

## The Torah as she is read

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**I**T used to be taken for granted that the way best to explain the meaning of a thing would be to trace its history. To borrow an illustration from a modern Bibli-cist,<sup>1</sup> one would explain a house by recounting the stages in its planning and construction, rather than describing the architecture of the house, the functions and interrelations of its parts, its relation to its environment, and so forth. Similarly, it used to be taken for granted in such modern classics as Speiser's *Genesis* and Sarna's *Understanding Genesis*<sup>2</sup> that the way best to explain the meaning of a Biblical text, a story, say, would be to trace its history. How did the story evolve into what it is in the text? If we could recount its history, we could explain its meaning.

Why, for example, are there two accounts of Creation in Genesis, differing in style and substance? A historically oriented answer is: the two accounts were originally composed separately, in different contexts, from different perspectives. A redactor later juxtaposed them, leaving the original shape of each intact. Each must, therefore, be read separately. They have different meanings. What about the fact that someone has taken a great deal of trouble to include both accounts, and in a certain sequence?

This problem becomes especially acute when we consider the Flood story. Here, source criticism convincingly argues, two texts have been spliced together. Should each source, JE and P, be read on its own after a redactor has taken pains to interlace them? Yes and no. Yes, if we are interested in the historical significance of

each source. No, if we want to understand the story as it has been transmitted to us in the Bible, which is, after all, the only way we know it. Nobody preserved the Priestly source. The Jewish community has indeed preserved the Torah in its redacted shape. Nobody canonized JE or P or even, Josiah's Reform notwithstanding, D.<sup>3</sup> If they had been canonical, would they have been ravaged by the redactional process? No, it was the process of redaction that created the sacred scripture that is Torah.<sup>4</sup> If the Torah is revealed, revelation took the form of redaction.

This is, of course, epigrammatically expressed in the formula of Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig: *R = Rabbenu*, "our teacher." Perush Rashi: The redactor whom source critics designate by the siglum "R" is the one who transmitted Torah to us in its sacred, canonized form. Although R cannot be credibly identified with Moshe Rabbenu, R is our teacher nonetheless and can be esteemed as Rabbenu. Our teacher was not a transcriber or author, but rather a redactor:

It appears that a book like the Book of Genesis could not have been put together like a cheap newspaper, with the help of scissors and paste. Many expressions and turns of phrase formerly thought to be characteristic of one or another "source" increasingly reveal their meaning and their intent within a well-ordered whole. Such a rounded unity is not necessarily the finished work of a single, early author. My ear, too, distinguishes a variety of voices in the chorus. Even the most ancient memories are likely to have been preserved from a variety of motives and will accordingly have been rendered in a variety of tones. . . . And yet this story has an amazingly homogeneous character, although the homogeneity did not exist from the beginning, but developed in time.<sup>5</sup>

If the Torah is so homogeneous in its story and storytelling, does that mean there were no sources? Hardly. The Torah itself quotes sources, the "Book of the Wars of YHWH" in particular (Num. 21:14). Many times the narrator acknowledges the distance in time between his material and his own situation (Gen. 2:24; 12:6; 22:14, etc.). What it does mean is that the Torah comprises a joining of material such that a striking amount of literary and thematic coherence obtained. How, then, should the Torah be read to be understood? In pieces, by disintegrating its hard-won unity, or as a whole, respecting its integrated form?

It is not necessarily an altogether either/or proposition. Brevard Childs, in his *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*,<sup>6</sup> as well as in his prodigious commentary on *The Book of Exodus*,<sup>7</sup> first delineates the literature of the text in its historical components and then describes the redaction of that literature. He seeks to recover the ideology that underlies the form of the redaction and, further, the implications for the meaning of a text that arise from its position within the Canon. (For him, of course, the Canon is the Christian one.) From a literary perspective, there can be no denying that the form of a text and its position within a larger context affect its meaning. Imagine, for example, what Genesis would mean if the second Creation story preceded the first, or the manner in which we would react to the Golden Calf had it not been preceded by two injunctions (Exod. 20:3, 19) against graven images. What would lie at the heart of the Torah if Joshua had been included within it? Childs's approach is essentially historical, though, asking most fundamentally what the text meant to the community that canonized it, or fixed it in its sacred shape.

In a similar vein, the process of redaction leads Richard Elliott Friedman to identify the latest editorial endeavors and assess their historical significance.<sup>8</sup> He shows the ways in which one version of Torah responded to earlier versions by revising and supplementing. His book operates on the assumptions and procedures of conventional source criticism. This is necessary perhaps for the kind of work he is doing, but it therefore suffers from the uncertainties of source-critical analysis. Note, for example, the presumptuousness of a sentence like: "But surely it would have been better to write nothing at all than to inform exiles that their channel to salvation is the building which no longer exists [that is, the Temple of Solomon]" (p. 21). Using this presumption, Friedman determines that 1 Kings 8:46-53 must antedate the Exile. Friedman may be correct in his judgment, but his reasoning is imposed and not induced from Biblical literature. Certainly the Temple was of vital importance to those exiles who felt a clear imperative to rebuild it upon their return to Jerusalem. Friedman similarly discriminates between a pre-Exilic edition of Deuteronomy and an Exilic revision not on the basis of language and style—which he admits are homogeneous between the two putative editions—but on the basis of his own logical assumptions. The theme of restoration after the Exile, he

contends, must have arisen in the Exile and not before it. He seems not to reckon with the alternative that it was precisely because certain pre-Exilic materials did foresee a restoration following the Exile that they served as sacred scripture for the exiles.

Source criticism has always rested on Western suppositions and standards about logical sequence, the unacceptability of logical contradiction, the aesthetic blemish of duplication or repetition, the ideal of consistency. Studies of orally performed literature in preliterate societies, however, demonstrate that "repetitions, doublets, false starts, digressions, rough transitions and the like so dear to the heart of biblical critics" tend to pervade oral literature.<sup>9</sup> This observation, coupled with the impossibility of confirming the results of source-critical analysis empirically, render source-critical conclusions indecisive.

