

**ISRAEL, INTERPRETATION, AND THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD:
ENGAGING THE JEWISH CONVERSATION**
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I want to begin by commenting on an issue brought up in Mark Kinzer’s paper, “Finding our Way Through Nicaea.”¹ This is not the first time Kinzer has emphasized the connection between community and the interpretation of Scripture,² and I trust it will not be his last. In this paper he introduces the term *dialectical ecclesial continuity* to describe the unique Messianic Jewish mode of interpretation he advocates. Kinzer writes,

I am proposing a theological and hermeneutical approach in which we as Messianic Jews take our place as part of the Jewish community with its tradition of interpretation, and as a partner to the Christian community with its tradition of interpretation, and from that place listen and respond to the Bible's witness to the God of Israel and the Messiah of Israel. From this place of communal connection, we learn to hear what Jews and Christians have heard before. However, because we are connected to both communities and traditions, we also hear new things which these communities' mutual and unnatural isolation prevent them from hearing. We can describe this as a hermeneutic of *dialectical ecclesial continuity*.

I agree completely. I have invested a number of years in this approach. After many years connected to Christian communities and traditions, I responded to Kinzer’s earlier exhortation that “we must be *rooted in the Jewish community and participate actively* in that Jewish conversation about the text that spans the centuries and the continents.”³ I am sure it will come as no surprise that I found the Christian community far more welcoming—despite their theology—than the Jewish community. My personal experience is uneven; I have generally found far more of a welcome from rabbis and scholars than from laypeople. The idea that the rabbis are the “gatekeepers” and are therefore hostile to us is not true. The synagogue board is the gatekeeper, and some board members can be hostile and hysterical about Messianic Jews.

At this time, I find that it is much more do-able to be involved in the Jewish community on a level of activities and certain limited relationships than to participate in the “Jewish conversation

1 Mark S. Kinzer, “Finding our Way Through Nicaea: The Deity of Yeshua, Bilateral Ecclesiology, and Redemptive Encounter with the Living God.” Mark S. Kinzer, 2010 Hashivenu Forum (Los Angeles).

2 See, for example, “Scripture as Inspired, Canonical Tradition,” delivered at the 2001 Hashivenu Forum (Pasadena, CA).

3 Kinzer, “Scripture as Inspired, Canonical Tradition,” pp. 25-26

about the text” in the local synagogue or JCC. As a rule, we are not welcome in that conversation as Messianic Jews, even on the basic levels of learning. But we must listen to the conversation and begin to grasp it before we can *actively* participate in it. And if the doors of learning are mostly closed to us as, it is time for to us deepen our *internal* engagement with that Jewish conversation. By “internal engagement,” I mean that we start our learning in our own circles—just like every other Jewish movement—and connect more fully with the broader Jewish conversation when we are better prepared and more of an openness develops. We will not give up on community involvement, but we also cannot give up on becoming involved in the Jewish conversation because some doors are closed to us.

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The heart of the paper consists of reflections on a text taken from Shir Hashirim Rabbah, a midrash collection based on the Song of Songs, beginning with responses to the phrase, “May he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth” (Songs 1:2). The subject is the connection between Israel, the interpretation of Torah, and the knowledge of God.

WHAT IS MIDRASH?

After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE there arose a movement of sages for whom Torah study was a vital form of worship. Though apparently all of them had trades or otherwise earned income, their true vocation was study and the production of halakhic and midrashic texts.⁴ They were not unique in this respect: interpretation and the reworking of Scripture was an established practice among sectarian groups. However, this particular group established patterns of study, interpretation, social networking, and community relations that helped them to survive over the centuries, then flourish, and then become the core of the Jewish community.

Midrash was their primary mode Scripture interpretation and philosophic discussion. This mode of interpretation was followed by successive rabbis in the Land of Israel for at least five centuries, and was adopted again in Jewish mystical texts of the Middle Ages, the Chassidic movement in the eighteenth century and beyond, and in the contemporary synagogue.

⁴ Almost certainly, these texts were transmitted orally for several generations, perhaps with private notes as memory aids, before being written down in the third century CE and later.

The word “midrash” arises from the Hebrew root *darash* [דרַשׁ], which means “examine; question; interpret.” **Midrash** is an interpretive response to Scripture. As such, it includes the process of determining what is said and not said in a particular scripture, the questions that arise from these, and the development of a theological response. A **midrash** is that interpretive response in the form of a story or word-picture.⁵ **Midrash collections** are edited volumes of such interpretive responses.

These stories can be insightful, vivid and memorable, often beautiful, sometimes offensive, and almost always challenging if we are open to being challenged. When midrash is read and understood on its own terms, it often enlarges the frame in which a scripture is seen. As an example, let us look at a fairly well-known midrash on Genesis 12:1–4. By looking at the scripture and the midrash, I hope to bring out the basic characteristic of midrash.

GENESIS 12:1–4⁶

- 1 Now יהוה said to Abram,
"Go forth [לֵךְ-לְךָ] from your country,
And from your relatives
And from your father's house,
To the land which I will show you;
- 2 And I will make you a great nation,
And I will bless you,
And make your name great;
And so you shall be a blessing;
- 3 And I will bless those who bless you,
And the one who curses you I will curse
And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed."

5 The categories invented to distinguish one type of interpretation from another (midrash, aggadah, midrash halakhah, midrash aggadah, homiletic midrash, and exegetical midrash) are far from precise enough to do the job. I am currently working within the framework suggested by Sandor Goodhart, “‘A Land that Devours Its Inhabitants’: Midrashic Reading, Emmanuel Levinas, and Prophetic Exegesis.” *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*. Vol. 26.4 (2008), pp. 13-35.

6 The translations of the Tanakh and midrash are mine, made in consultation with the Jewish Publication Society Tanakh, Maurice Simon, *Midrash Rabbah Song of Songs*. London: Soncino Press, 1939, Michael Fishbane, "Anthological Midrash and Cultural Paidea: The Case of *Songs Rabba* 1.2" in Peter Ochs and Nancy Levene, Eds. *Textual Reasonings: Jewish Philosophy and Text Study at the End of the Twentieth Century*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002, pp. 32-51, and Jacob Neusner. *A Theological Commentary to the Midrash: Volume 3, Song of Songs Rabbah*. Lanham, MD: University Press of American, 2002. Translations of the Apostolic Writings (Brit Hadashah) are adapted from the NASB and NIV.

4 So Abram went forth as **יהוה** had spoken to him. [Insert JPS]

This text presents significant problems of interpretation. Putting aside the content of God's words, it would seem that God appeared to Abram and spoke these words. Then Abram responded to God's command (lekh-lekha) with faith and obedience. But that is not how the text reads on its face. Here are some of the issues that arise on closer inspection.

Abram hears a voice (audible or not) telling him to leave his country and family and head out to an unnamed place. We know that it was **יהוה** who spoke to him, but did Abram understand that the One God of "pure monotheism" was speaking to him, or simply a very powerful god among the gods? What was his reaction to the voice—terror, faith, pride, reflection? Did he go on the basis of faithful obedience, did he feel compelled by terror, or did he just think it sounded like a good business risk?

These questions arise as I try to read this scripture without importing any assumptions I may have accumulated over the years. It seems to me that the rabbis do the same. They go to square one and try to sort out what the scripture says and what it seems to leave out. And it often seemed that what was left out was important for understanding the scripture.

So when these sages looked at scriptures like this, they were willing to study, deliberate and, if need be, argue *for generations* until they settled on a number of interpretive stories—for a midrash is generally a story, however brief or condensed—in response to the questions raised by the text. And additional midrashim (pl. of midrash) could be added in subsequent generations.

One of the sages who contributed a midrash was a certain Rabbi Isaac, who lived in the Galilee region in the mid-to-late third century CE. He spoke his midrash in the form of a parable:

God spoke to Abram: "Go you from your land" . . . R. Isaac opened his discourse with a parable: "This may be compared to someone who was travelling from place to place, and he saw a burning mansion. He said: 'Is it possible that no one is responsible for this mansion?' The owner of the mansion looked out at him and said: 'I am the owner of the mansion.'"

