

## *“The Same from Beginning to End” On the Development of a Midrashic Homily*

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In his important article “*Tannā Hēkhā Qā’ei*,”<sup>1</sup> Professor S. Lieberman demonstrated by means of some enlightening examples how important it is to try to reconstruct the occasions on which midrashic passages originated, if we wish to appreciate these passages and to understand them as they were understood by their original audiences. The task is rendered more difficult by the fact that such sources underwent reinterpretation at the hands of different homelists and scholars as they were utilized for various literary and ideological ends in public discourses<sup>2</sup>. In the following pages we shall attempt to unravel the tangled history of one such difficult midrash, tracing it backwards in an “archaeological” search, through its medieval textual manifestations, back to its various strata in the talmudic era; all the while we shall be seeking to understand the original meaning of the passage, how and why it was altered by subsequent homelists and redactors, and how a knowledge of the occasion on which a discourse was delivered helps cast light on the author’s intentions.

We read in *Genesis Rabbah* 30:8 (ed. Theodor-Albeck [T-A] pp. 273ff):

“[Noah] was [a righteous man . . .]” (*Gen.* 6:9):

Said R. Yoḥanan: Everyone of whom Scripture says “was” was the same from beginning to end.

They object to him: Is it not written (*Ezek.* 33:24): “Abraham was one man” — which would imply: He was the same from beginning to end!

He said to them: This is no contradiction — R. Yoḥanan and R. Ḥanina both say: At the age of forty-eight years Abraham acknowledged his Creator. [And R. Levi in the name of R. Simeon b. Laqish says: At the age of three years Abraham acknowledged his Creator, as it is written (*Gen.* 26:5): “Inasmuch (‘QB) as Abraham obeyed me”.]<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *M. Schorr Memorial Volume*, New York 1945.

<sup>2</sup> The study of the transformations undergone by *agadot* in the course of their oral retelling has proven to be one of the more productive approaches to the subject. One of the best collections of such studies is to be found in: J. Heinemann, *Aggadah and its Development*, Jerusalem 1974 [Heb.].

<sup>3</sup> This addition is found in several witnesses; see the variant readings and parallels listed by Theodor-Albeck (T-A). ‘QB in *gematria* = 172, subtracted from 175 (Abraham’s total years), leaves three years.

And how does he justify the “was”? — Ordained to guide the entire world in repentance.

“Now that the man (Adam) was . . . (*Gen. 3:22*)” — Ordained for death.

[“The serpent was . . . (*Gen. 3:1*)” — ordained for punishment.<sup>4</sup>

“Cain was . . . (*Gen. 4:2*)” — ordained for exile.

“Job was . . . (*Job 1:1*)” — ordained] for suffering.

“Noah was . . .” — ordained for a miracle. .

“Moses was . . . (*Ex. 3:1*)” — ordained as a redeemer.

“Mordecai was . . . (*Est. 2:5*)” — ordained for redemption.

The passage presents a number of difficulties, among them the following:

A. The order of the Biblical figures cited as objections does not conform to their chronological order; why does Job appear between Cain and Noah? Among all the various opinions concerning Job’s dates, none of the Rabbinic views places him earlier than Abraham.<sup>5</sup>

B. R. Yoḥanan appears to be seeking support from the view of R. Levi in the name of R. Simeon b. Laqish — in contradiction of his own personal opinion in the matter!<sup>6</sup> Or as Z. W. Einhorn (Maharzu) commented: “If this is so, then it is difficult — how could R. Yoḥanan claim on the one hand that Abraham was righteous from beginning to end, and on the other hand that Abraham acknowledged his Creator at forty-eight?” He therefore emends the text according to *Esther Rabbah*, thereby reversing the names of the disputants, even though this reading is not supported by other parallels.<sup>7</sup>

C. R. Yoḥanan’s statement about “was” is obviously an untenable one as regards the entire Bible! The commentators tried to limit the scope of this statement to verses in which the word-order is unusual (Maharzu), where the “was” seems superfluous, or if an alternative formulation of the verse is conceivable (!) (*Yefe To’ar*).<sup>8</sup> All these attempts at explanation are far-fetched and unsatisfactory.

