A Comparison of Narrative in Genesis
and Genesis Rabbah:
The Cain and Abel Story

Joshua Lesk

Department of Jewish Studies
McGill University, Montreal
02/2006

Canada

Table of Contents

Abstract

This paper is a comparison of narrative in Genesis and Midrash Genesis Rabbah, using as a sample each text's version of the story of Cain and Abel. The paper begins with a survey of the study of Bible as literature and Midrash as literature, examining the work of Robert Alter, Meir Sternberg, Wesley A. Kort, Isaak Heinemann, Ofra Meir, David Stern and Jacob Neusner. Following this is a close reading and poetic analysis of the two primary texts, then a summary and comparison of narrative conventions and techniques. Narrative is examined according to the considerations of plot, character, narration and meaning. Further conclusions are drawn regarding the different portrayal of God in biblical and midrashic discourse, attitudes toward paradox and ambiguity, and strategies for achieving ideological and rhetorical goals.

Cette thèse est une comparaison de la narration entre Genèse et le Midrach Genèse Rabbah, utilisant comme un échantillon l'histoire de Caïn et Abel dans chaque texte. La thèse commence par une enquête de l'étude littéraire de la Bible et le Midrach, examinant les recherches des Robert Alter, Meir Sternberg, Wesley A. Kort, Isaak Heinemann, Ofra Meir, David Stern et Jacob Neusner. Suivant sont une lecture proche et une analyse poétique des deux textes primaires; la thèse conclue par un résumé et comparaison des conventions et techniques narratives dans les deux textes. La narration est examinée selon les critères de l'intrigue

(plot), la caractère, le manière du récit, et le thème. On déduit des conclusions concernant les représentations différantes de Dieu dans la Bible et le Midrach, et leurs positions vers le paradoxe et l'ambiguïté, ainsi que leurs intentions idéologiques et rhétoriciennes et leurs stratégies pour les accomplir.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dean B. Barry Levy, for all of his support, patience and good advice. I would also like to thank the Jewish Studies Department, Professors Orenstein and Hundert, and my teachers in Jewish, Religious and Islamic Studies, as well as Professor Uner Turgay for his many years of support.

Those who know me know this thesis is the culmination of much more than just my degree. Thank you to all my friends who helped me through almost ten years in Montreal.

Of course, I especially want to thank my family for all their love and support, especially the Lesks in Montreal.

Finally, I want to thank my immediate family - my father, my mother, z"l, my brother Ari and Lili. I started this degree after Mom died, and I know she more than anyone else would have enjoyed reading my papers. So I dedicate this thesis to her memory. May the completion of this thesis be the beginning of many wonderful things.

I. Introduction

This paper is a textual and literary comparison of two versions of the same

story. The story is that of Cain and Abel, the versions are from the book of

Genesis (4:1-16) and Midrash Genesis Rabbah (22). My intention is not to show

how the Midrash deviates from the biblical original, but to analyze the two

narratives as equals, with an emphasis less on the biblical hermeneutics of the

Midrash than on its own poetics. Although the study examines two, brief

pericopes, it will, I hope, shed some light on the nature and use of narrative in

Genesis and Genesis Rabbah, and in Bible and Midrash in general.

What do I mean by "narrative"? "Narrative" is discourse arranged

according to the flow of time,[1] describing a succession of events; narrative can be

both factual and fictional. I will analyze biblical and midrashic narrative

according to four criteria: plot, character, narration and meaning.[2] When

examining plot I will consider what events each version includes and excludes,

and the different senses of narrative time. As for character, I will note the

different use of characterization techniques, such as narratorial description and

direct speech; I will determine whether characters are outwardly depicted or

illuminated internally, whether they are complex or flat, and whether they have

---

[1] Seymour Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990, 9.
[2] These criteria are taken from Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*, New York: Oxford University Presss, 1966.

5

depth or are merely functional. I will consider whether narration is external or internal to events, the extent of the narrator's knowledge and reliability, and what information he chooses to reveal, and why. Finally, I will try to identify the themes of the narratives, determine how these are served by the poetic form, and relate them to the two texts' ideological and rhetorical goals.

Before analyzing Genesis 4 and Genesis Rabbah 22 I will look at some of the scholarship on the study of Bible and Midrash as literature, and will incorporate some of the ideas found there into my approach to the texts.

II: Review of Secondary Literature

1. Introduction

The Bible-as-literature movement emerged after approximately three centuries of critical study of the Bible; the critical approach to the Midrash goes back at least to the Middle Ages[3], but its analysis as literature is also a modern phenomenon. For modern scholars of the Bible, the most urgent questions were how to define biblical discourse and determine the approach most suitable for unlocking its meaning. The typical aim of midrashic scholars had always been to evaluate the Midrash's exegesis - namely, to understand its systematic deviation from the plain sense of the scriptural text - and determine what kind of authority to grant it. While the research surveyed here addresses these questions it is primarily concerned with poetics: i.e., setting out the methodology and criteria for the formalist literary analysis of biblical and midrashic narrative.

II. 2. Literary Study of the Bible

Interest in the literary aspects of Scripture existed long before the modern era. Saint Jerome saw Job as a tragedy, the Pentateuch as epic, and compared the Psalmist to Pindar and Horace.[4] Luther advocated the study of biblical poetics

---

[3] For example, the introduction to Ibn Ezra's longer biblical commentary. Questions of how best to understand and use Midrash Aggadah were posed by the rabbis themselves.
[4] O. B. Hardison in Paul R. House, "The Rise and Current Status of Literary Criticism of the Old

and rhetoric for the purpose of "grasping[...] sacred truth and for handling it skilfully and happily."[5] But the conception of the Bible not merely as literary but as literature - i.e., not *sui generis*, but sharing the characteristics of profane discourse - only emerged after textual criticism had brought the Bible down from the status of Revelation to that of a historical document.

Historical Criticism held sway in modern biblical scholarship for over a hundred years. In response to the overwhelming hegemony of diachronism, Hermann Günkel created Form Criticism around the turn of the century: as an attempt to classify biblical pericopes according to literary genre this constituted a new, synchronic approach to the text. In 1968, in an address later published under the title "Form Criticism and Beyond,"[6] James Muilenberg advocated stepping beyond Form Criticism's strategy of drawing parallels between biblical pericopes and ancient Near Eastern literature, to instead determining what rhetorical function literary forms played within the Bible itself. Muilenberg's new approach, Rhetorical Criticism, was aimed at perceiving the rhetorical forms that drove a pericope; his sensitivity to the trajectory and aims of the literary unit heralded a growing interest in the formalist analysis of Scripture. As Paul House states, Rhetorical Criticism "helped ease several scholars' transition from historical

---

Testament," *Beyond Form Criticism*, Paul R. House, ed., Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1992, 5.
[5] Cited by David Clines, "Story and Poem: The Old Testament as Literature and as Scripture," *Beyond Form Criticism*, 6.
[6] *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 (1969) 1-18.

background issues to the text itself."[7]

In the 1970s Structuralism quickly dominated the field of Bible-as-literature.[8] The application of Structuralist linguistics to myth and literature stemmed from Claude Lévi-Strauss's essay "The Structural Study of Myth" (1955).[9] The premise of the linguistic theory was that, because the connection between a word and its meaning is arbitrary, the analysis of words cannot yield an understanding of language; rather, insight into language can only be achieved through the study of the functional arrangement of words - that is, a language's structure. Thus, by analogy, the key to understanding a myth was not through examining the individual characters or scenes, but by studying the patterns of character relationships and of basic actions within a myth or between myths. In his essay "Genesis as Myth"[10] Edmund Leach applied this type of analysis to the Cain and Abel story, which he saw as part of a fundamental theme of dichotomy stretching through the first part of Genesis. Other Structuralist analysts of the Bible were Roland Barthes, Jean Calloud, Corina Galland, Richard Jacobson, Daniel Patte and Robert Polzin.

In the late 1970s another literary approach to the Bible emerged with the work of Shimon Bar-Efrat and Robert Alter. This approach, termed "Biblical Formalism" by some scholars, was an adaptation of the "close reading" of

---

[7] House, *Beyond Form Criticism*, 48.
[8] Ibid, 100.
[9] Richard Jacobson, "The Structuralists and the Bible," *Beyond Form Criticism*, 104.
[10] In Edmund Leach, *Genesis as Myth and Other Essays*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1969.

American New Critical Formalism; it was an attempt to understand the biblical text's internal meaning through the analysis of form, independent of such "external" factors as ideology, *sitz im leben* or authorial intent. This approach thus saw the application to Scripture of such considerations as plot, character, narration and meaning, that had already been employed for centuries in the study of profane literature. Robert Alter describes this approach:

> By literary analysis I mean the manifold varieties of minutely discriminating attention to the artful use of language, to the shifting play of ideas, conventions, tone, sound, imagery, syntax, narrative viewpoint, compositional units, and much else; the kind of disciplined attention, in other words, which through a whole spectrum of critical approaches has illuminated, for example, the poetry of Dante, the plays of Shakespeare, the novels of Tolstoy.[11]

Alter's book, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (1981), was the work that put Biblical Formalism on the map, though he did not use this term to describe his method. My reading of Genesis 4 will rely on this approach, and the remainder of this section will discuss the work of Alter and other Biblical Formalists.

Alter begins *The Art of Biblical Narrative* by adopting a position on the nature of biblical discourse, characterizing the narrative portions of the Bible as "historicized prose fiction." This discourse thus contains historical information and a historical aspect, but the focus, even during the description of historical events, is on individuals - their thoughts, feelings and actions. Historicized prose fiction is the vehicle that conveys the Bible's particular doctrine of the individual.

---

[11] Ibid, 12-13.

If the ancient Near Eastern epic assigned man a lowly place in the cosmic saga,

> [p]rose narration, affording writers a remarkable range and flexibility in the means of presentation, could be utilized to liberate fictional personages from the fixed choreography of timeless events and thus could transform storytelling from ritual rehearsal to the delineation of the wayward paths of human freedom, the quirks and contradistinctions of men and women as moral agents and complex centers of motive and feeling.[12]
> Every human agent must be allowed to struggle with his destiny through his own words and acts. Formally, this means that the writer must permit each character to manifest or reveal himself or herself chiefly through dialogue but of course also significantly through action, without the obtrusive apparatus of authorial interpretation and judgment. The Hebrew narrator does not openly meddle with the personages he presents, just as God creates in each human personality a fierce tangle of intentions, emotions, and calculations caught in a translucent net of language, which is left for the individual himself to sort out in the evanescence of a single lifetime.[13]

Tied to this outlook is the conception of a God that is involved in the lives of men and the events of history.

> The ancient Hebrew writers [...] seek through the process of narrative realization to reveal the enactment of God's purposes in historical events. This enactment is continuously complicated by a perception of two, approximately parallel, dialectical tensions. One is the tension between the divine plan and the disorderly character of actual historical events, or, to translate this opposition into specifically biblical terms, between the divine promise and its ostensible failure to be fulfilled; the other is a tension between God's will, His providential guidance, and human freedom, the refractory nature of man.[14]

The second force in tension with the divine plan - namely, human free will - figures prominently in Genesis 4: the dialectic between "the refractory nature of man" and God's demand that he live morally is at the heart of this narrative.

---

[12] Ibid, 26.
[13] Ibid, 86-87.
[14] Ibid, 33.

Thus, in biblical narrative, the thoughts, feelings and actions of the characters are the medium of the discourse; to be able to discern them and understand their significance, the reader must know how to recognize the literary conventions of biblical narrative.

> Accustomed as we are to reading narratives in which there is a much denser specification of fictional data, we have to learn [...] to attend more finely to the complex, tersely expressive details of the biblical text. (Traditional exegesis in its own way did this, but with far-reaching assumptions about the text as literal revelation which most of us no longer accept.) Biblical narrative is laconic but by no means in a uniform or mechanical fashion. Why, then, does the narrator ascribe motives to or designate states of feeling in his characters in some instances, while elsewhere he chooses to remain silent about these points? Why are some actions minimally indicated, others elaborated through synonym and detail? What accounts for the drastic shifts in the timescale of narrated events? Why is actual dialogue introduced at certain junctures, and on what principle of selectivity are specific words assigned to characters?[15]

Alter gathers these literary conventions under four poetic "rubrics": words, actions, dialogue and narration.[16]

Words: Given the terseness of biblical prose, the exegete must pay extra attention to language; the understanding of a pericope may frequently depend on a single word or shade of meaning. Although character development and plot are primarily advanced through dialogue, the rare information offered by the narrator in the form of summary or comment is highly reliable and should be noted carefully.

Actions: Given the paucity of editorialization, parallels between plots or

---

[15] Ibid, 183-184.
[16] Ibid, 179.

characters can be used to illuminate difficult narrative episodes. Thus Jacob's

deception of Isaac in Genesis 27, lacking any comment from the narrator, is

"glossed" by the analogous deception of Jacob by Leah two chapters later,

revealing, among other things, the text's dim view of the theft of the blessing. In

general, similar narrative episodes demand that the reader ask what the theme or

meaning of the sequence is and what function the part plays within the whole.

The sin and punishment of Cain parallel that of Adam and Eve, and I will examine

this pattern for its implications.

Dialogue: Alter states: "Everything in the world of biblical narrative

ultimately gravitates toward dialogue."[17] Dialogue, in terms of its relative

quantity and preferred status as a means of conveying meaning, is the primary

mode of discourse in biblical narrative. As an example, Alter cites II Samuel 11.

There, the premise of the chapter's events, David's adultery with Bathsheba, is

narrated briefly, but the king's frustrated attempts to cover up his crime are

reproduced in full through his conversations with Yoav and Uriah the Hittite. In

Genesis 4, the greater part of the pericope is taken up by God's words to Cain

before and after the murder, exceeding the combined description of the brothers,

their sacrifices, and the murder itself. It seems that the core of the story is

therefore this ongoing colloquy and the ideas expressed therein.

Narration: As was noted above, the biblical narrator rarely makes

editorial comments; when he does offer an insight or verdict on the story one

---

[17] Ibid, 182.

should wonder why and consider the information closely.[18] Finally, the reader

must be sensitive to the interplay of narration and dialogue, noting when each is

used and for what purpose.

I will now turn to Meir Sternberg and his work *The Poetics of Biblical

Narrative* (1985); this book analyzes biblical narrative in its role as

communication, in particular the goals and tactics of its discourse. In this light,

Sternberg objects to the New Critics' dismissal of authorial intentions as a

consideration for the interpreter, advocating a synthesis of discourse- and source-

oriented criticism.[19] Despite this, his poetics is essentially synchronic; while

Sternberg examines the way poetics and rhetoric serve ideology, he rarely enters

into the possible ideological context of a given passage.

In defining biblical narrative, Sternberg objects to Alter's characterization of

the medium as "historicized fiction," deconstructing the criteria Alter uses to

distinguish fiction from historiography. Typical of fiction, says Alter, are

"individuation and realistic psychology[,...] also thematic shaping, play of

language, and conscious artistry in general"; historiography possesses an

"'irregular, 'metonymic' quality.'"[20] Sternberg asserts that these are neither

intrinsic nor dependable criteria: inventiveness and characterization occur in the

histories of Thucydides and Gibbon, and the accuracy and fidelity to fact that are

---

[18] Ibid, 178-185.
[19] Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985, 6-10.
[20] Ibid, 27.

supposed to indicate historiography can often only be verified through hindsight.

As well, "[w]hatever its faults, real or imagined, bad historiography does not yet

make fiction."[21] Rather, says Sternberg, fiction and historiography are

distinguished by their respective truth-claims: art does not make the same truth-

claim, nor demand the same allegiance, as historiography. The Bible never claims

to be fiction - on the contrary, it presents its account as true and authoritative.

Because of this, it must be read as historiography.[22]

> The new mode and rhetoric of historiography [adopted in the Bible] are
> themselves means to an end that any hint of invention would put in danger.
> Were the narrative written or read as fiction, then God would turn from the
> lord of history to a creature of the imagination, with the most disastrous
> results. The shape of time, the rationale of monotheism, the foundations of
> conduct, the national sense of identity, the very right to the land of Israel and
> the hope of deliverance to come: all hang in the generic balance. Hence the
> Bible's determination to sanctify and compel literal belief in the past. It
> claims not just the status of history but, as Erich Auerbach rightly maintains,
> of *the* history - the one and only truth that, like God himself, brooks no
> rival.[23]

Sternberg asserts that biblical narrative operates on three interconnected

planes: the ideological, the historiographic and the aesthetic. If the goal of the

discourse is to inculcate ideology, it does so through historiography and aesthetics

- i.e., through storytelling that is presented as historiography. But even if ideology

is ubiquitous, the text artfully avoids didacticism.[24]

> Strictly defined, the didactic genre moves beyond commitment to self-
> immolation: it not only advances a doctrine but also ruthlessly subordinates

---

[21] Ibid, 25.
[22] Ibid, 26-30.
[23] Ibid, 30-32.
[24] Ibid, 41.

the whole discourse - the plot, the characters, the arena, the language, their ordering and interlinkage - to the exigencies of indoctrination.[25]

Now, if biblical narrative is didactic, then it has chosen the strangest way to go about its business. For the narrator breaks every law of the didacticist's decalogue. Anything like preaching from the narrative pulpit is conspicuous for its absence. So is its immemorial mate and nearest equivalent - black-and-white delineation of agents, motives, causes, processes.[...] The characterization is complex, the motives mixed, the plot riddled with gaps and enigmas, behavior unpredictable, surprises omnipresent, the language packed and playful, the registration of reality far more governed by the real and the realistic than by the ideal.[... T]he biblical narrator is either an incompetent didacticist or an artful ideologist.[26]

If didactic literature tends toward self-immolation in the cause of indoctrination, biblical narrative avoids this pitfall by, paradoxically, engaging the reader through complexity and ambiguity. These qualities are the text's challenge to the reader to win coherence from the narrative, and, in the process, participate in the text's ideology. This ideology is the doctrine of man's limitations and God's perfection, not in the sphere of power or mortality, but of knowledge. The discrepancy between God's perfect knowledge of events and the limited understanding of human beings is built into the narrative itself: the reader is constantly confronted by gaps in the narrative, where a key piece of information seems to have been withheld or some norm of the text violated, which block his understanding of the situation.

> Thus, insofar as knowledge is information, the ubiquity of gaps about character and plot exposes us to our own ignorance: history unrolls as a continuum of discontinuities, a sequence of non sequiturs, which challenge us to repair the [narrative] omissions by our native wit.[...] With the narrative become an obstacle course, its reading turns into a drama of

---

[25] Ibid, 37.

[26] Ibid, 38. Many of the characteristics of didactic literature will be evident in Genesis Rabbah.

16

understanding - conflict between inferences, seesawing, reversal, discovery, and all. The only knowledge perfectly acquired is the knowledge of our limitations.[...]

   The reader's drama is literally dramatized in and through an analogous ordeal of interpretation undergone by some character [...] with variable success but under the same constraints on human vision. The resulting brotherhood in darkness and guesswork and error cuts across the barrier separating participant from observer to highlight the barrier separating both from divine omniscience. Furthermore, God shapes the world plot with a view to getting his creatures to "know" him. Biblical history therefore stretches as a long series of demonstrations of divine power followed by tests of memory, gratitude, inference from precept and precedent, or, in short, of "knowledge," with further demonstrations staged in reward or punishment.[...] And by the narrator's art, the historical tests applied to the fathers in the world are perpetuated in the discourse addressed to the sons as a standing challenge to interpretation.[27]

Thus for Sternberg, the ambiguity and complexity of characters and plot are part of the medium for the Bible's ideological message regarding human knowledge.