So, was our father Abraham saying: "Is it possible that no one is responsible for the world?" The Holy One, blessed be he, looked out at him and said: "I am the owner of the world." *So shall the King desire your beauty, for he is your Lord (Ps. 45:11). So shall the King desire your beauty. To beautify you in the world. And to bow down to him (Ibid.).* Hence, "And the LORD spoke to Abram." (Genesis Rabbah 39.1⁷)

7 Genesis Rabbah was among the first midrash collections, edited about the middle of the fifth century CE.

While Abram is wondering whether there is “someone” responsible for the whole world, God speaks. “I am the owner of the world,” implying responsibility for the world. So there is, in part, a revelation of a God who *hears* and *responds* and who at least *claims* to be owner of the world. He is not like the gods and idols of Abram’s home culture, who squabble over bits and pieces of territory, over day or night, gods who were willing to co-exist with other gods. This God is master of the world in the same way as the owner of the burning mansion.

Psalm 45:11 is then introduced to express God’s intention for Abram—to beautify him in the world—and that makes sense in the light of Genesis 12:2–3. God can bless him and bless the families of the world in him, because God knows the stuff Abram is made of: Abram was not comfortable with the theology of his day. He was inquiring (out loud or to himself) about the existence of the one who is responsible for the whole world.

The overall goal of the midrashic process is to respond to questions that arise from gaps and brevity of a text of scripture and thereby to put that text in its context. Midrash draws attention to what we would call theological issues. Taking the Scriptures as primary, how do we fill in the gaps and fill out a world-view that encompasses the central relationships of life, especially the relationship between God and humanity? This very concrete way of thinking, where ideas are embedded in actions rather than described abstractly, is the fundamental idiom of non-halakhic Jewish thought.⁸

So, R. Isaac’s midrash is not the result of an “anything goes” policy of interpretation. It reflects a deeply-held rabbinic view of the relationship between God and humanity. Created in the image and likeness of God, human beings are not insignificant in God’s eyes. Their choices are significant. Unlike other gods, God does not treat them as mere pawns in a scheme. Instead, God normally requiring *uncoerced* human agreement and participation. The command and promises involved in Genesis 12:1–4 (“Go. . . and I will. . .”) involved no threat or negative consequences of disobedience. The only basis for Abram’s obedience, then, would be comprehension of what was going on and an uncoerced choice. R. Isaac believes that one explanation of the scripture is that Abram was already a “seeker.” He was not transformed by God’s sudden intervention (something that smacks of coercion not only in rabbinic theology but

⁸ Jewish philosophy (philosophy carried out by Jews or concerning Judaism) has been practiced at least since Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE to 50 CE). Unlike midrash and halakhah, it is not characterized by a consistent idiom.

in many varieties of moral philosophy). God spoke to Abram because Abram inquired after God.⁹

R. Isaac's midrash is one of many on these verses. Like most midrash, it does not stand alone but is embedded with other interpretations of the same scriptures in a collection of midrashim on Genesis named Genesis Rabbah, probably edited in the fifth century CE. Jewish tradition honors its sages, but no individual has a determining voice or vote. While no one determines that this story actually took place,¹⁰ the ideas it reflects fit in with the array of Jewish thought and world view that can be termed "theology."

That being said, midrash approaches Scripture in ways that are strange to us. This unfamiliarity puts us in a dilemma when engaging with midrash as part of the Jewish conversation about Scripture. Apart from the extremes of simply rejecting midrash in its strangeness or accepting it completely as part of the tradition, there are two more moderate approaches: (1) to become more familiar with midrash as an object of knowledge, and (2) learning midrash from a community perspective and allowing it to speak to us.

In the first approach—treating midrash as an object of knowledge—we learn about midrash from the perspective of my own world view or system of beliefs. We may read a book or two about midrash that attempt to make it more accessible by "translating" it into terms that are more familiar to us. But when we treat midrash as an object, we have the comfort of being in the driver's seat, but the less we allow it to speak to us and even critique our ways of thinking about spiritual things.

We must move from the first approach to the second, which is learning midrash as part of the interpretive community, the Jewish community, whether or not we are physically in that community. This means learning midrash on its own terms. That does not devalue our world view, but acknowledges that it is not complete apart from the tradition. We need the Jewish communal voice, even as the larger community needs our voice.

9 This is obviously far from Reformation theology, which would claim that Abram's actions were predetermined.

10 The notion that midrash claims to be "historical" is a misunderstanding that has been promoted in some Orthodox groups.

Ultimately, as an individual, I have only limited ability to engage the Jewish communal tradition, and to listen to its voice in healthy way. I also need to be part of a Messianic Jewish engagement with the broader tradition. This will help to alleviate legitimate concerns that lone Messianic Jews can experience social and psychological pressure to compromise on issues of Messianic faith and practice.

SHIR HASHIRIM RABBAH

The remainder of this paper draws primarily from a work called Song of Songs Rabbah, a collection of midrashim based on the Song of Songs. In order to avoid confusion, I will call the midrash collection by its Hebrew name, Shir Hashirim Rabbah to distinguish it clearly from the biblical Song of Songs. This work was edited in the Galilee region of the Land of Israel in the sixth century CE, as Jews were becoming an increasingly marginalized group under Roman rule and in increasingly Christian urban areas. Shir Hashirim Rabbah is a profound work of interpretation, consolation, and imagination that link the interpretation of verses with r.

In Rabbi Isaac's midrash on Genesis 12:1-4 we saw that midrashic interpretation addresses not only what is in the text, but what is behind the text. It was not a random act of Rabbi Isaac's imagination but an application of rabbinic theology to a specific situation. In Shir Hashirim Rabbah, the scope of midrash is greatly expanded. The primary text is the Song of Songs and its verses, phrases, and words. But throughout this work, other biblical texts and circumstances are brought into play. The result is a depiction of the Scriptures in the light of the Song of Songs.

SONG OF SONGS 1:1–2

1 שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים אֲשֶׁר לְשֹׁלֹמֹה:
2 יִשְׁקֵנִי מִנְּשִׁיקוֹת פִּיהוּ כִּי־טוֹבִים דְּדֹדְךָ מִיַּיִן:

The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's.
May he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your love is better than wine

In its commentary on verse 1, Shir Hashirim Rabbah tells us that Solomon sought and pondered and gained wisdom bit by bit until “he mastered the words of Torah.” This wisdom is recorded in Proverbs, Qohelet, and especially the Song of Songs, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Prior to Solomon people would get lost, as it were, in the Torah. It is not that

they understood nothing. For example, halakhah could be developed and the Scriptures understood on some levels.

But it was not clear how everything fit together. What is the big picture? What is the master narrative that includes and gives coherence to everything else? Shir Hashirim Rabbah tells us that the master narrative, the big picture, is found in the Song of Songs, *a parable of the love relationship between God and Israel*.¹¹ The elements of Torah, covenant, wisdom, commandments, promise, sacrifice, holiness, and all the narratives of the Bible can be grasped in light of that love relationship. Seen in that context, even the darkest episodes in Israel's history take on a new significance.

The midrash tells us that after Solomon arose and wrote his three books “everyone began to comprehend the Torah.” Notice the emphasis on “everyone” and on process. Shir Hashirim Rabbah highlights the public nature of knowledge. Solomon was received special help from the Holy Spirit because he taught in public. Even his most treasured writing, the Song of Songs, was given to the nation as a whole. In this midrash, learning is not the private realm of sages; it is a public, lifelong-learning project. The people did not comprehend everything all at once; they *began* to comprehend. Shir Hashirim Rabbah assures us that, using Song of Songs as our key, we can unlock and master the words of Torah, both their secret or *sod* [סוד] and their details [דקוודים]. It does not promise instant or perfect knowledge, but the gaining of knowledge through learning.

The midrash works through the Song of Songs verse by verse, phrase by phrase, to surface the love of God (as Israel understands it) especially in places in Scripture where it is less evident. Conversely, the rest of Scripture fleshes out the Song of Songs. The Song begins, “May he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth” (Songs 1:2). How does the midrash depict God and Israel in that verse? By juxtaposing the verse with scenes and verses from the Bible and, to some extent, daily life in the world of the rabbis. It turns out that the midrash, Shir Hashirim Rabbah, sees the love between God and Israel in unlikely places and often expresses it with unusual images.

Another explanation: Midrash is shaped and energized by a very concrete theology. For example, the theology of Shir Hashirim Rabbah is summed up in the love relationship of God

¹¹ See Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1990, pp. 105-116.

and Israel—not in the *statement* “God loves Israel and Israel loves God” and not in an *explanation* of that statement, but in the love relationship itself. Rabbinic theology is not abstract. It is located in concrete events, narratives, people, places, and things. Studying a few examples of holy things found in Scripture will further a Jewish understand of “holiness” more than any definition or theological statement.