Let us begin with the first difficulty. We must note that there are variations in the order of the objections in parallel passages and in various MSS of *Gen.R.* In the *Yalqut Shim’oni* (I 48)<sup>9</sup> the order is: Adam (death), Serpent (punishment), Cain (exile), Moses (redeemer), Mordecai (redemption), Job (suffering). That is to say, Noah is entirely absent and Job has been moved to the end. It is true that this change solves the

<sup>4</sup> Heb.: *pur’anuth*, may also mean “evil.”

<sup>5</sup> Cf. L. Ginzburg, *Legends of the Jews*, vol. V p. 381 n. 3, and literature cited there.

<sup>6</sup> Note in particular the comment of ps.-Rashi: “And R. Yoḥanan is of Levi’s opinion”!

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Yalqut Shim’oni* ed. Heiman-Lehrer-Shiloni [HLS] p. 169 n.17; “. . . and this is very forced . . .”.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. the commentary of M. Mirkin *ad. loc.*

<sup>9</sup> Ed. HLS p. 169 and notes.

chronological difficulty; however it ruins the nice symbolic progression; death, punishment, exile, (suffering), miracle, (repentance?),<sup>10</sup> redeemer, redemption. It is certainly aesthetically unsatisfactory to have suffering follow redemption.

In *Yalqut Esther* (1053) Noah is missing, and Job is mentioned between Cain and Moses.

Not only is Noah missing from the *Yalqut* versions, but in *Esther Rabbah*, though he is mentioned, it is said of him that he was “ordained to acknowledge his creator.” Moreover, in *Exodus Rabbah* (to *Ex.* 2:4) the order is: Adam (death), Serpent (punishment), “Of Noah it is written ‘was perfect’ — ordained for redemption”; “Of Joseph it is written: ‘And Joseph was’ (*Ex.* 1:5) — ordained for providing”, Mordecai (salvation), Moses (redemption). Presumably the context in which the passage was cited there — the verse “And Moses tended the sheep etc.” (*Ex.* 3:1) — is responsible for Moses’ being moved to the end. In any case, noteworthy are the addition of Joseph, the different wording of the Noah passage (redemption), and the complete absence of Job from this list.

All the above data point to the fact that Noah’s name is not original to the list; this is proven by his omission in some parallels and by the inconsistent wording of the passage. Probably he was added to the various lists after the whole pericope had been fixed in its place in *Gen. Rabbah*. Such wholesale transfers of midrashim from verse to verse are, of course, typical of the redactional process of *Gen. Rabbah*<sup>11</sup>. The parallels cited were from Midrashim compiled later than *Gen. Rabbah*, and so can be attributed either to the editors of the later collections or to medieval copyists.

And in fact MS Vatican 60 of *Gen. Rabbah* does not include Noah’s name in the list, and Job’s is mentioned only at the end, in the sentence “*R. Levi said: ‘Job was’* — ordained for suffering.” As far as I know, this version of the Job segment is unique and one hesitates to accept it against all the other versions; it is particularly suspect here since *R. Levi* is mentioned in the next sentence in *Gen. Rabbah*. In any case, if we remove Noah from the list, we thereby solve the chronological difficulty and we may insert Job between Cain and Moses. Nevertheless the wanderings and variants indicate that Job too is not original to the list (see *infra*).<sup>12</sup>

Having made allowances for those elements which are not integral to the

<sup>10</sup> If we insert Abraham into his proper chronological place.

<sup>11</sup> This phenomenon has been described at length by Albeck in his Introduction to the T-A edition, pp.1-11, and elsewhere.

<sup>12</sup> In the Genizah fragment published by M. Sokolow, *The Geniza Fragments of Genesis Rabba*, Hebrew University Dissertation 1971 p. 85, the order is like T-A. Noteworthy is the wording: “Moses was — ordained to *redeem*,” instead of “redeemer.”

list, we are left with a sequence of the following biblical figures, and a parallel "eschatological" progression:

Adam	Death
Serpent	Punishment
Cain	Exile
(?Abraham?)	(?Repentance?)
Moses	Redeemer
Mordecai	Redemption.

