

SARAH AND ISCAH: METHOD AND MESSAGE IN MIDRASHIC TRADITION

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ABSTRACT

This article illustrates the variety of considerations that go into modern attempts to reconstruct the origins of midrashic traditions. Focusing on the rabbinic texts which identify Iscah (in Gen 11:29) with the matriarch Sarah, the study examines various considerations which might have motivated the rabbis to invent such an identification, paying particular attention to hermeneutical considerations (i.e., issues arising from the biblical text) and to the homiletical uses that might have been served by this interpretation. It was noted that the Sarah-Iscah equation could be explained satisfactorily according to the literary and ideological conventions of aggadic midrashic exegesis. Nonetheless, an examination of texts from the Second Commonwealth period demonstrates that the Sarah/Iscah equation antedated the literary homiletics of rabbinic aggadah. In light of this early extra-Talmudic material, it appears more likely that our exegetical tradition owes its origins to Pharisaic attempts to find a precedent for their championing of uncle-niece marriages, a burning controversy which found expression in many writings of the period. With the disappearance of non-Pharisaic Jewish sects in the post-Destruction era, the Sarah/Iscah tradition became "just another" aggadic midrashic tradition to be dealt with according to the methods that characterize that genre, and its polemical and sectarian origins were probably forgotten.

At the heart of the midrashic interpretation of Scripture lies a rich and flexible "toolbox" of hermeneutical rules that stand at the disposal of the homilist or exegete as he ventures to expound his text. By applying these rules to the biblical passage which he is expounding, the skillful *darshan* is able to elicit additional possibilities of meaning, which will allow him to construct a *derashah* around a chosen theme.

For the modern reader, attempting to reconstruct as reasonably as is possible the creative process that led to the composition of a midrashic passage, there is no foolproof way of establishing the precise relationship between the hermeneutical technique and the thematic point of the *derashah*. Modern readers often have a tendency to regard the message as primary, and the exegetical

media as a set of mechanical devices that can be invoked to justify any conclusion. Nevertheless, there will be instances where the scriptural text is clearly primary; e.g., where the homilist is responding to a glaring problem in the text.¹ Probably the most successful *derashot* are precisely those in which we are least clear about which of the two poles (text or homiletical point) is primary; where the hermeneutic analysis of the biblical text leads so naturally to the homiletical idea that we remain uncertain about how to describe the type of creative process that is at work.

Concerning any given midrashic passage, we must ask ourselves whether it originated in the context of academic scriptural exegesis (e.g., within the precincts of the yeshivah) or as part of a homiletic sermon delivered in the synagogue. If we opt for the latter possibility, we must attempt to reconstruct the interpretative process: Was the preacher originally inspired by an association, problem, or other feature in the text, which started him upon a chain of reasoning that eventually came to its culmination in the *derashah*? Or did he walk into the synagogue that Sabbath determined to make a particular point and confident that his midrashic ingenuity would allow him to find support for his view in the words of the week's *parashah*, whichever it might be? It is likely that in many instances, the homilist himself, even if he were able to distinguish in principle between the two processes, would so identify himself with the midrashic method that he would be unable to supply us with a clear answer to such questions.

In the following pages I propose to walk step by step through the history and prehistory of a midrashic tradition. Along the road we shall be challenged by a variety of doubts and difficulties, and tempted down some false trails. The end result, however, will be an instructive lesson in the perils and possibilities involved in reading and appreciating midrash.

And thus it says: “[And the name of Nahor’s wife, Milcah, the daughter of Haran], the father of Milcah, and the father of Iscah” (Gen. 11:29) <(for)² it need not have taught “Iscah”.³

¹ Whether in its own right or according to traditional midrashic assumptions.

² Missing in some witnesses, including MS Vatican 32.

³ The precise reading is uncertain. See Horovitz’s critical apparatus to line 17. On the shortcomings of this edition see M. Kahana, “Prolegomena to a New Edition of the Sifre on Numbers” [Hebrew], (Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1982), pp. 277–294.

Rather [it thereby teaches] that everyone gazes [*sakhin*] at her beauty; as it is written, “and the princes of Pharaoh saw her and praised her to Pharaoh” (Gen 12:15).