In other words, my use of terms like “master narrative” could be misleading. It is not the narrative that unlocks Scripture but the love relationship itself. The narrative only describes the relationship. The dynamism of midrash arises from using relationships and other concrete things like places and objects as paradigms for understanding and for expression. For example, here is part of Shir Hashirim Rabbah’s commentary on the Song of Songs 2:9, *My beloved is like a gazelle*:

My beloved is like a gazelle (Songs 2:9). Rabbi Isaac said, “The community of Israel said before the Holy one, blessed be he: ‘Sovereign of the Universe, you say to us, “My love, my love”—You give us the greeting of love first.’” Just as a gazelle leaps from mountain to mountain and valley to valley, from tree to tree and fence to fence, so the Holy One, blessed be he, leapt from Egypt to the Red Sea and from the Red Sea to Sinai, and from Sinai he leaps to the future [redemption].

Another interpretation: *My beloved is like a gazelle*. . . Thus the Holy One, blessed be he, leaps from synagogue to synagogue, from Beit Midrash to Beit Midrash. And why all this? To bless Israel. And because of whose merit? Because of the merit of Abraham.

The midrash moves us from *My beloved is like a gazelle* to an easily visualized personification of God as a gazelle leaping from one scene to the next. The leaping gazelle is a very joyous image. He comes out of hiding, motivated by love, as Israel moves through the gazelle’s native wilderness habitat after they leave Egypt. This midrash tells explicitly the story that the Song of Songs tells implicitly: that even at the worst moments in the desert, God always retained a passionate love for Israel, a love that no amount of disobedience or alienation could snuff out.

R. Isaac (or another interpreter) extends the parable of God’s love and presence into then present-day Israel with the simple device of the leaping gazelle . . . The rabbis, conceive of the synagogue and Beit Midrash as the centers of Jewish life: ideally, every Jew would regularly spend time within those walls.

As the rabbis explored the Scriptures and fashioned midrashim, their audience played a role as well. It seems that in the second and third century CE, the rabbis formed a small circle devoted to exploring, primarily, the legal or halakhic aspects of the Torah. Even their midrash was less concerned with developing a world view than with establishing halakhah. By the fifth century, if not earlier, the rabbinic movement was expanding, even as it became more of an urban movement. It included not only the rabbis themselves, but the larger circle including more loosely affiliated men and the families of the study circle. And there are indications that the preaching of the rabbis (which would likely have been midrashic in nature) had a larger audience still. The rabbinic movement was on the verge of functioning as the center of the Jewish community.

The spiritual and emotional needs of this more diverse assembly differed from the earlier “rabbis-only” group. Their role as communal leaders was an important factor in their interpretation of Scripture. Thus, there is a noticeable shift in the subject matter and tone of the later midrash such as Genesis Rabbah and Shir Hashirim Rabbah. They are more personal, more concerned with the lives of less halakhically-inclined Jews, more pastoral.

In Shir Hashirim Rabbah, God’s love overshadows or even overwhelms the sinfulness of Israel. Instead of dwelling on Israel’s sin, the Holy One will bring Israel to the time of their full redemption.

Another interpretation: *My beloved is like a gazelle . . .* Just as a gazelle appears and vanishes, then appears and vanishes again, so the first deliverer [Moses] appeared and vanished and then appeared again. Judah son of Rabbi [Yehuda the Prince] said: He appeared intermittently, and so the future deliverer [Messiah] will appear to them and again disappear. [Here several versions of the disappearance and reappearance are offered, modeled on the times mentioned in Daniel, but differing from one another].

So, the gazelle is the Holy One (leaping through the events of Jewish history and from synagogue to Beit Midrash in the rabbis’ day). And the gazelle is also Moses and the Messiah. These midrashim are placed one after the other without further explanation. The explanation lies in the imagery. God, Moses, and Messiah are all “like a gazelle” because they are all “beloved” of Israel. Although not fully developed, the midrashim on “like a gazelle” present God’s love entirely in concrete terms, addressing the past (God and Moses), the present (God), and the future (Messiah) of Israel. This the rabbis’ theology of God’s love in a nutshell.

Shir Hashirim Rabbah references large parts of the Torah, explaining them in terms of the love relationship described in the Song of Songs. It assures Israel that whatever God does is done out of love. Although God is not blind to Israel's faults, some of which arise even in this midrash collection, that love will not fail.

INNER-BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Midrash achieves some of its characteristic effects by providing background or narrative elements not present in the specific scriptures being interpreted. It does this by putting biblical verses and passages in the context of another verse or some expression of rabbinic theology. In Genesis Rabbah 39.1, for example, the Rabbi Isaac juxtaposes Genesis 12:1–4 with Psalm 45:11. In between, he places a story that arises from the rabbinic idea that God does not normally coerce human actions but looks for us to make informed and unconstrained choices.

Some readers will be uncomfortable with midrash. Does the midrash expect us to believe that God was really “like a gazelle” with Israel in the wilderness? Are we expected to take Rabbi Isaac's midrash on Genesis 12 as fact? It would be unreasonable for me to suggest that you go against the grain of that discomfort without offering you some entrance into the world of midrash that seems reasonable to you. That entrance can be found in Scripture itself.

Every recounting of the Exodus narratives in later scriptures reworks the material in one way or another (even if only by abbreviating it) to make it suitable for its new context. This phenomenon of inner-biblical interpretation¹² is observed, for example, in the words of prophets and psalmists concerning the Exodus narratives of God delivering Israel from Egypt, the Torah given at Mt. Sinai, and the time in the desert before Israel was brought into the Promised Land. There are also a number of overt references to these Exodus narratives in the Brit Hadashah. The majority of these scriptural accounts are characterized by an emphasis on Israel's disobedience and God's anger; the (admittedly few) high points are usually omitted in these accounts.

However, a number of accounts that are heavily reworked in a manner similar to midrash, with added material, and sometimes vivid imagery, not found in the Exodus narratives

¹² The most thorough work on inner-biblical interpretation is Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

themselves. Like midrash, they place the Exodus narratives in a different context. That context can be anywhere on the spectrum of negative to positive.

Perhaps the darkest picture is painted in Ezekiel 20:8–9,13–14:

They rebelled against me and would not listen to me [in Egypt]; they did not cast away the detestable things of their eyes, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt. So I said I would pour out my wrath on them and spend my anger against them in Egypt. 9 But for the sake of my name [I brought them] out of Egypt . . . the people of Israel rebelled against me in the desert. They did not follow my decrees but rejected my laws . . . and utterly desecrated my Sabbaths. So I said I would pour out my wrath on them and destroy them in the desert. But for the sake of my name I did [not destroy them].

In this passage, God did not want to bring Israel out of Egypt in the first place. Everything is done for the Name of God. There's no mention here of God's love or even empathy for Israel.

There are a number of biblical accounts that present a more positive view of the relationship between God and Israel during those years. The following account is from Psalm 80:8–10. The psalmist asks God to intervene and rescue and restore Israel as in the past:

You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it, and it took root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches.

Here, the nurture and protection of God are emphasized. The vine flourishes under God's care. There is no mention of any trouble with this vine.

In the Brit Hadasha (the Apostolic Writings), accounts of the Exodus are mostly negative, but not nearly as sharp as Ezekiel's. The focus is always brought toward the Messiah in one way or another, as illustrated by two examples. In Acts 13:17–18, Shaul is preaching Yeshuah at Pisidian Antioch. In passing, he mentions the Exodus.

. . . with mighty power he led them out of [Egypt]; he endured their conduct[a] for about forty years in the desert. . .

Hebrews 3:17 is part of an exhortation not to abandon faith in Messiah:

And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert?

Both scriptures represent the common account of the Exodus: Israel sinned; God was angry.

1 Corinthians 10:1–6 contains imagery more striking than any other inner-biblical interpretation of the Exodus narratives. It is a continuation of Shaul’s exhortation, in chapter 9, to the Corinthians not to abuse their freedom in Messiah.

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Messiah. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness. Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.

Despite God’s provision, the people displeased God and incurred a severe discipline. Again, this dynamic—Israel sins; God punishes—is the common account in the Scriptures.

There are several added elements here that go beyond vividness of language: the baptism into Moses, the spiritual food and drink, and Messiah accompanying Israel as a “spiritual rock.”

