncertain. It might have originally referred to Hoshaya himself (in some manuscripts the midrash begins, "Rabbi Hoshaya Rabbah commenced …") and was adapted from there as a title for the entire book, or it might have been a reference to the size of the book in comparison to the biblical book of Genesis or to an earlier or shorter (currently unknown) collection of midrash on Genesis.[16] In any case, this modifier was eventually used, in the medieval period, not only for this text but also for several other midrashim, now grouped together in the so-called *Midrash Rabbah*. In the rabbinic period itself, however, it would seem to be anachronistic to speak simply of the existence of a text or book – rather than a constellation of developing traditions and interpretations – named *Genesis Rabbah*.[17]

It is for this reason that scholars have questioned the extent to which it is feasible to seek, as it were, the "first edition," or *Urtext*, of *Genesis Rabbah* or of similar rabbinic compositions.[18] As mentioned above, the bounds and contents of these collections were somewhat fluid during the rabbinic period. This does not mean that the effort of text criticism – to develop more precise versions of each text based on all available manuscript evidence – is not of great value.

[14] The term *mekhilta* in the Talmud has a general meaning of "collection" or "chapter."

[15] See Albeck, *Einleitung und Register zum Bereschit Rabba,* 93–96.

[16] See Albeck, *Einleitung und Register zum Bereschit Rabba,* 93–94.

[17] Martin S. Jaffee, "Rabbinic Authorship as a Collective Enterprise," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature* (ed. Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 17–37, at 25, compares the editing of rabbinic collections to "the editing of a lecture series." Perhaps these rubrics of organization might have been more akin to programs of study than to fixed books.

[18] Peter Schäfer, "Research into Rabbinic Literature: An Attempt to Define the Status Quaestionis," *JJS* 37 (1986): 139–152; Chaim Milikowsky, "The Status Quaestionis of Research in Rabbinic Literature," *JJS* 39 (1988): 201–211; Peter Schäfer, "Once Again the Status Quaestionis of Research in Rabbinic Literature: An Answer to Chaim Milikowsky," *JJS* 40 (1989): 89–94; and Chaim Milikowsky, "Reflections on the Practice of Textual Criticism in the Study of Midrash Aggada: The Legitimacy, the Indispensability and the Feasibility of Recovering and Presenting the (Most) Original Text," in *Current Trends in the Study of Midrash* (Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 106; ed. Carol Bakhos; Leiden: Brill, 2006), 79–110. And see most recently, Peter Schäfer and Chaim Milikowsky, "Current Views on the Editing of Rabbinic Texts of Late Antiquity: Reflections on a Debate after Twenty Years," in *Rabbinic Texts and the History of Late-Roman Palestine* (Proceedings of the British Academy 165; ed. Martin Goodman and Philip Alexander, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 79–88; and n. 8, above.

Most scholars of rabbinic literature would agree that there are better and worse editions, more and less corrupted manuscripts, and earlier and later variants of traditions. These efforts must always be tempered, however, with an awareness of the nature of rabbinic tradition-making itself as a more dynamic process than simple traditional authorship.[19]

Genesis Rabbah also marks an important starting point in terms of its historical relationship with its Roman imperial context. More so than tannaitic midrashim and the Mishnah and Tosefta, *Genesis Rabbah* is characterized by its frequent use of Greek loan words and of concepts and metaphors from Greco-Roman culture.[20] The opening lines of the midrash, with which we began this essay, are a good example of this aspect of the work. With a rich Greek vocabulary, the midrash employs a parable about a king in the context of the Roman Empire,[21] no doubt drawing imperial allusions for its ancient audiences, and it uses an architectural analogy, perhaps gesturing to similar metaphors about the world's creation in classical and Hellenistic philosophy popular in the late antique east.[22] The artisan-tools that God as the divine architect employs by looking into the Torah are precisely those employed by an artisan of the eastern Roman Empire of the fifth century.[23]

Moreover, *Genesis Rabbah* is the first work of rabbinic midrash that postdates the Christianization of the Roman Empire. By the fifth century, the Empire had become, at least nominally, a Christian one.[24] The Emperor Constantine had converted to Christianity and, in 325, held the Council of Nicaea to standardize church doctrine; this same emperor, along with his mother Helen, began Christianizing Jerusalem and other parts of the Holy Land, erecting large churches and other monuments, and impacting the sacred topography of the region. Some scholars have read the midrash's opening lines about the Torah as God's blue-

[19] See Jaffee, "Rabbinic Authorship as a Collective Enterprise," 17–37.

[20] See Marc Hirshman, "The Greek Words in the Midrash Genesis Rabbah" [Hebrew], in *Tiferet Leyisrael: Jubilee Volume in Honour of Israel Francus* (ed. Joel Roth, Menahem Schmelzer, and Yaacov Francus; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 2010), 21–33; and ibid., "Reflections on the Aggada of Caesarea," in *Caesarea Maritima: A Retrospective after Two Millenia* (ed. Avner Raban and Kenneth G. Holum; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 469–475.