Nevertheless, the presence of a number of source-critical discriminations in the same places does suggest probable boundaries between literary materials. The premier instance is the Flood narrative. Attempts have been made to view the structure of the Flood account in Gen. 6-9 as a coherent literary unit.<sup>10</sup> Viewed as an outline, from what I call an aerial view of the text, the Flood narrative may appear smooth in its present form. But from the ground, the level at which we actually hear or read the text, this particular narrative is jagged. We are thrown back and forth between passages by contrasts in style, jarring repetitions, and, especially, downright factual contradictions that recur in the text. Here, Friedman's approach is useful. Where the literary form appears not artful but political, a later redactor interfering with an earlier version of the story, the most fruitful reading may be historical. Thus, the earlier Flood narrative of J is interlaced with the later version of P in order to "correct" elements of the J account that were unacceptable to P. According to P, only a priest may make an offering to God, and then only at the ordained sanctuary. In building his own altar and offering up animals to God, Noah, from a Priestly perspective, was way out of line. So in P's version, Noah brought only two of each of the pure animals with him; he didn't need extras for offerings, which J's seven of each kind provided.

If P was, as seems likely, not only the compiler of the P materials but also the redactor of the Torah—note, as a simple

example, that Gen. 1 and most of Deut. 34, the framework of the Torah, are P; or note that the backbone of Genesis, the ten *toledot* (genealogy) passages, is P—why did P include those materials of JE, as well as D, alongside or intertwined with the revised P versions? It's a "mystery," Friedman admits. The answer is elusive, but one may try anyway. Friedman's own suggestion is that P incorporated other, divergent sources into the Torah because they all were traditionally ascribed to the same author, Moses. More likely, the redactor, whatever his orientation, felt compelled to include materials other than P because those materials were already precious, if not sacred, to the Judean community in or after the Exile.

It is also possible to see the motivation of including divergent sources in one Torah more or less as Buber did: the art of the Torah, the structuring that created a canonized text out of hitherto profane, or unauthoritative, materials, was in redacting. Our Torah is not a painting but a collage. The final result is the art.<sup>11</sup> This assumes a redactor not entirely convinced of the early P ideology, but it could be accounted for by a revised Priestly orientation in the Exile, a position taken by Friedman.

Friedman approximates a Buberian posture when he discusses the theology that emerges from the text once it has been combined or redacted. "The juxtaposition of the JE and Priestly Creation accounts," Friedman writes (p. 120), "precipitated a narrative synthesis with exegetical possibilities which neither of the original documents possessed independently." JE depicts a God intimate, personal, and doting.<sup>12</sup> P's God is more transcendently perceived. He won't even use angels (thus, for example, P must tell of Jacob's renaming as Israel apart from the wrestle with God in Gen. 32). In P's Creation account in Gen. 1, God is cosmic and creates a harmonious order. JE's account in the Garden of Eden narrative introduces an intimate God, grappling with the conflicts of his creatures in a disorderly scene. The truth is conveyed by neither version. The ongoing tension between the ideal and the all-too-real, which comes as close as one can to the truth, is evinced by the pitting of the one account against the other. Why couldn't the two versions be editorially combined? I would use the following analogy. Imagine a painting in which red and blue paint were mixed and then applied to an entire canvas. Now imagine a canvas painted

half red and half blue. The colors bounce off, responding to and commenting upon one another. Such is the juxtaposition of the two Creation accounts.

There are, however, redacted texts in the Torah in which two (or more) sources were editorially combined. How should they be read? Conventionally in Biblical scholarship, the sources would be isolated—thwarting, and thereby demeaning, the redactor, Rabenu—and then interpreted. The results can be especially interesting if an entire source, all of J, say, can be isolated and analyzed. Then one could see what J was up to. This Harold Bloom has tried to do for J.<sup>13</sup> He observes, for example, a literary and thematic coherence to this source, which begins with YHWH shaping the first human from clods of earth and concludes with YHWH burying the greatest human, the prophet Moses, in an unmarked grave. A concentric symmetry informs the next circle of structure, too. In the Garden of Eden, YHWH forbade the man and woman to eat of the Tree of Knowing; before Moses' death, YHWH forbade him to cross over into the Promised Land. There is even a stylistic analysis of the narrative art of the Priestly source.<sup>14</sup>

The difficulties with this method of divide and conquer are not hard to cite. Source criticism is a highly conjectural methodology. Much material in the Torah probably does not come down within any of the literary sources (such as J and P). The Testament of Jacob and the final songs of Moses, for example, are not attributable to a source. But the most serious problem with examining the structure of any hypothetical source is that we have no idea at all about what might have been dropped in the course of redaction. How complete are the remains of the sources in the present Torah? Might crucial material be lying on the cutting room floor?

From a Jewish perspective—and there is an analogous Christian one, too (see Childs)—there is an even more serious problem. It is one to which we have alluded before. None of the putative sources was preserved as sacred in its preredacted shape. If the Torah is sacred only in its redacted form, it is that form in which it must be read as Scripture. Isolating narrative strands will not do. What do the strands mean in their intertwined form? What is the meaning of the braid that is the text?

Approaches to the text in its unified form have found expression in the midrashim, of course, especially in their analyses of *semikhut parshiyot*<sup>15</sup>; in Benno Jacob, the great German Jewish

commentator whose *Genesis* exists in English only in a popularized abridged form that does it a terrible disservice and whose *Exodus* is about to appear in English unabridged (from Ktav); in Cassuto, in Buber, in a variety of literary studies, and, most popularly, in Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative*.<sup>16</sup> In a chapter entitled "Composite Artistry," Alter compares the redactor's art of composition to the filmic technique of "montage," juxtaposing images so that they can communicate by means of their interaction within our perceptions. Among the texts Alter explores are the Joseph story, Numbers 16, and the two conflicting accounts of how it was that David came to Saul's camp.<sup>17</sup>