Messiah as a spiritual rock following Israel during their wilderness wanderings occurs only here in the Brit Hadashah, and there is no mention of it anything like it the Tanakh.¹³ Perhaps Shaul is speaking allegorically. But, whether the rock was seen or unseen, Messiah was there in some way. It puts the Messiah of Israel right in the middle of Israel’s desert wanderings. Although the story of sin and displeasure remains unchanged, the presence of this spiritual rock places the Exodus narratives in a clearly Messianic context. To be blunt, Yeshua, who is “the radiance of [God’s] glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power” (Hebrews 1:3) was present and involved with Israel during at least their entire time in the desert.

But the most radical narrative reshaping I have found is in Jeremiah 2:2–3. In the prophetic poetry of this chapter, God speaks of Israel in the wilderness and newly planted in the land as a devoted bride who followed God in difficult circumstances. The language used here to describe the relationship between God and Israel is very similar to the love language found in Shir Hashirim Rabbah.

13 It has been suggested that “the spiritual rock” reflects a Jewish tradition of a moving well that is found in a few early midrashim. See Peter E. Enns. “The ‘Moveable Well’ in 1 Cor 10:4: An Extrabiblical Tradition in an Apostolic Texts.” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 6 (1996), pp. 23-28. However, there is no consensus on that 1 Cor. 10 relies on that tradition. There is also no common interpretation of verse 4. See Carlos R. Bovell, “Scriptural Authority and Believing Criticism: The Seriousness of the Evangelical Predicament.” *Journal of Philosophy & Scripture*, Volume 3 Issue 1, Fall 2005, p. 22.

“I remember the devotion of your youth,
how as a bride you loved me
and followed me through the desert,
through a land not sown.

Israel was holy to the LORD,
the firstfruits of his harvest;
all who devoured her were held guilty,
and disaster overtook them,”
declares the LORD.

In this chapter, the prophet confronts the Israel of his own day concerning her unfaithfulness to God. Her former devotion to God in the wilderness is offered as a standard against which her later corruption is judged (v. 21):

I had planted you like a choice vine
of sound and reliable stock.
How then did you turn against me
into a corrupt, wild vine?

Later biblical depictions of the Exodus narratives vary from nearly total alienation between God and Israel to a nurturing and protective relationship. These passages demonstrate that the events of Scripture may be contextualized in divergent ways, even within Scripture. Certain perspectives that are unspoken or barely spoken in the text are fore-grounded in the interpretation. true. The issue is not whether they relate the facts “objectively” but whether the perspective and emphasis of the interpretation are valid in the broader scriptural context. In the case of these inner-biblical interpretations, as divergent as they are, they must all be valid.

Likewise, in the case of midrash, realities that may be unspoken or barely spoken in the scripture text may be fore-grounded in the midrash. The issue is not whether it relates the facts “objectively” but whether the perspective and emphasis of the interpretation are valid in the broader scriptural context.

My purpose in highlighting midrashic elements of inner-biblical interpretation is not to lend the Scriptures’ authority to post-biblical midrash. Midrash shares in the authority of tradition, not of the Scriptures. I am trying to show that the midrashic way of emphasizing what is not present in the scripture text is similar to some inner-biblical interpretation. It is not a pure rabbinic innovation. In addition, Shir Hashirim Rabbah’s view of the love relationship between God and Israel is similar to the way several scriptures characterize the Exodus narratives.

THE KISSES OF HIS MOUTH

The song itself begins at Songs 1:2. We will focus on a selection of midrashim connected to first half of the verse, *May he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth*. The midrash asks, “Where was this recited?”

Hanina bar Pappa said, “It was recited at the Sea” . . . R. Yudah, son of R. Simon said, “It was recited at Sinai” . . . Rabban Gamaliel says, “The ministering angels recited it” . . . R. Yohanan said, “It was recited at Sinai” . . . R. Meir says, “It was recited at the Tent of Meeting” . . . The rabbis say, “[It was recited] in the Temple.”

The verse could be used as a lens to interpret events at any of those places. In fact it is interpreted in the context of the Crossing of the Sea in the *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, an earlier midrash collection, on Exodus 15:1–2. *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* ends up focusing on events that took place at Mt. Sinai because it wants to include midrashim dealing with mediation, the giving of Torah, and the encounter with God in Torah study.

In one midrash, an angel delivers the Torah and the kisses are angel’s kisses. In another midrash, the Torah is delivered by a personalized Word and the kisses are the kisses of that Word.¹⁴ These midrashim examine different modes of mediation between God and Israel. But the editor of this midrash collection also wants to include midrashim that explore Israel’s direct, unmediated experience with God and what followed.

**רבי יהושע בן לוי ורבנין רבי יהושע אומר שני דברות שמעו ישראל מפי הקב"ה
אנכי ולא יהיה לך הדא הוא דכתיב ישקני מנשיקות פיהו ולא כל הנשיקות. ורבנין
אמרין כל הדברות שמעו ישראל מפי הקב"ה.¹⁵**

R. Joshua b. Levi and the rabbis—R. Joshua says, “Israel heard two words from the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be he, I [*am Hashem your God*] and *You shall not have [any other gods besides me]* (Exod. 20.1-2), as it is written, *May he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth*—not all the kisses, [only two].”

But the rabbis say, “Israel heard all the [ten] words from the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be he.”

14 This midrash stands at the limits of early rabbinic thought concerning a divine mediator.

15 The Hebrew text of *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* is from *Midrash Rabbah Hamevoar: Shir Hashirim*. Jerusalem: Mechon Hamidrash Hamevoar, n.d.

On the surface, this is a simple disagreement over how many of the Ten Words proceeded directly from the mouth of God. Rabbi Joshua b. Levi is a sage who flourished in the first half of the third century CE and is credited for his work on the Pesach Haggadah. Rabbi Joshua claims that only two of the Ten Words were spoken directly; the rabbis counter with “all ten.”

There are numerous possible reasons for the two positions, relating to the effect of God’s speech on the Israelites and levels of intimacy and responsibility. The most important thing to take away from this midrash is Rabbi Joshua’s interpretation of *the kisses of his mouth*: the kisses are the Words that come directly from God’s mouth (not individual words but the Commandments). The issue of “two or ten” will not be resolved here, because a rupture is about to take place that will short-circuit that discussion.

LEARNING AND LOSS

רבי יהודה אומר בשעה ששמעו ישראל אנכי ה' אלהיך נתקע תלמוד תורה בלבם והיו למדים ולא היו משכחין באו אצל משה ואמרו משה רבינו תעשה את פרוזביון שליח בינותינו שנאמר דבר אתה עמנו ונשמעה ועתה למה נמות, ומה הנייה יש באבדה שלנו.

R. Yehuda says, “When Israel heard *I am the Lord your God* (Exod. 20.1), the study of Torah was fixed in their heart and they would study and not forget. [Then] they approached Moses and said, ‘Moses our rabbi, make [yourself] an ambassador, an emissary [lit. agent] between us [and the Holy One, blessed be he], as it is said, *Speak with us and we will listen* (Exod. 20.16). . . *And now, why should we die?* (Deut. 5.22) What benefit would there be in our perishing?”

This Rabbi Yehuda (there are several others) flourished in the middle of the fourth century CE. If the attributions in Shir Hashirim Rabbah can be counted on, over a hundred years separated him and his midrash from Rabbi Joshua and his. When collected and placed one after the other, that gap disappears from view and all the rabbis seem to be living at the same time, gathering in the Beit Midrash, each rabbi contributing to the conversation.

Notice that “when Israel heard” the first Word—that is, at the same time—“the study of Torah was fixed in their heart.” This indicates a clear connection between God’s words and the process of studying (read “interpreting”) those words. He did not simply download the

data of Torah but the ability to grapple with the words, to unfold them as it were, one study session after another, where the words of God are repeated and studied orally.¹⁶

Because these Words are given to Israel as a nation or community, the community as a whole needs to subject these words to interpretation within the process of study. In this midrash, there is no institutional control of the learning process. As Gerald Bruns writes, “The interpretive community is nothing less than Israel herself, and all who belong to Israel belong to the ongoing dialogue in which the Torah is understood.”¹⁷ Messianic Jews are, or should be, part of that interpretive community as a dimension of our participation in Israel and our claim to be a Judaism. Although that participation may begin in our own congregations and other Messianic Jewish learning venues, some of us will be involved directly.