[21] See Marc Hirshman, "The Greek Words in the Midrash Genesis Rabbah," 21; ibid., "Reflections on the Aggada of Caesarea," 475; and Visotzky, "Mosaic Torah as the Blueprint of the Universe," 129–134. For a study of king parables in rabbinic literature, including earlier rabbinic compositions, see David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 19–21.

[22] E. g. Philo of Alexandria, in *De opificio mundi* 1.17–25, uses a similar analogy in his attempt to reconcile the account in Genesis with Plato's *Timeaus*.

[23] Visotzky, "Mosaic Torah as the Blueprint of the Universe," 129–134.

[24] As Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society: 200 B. C. E. to 640 C. E.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 179, notes, "it must be emphasized that christianization was a process, not a moment, which cannot be regarded as in any sense complete before the reign of Justinian [527–565], if then." See Peter Brown, *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianisation of the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

print for the universe as a polemic against alternative accounts of creation that placed another word – Christ (as *logos*) – at the beginning with God, articulated in the opening verses of the Gospel of John.[25] According to this reading, the rabbinic interpretation subverts an important component of Christian theology, and does so in its introductory section, proceeding frequently to confront Christian ideas, more and less subtly, throughout the remainder of the midrash. The interpretations in *Genesis Rabbah*, then, engage in these new religious and political circumstances within a recently-Christianized Roman Empire with creative and innovative exegetical strategies.

Thus far, we have discussed *Genesis Rabbah* as "A Great Beginning" from the perspective of its innovative theological content, its place in the rabbinic corpus, and its unique engagement with its cultural context. But this midrash is also an important beginning from the perspective of modern scholarship on rabbinic literature. One of the first and certainly the most ambitious and important of the early critical editions of rabbinic texts is Julius Theodor's edition of *Genesis Rabbah*, the publication of which started in 1912 and was completed by Chanoch Albeck after Theodor's death in 1921.[26]

Theodor and Albeck's edition answered a challenge laid down more than a century earlier by Leopold Zunz, a pivotal figure both of the modern critical study of Judaism, *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, and in the founding of midrashic studies. Zunz contributed to the *Wissenschaft* enterprise as part of the leadership of the *Verein für Cultur und Wissenschaft der Juden* in Berlin beginning in 1819, and as the editor of the *Zeitschrift für die Wissenschaft des Judenthums* from 1823.[27] His contributions to midrashic studies include his 1818 manifesto,[28]

[25] See e.g. Niehoff, "*Creatio ex Nihilo* Theology in *Genesis Rabbah* in Light of Christian Exegesis," 60–63.

[26] See Michael Sokoloff's article in this volume.

[27] The society was founded in 1819 under the name "Verein zur Verbesserung des Zustandes der Juden im deutschen Bundesstaate" and renamed in 1821 to "Verein für Cultur und Wissenschaft der Juden." It was founded by Eduard Gans, along with Heinrich Heine, Moses Moser, Michael Beer, and Zunz. See the opening statement of the *Zeitschrift für die Wissenschaft des Judenthums* by Immanuel Wolf, "Über den Begriff einer Wissenschaft des Judentums," or "On the Concept of a Science of Judaism," in *Ideas of Jewish History* (edited, with introduction and notes by Michael A. Meyer; Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 143–155. See also Paul Mendes-Flohr, "Jewish Scholarship as a Vocation," in *Perspectives on Jewish Thought and Mysticism: Proceedings of the International Conference Held by the Institute of Jewish Studies, University College of London, 1994, in Celebration of its Fortieth Anniversary, Dedicated to the Memory and Academic Legacy of its Founder Alexander Altmann* (ed. Alfred L. Ivry, Elliot R. Wolfson, and Allan Arkush; Australia: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998), 33–48. Mendes-Flohr, ibid., 36, refers to Zunz as "The principle architect of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*." See also Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, ed., *Encyclopaedia Judaica, Second Edition* (22 vols.; Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2007), s.v. "Wissenschaft des Judentums," 107: "'Science of Judaism' was born with the publication by Leopold Zunz of his pamphlet *Etwas über die rabbinische Literatur* (1818) and his first articles in *Zeitschrift*."

[28] "Manifesto," borrowing the language of Aaron W. Hughes, "'Medieval' and the Politics of Nostalgia: Ideology, Scholarship, and the Creation of the Rational Jew," in *Encountering*

Etwas über die rabbinische Literatur, often considered the first work of modern Jewish Studies, and his influential work, *Die gottesdienstliche Vorträge der Juden historisch entwickelt*, which first appeared in 1832. There is a clear ideological and methodological continuity from Zunz's *Etwas über die rabbinische Literatur*, in which he makes an explicit call to his colleagues to produce critical editions of rabbinic texts, and his study of *Genesis Rabbah* in his *Gottesdienstliche Vorträge*, to the works of Zacharias Frankel and Heinrich Graetz; [29] and from Frankel and Graetz to their student at the Breslau Rabbinical Seminary, Julius Theodor. Theodor's critical edition of *Genesis Rabbah*, which is still the standard edition of this midrash, was a direct response to Zunz's call. Indeed, on its publication, one reviewer noted: "Die Ausgabe des Bereschit Rabba gilt mit Recht als Ehrensache der Jüdischen Wissenschaft" ("This publication of *Genesis Rabbah* is rightly regarded as a matter of honor for Judaic Studies").[30] In this way the modern critical study of Judaism began with the critical study of midrash generally and *Genesis Rabbah* specifically.