A decade before Alter's book appeared, the late great French critic, Roland Barthes—who is egregiously omitted by Alter—endeavored to explain the meanings conveyed by the composite narrative in Gen. 32:23-33, the story of Jacob's struggle.<sup>18</sup> Barthes described the "logic" of sequence on composite Biblical narrative as a "metonymic montage": "the themes (Crossing, Struggle, Naming, Alimentary Rite) are *combined*, not '*developed*.' . . . Metonymic logic is that of the unconscious. Hence it is perhaps in that direction that one would need to pursue the present study, to pursue the reading of the text—its dissemination, not its truth."<sup>19</sup> The text embraces an apparent contradiction, one attributed by source criticism to different documents. According to Gen. 32:23, Jacob crossed the Jabbok; Gen. 32:24 says he crossed over his party. Did he cross, or didn't he? If he did not, the struggle connotes the triumph of a hero over the deity (demon?) who guards the river.<sup>20</sup> If he did cross, his struggle was clearly a *rite de passage*, a spiritual, symbolic, psychoanalyzable wrestling, implied already in the midrash in which the combatant is *saro shel Esav*, "Esau's guardian angel." Need the text be read in an either/or fashion, which is to select what will be considered and what will be discarded or benignly neglected? Barthes says no. The two readings are inextricably "tangled" together in the text. It is not for us to disentangle them but to hold them in tension. In fact, just as the text continues to refer to Jacob by both names (Jacob: the conniver, and Israel: the one who strived with God), so the story here holds both perceptions open. Again, if the text as redacted keeps the readings open, is it fitting for the audience to close one in favor of the other?

Peter D. Miscall in *The Workings of Old Testament Narrative*<sup>21</sup>

asks us to leave open that which the text itself does not close. Through a reading of several passages related to Abraham and David, Miscall concludes that the morals of both figures are left ambiguous. We should not assume, for example, that Abraham followed the divine command to go to a new land out of any but selfish motives. After all, does the text share his motives with us? Miscall's arguments provide a welcome caution against overreading, assuming more than we are permitted to insinuate into the text. However, his own readings are not neutral but rather super-skeptical. He distrusts the ways in which the Bible presents its characters to us. He is correct, however, in reprimanding commentators for exploiting and distorting what the text says in order to draw lessons from it.

Returning to the problem of how to read "tangled" texts, we may ask whether we are supposed to identify different blocks of source material in it, or different traditions that speak to or at one another in the text. It has been eloquently argued by Robert Polzin, for example, that the narrator of Deuteronomy both frames and comments upon the words of Moses, ultimately superseding Moses' authority in presenting God's word to the community. That way, the narrator has commanded the respect he needs to carry Moses' materials further into the Deuteronomistic history (Joshua-Kings) and legislate for the audience living at the tail end of that history.<sup>22</sup> Polzin's reading, however, hinges on the audience's perceptions of the breaking in and dropping off of the narrator's voice, perceptions of which I, at least, am not always convinced. He sees the narrator purposely undermining the authority of Moses and the uniqueness of Israel in order to interpose his own authority and ideology. But whether the audience will perceive this subtle argument within the rhetoric of Moses' own speeches is questionable.

In his analysis of the Garden of Eden story,<sup>23</sup> Joel Rosenberg, too, suggests that the components of a text are identifiable. The braid of composite Biblical narrative, to use our earlier metaphor, comprises strands of different colors. We observe their interrelation even as we retain our perceptions of the individual members. Rosenberg characterizes this aspect of Biblical style as "an art of quotation," adducing various components of the Israelite tradition. The "redactional level of meaning," the meaning of the text

that emerges as the parts of the text comment on one another, "is sometimes at odds with the story's plain or apparent meaning." He tries "to show that the logical analogies established in the story arise from relations of its traditional units" (p. 20). Again, my quarrel with such an approach is that the text itself does not signal our perceptions of different voices or traditions. When they become meshed in a tight manner, can we really be meant to pry them apart?

My own approach to a composite text respects the literary unity of the text until such time as the text itself calls attention to its molecular structure. Without *literary* signals, I would read the text straight, allow for duplication, contradiction, and ambiguity, and incorporate the effects of duplication, contradiction, and ambiguity into my interpretation of the text. I have tried to exemplify this way of reading in "An Equivocal Reading of the Sale of Joseph."<sup>24</sup> There I deal in detail with Gen. 37 and subsequent passages that describe the circumstances under which Joseph goes down to Egypt. We are all familiar with the crux: did the brothers sell him to Ishmaelites or did Midianites kidnap him from the pit? The narrative intertwines two sequences of action so that it becomes impossible to tell. It is my contention that the confusion in the narrative is meaningful, the redactional process artful, and that one finds a similar structure and function for that structure in Num. 16. We have what Barthes calls a "friction between two intelligibilities." While it has been customary to settle for one and dismiss the other, insist that the two sequences must be read distinctly—despite the efforts of the redactor to combine them or harmonize them—I would plead for the integrity of the redacted text. I do not here repeat my interpretation of the ambiguous narrative because that is less significant than the principle of reading, or hearing, the text as it is, without superimposing preconceptions of what it ought to be. (I am not talking about accidents of scribal transmission. They are not to be regarded as serious. To interpret scribal errors as sacred scripture is to interpret the typing of a chimpanzee as poetry.)

Most contemporary literary analysis of the Biblical text seeks to show how the text's meaning arises out of its network of literary or stylistic features as well as its overall structure.<sup>25</sup> Such study takes an epistemological stance: the best way to know what the

text means is to observe it in its various literary patterns and devices, to see how it communicates and how it "hangs together." It is held that these indicators are the clearest channels to drawing out the text's significance. Such methodology challenges the comparative method, which held sway for decades. The comparative method maintains that to know the text best, I should examine it in contrast with other texts. To know Genesis 1 best, for example, I should see how it distinguished itself from Enuma elish, or another ancient Near Eastern creation account. A literary method would seek out the patterns and recurrent formulae of the text, note the effects of its diction, follow its allusions (if any), and so forth. It may be best to utilize both approaches, wherever possible. But a literary approach will hold that the text gives away its meaning by its formal and rhetorical devices. Literary analysis, then, best serves its practitioners by exposing the means by which the text communicates. In recent years, in addition to literary analysis, another method of revealing what the text means has proved fruitful, especially for finding the levels of significance a text may have beneath the surface of its stories: structural anthropology.

