

WHO'S KIDDING WHOM?:  
A SERIOUS READING OF RABBINIC  
WORD PLAYS

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The study of midrash, the rabbinic commentaries to Scripture, has recently taken a literary turn. This turn is evident in the increasing use of literary theory by interpreters of midrash as well as the interest among literary critics in rabbinic exegesis. In part, this trend is a natural result of post-structuralist literary theory—particularly reader-response criticism and deconstruction—that criticizes the foundationalism endemic to Western philosophy and the theory of reading that derives from it. The attempt to escape the presuppositions of that tradition has drawn attention to literatures not shaped by it and has sparked a general interest in rabbinic interpretation.

The turn to midrash, however, often involves even stronger claims. For some, rabbinic interpretation of Scripture is a forerunner of certain contemporary theories of reading.<sup>1</sup> One school of recent criticism argues that all texts sustain a multiplicity of equally valid readings, each informed by its own set of assumptions. The text itself is said to exercise little control over its interpretation. Instead, the constraints of interpretation reside with the community of readers (eg. Fish). In this view, there can be no single meaning of a text but only various readings from different points of view. Deconstructive criticism takes this position to the extreme by claiming that true readings are merely misreadings whose misses have been forgotten (Culler:178).

This understanding of reading is said to be anticipated in rabbinic literature. In their explication of Scripture, the rabbis take words out

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Handelman (1982:xv) claims that there are structural affinities between rabbinic models of interpretation and those of Freud, Derrida, and Bloom. See also Hartman and Budick (x) and most recently, Faur. For a critique of such claims see Stern, and the rejoinder by Handelman (1985) as well as my own review (1987b) of Faur.

of context, ignore grammatical constructions, delete, transpose, and add letters, divide single words into two smaller words, treat apparently regular words as acrostics, and interpret words in biblical Hebrew as if they were rabbinic Hebrew, Aramaic, or even Greek. The cavalier way in which the rabbis manipulate scriptural language is, in this view, evidence that the sages operated with a theory of reading that resembles post-structuralist criticism. After all, the text exercises little control over rabbinic interpretation.

The comparison of midrash and post-structuralist literary theory is completely misleading. This perspective ignores the numerous background assumptions that provide the framework for the sages' interpretive activity and consequently misconstrues rabbinic practice. Specifically, it offers a problematic interpretation of the linguistic transformations or "word-plays" in rabbinic literature.

The following example illustrates how the rabbis manipulate words to produce new readings. The book of Genesis states that at the conclusion of the sixth day of creation, "God saw all that was made, and behold [it] was very (*m'd*) good (Gen. 1:31)." It would seem that God is pronouncing a judgment on the whole of creation. The text says, "God saw *all* that was made and behold it was very good." The sages, however, arrive at a different understanding of the verse. By transposing the consonants of the word "very" (*m'd*), they arrive at this interpretation: "God saw all that was made and behold Adam (*'dm*) was good." Since the words "Adam" and "very" are composed of the same consonants and since the scriptural text has no vowel notation, a substitution can take place. According to this new reading, God's approval of creation is not general, but applies specifically to humanity (Genesis Rabbah 8:5).<sup>2</sup>

From a literary perspective, such linguistic transformations appear to represent a punning or joking that aims to give new meaning to Scripture. I. Heinemann (4,96), the forerunner of this sort of interpretation, labels this activity "creative philology." Kugel (133, 147) argues that the rabbis' manipulation of Scripture constitutes "a kind of joking, a learned and sophisticated play about the biblical text," which circulated and was eventually written down. In Kugel's view, the student who mistranslates the Latin phrase *Mea mater sus est mala* to mean "My mother, uh, is a bad pig" performs a practice analogous to rabbinic interpretation: "What is a joke in high school is the foundation-stone of rabbinic exegesis . . . there is often something a bit joking about midrash too. The ultimate subject of that joke is the disso-

<sup>2</sup> References to Genesis Rabbah follow the critical edition of Theodor and Ch. Albeck. See the English translations by Neusner; and Freedman.

nance between the religion of the Rabbis and the book from which it is supposed to be derived.”

Adopting a slightly different perspective, Handelman suggests that

the variation in letter combinations also extends to a play of variant reading of words. Because of the structure of Hebrew, and the nonvocalized text of Scripture, it is possible to read words in several ways. All manner of *intentional misreadings* were codified in the exegetical principle al tikrei (“Do not read it thus, but thus”). (1982:73; italics supplied)

In Handelman’s view, the rabbis’ linguistic transformations illustrate how “The Rabbis’ interpretation subtly takes primacy over the text in a way unprecedented in the history of religion: human interpretation becomes divine (42).”