Sifre Numbers 99⁴

The conclusions of this anonymous passage seem to have been derived through the application of several well-known midrashic hermeneutical premises culled from the standard “toolbox.” In our particular instance, the *darshan* has made use of the following exegetical rules:⁵

1. The “retreat from anonymity”: The aggadah generally feels uncomfortable with biblical figures who are not identified by name, and even more so when Scripture does take the trouble to name them, but then remains silent about who they are and what they have done. In light of the axiomatic midrashic belief in the economy of sacred language, it would be intolerable to simply introduce characters who do not contribute or connect to the main course of the plot.⁶ This difficulty is particularly conspicuous in the rare cases of women who are listed in genealogies; why should an otherwise unknown woman be mentioned when genealogies are normally an exclusively male preserve? A common midrashic solution to such a phenomenon is to identify the obscure name with a better known figure. This is usually done in conjunction with an etymology, as discussed below.⁷

⁴ Ed. H. S. Horovitz (Leipzig, 1917), p. 98. Cf. J. Neusner, *Sifré to Numbers, An American Translation and Explanation* (Atlanta, 1986), 2:117.

⁵ We are, of course, using a broader and more fluid definition of “exegetical rules” than would be conveyed by the traditional *middot she-ha-Torah nidreshet bahen*. While the midrashic rabbis themselves do not classify these methods (even as they do not describe or define the ubiquitous proem structures, etc.), no serious literary study of midrash can ignore their existence.

⁶ Nahmanides to Exod 6:23 (cited by I. Heinemann; see next note): “What reason is there to mention a person if we do not know who he is?”

⁷ For a concise discussion of the phenomenon, citing parallels from classical and folk literatures, see I. Heinemann, *Darkhe ha-Aggadah* (Jerusalem-Tel Aviv, 1974), pp. 28–29 (and 21–22; the phrase “retreat from anonymity” is found there). Heinemann includes the Sarah-Iscah identification among his examples; see also p. 207, n. 30. It appears that a disproportionate number of his examples involve women, and the list could of course be expanded considerably; e.g., Lemech’s daughter Na’amah (Gen 4:22) becomes Noah’s wife (sources cited by L. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* [Philadelphia, 1947], 5:147, n. 45); Vashti in Esther 1 becomes a descendant of Nebuchadnezzar (Ginzberg, *ibid.*, 6:455, n. 21). The redundancy in

2. Names have meanings: The rabbis "saw all names . . . as given by God, and names of individuals as telling about their lives and characters."⁸ In cases where two or more figures have been equated, it is usually presumed that one name is the actual one given by his/her parents, whereas the others are descriptive.

In the current example we might easily retrace the thoughts of our *darshan*, approximately as follows: He first noted that the narrator of Genesis went to the trouble to relate that Abraham's brother Haran had a daughter named Ischah who is never again referred to.⁹ Since Scripture does not normally waste words on minor characters, it follows that there must be some importance to this mention. The significance is not implicit in Ischah's deeds (which are not recorded). Hence we must presume that Ischah is in fact an alternate name for a better known figure. There is in fact only one woman in this heathen generation who is of any interest to us, and that is Abraham's wife Sarah. Ergo, Ischah = Sarah.

At this point there remains only one outstanding difficulty in the exegetical process. Following the normal midrashic premises, we must assume that if an individual is assigned two names, at least one of them is actually a description, not an appellative. Since it is unlikely (though by no means impossible) that Sarah is not the "real" name, we must explain how "Ischah" describes Sarah. This problem can also be solved without too much difficulty by following normal midrashic practice. The root *סכ* or *שכ* which forms the basis of the name Ischah, denotes seeing.¹⁰ What does seeing have to do with Sarah? A quick search through the *darshan*'s mental biblical concordance will easily retrieve an appropriate verse which links Sarah with seeing, albeit using a different Hebrew root. The verse speaks of Pharaoh's princes seeing Sarah and admiring her beauty; hence the name Ischah becomes an elliptical reference to Sarah's great beauty.¹¹

this passage is apparent not only to the midrashic sages; cf. E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*. The Anchor Bible (Garden City, 1964), pp. 78-79.

⁸ Heinemann, *Darkhe ha-Aggadah*, p. 111.

⁹ In contrast to Milcah, who does reappear in Gen 22:20, 23.

¹⁰ While not common in the biblical vocabulary, the root appears frequently in various Aramaic dialects, including the Targum; see the standard talmudic dictionaries.

¹¹ The Yemenite *Midrash ha-Gadol* anthology to Gen 12:15 (ed. M. Margulies [Jerusalem, 1967]) explains: "And they praise her to Pharaoh; this teaches that everyone gazes at her beauty."