Literary methods tend to read the Biblical narrative not as history, but as story. To the extent that the Torah's story moves in certain repeating patterns and articulates the people Israel's perceptions of their place in the world and the meaning of their existence, as well as their concerns and anxieties, that story is myth.<sup>26</sup> For that is what literary critics and anthropologists have been meaning by "myth" of late. The rehabilitation of "myth" as a certain kind of narrative, and not only stories about gods, is a happy contribution of recent literary, anthropological, and religious studies writing.

It is obvious that the Torah does not tell us everything that happened in its world, even within its own time-frame. What, for example, did Abraham do for the first seventy-five years of his life? Of all that Abraham did later, the Torah selects two stories in which he represents his wife to be his sister. For what reason does such behavior merit a double recounting in a narrative that omits nearly all description of Abraham as husband and father? Clearly the material that was not only selected but preserved, transmitted, and variously transformed until the Torah book was produced somehow expressed the underlying ideas and concerns of the communi-

ties to whom it was precious, sacred. The narratives of the Torah, and the Former Prophets that continue the narrative, may present themselves as a form of history. But they are far too sketchy and idiosyncratic to serve that function for an audience concerned primarily with history. The audience almost certainly responded to underlying messages and values.

To read the Torah for its underlying meaning is hardly new to Jewish tradition. The effort to draw out that which lies behind or concealed in the Torah is the impetus of Midrash. Few texts make this more explicit than the *Zohar*:

Rabbi Simeon said: Alas for the man who regards Torah as a book of mere tales and profane matters. If this were so, we might even today write a Torah dealing in such matters and still more excellent. In regard to earthly things, the kings and princes of the world [in their chronicles?] possess more valuable materials. We could use them as a model for composing a Torah of this kind. But in reality the words of the Torah are higher words and higher mysteries . . . the Torah has a body, which consists of the commandments and ordinances of the Torah, which are called *qufe torah*, "bodies of the Torah." This body is cloaked in garments, which consist of worldly stories. Fools see only the garment, which is the narrative part of the Torah; they know no more and fail to see what is under the garment. Those who know more see not only the garment but also the body that is under the garment. But the truly wise . . . look only upon the soul, which is the true foundation of the entire Torah.<sup>27</sup>

How do we proceed to uncover the underlying ideas of the Torah?

First, as was said above, we must read larger structures—books, blocks of books (Tetrateuch, Pentateuch, Hexateuch), series of books (Torah plus Former Prophets). Global reading affords us two advantages. Overall structure may reveal the design, the plan of the whole and its component parts. Spinoza, for example, knew that the meaning of the Torah is bound up with the fact that it forms a segment of the story of Israel from Creation to the Exile: "Now, if we turn our attention to the connection and argument of all these books, we shall see easily that they were all written by a single historian, who wished to relate the antiquities of the Jews from their first beginning down to the first destruction of the city."<sup>28</sup> Long before twentieth-century German Bible scholars such as Martin Noth established the literary and ideological unity of

Deuteronomy and the ensuing "Deuteronomistic History," the latter being a narrative illustration of the program of the former, Spinoza perceived the thematic thread running through the entire history. The significance of the thread is suggested by the direction it takes and its ultimate destination, the destruction of Jerusalem in 587. The entire history, from Genesis through Kings, explains how the Jewish nation came to suffer devastation and exile

even as Moses had foretold. In regard to other matters, which do not serve to confirm the law, the writer either passes over them in silence, or refers the reader to other books for information. All that is set down in the books we have conduces to the sole object of setting forth the words and laws of Moses, and proving them by subsequent events.<sup>29</sup>

The other advantage of global reading is that only in larger structures can we determine those themes that persistently recur. If certain themes or motifs crop up time and again in diverse material, it is a sign of their significance. Claude Lévi-Strauss, in his *Myth and Meaning*<sup>30</sup> for example, compares the communication of myth to a musical score. The narrative sequence represents the horizontal unfolding of the music in time, measure after measure. But what is thematically significant will repeat, directly or through transformation/variation, in the course of the music. Now take all instances of any particular theme or motif and line them up in vertical columns. The bulkier columns will contain the most persistent, hence significant, themes and motifs. Therein lie at least a portion of the important ideas or concerns of the text.

The structural anthropology of Lévi-Strauss has spawned a large number of applications to the Bible. Most focus on mythic patterns that relate to kinship. Edmund Leach, perhaps the first to do this in his *Genesis as Myth and Other Essays*,<sup>31</sup> finds a series of episodes in Genesis that seek to define the ideal kinship relation of a prospective wife to her husband. In what does seem, at least on the surface, a perverse claim, Leach argues, among many other things, that the recurrence of illicit sexual liaisons of a gross type in Genesis (Adam and his quasi-sister Eve, Cain and Abel who were compelled to incest, Lot and his daughters) mitigates the impropriety of Abraham's marriage to the woman he declares to be his half-sister, Sarah (Gen. 20:12). Whether the text does convey this

meaning, Leach properly sees a major function of myth in mitigating conflicts between the real and the ideal, between what a society possesses and what that society professes.

What Leach and many other structural anthropologists lack is sensitivity to the social environment in which kinship practices, rituals, and myths develop. Textual analysis must take into consideration and be controlled by ethnological data. The meaning of myths can be discerned only when they are related to the structure of a particular society. For whereas "the interpretation of myth . . . is the analysis of structure, and though the rules of structuring may derive from some general properties of the human mind, the forms and contents of given structures derive from particular societies." The author of that quotation, Nathaniel Wander,<sup>32</sup> adopts the original program of Lévi-Strauss (who himself admittedly violated it) to perform analysis of myth within an ethnographic context. He then shows the rhetorical means by which the text of Genesis treats women, certain women, in order to mitigate a practical societal tension.