It is, therefore, worthwhile to reflect on the current state of the study of midrash in light of the foundational work of Leopld Zunz. Zunz's *Gottesdienstliche Vorträge*, which analyzed midrash in the context of a historical study of the sermon, is still frequently cited in midrashic studies. It appeared in a revised second edition in German in 1892, which was published after Zunz's death in 1886, and in an updated Hebrew version, titled *Ha-Derashot be-Yisrael ve-Hishtalshelutan ha-Historit*, by Chanoch Albeck in 1945, with a second edition in 1954. Isidore Singer and Emil G. Hirsch's article on Zunz in the 1906 *Jewish Encyclopedi*a refers to this book as "the most important Jewish work published in the 19th century."[31] In this work, Zunz approaches the amoraic midrashim as discrete works of literature composed by a well-established community of rabbis, which

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the Medieval in Modern Jewish Thought (Supplements to the Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy 17; ed. James A. Diamond and Aaron W. Hughes; Leiden: Brill, 2012), 17–41, at 20. For a translation of excerpts from Zunz's *Etwas über die rabbinische Literatur*, see Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History, Second Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 221–230. For the German text, see Leopold Zunz, *Etwas über die rabbinische Literatur. Nebst Nachrichten über ein altes bis jetzt ungedrucktes hebräisches Werk* (Berlin, 1818; repr. ibid., *Gesammelte Schriften, volume I* [Berlin, 1875], 1–31).

[29] Which is not to say, of course, that Zunz, Fränkel, and Graetz did not have significant ideological disagreements. See Michael A. Meyer, "Jewish Religious Reform and Wissenschaft des Judentums: The Positions of Zunz, Geiger, and Frankel," *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 16 (1971): 19–41. Meyer, ibid., 39, writes, "The relationship between Zunz and Frankel never developed into bitter animosity. That happened only between Zunz and Frankel's protege, the historian Heinrich Graetz."

[30] Cited by Louis M. Barth, *An Analysis of Vatican 30* (New York: Hebrew Union College, 1973), 5.

[31] Isidore Singer and Emil G. Hirsch, "Zunz, Leopold," in *Jewish Encyclopedia* (12 vols.; ed. Isidore Singer, et al.; New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1901–1906), 699–704, at 701.

are precisely dateable by a close examination of internal textual clues.[32] This approach, although problematic, still informs the assumptions underlying much of midrashic studies.

The fact that Zunz's approach has held up so well certainly reflects favorably on the importance of his work. But the time has come for a reconsideration of these midrashic collections in their late antique textual and historical contexts. After all, almost two centuries have passed since Zunz's first publication and over a century since Theodor started his work on *Genesis Rabbah*. The last few decades have witnessed a fundamental reconsideration of well-entrenched scholarly assumptions regarding the structure and influence of the rabbinic community, the composition and transmission of rabbinic literature, and the use of rabbinic texts for the study of the ancient world, especially in the context of talmudic studies.[33] And yet it is remarkable that there is still no critical book-length study in English devoted wholly to *Genesis Rabbah* that systematically applies these recent scholarly advances to this rabbinic work. Albeck's Hebrew "Introduction to Genesis Rabbah," appended to the 1965 printing of Theodor's critical edition of *Genesis Rabbah*, is itself a comprehensive examination of the midrash. Also relevant is Jacob Neusner's *Comparative Midrash* (1986) on *Genesis Rabbah* and

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[32] Singer and Hirsch, "Zunz, Leopold," 701–702, write, "For all time to come the 'Gottesdienstliche Vorträge' fixed the method which the literary exploration of Jewish literature must follow to a certain degree, even though the merely formal criterion of the mention of a literary document is urged too strongly as decisive in assigning to it its date and place." It is also significant that Zunz's 1818 manifesto is titled, *Etwas über die rabbinische Literatur*, "On Rabbinic Literature," in essence offering the post-biblical traditions as a "Jewish literature" to serve against the Christian literature of modern Europe. It is not, of course, self-evident that these traditions are best described as "literature" in the modern sense and surely the rabbis do not refer to it as such. Zunz does comment with a question regarding whether this literature is best called "rabbinic," suggesting as an alternative "New Hebrew Literature" or "Jewish Literature." Eventually he rejects the idea of "rabbinic" literature entirely, not because it is not "literature" but because of its religious or theological overtones. See Meyer, "Jewish Religious Reform and Wissenschaft des Judentums," 30: "While for Zunz it was essential that the history of Jewish literature achieve equal status in the Literaturgeschichte of the nations, for Geiger it was Jewish theology that must be given its rightful place beside the theological investigations of Protestants and Catholics." Also, see ibid., 26.