Now this is quite satisfactory as far as it goes, though we might still find ourselves wishing that the *darshan* had gone a step further. He has indeed succeeded in responding to the textual challenges, but has stopped short of turning it to homiletic advantage. There is no obvious religious or moral lesson being derived from all this midrashic ingenuity. At best, it serves to enhance the praises of the nation's matriarch, which is in itself an accepted justification for midrashic embellishment,¹² though not a terribly profound one.¹³

The absence of a homiletical point need not in itself be considered a flaw in the interpretation. We have no evidence that the passage was intended as a homily, or that it originated as part of a public discourse. It does, after all, appear in a "halakhic" midrashic collection, and may reflect merely an academic intellectual grappling with the textual problems.

We can nonetheless hypothesize about the role it may have played in conjunction with a larger homiletical unit. For example, we might view it in connection with a passage like bBB 16a:

"[And it came to pass, when he was come near to enter Egypt, that he said unto Sarai his wife]: 'Behold now, I know that thou art a fair woman to look upon'" (Gen 12:11).

Rava expounded: "I made a covenant with mine eyes: how then should I look upon a maid?" (Job 31:1). Dust in the mouth of Job! You [do not look upon] other women. Abraham did not even look upon his own wife! As it is written, "Behold now, I know," [implying] that until now he had not looked upon her.

¹² A *derashah* extolling the praises of Sarah would be appropriate for a lection beginning with Gen 23:1. See J. Mann, *The Bible as Read and Preached in the Old Synagogue* (Cincinnati, 1940), 1:183–184.

¹³ This purpose would appear to be supported by the context of the passage in the *Sifre*, in which it is appended to a comment on the incident of Moses' Ethiopian wife. According to S. Horovitz's commentary (p. 98), the Hebrew *kushit*, 'Ethiopian', is apparently being expounded from the same root 'שׂו', 'see', in order to make the point that "all who saw her would recognize her beauty" (the passage is obscure; cf. the different interpretations in L. Friedman's edition [Vienna, 1864] and in Neusner's translation). Sarah's beauty is frequently extolled in rabbinic literature; see, e.g., the references in L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, 7:417, and especially 5:220, n. 67. It is of course a well-attested feature of the midrashic retelling of the Bible that it tends to glorify the heroes (and vilify the villains) in clear black-and-white strokes; on the exaggeration of moral and other contrasts in the aggadah, see Heinemann, *Darkhe ha-Aggadah*, pp. 44–53.

By exaggerating Sarah's beauty, the homilist, in a *derashah* that was devoted to the theme of personal modesty, might be helping to magnify the modesty and self-control demonstrated by the patriarch in failing to recognize that beauty until this point.¹⁴ Alternatively, the emphasis on Sarah's comeliness might have played a part in an attempt to justify Abraham's apparent dishonesty in misrepresenting his wife as his sister.¹⁵ The fragmentary nature of midrashic literature does not allow us more than speculation on the question.

The view that the name Iscah alludes to Sarah's beauty is not, however, the only interpretation found in rabbinic literature. Another tannaitic tradition, responding to the same textual stimuli and accepting the identification of Sarah with Iscah, explains the significance of the name in a different manner, as evidenced in the following passage:

There were seven prophetesses . . .

Concerning Sarah it is written, "the father of Milcah, and the father of Iscah . . ."

These are the forty-eight prophets and seven prophetesses who prophesied for Israel, and were recorded in the Scriptures . . .

Seder 'Olam Rabbah 21¹⁶

The text is not very helpful in explaining how the quoted verse proves that Sarah was a prophetess. The Babylonian Talmud (bMeg 14a)¹⁷ offers an explanation:

¹⁴ Admittedly, if Abraham did not look upon his wife at all, it would not make much difference how attractive she was, though it is likely that he would eventually have come to notice the reactions that she elicited from other people.

¹⁵ That is to say, the more attractive she was, the greater the danger of her being taken unless they lied about their relationship. A similar treatment of the subject is found in the Qumran *Genesis Apocryphon*, where Abraham's trepidations over Sarah's fate at the hands of the Egyptians (column 19) are followed by a lengthy limb-by-limb celebration of her charms by the Egyptian princes (column 20), resulting in her seizure by Pharaoh.