However, the challenge of interpretation is only posed to the reader that identifies these ambiguities in the text. Yet Sternberg asserts that the text operates on at least two different levels, presenting parallel literary realities, so as to reach the widest range of readers. Thus, to the reader who perceives or prefers only the basic plot-line, free of ambiguity, the text will communicate directly its ideology regarding God, man and Israel. Yet the reader that notices and acknowledges the gaps in the narrative is invited to engage the text in a manner similar to the interpretation demanded by the complexity of real life. And yet, even piecing the meaning together in a seemingly independent critical exercise, this reader is manipulated so that he is inexorably won over to the same ideological destination

---

[27] Ibid, 47-48.

as his counterpart, but has the benefit of having had some hand in the process.[28]

Sternberg explains that the biblical narrator always provides reliable information - enough for any reader to follow the basic plot line - but never reveals the whole truth, reserving this for the character of God. The omniscience of the biblical narrator allows him to speak from and for the perspective of heaven: the constant withholding of information from both the human characters and the reader and the depiction of the omniscient God as the true manager of events deepen the dichotomy between God and man in the field of knowledge.[29] Thus, in Genesis 4 Cain and the reader are comrades in ignorance regarding God's intentions and, consequently, the logic underlying the reality presented in the narrative; God, on the other hand, always shows complete perception and understanding. Sternberg notes that the beginning of Genesis is full of cases illustrating this dichotomy, as it is "the ideal place to set up premises and generate enduring impressions."[30] In the Conclusion I will discuss this concept as one of the central ideas of Genesis 4.

The third and final source in this section is Wesley A. Kort's *Story, Text, and Scripture* (1988). Where Alter and Sternberg begin their studies by defining biblical narrative, Kort starts by discussing the narrative form itself. He rejects what he says is the prevailing conception of narrative, wherein the discourse is means of structuring an undifferentiated, pre-categorized reality: the schism

---

[28] Ibid, 50-56.
[29] Ibid, 84-92.
[30] Ibid, 92.

18

between reality and word, and the logical priority of the former over the latter, are false, says Kort.[31] Rather, narrative is a category of human existence, and is therefore prior to all these distinctions.

> [N]arrative, rather than a product of originally separated, non-narrative ingredients, is itself originating of those aspects of our world that we abstract from a narrative base and isolate from one another as facts and ideas. As Stephen Crites pointed out in his seminal essay on the status of narrative, there is no point so deep in the life of a culture that it is free from the narrative form, nothing prior to narrative upon which narratives depend. [...W]e can consider that the distinction between facts and ideas results from the abstraction of the two from an originally unified situation, one that has an actual or potential narrative form. Nor need we take the narrative world as broken into two along the lines of this putative gap. True, in our culture we have assigned different tasks to fictional and historical narratives, and we are predisposed to read them in differing ways. But the separation between them is artificial or conventional, and it does not rest on an actual gap.[32]
> Narrative provides an underlying unity to human experience, so that fact and idea, event and word, reality and mind, are related before they are separated.[33]

Kort cites four considerations as determining a particular narrative reality: character, plot, tone and atmosphere. Character describes human nature; plot depicts the nature of temporal movement, whether, for example, it is "destructive or beneficent"[34]; tone relates to the projected nature of the story-teller.[35] Kort notes that a narrative makes particular use of one or two of these considerations in order to convey its message; in Genesis 4, the narrative's thematic development is reflected by a change in "atmosphere."

---

[31] Wesley A. Kort, *Story, Text, and Scripture*, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988, 10.
[32] Ibid, 12.
[33] Ibid, 18.
[34] Ibid, 19.
[35] Ibid, 16-20.

> Atmosphere [...] is that element of narrative that describes the boundaries and sets the conditions of the narrative world. It determines what is possible and what cannot be expected to occur. It establishes conditions that are either hostile to or supportive of human life. The boundaries of a narrative world can be either more inclusive or more restricted than what we take the limits of our own experience to be, and the conditions can be like or unlike what we generally believe to be the case in our world.[...]

As an example of a biblical narrative that develops along the axis of atmosphere, Kort cites the book of Jonah.

> [In this book, c]onsideration of the relation of [... God] to Jonah leads to the question of atmosphere, the dominant element in the narrative[, or,] more exactly, to the conditions under which Jonah carries on or to which he responds. It is important to note that [... God], who determines those conditions, speaks at both the beginning and the ending of the narrative, providing thereby its frame or boundaries. The frame represents the conditions of human life as set and varied by divine intentions.[36]
>
> The conditions under which Jonah lives are beyond his control. They generally confront him as contrary to his best interests. But they counter his desires not in order to vex him but to lead him beyond the forms of the familiar into the larger world over which the creating and redeeming deity presides.[37]

Atmosphere describes "the boundaries and sets the conditions of the narrative world." Just as Jonah tries to escape from "the conditions of human life as set and varied by divine intentions," so, in Genesis 4, Cain acts upon a perception of atmosphere that turns out to be false, but which he struggles to retain at all costs. Furthermore, just as God's words to Jonah at the beginning and end of that book establish the atmospheric frame of the narrative, so, in our chapter, His speeches to Cain serve to establish the norms of that world - the backdrop and antithesis to Cain's actions throughout. Jonah and Cain only accept what they see as

---

[36] Ibid, 37.
[37] Ibid, 39.

atmospheric aberrations belatedly and after much struggle, at the end of which

Jonah is humbled and Cain has destroyed his brother and himself. One might see

the Fratricide as an early chapter in a long process of unfolding of atmosphere in

the narrative world of the Bible - an ever growing consciousness proposed by God

for the sake of human development - analogous to Sternberg's idea of the

characters' constant progression towards a greater knowledge of God. I shall

return to these ideas in the final comparison of biblical and midrashic narrative.

II. 3. Literary Study of the Midrash

As I noted above, the scholarly literature on the Midrash[38] is quite

different from that on the Bible. The aim of critical Midrash scholarship, as

opposed to the mere editing and compilation of midrashim, was almost always to

determine the authority of the corpus in its role as biblical interpretation,

especially in light of what seemed to be its systematic divergence from the plain

meaning of the biblical text; Ibn Ezra and Maimonides already discussed this issue

---

[38] Most of the scholars whose work I will consider in this section describe their subject as either
"Midrash" or "Aggadah," generally favouring one of these terms overall and using the alternate as
a qualifier to designate a subgenre - i.e. "midrashic Aggadah" (Aggadah based on Scripture), or
"Midrash Aggadah," as opposed to "Midrash Halakhah." Because Genesis Rabbah is both
Midrash and Aggadah, and because most of what each author says regarding one term usually
applies to the other as well, while examining a particular author I will use whichever term he or she
favours, it being understood that, unless otherwise noted, one author's discussion of Aggadah is
comparable to another's study of Midrash. In our own discussion I will use the term "Midrash," on
the assumption that I can make some generalizations about the poetics and hermeneutics of the
genre but that this analysis pertains most specifically to Genesis Rabbah. Finally, in the discussion
the term "Midrash" (capitalized) will denote either the genre as a whole or a particular
compilation, such as Genesis Rabbah, while "midrash" refers to a particular pericope or gloss
drawn from a larger work.

in the 12th century. While the scholars in the following survey address this and

other questions relating to midrashic hermeneutics, I have cited them because they

deal foremost with poetics. I will therefore pass over the work of Zunz, Bacher,

Ginzberg and Urbach, who on the whole do not treat midrashic poetics as such.

First I shall look at Isaak Heinemann's work *Darkhei ha-Aggadah* (1949).

Heinemann begins his study by addressing the Midrash Aggadah's divergence

from the *peshat*, asserting that, notwithstanding its creativity, the Aggadah

constitutes a serious and responsible exegesis. He argues against those who, like

Maimonides, dismiss the Aggadah's "exegesis" as mere poetic flights of fancy,

citing Michael Sacks' book *Die Religiöse Poesie der Juden in Spanien* (1901) in

support of his thesis that philology is not necessarily the most valid nor the most

successful approach to the text.

> Sacks admits that in the Aggadah there is some creative activity that
> maintains the approach of sacred poems and the words of the prophets,
> which also found "free expression of eternal ideas." It is also his opinion
> (and in this he overreaches) that at [... the time of the rabbis] there was not
> yet a need to interpret the verses literally. But not only does he see in the
> Aggadah an "attempt at contemplating and understanding the exceedingly
> lofty," he sees this effort as successful: "out of often amazing mental acuity,
> and from a penetrating gaze as from the eyes of a child" the midrashists
> recognized the strong and weak points of the heroes of the Bible. "The
> sentiments of the nation and the life of the community, with neither
> grammar nor the ammunition of [critical] history, are better able to interpret
> the Bible than philology, which, the more it recognizes the demands of
> method, the less understanding it has of the issues." That is to say: the
> Aggadah is not a methodological creation; up to here is confirmed the
> opinion of Maimonides. But as opposed to this - perhaps despite this - it is
> necessary to see the Aggadah as the fruits of a serious and successful effort
> to determine the meaning of Scripture and to erect in its gaps the truth that

evaded the rationalists.[39]

Heinemann notes that Sacks' Romantic theory of interpretation is somewhat apologetic, and rejects his opposing of philology and intuition. Maintaining that objectivity is an impossible ideal, Heinemann states that, rather than see the rabbinic exegesis only as a deviation from the truth, one should evaluate it on its own terms and try to understand its logic. To answer this, he says, one must consider a) the nature of rabbinic thought in general, b) the nature of the material before the rabbis, and c) the literary character of the Aggadah.[40]

Rabbinic thought, says Heinemann, is not systematic but "organic" - namely, it developed gradually, served the needs of the community, and spoke in terms of emotion and experience. Its goals are not critical understanding, but rather "an awe of the sacred (*haredat ha-qodesh*) before the secrets of life."[41] The object of their exegesis - the Torah - the rabbis believed held multiple meanings in every letter, word and verse, a fact that gave them the prerogative, even the duty, to multiply interpretations.[42] Finally, says Heinemann, the Aggadah's exuberant creativity was due in part by its original role as a didactic tool in the synagogue, where "the speaker was compelled even more than the scribe to worry about the attentiveness of the congregation."[43]

Having defined the Aggadah as a responsible exegesis and a subject

---

[39] Isaak Heinemann, *Darkhei ha-Aggadah*, Givatayim: Magnes Press, 1970, 3-4. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of Hebrew texts, whether modern or ancient, are my own.
[40] Ibid, 8.
[41] Ibid, 9.
[42] Ibid, 11-12.
[43] Ibid, 12.

worthy of attention, the author describes his study: an analysis of the Aggadah according to its two main operations - creative historiography and creative philology, corresponding more or less to poetics and hermeneutics. Under the latter rubric Heinemann includes the parsing and exegesis of letters, words, sentences and chapters of the Bible; since my focus is poetics rather than hermeneutics I will only discuss these procedures within my reading of Genesis Rabbah 22.

On the other hand, the Aggadah's creative historiography is essentially its system of poetically expanding on the biblical text. It does this, says Heinemann, in three main ways. The first is by associating and combining similar characters, places, times and events; interpolating into the biblical account a rabbinic outlook or perspective; by filling in textual gaps. Thus the Aggadah frequently combines disparate narratives by associating two far distant characters or places with similar names, often producing quite a fantastic narrative.[44] This practice frequently makes explicit ironic similarities and juxtapositions in the biblical account. The second practice is of putting their ideas into the mouths of the biblical characters, so that they share the rabbinic ideological outlook and concerns, and frequently display the rabbis' knowledge of future events and Torah.[45] This is only natural, given the rabbinic view that the Bible spoke to their own time, and that they were merely perpetuating the actions of their ancestors, the heroes of the text. Finally,

---

[44] Ibid, 27-32.
[45] Ibid, 35-39.

the Aggadah fills in character and plot gaps, taking material from a variety of sources: information hinted at in the biblical text; the model of more developed characters or plots (Jacob vs. Esau → Cain vs. Abel)[46]; the influence of halakhah; historical information.[47]

The rabbis used the aggadic story as a vehicle for ideas; this is typical of organic thought and an emulation of biblical books like Job and Ecclesiastes, where conceptual problems are explored "through the description of the lives of individuals."[48] Of course, one might say that all biblical narrative is a medium for ideology: that the Aggadah discusses moral and conceptual problems only because they are first introduced by Scripture. In this case, how do the two narrative types pursue their ideological agenda? Perhaps the Aggadah's speculation is more explicit, while the Bible encodes its thought in the gaps of its narrative, to be mined and contemplated by the reader. Answering this question is, of course, one of the aims of this paper, and I will return to it later on.

Heinemann acknowledges that the Aggadah is part of a continuum of inspirational literature that begins with the earliest narratives of the Bible. Just as the Bible does not "decree moral or religious sentences,"[49] but rather illustrates them in narrative,

> [t]he Aggadah draws the general life lessons from Scripture [based on the
> example of] the heroes of history [such as King David, Mordecai and

---

[46] Ibid, 24.
[47] Ibid, 21-24.
[48] Ibid, 15. As an example Heinemann cites Genesis Rabbah's portrayal of Cain (17).
[49] Ibid, 45.

Hillel;] thus it transfers the intense [ethical] dichotomies found in the Wisdom Literature to the actions of the forefathers, about whom the Torah does not pronounce explicitly. In this way it succeeds in precipitating simplified lessons as well as in recognizing the actions of Divine Providence. And it not only brands its heroes for praise or disgrace, like "Joseph the Righteous" or "Titus the Wicked," but also says in a number of places "Anyone who mentions the righteous one and does not bless him, and anyone who mentions the wicked one and does not curse him, violates by omission." (*Genesis Rabbah* 49:1, *Midrash Tehillim* 118:1)[50]

Thus Heinemann sees the Aggadah as glossing the earlier, more ambiguous biblical narrative with the dichotomous morality of the later Wisdom Literature; its aims are to derive moral lessons and to "recognize the actions of Divine Providence." Yet, even while fulfilling this mission, Heinemann notes the rabbis are often flexible, even skeptical, about their ideas. Thus, even though the Aggadah frequently labels biblical characters as either righteous or wicked, it has compassion and empathy for Cain, Ishmael and Esau, and even finds good points in such villains as Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar.[51] Still, just as Sternberg noted that, despite its complexities, the Bible always makes sure to win the reader over to God, so in the end the Aggadah never neglects its homiletic and ideological mission.

Serving an aim of this mission - namely, "recognizing the actions of Divine Providence" in the biblical narrative - was the rabbis' belief that the Bible was a single book, with a unified program and outlook.

All the sacred writings were, in the eyes of the rabbis, not a book of one variety (*ḥad-givuni*) but a single book, and they strove with every effort to

---

[50] Ibid, 47.
[51] Ibid, 51.

prove its unity; first, by resolving everything that could be considered a contradiction, and, second, by emphasizing the internal connection between all of its parts.[52]

These two procedures are central to the Aggadah. The endeavour to resolve the apparent contradictions in the text - or, depending on one's perspective, its built-in ambiguities - is the literature's foremost rhetorical convention, as textual gaps serve to stimulate homily. In its concern with resolving inconsistencies Heinemann sees another difference between the Aggadah and the Bible: while the biblical text embraces contradiction and paradox, interweaving these aspects into the world it creates, the Aggadah sees its purpose as making the grand design only visible in the long view of the original explicit at each and every step. Using paradox and struggling to eliminate it reflects, perhaps, a difference in "tone," to use Kort's term - the attitude of the storyteller *vis à vis* his material. Genesis introduces ambiguity and paradox as obstacles to passive reading, forcing the reader to reconcile conflicting ideas and synthesize a coherent narrative; Genesis Rabbah, on the other hand, sees ambiguity and paradox as obstacles to "recognizing the actions of Divine Providence," and thus integrates the explicit affirmation of this Providence into its narrative, thereby generating a more transparent, if flatter, world.

I will now look at Ofra Meir's book, *Ha-Sipur ha-Darshani be-Vereishit Rabbah* (1987). As the title suggests, Meir examines the midrashic story in Genesis Rabbah; her book is an extensive catalogue of the variations in this form.

---

[52] Ibid, 57.

I will not enter into this extensive taxonomy, but rather will discuss instead at

some of her observations regarding midrashic narrative in general.

As is traditional, Meir begins by giving her position on the meaning and

import of midrashic discourse, in particular regarding the question of its creative

exegesis. After considering Heinemann's position, Meir discusses Addison G.

Wright's stance in *The Literary Genre Midrash* (1967):

> Wright, who sees the midrash as a literary genre, points to the similarity
> between midrash and poetry (*shira*): both poetry and midrash are composed
> as a result of stimulus. In poetry the stimulus is an object or experience; in
> midrash it is the literal sense of the biblical text. In both cases the stimulus
> is not deterministic - it can create a variety of possibilities - and just as there
> are any number of poems about the moon it is possible to have numerous
> drashot on the same biblical text. Neither the poem nor the drash are
> integral pieces of an ideological campaign, but are individual creations. As
> in poetry so in midrash, the stimulus may fulfill itself by shaping the
> development of the creation or may serve merely as the initial cause of an
> invention that soars on the wings of the imagination, though there must
> always remain in the creation something in the nature of an "ideological
> continuity" that will preserve the connection of the stimulus to its outcome.
> Wright sums up the analogy [with poetry] by differentiating between the
> two: whereas poetry is intended first and foremost to convey an aesthetic
> experience, the midrash is interested primarily in ethical and religious
> values, and aesthetic criteria are not the first priority.[...]
> Wright appropriately affirms the fact that at least part of the material
> compiled in the Midrashim is literary creation (*yetzirah sifrutit*) (and
> therefore it is preferable, perhaps, to replace the term "poetry" in his words
> with "literary creation"). Even though the creation of the rabbis has a
> didactic aim, this does not affect its quality as literature. At least in the
> realm of Aggadah it is fitting to view the drashot as the expression of their
> creators: by preserving the scriptural starting point of the drashot the rabbis
> were able to transcend the restrictions on free expression that existed in the
> secular realm.[53]

Thus Meir sees the midrashim as bits of the rabbis' personal expression, offered in

---

[53] Meir, 29.

response to the stimulus of Scripture, with an overriding concern for "ethical and religious values."

Yet these things might be said about other literature, exegetic or otherwise, inspired by the Bible. To distinguish between Midrash and other ancient biblical interpretation, Meir cites Gary G. Porton's description of the literature's characteristics, from his book *Understanding Rabbinic Midrash* (1985). These points are a) the dual nature of the midrashic unit, as both independent and edited[54]; b) the plurality of glosses on the same prooftext[55]; c) the inclusion of the speakers names with the glosses[56]; d) the inclusion of non-exegetic material, such as stories or proverbs[57]; e) the often very small units of scripture serving as prooftexts[58]; f) the explicitness of the exegetic process within the gloss.[59]

These points vary in importance to this inquiry. Regarding a) - the nature of midrashim as both independent and edited - my approach has been to analyze Genesis Rabbah 22 both in parts and as a whole, keeping the narrative aspect - especially the thread of the biblical story - in the foreground. Regarding d) - the inclusion of material not related to the biblical story - I have analyzed these non-biblical stories for their narrative qualities as well as their role in the course of exegesis. More problematic is how to analyze non-narrative discourse: I will address this material by determining its message, as well as how and to what

---

[54] Meir, 33.
[55] Ibid, 34.
[56] Ibid, 37.
[57] Ibid, 38.
[58] Ibid, 39.
[59] Ibid, 40.

extent it relates to the midrashic narrative. As for e) - the frequent brevity of midrashic prooftexts - I have already discussed in the section on Heinemann the Midrash's tendency to atomize the biblical text, and will deal with it as it arises in the course of my reading.