Most recently, Faur claims that in the rabbinic linguistic transformations “the linguistic concept . . . is either suspended or modified. In this fashion it is possible to relate a term with another term of the system, and generate new meaning (xix).” Faur claims that this is one way in which the rabbis anticipate deconstructive criticism, for similar sorts of linguistic transformations characterize Derrida’s own work. As Richard Rorty puts it,

The most shocking thing about his work . . . is his use of multilingual puns, joke etymologies, allusions from anywhere to anywhere, and phonic and typographical gimmicks. It is as if he really thought that the fact that, for example, the French pronunciation of ‘Hegel’ sounds like the French word for ‘eagle’ was supposed to be relevant for comprehending Hegel. (146-147)

Since such gimmicks are also frequent in rabbinic interpretation, Faur confidently concludes that “As did Jacques Derrida, the rabbis sought ‘a free-play,’ amounting to a ‘methodological craziness’ whose purpose is the ‘dissemination’ of text; this craziness, though ‘endless and treacherous and terrifying, liberates us to an *errance joyeuse*’ ” (xviii-xix).

These descriptions of rabbinic interpretive practices all conceive the linguistic phenomenon in question as a literary creation, in which poetic or literary license authorizes and even encourages the ignoring of actual etymologies. This position, which treats literature as a fictitious world in which author and reader (or listener) agree to suspend the reality of everyday life, claims that the ancient rabbis defied the rules of language, which they presumably knew well, to pursue a deeper religious truth that spoke to their own historical situation. In this view, the rabbis consciously went beyond what they thought the divine author intended by the language of the scriptural text to produce homiletical readings that were more meaningful or more entertaining. This understanding clearly has close affinities with post-

structuralist literary criticism, which claims that there are no rules to govern interpretation and that the author's intention is irrelevant to the interpretation of a text.

The assimilation of rabbinic linguistic transformations to poetry and fiction forecloses the use of another analogy: a comparison of the rabbis' word-modifications to philology or linguistics. Scholars have avoided this other comparison because it makes rabbinic linguistic practices appear philologically and linguistically primitive; the sages frequently violate the rules that govern Hebrew in particular and language in general. For example, they confuse weak stemmed verbs of various types with one another,<sup>3</sup> they give multiple etymologies of words, and they offer anachronistic interpretations of biblical words based on the meaning those words later acquired in rabbinic Hebrew (Barr:44-50). Some Hebrew linguists claim (Greenspahn:51; Gottlieb:134-61) that the rabbis did not understand how Hebrew actually works and, consequently, their etymologies were bound to be problematic, or, as Gottlieb puts it, "unscholarly philology." The literary perspective obviates such a discomfiting conclusion by claiming that rabbinic word transformations are not primitive attempts at understanding language but sophisticated ways of rendering the text meaningful.

Some interpreters have realized that neither of these perspectives can explain all rabbinic word-transformations. Consequently, they argue that each explanation covers only a sub-set of the rabbis' linguistic modifications: in some instances the rabbis are playing with language, while in others they are engaged in serious philological study (Goldin:158-9; Gottlieb:134-146; Barr:44-50). All interpreters, however, assume that a dichotomy that makes sense in our culture is relevant to understanding rabbinic culture. But the applicability of familiar dichotomies to other cultures is questionable. In fact, an opposition between serious philology and word-plays does not exist in rabbinic literature and would make no sense to its authors. To force the rabbis' manipulation of language into either category distorts their activity and misses the important and interesting ways that this rabbinic practice differs from both of these activities.

In what follows, I offer an interpretation of rabbinic linguistic practices that avoids this dichotomy altogether. I explain these transformations of words in terms of the sages' own understanding of lan-

<sup>3</sup> Weak-stemmed verbs lose one of their root letters in various verbal forms. Consequently, the sages often assume a relationship between weak-stemmed verbs that actually derive from different stems. For example, they confuse words deriving from *yrd* and *rdh* (GR 8:11), *bnh* and *byn* (GR 18:1, 34:9), *šrr*, *yšr*, and *nšr* (GR 22:6), *nbl* and *bll* (GR 38:10), *yraq* and *ryq* (GR 43:12).

guage, including its origin and its internal structure. The rabbinic understanding of language cannot be completely divorced from certain theological and textual presuppositions. This web of assumptions—linguistic, theological, and textual—underlies and makes comprehensible the linguistic transformations found in rabbinic texts.