[33] On the structure and influence of the rabbinic community, see Catherine Hezser, *The Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Roman Palestine* (Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum 66; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1997); Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society*; and Hayim Lapin, *Rabbis as Romans: The Rabbinic Movement in Palestine, 100–400 CE*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). On composition and transmission of rabbinic literature see nn. 8 and 18, above. On use of rabbinic texts for the study of the ancient world, see David Goodblatt, "Towards the Rehabilitation of Talmudic History," in *History of Judaism: The Next Ten Years* (ed. Baruch M. Bokser; Chico: Scholars Press, 1980), 31–44; Jacob Neusner, *In Search of Talmudic Biography: The Problem of the Attributed Saying* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1984); Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative, Art, Composition and Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 1–33; and Isaiah M. Gafni, "Rethinking Talmudic History: The Challenge of Literary and Redaction Criticism," *Jewish History* 25 (2011): 355–375.

Leviticus Rabbah;[34] Ofra Meir's *The Exegetical Narrative in Genesis Rabbah* (1987) and Joshua Levinson's *The Twice-Told Tale*, both about the literary dimensions of the midrash, and both also in Hebrew;[35] and Hans-Jürgen Becker's *Die großen rabbinischen Sammelwerke Palästinas* on *Genesis Rabbah* and its relationship to the *Yerushalmi* (1999).[36] And yet, while we have scholarly monographs dedicated to the other classical Palestinian midrashim such as Burton Vistozky's *Golden Bells and Pomegranates* (2003)[37] and Galit Hasan-Rokem's *Tales of the Neighborhood* (2003) on *Leviticus Rabbah*; Hasan-Rokem's *Web of Life* (2000) on *Lamentations Rabbah*; and Rachel Anisfeld's *Sustain Me with Raisin-Cakes* (2009) on *Pesiqta of Rav Kahana*;[38] no comparable monograph exists for *Genesis Rabbah*.[39]

It is our hope that this collection of essays, centered around analyses of the texts and contexts of *Genesis Rabbah* from a variety of new angles, will also serve as a beginning: a new point of departure and an inspiration for further research dedicated to *Genesis Rabbah* and the important moment in the development of rabbinic midrash and Jewish history that it represents. To return to the opening of *Genesis Rabbah*, with which we too have begun this book, perhaps the essays in this volume can serve as a set of blueprints – tablets and parchments – that will open doors and make room for more work on *Genesis Rabbah* in the future.

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[34] Jacob Neusner, *Comparative Midrash: The Plan and Program of Genesis Rabbah and Leviticus Rabbah* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986).

[35] Ofra Meir, *The Exegetical Narrative in Genesis Rabbah* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuchad, 1987); Joshua Levinson, *The Twice-Told Tale: A Poetics of the Exegetical Narrative in Rabbinic Midrash* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2005).

[36] See n. 7, above.

[37] See n. 7, above.

[38] Galit Hasan-Rokem, *Tales of the Neighborhood: Jewish Narrative Dialogues in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); ibid., *Web of Life: Folklore and Midrash in Rabbinic Literature* (trans. Batya Stern; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); and Rachel Anisfeld, *Sustain Me with Raisin-Cakes: Pesiqta deRav Kahana and the Popularization of Rabbinic Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

[39] There are, of course, synthetic studies of themes and literary features across the corpus of aggadic midrashim, such as Stern, *Parables in Midrash*; and Dina Stein, *Textual Mirrors: Reflexivity, Midrash, and the Rabbinic Self* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012). There are also several monographs about tannaitic midrashim and post-classical midrashim: e. g. Jacob Neusner, *Uniting the Dual Torah: Sifra and the Problem of the Mishnah* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Steven Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and Its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deuteronomy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991); Azzan Yadin, *Scripture as Logos* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Azzan Yadin-Israel, *Scripture and Tradition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); Rachel Adelman, *The Return of the Repressed: Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer and the Pseudepigrapha* (Leiden: Brill, 2009); Steven Daniel Sacks, *Midrash and Multiplicity: Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer and the Renewal of Rabbinic Interpretive Culture* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009); and Marc Bregman, *Tanhuma Yelammedenu Literature: Studies in the Evolution of the Versions* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2003).

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The volume's subtitle – *Text and Context* – summarizes the two focal points of the essays within: half of them study the text of *Genesis Rabbah* primarily in relation to other rabbinic compositions and trace the midrash's textual development in late antiquity and in modern scholarship; the other half explore in greater depth the cultural, literary, religious and political contexts in which *Genesis Rabbah* was composed and within which we ought to understand its allusions, exegetical preferences, and themes. Texts and contexts overlap, of course, and so the essays in the volume are ordered according to the section of *Genesis Rabbah* that they analyze, beginning with Michael Sokoloff's study of the manuscripts and ending with Marc Hirshman's analysis of the multiple endings of *Genesis Rabbah* and the implications of the various alternatives for the textual and contextual history of the midrash.