Of greater relevance are points b), c) and f) - namely, the multiplicity and variety of glosses on the same prooftext, the appearance of the rabbis as narrators within the text, and the explicitness of the interpretive process in and around the gloss. Regarding b), while it is clear, given their divergence, that the individual glosses are not presented as authoritative, the versions have much more in common as far as ideology, poetics and hermeneutics go than differences; taken together they comprise a distinct and relatively consistent narrative that can be analyzed and compared with the biblical original. Points c) and f) speak to a fundamental characteristic of midrashic discourse: although its foundation is the biblical text, the level where the action truly takes place in Midrash is not that of the biblical story but in the rabbinic discussions about interpretation. It is natural, then, that the rabbis appear as characters to dramatize the interpretive process, making the perspective and concerns of the exegetes - the true protagonists - foremost in the reader's eyes. More on this later.

Meir analyzes the midrashic story in Genesis Rabbah using the categories supplied by Scholes and Kellogg: character, plot, meaning and narration. Regarding character Meir states:

> [I]n my opinion, the term that suits the character in the rabbinic story is "functional character" (*demut po'elet*): with this [conception] the emphasis

moves, to a considerable extent, from the character as a developed entity (*yeshut me'utzevet*) to its existence as a component that [only] plays a given role in the story; there is also a cancelling of the overlap between a character in the story and a person.[60]

This point about the functional nature and didactic purpose of the character in the midrashic story will be borne out in my reading. As for plot, Meir is mostly concerned with determining the criteria of the "minimal plot (*'alilah minimalit*)" in Genesis Rabbah, and with cataloguing variations in plot structure. This taxonomic approach to the midrashic plot yields numerous structural variations but little insight that is applicable to my study, and I will therefore not cite it here.

In regards to meaning in the midrashic story, Meir states the following:

> In the stories of the rabbis there is no place empty of meaning. It is easier to see the meaning than to distinguish the plot. The phenomenon is embedded, to a great extent, in the didactic nature of the rabbinic stories[...][61]

The didactic program of the Midrash is, of course, crucial to its poetics: the determination of poetics in Genesis Rabbah by the requirements of ideology is dealt with extensively by Jacob Neusner (below).

Finally, in the matter of narration, Meir notes the prevalence in midrashic narrative of direct speech over exposition. She explains this in two ways:

> a) [P]art of the information essential to the plot [in the midrashic story] is drawn from the Bible, allowing the narrators to limit their exposition more than in non-midrashic stories.
> b) The biblical story is also distinguished by direct speech, and in addition to the midrashic story's direct dependence on biblical situations containing conversation, [the midrashic story...] adds dialogues and monologues in the exegesis of the verses, drawn by the narrator from [other

---

[60] Ibid, 57.
[61] Ibid, 60.

places in] Scripture.[62]

The first point re-affirms the essentially interpolative character of midrashic

narrative; yet, in late Midrash like *Pirqei de-Rabbi Eliezer* and *Sefer ha-Yashar*,

both of which are based on the biblical narrative, one finds a much larger ratio of

narration to direct speech than in earlier compilations. What, then, is the reason

for the prevalence of direct speech in Genesis Rabbah? Meir is certainly correct

to point to the precedent formed by the Bible; recall Alter's remark, "Everything

in the world of biblical narrative ultimately gravitates toward dialogue." Direct

speech, which is the illusion of the characters speaking for themselves, is a highly

mimetic way of illustrating character. In Genesis Rabbah 22, even more than

Cain, Abel or God, it is the rabbinic narrators who are quoted directly: most of the

discourse is conveyed through their direct speech. The result is a highly mimetic

and immediate view of the rabbinic academy: the detailed accounts of discussions

over interpretation, the descriptions of the rabbis' world, the narrative forays into

Roman Judea, and the periodic controversies with contemporary challengers to

their exegesis, bestow a normative quality on the rabbis' perspective and make

their reading of Scripture authoritative. The dialogic quality of the rabbinic

discourse is mirrored in their version of the biblical narrative: the speech of the

characters in the re-told biblical story frequently takes the form of conceptual

argument, often, like the midrashists, citing scriptural prooftexts to prove a point.

This dialogue allows the rabbis to put their ideas into the mouths of the biblical

---

[62] Ibid, 154.

figures, formulating thereby an "independent" endorsement of their ideology.

I will now look at David Stern's book, *Parables in Midrash* (1991). The subject - the *mashal*, or rabbinic parable[63] - is relevant to this study for two reasons, both because of the meshalim in Genesis Rabbah 22 and because, in my opinion, the mashal is a representative type of rabbinic literature. Before turning to Stern's research on the mashal, I will consider his general insights regarding Midrash.

Stern distinguishes between the micro- and macro-levels of interpretation occurring in the Midrash compilation - i.e., between the "local exegetical operations that lie behind nearly every midrashic passage," and the greater interpretive trajectory of the "literary rhetorical units [...that] constitute the macrostructure of midrashic discourse," and "the point where exegesis and ideology intersect."[64]

> [M]idrashic discourse is organized [...] in recognizable units of discourse, in literary forms like the petihta, the mashal, the enumeration, the series. These forms comprise the genres or subgenres of midrash. They constitute its language, and they maintain themselves in midrashic literature, formally and rhetorically, even when they combine with one and another. The combinatory pattern of these units is essentially additive.[65]

Among these basic genres is the *ma'aseh* - a short, "openly didactic" narrative, where the rabbis are the characters and the implicit claim is thus of historicity.[66]

---

[63] Throughout his book Stern uses "parable" as a synonym for "mashal" (13); I will do the same.
[64] David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991, 182.
[65] Ibid, 179.
[66] Ibid, 13.

More on ma'asim in Genesis Rabbah 22 later.

Turning now to the mashal, Stern considers three models for its role as communication. The first and most conventional conception is the "Mashal as Illustration," where the narrative of the mashal illustrates or clarifies its lesson, or *nimshal*. However, says Stern, the illustrative function of the mashal is less common in rabbinic than in early medieval literature; furthermore, "the narratives of most meshalim [...] are actually far more enigmatic and difficult to explain than the nimshalim themselves."[67] The second model, deriving from Jesus' use of parables in the Gospels, is that of the "Mashal as Secret Speech." This model is not really appropriate either, since, according to Stern, most meshalim are intended to be deciphered fairly easily. As an example of a mashal that, though it treats sensitive ideas never loses its transparency, Stern offers the parable of the gladiators from Genesis Rabbah 22: while the speaker, R. Shimon bar Yoḥai, acknowledges the almost sacrilegious message of the mashal, that message always remains clear to the audience. The third model, that of the "Mashal as Rhetorical Narrative," Stern feels is "the single one adequate to explain most meshalim in Rabbinic literature." This model defines the mashal as "a story that turns allusiveness to effect in order to persuade its audience of the value of a certain idea or approach or feeling."[68]

> [E]ven if the mashal overlaps with allegory[...], it is not itself a mode of literary discourse as allegory is, a type of speech that says one thing and

---

[67] Ibid, 49.
[68] Ibid, 51.

means another. Rather, the mashal is a literary-rhetorical form, a genre of narrative that employs certain poetic and rhetorical techniques to persuade its audience of the truth of a specific message relating to an ad hoc situation. Even if a mashal's narrative personifies abstract concepts, entities, and relationships - God, the Community of Israel, the covenant - those features of the mashal, be they called allegorical or symbolic or referential, exist only for the sake of enabling its audience to grasp for themselves the ulterior message that the mashal bears.[69]

The question posed by the ideological narrative is [...,] How can a fictional narrative communicate an unambiguous message, and especially one that bears insistently upon its audience's lives? How can narrative "demonstrate the validity of [...] doctrine?"[70]

One way the mashal does this is by pretending not to be narrative. In genre, the rabbinic mashal can be defined as a parabolic narrative that claims to be exegesis and serves the purposes of ideology. In this, the mashal is similar to biblical narrative, which, as Meir Sternberg has shown, claims to be history and uses that claim, with an appearance of history-likeness, as a medium for impressing a world-view, an ideology, upon its reader. So, too, scriptural exegesis, or exegesis-likeness, works for the rabbis as an ideological medium. So, too, scriptural exegesis, or exegesis-likeness, works for the Rabbis as an ideological medium. And as with other types of ideological literature, a good part of the mashal's art lies in its capacity for obscuring its ideological purpose. Sometimes this is accomplished simply by hiding rhetoric under the cloak of exegesis; at other times, by pretending that the midrashic interpretation of the verse is indeed the necessary, inevitable meaning. This impression is achieved, in turn, by making the mashal's narrative appear to create or to produce the nimshal, which then serves as the setting for interpretation of the mashal's prooftext, for the midrashic event of interpretation. The prooftext, once interpreted via the nimshal, then casts back upon the preceding narrative the aura of its own scriptural authority, as though to authenticate that narrative, to salvage it from the triviality of mere functionality. Thus a whole, seamless rhetorical artifice is created inside which ideology hides.[71]

Thus for Stern, the mashal is an ad hoc narrative created to convey an ideological message, through the guise of scriptural exegesis.

---

[69] Ibid, 11-12.
[70] Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre*, New York: 1983, 7, 27.
[71] Stern, p68.

In the typical mashal, the narrative or mashal-proper is offered to illustrate

a teaching, or nimshal - itself an interpretation of a prooftext or a moment in

Jewish history; Stern considers the nimshal the predecessor to the mashal-proper,

and a part of a larger rabbinic master-narrative.

> [T]he mashal-proper's narrative is clearly dependent upon the nimshal, as story is dependent upon meaning.
>
> Yet the nimshal's meaning is not a static discursive presence. In fact, the nimshal is simply another narrative: typically, a single moment in the master plot, the covenantal narrative of God's relationship with His chosen people and their representatives. Which one of these narratives, then, is primary? The fictional narrative in the mashal-proper about a human king, or the exegetical narrative in the nimshal dealing with God and Israel? [...We may invoke] the Russian formalist distinction between *fabula* and *sjuzhet* - *fabula* is "the order of event or chronology referred to by the narrative, whereas *sjuzhet* is the order of presentation of event in the narrative"[72] [...]
>
> An analogous relationship holds between the two narratives in the mashal. If the narrative recounted in the mashal-proper is the *sjuzhet*, then its *fabula* may be one of several other narratives. It may be an ideal narrative, a conventional *fabula*, standing behind the specific events presented in the mashal-proper. It may also be the nimshal's narrative, which one scholar has described as "a statement of a convention or code, through which the real story, the nimshal, receives its narrative and normative meanings."[73] Finally, it may be the ideal master-narrative or *fabula* of the covenantal relationship of God and Israel in its full scope, which is truly realized only in Scripture but which stands behind the nimshal's partial narrative of one moment in that relationship.[74]

The notion that the nimshal is a portion of the "*fabula* of the covenantal

relationship of God and Israel" accords with the opinion of Daniel Boyarin:

> Their own intertext - that is, the cultural codes which enable them to make meaning and find meaning, constrain the rabbis to fill in the gaps of the Torah's discourse with narratives which are emplotted in accordance with

---

[72] Peter Brooks, "Fictions of the Wolfman," *Diacritics* 9 (1979), 75-81.

[73] Daniel Boyarin, "An Exchange on the Mashal; Rhetoric and Interpretation: The Case of the Nimshal," *Prooftexts* 5/3 (1985), 269-280, 272.

[74] Stern, 69-70.

certain ideological structures. The type of midrashic parable called the mashal is only the most explicit of these structures, but it can be taken as a prototype - a privileged type - of all midrashic narrative interpretation. [...] These basic plots – the narratives which the culture allows one to tell – form a vital aspect of the intertext. The mashal and its congeners play a role in the present description of midrash analogous to the "eternal truths" of which Isaak Heinemann spoke[...][75]

The mashal is a prototype of midrashic narrative and interpretation because it expresses, in their most reified form, the "eternal truths" that undergird rabbinic discourse. While Boyarin considers the mashal a special articulation of ideology in Midrash, Stern explains its exemplary nature in terms of its rhetorical structure, saying: "What makes the mashal so deeply characteristic of midrash is not its narrative of interpretation alone but the highly structured, stereotyped form it lends to that narrative."[76]

One aspect of that stereotyped form is a character Stern calls the "implied interpreter": "an idealized character in the mashal who serves as a model for the real interpreter/reader[...]; the character joins fictionality and hermeneutics in his or her persona."[77] Another convention of the mashal is the discussion of ideas about God and His rule of the world: this is accomplished through a narrative featuring a king as a symbol for God, known as a "king-mashal." Of course, this depiction is not just another homiletic moment, but the most direct and creative way available to midrashists to address and interpret the norms of reality.

---

[75] Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990, 16-17.
[76] Stern, 44-45.
[77] Ibid, 86-87. This is reminiscent of Sternberg's notion of the biblical character as the reader's counterpart in interpretation.

Beyond all else, the mashal represents the greatest effort to imagine God in all Rabbinic literature. The achievement behind the mashal's characterization of God is even more extraordinary in that virtually all the other characters appearing in the mashal are what students of narrative call types or stock characters. Created to fit generic situations in the plot, these figures duly fulfill their functions as characters in the narrative, but they have little psychological or emotional depth. Their behavior is usually predictable or easily explained. They rarely contain the nuanced particularities, the conflicted intimations of flesh and soul, that inform full-bodied, vividly imagined fictional characters.

The one character in the mashal who is never a type or stock character is the king; he is the only character consistently to possess a personality - or personalities, since he can change utterly from one mashal to another - and this distinction among characters may stand, from a theological perspective, as an emblem of God's profound difference from all else in the universe.[78]

God as king is both beneficent and severe. But what is most exceptional about the mashal's portrayal of the king is the way he is represented as being uncomfortable with the absolute power at his disposal. The king in the mashal tends to use his power in the extreme, often seemingly unreasonable ways. He is either a tyrant or a victim of circumstance. When he gives expression to his feelings, it is often in the most intense and impulsive fashion.[79]

This complex, ambivalent depiction of God is understandable if one sees Him as the face of a baffling and often cruel universe. Yet the consolation for Israel is the enduring relationship with God, in which He empathizes with her suffering. This relationship is embodied in the mashal form itself, for the God of the king-mashal is not just a symbol but an interlocutor: the midrashists could and did contend with Him in their narratives, remonstrating with Him for forsaking His people or for breaching the norms of His own stated morality.

To illustrate the mashal's use of the implied interpreter and its characteristic depiction of God, Stern cites a king-mashal from Lamentations

---

[78] Ibid, 93.
[79] Ibid, 98-99.

Rabbah (4:11). R. Eleazar presents the mashal as a gloss on Psalms 79:1 - "A song of Asaph. O God, heathens have entered Your domain" - in order to explain why a Psalm describing the destruction of the Temple is introduced as "a song," not "a lament." R. Eleazar tells of a king who built and prepared a bridal-chamber for his son; once, when his son angered him, the king destroyed the room. When the son's teacher heard this he rejoiced and sang; when people were startled and asked him why, he replied, "Because the king has destroyed the bridal-chamber and has spared his son." Therefore, states the nimshal, Asaph sang and rejoiced because God had destroyed the Temple but spared His people.[80]

In this mashal one sees the impulsive character of God, who can be both benevolent and destructive. The implied interpreter is the teacher, whose words and behaviour are not merely a reaction to the situation, but "the narrative equivalent to an *interpretation* of the king's action."

> The narrative of the mashal is therefore itself about interpretation. It provides a model for the interpretive activity, and thus does more than solely fulfill a rhetorical function. The narrative assumes a cognitive value of its own, telling us something in its own right: about the inherently paradoxical character of interpretation, and about the extreme conditions under which such interpretation becomes necessary.[81]
> What R. Eleazar's mashal suggests, however, is that midrash may be less a hermeneutics, a system or even stance of interpretation, than a narrative of exegesis. The nature of that narrative, as told in the mashal, has already been related: it begins with a crisis and is followed by an effort at recuperating or salvaging the text - saving not only its meaning but its value, its felt importance in the life of the reader.[...] Rather than primarily determining the Torah's meaning, or its multiple meanings, midrashic interpretation seems often to be more concerned with maintaining the

---

[80] Ibid, 24-25.
[81] Ibid, 41.

Torah's presence in the existence of the Jew, with bridging the gap between its words and their reader, with overcoming the alienation, the distance of Torah, and with restoring it to the Jew as an intimate, familiar presence.[82]

While the king-mashal is an emblematic form for addressing the subject of God and His ways, the ideology of exegesis and the constant exercise of the relationship with God are central to the Midrash in general. I will return to these ideas in the reading of Genesis Rabbah 22 and the Conclusion

Jacob Neusner, the final scholar of this survey, presents a unique outlook here: Neusner rejects the approach to Midrash as a homogeneous literary genre or hermeneutic stance; instead, he maintains that each Midrash compilation is unique in content and program, and must be analyzed as such. In his book, *Midrash as Literature* (1987), Neusner calls this position the "Primacy of Documentary Discourse"; there he singles out James Kugel as a representative of the approach that he opposes, presenting the following statements of Kugel's (some in paraphrase) in order to rebut them.

> Midrash is precipitated by the character of the verse subject to exegesis[83]
> > [M]idrash is an exegesis of biblical verses, not of books. The basic unit of the Bible for the midrashist is the verse: this is what he seeks to expound, and it might be said that there simply is no boundary encountered beyond that of the verse until one comes to the borders of the canon itself.[84]
> The components of midrash-compositions are interchangeable[85]
> > Our Midrashic compilations are in this sense potentially deceiving, since they seem to treat the whole text bit by bit; but with the exception of certain patterns, these 'bits' are rather atomistic, and, as

---

[82] Ibid, 44.
[83] Jacob Neusner, *Midrash as Literature*, New York: University of America Press, 1987, x.
[84] Kugel in ibid.
[85] Neusner, ibid.

any student of rabbinic literature knows, interchangeable, modifiable, combinable - in short, not part of an overall exegesis at all.[86]

Kugel's point is that midrashim are verse-centred and verse-instigated, and that Midrash compilations are indifferent and interchangeable blocks of these ad hoc exegetical notes. Neusner attacks this view from all angles. First, comparing a number of Midrash compilations, he demonstrates that only a small percentage of material is common to more than one work. Next, by citing substantially different glosses on the same prooftext in different compilations, he proves his contention that the nature of the gloss is dependent less on the content of the prooftext than on the greater ideological and rhetorical program of the compilation.[87]

Looking at a number of Tannaitic and Amoraic Midrashim, Neusner analyzes their programs.[88] Regarding Genesis Rabbah, Neusner identifies four rhetorical forms and tries to derive their ideological function.

The Propositional Form: The basic components of this form are the "base-verse" - the subject or starting-point of the gloss - and the "contrastive-" or "intersecting-verse," drawn from elsewhere in the Bible to serve as a gloss and yield an implicit ideological syllogism. "There is no pretense at a systematic exegesis of the diverse meanings imputed to the contrastive-verse [...] The base-verse, for its part, also is not subjected to systematic exegesis."[89]

The Exegetical Form: Here there is no contrastive-verse; the "implicit

---

[86] Kugel in ibid.
[87] Neusner, 13-19.
[88] Ibid, 31-51.
[89] Ibid, 66.

syllogism is stated through a systematic exegesis of the components of the base-verse on their own."[90]

The Syllogistic List: "The syllogism is explicit, not implicit, and is proven by a list of probative examples."[91]

The Miscellany: Genesis Rabbah often presents a list of names or references to illustrate a given theme, with no apparent syllogism.[92]

Genesis Rabbah is an arrangement of these four forms. According to Neusner, the compilation demonstrates a consistent rhetorical structure in the service of a consistent ideology. The Propositional Form is especially important in this regard:

> The power of [...the Propositional Form] - the juxtaposition of two verses, one derived from the document at hand, the other from some other document altogether - which will dominate from *Genesis Rabbah* (ca. 400-450) onward, is simple. On the surface, the intersecting verse expands the frame of reference of the base verse, introducing data otherwise not present. But just beneath the surface lies the implicit premise: *both the intersecting verse and the base make the same point; in their meeting, each rises out of its narrow framework as a detail or an instance of a rule and testifies to the larger picture, the encompassing rule itself.*[93]
> The intersecting verse-base verse construction therefore yields a proposition that transcends both verses and finds proof in the cases of each[...] The reason that this rhetorical program works so well derives from the topical program of *Genesis Rabbah* - to demonstrate that reliable rules govern Israel's history, and to discover and validate those fixed rules within the details of stories of the origins of the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, which Israel now constitutes.[94]

---

[90] Ibid, 73.
[91] Ibid, 102.
[92] Ibid, 151.
[93] Author's emphasis.
[94] Jacob Neusner, *Invitation to Midrash*, New York: Harper and Row, 1989, 104-105.