But where does Wander get an ethnography of ancient Israel? Archaeology is not suited to foot so large a bill; ancient Near Eastern texts offer only fragments and refractions of real life. Thus, with nowhere better to turn, Wander looks to studies of modern Semitic societies, especially Middle Eastern bedouin. For while some aspects of bedouin social structure have been bent by technological and geopolitical changes, kinship structures have been less susceptible to the corrosive forces of modernity. Characteristic of Semitic marriage is that the most preferred wife is one's father's brother's daughter, that is, one's first cousin on the father's side. Such a practice serves a system in which inheritance and authority in the family pass through the father's line, a patrilineal system. Now what happens after two generations is that the father's brother's daughter turns out to be a relative through the mother's line, too. Take, for instance, Rachel/Leah, who is Jacob's cousin by his father and his mother. Women in such an ambiguous position are dangerous to the social structure because widespread misinterpretation could lead to a reinterpretation of the society by its members as matrilineal, or patri- and matrilineal.

The danger of such women is tamed by Israelite myths in which the text goes out of its way to show that what seem like



father's brother's daughters are not so. Sarah's status is blurred: is she or isn't she a relative? Rebekah is a condensation of a relative and a nonrelative and gives birth to two sons, one in the lineage of Israel, one without. Leah and Rachel are a split father's brother's daughter (actually with an extra generation added, but see how the text itself skips a generation in Gen. 29:5). The text refers to the marriages of Jacob as mother's brother's daughter liaisons (Gen. 27:43-46; 28:2, 13). Esau's father's brother's daughter marriage to Basemat is disguised in the text as a marrying out, and Lot's liaisons with his daughters seem to abridge the generational span (FBD marriage becomes D marriage). Because Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel are important in the lineage, they are compromised in the text: through barrenness and (except for Rebekah) substitutions by stand-in wives. Because the ideal of FBD marriage suffers potential confusion and redefinition in reality, the myths of Genesis mitigate the society's anxieties.

Although Wander has space only to deal with it in a footnote, his study uncovers another tension in societies similar in structure to ancient Israel's. Ideally, the oldest son receives the larger share of his father's estate. But older sons also leave home sooner. While the younger sons grow up, the father may increase his estate such that the younger sons hanging on may wind up with a share larger than that of the enterprising older son. This scenario seems likely to explain, on one level, the numerous passages in the Bible in which a younger son achieves higher station than his older brother. Such a myth in its manifold variations serves to mitigate the tension between the ideal of primogeniture and the frequent actuality of ultimogeniture.

Read this way, Genesis expresses the concerns of a largely tribal and fairly primitive culture. Was that the state of Israelite civilization at the time the Biblical narrative extended to the Babylonian Exile? No. One of the rewards of Wander's essay is his argument that "myths never forget." The material in the Biblical narrative embodies mythic patterns and relations that emerged in Israel's earliest stages, as well as its later stages. In the course of growth and transformation, myths may take on new associations and references. But they do not lose their earlier meanings. Like rolling stones gathering moss, they acquire new layers of significance without shedding the underlayers. Thus, as we shall soon

see, the theme of the younger son's domination increases in significance by extending its reference.

At its tribal stage, Israel's ethnography must be derived by analogy from modern bedouin (or not at all). As for the ethnography of Israel at the stage at which the Torah came into being more or less as we now have it, the overwhelming historical fact is the Exile. The latest strata of the Torah, those of P, can be dated by the most empirical criteria, those of linguistics, to the sixth century B.C.E.<sup>33</sup> The Torah speaks to, even comforts, the exiles in many ways and on various levels. With the situation of the Exile as a reference point, what does the Torah say?

Most obviously perhaps, the Torah explains the Exile. The core of the Torah is the covenant and its regulations. The threatening curses that conclude sections of law in Leviticus and Deuteronomy promise Exile for repeated infractions. In the Former Prophets, Israel is chastened with deliverance to the enemy whenever they stray from the fealty God expects from his vassals. When the people repent, God saves them. This was widespread theology in the ancient Near East. Compare, for example, this excerpt from the inscription of King Mesha of Moab:

I, Mesha . . . king of Moab . . . made this high-place for Chemosh . . . because he has saved me from all the kings and has let me see [victory] against all my enemies. Omri, king of Israel—he oppressed Moab many years, for Chemosh had been angry at his land.<sup>34</sup>

The destruction of the northern kingdom by Assyria in 722 pre-figured a similar fate for the southern kingdom.

The pattern of command, disobedience, and punishment also shapes a large number of episodes in the Torah. I am not only thinking of the Golden Calf and the several instances in which the people grumble and God afflicts them with fire (Num. 11:1-3) or serpents (Num. 21:4-9; see Culley, cited above, for analysis of the "punishment stories"). The theme of threatened exile begins to manifest itself in Genesis, first in the Garden of Eden. The first humans are given one prohibition by God, they blow it, and they are expelled from the Garden. The entire world is evil, they have polluted the ground,<sup>35</sup> so in a most extreme form of expulsion God annihilates them and the ground from beneath them by flood.



od's destruction of the cities of the plain is a limited version. That is God's way—removing people from their land for having sinned—takes on a remarkable form in Gen. 15, for there God tells Abram that the latter's descendants will have to suffer a temporary exile and persecution because God cannot yet displace the native inhabitants of Canaan. They haven't amassed enough sinfulness yet (see verse 16). The lesson is restated in Deut. 9:4, where Moses admonishes the Israelites: "Do not say in your heart [that is, think] when the Lord your God sweeps them away from before you, 'By dint of my righteousness has the Lord brought me to possess this land,' for it is by dint of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord dispossesses them before you." Moses fills his recounting of the Israelite history, from Deut. 1 to the song in Deut. 32, with reminders of Israel's apostasy and recalcitrance. When the Exile comes, Israel will know why.

It is perhaps worth mentioning in this connection that recent studies call attention to the large amount of north Israelite tradition in the Book of Deuteronomy.<sup>36</sup> It would then be likely that, as Ginsberg has argued,<sup>37</sup> there already existed a core edition of Deuteronomy in the reign of Hezekiah. The theology of the late-eighth-century Deuteronomy would serve the function, among other things, of interpreting the destruction of Samaria to the southern kingdom. A later edition of Deuteronomy, taking into account the abominations of King Manasseh, would speak directly to the Judeans.