The papers that concentrate primarily on the text of *Genesis Rabbah* include the contributions by David M. Grossberg, Marc Hirshman, Joshua Levinson, Martin Lockshin, Chaim Milikowsky, and Michael Sokoloff. The overarching themes that emerge from these papers are the complex and multi-layered nature of this text in antiquity, the interpretive strategies that the midrash applies to the biblical text, the relationship of the traditions within the collection to one another, its redaction in the early medieval period, and its manuscript history. As a collection of traditions organized around biblical verses, the process both of collecting traditions and of organizing them around specific verses seems to have been ongoing over several centuries. For this reason, we often find "doublets," variant versions of a single tradition that are associated with distinct verses in the book of Genesis. Grossberg analyzes one instance of such a variant in order to shed light on how tradition units moved through the process of preservation and changed over time as they were adapted to changing social, cultural, and linguistic circumstances; Levinson demonstrates how this process of variation operates as part of the overall strategy of midrashic creation and facilities the creativity and unity of *Genesis Rabbah* as a whole; and Milikowsky reads a variant text that appears in *Genesis Rabbah* and *Leviticus Rabbah* to problematize the question of the temporal relationship of these collections to one another. The manuscript tradition, as well, presents challenging variety, both in terms of the reliability of various manuscripts and in terms of their fluidity. Sokoloff provides important data regarding how to approach the manuscripts in order to facilitate the best possible reading of this text; and Hirshman teases out, within the range of endings preserved in various manuscripts, an insight into a theological message that might have served to unify the collection as a whole in antiquity, and how and why it was later altered. And finally, Lockshin shows how an investigation of interpretive strategies across the midrash can better illuminate the range of interpretive possibilities available to and preferred by the rabbis of this particular midrashic collection.

The papers that concentrate primarily on reading *Genesis Rabbah* in its wider Jewish, Greco-Roman pagan, and early Christian context include the contributions of Carol Bakhos, Sarit Kattan Gribetz, Martha Himmelfarb, Laura Lieber, Maren Niehoff, and Peter Schäfer. Lieber reads *Genesis Rabbah* within a Jewish literary context, showing how works of piyyut, a genre of literature typically considered distinct from the rabbinic texts, can shed light on the narrative and performative dimensions of rabbinic texts and vice versa. Kattan Gribetz concentrates primarily on the Greco-Roman pagan context, showing how rabbinic storytellers were aware of and responded to Roman criticisms of Jewish observances. Bakhos, Himmelfarb, Niehoff, and Schäfer concentrate on the early Christian context and demonstrate that midrashic references to Christianity appear throughout the midrash although they are usually subtle – a counterintuitive interpretation of a biblical figure, an association of a verse with messianism, the omission of an obvious reading, the embedding of an exegesis within a dialogue between a rabbi and a heretic – but can be accessed through careful contextual readings. One important trend revealed by these essays is that *Genesis Rabbah* frequently engages with its Christian context through its development of biblical characters in ways that reveal awareness of and often efforts to undermine Christian exegetical and theological ideas associated with those same figures; these essays deal specifically with Enoch, Abraham, Abraham's family, Isaac, and Joseph as figures reimagined by rabbinic interpreters to counter contemporaneous Christian appropriations of those personalities. These six papers demonstrate that *Genesis Rabbah* does not ignore its wider cultural context but engages with it in sophisticated ways; the midrash, composed within the Roman Empire, can be read as participating in as well as contending with Greco-Roman intellectual culture. Far from being unconcerned with competing trends within Judaism, Greco-Roman paganism, and the rise of Christianity, the rabbis behind *Genesis Rabbah* devoted significant energy in their interpretation of Genesis to distinguish themselves and their readings from their Jewish and Gentile neighbors, colleagues, and competitors.

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Michael Sokoloff's paper, "The Major Manuscripts of *Genesis Rabbah*," details the history, from the sixteenth century to the twenty-first, of the printing of *Genesis Rabbah* alongside the available manuscripts of the text. The essay outlines the status of these printed editions and manuscripts, the relationships between them, and which manuscripts must be consulted in current studies of the midrash: (1) Theodor and Albeck's critical edition of the text, based on the MS BM Add. 27169; (2) MS Vat. 30, found in the critical apparatus of Theodor-Albeck's edition and generally a more "reliable" witness (exceptional sections are noted by the author) than any other manuscript; (3) MS Vat. 60, discovered after the publication of Theodor-Albeck's text, and also a composite

text; and (4) Geniza fragments from the Bodleian Library and the Taylor-Schechter Collections, some of which Theodor-Albeck mentions and about a dozen manuscripts (amounting to 60 pages of fragments) discovered by Sokoloff in his earlier work on the midrash, including an extremely important early and accurate manuscript (MS 2). The author concludes that, given the problems with the base text used in Theodor-Albeck's edition and new manuscript discoveries in the Vatican Library and the Cairo Geniza, the time has come for a new critical edition of the midrash to be produced, and he provides detailed guidelines for which manuscripts to consult alongside Theodor-Albeck in the meantime. This article serves as an important methodological starting point about which "text" to use in any analysis of *Genesis Rabbah*.