Neusner's ideas regarding the rhetorical structure and ideology of Genesis Rabbah are quite relevant to this study; I will return to them in the analytical reading. On the other hand, deciding whether his theory of the Primacy of Documentary Discourse is the final word on the subject is not my concern here: in general, I will continue to discuss the characteristics of midrashic discourse versus that of the Bible, while maintaining particular emphasis on Genesis Rabbah.

II. 4. Summary

I will briefly review the ideas introduced in the previous two chapters. Robert Alter and Meir Sternberg represent what has been termed a Formalist or "literary" reading of biblical narrative: both demonstrate the techniques of close reading to yield insight into character, plot, language and narration in the biblical text. Sternberg in particular discusses the ideological goals of the text and the techniques it uses to win over the reader, including the narrative's simultaneous address of both the critical and non-critical reader. Sternberg also points to the ideological value the text gives knowledge and its illustration of human ignorance both within the text and without. The third author, Wesley A. Kort, identifies four "considerations" inherent in any narrative - atmosphere, plot, character and tone - each of which the Bible exploits at different points in order to best make God manifest in its narrative universe. In Genesis 4, the development and message of the story are reflected in changes of atmosphere, or the norms of reality and the possible.

Amongst the scholars of Midrash both Isaak Heinemann and Ofra Meir analyze the literature's poetic and exegetic techniques. Heinemann asserts that the Aggadah's aim is to demonstrate the unity of Scripture and its accordance with rabbinic ideology, and identify the hand of Providence in the text and in history. These goals are accomplished by filling in narrative gaps and by tightening the connections of time, space, and causation between characters and events, so that biblical ambiguity is replaced with a lucid narrative reality where divinity is manifest. Ofra Meir describes the midrashic story in the categories of Scholes and Kellogg: its characters she sees as "functional," without any aspirations to a reality beyond the text; its plot resembles the biblical original in the prevalence of dialogue; as didactic literature it is saturated with meaning, including possible countervailing meanings from individual voices from within the story and the agenda of the editor without.

David Stern's insights into the mashal are important both because of the meshalim in Genesis Rabbah 22, and because much of what he says can be applied to other midrashic narrative as well. Thus the mashal, like other midrashim, disguises ideology as exegesis; in general Midrash, like the prototypical king-mashal, addresses harsh realities via interpretation, and glorifies this interpretation as the vehicle for Israel's ongoing relationship with God and the greatest comfort and refuge open to her. Given the existential purpose of the king-mashal, the ideas it produces and the image it forms of God are often the most daring and relevant concepts in rabbinic literature.

Finally, Jacob Neusner analyses both the pattern of rhetorical forms in Genesis Rabbah and its particular ideological program. In the ubiquitous propositional form he sees an implicit affirmation of the unity of Scripture and an oracle for Israel that must be synthesized by the midrashist.

Many of the ideas treated above will guide the following readings of Genesis 4 and Genesis Rabbah 22.

III: Analysis

1. Reading of Genesis 4

My first task in analyzing Genesis 4 is to explain why I have delineated the story from verses 1 to 16. In my opinion, whatever story there is in Genesis 4 is not the conflict of Cain and Abel, but really the life of Cain. The chapter opens with his conception and birth, his name and naming give him a special significance; it is Cain who begins the events by bringing an offering to God; his emotions are the ones the text reveals to the reader with which it upon us to empathize; he is the reader's image within the narrative, struggling to make sense of events; he is God's interlocutor and the recipient of His challenge to behave morally; he is the only one in the chapter to pass through a narrative cycle, undergoing temptation, sin, punishment, remorse and acceptance. Cain's presence lingers in the chapter even after he leaves the stage, both in the account of his descendants and in the song of Lamekh (4:23-24); still, the story focuses on Cain the individual, and therefore truly ends when he walks away from God in verse 16.

This narrative, featuring an eminently human protagonist who effects his own downfall through a moral failing, resembles a Greek tragedy. The many similarities which will become apparent in the course of this reading make it worthwhile to refer periodically to the quintessential treatise on tragedy, Aristotle's *Poetics*. Therefore, while considering how to delineate the pericope, I will allude to Aristotle's words regarding the tragic plot.

Now, according to our definition, Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete, and whole, and of a certain magnitude; for there may be a whole that is wanting in magnitude. A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end.[95]

As, therefore, in the other imitative arts, the imitation [in Tragedy] is one when the object imitated is one, so the plot, being an imitation of an action, must imitate one action and that a whole, the structural union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole thing will be disjointed and disturbed. For a thing whose presence or absence makes no visible difference is not an organic part of the whole.[96]

By confining my study to verses 1-16, from Cain's conception to his exile, I have demarcated a pericope in which the story begins, rises and ends in a natural manner, the "imitation of an action that is complete." Thus, the story begins with a sketch of the brothers' conception, birth and livelihoods; the action commences with the brothers' offerings, complicates with God's response, then rises into a conflict between the brothers which climaxes in murder. At the same time, the relationship between Cain and God - the story's primary theme - develops from the beginning of the action parallel to the above, until reaching its final phase when Cain is sentenced. In fact, the dénouement of both story lines - Cain's conflict with Abel and his relationship with God - occurs at the moment of the sentencing. As soon as equilibrium is restored, the protagonist exits; this is therefore the appropriate place to close the pericope.

1. And the man knew Eve his wife; and she conceived and gave birth to Cain, saying: "I have gotten a man from God."[97] 2. And she persisted to give birth to his brother, to Abel[...]

---

[95] Aristotle, *Poetics*, S.H. Butcher, trans., New York: Hill and Wang, 1994, 65.
[96] Ibid, 68.
[97] After KJV.

That Genesis 4 is the story of Cain rather that of Cain and Abel is evident in the

brothers' asymmetrical introduction. In her remark at Cain's appearance we

witness Eve's surprise and joy that she is somehow a partner with God in the

creation of another human being, a wonder that attaches to Cain through his name.

Not only are Eve's feelings revealed, but also the way the narrator wishes us to

read the phenomenon of childbirth in general and the birth of Cain in particular.

Eve's unusual response to what is for us a normal occurrence underscores Cain's

uniqueness: he is the first person to be born from a man and a woman, and hence

the first "normal" man in the Bible. Cain's story is therefore a fable of Everyman;

it is self-contained, leading nowhere, yet deep and powerful - a tiny jewel

reflecting many of man's basic existential challenges.

However, the conventional view labels Cain the villain of the story and

Abel, if not the hero, at least the innocent victim. Yet the text itself belies this

reading, for, as I will continue to show, it presents Cain as a sympathetic character

and Abel as little more than his dramatic foil - a "functional character," to use

Ofra Meir's term. First, rather than assume from the beginning that Cain is a

villain, I would propose that the text intends him to be neither too good nor too

bad. It will be useful to refer to the *Poetics* for Aristotle's stipulations regarding

the tragic hero.

> [A perfect tragedy] should, moreover, imitate actions which excite pity and
> fear, this being the distinctive mark of tragic imitation. It follows plainly, in
> the first place, the change of fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a
> virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity: for this moves neither
> pity nor fear; it merely shocks us. Nor, again, that of a bad man passing

48

from adversity to prosperity, for nothing can be more alien to the spirit of Tragedy: it possesses no single tragic quality; it neither satisfies the moral sense nor calls forth pity or fear. Nor, again, should the downfall of the utter villain be exhibited. A plot of this kind would, doubtless, satisfy the moral sense, but it would inspire neither pity nor fear; for pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves. Such an event, therefore, will be neither pitiful nor terrible. There remains, then, the character between these two extremes - that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous - a personage like Oedipus, Thyestes, or other illustrious men of such families.[98]

Aristotle stipulates that, for a story to elicit fear and pity, the audience must be able to identify with the protagonist. The action must not be of a bad man brought low, for although this "would satisfy the moral sense" - it would be didactic - "it would inspire neither pity nor fear." Rather, the character must be confronted by an unmerited misfortune, then exacerbate the situation until he destroys himself. This is more in keeping with the events of Genesis 4 and with the overall style of the book, which is much more psychological than it is moralizing. Even the condition that the protagonist be a man of good family is appropriate here: to my mind this is to ensure that the audience has a reason to want to know about him, in a way Aristotle would likely not have expected for a story featuring a slave, for example. Cain, being the first child of man, is indeed illustrious: as soon as he is introduced and named the reader is curious to see how he will fare. That Cain is a man who is good but not too good will is borne out as the story progresses.

Thus, following Cain's birth and naming, Abel is introduced as something

---

[98] Aristotle, 75-76.

of an afterthought. The phrase, "And she persisted to give birth (*va-tosef la-ledet*)" indicates the auxiliary nature of Abel's birth in relation to Cain's. While Cain's naming gives his character a definite value from the outset, there is no value attached to Abel's name: he is left undefined. Of course *hevel* means "vapour, breath" or "vanity,"[99] as in Ecclesiastes 1:2: "Vanity of vanities (*havel havalim*)."

The text's comment on Cain via Eve is an editorial emphasis on the character; the absence of any such recognition regarding Abel and the clues that he is meant to be downplayed indicate that he is a bit part - born as an afterthought, playing a functional role until he is murdered. He does not even have a voice until after he is dead, and then only in paraphrase. Nor does the text inflect or acknowledge this lack of characterization: it is simply not important. Genesis 4 is not really the story of a conflict between brothers, but of one man's conflict with his own emotions and conscience.

> 2. [...] and lo, Abel was a shepherd and Cain was a tiller of the earth. 3. And lo, after some time, Cain brought from the fruit of the earth a gift for God. 4. And Abel, he too brought from the first of his flock, and their best,[100] and God ["]had regard for["][101] Abel and his gift. 5. And for Cain and his gift He had no regard, and Cain was very angry, and his face fell.

Though Cain is given all the importance in birth, the next few verses set up

---

[99] Brown, Driver and Briggs, 1962, 210.

[100] After Speiser in *The Anchor Bible*; E. A. Speiser, trans., *The Anchor Bible, Genesis*, Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1964, 29. The KJV has "the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions"; the Septuagint is similar.

[101] Thus Speiser (29); the KJV translates "had respect unto." Rashi replaces "*vayosha'*" with "*vayifen*," citing Isaiah 17:8 and Job 16:6. See Rev. M. Rosenbaum and Dr. A. M. Silberman, trans., *Pentateuch, Genesis*, London: Shapiro, Valentine & Co., 1929, 17, note 2, for the translators' comment on Rashi regarding this point.

a symmetry of description and action between the brothers, supplying just the necessary information to establish opposition and set the scene for conflict. Thus Cain is born, and also Abel; Abel is a shepherd and Cain is a farmer; Cain brings a gift, "and Abel, he too..." This symmetry holds until the shift from iterative to singulative narration - that is, into the immediate time of the story. Thus the reader is told that, "after some time (*miqeitz yamim*)," Cain brought a gift to God, as did Abel. Though there is some symmetry here, I feel the text emphasizes both that Cain is the one who initiated the offering, and that Abel's offering was the one that God favoured. I will discuss this difference in emphasis more in a moment.

What is most striking in verses 3-4, other than God's acceptance of Abel's offering, is that it seems this offering was of a higher quality than Cain's. Cain brought an offering "from the fruit [or "yield"] of the earth," while Abel brought "from the first of his flock, and their best (*mi-bekhorot tzono ve-ḥelveihen*)." How one reads the offerings will determine how one understands later events in the story. If the text is telling the reader that Abel's offering was clearly superior to Cain's, then it makes perfect sense that God favoured one brother over the other. In that case, for Cain to rail at heaven for his own faults and murder his brother out of unchecked anger implies a complete lack of insight, morality or emotional integrity. This is the way most commentators have understood Cain. Perhaps the earliest such view is in Genesis Rabbah. Rashi asserts that Cain's offering was of "the worst quality (*ha-garu'a*)"; Ibn Ezra interprets the phrase "from the first of

51

his flock," describing Abel's offering, as indicating that Cain did not bring the first fruits, contrary to halakhah; David Kimhi and Bekhor Shor also state that Cain's offering was substandard.

An alternative interpretation, though, is that it is by no means clear that Cain's offering was inferior to Abel's and that the text did not mean for it to be clear, but that it intended that this point remain ambiguous and thus the first step leading to Abel's murder - God's favouring Abel over Cain - to remain something of a mystery. I will return to this notion of ambiguity many times over the course of this paper, for I believe it is fundamental to understanding the nature of narrative in Genesis, as opposed to that in Genesis Rabbah.

In fact, the ambiguity surrounding the offerings, a fact I will try to prove in a moment, relates to Meir Sternberg's theory of the dual-level narrative. Thus, to recall Sternberg's theory, the text operates on different levels simultaneously in order to win over the widest range of readers. The reader who is content to follow along the surface of the text will be guided sufficiently to give his allegiance to the ideology of the text and its hero, God. On the other hand, the reader that cannot ignore the gaps, ambiguities and moral grey areas will be forced to study the textual clues to synthesize a coherent narrative. Yet the text leaves such clues as will lead the reader, in the end, to the side of God, winning him over despite the problems with a subtle moral calculus. Even though both readers reach the same ideological endpoint, the critical reader gains a sense of meaning through realism, for the ambiguous narrative world resembles extra-textual reality more closely

than a simple, black-and-white morality tale.

One example that Sternberg provides of a dual-level narrative is I Samuel 15, where God takes the kingship away from Saul. For the reader who is willing to follow uncritically, God's explanation to Samuel - that Saul has disobeyed His explicit instructions by sparing the life of the Amalekite king - is sufficient to justify God's abandoning Saul. But for many readers this is not sufficient: it seems to be an instance of God's punishing a man far beyond what he deserves. However, by reading the clues the text provides for this purpose - Saul's words and actions over the course of the chapter - Sternberg demonstrates that all the signs point to the fact that Saul is no longer worthy to rule.

In my opinion, the Fratricide is another such split-level narrative. The simple reading follows from the initial dichotomization of Cain and Abel. Since Cain kills Abel, it is natural to read him as the story's villain; in turn, this characterization seems to be confirmed by God's rejection of Cain's offering: it is easy, then, to lump together sloth, parsimoniousness, anger, jealousy and criminality in Cain's character, because the binary structure of the characterization seems to require a villain. Thus in retrospect it seems quite clear that the mention of "the first of his flock" indicates that Abel's offering was superior to Cain's. I believe this is the reasoning behind such interpretations as that of Genesis Rabbah; in fact, the Midrash clarifies the story by deepening the dichotomy between the brothers, making Cain truly vile, and fleshing out Abel's character with noble qualities so that he may serve as the antagonist.

This, then, is the surface reading. But, looking more closely, I believe the text is saying something quite different. The interpretation of the offerings is the decisive factor in understanding the story one way or the other: if Cain's offering was clearly inferior and meant to be read as such then there is no mystery about God's rejection of it, and the story follows a dichotomy of character. But, as I said before, I think the text is purposely presenting a much more ambiguous narrative. First, is it possible that Cain's offering was not inferior to Abel's, but of equal value? Verse 4 begins "And Abel, he too brought from the first of his flock, and their best." The phrase "he too" implies a continuation of the symmetry between the brothers that has existed up to this point, even the sense within that symmetry that Cain initiates and Abel follows. Depending on how one parses the verse, "he too" means either "like Cain, Abel brought an offering (which were the first of his flock, etc.)," or "like Cain, Abel brought from the first and best of his yield." Is it possible that Cain really did bring his first and best? I believe it is. The clue is hidden in the preceding verse: "And lo, after some time (*miqeitz yamim*), Cain brought from the yield of the earth a gift for God." As I noted above, the transition from iterative narration, where the brothers are introduced, to the immediate events of the story is made by the words "*miqeitz yamim.*" Not only does the phrase introduce the action, it is the segue from the statement that Cain was a farmer to his bringing an offering to God from his crops. Instead of reading "*miqeitz yamim*" as a throwaway phrase, one can read it as a piece of information: that Cain brought his crop at the end of a period of farming - i.e.,

after the harvest. This is the reading of Ibn Ezra and Kimḥi. This segue would explain the structure of verse 3, where, in contrast to the preceding verses, the text describes Abel first, then Cain. A meaningful link between the information that Cain was a farmer and the description of his offering, placing the sacrifice at the exact temporal point any reader familiar with farming would understand and expect, would justify this structural reversal.

That Cain brought his offering after the harvest implies it was the first of his crop. Although on the surface this is a tenuous deduction, the way the text describes Cain's farming and sacrifice supports this assumption. It seems to me that verses 3-4 are a straightforward report of the activities of the first farmer. Rather than it being intended to stand out to the reader as the particular actions of Cain, the first murderer, the account of farming, then an implied harvest, then the bringing of an offering to God, was meant to strike the ancient audience as the natural and proper series of events. Again, I believe the structural reversal in verse 3 is meant to facilitate a smooth continuity of activities the audience would clearly understand. In this context, it would only be natural for Cain to offer the first and, by implication, the best of his crop; indeed, to interpret otherwise would be to read in a meaning that would go against convention and would not, I believe, be justified. I think, then, that it is definitely plausible the text is implying that Cain's offering was of the first of the harvest, and therefore comparable to Abel's gift.

But the text also states that Abel brought "[ve-]ḥelveihen," which I have

translated "[and] their best." Cain's offering has no such qualification: is it, then, necessarily inferior? I do not think so. First of all, the word *"ve-ḥelveihen"* can also be translated as "and their milk" or "and their fat," and could therefore be indicating anything from the quality of Abel's sheep to his inclusion of their milk or fat in the offering. Any one of these alternatives is only an uncertain indicator of the superiority of Abel's offering at best. Reading one offering as comparable to the other is supported by three precedents: a) the emphatic symmetry established up to this point between the brothers; b) the presentation of Cain as a viable protagonist; and c) the text's penchant for ambiguity. I have already discussed the structure of the opening verses and the implications of that structure for character development. As for the second point, in addition to what was stated above it is important to note that it is Cain that first conceives the idea of bringing an offering to God. He is the first to do so in the entire Bible, anticipating all of the book's major heroes; within their respective narratives those offerings symbolize the special sensitivity these men had to the Divine, and their commemoration of the vital, personal involvement of God in their lives. Up until Korah, Cain is the only biblical "villain" to bring a sacrifice. But, again, I do not feel the text intends Cain to be read as a villain. His initiative in bringing the first offering to God is one more indication of this: it is completely consistent with his role as the first child of man, without any stain on his identity. If the text had not wished any credit to reflect on Cain, why did it not have Abel bring the first sacrifice, or stated, as it easily could have, "And lo, after some time, the two

56

brothers brought offerings…" Here as before, within the symmetry of the brothers, Cain is the protagonist.

Therefore, I advocate a reading of the brothers' offerings as *equal* (not identical) - because of the reasons listed above, because the text did not choose to portray Abel's gift as clearly superior gift when it easily could have, and, most importantly, because to read otherwise would ruin the power of the story. Furthermore, if Cain brought a mediocre gift and Abel a fine one the story would have little meaning; it would be merely an unfortunate incident, one in which a man destroys himself and his fellow because he cannot accept anything less than total success. brother out of outrage for the natural consequences of his own laziness or stupidity. Such a story may be realistic, but it seems of negligible value and completely out of place in Genesis. It would also be a story lacking a protagonist, for neither Cain nor Abel would possess enough substance or virtue to justify the reader's interest in them.