So, the Holy One speaks Words that interpreted as kisses. Immediately and, it seems, spontaneously they begin to study Torah themselves. Even more, “they would study and not forget” what they had learned. Everyone who has done serious, ongoing Torah study knows that weakness of memory presents a considerable challenge in moving forward. All sorts of details and even major insights begin to fade. Sometimes, learning involves taking two steps forward and one step back. Constant review is an essential part of learning. But in this midrash, the kiss of the Holy One removes that problem. Israel would not learn by taking two steps forward and one back; they would move steadily forward grappling with Torah together and integrating it into the life of the community.

At this point, “Torah” can mean only the words that had just been spoken by the Holy One. But Israel immediately began to study and the body of Torah began to grow. It is important to understand that in Jewish communal context “Torah” or “words of Torah” refer not only to the original words or the words of Scripture (or a Torah that is said to have existed, whole, before Creation): they include the interpretive tradition that follows. So the content of Torah depends on the time context in which it is mentioned.

16 “[T]hey would study” translates a Rabbinic Hebrew Construction indicating regular or habitual action. From that point on, they would [regularly] study.

17 Gerald L. Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992, p. 17.

Unfortunately, that is not the end of the story. The same Words that jump-started Torah study also frightened the people. The words of the Holy One were terrifyingly powerful. Fearing for their lives, the people asked Moses to be an intermediary between them and the Holy One. I suppose they figured he could take the heat.

Stephen Fraade observes that this expresses the “the unresolved dialectic of intimacy and intermediacy in Israel’s revelatory relationship to God. Israel desires, and is privileged with, the ‘mouth to mouth’ intimacy of God’s revelatory kiss, yet also, in fear of the potency of such unmediated divine contact, prefers to receive revelation via an intermediary agent.”¹⁸

There are also varieties of mediation. The angel or the Word who served as mediators, in the midrashim that preceded this one, were sent by God, on God’s initiative. Likewise Yeshua was sent by God. The Holy One sets the terms, not the people. But here, Israel asks for a mediator not to bridge the gap between God and Israel, but to buffer them from the frightening immediacy of God’s speech. Moses would shuttle back and forth delivering messages from God to the people and vice-versa. The results were tragic.

**חזרו להיות למדים ושוכחים. . . אמרו מה משה בשר ודם עובר אף תלמודו
עובר מיד חזרו באו להם אל משה אמרו לו משה רבינו לוואי יגלה לנו פעם
שניה לוואי ישקני מנשיקות פיהו לוואי יתקע תלמוד תורה בלבנו כמות שהיה.**

They returned to [their] studying but would forget [what they had learned]. They said, “Just as Moses, made of flesh and blood, will pass away, so also his learning will pass away.” Immediately, they turned and came to Moses. They said to him, “Moses our rabbi, if only he¹⁹ [the Holy One] would be revealed to us a second time. If only *he would kiss us with the kisses of his mouth*. If only he would fix the study of Torah in our heart as he did [before].”

As they continued studying, they realized that something was wrong: they were forgetting what they learned from the previous session. Based on what follows, it seems that their minds were not simply wiped clean but there was a significant or even profound weakening of memory, making the learning process more cumbersome because of the constant review and relearning that was now required. While memory is affected, there is no

18 Stephen Fraade, "The Kisses of His Mouth: Intimacy and Intermediacy in as Performative Aspects of a Midrash Commentary" in Peter Ochs and Nancy Levene, Eds. *Textual Reasonings: Jewish Philosophy and Text Study at the End of the Twentieth Century*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002, p. 53.

19 God. The verb form is masculine and so could not refer to the Torah. They understood that their primary need was another revelation of God.

mention here or anywhere else in Shir Hashirim Rabbah, of “the study of Torah” being suspended because of this situation.

But Israel lost confidence that even the nation as a whole could any longer retain and transmit Torah accurately. They realized what is at stake—the clear memory of Torah learning now resides in one person, Moses, and if he dies, Torah dies.²⁰

This midrash makes an important connection between Torah study and the knowledge of God: both arose from the kiss of God, the words “I am Hashem your God” spoken to Israel directly, without mediation. Even as Torah study continued, there is no reason to assume that it was disconnected from the knowledge of God. The midrash is not being unrealistic here—the Scriptures make it clear that God bears with the weakness and the sins of the people. The bond between God and Israel is never an all-or-nothing deal.

The solution to this erosion seemed obvious: if only the Holy One would “kiss” Israel again, things would be made right. They asked both for another revelation of the Holy One and that he would fix the study of Torah in their hearts as before.

The level of Israel’s distress is not easily captured with the English. “Oh that. . .”. *l’vai* [לואי] has the sense of urgent pleading with an overtone of woe. Repeated three times it borders on despair. In their condition of eroded memory of the Holy One and of Torah study, they bitterly beg Moses for a second chance.

Typically, the midrash does is not concerned only with Israel’s past but also the immediate circumstances of the rabbis who authored or collected the midrashim and the community of which they were a part. Here in Shir Hashirim Rabbah, the rabbis envision the Holy One as a gazelle leaping with love from synagogue to synagogue and Beit Midrash to Beit Midrash. This reads to me as an honest expression of their sense of God’s love for them and for all Israel. Yet these same rabbis are also willing to face some of the most profound issues of loss in a very open way. Knowing full well the Christian claim that Israel’s relationship with God was broken., these rabbis must have possessed great inner

²⁰ The “chain of transmission” by which Torah is said to have been transmitted is strangely not in view. The “chain of transmission” is recorded in at least two distinct forms. In Mishnah Avot 1:1, Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders. In Bavli Eruvin 54b, Moses receives from the mouth of God and transmitted it to Aaron, to Eleazar and Ithamar, and to the Elders, etc.

strength to “air their dirty laundry” in public (for would it not confirm the Christian accusation?).

Now Moses responds to Israel’s request for the Holy One to be revealed to them again:

אמר להם אין זו עכשיו אבל לעתיד לבא הוא שנאמר (ירמיה לא) ונתתי את תורת בקרבם ועל לבם אכתבנה.

[Moses] said to them, “This [will] not [be granted] now but in the future,” as it is said, *I will put my Torah within them and on their heart I will write it* (Jer. 31.33).’

Moses’ response was must have been devastating, but at least it held out hope for the future. The Holy One would not kiss them again at that time, but at some indeterminate time in the future. Moses describes that future by quoting from Jeremiah 31. Since the rabbis often refer to an entire passage when they quote a verse or part of a verse, we need to check the context of the quote from Jeremiah to see how it might relate more broadly to the midrash. The rabbis often bring in whole scripture passages by citing only a verse, or even less. Since that is how they construct and express their interpretation, them,

Jeremiah 31:31-34 concerns the establishing of a *brit hadashah* [ברית חדשה], a new covenant, with Israel.²¹

But this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days—declares יהוה: I will place my Torah within them and write it on their heart. Then I will be their God and they will be my people. And a man will not anymore teach his neighbor or his brother saying, “know²² יהוה,” for all of them will know²² me, from the least to the greatest—declares יהוה. For I will forgive their iniquities and no longer remember their sins.

The “placing of Torah within them and writing it on their heart” in Jeremiah is an advance over the midrash’s “fixing the study of Torah in their heart and they will not forget.” There is no reason to believe that “Torah” here in Jeremiah 31 is any different from “Torah”

21 Verse 31 reads “the house of Israel and the house of Judah,” but uses the summary term “house of Israel” in verse 34.

22 JPS translates *yedu* [יָדוּ] as “obey” instead of “know” in both occurrences in this verse. This serves to contrast obedience in the new covenant with disobedience in the Mosaic covenant. It also relates obedience in verse 34 to the Torah in verse 33. However, Koehler-Baumgartner does not even list “obey” among its primary translations of יָדוּ in the qal. Instead, they concern some way of knowing, literal or figurative. Furthermore, the translation “obey” obscures the very point the midrash (and, I believe, the scripture, wants to make by associating Torah with the knowledge of God. Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, Johann Jakob Stamm, and M. E. J. Richardson, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* E.J. Brill, 2001, pp. 390-91.

elsewhere in Scripture or in the midrash. There is nothing here to indicate that the specifics of Torah would be voided, superceded, or spiritualized in the new covenant. Instead, *the external Torah will now have an internal counterpart*. There is no diminishing of the Torah in this covenant but a deepening of the Torah's presence within Israel and an inner strengthening to understand and obey it.

In the midrash, Torah study is associated with the knowledge of God. In the new covenant, the knowledge of God will not only be communal ("they will be my people) but also individual ("all of them will know me").²³ It is also associated with the forgiveness of sins. In its communal or individual dimensions, it is unthinkable that this covenant is intended to *separate* Jewish Yeshua-believers from their own community and substitute another community as our primary place of identity. And yet that separation is now taken for granted among Jews and Christians alike. Although we are not in a position to demand our rights in the Jewish community, we must work for reconciliation and resist internalizing the rejection we experience.