The suggestion that Sarah was Abraham's niece may also have arisen out of an attempt to soften the problematic wording of Gen 20:12, where the patriarch tells Abimelech, "She is, in truth, my father's daughter, though not my mother's; and she became my wife." See the sources cited in the notes to the Theodor-Albeck edition of *Genesis Rabbah* (Jerusalem, 1965) 52, pp. 551-552; and cf. E. A. Speiser's comments in his *Genesis* to 11:29 (pp. 28-29) and 20:12 (pp. 149-150).

¹⁶ Ed. B. Ratner (New York, 1966), p. 55.

¹⁷ R. Isaac's dictum is also cited in a secondary context in bSanh 69b, as evidence that Iscah is Sarah; cf. yYev 10.14, 11b.

And R. Isaac¹⁸ said: Iscah is the same as Sarah. And why was she called Iscah? Because she saw through the Holy Spirit. And thus it says: “In all that Sarah says unto thee, hearken unto her voice” (Gen 21:12).

Another explanation (דבר אחר):¹⁹ “Iscah” means that everybody gazes at her beauty . . .

While we cannot take it for granted that R. Isaac’s explanation conveys the original intention of the *Seder ‘Olam* passage, it would be difficult to construct a more persuasive interpretation.²⁰ This explanation also begins with the premises that the name Iscah is a description of Sarah, and that the description has to do with seeing. The seeing here, however, refers not to the matriarch’s beauty but to her prophetic visions. This midrash is not quite as satisfying as the *Sifre*’s as regards its technical use of hermeneutic methods. It is unable to cite a convincing proof-text other than the name Iscah itself which speaks of Sarah “seeing” prophetically.²¹ The evidence from Gen 21:12 (which may or may not have been adduced by R. Isaac himself) may be an acceptable enough proof (by midrashic standards) that Sarah had foreseen, where Abraham had not, that Isaac’s line would be more important than Ishmael’s; however, it lacks the formal tie-in with seeing that we found in the *Sifre*’s interpretation.

As to the homiletical point of it all, if one is to be sought, we are again obliged to indulge in speculation. In the context of bMeg, for example, the passage is associated with a statement by R. Abba bar Kahana about how the exhortations of forty-eight prophets and seven prophetesses were not sufficient to inspire the Israelites to repent. Another context is suggested by the opening proem to

¹⁸ I.e., R. Isaac Nappaḥa, the third-generation Palestinian amora; see Ch. Albeck, *Mavo² la-Talmudim* (Tel-Aviv, 1969), pp. 252–253.

¹⁹ MS Göttingen reverses the order of the two explanations.

²⁰ Though it should be noted that *Seder ‘Olam*’s understanding of what is involved in prophecy is not necessarily the same as the Talmud’s. In the cases of Miriam, Hannah, and others on the list of prophetesses, *Seder ‘Olam* seems satisfied to cite proof-texts that indicate their inspired utterances, whereas BT insists on proving that they were capable of foretelling the future. I hope to deal with this phenomenon in greater detail in another context.

²¹ Though this shortcoming could easily have been remedied by means of the insertion of an additional “transitional” proof-text, of the type “And ‘seeing’ refers to none other than prophecy, as it is written . . . ,” to be completed with any of the dozens of verses that speak of prophetic visions.

Exodus Rabbah,²² where Gen 21:12 is cited in the context of a sermon extolling the importance of properly disciplining one's children, a discourse which alludes to Sarah's perceptive disowning of Ishmael, and the observation that "You can learn from this that Abraham was inferior to Sarah as regards prophetic power." Alternatively, the passage might have been incorporated into a homily for the first day of Rosh ha-Shanah, based on the designated reading of Gen 21.²³

To summarize the argument thus far, we have been able to trace with varying degrees of certainty how the rabbinic *darshanim*, following accepted hermeneutical premises, were able to identify the otherwise unimportant figure of Iscah as the matriarch Sarah, and to explain why the name Iscah is in fact an appropriate epithet for her. On the assumption that this exegesis was used for a homiletical purpose, I suggested several possible ways in which the identification may have been applied to the development of a thematic *derashah*.

Underlying all the above comments is the assumption that the rabbis involved were making use of the sophisticated methods of aggadic exegesis that were perfected by the Jewish sages of the talmudic period.

This entire structure is called into question when we take note of a source that predates those we have been citing so far,²⁴ namely the *Jewish Antiquities*²⁵ of Josephus Flavius. In his paraphrase of Gen 11, Josephus reports that Milcah and Sarai were the daughters of Haran, and that both were married to their uncles.