In "Between Narrative and Polemic: The Sabbath in *Genesis Rabbah* and the Babylonian Talmud," Sarit Kattan Gribetz studies some unusual aspects of the Sabbath that are emphasized in *Genesis Rabbah* and in the Babylonian Talmud, texts separated by a wide space of time and distance. Kattan Gribetz argues that these texts' emphasis on specific aspects of Sabbath observance such as tasty food, pleasant aromas, and the strategic advantages of observing the Sabbath in military contexts are illuminated by reading them against the background of Greco-Roman pagan and ancient Christian critiques of Jewish Sabbath practices. These same three themes are found in critics such as Pseudo-Ignatius, Martial, and Dio Cassius, who claimed that the food that Jews ate on the Sabbath was cold and unpalatable, that those who observed the Sabbath emitted unpleasant odors, and that Roman military advantages over the Jews owed to the Jews' passivity on the Sabbath. Kattan Gribetz suggests that both these polemical attacks and the counter-polemical narratives found in the rabbinic texts are each directed internally. The polemical accusations served as a warning to Romans, many of whom were in fact attracted to observing the Jewish day of rest, as Dio Cassius, Seneca, and Tertullian attest, to refrain from such an observance. The counter-polemical responses in *Genesis Rabbah* and the Babylonian Talmud exhort Jews, especially rabbinically oriented Jews, to remain faithful to Sabbath observance and to ignore such criticisms. Kattan Gribetz acknowledges that the relationship between these texts in *Genesis Rabbah* and the Babylonian Talmud is complex, and her analysis does not provide evidence of direct dependence. What draws them together, however, is their polemic tone, which is not as noticeable in important collections of Sabbath material in later texts such as *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer* and the *Tanhuma*.

Peter Schäfer's paper analyzes the figure of Enoch, especially the mysterious account of his disappearance in Gen 5:24, and *Genesis Rabbah*'s even more startling interpretations of the biblical episode. Schäfer argues that at stake for the rabbis was the question of Enoch's righteousness (what did the biblical "walking with God" imply?) as well as the matter of whether Enoch died before ascending to heaven or whether he was taken up alive (what did the phrase "he was no

more, for God took him" mean?). Early interpretations of the biblical passages, including those in the Septuagint, Ben Sira, and Philo, and later Christian patristic authors, all assume that Enoch was righteous and did not die, but was rather taken alive to commune with God. In stark contrast, *Genesis Rabbah* forcefully insists that Enoch was either fully or partially evil, and in each interpretation, the rabbis vehemently defend their position that Enoch must have died before being "taken" by God to the heavens. Rabbi Abbahu's perspective on Enoch in *Genesis Rabbah*, especially, Schäfer suggests, may have developed in conversation with, and opposition to, Christian adoptions of Enoch as a model for Christ. Enoch, the rabbis counter, was no righteous man who ascended to heaven, but a sinner who died on earth – implying, perhaps, that the same might be true for later figures modeled on or prefigured by Enoch.

Chaim Milikowsky's "Into the Workshop of the Homilist: Comparison of *Genesis Rabbah* 33:1 and *Leviticus Rabbah* 27:1" challenges the scholarly consensus that dates *Genesis Rabbah*'s composition as earlier than *Leviticus Rabbah*. Through a close comparison of parallel petihot in the two midrashic collections, Milikowsky argues that both sections rely on an earlier (now lost) version of the midrash, and that in their current forms *Leviticus Rabbah* preserves an earlier version of the extended petihah than does *Genesis Rabbah*. The implications of this conclusion, Milikowsky suggests, are twofold: first, we are able to isolate the ways in which the secondary formulator of the section in *Genesis Rabbah* altered the earlier petihah to fit his homiletical purposes, and, second, we are, as a result, better able to identify theological preferences particular to *Genesis Rabbah.* In one section, for example, *Genesis Rabbah* incorporates the idea of the world's coming destruction, and insists that while wicked people are able to destroy the world, the righteous have the capacity to save it, in contrast to *Leviticus Rabbah*, which presents a different view of the world's potential end.

Martha Himmelfarb's essay, "Abraham and the Messianism of *Genesis Rabbah*," juxtaposes *Genesis Rabbah*'s subdued eschatological expectations and conception of a messiah with the outsized role that the midrash attributes to Abraham as a salvific and redemptive patriarch. *Genesis Rabbah*'s Abraham shares traits with Jesus (salvific, suffering, anointed, chosen, even at times Davidic) and fulfills functions associated with Christ (mediating between God and humanity, performing healings and other miracles, and assisting God in the creation of the world). This midrashic portrayal can best be understood in the context of competing claims, such as those found in Paul's letter to the Galatians and in the writings of Origen and Eusebius, that believers in Christ were the true heirs of Abraham. Himmelfarb's analysis centers on *Genesis Rabbah*'s exegesis of Abram's call in Gen 12:1–3, and the ways in which the midrash uses these verses (reading them intertextually with other biblical passages) to present Abraham as an alternative to Christ, often associated in Christian literature with the very same passages *Genesis Rabbah* brings as proof texts. Abraham was a good alter-

native to Jesus in his human and divine aspects, *Genesis Rabbah* proposes, and Abraham's descendants in the flesh benefit from the blessings and salvation he offers them in the present.