To this basic outline, which we believe reflects the original form of the homily, were added at various stages the figures of Job, Noah and Joseph in later traditions. Nor is it difficult to surmise what impelled them to make the addition. For in the passage immediately following in *Gen. Rabbah* and its parallels there appear two lists of "Everyone of whom Scripture says 'was' etc.", and about both R. Samuel b. Naḥman observes: "And there are five of them: Noah, Joseph, Moses, Job and Mordecai." Obviously the rule stipulating that everyone of whom Scripture says "was" was the same from beginning to end cannot be considered complete until it has taken into account the "was" verses cited by R. Samuel b. Naḥman. Apparently by virtue of this difficulty the later versions added the other figures to the midrash, though thereby detracting from its original symmetry of chronology and ideas.<sup>13</sup>

Let us now address ourselves to the second of the difficulties with which we began this discussion: How is it possible for R. Yoḥanan to defend his position on the basis of R. Simeon b. Laqish's view which opposes his own? Of course we have good reason to doubt that R. Yoḥanan actually offered the defence attributed to him here. Nonetheless we ought to try to understand the rationale of the redactors who ascribed to him such a defence. It seems that if we view the homily in the light of its conclusion and aim, we find that the basic interpretation of "He was the same from beginning to end" is precisely that he was *ordained* to lead the entire world to repentance." This interpretation underlies the whole homily and it is the one that accords with R. Yoḥanan's view,<sup>14</sup> whereas according to R. Simeon b. Laqish the rule must be explained literally "from the age of three," an explanation which will not lead us to the series of "ordained for" statements which form the theological point of the midrash.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> No reverse process occurred; i.e. Adam, the Serpent, Cain and Abraham could not be added to R. Samuel b. Naḥman's list, since he explicitly stipulated: "They are five."

<sup>14</sup> In MS Vat.60: R. Jonathan; but this is apparently a corruption.

<sup>15</sup> It is not unlikely that R. Yoḥanan originally dealt only with the question of Abraham's acknowledgement of his Creator, and that the statement about "the same from beginning to end" was ascribed to him on the basis on this statement appearing in the pericope; on similar phenomena in midrashic collections, v. Albeck, Introduction to T-A pp. 15ff. Cf. below.

A possible solution to the last of our three difficulties is suggested by a passage in *Tanḥuma Ex. No. 13 (Tanḥ. Buber No.11)*,<sup>16</sup>

“And Moses was tending the flock (*Ex. 1:3*)” — Said R. Levi: Everyone of whom Scripture says “was” was upright from beginning to end. And R. Yoḥanan says: All those of whom Scripture says “was” were providers.

They said to him: Is it not written “And the serpent *was* cunning?” He replied to them: He too was ordained for punishment.

Is it not written “And Cain *was* a cultivator of the earth?” He replied to them: He too was ordained for exile.

They said to him: Is it not written (*Jer. 38:28*) “And it *was* when Jerusalem was taken?” He said to them: This too is a favourable sign, for unless Jerusalem had been taken, (the enemies of) Israel would have been annihilated within; furthermore . . .

The Rabbis say: Anyone of whom it is written “was” sees a new world, hence it says “And Moses was tending . . .”

In this version R. Yoḥanan’s statement is attributed to R. Levi, while the statement that in *Gen. Rabbah* was ascribed to R. Levi is here brought in the name of R. Yoḥanan. In the *Tanḥuma* three objections are adduced against R. Levi — the serpent (ordained for punishment), Cain (for exile), Jerusalem.

The passage is difficult, and the “*Eṣ Joseph*” commentary suggests emending the *Tanḥuma* according to *Ex. Rabah* to *Ex. 2:4*: “Everyone of whom it is written ‘was’ was ordained for it.”<sup>17</sup> This version strikes us, however, as a bit too facile. The version in our *Tanḥumas* is supported by the Yemenite *Midrash Ha-Gadol*. Nevertheless it is clear that the serpent cannot be made to conform to the principle “upright from beginning to end.” In *Tanḥuma-Buber* we read instead “. . . was the same from beginning to end.” This text is also suspect of being an emended version of the difficult wording of the regular *Tanḥuma*. The “*Eṣ Joseph*” points out that the passage concerning Jerusalem “is utterly meaningless in this context, its proper place being *infra* in *Tanḥ. Sheminit* par. 9 in connection with the dictum of R. Simeon b. Abba in the name of R. Yoḥanan, “Whenever it says ‘*vayehi*’ it can express either sorrow or joy . . . But every ‘*vehayah*’ means joy . . . They said to him: But is it not written ‘And it was (*vehāyāh*) when Jerusalem was taken.’ — He replied to them: This too is not a sorrow etc.” This passage appears in several parallels, especially in