Josephus does not offer any justification for this departure from the simple sense of the biblical text. The general character of *Antiquities* is by no means homiletical, and (apart from some

²² *Midrash Shemot Rabbah, Chapters I–XIV*, ed. A. Shinan (Tel-Aviv, 1984), pp. 35–36.

²³ bMeg 31a, bRH 10b–11a; *Pesiqta Rabbati* 40.

²⁴ On Josephus and rabbinic midrash see the excellent review of literature by L. Feldman, "A Selective Critical Bibliography of Josephus" in L. Feldman and G. Hata, eds., *Josephus, the Bible, and History* (Detroit, 1989), pp. 330–348, and especially pp. 355–366, 400–429. Though we possess impressive examples of the homiletical sophistication of Josephus' contemporaries at Yavneh, we must keep in mind that at this point in history we have yet to experience the flowering of midrashic activity associated with R. Akiva and R. Ishmael, let alone the classical midrashic compilations of the third to fifth centuries.

²⁵ 1.151.

conventional moralizing) he tends to adhere very closely to the plain meaning of the verses. At any rate, his presentation here shows no indication that he is bothered by the kinds of hermeneutical difficulties that underlay the rabbinic comments, as explained above.

It is of course conceivable that Josephus had preserved the conclusions of a contemporary “rabbinic” discourse that he had heard in the synagogue, one that was basically identical with one of the reconstructions I have proposed. We should note, however, that his version of the tradition places the emphasis neither on Sarah’s beauty nor on her prophetic gifts. What is important for Josephus is the family relationship between Abraham and his wife: they are uncle and niece as well as husband and wife.

This is not the only place in *Antiquities* where Josephus disregards the plain sense of a biblical text in order to marry off an uncle and niece. We encounter a similar phenomenon in his treatment of the Esther story in *Ant* 11.6, where he relates that Esther was raised by her uncle Mordecai, contrary to the apparent meaning of the Hebrew, which states that Esther was Mordecai’s uncle’s daughter, i.e., Mordecai’s cousin. While Josephus does not say explicitly that Mordecai married Esther,²⁶ he is likely to have been familiar with the Septuagint reading of Esth 2:7, according to which Mordecai took Esther “for his wife” instead of (as the Masoretic reading has it) “for his daughter.”²⁷

The phenomenon of niece-marriage is a well-known issue in ancient Judaism.²⁸ From the talmudic sources it is clear that it was

²⁶ Something of the sort seems however to be implied in the concluding words of *Ant.* 11.295, to the effect that after the Jewish victory Mordecai went on to “enjoy life together” with the Queen (ἀπολαύων ἄμα καὶ τῆς κοινωρίας τοῦ βίου τῆ βασιλοισσῆ). It would appear that in adding this detail that is not found in the biblical text, Josephus is intentionally presenting his own midrashic softening of the problematic tradition that would have Esther married simultaneously to two husbands. It allows for the possibility that the Septuagint version of Esth 2:7 (see immediately below) refers to something less than actual marriage.

²⁷ See C. Moore’s analysis in his commentary on *Esther* (Anchor Bible; Garden City, 1971) pp. 20–21. He notes Paul Haupt’s hypothesis that the translations might be based on a variation between לבת and לביית in the Hebrew *Vorlage*, a possibility which is treated midrashically (without actual emendation) in bMeg 13a. On this passage see also M. A. Friedman, “^cIyyunim be-Midrasho shel R. Me^oir,” *Te^oudah* 4 (1986): 79–92.

²⁸ A concise but thorough bibliography on the topic may be found in M. A. Friedman, *Jewish Marriage in Palestine: A Cairo Genizah Study* (Tel-Aviv and

a fundamental institution of rabbinic law that was presupposed in several areas of the halakhah.²⁹ While these sources do not single out niece-marriage as a source of sectarian controversy, discoveries over the last century have supplied ample proof that the Pharisees were subjected to constant attack for their consistent espousal of such marriages.³⁰

The Pharisees' position on this question was probably another instance of their tendency to bestow religious sanction upon widespread popular practices. In this case, the custom probably arose out of the attitude that a man would feel a particular protectiveness for the daughter of his sibling.³¹ In sanctioning these marriages, the Pharisees were committing themselves to an anomalous interpretation of the incest prohibitions in Lev 18. In blatant contrast to their normal tendency to expand the list of forbidden relation-

New York, 1980), 1:47-48, n. 112. The only significant work missing from Friedman's list is S. Krauss, "Die Ehe zwischen Onkel und Nichte," in D. Philipson, D. Neumark, J. Morgenstern, eds., *Studies in Jewish Literature Issued in Honor of Prof. Kaufmann Kohler* (Berlin, 1913), pp. 165-175. This pioneering article serves as the principal basis for the chapter in L. Epstein, *Marriage Laws in the Bible and Talmud* (Cambridge, MA, 1942), pp. 250-254.