If it had wanted to, the text could easily have made it clear that Cain's offering was inferior; after all, even if one considers sheep a more generous gift than vegetables, this point is hardly unequivocal. That Genesis Rabbah clarifies this by stating that Cain brought the refuse shows that the text is unclear here. In my opinion, this ambiguity is both typical and intended. Genesis 4 is preceded by the Fall of Man, a story that is deep and resonant precisely because of the questions it provokes regarding human vs. divine responsibility for the existence of evil. If the story did not combine the ideas of a Fall and a new beginning, and

if the tragedy of independence and the glory of knowledge were not two sides of the same coin, and if there were not some sense of mystery about all this, it would be a completely different story. The fact is that the story of the Fall establishes a precedent in Genesis by showing that at the root of things often lie ambiguity and paradox, and that the ways of the world are not easily understood. After this precedent it is incumbent upon the reader to allow the story of the Fratricide to maintain its moral grey areas. So much for the sacrifices.

The first climax of the story comes with what happens next - the acceptance of Abel's offering and the rejection of Cain's. For the reasons I have stated, I believe the reader is meant to be left in the dark regarding the reason. Rather than understanding God's motives, what is important here is our ignorance - an ignorance that we share with the protagonist. To recall Meir Sternberg's words:

> The reader's drama is literally dramatized in and through an analogous ordeal of interpretation undergone by some character [...] with variable success but under the same constraints on human vision. The resulting brotherhood in darkness and guesswork and error cuts across the barrier separating participant from observer to highlight the barrier separating both from divine omniscience. Furthermore, God shapes the world plot with a view to getting his creatures to "know" him.

The situation has become a dilemma for the protagonist and a puzzle for the reader; both are shaped by an omniscient power - for Cain, God; for the reader, the author. Given the simple account of the situation and the speed with which the text moves forward, it seems that the offerings and their reception are only the premise of the story - namely, the account of the protagonist's reaction to the

circumstances.

The symmetrical structure of the story's preamble is truly broken when the reader is informed that Cain "was very angry, and his face fell." This is the first internal moment of any of the characters, and, typically, it illumines Cain. The narrator's direct disclosure of a character's thoughts or feelings is relatively rare in the early chapters of Genesis; when it occurs it is important to understand its significance. The impact of this technique becomes apparent when one considers the importance of the revelation that, after He created the universe, God saw that it was good, or that before their Fall Adam and Eve were naked and were not ashamed. It is important to recall that of all the characters in Genesis, if not the entire Bible, God is the one the reader knows best, precisely because His thoughts and feelings are most often revealed. Of course, this is no accident, for the effect is to draw the reader to God's perspective, ideologically if not in knowledge. Therefore, although brief, the text's disclosure of his anger is a means of fortifying the reader's sympathy and attention vis-à-vis Cain, in his moment of crisis and transformation. This is yet another indication that the reader is meant to view Cain as a tragic figure rather than a stock villain. Rarely does the Bible reveal the inner workings of its villains, for the simple reason that if it did the reader would empathize with them too much. To the extent that Exodus reveals the emotions of Pharaoh through the information that God "hardened his heart," one is compelled to sympathize with this character, whose Creator manipulates his sentiments to bring about his destruction.

Furthermore, given the scarcity of detail in biblical narrative and in this pericope in particular, that Cain was "very angry" indicates that the intensity of his rage is significant. Both the empathic focus on Cain and the addition of the intensifier "*me'od*" preclude Cain's bringing a mediocre offering; if he did his excessive anger would only show his boorish temper, disqualifying him as a worthy protagonist or object of divine solicitude. Even Esau has a real grievance to justify his rage. Cain's intense anger seems to be born out of his shock that, having reached out to God, he has been rejected for no apparent reason.

Now that a situation perplexing to both protagonist and reader has been established, God addresses Cain, familiarly and without fanfare.

> 6. And God said to Cain: "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? 7. [']Surely, if you act right, it should mean exultation. But if you do not, sin (*hat'at*) is the demon (*rovetz*) at the door, whose urge is toward you; yet you can be his master.[']102"

This is obviously a difficult passage. The Hebrew is notoriously enigmatic, and Speiser (32-33) notes the wide variance in translations. I have chosen his rendering for two reasons. The less important one is that, in my opinion, it possesses greater meaning and relevance to the story, rather than merely having God encourage Cain to offer a better sacrifice next time. However, the main reason is that, unlike the KJV, Onkelos and Rashi, all of whom read "*hat'at rovetz tahat*" as "sin crouches" or the like, Speiser's reading of "*rovetz*" as the predicate nominative rather than the verb solves the disagreement of its gender with

---

102 Speiser, 29.

"*ḥat'at*." While he concedes that the most common sense of "*rovetz*" is "he/it is

crouching," Speiser supports his translation by citing an Akkadian cognate,

"*rabiṣum* [-] a term for 'demon' depicted both as benevolent and malevolent,

often lurking at the entrance of a building to protect or threaten the occupants."[103]

Such a reading, albeit unconventional, would fit the context satisfactorily.

With this speech God enters the narrative: it is the first time He has spoken

since His sentencing of Adam and Eve. Regarding speech and narration in

biblical prose, Alter says:

> Spoken language is the substratum of everything human and divine that
> transpires in the Bible, and the Hebrew tendency to transpose what is
> preverbal or nonverbal into speech is finally a technique for getting at the
> essence of things, for obtruding their substratum[...][104]
> In any given narrative event, and especially, at the beginning of any new
> story, the point at which dialogue first emerges will be worthy of special
> attention, and in most instances, the initial words spoken by a personage will
> be revelatory, perhaps more in manner than in matter, constituting an
> important moment in the exposition of character.[105]

Certain signs indicate the significance of God's speech: it is the first of the story;

it is of exceptional length compared to the narrative that precedes it; it illuminates

the decisive vertex in the triangle of relationships (the others being Cain and Abel)

around which the story has been built. In fact, rather than being only a response to

the actions of the human characters, God's speeches are the thesis - the

"substratum" - of the story. Sternberg states that "God shapes the world plot with

a view to getting his creatures to 'know' him"; it seems that so far He has

---

[103] Ibid, 33.
[104] Alter (1981), 70.
[105] Ibid., 74.

engineered events to lead Cain and the reader to this point in the story. The smooth flow of the story is disrupted by the strange rejection of Cain's offering, an incongruency the text emphasizes by having the protagonist respond with natural shock - perhaps in order to guide the reader's reaction. Cain is alone, angry and utterly bewildered, whatever result he imagined for his sacrificial offering denied him, it seems, for no good reason. This is the set-up. Then, in the next moment, God is there with an answer - , the object of his hopes, sensitive to Cain's feelings and offering an encounter that, despite not being what Cain had imagined, constitutes a meaningful dialogue. It is as if He had been observing Cain the entire time - not absent, but hidden.

Why? It seems to me that, rather than this being a collection of unfortunate and random occurrences, the events of the story, in particular Cain's failure, have been put together for the purpose of teaching both character and reader a lesson. A mystery is established, and God arrives to deliver the solution. As with Job God does not answer for His actions, but instead apprises man of a "truer," if harder, reality. He says, in effect, that Cain is troubling himself over something he cannot control - i.e., the divine favour - but what he *can* control is his response to the circumstances; regardless of not reaping the reward he had expected, if in future Cain does well he will succeed and exalt - rather than aspire to external approval he should live well for its own sake; if he does not do well, sin will be waiting to ensnare him. But the consequence of failure is not sin; what, then, does this mean? This could be an observation that, in general, he who

fails is in danger of falling into sin. Or it might be a specific warning about the danger inherent in this situation, implying that the good that Cain should do is not in his work but in the way he responds to the immediate crisis. If he does the right thing, presumably by controlling his anger, he will come out successful; if he does not, sin is waiting to catch him. Either interpretation leaves the impression that God knows Cain is teetering on the edge of something horrible.

Of course, "*im teitiv se'et*" could also mean that if Cain were to only offer a proper sacrifice next time, he would receive the favour that was denied him. Naturally I prefer the first reading, if for no other reason than that a God who would be so nitpicking as to utterly refuse the first, freely-brought thank-offering of man because it did not meet certain unknown ritual specifications would be unworthy both of the book and the reader.

Until verse 6 the reader has about as much understanding of events in the story, particularly in the matter of the sacrifices, as does Cain, and, like Cain, a feeling that things don't make sense. However, as soon as God speaks the reader learns that, in fact, He has the situation in hand, is aware of Cain's feelings, and understands their destructive potential. Even while He is stern and inscrutable God is sensitive, even sympathetic. For though He is unapologetic about not favouring Cain's sacrifice - He does not even mention it - even more than warning Cain He seems to be encouraging him to prosper and be happy, even while things have not gone his way. The lack of emphasis both God and the text give to the offerings, accepted or rejected, implies that the real problem of the story is not

how to attain divine favour but how one should act in the face of adversity. Indeed, God, ignoring the whole business of the sacrifices, states outright that the important thing is not who wins or loses, but how one plays the game.

In His speech, God presents a new paradigm for His relationship with man, a development that Alter, Sternberg and Kort all discuss in different terms. Alter noted that the Bible emphasizes the moral dimension in its narrative: the crux of Genesis 4 is that God puts morality at the forefront of his relationship with Cain, despite the latter's expectations. As for Sternberg, this is an example of God "shaping the world plot with a view to getting his creatures to know him." Finally, in Kort's parlance, God reveals to Cain a new "atmosphere," or norm of narrative reality, which Cain first challenges, then ultimately submits to. If God's lesson for Adam and Eve was that rules have consequences, perhaps His lesson for Cain is that life isn't always fair but that one must behave morally. Like his parents, Cain only learns his lesson by breaking the rules and discovering exactly what they mean.

8. And Cain said to Abel his brother: ["..."] and lo, when they were in the field, Cain rose up over Abel his brother and killed him.

What did Cain say to Abel? I believe the ellipsis represents a scribal error; Speiser, citing the Samaritan Bible and the Septuagint, inserts " 'Let us go outside.' "[106] Speiser's interpolation is typical of the Bible's concision and appropriate to the length of the pericope; it does not, however, add much to the

---

[106] Speiser, 29, note c.

64

story. In any case, what is evident from what follows is that at this point Cain's

anger is unabated. Perhaps Cain enticed Abel to the field with murderous intent;

perhaps his anger was ignited there by what passed between them; the Midrash

proposes both scenarios.

Once the brothers are in the field, the climax occurs simply. The Hebrew

of verse 8 follows a general pattern of iamb/anapest + trochee, with the

impressive, five-syllable word "*va-yahargehu*" shattering the rise-and-fall rhythm.

In order to achieve his goal of exciting fear and pity in the audience,

Aristotle offers the following prescription for the tragedian:

> Let us then determine what are the circumstances that strike us as terrible
> or pitiful.[...]
> If an enemy kills an enemy, there is nothing to excite pity either in the
> act or the intention - except so far as the suffering in itself is pitiful. So
> again with indifferent persons. But when the tragic incident occurs
> between those who are near or dear to one another - if, for example, a
> brother kills, or intends to kill, a brother, a son his father, a mother her son,
> a son his mother, or any other deed of the kind is done - these are the
> situations to be looked for by the poet.[107]

How well these words fit the narrative.

Again, as if He had been looking over Cain's shoulder the entire time, God

confronts the first murderer:

> 9. And God said to Cain: "Where is Abel your brother?" And [Cain] said
> "I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?"

Just as God demands "Where is Abel your brother?" He had asked Adam, "Where

are you?" The difference in their replies speaks volumes about their

---

[107] Aristotle, 79.

understanding of their respective sins. Adam responds, "I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid for I was naked, and I hid" (3:10): he is either honest or naïvely guileful. Either way, he immediately exposes both his sin and his shame. Cain, on the other hand, is brazen and shameless. God has so deteriorated in man's eyes in just one generation that, while Adam hid at His approach, Cain treats God like a tedious old friend of his parents.

The difference, of course, is that Cain feels wronged. From his sullen response the reader can assume that Cain still feels he has been mistreated in the matter of the sacrifice, and has not taken God's warning to heart. In the face of Cain's implied indictment, God quickly disabuses Cain of the belief that their relationship is any longer the issue, and that the situation Cain has created is much more serious than he imagines. Therefore, finding only defiance, and as if to impress on Cain the magnitude of his crime, God rejoins in horror:

> 'What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood cries to me from the earth.'

What provokes God's horror is the "voice" of Abel's blood. Even in death the individual has the right to accuse his murderer, and God demands that Cain not only recognize his crime but acknowledge his victim. But does Abel's blood accuse Cain alone, or does it indict God as well? The Midrash will take up this question.

God then delivers the sentence:

> 11. "And now you are cursed to the earth, which has gaped its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. 12. When you till the earth it will no longer yield its strength to you; [']a fugitive and a vagabond shalt

66

thou be in the earth.[']¹⁰⁸"

Notice the parallels between Cain's curse and Adam's.

> And to Adam He said: "Because you listened to the voice of your
> wife and ate of the tree which I commanded you, saying:
> 'Do not eat of it,' accursed is the earth for your sake - with suffering
> shall you eat of it, all the days of your life." (3:17)

Both sentences demote the nature of the earth's relationship with the sinner: in

Adam's sentence the earth is cursed "for [his] sake (*arura ha-adama ba-*

'avurekha)"; in Cain's, the sinner himself is "cursed to the earth (*arur ata min ha-*

adama)." What do these different formulations signify? With Adam it seems the

sin has altered nature itself, for in his case the curse is on the earth. With Cain, it

is *he* that is cursed in relation to the earth, the implication being, as the reader

learns in the next verse, that he will turn from a farmer to a nomad. Verse 11

implies that it is Cain's abuse of the earth, because of his forcing it to receive the

blood of Abel, that terminates their relationship.

> 13. And Cain said to God: "My guilt (*'avoni*) is greater than I can bear. 14.
> You have banished me today from the face of the earth, and from your face I
> will hide and be a wanderer in the land, and it will happen that any who
> finds me will kill me."

In my opinion, rather than a protest at his punishment this speech is Cain's

admission of guilt. There is a variety of interpretations amongst commentators.

The Septuagint translates "*'avoni*" as "my crime (*hei aitia mou*)"; the KJV,

Speiser and Rashi¹⁰⁹ all read it as "my punishment." Brown, Driver and Briggs

---

¹⁰⁸ KJV.
¹⁰⁹ Rosenbaum and Silbermann (18, v.13 commentary) admit that the literal meaning is "my sin,"

state that the first meaning of the word *'avon* is "iniquity"; the second is "guilt of

iniquity"; the third is "consequence of, or punishment for, iniquity." Though they

supply a number of scriptural examples for the third meaning, they note that two

sources, Siegried and Stade, explain most of these cases by the second meaning

and do not even recognize the third interpretation; a third source, Buhl, "thinks

[...the third] meaning rare," offering only Genesis 4:13 and Isaiah 5:18 as

examples.[110] "My crime" or "my guilt" therefore seem to me to be better

translations of *'avoni*; in my opinion, this sense best fits the speaker's character up

to this point. If Cain were merely protesting his sentence here, he would remain

until the end an unrepentant, uncomprehending figure, and thus a poor

protagonist. Up to now Cain has shown himself to be sensitive and sincere, more

at the mercy of his feelings than hateful or conniving. When he was confronted

after the murder he did not so much try to evade his guilt as to vent his anger and

hurt, seemingly unaware of the significance of his crime.[111] It seems to me, then,

that Cain is merely acknowledging his sentence, his assurance that "from Your

face I will hide" expressing an appreciation of his guilt and a resignation to his

fate.

As He did with Adam and Eve, God cares for the sinner despite his

punishment.

---

but preserve Rashi's rendering in their translation.

[110] Brown, Driver and Briggs, 731.

[111] That the rabbis recognize this is clear from their explanation that God commuted Cain's sentence from death, the halakhic penalty for murder, to exile because he had no way of appreciating the seriousness of his crime until after he had committed it.

> 15. And God said to him: "Therefore, he who kills Cain will be avenged upon seventy-fold." And God put a sign on Cain lest any who happen upon him smite him. 16. And Cain went out from before God and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

The text does not state that Cain took leave from his parents, nor from his home, but "from before God." This is an especially poignant detail. The story begins, after the introduction of the characters, when Cain brings a gift to God: Cain's first action is to try to make contact with his Maker. Instead of winning approval he is given a lesson about the harsh realities of life. This in itself is not disfavour, but a prize of a different kind than the one Abel wins: the sensitivity and frankness God exhibits as He responds to Cain's feelings, and His desire to reason with and encourage him, constitute an intimacy unmatched in Genesis until the appearance of Abraham. But Cain, who still craves the "favour" that Abel won, does not appreciate what he receives and revenges himself on his rival, both from jealousy and because God explicitly warned him not to. At the moment of the murder and when he snubs his accuser, Cain, in his mind, is still the injured party; yet both God and the reader recognize that his sin in fact eclipses the importance of his injury and has forever altered his life. Reality only sinks in after God impresses upon Cain the weight of his crime and explains to him how his life has changed; then Cain mourns, "My guilt is greater than I can bear." He goes from striking out at Abel and God in an act of rebellion, to understanding that he is guilty of killing another human being. But Cain wins this knowledge through his own downfall: he realizes too late that by killing Abel - his way of hitting back at God - he has ruined forever any chance of winning the divine approval he had craved before.

Crushed, he concedes any claim on God's love or understanding, and walks away from the human family.

Aristotle considers such a reversal of fortune and awareness to be a crucial element in tragedy:

> Reversal of the Situation is a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability or necessity. Thus in the *Oedipus*, the messenger comes to cheer Oedipus and free him from his alarms about his mother, but by revealing who he is, he produces the opposite effect.[...]
> Recognition, as the name indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune. The best form of recognition is coincident with a Reversal of the Situation, as in the *Oedipus*.[...] But the recognition that is most intimately connected with the plot and action is, as we have said, the recognition of persons. This recognition, combined with Reversal, will produce either pity or fear; and actions producing these effects are those which, by our definition, Tragedy represents.[112]

Reversal and recognition both occur at the moment God makes Cain understand that, rather than getting back at God or somehow compelling His attention, he has in fact destroyed himself. Thus the recognition is not of a person or an object, but of the morality and significance of an action - something both God and the reader understand long before the protagonist. Perhaps biblical narrative contains fewer "recognitions" of the type that Aristotle describes, like Jacob waking to Leah, and more like David's acknowledgement of his sin before Nathan, where the moral transformation is more important than the ironic circumstances of the reversal.

This completes my reading of Genesis 4. It has demonstrated a number of traits of biblical narrative, including complex characterization, the embracing of

---

[112] Aristotle, 72.

paradox within the narrative world, an appreciation for the tragically ironic, and

God's concern with the moral education of His creatures. The specifically literary

aspects of the narrative, such as plot, character, narration and meaning, will be

discussed after the reading of Genesis Rabbah.

III. 2. Reading of Genesis Rabbah 22

The narrative format in Genesis Rabbah 22 is, of course, quite different

from that in Genesis 4. The account of the Fratricide is told through the glosses

on individual verses, and must be pieced together from these; at the same time,

certain glosses constitute mini-narratives in themselves. The concern of the

Midrash is the didactic function of the scriptural events and not the story as such:

the story is taken as a given, while analysis is brought to bear on the individual

verses that comprise it. Though it is filtered through the comments of the rabbis,

the Midrash does present a coherent narrative, if for no other reason than that it

must adhere to the biblical template. Because there is almost no sense of a

tragedy in this story I will not refer to Aristotle.