My account is based on an examination and classification of the linguistic modifications in *Genesis Rabbah* (hereafter GR), a collection of rabbinic statements related to the book of Genesis. This work, which represents a relatively early collection of rabbinic interpretations (4th to 6th C.E.), is filled with hundreds of such transformations. Although GR contains material written over a period of time, a unitary and coherent understanding of language is taken for granted in this document and thus suggests that an inchoate theory of language was operative in at least one segment of early rabbinic culture.

### The Origin and Character of Language

A number of statements in GR assume that the Hebrew language existed prior to the creation of the world. The sages state explicitly that God used Hebrew in the process of creation (GR 18:4, 31:8), an idea that derives from the claim in Genesis 1 that God commanded the world into being. According to GR, God created the world with the letter *h*, which means that this letter formed the basic component of the Hebrew word “Let there be (*yhy*),” the word God uttered in creating things (GR 12:10, 39:11). In addition, the sages claim that God had various conversation partners, such as the angels, before humans were even created (GR 1:8, 8:4-5, 9:4, 11:8). The idea that Hebrew preexisted the world and its status as the “holy tongue” (GR 18:4, 31:8) certify that language was regarded as a divine creation rather than a human invention.

The assumption that God created Hebrew means that the composition of and interconnections among words are necessarily significant. The preoccupation with finding the etymologies of words, therefore, represents an attempt to understand how God constructed Hebrew and to discover the divine motivations in creating it in this way rather than another. We have thus exposed an important difference between the sages’ understanding of language and the one that has prevailed in our culture, at least since the work of de Saussure. According to the rabbis, the relationship between signifier and concept signified is never arbitrary. The sages assume that God had specific reasons for choosing to link certain signs and sounds with certain meanings.

In the sages’ view, God formed Hebrew words in one of two ways. Some words represent divine acrostics (*notaricon*). For example, the word for “elder” or “old” (*zqn*) is understood as an acrostic that signi-

fies “this (*zh*) one acquired (*qnh*) two worlds,” meaning that one whom God permits to reach old age has merited life in this world and the world to come (GR 59:6). Thus, the letters of this word were not arbitrarily selected; they allude to ideas, and the word itself summarizes a sentence. The divine name El Shadai (*ʾl šdy*) is also understood as an acrostic that summarizes the sentence “I (*ny*) am the one who said (*šmrty*) to the world (*lʾlm*), ‘Enough (*dy*)’” (GR 46:3). The divine name, far from being arbitrarily chosen, was a deliberate attempt to specify something about God’s power and mercy.<sup>4</sup> Had God not said, “Enough,” the world would have continued to expand indefinitely.

Second, the sages assume that God constructed some words out of smaller words. For example, the word for heaven (*šmym*) represents a contraction of two words, “fire” (*š*) and “water” (*mym*), thus signifying the elemental composition of the heavens (GR 4:7). By implication, there must exist some basic words that cannot be broken down further into either acronyms or smaller words. These presumably are the original words from which the rest of the language was constructed. But even in these cases, the words are not understood as arbitrary designations for ideas. There was a reason that particular letters were chosen to comprise these original words. The letters in the word for truth (*mt*), for example, were selected because they represent the first, middle, and last letters of the alphabet respectively. This suggests how important truth is to God, who is also described as “the first and last” (Is. 44:6) (GR 81:2). Similarly, the word “Let there be” (*yhy*), which was the word God used in creating the world, has “*h*” as its basic letter. Since the *h* is an aspirate and requires no effort to pronounce, it signifies how effortlessly God created the world (GR 12:10).

It is not only the relationship between signifier and concept signified that the sages assume is overdetermined. The connections among signifiers themselves are also laden with significance. Words share the same consonants because God intended for humans to understand a connection between the concepts those words signify. Indeed, in some cases God fashioned a single word so that it would simultaneously allude to several other concepts. The Hebrew word for “heaven” is a case in point. As noted above, the letters *šmym* allude to the heaven’s elemental composition out of water (*mym*) and fire (*š*). But, in addition, God intended the word to suggest that heaven evaluates (*šmym*) human deeds, that its mysterious qualities would astonish

<sup>4</sup> Lieberman (70-74) has argued that the interpretive operations of *notaricon* (or acrostic), *gematria*, and *paronomasia* (the playing with homonyms) derived from the Greco-Roman practice of dream-interpretation. I do not mean to dispute that claim. However, once these methods are adopted in rabbinic culture, they must be examined in light of the sages’ own assumptions about language. In the context of these assumptions, the sages’ linguistic practices take on a quite different meaning.