²⁹ E.g., several passages in the tractate Yevamot in the Mishnah, Tosefta, and the Talmuds revolve around the complications created when a man finds himself subject to a levirate marriage with his own daughter.

³⁰ Much of the scholarly literature on the subject is slanted by the authors' determination to find close resemblances between the "Zadokite Work" and the pharisaic-rabbinic halakhah. This is true of Ch. Rabin, ed., *The Zadokite Fragments* (Oxford, 1958); idem., *Qumran Studies* (Oxford, 1957), pp. 91-92; L. M. Epstein, *Marriage Laws*, pp. 250-254. L. Ginzberg (*An Unknown Jewish Sect* [New York, 1976]; see Index, s.v. "Marriage with Niece") finds this law particularly troublesome to his thesis that the document is of proto-pharisaic provenance. In the end he vacillates between the possibilities that the document represents an ancient halakhic tradition preserved by a conservative stream within the pharisaic movement; or that the passage in question is an interpolation and not a part of the original document. M. A. Friedman, *Jewish Marriage in Palestine*, 1:47-48, n. 112, also accepts the premise that the prohibition of niece-marriage was part of ancient halakhah.

³¹ This is reflected in later halakhic sources, where concern is expressed that the husband in such a marriage might be overly ready to cover up for his wife's marital infidelities; see yGiṭ 4.3, 4c; bGiṭ 17a; bYev 31b, 62b; bSanh 76b, etc. Cf. L. Ginzberg, *An Unknown Jewish Sect*, p. 23, n. 55; E. S. Rosenthal, "Rav Ben-ʿAḥi R. Ḥiyyah Gam Ben-ʿAḥoto?," *Sefer Hanokh Yalon* (Jerusalem, 1963), p. 295.

ships beyond those mentioned explicitly by Scripture,³² here they were artificially reading the verses in the narrowest possible sense, an inconsistency which was readily pointed out by their opponents, who could not see how one could reasonably distinguish between the Torah's prohibition of marrying an aunt (Lev 18:13) and the Pharisaic encouragement of marrying one's niece.³³

The combined testimonies of this broad spectrum of Second Temple writings³⁴ coalesce to offer us a clear idea of how crucial it was for the Pharisees and the rabbinic sages to find scriptural support for niece-marriage. The legal restrictions of Lev 18 offered little room for suitable midrashic manipulation; the rabbis had their work cut out for them to show how these restrictions did not constitute an irrefutable argument *against* their view. If positive support was to be cited, it was more likely to be found in the narrative sections of the Bible, by unearthing historical precedents

³² As exemplified in the halakhic category of *sheniyot* (secondary, i.e., rabbinically ordained, degrees of consanguinity); see mYev 2.4, 9.3, etc. This is also a venerable pharisaic institution whose details and implications are argued by the Houses of Shammai and Hillel.

³³ Thus in the *Damascus Document* (the *Zadokite Work*) 5.7-11:

And they marry each man the daughter of his brother and the daughter of his sister, though Moses said: "Thou shalt not approach to thy mother's sister; she is thy mother's kin" (Lev 18:13), and the laws of incest are written with reference to males and apply equally to women; hence, if the brother's daughter uncover the nakedness of her father's brother, she is [also his] kin.

The *Temple Scroll* (column 66) also includes this prohibition, incorporated without an explanation into the incest prohibitions of Lev 18. Y. Yadin (in the English version of his edition of the *Temple Scroll* [Jerusalem, 1983], 1:371-372) observes that "the text in the *Damascus Document* is identical to that of the scroll and may be founded upon it." The truth is, of course, just the opposite. If the prohibition against niece-marriage were an explicit part of the *Damascus Document's* scripture, there would have been no need to draw a lengthy analogy from the prohibition of the mother's sister. Cf. B. Z. Wacholder, *The Dawn of Qumran: The Sectarian Torah and the Teacher of Righteousness* (Cincinnati, 1983), p. 126: "The citation from Moses . . . makes it evident that the reference is to the canonical Torah which is accepted by the opponents of the sectaries." See Ginzberg, *An Unknown Jewish Sect*, p. 195.