In "The Family of Abraham in *Genesis Rabbah*," Carol Bakhos, too, investigates the figure of Abraham, focusing especially on the various ways in which the midrash portrays Abraham as a father, also in conversation with Christian adoptions of the patriarch. First, Bakhos finds that *Genesis Rabbah* clearly regards Abraham as the father of several children (Ishmael, Isaac, and the children of Keturah) and, as a consequence, of many nations, not only of Israel. Moreover, he cares for his children equally (it is God, not Abraham, who blesses Isaac), and even when he treats Isaac preferentially (e.g. bestowing upon him the birthright), he takes responsibility for his other children by giving them gifts as well. *Genesis Rabbah*'s characterization of Abraham in these terms, Bakhos argues, is exceptional within the rabbinic corpus: in other earlier, contemporaneous, and later midrashim, Isaac is elevated as Abraham's most legitimate or righteous son, the child Abraham truly loves, while his other children are discounted as second-class descendants. Second, *Genesis Rabbah* is also unique in the extent to which it depicts Abraham not only as Israel's biological ancestor, but also as a father of Israel in metaphysical, spiritual, and typological terms, again in contrast to other rabbinic texts that privilege Jacob as Israel's spiritual "father." That Abraham fathers many children, but is also singled out as Israel's biological and spiritual father, are thus aspects of Abraham's portrayal that the midrash holds in tension. Why? Bakhos notes that Paul's writings in the New Testament extend Abraham's fatherhood in similar ways – according to Romans and Galatians, followers of Christ can become blessed children of Abraham, if not biologically then spiritually, and Abraham thus becomes the father of many children. Whereas such Christian texts present Abraham as their spiritual ancestor, and, in some passages, deny Israel descent from Abraham, *Genesis Rabbah* insists that the children of Israel are not only Abraham's biological descendants, but also that he is their father *in spirit*. Bakhos leaves open the question of whether *Genesis Rabbah* is familiar with such Christian claims and seeks to respond to them, or whether the midrashic portrayal of Abraham merely demonstrates the pliability of the biblical portrayal of the figure of Abraham and the fluidity of possible interpretations in late antiquity. Either way, however, we see that in *Genesis Rabbah* the children of Israel are portrayed as Abraham's heirs in both flesh and spirit. Like Schäfer's and Himmelfarb's, Bakhos' analysis illuminates *Genesis Rabbah*'s concerns with Christian appropriations of a biblical figure, in this case Abraham as a metaphysical ancestor, and with ancestry and chosenness more broadly, to highlight the intricate ways in which the midrash sought to stake its theological claims vis-a-vis competing Christian claims within its close reading of Genesis.

In "Origen's *Commentary on Genesis* as a Key to *Genesis Rabbah*," Maren Niehoff presents a concrete, local historical context in which *Genesis Rabbah*'s

engagement with Christian exegeses might be located. Origen and the rabbinic authors of *Genesis Rabbah* both composed systematic commentaries of the book of Genesis in Roman Palestine (specifically in and around Caesarea), participated in the Greco-Roman culture of the region, and made use of some of the same intellectual resources, including Aquila's translation of the Bible and the ideas of the Cynic Oenomaus of Gadara. Through comparative readings of passages about the patriarchs and their family members, Niehoff argues, first, that Origen and the rabbis share many hermeneutical and exegetical strategies in their writings, and that this should come as no surprise if we view *Genesis Rabbah* as contributing to the Hellenistic interpretive tradition that extended from Alexandria to Palestine. Beyond engaging in a shared intellectual project, however, Niehoff also highlights particular instances in which the two commentaries seem to be familiar with the other's exegetical positions and seek to respond to or critique specific interpretations they find problematic or unacceptable. In some cases, Origen explicitly refers to Jewish interpretations of Genesis, which appear in their earliest forms in *Genesis Rabbah*. Niehoff argues that if Origen's own commentary was developed with rabbinic ideas in mind, then Origen's work can also be used as a lens into *Genesis Rabbah*'s earliest midrashic formulations from the mid-third century. In other cases, Niehoff identifies instances in which *Genesis Rabbah* seems to be aware of Origen's interpretations and offers readings that directly argue against Origen's positions, or modifies its own interpretations in light of criticisms launched against them by Origen. By placing Origen and the rabbis of *Genesis Rabbah* in conversation with one another, Niehoff explores *Genesis Rabbah*'s engagement with Christian exegesis not as a theoretical possibility but as a historical occurrence and highlights the ways in which each text both creates the conditions for interaction and responds to competing interpretations, and yet also participates within a single Hellenistic hermeneutical discourse.

Laura Lieber turns from patriarchal to matriarchal figures in her essay, "Stage Mothers: Performing the Matriarchs in *Genesis Rabbah* and Yannai." At the heart of Lieber's paper is the question of how midrash and piyyut (liturgical poetry) – two different modes of interpretation – rhetorically and performatively create characters out of the biblical texts they exegete and in light of the audiences they engage, in more public liturgical contexts within the synagogue (piyyut) as well as in more intellectually elite, scholastic contexts of rabbinic study-houses (midrash). Through an analysis of the matriarchs – Sarah, Rachel, Leah, and the personified Zion – in *Genesis Rabbah* and the poetry of Yannai, Lieber demonstrates the ways in which these women gain voices and vivid personalities far beyond their biblical presentations. *Genesis Rabbah* is inclined towards presenting its matriarchs as strong, outspoken women, a trend that Yannai sustains (often incorporating similar readings) but in more positive and less critical ways than the midrash, and with a more univocal, rather than anthological,

authorial voice. Audiences would hear these women's voices – mediated through the voice of the male *hazzan*, who embodies the matriarch within the space of the synagogue – and relate to their many emotional dimensions of longing, persevering, suffering and celebrating. By juxtaposing midrashic interpretations of these characters with those developed in Yannai's piyyutim, Lieber allows us to consider that midrash was not the only mode of biblical interpretation in late antique Palestine, and therefore neither was it inevitable. Even as the same interpretive building blocks were used by the redactors of *Genesis Rabbah* and Yannai, Lieber characterizes midrash as more direct, detailed and emotionally distant, focused as it is on explicating the text and conveying its multiple possible meanings, while she presents piyyut as more dramatic, immersive, and affectively engaging, telling a single story in dramatic fashion. Lieber's analysis reminds us of the possibilities and limits of genre, style and rhetoric: midrash and piyyut, even when they share basic interpretations, convey meaning and emotion in unique ways.

