

Genesis Rabbah in Text and Context

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

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Preface

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

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

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

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Abbreviations

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

Introduction: *Genesis Rabbah*, a Great Beginning

Sarit Kattan Gribetz and David M. Grossberg

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁹ Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 244: “The Petihah is occasionally found in halakhic midrash (but always doubtful).”

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

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

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

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

aggadah, yet on the other hand it is not mentioned by name before the geonic period. In contrast, the Mishnah and perhaps even the Tosefta seem to have been considerably stable textual forms already in the classical rabbinic period; and the *Sifra* and *Sifre* (and perhaps the *Mekbilta* as well¹⁴) are cited as known collections already within the Babylonian Talmud. The name of the rabbinic commentary on Genesis, however, is not at all fixed even as late as the redaction of the Babylonian Talmud, and is instead referred to variously in geonic works and manuscripts as *Bereshit of Rabbi Hoshaya* or *Baraita de-Bereshit Rabbah*, among other attested names.¹⁵ Even the significance of “Rabbah” in the title is uncertain. It might have originally referred to Hoshaya himself (in some manuscripts the midrash begins, “Rabbi Hoshaya Rabbah commenced ...”) and was adapted from there as a title for the entire book, or it might have been a reference to the size of the book in comparison to the biblical book of Genesis or to an earlier or shorter (currently unknown) collection of midrash on Genesis.¹⁶ In any case, this modifier was eventually used, in the medieval period, not only for this text but also for several other midrashim, now grouped together in the so-called *Midrash Rabbah*. In the rabbinic period itself, however, it would seem to be anachronistic to speak simply of the existence of a text or book – rather than a constellation of developing traditions and interpretations – named *Genesis Rabbah*.¹⁷

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

¹⁴ The term *mekbilta* in the Talmud has a general meaning of “collection” or “chapter.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thus far, we have discussed *Genesis Rabbah* as “A Great Beginning” from the perspective of its innovative theological content, its place in the rabbinic corpus, and its unique engagement with its cultural context. But this midrash is also an important beginning from the perspective of modern scholarship on rabbinic literature. One of the first and certainly the most ambitious and important of the early critical editions of rabbinic texts is Julius Theodor’s edition of *Genesis Rabbah*, the publication of which started in 1912 and was completed by Chanoch Albeck after Theodor’s death in 1921.²⁶

Theodor and Albeck’s edition answered a challenge laid down more than a century earlier by Leopold Zunz, a pivotal figure both of the modern critical study of Judaism, *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, and in the founding of midrashic studies. Zunz contributed to the *Wissenschaft* enterprise as part of the leadership of the *Verein für Cultur und Wissenschaft der Juden* in Berlin beginning in 1819, and as the editor of the *Zeitschrift für die Wissenschaft des Judenthums* from 1823.²⁷ His contributions to midrashic studies include his 1818 manifesto,²⁸

²⁵ See e.g. Niehoff, “Creatio ex Nibilo Theology in *Genesis Rabbah* in Light of Christian Exegesis,” 60–63.

²⁶ See Michael Sokoloff’s article in this volume.

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

²⁸ “Manifesto,” borrowing the language of Aaron W. Hughes, “‘Medieval’ and the Politics of Nostalgia: Ideology, Scholarship, and the Creation of the Rational Jew,” in *Encountering*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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