Torah study (as opposed to Torah itself) is not specifically mentioned in this passage. However, it is a general assumption of Scripture that the Torah requires interpretation (see especially Psalm 119). Whether Torah is only external or it is also internal, it requires interpretation in order to make the transition from words to thought and from thought to life as a whole. Therefore, the word "Torah" in this context cannot represent some finished body of knowledge that requires no mental processing by individuals or communities. A process of interpretation is implicit.

HEBREWS CHAPTER 8

The Jeremiah passage is cited in full in Hebrews 8.²⁴ It occurs in the midst of an extended discussion of the superiority of the new covenant and its mediator, Yeshua. This discussion is too rich to summarize here. But some of the main points are that Yeshua is a perfect and

23 The individual is not in view in the midrash.

24 Taken from the Septuagint, a translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek, a common language of the eastern Mediterranean Basin from the time of Alexander the Great (356-323 B.C.E). The noticeable difference between the Jeremiah and Hebrews passages is found at Hebrews 8:10, which reads "I will put my laws [instead of "law," singular] in their minds [instead of "within them"] and write them on their hearts." It is not within the scope of this paper to explore the use of the Septuagint in the early Church and its implications for this passage.

eternal high priest, an intercessor and a Son who is able to save completely (Chapter 7). He is the “mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises” (Hebrews 8:6). Those promises are enumerated first of all in Hebrews 8:7-12,²⁵ which is an almost word-for-word quote of the Jeremiah passage we have just been looking at. Chapter 9 and 10 develop the themes of high priesthood, sacrifice and mediation.

The Jeremiah passage takes on new meaning when it is viewed in its Hebrews framework. The promises in Jeremiah’s new covenant are clearly mediated to Israel by Yeshua. This re-framing of the passage is very similar to the way midrash works: the text being interpreted remains unchanged, but it is placed in a new context. Its ultimate place in Scripture is in this letter to Jewish Yeshua-believers, emphasizing Yeshua’s exalted place in all things.

In Shir Hashirim Rabbah, Torah study continues even before the promised kiss of Jeremiah 31. It is recorded that Rabbi Shimon, the son of Rabbi Nachman, says that the words of Torah benefit “the one who labors in them with all [the effort] they require **מי שעמל בהן כל צרכן**]. The word for “labor” **[עמל]** occurs here for the first time in relation to Torah study. It is assumed that Torah study will involve that same labor until the nation as a whole experiences the kiss of God in the new covenant. Until then, that labor is not in vain. Its fruit is the living Jewish conversation about our texts that is the heritage of all Jews today.

At the same time, because Yeshua is the mediator of the new covenant, it is impossible for the whole of Israel to enter into new covenant life apart from him. This is not meant to minimize Jewish Torah-study of the past or present. It is an assertion of that only through Yeshua, and along with us, will the Jewish people receive the kiss of God mentioned in Shir Hashirim Rabbah.

As we see in Jeremiah 31 and Hebrews 8, the provisions of the new covenant are not only for individuals; they are intended for the Jewish people as a whole. We who have already entered this covenant have experienced, in part, the kiss of God. I emphasize “in part” for two reasons: First, the body of Messianic Jews has not yet embraced the role of Torah that is so essential to these passages. The new covenant points to the ongoing study of Torah in the communal and personal life of all Jews. Until that becomes a reality in the Messianic Jewish

²⁵ I am not able to address here the complex issues involved in the relationship of the two covenants. Briefly, I believe that the fading of the old covenant mentioned in verse 13 concerns the sacrificial system and related matters.

community, we will have failed to enter the new covenant in its fullness. Second, we cannot experience the fullness of this covenant apart from the Jewish people as a whole. The covenant and its provisions are not intended only for individuals; they are meant to impact and shape the Jewish people. This covenant envisions the oneness of the Jewish people, including Messianic Jews, in the ongoing interpretation of Torah, which is placed in our hearts and written on our minds, and in the knowledge of God through Messiah.

In the past, Messianic Jews often had the attitude that we have arrived; though we *feel* for Jews separated from Messiah, we do not have any particular *need* of them. Grasping the oneness of the Jewish people will help us to position ourselves as part of the interpretive community rather than as individuals looking in from the outside. Being part of the interpretive community does not require that we submerge our individuality, our personality, or our Messianic Jewishness. Jewish tradition is filled with creativity and unique personalities, a fact that gets lost because the whole idea of tradition is misunderstood as being unfriendly to individual expression.

Without in any way minimizing the need to partner with the Christian community, Jews are part of the Jewish people. Granting the importance of our individuality, the awareness that Messianic Jews cannot experience the fullness of the new covenant apart from the whole of the Jewish people is essential for a healthy participation in the community and engagement with the Jewish conversation.

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ISRAEL, INTERPRETATION, AND THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD:

ENGAGING THE JEWISH CONVERSATION

ADDENDUM: THE WORD AS MEDIATOR

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In *Border Lines*, Daniel Boyarin argues that early Jews and Christians shared a common, Jewish “binetarian theology of the logos,”¹ in which a divine Logos serves as mediator between God and humanity. Soon, early Jewish and Christian authorities busied themselves to determine what and who were Christian, what and who were Jewish, and began to draw and guard border lines between the two communities. The authorities of nascent Christianity rejected Torah observance as it became more central to rabbinic Jews. At the same time, the rabbinic movement rejected the idea of a hypostatic² Logos (Word) as mediator while the divine Word became central to the theology of nascent Christianity. In Christianity, the divine, mediating Logos superseded Torah; in Judaism, Torah superseded the divine, mediating Word.³ Eventually, the border lines became impenetrable.

Boyarin’s thesis involves tracing the Second Temple and early rabbinic uses of the Greek word *logos* [λόγος] and the Aramaic *memra* [מִמְרָא]—both meaning, “a spoken word”—in Jewish and Christian texts. Strangely, Boyarin does not introduce the uses of the Hebrew *dibbur* [דִּבּוּר], also meaning “a spoken word.” Since *logos*, *memra*, and *dibbur* share highly overlapping semantic domains. I suggest that Boyarin’s work suffers from this gap, largely eliminating from his work a significant body of rabbinic material written in Hebrew. This is not a minor omission from *Border Lines*, as *dibbur* is used of a hypostatic Word in a number of midrashim attributed to rabbis of the second through fifth centuries C.E. These midrashim were then included by the author-editors of midrash collections assembled from at least the fifth through ninth centuries, indicating that some of the sages of those later centuries retained the idea of a hypostatic Word serving as a mediator between God and Israel. In my view, the

1 Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judeo-Christianity*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004, pp. 89-127.

2 Hypostatic: independent, divine, and even personal.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 128-147

inclusion of these texts would likely have modified Boyarin's claims that *logos* theology was completely suppressed in the formation of rabbinic Judaism.

In the body of this paper, we reviewed several portions of Shir Hashirim Rabbah's commentary on Song of Songs 1:2a, "May he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth." Our goal was to learn to read midrash on its own terms and point the way for a deeper Messianic Jewish engagement with the trans-generational Jewish conversation about Scripture. In this section, I will introduce four brief midrashim, all but one taken from that same extended passage. These midrashim deal with the issue of mediation between God and Israel in ways that in ways that call Boyarin's analysis into question.

The issue of mediation arises theologically from the tension between the transcendence and immanence of God in the context of longing for the nearness and words of God. This tension is evident throughout Jewish texts, beginning with the Bible (especially in the Psalms) and extending through the rabbinic era.⁴ In Shir Hashirim Rabbah, texts concerning mediation focus on *Matan Torah* [מתן תורה], the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai. Since the giving of the Torah is such a crucial point in Israel's history and identity, the issue of mediation in that event is of utmost importance.