³⁴ Some other works of the period have been cited as explicit or veiled allusions to the issue at hand, including the *Apocalypse of Baruch* (see the explicit quote in Ginzberg, *An Unknown Jewish Sect*, p. 23); *Jubilees* (ibid., p. 142); and *Testament of Levy* (ibid., p. 158).

for the marriages between uncle and niece. The stories of Sarah and Esther were found to be amenable to such interpretation.

In the light of these facts, it seems far more likely that the identification of Sarah and Iscah did not originate in the application of midrashic hermeneutic technique to the biblical text, but rather out of a polemical determination to find pentateuchal support for the practice of niece-marriage.³⁵ Viewed from this new perspective, the function of the midrashic hermeneutics becomes problematic. When the Sarah/Iscah identification was first proposed, was its proposer already sensitive to the sorts of etymological explanations that we encountered in the rabbinic sources? Was our rule of the "retreat from anonymity" already at this point in time an accepted premise of biblical exegesis?³⁶ Unfortunately our knowledge of the state of aggadic midrash at this early period does not allow us to reconstruct these important details with any certainty.

With the end of the Second Commonwealth and the ascendancy of Pharisaism to the status of the unchallenged religious leadership of Palestinian Jewry, the original circumstances that had given rise to the Sarah/Iscah identification appear to have been forgotten, and none of the rabbinic passages that cite the tradition link it to the issue of niece-marriage. Removed from the arena of sectarian polemics,³⁷ the tradition becomes just another of the many details added in the midrashic retelling of the Bible, to be dealt with according to the normal rules governing aggadic exegesis: names

³⁵ To the best of my knowledge the only scholar to suggest the possibility of such a connection was L. Ginzberg, *Die Haggadah bei den Kirchenvätern* (Amsterdam, 1899), 1:98–100; *An Unknown Jewish Sect*, p. 342, n. 7. I am not aware of any discussion of the Mordecai/Esther traditions from this perspective.

The fact that the polemical origins of the tradition are not mentioned explicitly anywhere in the rabbinic sources need not trouble us, since this seems to be the rule rather than the exception in midrashic passages to which modern scholarship has ascribed polemical connotations. In this specific instance, it is likely that the polemical considerations were forgotten by the time the texts were redacted.

³⁶ Even in the later talmudic texts, when this rule was obviously being employed with greater frequency, it was used tacitly, as it was in the texts that we have been studying. It does not appear as a distinct hermeneutical mode in the various lists of such modes.

³⁷ While several groups continued to reject niece-marriages, these groups had by now been defined as lying outside the bounds of the Jewish fold which the rabbis felt they needed to address.

and redundancies must be explained, and suitable moral or religious lessons should be derived from this exegesis.

In attempting to trace the history of the traditions that identify Sarah as Iscah, we have been able to fill in the different stages with varying degrees of certainty. When discussing the well-documented sectarian controversies over the legality of niece-marriage we felt ourselves to be on a sure footing. When the investigation turned to broader literary phenomena, such as the possible homiletical use to which exegetical texts may have been put, the speculative possibilities were too numerous for scholarly comfort. While such a situation will seem daunting to our scientific sensibilities, it should not lead us to despair of further endeavors in the critical analysis of midrashic traditions. Ignorance, when it is founded upon a clear perception of the parameters of possible knowledge and an appreciation of which possibilities are more or less reasonable, can be a valuable form of knowledge. Most of the doubts that were encountered in the present study were of this sort: we may not know what was the truth, but we have emerged with a much more accurate understanding of what solutions are possible for specific problems. In humanistic studies this is often the most that can be hoped for.

It has in fact been one of the main purposes of this study to demonstrate how valuable such literary considerations can be in reconstructing the original meanings and purposes of midrashic texts. The authors and redactors of this literature operated within a carefully defined set of assumptions and literary conventions that dictated their reading of the biblical text and their use of exegesis in the construction of *derashot*. To the extent that we can step into their shoes, we shall stand a reasonable chance of appreciating their successes or failures as literary craftsmen, and the impact their words would have had on their contemporary audiences.