Having an explanation of the Exile would be consoling to many Judeans. If they knew how they got into it—violating the covenant—they would know how to get out of it—strict adherence to the covenant. But even so, the Judeans must have been dubious about the power of their ancestral God. The oracles of the Second Isaiah, mocking the pagan gods and beatifying the Lord of Israel as Creator and Controller of events, are clearly addressed to such a skeptical, if not disbelieving, Judean audience. Many, if not most, Judeans must have questioned the covenantal promises, must have wondered how, if they were a special people of God, *'am sequlla*, they could live in such a state of humiliation and powerlessness.

In more obvious ways and in less obvious ways the Torah, and many other Biblical writings, respond to those anxieties. The Torah's narrative ends before the end, as David J. A. Clines

emphasizes in *The Theme of the Pentateuch*.<sup>38</sup> Because the Torah transports the Israelites only to the threshold of the Promised Land, with the conquest by and large ahead of them, the position of the Israelites parallels that of the Judean exiles: "the promise of God stands behind them, the promised land before them" (p. 98). The Judeans know from their Deuteronomistic History that the Israelites eventually took possession of the Land. They could hope the same for themselves.<sup>39</sup>

In a succinct but precise outline of the major themes in Genesis, Everett Fox observes that its major apparent theme is that of continuity, conveyed most concretely by the *toledot* lists.<sup>40</sup> With all its concern with continuity, however, "the undercurrent in Genesis points not to life and its continuation, but rather to its threatened extinction" (p. xxxiv). Genesis and the Torah as a whole (look at the beginning of Exodus!) treat the threat of extinction as forever real, but also reassure the audience that Israel's future is insured.

Like Jeremiah, the Judean exiles would want to know: "Have you rejected, rejected Judah? Are you revulsed by Zion?" (Jer. 14:19). The Lord has elevated Israel by calling them his "firstborn son" (Exod. 4:22). If Israel retains that status even in Exile, it sure doesn't look like it. Again we have a case of conflict between the ideal and the real. Israel in Exile does not resemble the firstborn but the younger, weaker, underprivileged son. But, in a marvelously shrewd analysis of recurrent themes in Genesis 37-Exodus 20,<sup>41</sup> Alan W. Miller shows that the two dominant themes, twins unidentical though they be, respond precisely to this exilic anxiety. Repeatedly the younger son overpowers, overshadows, or is simply more blessed than his older brother. Israel in Exile, by rights, the firstborn but in reality the last in line, in the role of younger son will eventually triumph, as did Jacob over Esau. Nonetheless, having suffered defeat and a humbling deportation, the Judeans hardly feel chosen. They don't look chosen. This is where the second recurrent theme Miller identifies enters into play. Over and over we find in the Biblical narrative instances of deception, disguise, dissimulation. We find it explicitly, as in the deception of Isaac by Rebekah and Jacob and the tit-for-tat deception of Jacob by Laban (and—how can she be exempted?—Leah). But we find it more subtly, too. Didn't the Lord disguise himself in a burning

ush, and wasn't Moses surprised? Things are not what they appear to be, the Torah reminds its audience. Israel in Exile may not look chosen, may seem fallen from divine favor. But looks are deceiving. That is a message for Israel to ponder.

A number of writers, Fox, Richard Friedman, and now Robert L. Cohn,<sup>42</sup> indicate a progression in the Biblical narrative from Genesis on in which God withdraws more and more from complete and direct control of worldly affairs and human beings must accept more and more responsibility. Using the Joseph story as an illustration, Cohn observes in addition that "Directly correlated to the diminished direct divine role in events is the augmented role of human wisdom" (p. 13). As Cohn and most of the authors we have been discussing acknowledge, the exiles would hear in this message confirmation of the theology that they themselves have brought on the Exile, and its companion message that they themselves can by rededicating themselves to the covenant bring themselves out of it.

How? By observing Torah. It must not be neglected that the core of the Torah is not the reassuring and chastening narrative framework that runs into the Former Prophets. It is the legal code that with all its civil statutes and moral injunctions places Leviticus in the center.<sup>43</sup> The crisis of the Exile is that God's presence seemed to be removed from the midst of his people. God's presence among the Israelites was that which defined their *raison d'être*: "in your going along with us, I and your people are distinguished from every people that is on the face of the earth" (Exod. 33:16; cf. Deut. 7:6-8; 14:2). In the Land of Israel, and in the situation the Torah imagines the Israelites were in in the wilderness, God's presence was housed among the people in the *mishkan*/Temple. The end of Exodus vividly describes God's taking up residence there in an environment of freshly made purity and luxury. You could see God there. In Exile Israel would feel the need to restore God's presence by maintaining an environment of holiness and purity. Leviticus provides the means.

Without a Temple, the cult of animal and meal offerings had to be discontinued until the Temple was rebuilt. The Temple, from the Torah's perspective, would have to be rebuilt. The many laws of purity have one preeminent purpose: to keep ritual pollution out of the sanctuary. They are virtually irrelevant without a sanctuary. The "logic" of the Torah's purity concept is this. God is holy, his

essence utter purity. God's purity is supersensitive to ritual pollution, so that God's immediate environment—the *mishkan* and secondarily the camp—must be kept free of pollution. God would reject and withdraw from an accumulation of ritual pollution, as in an allergic reaction to pollen. Thus, ritual pollution, be it intentional or unintentional, has an ineluctable effect on God's presence. The priests were trained to catch pollutants in offerings and persons entering the sanctuary. The community would be responsible for keeping the polluted out of their camp, to safeguard God's nourishing and protective presence among them. Just in case pollutants entered the holy presence of God unbeknownst to the priests, the sanctuary would be purified once a year whether it needed it or not, on *Yom hakkippurim*. This, as Yehezkel Kaufmann<sup>44</sup> explained in a retort to the Wellhausen claim that *Yom hakkippurim* was instituted in the Exile to atone for the sinfulness of the nation, was what the annual purification was about.