<sup>16</sup> Cited according to *Midrash ha-Gadol* (MHG) to *Exodus*, ed. Margoliot p. 42.

<sup>17</sup> “Death was ordained to come to the world, since it is written: ‘And darkness was upon the void,’ — this is death, which darkens the countenances of creatures.” The midrash brings objections from Adam, the Serpent, Noah, Joseph, Mordecai and Moses.

*Gen. Rabbah*<sup>18</sup> and *Lev. Rabbah*,<sup>19</sup> and it presumably ended up here under the influence of these other passages.

No wholly convincing explanation can be offered for all these difficulties. In any case, I would suggest that we ought to see R. Levi's original statement as being grounded in the context of *Ex. 3:1*, and not as a general rule covering the use of the verb "was." If so, then we can reconstruct the original form of R. Levi's statement as being something like: "And Moses was tending the flocks" — Said R. Levi: "was" — implies that his beginning and end were both upright," or: ". . . his beginning was the same as his end." R. Levi's intention was to draw a parallel between the youthful shepherd of Jethro's flock, and the older faithful shepherd of the Israelites. The context of the *Tanḥuma* suggests that the statement originally made reference only to Moses, and was not intended as an all-encompassing exegetical principle.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps the original authors of the statements about him who "sees a new world" or "was a provider,"<sup>21</sup> were also merely explicating this verse about Moses (though there is no compelling reason to reject the tradition that they referred to the five figures adduced by R. Samuel b. Naḥman). The transition from this original, modest intention to explain the use of "was" in one specific verse, to a bold generalization about "everyone about whom it is written 'was'" probably was a result of the influence of such famous and oft-cited dicta as: "R. Samuel b. Naḥman in the name of R. Nathan: This midrash came up with us from the Exile: Everywhere it is written '*vayehi bime'* it means trouble."<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> 42:3, p. 407.

<sup>19</sup> *Shemini* 11:7, p. 236.

<sup>20</sup> This verse opened a lection in the triennial cycle of Torah-reading; cf. J. Mann, *The Bible as Read and Preached in the Old Synagogue* (Cincinnati 1940) vol. 1, pp. 365ff., who cites a wealth of material from the Palestinian Midrashic literature and *piyyut*, all drawing parallels between Moses the young shepherd, and the faithful shepherd of his people. See also Ginzburg, *Legends*, vol. V, p. 414 n.109.

<sup>21</sup> "He sees a new world" may have been derived by *notarikon* from the word "R'H" in the verse, which was read as an acronym for "Ro'eh 'olam Hadash" (substituting H for H; v.E. Y. Kutscher, *The Language and Linguistic Background of the Isaiah Scroll* (Jerusalem 1959) pp. 42ff. [Heb.].

It is however possible that the "saw a new world" idea had its origin in a *petiḥa* to *Gen. 6:9*, beginning with an explication of *Ezek. 14:14ff*, which groups together Noah, Daniel and Job. In a Midrash published by Mann (*op. cit.* Heb. part p. 151 and n.191) from a JTS MS, we find: "Why are these three mentioned out of all the prophets? Because each one of them saw three worlds. Noah saw an established world, a destroyed one and an established world, etc.; cf. *Tanh. Noah 5*, *Yalqut Noah 50*, *Midrash Avkir* (Buber) 4,8, *MHG Gen.* (6:9) p. 152, Mann *ibid.* p. 282 (from Sikili's *Yalqut Talmud Torah*). In most of these parallels the key word "world" does not appear, though the idea is found; Mann's version was nevertheless known to Origen from "a certain Hebrew" (Homily 4 on Ezekiel, PG 13:703-4); v.S. Spiegel, "Noah, Daniel and Job," in *L. Ginzburg Jubilee Volume* (New York 1945) p.308 and n. 4, from which most of the above references have been culled; also J. Braverman, *Jerome's Commentary on Daniel* (Washington 1978) pp. 60ff.