For this reading, I have translated the appropriate passages of Julius

Theodor and Chanoch Albeck's scholarly edition of Genesis Rabbah[113] (1912-

1936), itself based on the London Manuscript of the Midrash, but including

variations from all extant manuscripts; I have noted these variations when I felt it

---

[113] Julius Theodor and Chanoch Albeck, trans., *Bereschit Rabba*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1912-
1936.

was important to do so. For guidance I have referred to Theodor's commentary,

Minḥat Yehudah, as well as the translation of Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman[114] (1961;

original pub. 1939), based on Theodor-Albeck.

> 1. AND THE MAN KNEW EVE HIS WIFE. REMEMBER, O LORD,
> THY TENDER MERCIES AND THY LOVINGKINDNESSES; FOR
> THEY HAVE EVER BEEN OF OLD[115] (Psa. 25:6). R. Joshua b.
> Neḥemiah said: "You treated the first man so, for You said to him, FOR IN
> THE DAY THAT THOU EATEST THEREOF THOU SHALT SURELY
> DIE (Gen. 2:17), and had You not given him a day of Your own, that lasts a
> thousand years, ah! 'how could he have applied himself to begetting
> posterity?'[116] AND THE MAN KNEW, etc."

The *petiḥtah* features Neusner's Propositional Form: therefore, a base-

verse from the pericope is glossed by a contrastive-verse from the Writings or

Later Prophets, which serves to unite disparate points in Scripture and show the

hand of Providence behind it all. The stimulus for this homily is the Bible's

statement that Adam and Eve started a new life east of Eden, thereby contradicting

giving the lie to God's warning that they would die the day they ate from the Tree

of Knowledge (2:17). R. Joshua b. Neḥemiah fills this gap by claiming that God

commuted their sentence by making the "day" which He spoke of one of His own

days, lasting a thousand years. That R. Joshua does not bother to bring a prooftext

containing the idea that for God a thousand years passes as a day - for example,

Psalm 95 or 108 - but instead one that attests to God's compassion and mercy

---

[114] Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman, trans., *Midrash Rabbah, Genesis I*, London: The Soncino Press, 1961, 180-198.
[115] Biblical quotations in this translation are taken from the KJV, except for quotations from Genesis 4:1-16, which are my translation from the previous section.
[116] Freedman, 180.

demonstrates, perhaps, that this concept was well-known.

> 2. AND THE MAN KNEW, etc. R. Hunah and R. Jacob in the name of R.
> Aba said: "There was no procreation before the first man: it is not written
> 'Adam knew' but AND ADAM [KNEW]. KNEW (*yada'*) [signifies] that
> he taught the custom to all (*hodi'ah derekh eretz la-kol*). [Another
> interpretation:] What does KNEW mean but that his tranquility was stolen,
> for he knew what his serpent [Eve] had done to him."[117]
> R. Aḥa said: "She was given as a guide (*ḥivitah*) and he found her to be a
> serpent (*ḥivyah*)." R. Aḥa said: "The serpent was your [Eve's] serpent, and
> she was Adam's serpent."

The Midrash credits Adam and Eve with the first act of procreation;

punning on the word *yada'*, it also confers on Adam an awareness both of what he

had lost in the Fall and "what his serpent had done to him." Heinemann states that

the Midrash typically ascribes anonymous events in the plot, especially prestigious

ones, to known characters: the Midrash abhors the vacuum of anonymity and

indeterminacy.

The glosses associate Eve's enticing Adam sexually with her tempting him

to eat from the Tree, creating a nexus between the ideas of sex (Adam knows his

wife), the seductiveness of women (Eve is his temptress), and awareness (the Tree

of Knowledge; Adam recognizes Eve's seductiveness). This is a narrative

interpolation of Adam's thoughts and feelings about his misfortune and its cause,

Eve. The way the Midrash transforms the Bible's neutral disclosure of Adam and

Eve's procreation into an act loaded with guilt and anger converts the original

sense of the verse - that of a new beginning - into the continuation of the theme of

Eve's guilt. The revelation of characters' thoughts and feelings is characteristic of

---

[117] After Freedman, 180.

Genesis Rabbah. Though during the story of the Fall in Genesis 3, the reader's

perspective is above the scene, along with the narrator, here the reader looks back

through Adam's eyes. Adam is the text's implied interpreter; through him the

authors guide the reader to their interpretation of the story's events.

> AND SHE CONCEIVED AND GAVE BIRTH TO CAIN. R. Elazar b.
> 'Azariah said: "Three wonders occurred that day: the same they were
> created, the same day they mated, and the same day they begot
> descendants." R. Joshua b. Qorḥah said: "Two went up to the bed and seven
> came down: Cain and his twin, Abel and his two twins."

R. Elazar b. 'Azariah's reading is an example of what Heinemann calls the

Midrash's "concentration of activity." The rapid progression of conception and

birth establishes the narrative reality as different from both the Bible's and our

own. R. Joshua b. Qorḥah's gloss - that Cain was born with a twin sister and Abel

with two - anticipates the existence of Cain's wife (4:17) and supplies a motive

for the murder.

> AND SHE SAID: "I HAVE GOTTEN A MAN FROM GOD." R. Isaac
> said: "When a woman sees she has children, she says 'My husband is now in
> my hands.'"

This piece of folk wisdom perpetuates the image of Woman as conniving

and insecure. Even though the text appears to reveal the thoughts and feelings of

women, the perspective is not of the woman herself but of the narrator, R. Isaac:

the reader is given little reason to identify or empathize with Eve.

> [Another interpretation:] FROM GOD (*et adonai*). R. Ishmael asked R.
> Akivah: "Since you studied under Naḥum of Gamzo for 22 years, [who
> taught that] *akhim* and *raqim* ["but"s and "except"s] are limiting, while *etim*
> and *gamim* [accusative particles and "also"s] are additive, what does the *et*
> written here signify?" He said: "If it had said 'I have acquired a man from
> God (*qaniti ish adonai* [without the *et*])' it would have been a difficult

74

matter, but [since it says] '*et adonai*,'" he quoted, "FOR IT IS NOT A VAIN THING FOR YOU (Deut. 32:47), and if it is vain for you it is because you do not how to interpret it. '*Et adonai*' [indicates that] before, Adam was created from the earth and Eve from him, but from then on [it would be as it was written:] IN OUR IMAGE, AFTER OUR LIKENESS (Gen. 1:26) - neither from a man without a woman, nor from a woman without a man, nor from the two of them without the Divine Presence."[118]

This is a brief *ma'aseh*, a tale of the rabbis. The narrative, which is conveyed almost completely in dialogue, recounts a controversy about exegetical methodology; within the *ma'aseh* is another narrative, a small section of the re-told biblical story. The *ma'aseh* is a dramatization of the discourse of Torah exegesis. What is at stake in this story is the proper approach to the exegetical problem, as well, perhaps, as R. Akivah's ability to defend his general hermeneutic; the controversy is resolved when Akivah successfully interprets the particle *et*. As will become increasingly evident, this narrative of interpretation, not the biblical Aggadah, is in fact the heart of the Midrash.

> 3. AND SHE PERSISTED TO GIVE BIRTH, etc. This supports what R. Joshua b. Qorhah said: "Two ascended to the bed and seven came down from it." AND SHE PERSISTED TO GIVE BIRTH indicates further delivery, not an additional pregnancy.

This is another "concentration of activity" - a fantastic association of similar or related events in time and place.

> AND LO, ABEL WAS A SHEPHERD AND CAIN WAS A TILLER OF THE EARTH. Three were consumed [with passion] for the earth (*hayu lehutim ahar adamah*) and no good was in them: Cain, Noah and Uzziyahu - CAIN WAS A TILLER OF THE EARTH [and murdered his brother]; AND NOAH BEGAN TO BE AN HUSBANDMAN (Gen. 9:20) [and was a drunkard]; Uzziyahu LOVED HUSBANDRY (II Chron. 26:10) [and

---

[118] A reference to Genesis Rabbah 8:9.

became a leper[119]].

This is an example of what Neusner calls the Syllogistic List, a set of

examples assembled to demonstrate an idea. What this particular unit illustrates is

the way the Midrash turns biblical characters into types and fits them into its

dichotomous moral system.

> 4. AND LO, AFTER SOME TIME. R. Eliezer and R. Joshua [discussed
> this]; R. Eliezer said: "The world was created in the month of Tishrei"; R.
> Joshua said: "[It was created] in the month of Nisan." He that said in
> Tishrei said "Abel lived from Sukkot (*ha-ḥag*) until Ḥannukah"; he that said
> in Nisan said "Abel lived from Passover until Shavuot"; both agreed that
> Abel did not remain in the world more than fifty days.[120]

Here the events of the biblical story are associated with the Jewish

calendar, an example of Heinemann's "concentration of time." In one sense,

which month the story took place in is irrelevant, especially if it does not shed any

light on whether Cain brought his offering after the harvest. Yet interpolating

norms of rabbinic Judaism into Scripture is a general function of Midrash, and the

calendar is one of the most important of these.

> 5. CAIN BROUGHT FROM THE FRUIT OF THE EARTH. From the
> refuse (*min ha-pesolet*), like a bad tenant farmer that would eat the new fruit
> and honour the king with what was left.

Here, as one would expect, Cain's offering is interpreted as substandard:

this reading is justified by the absence in the text of any mention of "first fruits,"

which, in light of the halakhah, is an important omission. However, what is

---

[119] *Minḥat Yehudah*, line 11, "*ve-lo nimtzah ba-hem toḥelet.*"
[120] Freedman notes that the Rabbis interpret "*miqeitz yamim*" as referring to the beginning of new seasons; Freedman, 182, note 3. The period between Sukkot (or even Simḥat Torah) and Ḥannukah is of course more than fifty days.

operating here, even more than the exegete's sensitivity to the text, is an ideological obligation to find Cain guilty and God innocent, since the rejected offering implies that one or the other is at fault. Naturally, for the rabbis to conclude that God rejected Cain's offering in order to teach him about the indeterminacy of existence is impossible. Neusner stated that the ideological program of Genesis Rabbah is to "demonstrate that reliable rules govern Israel's history, and to discover and validate those fixed rules within the details of stories of the origins of the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." One of these rules, perhaps the primary one, is that good is rewarded and evil is punished. If, by denying that he brought a substandard sacrifice, my reading has saved the sense of Cain as a multi-dimensional character, I recognize that I have abandoned the premise that God acts in a way that is both just and understandable. Whether or not this is the "true" sense of Genesis 4, it is clearly not the belief of the rabbis. The Midrash's use of the absence of a mention of "first fruits" in Cain's offering to read Cain and God a certain way recalls Stern's observation about the mashal - that the ideological reading of the nimshal precedes the mashal-proper, but is presented as its outcome.

> AND ABEL, HE TOO BROUGHT FROM THE FIRST OF HIS FLOCK, AND OF THEIR BEST [or AND OF THEIR FAT]. R. Elazar and R. Yossi b. R. Haninah [discussed this]; R. Elazar said: "The sons of Noah[121] offered *shelamim*"; R. Yossi b. R. Haninah said: "They offered *'olot*." R. Elazar answered R. Yossi b. R. Haninah: "It is written AND OF THEIR FAT meaning that he offered its fat [and therefore it was a *shelamim* sacrifice]." How did R. Yossi b. R. Haninah answer him? "[FAT means] from the

---

[121] I.e., mankind before the giving of the Torah.

fattest [of the flock]." R. Elazar answered him: "Is it not written AND HE SENT YOUNG MEN OF THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL, WHICH OFFERED BURNT OFFERINGS (*'olot*), AND SACRIFICED PEACE OFFERINGS (*zevaḥim shelamim*)? (Ex. 24:5)"[122] What did R. Yossi b. R. Ḥaninah answer? "It means that they were whole (*sheleimim*) in their hides, and were not flayed or cut up."[123]

R. Elazar replied to R. Yossi b. R. Ḥaninah: "It is written AND JETHRO, MOSES' FATHER IN LAW, TOOK A BURNT OFFERING (*'olah*) AND SACRIFICES (*zevaḥim*). (Ex. 18:12)"[124] What did R. Yossi b. R. Ḥaninah answer him? "[I hold] as those who say that Jethro came after the giving of the Torah [and therefore the sons of Noah did not offer *shelamim*]." R. Huna said: "R. Yanai and R. Ḥiyya the Elder disagree; R. Yanai says 'Jethro came before the giving of the Torah' and R. Ḥiyya the Elder says 'Jethro came after the giving of the Torah.'" R. Ḥaninah said: "They do not differ, for he who says [Jethro] came before the giving of the Torah holds that the sons of Noah offered *shelamim*, while he who says that Jethro came after the giving of the Torah holds they offered *'olot*."

The following supports R. Yossi b. R Ḥaninah: " AWAKE, O NORTH WIND (Song 4:16) - this is the *'olah*, which was slaughtered on the north [side of the altar]; what does AWAKE signify, but something that was sleeping and wakes up [is restored]. AND COME, THOU SOUTH (ibid) - these are *shelamim*, which were slaughtered on the south [side of the altar]; what does COME signify but something that is an innovation." R. Joshua of Sikhnin said in the name of R. Levi: "The following supports R. Yossi b. R. Ḥaninah: THIS IS THE LAW OF THE BURNT OFFERING (*'olah*): IT IS THE BURNT OFFERING (Lev. 6:9) that the sons of Noah offered; but when it comes to *shelamim* it says AND THIS IS THE LAW OF THE SACRIFICE OF PEACE OFFERINGS (*zevaḥ ha-shelamim*) (ibid 7:11): it is not written 'which they offered' but WHICH HE SHALL OFFER (ibid) in the future.

This unit, which reads *ve-ḥelveihen* as "and their fat," emphasizes the superiority of Abel's offering, but, first and foremost, dramatizes the process of interpretation. This time the issue is whether Abel's offering was a *zevaḥ shelamim*, which includes a portion of the animal's fat, or an *'olah*, which does

---

[122] This being before the giving of the Torah.

[123] *Minḥat Yehudah* states that the *'olah* was traditionally whole, neither flayed nor cut up; 208, line 3, "*ve-yizbeḥu zevaḥim shelamim*."

[124] According to the *Minḥat Yehudah*, the latter refers to *shelamim*; ibid, line 4, "*ve-zevaḥim*."

not. The larger question is whether mankind offered *shelamim* before the giving

of the Torah. The Midrash decides they did not, thereby preserving the singularity

of Israel's ritual prerogative - another important ideological theme in the text.

> 6. AND GOD HAD REGARD FOR ABEL AND HIS GIFT. He was
> appeased by it.
> AND FOR CAIN AND HIS GIFT HE HAD NO REGARD. He was not
> appeased by it.
> [AND CAIN WAS VERY ANGRY,] AND HIS FACE FELL. It became
> [black] like a brand.
> AND GOD SAID TO CAIN: "WHY ARE YOU ANGRY, AND WHY
> HAS YOUR FACE FALLEN? SURELY, IF YOU ACT RIGHT, IT
> SHOULD MEAN a blessing BUT IF YOU DO NOT [YOU WILL
> RECEIVE] a curse. That is to say, if you do well I will forgive you (*mohel
> lekha*), but if not, the sin of that same man overflows the brim (*gadush u-
> mugdash*)."[125] R. Berekhiah in the name of R. Shimon [quoted,] BLESSED
> IS HE WHOSE TRANSGRESSION IS FORGIVEN, WHOSE SIN IS
> COVERED (Psa. 32:1): "Happy is the man who is bigger (*gavoha*) than his
> sins and his sin [*sic*] is not bigger than him."

These glosses clarify that God accepted Abel's offering, rejected Cain's,

and that Cain was angry. At this point, the narrative fragments. In one version,

God assures Cain that if he does well (*im teitiv*), he will receive "a blessing"; if

not, he will receive "a curse." In an alternate reading God says that if Cain does

well He will forgive his transgressions; if not, his "sin overflows the brim." In

both readings it seems the rabbis interpret "*teitiv/lo teitiv*" as referring to action in

the moral sphere rather than the quality of future sacrifices. Both the midrashic

and the biblical God, as I read in the previous section, therefore exhort Cain to

behave ethically. The difference is that I have read God in the Bible as

---

[125] The Paris and Munich MSS have "*garush u-megurash*" - "[that same man will be] expelled"; the London MS has "*garush u-mugrash*"; 210.

encouraging Cain to live morally without immediate gestures of divine favour or disfavour. In the Midrash, however, God's exhortation to good is a timely warning, lest Cain sin now that he has failed. Of course, the Midrash blames Cain for the rejection of his sacrifice, and the admonition is in this light.

The Midrash's reading of *se'et/lo se'et* as "a blessing" and "a curse" is, I believe, an allusion to Deuteronomy 11:26-28:

> Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse; A blessing, if ye obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you this day: And a curse, if ye will not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn aside out of the way which I command you this day, to go after other gods, which ye have not known.[126]

In Genesis, if God is indeed conveying the principle of reward and punishment for human actions, the statement seems specific to Cain and the narrative. Here, the Deuteronimic intertext is on the surface of the text, and the system of universal justice is manifest and known to all characters.

> IN THE DOORWAY SIN CROUCHES. *'Rovetzet'* [the feminine form of "crouches"] is not written here, but rather *'rovetz'* [the masculine]. At first [sin] is feeble like a female, then later it grows strong like a male. R. Akivah said: "At first it is like a spider's web, then afterwards it becomes like a ship's rope, as it is written, WOE UNTO THEM THAT DRAW INIQUITY WITH CORDS OF VANITY (*be-ḥevlei ha-shav'*) [or WEAK CORDS], AND SIN AS IT WERE WITH A CART ROPE. (Isa. 5:18)" R. Isaac said: "At first it is like a boarder, then a guest, then the master of the house, as it is written, AND THERE CAME A TRAVELLER TO A RICH MAN (II Sam. 12:4) - a traveller by foot - AND HE SPARED TO TAKE OF HIS OWN FLOCK AND OF HIS OWN HERD (ibid) - now a guest - TO DRESS FOR THE WAYFARING MAN THAT WAS TO COME UNTO HIM (ibid) - now the master of the house.[127]

---

[126] KJV.

[127] Freedman explains that the term "the man" (*ha-ish*), without any qualification, indicates the master of the house; 185, note 1.

R. Tanḥum b. Marion said: "There are dogs in Rome that know how to deceive: a dog goes and sits in front of a store that sells bread and pretends to sleep; when the store-owner falls asleep he knocks loose a loaf near the ground, and while the onlookers are collecting the [scattered] loaves he steals the loaf and runs away."

R. Aba b. Yudan said: "[Sin] is like a feeble robber that sat at the crossroads and demanded from every person who passed his possessions, until one who saw came by and saw there was nothing to him and began to crush him. Thus the *yetzer ha-ra'* (the evil impulse) destroyed many generations, including the generation of Enosh, the generation of the Flood and the generation of the dispersal [after the Tower of Babel], but when Abraham stood and saw that there was nothing to him he began to crush him, as it is written, AND I WILL BEAT DOWN HIS FOES BEFORE HIS FACE. (Psa. 89:23)"

The disagreement of gender between *ḥaṭ'at* and *rovetz* is the jumping-off point for some "creative philology," to use Heinemann's term, as well as a number of meshalim to illustrate the different characteristics of the *yetzer ha-ra'* ("the evil impulse"), which seems to be used interchangeably with *ḥaṭ'at* ("sin"). The meshalim characterize sin as a) first weak and feminine, then strong and masculine; b) like a visitor, then like a longer guest, then like the master of the house; and c) like a crafty thief that waits for one's guard to go down to steal. R. Abba b. Judan's mashal, relating to the generations of man before Abraham, conveys almost the opposite sense - that the strength of the *yetzer ha-ra'* is only apparent. In these mini-narratives characters are at their most functional; yet, paradoxically, the numerous angles by which the *yetzer ha-ra'* is depicted impart a multi-dimensionality to the concept.