What constitutes the holy? For the Torah the holy is that which is God's, pertaining to God—God's land, God's people (when they observe their purity), God's paraphernalia (sanctuary, ark, altar, and so forth), and life.<sup>45</sup> After the Garden of Eden events, when humans acquire knowledge like that of God (Gen. 3:8), God is distinguished from mortals by the fact that he lives forever, he is, as I would say, livingness. The Torah's concern for maintaining this definition of boundaries comes out especially in the strange, distressingly pagan, episode in Gen. 6:1-4. The Gods have intercourse with the human daughters and produce a hybrid race of God-people. That means there would be human beings living for a long time if not forever, and God's distinctiveness would be jeopardized. God's reaction is to make his unique characteristic firmer than ever: human beings would live no more than 120 years. No doubt this obviously un-Israelite, or un-Toraitic story was included in order to underscore this message.

Thus, life is God's, blood, the primary liquid of life, is God's, and humans may not take or partake of life and blood. Because blood is the quintessential material of God's, it is the one that most effectively purifies the polluted.<sup>46</sup> Discharges of blood or other bodily fluids pollute, as does death. They are what I call leaks of life, impairments in the divine character. Until they are repaired, they are polluting.

The other quality of holiness in the Torah is the state of

createdness. Things can be holy when they remain in the condition in which God made them. God demands from Israel the fresh and new; being close to their created and unused state, they properly belong to God. God wants the first fruits of the earth and the womb (Exod. 13:1ff.; Deut. 26:5-10); an altar of unhewn stone (Exod. 20:25); a red heifer that never bore a yoke (Deut. 21:3-4); a new cart to carry the ark (2 Kings 6:3); free-flowing water for purifications (Lev. 14:5, 52; 15:13). God created the various species in categories, and humans must respect those categories. Genesis 1 sets the pattern for the Torah's holiness laws. God proscribes hybrids, the creation of new species, because humans may not create that which God did not. This explanation of the hybrid prohibitions was, so far as I know, first pointed out by Rabbi Joseph Bekhor Shor, the twelfth-century French commentator. Why shouldn't Israel mate different species of animals together? "You would have altered the act of creation . . . you would be making yourself like a Creator" (commentary to Lev. 19:19). What would happen if you did create a hybrid, say a new vegetable? Deut. 22:9-11 furnishes the answer. Because a hybrid is a new creation, and creation is God's prerogative, the hybrid is automatically "consecrated" property, property of God. Humans may not use it.

The dietary laws concretize the principle of respecting the categories of creation.<sup>47</sup> If one thing stands out in the diction of Genesis 1 it is the act of creation by separation, utilizing the verb *hivdil*. Israel may eat animals that do not devour blood and conform to one of three classes, the land-grazers, the air-wingers, and the sea-flappers. The language of Leviticus 11 puts emphasis on the place in which an animal typically dwells and, in particular, the manner by which that animal moves in its domain—by walking, the appropriate locomotion for land animals; by flying, the proper method for air animals; or by flapping, the right way for water animals. Animals that move inappositely for their domain cross a boundary, so to speak, and are tainted. Fowl, which is supposed to fly in the air typically, that walks on the ground (verse 20), cannot be eaten. Thus, Robert Alter,<sup>48</sup> in his discussion of the structural analyses of Douglas and Soler,<sup>49</sup> errs in assuming that the chicken was pure and not tainted. He is reading back later Rabbinic classification, which is not informed by the same concerns as the

historical ones of the Torah, into Leviticus. Israel's task is to maintain the divisions God has created, and by doing so, retain the presence of God in its midst. Because it possesses this responsibility, Israel must remain distinct among nations:

I, the Lord your God, have divided you from the peoples. So you will divide between the pure animal and the tainted one, between the tainted fowl and the pure ones, so that you do not pollute yourselves with animals, fowl, or with anything which creeps on the earth, which I have divided for you as tainted. So you will be holy to me, for holy am I, the Lord; I divided you from the peoples to be mine. (Lev. 20:24-26; cf. 11:46-47)

The Torah speaks to the exiles and urges them to maintain the distinctiveness of their practices and their distinctiveness as a people. Unlike the Assyrian deportation of the North, by whose policy Israelites were transplanted all over the map, virtually compelling the assimilation that ensued after 722, the Babylonian Exile left the Judean communities to themselves. They could preserve their distinctiveness and produce the circumstances in the Diaspora of which the Scroll of Esther speaks: "There is one people, diffused and dispersed among the peoples through all the provinces of your empire; and their laws are different from every people" (3:8). Proof positive that the Torah worked.

The Torah may incorporate ancient material, it may remember old concerns. But the form in which it was finally shaped spoke to the particular situation of the exilic community, the one that first made it Torah.

The Torah is eternal; it refers to all times and to every person. It existed before the world, and only afterwards took on the form of stories about events in time. While the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob lived, the Torah took on the stories of their lives. The same should be true of all times; Torah is so called because it teaches or points the way.<sup>50</sup>

The Torah may speak to all, but it spoke to the Exile first. In form and function it responded to the catastrophe of 587.

This essay comprises a slightly abridged and revised form of an essay I composed at the invitation of the Rabbinical Assembly, which circulated it among its members. I want to thank those colleagues and rabbis who encouraged me to publish the essay for a wider audience.