<sup>22</sup> On the readings of this passage cf. the notes in Margoliot's edition of *Lev. R.* p. 229; Bacher, *Agadot Amora'ei Ereṣ-Yisrael* vol. 1 pt. 2, p. 305 n. 305, etc.

To summarize the evolution of this homily, we can discern in it four principal stages:

A. A comment on *Ex. 3:1* in which R. Levi or R. Yoḥanan observed that Moses was a shepherd from beginning to end, apparently basing his interpretation on the word “*hayah*” (“was”) which in this verse is syntactically unnecessary.

B. Someone, following up the logical implications of this exegetical method, reformulated the dictum such that it expresses a general rule for all “was” verses in the Bible. This reformulation was presumably influenced by similar traditions about the expressions “*vayehi*” and “*vayehi bime.*” The obvious outrageousness of the rule made it a convenient vehicle on which to base a homily whose purpose was to emphasize a preordained pattern of history from Adam to Mordecai — as it were, from death to redemption. This stage sees the midrash in its crystalized height of literary and conceptual symmetry.

C. The redactor of *Gen.Rabbah* applied the dictum to *Gen.6:9*, regarding Noah. It is not certain whether he brought over R. Yoḥanan’s dictum with its entire homily, or whether originally he used only the dictum itself and the homily was filled in subsequently. Possibly it was brought over only as part of a *group* of “was” homilies, the rest of which mention Noah.

D. Copyists and/or editors of later midrashic collections filled in the names of some of the other Biblical figures whom Samuel b.Naḥman had singled out as belonging to “was” verses.

As has been remarked above, the passage we have been discussing is coupled in *Gen.Rabbah* and elsewhere with two other similar statements explaining that “Everyone of whom Scripture says ‘was’ ” — according to R. Levi: “sees a new world,” — and according to the Rabbis: “was a provider.” Each of these rules is applied by R. Samuel b.Naḥman to five figures: Noah, Joseph, Moses, Job, Mordecai. We have not dealt at length with these other statements because they do not present any serious difficulties. In the light of what we have observed about the first homily, we can suppose perhaps a similar evolution of the other two, that they began as isolated comments on specific verses and were later broadened, for the sake of the homily, into exegetical pseudo-principles — most likely by R. Samuel b.Naḥman himself; if so, they are earlier than the “beginning and end” homily, and influenced its structure and evolution.

It is important to note that all the above lists of Biblical figures end with Mordecai. Although this is easily explained by Mordecai’s historical position at the close of the Biblical era, there is nevertheless a clear intention to place him in a climactic role in the homilies. This is indicative of the fact

that we are dealing here with sermons delivered on Purim. This hypothesis is confirmed by the unusual conclusion of the midrash:

. . . Mordecai was a provider!?

Said R. Yudan: Once he went looking for all the wetnurses, but when he could not find one he nursed her himself.

R. Berachiah: R. Abahu in the name of R. Eleazar; Milk came to him and he nursed her.

Once R. Abahu said this in a sermon and the congregation laughed. He told them: Is this not a Mishnah: R. Simeon b. Eleazar said: The milk of the male is pure!

This rhetorical flourish is reminiscent of another famous sermon which was probably also delivered on Purim, by R. Akiba:

R. Akiba was sitting and expounding, and the audience was dozing off. Hoping to arouse them he said: How was it that Esther would deserve to rule over 127 dominions? — Let Esther, who is descended from the Matriarch Sarah who lived 127 years, come and rule over 127 dominions!<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> *Gen.R.* 58:3; *Yalqut* 102, *MHG Gen.* p.368, etc. (v. *Yalqut* HLS p.464). In the notes to *Gen.R.*, T-A p.275, can be found some other instances in which congregations responded in a humorous manner to the preacher, not necessarily in a Purim context. Other Talmudic passages which may reflect a Purim background are TJ *Sheq.* 5:1 p.48d (TB. *Men.* 64b) and TB *Hul.* 139b.