Joshua Levinson's essay, "Composition and Transmission of the Exegetical Narrative in *Genesis Rabbah*," turns to the textual strategies that undergird *Genesis Rabbah*'s exegetical narratives about patriarchal and matriarchal figures and the many layers of midrashic readings that each narrative contains within it. Levinson identifies two narrative devices – narrative doublets and layered redaction – employed within *Genesis Rabbah* to highlight the compositional and editorial creativity of the oral-textual community responsible for the midrash. Through these literary strategies, which involve applying an exegetical insight to two parallel biblical narratives or layering multiple midrashim within a single narrative, *Genesis Rabbah* is able to create an essentially new midrash out of (or on top of) a preexisting one. This process also allows new connections to be made between different plot points within and between the biblical stories in Genesis, weaving together the biblical narratives in unexpectedly innovative ways and creating more sustained exegetical narratives out of isolated midrashic insights. Beyond identifying these literary features, Levinson argues that often one half of a narrative doublet or part of a layered redaction is a later addition to the midrash, but not so late as to fit into the final editorial layer. That is, between the earliest stages of midrashic composition and the final layers of redaction and transmission, we see new midrashic insights created by those who introduced such secondary literary devices into the midrash. Levinson suggests that this intermediate step constitutes its own creative stage in the midrashic process, one that accounts for the sophistication of the final midrashic composition and yet also blurs the boundaries between creation, redaction, and transmission.

David M. Grossberg's "On Plane Trees and the Palatine Hill: Rabbi Yishmael and the Samaritan in *Genesis Rabbah* and the Later Palestinian Rabbinic Tradition" examines the topic of fixed and fluid traditions within the rabbinic corpus. Through a case study of a single passage – about a plane tree at the foot of Mount

Gerizim and an encounter between a rabbi and a Samarian at the site – Grossberg demonstrates that two obscure words, common in third or fourth century Palestine but rarely used in rabbinic texts, appear in *Genesis Rabbah* and preserve regional linguistic usages from that early period (rather than from the later redactional layers of the midrash). Once those terms were incorporated into later passages, however, the terms were misinterpreted and reused in different ways by later rabbinic composers and redactors, and so the same terms are employed with new meanings when they are used in other narratives in *Genesis Rabbah* from later strata and in other rabbinic compositions, including the *Yerushalmi*. The paper argues that, on the one hand, the original terms within this story retain their local meanings from a very early date (and thus this passage in the midrash is remarkably fixed), and yet retellings of the story and other instances in which the terms are used within *Genesis Rabbah* itself significantly shift those same terms' meanings (and thus the terms also reveal the linguistic and textual fluidity of the original narrative). A term can therefore be simultaneously fixed and fluid as a textual tradition, even within a single rabbinic composition. One of the terms at the center of the paper derives from Greek but becomes identified with a Latin term in the later passages, pointing towards the diverse – and dynamic – linguistic context in which *Genesis Rabbah* was composed and redacted.

In "*Peshat* in *Genesis Rabbah,*" Martin Lockshin analyzes the interpretive strategies and exegetical philosophy within *Genesis Rabbah* by turning to medieval discussions of the category of *peshat* (plain reading). Among medieval Bible commentators, there was disagreement about whether the classical rabbis were concerned with the *peshat* of the Bible, or whether they engaged only in more fanciful intertextual midrashic interpretations. Lockshin demonstrates that, even though medieval commentators often referred to *Genesis Rabbah* as the epitome of non-*peshat* interpretation (usually in opposition to their own readings), the midrash does at times offer readings that would be characterized even by those medieval standards as *peshat*. Reading *Genesis Rabbah* with this later medieval concern for *peshat* in mind allows us better to understand the range of interpretive possibilities available to the rabbis of the midrash, their exegetical choices and preferences, and their awareness of the creativity of their own readings. Lockshin further argues, however, that when *Genesis Rabbah* is read carefully alongside other midrashim with these medieval concerns about *peshat* in mind, we see that *Genesis Rabbah* often denigrates the *peshat* interpretation it offers and privileges non-*peshat* readings, which distinguishes it as a composition from earlier and contemporaneous rabbinic works. This exercise of reading *Genesis Rabbah* with the perspective of medieval readers uncovers subtleties in the midrashic text that we might not even have thought to look for had it not been for the concerns of medieval exegetes.

Marc Hirshman's paper, the final contribution in this volume, examines the competing and alternating versions of the final chapters of *Genesis Rabbah* in