AN ANGEL AS MEDIATOR

Shir Hashirim Rabbah on Song of Songs 1:2

דבר אחר ישקני מנשיקות פיהו אמר רבי יוחנן מלאך היה מוציא הדיבור מלפני הקב"ה, על כל דיבור ודיבור ומחזירו על כל אחד ואחד מישראל, ואומר לו מקבל אתה עליך את הדיבור הזה כך וכך דינין. . . והיה אומר לו ישראל הן וחוזר ואומר לו מקבל את אלהותו של הקב"ה והוא אומר לו הן והן מיד היה נושקו על פיו הדא הוא דכתיב (דברים ד') אתה הראת לדעת על ידי שליח

Another interpretation of *May he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth*—

R. Yohanan said, 'An angel would bring out the Word (*Dibbur*) from before the Holy One, blessed be He—each and every word [of the Ten Commandments]. And he went in turn to each and every Israelite. And the angel says to him, "Do you reive upon yourself this Word, such and such judgments as there are in it? . . . And the Israelite would say to him, "Yes," and [the angel] would respond and say to him, "Do you reive the divinity [אלהותו] of the Holy One, blessed be He?" And [the Israelite] would say to him, "Yes

4 Israel Efros, *Ancient Jewish Philosophy*, New York: Bloch Publishing, 1976, pp. 49-62. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Heavenly Torah: As Refracted through the Generations*. Edited and Translated with Commentary by Gordon Tucker with Leonard Levin. Hebrew: 1962. New York: Continuum, 2005, pp. 259-78

and yes.” Immediately [the angel] would kiss him on his mouth, as it is written, *You have been shown that you might know* (Deut. 4.25) by [an angelic] emissary.

I will focus on a few key elements of this midrash. I want to keep in mind that midrash is theologically driven and expresses itself in the form of a story or narrative with strong visual elements. Working in reverse, narrative and visual elements are keys to the theology being expressed. Three images in this midrash are (1) the angel brings out the Word from before the Holy One; (2) the angel speaks directly to each and every Israelite; (3) the angel kisses each Israelite.

In this midrash, the angel serves as an intermediary between the Holy One and Israel. The Word, which consists of “each and every word,” is entirely passive and without personality. Though there are hundreds of examples in rabbinic texts of the Word speaking, here the Word is completely silent.

Second, even though the Torah is given to the people as a community, the opportunity to receive Torah is given to every Israelite.

Third, the angel’s kiss is a sign of approval that each Israelite acknowledges the divinity of the Holy One. These are the kisses of “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth.”

This midrash is attributed to Rabbi Yohanan, a sage of the third century CE. R. Yohanan most likely had discussions with Christian clerics who lived in the Galilee region. These contacts would likely have made him aware of the details of Christian claims for Yeshua as the Word, a divine mediator. Whether or not this midrash was actually authored by R. Yohanan, it is clearly designed to minimize the role of the Word, reducing it to an inert message that has to be carried around and delivered by an angel. In addition, the angel’s requirement that each Israelite affirm the divinity of the Holy One draws a clear distinction between the Holy One on the one hand and both the angel and the Word on the other.

In John 1:1ff. the Word appears from the beginning *with* God and *as* God, is the agent of creation, and becomes flesh, dwelling among his fellow Jews. R. Yohanan’s midrash portrays the Word in a way that minimizes any similarities to that Word. At most, R. Yohanan’s Word, being the Word or Utterance of God, shares in some aspect of divinity. This involves no additional power or personality.

However, the opinion of a single rabbi is not conclusive. A group of rabbis is about to disagree.

THE WORD AS MEDIATOR

Shir Hashirim Rabbah on Song of Songs 1:2

ורבנין אמרין הדיבור עצמו היה מחזר על כל אחד ואחד מישראל ואומר לו מקבלני את עליך כך וכך מצות יש בי כך וכך דינין יש בי . . . והוא אומר הן והן מיד הדיבור נושקו על פיו . . . ולמדו התורה הדא הוא דכתיב (דברים ד') פן תשכח את הדברים אשר ראו עיניך דברים שראו עיניך איך היה הדבור מדבר עמך.

But the rabbis say, ‘The Word itself would go in turn to each and every Israelite and say to him, “Do you receive me upon yourself? Such and such commandments as there are in me? Such and such judgments as there are in me? . . . And [the Israelite] would say, “Yes and yes.” Immediately the Word would kiss him on his mouth . . .and teach him Torah, as it is written, *Lest you forget the words which your eyes have seen* (Deut. 4.9). *Words which your eyes have seen* [refers to] how the Word would speak with you.

R. Yohanah’s midrash has offered a description of how the commandments were brought from “before God” to Israel. The rabbis’ midrash works from the same framework and even elements of the same script. However, the message is radically altered because the Word plays the lead role in place of the angel in R. Yohanah’s midrash. Here, (1) the Word speaks directly to each and every Israelite; (2) the Word asks each Israelite to “receive me”—*me*, the Word, the one who brings you Torah; (3) the Word kisses each Israelite after they agree to receive him—the divinity of the Holy One is not an issue; “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth” refers to the Word’s kisses of approval for receiving the Word; (4) the Word follows up by teaching Torah to each Israelite; (5) The Word is visible, according to the Scripture citation and explanation at the end of the midrash (*Words which your eyes have seen* [refers to] how the Word would speak with you.). In this midrash, the Word is clearly personal, able to speak and relate to human beings on several levels—speaking, requesting, kissing, and teaching.

Marc Hirshman points out the distinction between this midrash and the preceding one: “Both approaches stress that the revelation at Sinai was a process of conscious acceptance by ‘each one of the Israelites’ but differ on the measure of hypostasis, or substance, ascribed to ‘the utterance.’

The rabbis believed that the utterance could reveal itself to the people of Israel, while R. Yohanan believed that an angel brought the word of God to the people and explained it.”⁵

Hirshman cautiously credits the Word with a measure of hypostasis. Michael Fishbane is bolder in his assertion that “There can be no doubt that they [the accounts of R. Yohanan and the rabbis] are the product of an emergent theology of the divine logos. . . . All three formulations [of the circling and inscribing] are based on a mythic reading of Psalm 29.7 in terms of a hypostatic Word – a divine logos.”⁶ It is interesting that Fishbane, a master of Jewish texts, views this midrash as part of an “emergent theology.” He knows full well that theologies of mediation developed more fully after the rabbinic period, especially in Jewish mysticism.

The most distinctive feature of this midrash is the Word’s position vis-à-vis Torah: The Word explains and offers Torah to each Israelite and then, after kissing those who receive *him*, teaches them Torah. The visible Word here is clearly not equivalent to Torah, but is an intermediary from God who brings, explains, and teaches Torah to Israel. Although this Word does not become flesh, the measure of hypostasis is significant.

THE WORD AND GOD

The characteristics of the Word are developed in two additional midrashim. The first addresses the nature of the Word’s connection with the Holy One.

Shir Hashirim Rabbah on Song of Songs 1:2

**אמר רבי ברכיה שנה לי רבי חלבו הדיבור עצמו היה נחקק מאליו וכשהוא נחקק
הולך קולו מסוף העולם ועד סופו שנאמר קול ה' חוצב להבות אש אמרתי לרבי חלבו
. . . ומהו דין דכתיב לוחות אבן כתובים באצבע אלהים, אמר לי כתלמיד שהוא כותב
ורבו מיישב על ידו.**

R. Berakhiah said, ‘R. Helbo taught me [on Tannaite authority,] that the Word was inscribed on its own, and when it was inscribed, the sound went out from one end of the world to another. *The voice of Hashem carves a blaze of fire* (Ps. 29.7). I said to R. Helbo . . . [Then] what is the meaning of *tablets of stone written with the finger of God* (Exod. 31:18)?’ He said to me, ‘Like a disciple who writes and his master guides his hand.’”

5 Marc Hirschman, *A Rivalry of Genius: Jewish and Christian Biblical Interpretation*. Stony Brook, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996. P.91

6 Michael Fishbane, "Anthological Midrash and Cultural Paidea: The Case of Songs Rabba 1.2" in Peter Ochs and Nancy Levene, Eds. *Textual Reasonings: Jewish Philosophy and Text Study at the End of the Twentieth Century*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002, pp. 32–51. See especially pp. 35–37.

This midrash addresses the inscription of the Ten Words on the stone tablets. R. Helbo claims that the Word, “the voice of Hashem,” acted on its own, inscribing itself [!] dramatically on the stone tablets. I do not see any basis in Shir Hashirim Rabbah or elsewhere in rabbinic literature to interpret this as an action complexly independent of God. R. Helbo is simply asserting the volitional identity of the Word—it is not merely a passive reflection of the divine will.