R. Ami said: "The *yetzer ha-ra'* doesn't walk to one side but in the middle of the road, and when he sees a man flitting his eyes and fixing his hair [and lifting his heel in pride], he says 'This one is mine.' What is the proof?

HAVE YOU SEEN A MAN WISE IN HIS OWN EYES? THE FOOL[128] GETS HOPE FROM HIM.[129] (Prov. 26:12)" R. Avin said: "Anyone who indulges his *yetzer* in his youth, in the end [his *yetzer*] will be his master in his old age. What is the proof? HE WHO INDULGES HIS SLAVE IN HIS YOUTH, IN THE END HE WILL BE HIS MASTER.[130] (Prov. 29:21)"

R. Ḥaninah said: "If your *yetzer* 'comes to incite you to levity, cast him down with the words of the Torah'[131] [as it is written THOU WILT KEEP[132] HIM IN PERFECT PEACE,] WHOSE MIND IS STAYED ON THEE: [BECAUSE HE TRUSTETH IN THEE.] (*yetzer samukh titzor shalom shalom ki be-kha batu'aḥ*). (Isa. 26:3) And if you do this I will laud you as if you created peace, [as it is said] THOU WILT KEEP HIM IN PERFECT PEACE. It does not say 'you shall keep (*tintzor*),' but 'you shall create (*titzor*),' and if you say he [the *yetzer*] is not in your power, learn that HE IS IN YOUR KEEPING[133] (*ki bekha batu'aḥ*) (ibid). And I have already written for you in the Torah, [SIN IS THE DEMON...] WHOSE URGE IS TOWARD YOU; YET YOU CAN BE HIS MASTER."

R. Simon said: "If your *yetzer* comes to incite you to levity, regale him with Torah, [as it is written,] WHOSE MIND IS STAYED (ibid); if you do this I will exalt you as if you created two worlds, for it is not written 'peace,' but PEACE PEACE."

If man wills, it the *yetzer ha-ra'* can be his servant; the Midrash lists a

number of its traits to help the reader avoid its clutches. It seems in general that

---

[128] The *yetzer ha-ra'*; *Minḥat Yehudah*, 212, line 1, "*ha-din didi.*"

[129] I have supplied my translation, as the KJV rendering does not support the midrashic gloss.

[130] Again, I have supplied the translation, for the same reason as above. The KJV translates "*manon*" as "son," in the sense of a slave with the privileges of a son of the house. My translation of "*manon*" as "master" conveys this figurative sense, which Theodor affirms in his commentary; 212, line 2, "*a"r avin.*"

[131] Freedman, 186. The Stuttgart and *Midrash Ḥakhamim* MSS have "regale him (*samḥehu*); 212.

[132] R. Ḥaninah's string of glosses on Isaiah 26:3 is confusing not only because he keeps assigning a different meaning to the word *titzor*, and because his interpretation is so much at odds with the KJV translation, but also because the prooftext is, in itself, difficult to understand. Instead of merely translating the prooftext in accordance with R. Ḥaninah's evolving reading, I have retained the KJV because I am not sure whether the verb can actually sustain the meanings the midrashist assigns it, or whether this is merely a typical piece of creative philology. The first time R. Ḥaninah cites the verse from Isaiah, he reads the verb *titzor* - which the KJV translates as "[thou wilt] keep" - as "restrain" or "besiege," from the root TZ.R.R; the second time, he reads the same word *titzor* as "create," deriving from the root Y.TZ.R. On the way he directly contradicts the KJV translation, stating "It does not say 'you shall keep (*tintzor*),'" vs. the KJV's "THOU WILT KEEP"; if this is a deliberate rejection of the literal sense of the verse, R. Ḥaninah is implicitly confirming the KJV's translation.

[133] My translation.

the Midrash reads Genesis 4 as a parable of temptation and sin - that is, as a

negative example of behaviour. The biblical text also has this function, insofar as

Cain is the reader's counterpart in the struggle to decipher reality and approach

God. Yet while in Genesis both reader and character inhabit the same void of

ignorance, the Midrash reveals to both all the norms of its narrative reality. Thus

when Cain sins he is flouting these norms out of some perverse determination,

rather than from the misguided naïveté he possesses in the Bible.

> 7. AND CAIN SAID TO ABEL HIS BROTHER. About what did they argue? They said, come, let us divide the world. One took the earth and the other took the objects on it. The one said: "The land you are standing on is mine." The other said: "What you are wearing is mine." The one said: "Rise." The other said: "Strip." From this, CAIN ROSE UP OVER ABEL HIS BROTHER [AND KILLED HIM.] R. Joshua of Sikhnin in the name of R. Levi said: "Both took the land and the objects on it. Then about what did they argue? One said: 'The Temple will be built on my property,' and the other said: 'On my property,' [as it is written,] AND LO, WHEN THEY WERE IN THE FIELD - this is no 'field' but the Temple, as one reads, THEREFORE SHALL ZION FOR YOUR SAKE BE PLOWED AS A FIELD (Mic. 3:12): from this, AND CAIN ROSE UP, etc."
> Judah b. Rabbi said: "They argued about the first Eve."[134]
> R. Aybo said: "The first Eve returned to dust."
> Then about what did they argue? R. Hunah said: "An extra [female] twin was born with Abel. One said: 'She is mine,' the other said: 'She is mine.' The one said: 'She is mine because I am the firstborn'; the other said: 'She is mine because she was born with me.'"

The various scenarios occasioned by the ellipsis in the biblical text are a

way of illustrating some basic sources of inter-human strife, such as stubbornness,

jealousy, and possessiveness, in particular towards the sacred and women. The

---

[134] Genesis Rabbah (18:4, page 163) states that God created the first Eve in front of Adam, so that "he saw her full of mucus and blood [and was revolted] and He took her away from him"; then God put Adam to sleep, and formed the second Eve from his rib.

rabbis display penetrating insight into human nature: for example, they are aware

that even such a noble desire as the possession of the site of the future Temple

carries the seeds of conflict. That the perspective on each of these scenarios is

neither that of Cain nor of Abel implies the reader is meant to empathize with

neither, but appreciate the folly of both positions.

> 8. AND CAIN ROSE UP, etc." R. Johanan said: "Abel was stronger than Cain, for ROSE UP can only mean that Cain was beneath him; [Cain] said 'There are only two of us in the world, what will you go and tell father?' Abel was filled with mercy, and immediately Cain stood over him and killed him. From this was said: 'Do not do good to an evil man, and evil will not be done to you.'"
> How did Cain kill him? R. Shimon said: "He killed him with a stone, for it says, FOR I HAVE SLAIN A MAN TO MY WOUNDING (Gen. 4: 23), [a stone is] something that wounds. R. 'Azariah and R. Jonathan in the name of R. Isaac said: "Cain observed how his father had slaughtered the bullock,[135] [as it is written] THIS ALSO SHALL PLEASE THE LORD BETTER THAN AN OX OR BULLOCK (Psa. 69:31), and thus he killed him - in the throat and the organs.
> 9. R. Joshua in the name of R. Levi said: "It is written, THE WICKED HAVE DRAWN OUT THE SWORD (Psa. 37:14) - this is Cain - TO CAST DOWN THE POOR AND NEEDY (ibid) - this is Abel - THEIR SWORD SHALL ENTER INTO THEIR OWN HEART (ibid 15) - [thus Cain's fate:] A FUGITIVE AND A VAGABOND SHALT THOU BE IN THE EARTH. (Gen. 4:12)

R. Johanan's gloss perpetuates the typological opposition of the brothers -

Abel strong and merciful, Cain weak and devious. As usual, the overriding goal is

the didactic one.

> AND GOD SAID TO CAIN: "WHERE IS ABEL," etc. It is like a prefect[136] that was walking in the middle of the road and saw a man who had been killed and a man standing over him. He asked him: "Who killed him?" The

---

[135] Theodor notes that in the *Midrash ha-Gadol* (73) on Gen. 2:7, after his creation Adam sacrificed a bullock to God; 132, line 1, "*be-shem r"sh ha-zaqen.*"
[136] So Freedman, 188.

man said: "I could ask you the same thing." The prefect said: "You have answered nothing." [Another interpretation:] It is like one who entered a garden, gathered berries and ate them; the owner of the garden ran after him and demanded: "What is in your hands?" He answered: "Nothing." [The owner said:] "But your hands are stained." Thus [it is written,] THE VOICE OF YOUR BROTHER'S BLOOD CRIES TO ME FROM THE EARTH. [Another interpretation:] It is like one who entered a paddock, stole a kid and carried it on his back; the owner ran after him, demanding: "What is in your hands?" [He answered:] "Nothing." The owner said: "But it is there, bleating behind you." This is like THE VOICE OF YOUR BROTHER'S BLOOD CRIES TO ME.

R. Yudan and R. Hunah and other rabbis [discussed this.] R. Yudan said: "It is not written '*dam*[137] *ahikha* (YOUR BROTHER'S BLOOD)' but '*demei*[138] *ahikha*' - [this signifies] his blood and the blood of his descendants." R. Hunah said: "It is not written '*et dam Navot ve-et dam banav* (THE BLOOD OF NAVOT AND THE BLOOD OF HIS SONS) but '*demei* [*Navot*, etc.]' (II Kings 9:26) - his blood and the blood of his descendants." The rabbis said: "It is not written '*va-yamat be-dam Yehoyada*'[139] but '*bi-demei*' [HIS OWN SERVANTS CONSPIRED AGAINST HIM FOR THE BLOOD OF THE SONS OF JEHOIADA] (II Chron. 24:25) [- his blood and the blood of his descendants.]

These three meshalim replicate Cain's impertinence as he tries to evade his accuser. While I explained Cain's flippant attitude in terms of his lingering grudge regarding the sacrifice, the Midrash merely sees him as a perversely determined criminal. The homiletic interpretation, whereby the plural noun in the phrase "your brother's blood (*demei ahikha*)" is understood to mean that Cain not only murdered Abel but all his unborn descendants as well is, in my opinion, the Midrash at its best - sensitive and insightful towards the ideals of humanity and the individual.

R. Shimon Bar Yohai said: "The matter is difficult to say, and impossible to

---

[137] Singular.
[138] Plural.
[139] This is a paraphrase of the verse.

make clear. It is like two gladiators (*atleitin*) who were contending in front of the king; if the king had wished he could have separated them, but he did not wish. One overcame the other and killed him, and the [dying one] cried out: 'Let my case be pleaded before the king [who did not pity me].' Thus, THE VOICE OF YOUR BROTHER'S BLOOD CRIES TO ME FROM THE EARTH."

[Abel's soul] could not ascend, for no soul had as yet gone there; it could not descend because Adam had not yet been buried; [thus] his blood was spattered on the trees and the stones.

R. Shimon Bar Yohai's mashal articulates the paradox at the heart of the narrative: while God seems to be concerned for the fate of his creatures, He cannot or will not intervene to prevent Abel's murder. Even though the Midrash has removed any question of God's responsibility in the matter of the sacrifice, it does not ignore the fact that God is indirectly responsible for the murder, nor does it deny the eloquence of Abel's blood as His accuser. Bar Yohai's reticence matches the sensitivity of this question. Try as the rabbis might to put forward a reading that would not implicate God, the issue of theodicy is truly inherent to the story; to their credit, they did not avoid it.

> 10. "AND NOW YOU ARE CURSED TO THE EARTH." R. Shimon b. Gamliel said: "In three places the Scriptures spoke reticently (*bi-leshon memu 'at*)[140]: AND NOW YOU ARE CURSED, BUT IF THE LORD MAKE A NEW THING (Num. 16:30); FOR I HAVE OPENED MY MOUTH UNTO THE LORD (Jud. 11:35).
>
> "WHEN YOU TILL THE EARTH IT WILL NO LONGER YIELD ITS STRENGTH TO YOU." R. Eliezer said: " 'To you [Cain] it will not, but to another it will.' " R. Yossi b. R. Haninah said: " 'Not to you, nor to another.' Thus we read: THOU SHALT CARRY MUCH SEED OUT INTO THE FIELD, AND SHALT GATHER BUT LITTLE IN. (Deut. 28:38)" R. Judah said: "[He will] sow a *se'ah* and reap a *se'ah*." R. Nehemiah said: "If so, how could he support himself? Rather, the field that should have yielded twenty would yield ten, and the field that should have

---

[140] I.e., the meaning is not spelled out but implied.

yielded ten would yield five. WHEN YOU TILL THE EARTH IT WILL NO LONGER YIELD ITS STRENGTH TO YOU - its strength it will no longer give to you, but your strength it will give to you."[141]

R. Shimon b. Gamliel feels the text does not elaborate on Cain's curse, though it seems clear that it is in relation to the earth. For the other rabbis, the question is whether the curse applies to Cain or to the entire human race, and to what degree.

> 11. AND CAIN SAID TO GOD: "MY GUILT IS GREATER THAN I CAN BEAR." [Cain said:] "You bear the heavens and the earth (le-'elyonim ve-tahtonim), but my sin You will not bear?" [Another interpretation]: "My sin is greater than my father's, for he was expelled from the Garden of Eden for a misdemeanour ('al mitzvah qalah 'avar ve-nitrad); the spilling of blood is a grave sin: how much greater is my iniquity!"
> YOU HAVE BANISHED ME TODAY - "Yesterday you drove out father, and now you drive me out. 'With monotony hast Thou fashioned the world'[142] - how so? YOU HAVE BANISHED ME TODAY [as you drove my father out yesterday]. But is it possible FROM YOUR FACE I WILL HIDE?

In the first gloss Cain objects to his excessive punishment; in the second he compares his crime to his father's; in the third he recognizes the consistency of God's rule, insofar as both he and Adam have been exiled.

Freedman understands the statement "From thy face I shall be hid" to be a rhetorical question - Cain reassures himself that he can never truly exile himself from God.[143] If Freedman's reading is accurate it reveals that, despite everything, Cain still values his relationship with God and cannot imagine it will end. Since God does not dissuade Cain of this belief, and indeed goes on to ensure his safety,

---

[141] It will only reward your exertions; Freedman, 190, note 4.
[142] Freedman, 190. A translation of the Paris MS: "Monon monon et tze'ir 'alma"; 218.
[143] Ibid, 191, note 1.

it appears that Cain's hopes are not in vain. It seems the relationship between God

and the individual, even the sinner, is not a matter of favour or disfavour but a

function of existence; this is an innovation over the Bible's description of Cain's

decisive break with God.

> 12. AND GOD SAID TO HIM, "THEREFORE HE WHO KILLS CAIN,"
> etc. R. Judah said: "[The beasts, animals and the birds pressed] the case of
> Abel, so the Holy One Blessed Be He said to [Cain]: 'To you I say 'HE
> WHO KILLS CAIN, etc.'" R. Neḥemiah said: "The sentence of Cain was
> not as the sentence for murderers, [for] Cain killed but had no one to learn
> from; thenceforth all who killed will be slain."
> AND GOD PUT A SIGN ON CAIN [or GOD MADE CAIN A SIGN
> [for others]] (va-yasem adonai le-qayin ot). R. Judah said: "He made the
> ball of the sun to shine for him." R. Neḥemiah said to him: "For the sake of
> that wicked man He made the ball of the sun shine? Rather, He made
> leprosy shine for him (tzara 'at hizriaḥ lo), as it was said, IF THEY WILL
> NOT BELIEVE THEE, NEITHER HEARKEN TO THE VOICE OF THE
> FIRST SIGN [the second sign will be leprosy] (Ex. 4:8) Rav said: "He sent
> a dog with him." Aba Yossi said: "He made a horn grow from him." Rav
> said: "He made him a sign for murderers." R. Ḥanin said: "He made him a
> sign for penitents." R. Levi in the name of R. Shimon b. Laqish said: "He
> suspended His judgment until the Flood came and washed him away, [as it
> is said] AND EVERY LIVING THING WAS DESTROYED, etc. (Gen.
> 7:23)

The aggadah of the animals that wish to avenge Abel is meant to explain

why God needs to protect Cain, there being no other people in the world. As well,

the Midrash asks why Cain's sentence is commuted from death to exile: by

answering this as was noted above - that as the first murderer he could not have

understood the gravity of his crime - the Midrash shows its sensitivity to human

weakness. As for the different signs God gives or makes Cain, these reflect his

mixed semiotic identity in the rabbinic system: he is the symbol of the murderer,

of the general sinner, of the suffering of guilt,[144] and of the penitent.

> 13. AND CAIN WENT OUT, etc. From whence did he go out?[145] R. Aybo said: "He threw the words behind him and went out like He had fooled God [with his penitence] (*ve-yatzah ke-gonev da'at ha-'elyonim*)." R. Berakhiah in the name of R. Elazar said: "He left as if conciliatory (*ke-mefayyes*)[146] and dissembling towards his Creator." R. Ḥaninah b. Isaac said: "He went out happy, as you read, HE COMETH FORTH TO MEET THEE: AND WHEN HE SEETH THEE, HE WILL BE GLAD IN HIS HEART. (Ex.4:14) Adam met him and asked him: 'What happened in your judgment?' He said: 'I repented and am reconciled.'[147] Adam began to slap his face, [saying]: 'This is the power of repentance, and I did not know!' At once he stood and said: [A SONG FOR THE SABBATH DAY] IT IS A GOOD THING TO GIVE THANKS UNTO TO THE LORD. (Psa. 92:1-2)

The rabbis offer a similar variety of interpretations for this verse: that he left God unrepentant, that he feigned repentance, or that he repented sincerely. Why such exegetic ambivalence at the end of the story, after such a consistently negative interpretation of the character? I think this is prompted by two textual gaps. The first is that Cain's exile is at odds with the halakhic penalty for the murderer. The second "gap" is the similarity of Cain's story to Adam and Eve's, the prototypical fable of crime and punishment: the reader's natural expectation of the reader is that Cain's story will present a new idea. That the Midrash is sensitive to this expectation is clear in the way it formulates this dialectic between the themes of sin, punishment and repentance: by dramatizing it in the meeting of father and son. There Adam articulates the poignancy of this thematic

---

[144] Ibid, note 6.

[145] Theodor: "For it is impossible to interpet it literally, that he left from before God." 220, line 2, "*me-eikhan yatzah*."

[146] After the alternative text of the Paris and *Midrash Ḥakhamim* MSS; 220.

[147] Freedman, 192.

development, realizing the tremendous power of repentance and thus closing the story with a favourite rabbinic theme.

This is my reading of Genesis Rabbah 22. In it are evident a number of features of midrashic narrative: the foregrounding of the process of exegesis and the perspective of the rabbis; the various concentrations of identity, action and time; the efforts to make all aspects of its narrative world understandable and overtly conforming to ideology. In the next section I will analyse the basic qualities of biblical and midrashic narratives.

IV. Comparison of Narratives

I will now evaluate my findings regarding narrative in Genesis 4 and Genesis Rabbah 22, according to the categories of plot, character, narration and meaning.

a. Plot

Because the previous sections have mostly been analyses of plot, my discussion of this aspect of both texts will be limited.

The plot of Genesis 4 follows Cain's resistance to and gradual acceptance of personal responsibility. Plot events follow one another in close succession to form a tight narrative, with the two blocks of direct speech as its structural and ideological heart. Thus, the segment of iterative narration is just long enough to introduce the brothers and distinguish between them, then events move forward rapidly until Cain's rejection and the beginning of the conflict. God's and Cain's words are given emphasis by the slowing down of time in direct speech, relative to the more rapid narrative flow of the narrated portions.

Genesis Rabbah 22 contains two levels of discourse. The wider framework is the "transcript" of the rabbis' discussions of the biblical text, narrated externally; whether or not this is narrative - i.e., whether the discourse progresses temporally - is unclear. At this level are also the *ma'asim* - clearly temporal and hence narratives - featuring the rabbis and conveyed by the same external narrator. The second, inner level of discourse is the one narrated by the

rabbis themselves, which includes their version of the biblical story and the meshalim they use to illustrate their interpretations.