1. Robert M. Polzin, *Biblical Structuralism* (Philadelphia/Missoula: Fortress Press/Scholars Press, 1977), ch. 1.
2. E.A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964); Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary & McGraw-Hill, 1966).
3. In 622 B.C.E. King Josiah of Judah, according to 2 Kings 22-23, adopted a law code as the official basis for Judean ritual observance. Nearly all modern scholars identify the code "discovered" in 622 as essentially the Book of Deuteronomy.
4. See, e.g., James A. Sanders, *Torah and Canon* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972).
5. Martin Buber, *On the Bible* (New York: Schocken, 1968; new ed.: 1982), p. 24.
6. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979.
7. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974.
8. *The Exile and Biblical Narrative: The Formation of the Deuteronomistic and Priestly Works* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981).
9. Burke O. Long, "Recent Field Studies in Oral Literature and Their Bearing on OT Criticism," *Vetus Testamentum* 26 (1976), 187-98.
10. E.g., Gordon J. Wenham, "The Coherence of the Flood Narrative," *Vetus Testamentum* 28 (1978), 336-48; Bernhard W. Anderson, "From Analysis to Synthesis: The Interpretation of Genesis 1-11," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97 (1978), 23-39.
11. See Joel Rosenberg "Meanings, Morals, and Mysteries: Literary Approaches to Torah," *Response* no. 26 (1975), 67-94.
12. For a striking characterization of J and J's God, see Harold Bloom's "Introduction" to the reprinting of Buber's *On the Bible* (see n. 5 above).
13. *Ibid.*
14. Sean E. McEvenue, *The Narrative Style of the Priestly Writer* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1971).
15. Literally, "the juxtaposition of passages," this midrashic method seeks to learn from the sequence of passages in the text. For comparisons of classical rabbinic interpretation and literary criticism, cf. Kalman Bland, "The Rabbinic Method and Literary Criticism," in Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis et al., eds., *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), pp. 16-23.
16. New York: Basic Books, 1981.
17. For extensive critical discussion of Alter's book, see the *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* no. 27 (1983), 75-111; Alter replies on 113-17.
18. "The Struggle with the Angel," *Image/Music/Text* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977); originally published in French in 1971, the first, poor English translation of Barthes's study appeared in *Structural Analysis and Biblical Exegesis* (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1974).
19. *Image/Music/Text*, pp. 140-41.
20. So Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, p. 204, and just about everyone else.
21. Philadelphia/Chico: Fortress Press/Scholars Press, 1983.

22. *Moses and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History* (New York: Seabury, 1980).
23. *Prooftexts* 1 (1981), 1-27.
24. In Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis with J. S. Ackerman, eds., *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives, Volume II* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), pp. 114-25, 306-10.
25. In addition to books cited elsewhere in this essay, let me mention the following English titles: Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983); Robert C. Culley, *Studies in the Structure of Hebrew Narrative* (Philadelphia/Missoula: Fortress Press/Scholars Press, 1976); David J. A. Clines et al., eds., *Art and Meaning: Rhetoric in Biblical Literature* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982); Michael Fishbane, *Text and Texture* (New York: Schocken, 1979); J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1975) and *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, Volume 1: King David* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981); Jacob Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1978). Literary studies of the Bible appear regularly in the periodicals *Semeia*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, and *Proof-texts*, among others.
26. See especially Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982); for a concise discussion, see Eduardo Rauch, "Toward an Understanding of the Forgotten World of Myth—An Essay in Definition," *Melton Journal* no. 13 (Winter 1982), 4, 18-19.
27. Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken, 1965), pp. 63-64.
28. Benedict de Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, ch. 8 (Dover ed.: New York, 1951, p. 128).
29. *Ibid.*, p. 129.
30. New York: Schocken, 1979.
31. London: Jonathan Cape, 1969.
32. "Structure, Contradiction, and 'Resolution' in Mythology: Father's Brother's Daughter Marriage and the Treatment of Women in Genesis 11-50," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University* 13 (1981), 75-99.
33. Robert Polzin argues for a mid-sixth-century dating in his *Late Biblical Hebrew* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976). Gary Rendsburg's critique of Polzin in the *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University* 12 (1980), 65-80, corrects a number of Polzin's arguments and claims but does not suffice to counter his overall thrust. Avi Hurvitz, in "The Evidence of Language in Dating the Priestly Code—A Linguistic Study in Technical Idioms and Terminology," *Revue Biblique* 81 (1974), 24-46, and *A Linguistic Study of the Relationship between the Priestly Source and the Book of Ezekiel* (Paris: Cahiers de la Revue Biblique, 1982), dates P to a period before the Exile, but not long before it. A date around 600 B.C.E. appears likely. See also Ziony Zevit, "Converging Lines of Evidence Bearing on the Date of P," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 94 (1982), 481-511. Zevit contends P was composed before 587 B.C.E., but he says we can't tell how much earlier.
34. See also Morton Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion: Assyria, Judah and Israel in the Eighth and Seventh Centuries B.C.E.* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1974).
35. See Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "The Atrahasis Epic and Its Significance for

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- Our Understanding of Genesis 1-9," *Biblical Archeologist* 40 (December 1977), 147-55.
36. See, e.g., Alan W. Jenks, *The Elohist and North Israelite Traditions* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977).
37. H. L. Ginsberg, *The Israelian Heritage of Judaism* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1982).
38. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978.
39. On the narrative from Genesis through Kings as "The Earliest Bible," see also David N. Freedman's essay in *The Bible and Its Traditions*, a special issue of *Michigan Quarterly Review* (Summer 1983), 167-75.
40. "On the Book of Genesis and Its Structure," *In the Beginning* (New York: Schocken, 1983), pp. xxxiii-xxxvii.
41. "Claude Lévi-Strauss and Genesis 37-Exodus 20," in Ronald W. Brauner, ed., *Shiv'im* (Ira Eisenstein Festschrift; Philadelphia: Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, 1977), pp. 21-52.
42. "Narrative Structure and Canonical Perspective in Genesis," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 25 (1983), 3-16.
43. Thank you, Rabbi Susan Einbinder, for reminding me of this recently.
44. Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel*, abridged and trans. Moshe Greenberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), especially pp. 307-9.
45. See, e.g., Jacob Milgrom, "The Biblical Dietary Laws as an Ethical System," *Interpretation* 17 (July 1963), 288-301. The best analysis of the Biblical mindset, though technical, is still Henry Wheeler Robinson, *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946); see also Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974).
46. See, e.g., Jacob Milgrom's article on the paradox of the red heifer ritual in *Beth Mikra* 89-90 (1982), 155-63.
47. See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (New York: Praeger, 1966), pp. 41-58; and Paul Soler, "The Dietary Prohibitions of the Hebrews," *New York Review of Books*, June 14, 1979, pp. 24-30.
48. "A New Theory of Kashrut," *Commentary* 68 (August 1979), 49-52.
49. See n. 47.
50. Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl, *Sefer Me'or Einayim*, trans. Arthur Green (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), p. 249.