R. Berakhiah counters that R. Helbo’s notion violates the plain sense of Exodus 31:18. The picture painted by R. Helbo in eight Hebrew words is highly expressive: The rav (teacher) places his hand on the disciple’s hand to guide him. The disciple, who has a mind and will of his own, yields to the mind and will of his rav. Figuratively, the Word inscribed the Torah “on its own,” but under the guiding hand of God. In this way, it can be said that God and the Word worked entirely in concert; they *both* inscribed the Ten Words on the tablets. This midrash affirms both the volitional individuality of the Word on the one hand and the utter conformity of the Word to the will of God on the other.⁷

THE WORD SPEAKS TO GOD

Our final midrash is taken from another portion of Shir Hashirim Rabbah. It is based on Song of Songs 5:16.

**כחו ממתקים, ר' עזריה ורבי אחא בשם ר' יוחנן אמרו בשעה ששמעו ישראל
בסיני אנכי פרחו נשמתן הה"ד (דברים ה') אם יוספים אנחנו לשמוע הה"ד
נפשי יצאה בדברו,**

**חזר הדיבור לפני הקב"ה ואמר רבונו של עולם אתה חי וקיים ותורתך חיה
וקיימת ושלחתני אצל מתים כולם מתים. באותה שעה חזר הקב"ה והמתיק
להם את הדבור הה"ד (תהלים כ"ט) קול ה' קול בכח קול ה' בהדר,**

His mouth is most sweet. R. Azariah and R. Aha, in the name of R. Yohanan, said, “At the moment Israel heard, on Sinai, *I [am Hashem your God],*” their spirit flew away, as it is written, *If we hear the voice any more [we shall die],* [Deut. 5:25] as is said, *My soul departed when he spoke* [Songs 5:6].

The Word returned before the Holy One, blessed be He, and said, “Master of the World, you are living and eternal and your Torah is living and eternal. But you [have] sent me to [among] the dead -- all of them are dead.” And at that time the Holy One,

⁷ Like the familiar parables in the Brit Hadashah, this midrash is limited in focus. It does not pretend to fully describe either the Word or the Word’s relationship with the Holy One.

blessed be He, responded and made the Word more palatable⁸ to them, as it is written, “The voice of Hashem is powerful; the voice of Hashem is majestic” [Ps. 29:4].

Here the Holy One speaks the first of the Ten Words, “I am Hashem your God,” which is a revelatory word tied to a command (the second Word, “You shall have no other gods before me”). Israel was terrified and that fear led to a huge mistake—backing off from God, they asked Moses to serve as a mediator to place a buffer between them and God.

The wording of this midrash—Israel hears the voice of Hashem, followed by the Word returning to the Holy One—seems to identify the voice as the Word. Apparently, the Word spoke to Israel, their spirit flew away, and they appeared lifeless. The Word returned to the Holy One with a report. There ensues a verbal exchange between the Holy One and the hypostatic Word. The Word feels and expresses anguish at the deadness of the people as compared with the living God and the living Torah. This emotion adds to the Word’s persona. The Holy one responds by making the Word more palatable to Israel, presumably by limiting its power and majesty.

For the first time in these midrashim, we see the Word speaking *to*, and not *only in behalf of*, God. This indicates a level of individuality and even autonomy that we have not seen before. In discussing intermediaries between God and Israel in the later midrash collections, Israel Efras observes that “the Word (*dibbur*) returned before the Holy One, blessed be He, and said, ‘O Lord of the Universe’ (*Shir haShirim Rabbah* 5:16), which shows that it is a separate being . . .”⁹ Efras is a philosopher and likely uses “separate being” in a very precise sense. In other words, the Word is *really* “separate” and really “a being.” This represents a stretching of the limits of rabbinic imagination concerning the Word as a divine mediator.

In these midrashic texts, individual words of God have a temporal existence, while “the Word” is a hypostatic entity that seems to proceed from God on a non-temporal basis. Insofar as the Word exists and has substance, it draws its being from God. This connection, expressed in narrative rather than philosophical language, resembles the Nicene formulation of the relationship between Father and Son.¹⁰

8 In Biblical and Rabbinic Hebrew the root **מתק** (*mataq*) word does not necessarily signify a sweetening (as in Modern Hebrew) but “making palatable”; see Exod. 15:25, where the waters of Marah were “sweetened.”

9 Israel Efras, *Ancient Jewish Philosophy*, p. 69.

10 See Kinzer, “Finding Our Way Through Nicaea,” pp. 17-19.

The midrashim of the rabbis, R. Berakhiah, and R. Azariah and R. Aha weave the hypostatic Word as mediator into the Bible's narration of events surrounding the giving of Torah on Mt. Sinai. The inclusion of a single midrash in Shir Hashirim Rabbah would not necessarily represent the consensus view of the tradition (or even of Shir Hashirim Rabbah). However, three of the four express a coherent perspective that is undoubtedly the dominant thinking of Shir Hashirim Rabbah on the subject. This also suggests that the same perspective was held by the persons and community responsible for the collection as a whole. Whatever their ultimate status in the larger tradition, this documentary and local status lends the three midrashim a level of legitimacy that individual midrashim do not possess.



The rise of Messianic Judaism and the Messianic Jewish return to Torah after so many centuries is an indicator that the border lines drawn so long ago from the Christian side will not hold. At the same time, various modes of mediation have persisted in Judaism—whether of a mediating hypostatic Word such as we have seen in Shir Hashirim Rabbah, the mediatorial role of the Shekhinah, the varieties of mediation involved in kabbalistic Judaism,¹¹ or the mediatorial role of the *tzadik* (alive or deceased) in some Chassidic groups.¹² All these indicate that mediation is a part of the fabric of Judaism. These multiple modes of mediation are signs both of a deep human need for intimacy with God and of Yeshua at work within Israel. The border lines drawn from the Jewish side are not quite as thick and high as they appear.

The more we learn about the varieties of mediation in Judaism, the more our identity as Messianic Jews is enhanced. We need to know that our absolute, core beliefs are not foreign to Jewish life, thought, and history. If they were, I believe that we would have to admit it to ourselves and no longer claim to be a Judaism. Hopefully, this paper helps support a broader

11 Numerous hypostatic realities (sefirot or emanations) are said to mediate between the Divine and human beings, E.g., “For Keter [Crown] is the mediator between the [infinite] Emanator and the [finite] emanated beings, and the lowest level of the Ein Sof is comprised in it.” In other words, the Keter shares in the “lowest level” (whatever that means) of the Divine. <http://www.sichosinenglish.org/cgi-bin/lessons.cgi?date=26092009&d1=1>

12 A rather mild example can be found in the official instructions for prayer at King David's tomb on Mt. Zion: “Prayers to God at a tzadik's grave are beneficial [because of] the tzadik's neshama. The tzadik has more power in Heaven than we, laymen do and therefore, he can elevate our prayers to levels that we can't reach on our own.” <http://www.kingdavidprayers.com/FAQ>

claim that our adherence to Yeshua as mediator falls within existing Jewish models, though it is obviously distinct.

However, we are still told that there is no place for a mediator—or for those who believe in one—within Judaism. This is not just an intellectual argument but an example of an age-old border-drawing mechanism used by communities to eliminate unwanted elements. The parallel phenomenon is the stigmatization of Torah belief and practice (as “legalism”) by the Church. One of the devastating effects of stigmatization is the birthing of a toxic shame within those who are stigmatized. In the case of Messianic Jews, that shame, coupled with fear of rejection, can stifle not only our faith but also our humanity if we voluntarily avoid talking about Yeshua, who is our life. There is “a time to be silent and a time to speak.” No good will come if we speak when it is “a time to be silent.” But I can tell you from experience that if we are silent when it is “a time to speak,” our shame will only deepen. One way to resist that shame is to know on a very deep level that our core beliefs are not “un-Jewish.” Judaism does have a place for a mediator.

Marginalization can also affect our relationship with God. The stigma and shame attach specifically to our bonds with Yeshua, with the potential to destabilize our relationship with God and experience, for example, in prayer. A Jew does not pray only as an individual, or only as part of a minyan, but as part of a people.¹³ While it is healthy to acknowledge the wounds we experience and bring feelings of shame to God in prayer, even then we cannot allow them separate us from the community. In other words, when we come to God even for healing of wounds experienced in the community, we do not come only as an individual, but as a part of that very community.

Our engagement with Jewish texts offers the potential not only to help us to join the Jewish conversation about those texts but also to move into deeper levels of Messianic Jewish identity and experience with God. It is not an easy engagement. It will require individual and communal Messianic Jewish resolve and resources. The rewards, however, will far outweigh the cost.

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¹³ See my paper, “Communal Aspects of the Besorah.” 2004 Hashivenu Forum (Pasadena, CA).