In the second-level narrative plot events are typically expansions of episodes that were treated briefly in Genesis or not at all. Ambiguity surrounding events and character is dispelled. Thus the reader is told what the brothers argued about before the murder, how exactly Cain killed Abel, what the sign was that God set for the murderer, and what Cain and Adam said to each other on the subject of repentance. The plot exposition is fragmented by the verse-by-verse format, by the discrepancy between the frequent multiple versions of a narrative segment and by the interruption of non-narrative material. I will further discuss this fragmented quality of the narrative in the section on meaning.

b. Character

Characterization in Genesis 4 is primarily accomplished through external information - rather than disclosure of characters' inner thoughts and emotions - conveyed through action and direct speech, the former more so for Cain, the latter more for God. Gaps arise from the inexplicable or inconsistent nature of a character's actions, forcing the reader to connect the dots in order to make the portrayal make sense: this generates an impression that the characters possess psychological depth, or "background." That this depth is real and not merely a modern interpolation is evident from the Bible's tendency to multiply these conflicted or puzzling depictions by always selecting more complex dramatic situations, which inevitably bring out moral grey areas and emotional

contradictions.

Cain, though portrayed almost completely from without, reveals his depth through his actions and speech: he displays a range of emotions and motives, and evolves over the course of the story. The reader is meant to empathize with Cain, for he is brought along with him from his birth, tipped off to his unique identity, and given evidence of his goodness and sincerity through his bringing of the offering. The moment Cain is rejected by God the text offers a brief but important insight into his feelings, enough to remind the reader to continue to empathize with him. Thus, if one does not force Cain to be the villain from the outset, he is allowed to make his own mistakes - to emote, to rebel and to sin, involving the reader both empathically and as a spectator, offering a different sort of edification than the more simple lesson of the Midrash. The fact that the protagonist is a viable one adds credibility to the text, and, ultimately, to its ideological program.

The other main character of Genesis 4 is God. Like Cain, God is depicted externally, without any direct revelation of His thoughts or feelings. While His actions are thus sometimes enigmatic, this indeterminacy is mitigated by His frequent speeches. Of course, what information is revealed and what is not is critical for conveying a certain ideological lesson without giving up the aura of divine inscrutability and transcendence. While God does not answer Cain's mystification regarding the sacrifice, affirming by His silence that He is only partially accountable to man, He does demonstrate sensitivity to human feelings and problems and a concern for their well-being. God's involvement in His

creatures business is not secondary to more important responsibilities: after Creation He only appears in the text in the context of human predicament; furthermore, He does not come in this story to congratulate the successful Abel, but to console and encourage the failed Cain.

In Genesis Rabbah 22, characterization occurs differently according to the level of narrative. The rabbis are portrayed predominantly through their speech. The content of this speech is mostly didactic; their thoughts and feelings in relation to their teachings are, for the most part, of a collective rather than an individual nature - the appropriate emotional stance vis-à-vis the content of the text. Since the narrator lets the rabbis speak for themselves the reader is drawn to empathize with their outlook, in particular regarding the paramount importance of learning and exegesis; with almost no independent information intruding on their discourse their understanding of the text and the outside world appears inevitably accurate and increasingly inevitable. Even when the narrator describes the rabbis in a *ma'aseh*, also typically full of direct speech, they are depicted in the same role they demonstrate in their discourse - discussing Torah, or the discussion of Torah, or defending their approach to Torah against others. They are a heroic corps of protagonists, characterized by piety and commitment to study.

The characters in the second level of discourse, including the biblical characters, personified ideas like the *yetzer ha-ra'*, and the characters of the meshalim, are all types and categories of the didactic genre; to recall, this "ruthlessly subordinates the whole discourse [...] to the exigencies of

indoctrination." Thus, throughout the story Cain is the type of the murderer, or,

better, the sinner, while Abel is the innocent; personal qualities which are absent

in the biblical version are filled in in light of this typology. As well, because in

Genesis it is unclear whether God was justified in rejecting Cain's offering, the

Midrash takes pains to defend God by alienating the reader from Cain. Even

though Cain is portrayed in this relatively flat way, the rabbis are sensitive to his

motives for murder and his status as penitent; rather than this demonstrating a

greater complexity in their characterization of Cain, I think the rabbis admit his

humanity in order not to miss the opportunity to impart certain lessons arising out

of the text. Thus, the opinion that Cain was sincerely penitent seems to be

intended less to qualify his villainy than to open a discussion of penitence and

divine mercy. In other words, the text's concern is always didactic.

The character in Genesis Rabbah 22 with the greatest depth is God. The

text carefully defends His justice and mercy, and presents His availability to man

as a sensitive, caring interlocutor.

The *yetzer ha-ra'* is an idea that draws character and vitality from the

rabbis' struggles with it in their daily lives. The characters of the meshalim are

"functional characters" that exist for the duration of the mashal. The exception to

this is the figure of the king, who is a dimension of the literature's evolving

conceptualization of God.

c. Narration

The biblical narrator is omniscient regarding both events and the inner lives of characters, but reveals very little of this information - only enough to drive the story forward. God shares this omniscience, displaying it when confronting Cain about his emotions and his crime. Yet the narrator almost never reveals any of God's thoughts and feelings, so that the reader is not a spectator situated above Him like he is the other characters. All of this has the effect of associating the narrator's omniscience with the divine perspective, so that even though God is a character in the story He appears to be above the action. At the same time, neither the reader nor the other characters possess anything more than partial knowledge of events, nor any information about God other than what He chooses to reveal. The interactions between God and the human characters often turn on the issue of knowledge and understanding, which in turn dramatizes the reader's struggle to understand the gapped and ambiguous narrative reality.

In Genesis Rabbah, narration differs according to the level of discourse. At the first level - that of the rabbinic conversations and the *ma'asim* - the narration is relatively imperceptible: although characters and setting are identified, especially in the *ma'asim*, little if any information about the characters or other editorializing occurs. Their speech is conveyed directly. The narrator is at his most inconspicuous, thereby giving the discourse the illusion of being highly mimetic, as if one is merely looking through a window onto the rabbis' lives and conversations. The sense this creates is of a narrative reality that is immediate,

96

accurate, and transparent.

At the second level of discourse the rabbis themselves are the narrators. Here the opposite situation pertains and the rabbis are extremely perceptible as external narrators - summarizing character traits, revealing "things of which characters are either unconscious or which they deliberately conceal,"[148] and editorializing on the story and ideas within it. While the rabbis often convey their characters' speech in direct dialogue, which gives them a bit more of an independent reality, that dialogue is usually no more than the articulation of what the narrator has already revealed about the character; furthermore, the common midrashic practice of creating dialogue from scriptural verses promotes textuality at the expense of narrativity, reminding the reader at what level the text's true discourse is taking place.

One of the aims rabbinic discourse is to make the biblical events clear and understandable. The motivations of characters, divine and human, are revealed; events are explained in detail. And while the discrepancy between versions somewhat tarnishes the reliability of the narration, the overall authority of the exegesis does not suffer, for the differences are small and the overall hermeneutic and ideology are never seriously challenged.

---

[148] Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, New York: Methuen, 1983, 98.

d. Meaning

The basic thread of the story in Genesis 4 is the life of Cain. In short, through his own implacable rage Cain defeats his noble wish of achieving a relationship with God, destroying his brother and himself in the process. Alternatively, one can understand the story through Sternberg's conception of the character's approach to God as an epistemelogical struggle. The story is structured as a lesson to both Cain and the reader regarding the interconnectedness between morality and intimacy with the divine. In addition, though both character and reader may expect a simple correlation between good behaviour and divine approval, God admonishes man to behave ethically, regardless of reward or recognition. Cain, of course, learns all of this the hard way: he ignores God's warning and brings down on himself a concrete proof of divine justice.

Besides these ideas, the story is an affirmation of the importance of the individual and his or her actions and feelings. The sole indication to the contrary is God's rejection of Cain's offering, despite what appear to be his good intentions: of course, the doubt this provokes is the necessary basis for the conflict. Otherwise, the text is sensitive toward the human reality: it describes Eve's experience when naming Cain; in accepts the role of emotion in Cain's actions; it recognizes Abel's value as a person, even in death. God is the personification of this respect and sensitivity, for it is He who dialogues with Cain and who calls the reader's attention to the murdered Abel, according him the dignity of a voice and the right to justice.

In Genesis Rabbah 22 the multiple levels of discourse translate into multiple levels of meaning. Here the thread of the chapter is not the life of Cain but the process of interpretation. I do not think one can consider this process of interpretation, conveyed by the first-level narrator, to be a narrative itself, for it lacks temporal progression; still, this discourse is the context for the re-told biblical narrative, and the theme of interpretation overshadows whatever individual ideas that exegesis provokes. Unlike the narrative of Genesis 4, which stands somewhat on its own relative to what comes before and after, the midrashic adaptation is fully integrated into the structure of the midrashic version of the biblical narrative: this is accomplished by glossing the verse at hand with other, distant passages from Scripture, by re-organizing the pericope's characters and ideas into intra-biblical paradigms, and by always interpolating the rabbinic ideology. The Midrash's version of Genesis 4 is a simpler story than the original: Cain fails, is angry and jealous, is warned by God, ignores the warning, is confronted and convicted, repents, and is banished. The discourse does not turn on the dramatic progress of the story but on its function as a didactic paradigm of the experience of sin. The primary messages of this paradigm are that sin is a constant temptation for man, and that its call must therefore be identified and resisted; most importantly, man must know that God requires justice and holds the sinner accountable for his actions, but that He is also merciful, and welcomes sincere repentance. The mashal of the wrestlers articulates the challenge to this paradigm entailed by the existence of evil, yet the greater message of the mashal is

the admission that even if no answer is forthcoming to the mystery of theodicy,

Israel possesses something altogether more important: her ongoing intimacy with

God guarantees her the right to confront Him, to demand justice, to be heard, and,

ultimately, to be redeemed.

V. Conclusion

What does this narrative comparison show? One thing it demonstrates is the way Midrash Genesis Rabbah reads the biblical text and adapts it for its own needs. One of the major characteristics of the biblical story is the way the "drama of reading" is built into the narrative, establishing the discrepancy of knowledge between God on the one hand, and humans - characters and reader - on the other. This theme determines the sort of story that is told, namely an epistemological and ethical struggle undertaken by the human characters, presented with the maximum complication of morality and emotion. These characters are suitable counterparts to the reader, their complex humanity capable of driving problematic scenarios; the narration maintains the relative ignorance of the reader and human characters but persuades the reader to empathize with God's ideological outlook.

The Midrash alters this narrative so that the duty of interpretation is no longer incumbent upon the reader but has been taken up by the rabbis: the midrashic discourse is therefore a record of the interpretative process, where the interpretation is never left to the reader's opinion but is fixed and authoritative. Rather than let God emerge out of an ambiguous narrative reality, the rabbis keep His presence in the foreground so that He undercuts the true independence of characters and events. On the first level of discourse - that of the rabbinic world - God is not immediately perceptible, but in lieu of dialogue with God the rabbis engage the text as a concrete record of His presence. The world of the rabbis -

narrated imperceptibly, and where the characters' direct speech is the rule - is more vivid and substantial than the biblical one they describe. The second-level discourse is fractured from verse to verse; biblical characters are stripped of autonomy and converted into types; meaning is mostly a reading-in of rabbinic norms: everything points upwards to the first level as the text's principal discourse. All in all, the Midrash highlights textuality at the expense of narrativity, the text merely becoming one pillar of a greater didactic discourse where the rabbis themselves are the heroes, the process of interpretation is the plot, and the reader is called upon not to interpret but to be persuaded of the veracity of the rabbinic world.

Genesis and Genesis Rabbah present two versions of reality, in which God and His involvement in human life are conceived of very differently. In Genesis 4, the human experience, dramatized by Cain, is existentialist. Both the reader and Cain progress assailed by doubt and dependent on God and the narrator for the information needed to construct a coherent reality. In Genesis, if not the entire Bible, the corollary to human ignorance is a persistent sense of irony: for while the text depicts God and contains His instructions for man, the existence of God and what He expects of man are never completely clear to the characters in the Bible's narrative world. Uncertainty and doubt are never fully dispelled by God's presence or speech, not even by the giving of the Law, as the backsliding of the Israelites makes abundantly clear. This existentialism may be not only the book's comment on the perverse godlessness of the masses but a faithful portrayal of

reality: outside the text, man's experience of God perseveres in the teeth of perpetual doubt that He is there. The Bible merely recreates this experience in its narrative reality, constantly addressing doubt in order to be a more compelling blueprint for faith. The text acknowledges that man cannot always know God, but demonstrates that he *should* know Him.

Genesis Rabbah has embraced this imperative and seeks to eliminate doubt from its borders. Almost none of the irony present in Genesis exists there: the sense of the absolute authority of Holy Writ precludes this. Since the text acts as a surrogate for God, the rabbis treat the apprehension of the divine not as an existential challenge but as a problem of exegesis, the text infinite like God but not as elusive. It is in the meshalim that the biblical doubt re-surfaces: not only do these address the mystery of God's intentions, the form itself is only a proposition, not an axiom; the mashal remains a tentative approach to the unknown, never claiming to be authoritative. Yet, even when the midrashist cannot give a definitive answer about evil or the way of the world, this uncertainty is allowed within the context of the ongoing engagement with the text and its eternal promise of a relationship with God. Perhaps this transparency of the natural order, and the immediacy and intimacy of the Divine are the most valuable and original contributions the Midrash has provided.

Bibliography

Alter, Robert. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. New York: Basic Books, 1981.

---. *The Art of Biblical Poetry*. New York: Basic Books, 1985.

---, trans. *Genesis*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1996.

Alter, Robert and Frank Kermode, eds. *The Literary Guide to the Bible*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987.

Aristotle. *Poetics*. Butcher, S. H., trans. New York: Hill and Wang, 1994.

Auerbach, Erich. *Mimesis*. Trask, Willard, trans. Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957.

Bacher, Wilhelm. *Erkhei Midrash*. Rabinovits, A. Z., trans. Tel-Aviv: [1922 or 1923].

Berlin, Adele. *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*. Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983.

Boyarin, Daniel. *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.

---. *Sparks of the Logos: Essays in Rabbinic Hermeneutics*. Boston: Brill, 2003.

Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs, eds. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1962.

Chatman, Seymour. *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990.

Clines, David J. A. *The Theme of the Pentateuch*. Sheffield: University of Sheffield, 1978.

---. *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995.

Clines, David J. A., David M. Gunn and Alan J. Hauser, eds. *Art and Meaning: Rhetoric in Biblical Literature*. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982.

Exum, J. Cheryl, ed. *Signs and Wonders: Biblical Texts in Literary Focus*.

Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1989.

Exum, J. Cheryl and David J.A. Clines, eds. *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993.

Fishbane, Michael. *The Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.

---. *Biblical Text and Texture: A Literary Reading of Selected Texts*. Oxford: Oneworld, 1998.

---. *The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.

---. *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Freedman, rabbis Dr. H., trans. *Midrash Rabbah, Genesis* I. London: The Soncino Press, 1961.

Frenkel, Yonah. *Darkhei ha-Aggadah ve-ha-Midrash*. 2 vols. Yad la-Talmud, 1991.

---. *Midrash ve-Aggadah*. 3 vols. Tel-Aviv: Ha-Universitah ha-Petuhah, 1996.

Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Lewin, Jane E., trans. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980.

Ginzberg, Louis. *Legends of the Jews*. 7 vols. Szold, Henrietta, trans. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1913.

Goldin, Judah. *Studies in Midrash and Related Literature*. Eichler, Barry L. and Jeffrey H. Tigay, eds. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988.

Gunn, David M. and Danna Nolan Fewell. *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Halivni, David Weiss. *Peshat and Derash: Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Hartman, Geoffrey H. and Sanford Budick, eds. *Midrash and Literature*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986.

Hasan-Rokem, Galit. *Web of Life: Folklore and Midrash in Rabbinic Literature*.

Stein, Batya, trans. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000.

---. *Tales of the Neighborhood: Jewish Narrative Dialogues in Late Antiquity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

Heinemann, Isaak. *Darkhei ha-Aggadah*. Givatayim: Magnes Press, 1970.

Heinemann, Joseph. *Aggadot ve-Toldoteihen: Iyunim be-Hishtalshelutan shel Masorot*. Jerusalem: Keter, 1974.

House, Paul R, ed. *Beyond Form Criticism*. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1992.

Jacobs, Irving. *The Midrashic Process: Tradition and Interpretation in Rabbinic Judaism*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Kort, Wesley A. *Story, Text, and Scripture*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988.

Kugel, James L. *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981.

---. "Two Definitions of Midrash" *Prooftexts* 3 (1983), 131-155.

---. *In Potiphar's House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990.

---, ed. *Studies in Ancient Midrash*. Cambridge: Harvard University Center for Jewish Studies: Distributed by Harvard University Press, 2001.

Kugel, James L. and Rowan A. Greer. *Early Biblical Interpretation*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986.

Leach, Edmund. *Genesis as Myth and Other Essays*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1969.

Lemon, Lee T. and Marion J. Reis, trans. *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965.

Martin, Wallace. *Recent Theories of Narrative*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986.

Meir, Ofra. *Ha-Sipur ha-Darshani bi-Vereishit Rabbah*. Tel-Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz ha-Me'uhad, 1987.

---. *Sugyot be-Poetikah shel Sipure Hazal*. Tel-Aviv: Sifriyat Poalim, 1993.

Neusner, Jacob. *Midrash in Context: Exegesis in Formative Judaism*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983.

---. *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis: A New American Translation*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985.

---. *Comparative Midrash: The Plan and Program of Genesis Rabbah and Leviticus Rabbah*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986.

---. *Midrash as Literature: The Primacy of Documentary Discourse*. Lanham: University Press of America, 1987.

---. *What is Midrash?* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987.

---. *Mekhilta According to Rabbi Ishmael: An Analytical Translation*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988.

---. *Confronting Creation: How Judaism Reads Genesis: An Anthology of Genesis Rabbah*. Columbia: USC Press, 1991.

Polzin, Robert. *Biblical Structuralism: Method and Subjectivity in the Study of Ancient Texts*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977.

---. *A Literary Study of the Deuteronomic History*. New York: Seabury Press, 1980.

Polzin, Robert and Eugene Rothman, eds. *The Biblical Mosaic: Changing Perspectives*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982.

Porton, Gary G. *Understanding Rabbinic Midrash: Texts and Commentary*. Hoboken: Ktav Publishing House, 1985.

Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. New York: Methuen, 1983.

Rosenbaum, Rev. M. and Dr. A. M. Silberman, trans. *Pentateuch, Genesis*. London: Shapiro, Valentine & Co., 1929.

Schneidau, Herbert N. *Sacred Discontent: The Bible and Western Tradition*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1976.

Scholes, Robert and Robert Kellogg. *The Nature of Narrative*. New York: Oxford

University Press, 1966.

Schwartz, Howard. *Reimagining the Bible: The Storytelling of the Rabbis*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

The Septuagint Version of the Old Testament. London: Samuel Bagster and Sons, 1884.

Sokoloff, Michael. *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002.

---. *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine Period*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002.

Speiser, E. A., trans. *The Anchor Bible, Genesis*. Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1964.

Stern, David. *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991.

---. *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996.

Sternberg, Meir. *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985.

Strack, H.L. and G. Stemberger. *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*. Bockmuehl, Markus, trans. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991.

Theodor, Julius and Chanoch Albeck, eds. *Bereschit Rabba*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1912-1936.

Urbach, Efraim Elimelech. *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*. 2 vols. Abrahams, Israel, trans. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975.

White, Hugh C. *Narration and Discourse in the Book of Genesis*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Wright, Addison G. *The Literary Genre Midrash*. Staten Island: Alba House, 1967.