(*mštwmmym*) people, and that it would change colors like the elements (*smym*) (GR 4:7). In creating language, therefore, God intended all interconnections among signifiers to be meaningful.

Given the sages' assumptions about language, one could theoretically analyse the entire Hebrew language and determine why each signifier was connected with each concept signified.<sup>5</sup> One could also determine why various words were composed of the same letters. At some point, one might even get back to those first words and understand why they comprised certain letters rather than others. It follows that the philological analysis of the Hebrew language itself, independent of the study of the biblical narrative and laws, can sometimes disclose God's perceptions and judgments. The interest in etymologies, therefore, is not always an interest in explicating the meaning of Scripture but often represents an interest in language as an independent vehicle for communicating divine perceptions.

This understanding of language represents an attempt to apply the biblical conception of naming to the Hebrew language as a whole.<sup>6</sup> According to the biblical narratives, the name God gives a person indicates something important about God's perception of that person. For example, God changes Abram's (*'brm*) name to Abraham (*'brhm*), an acrostic that signifies that Abraham would be a father (*'b*) of a multi-

<sup>5</sup> I want to distinguish this point from another kind of claim that is sometimes made about the sages' understanding of language. Some interpreters of rabbinic literature and of the "Hebrew world-view" claim that there is an intimate relationship in the sages' mind between word and thing. According to Handelman (1982:11, 32), for example, in rabbinic literature "names are not conventional, but intrinsically connected to their referents; the name, indeed, is the real referent of the thing, its essential character." Handelman seems to be advocating a view that has been popular in anthropology and the history of religions, namely, that for people in traditional societies the relation between word and thing is not arbitrary or conventional, and consequently, they confuse or mistake the properties of a word for the properties of the thing it signifies (called nominal realism). Recent studies suggest that such a characterization of "primitive" thought is misleading (Tambiah:181 and Scribner and Cole:157). Moreover, given the rabbinic view that language preexisted the world, it seems obvious that in the sages' view words can and did exist independently of things, for words were created prior to the things they would eventually signify. In contrast to Handelman, then, I am arguing that words and concepts are intrinsically related, not words and things. The rabbis know that signifiers theoretically could have signified other concepts. But the fact that God created language means that the connection between a signifier and the signified is intentional. Interestingly enough, in the study by Scribner and Cole, a Vai man makes a statement that parallels precisely the view that I am attributing to the rabbis. The man in question is asked whether the sun could be called moon and vice versa. In denying that the names for these things could be changed, he said, "Any thing that God created, His talking, the names He gave to things, cannot be changed" (141). Names cannot be changed because that would mean tampering with divine language.

<sup>6</sup> On the impact of the biblical ideas about naming on early rabbinic thought, see Eilberg-Schwartz (1986: 85-141, 1987a: 357-381).

tude (*hmwn*) (Gen.17:5). The sages cite this narrative as a paradigm for their own linguistic practices. They assume that God relied on the same linguistic principles in constructing the Hebrew language as a whole, and consequently, they seek other Hebrew words that represent divine acrostics (GR 46:7). By subjecting all Hebrew words to linguistic analysis, therefore, one can recover the divine perception of the things or concepts signified.

The sages' notion that Hebrew words are fashioned as acrostics or represent the contraction of two smaller words points to another way in which the rabbinic understanding of language differs from ours. The sages employ what may be called a molecular theory of language. Words are treated as molecules, which are constructed out of more basic elements (letters) that permit no further division or analysis. The sages' atomistic assumptions about language account for the various kinds of linguistic operations that they perform.

Consider an analogy from chemistry. For the sages, the letters of the Hebrew alphabet comprise a kind of periodic chart. These elements bond together in various ways to form simple compounds or words. Just as hydrogen and oxygen form water ( $H_2O$ ), the letters *h* and *y* bond together to form the word "Let there be" (*yhy*= $HY_2$ ). The letters, moreover, have certain properties that explain why they are present in particular molecules. Each letter, like the elements of the periodic chart, has an atomic number or value by virtue of its position in the alphabet. Other properties include the way a letter is pronounced and its shape. All of these characteristics determine whether a letter will form part of a given molecule.

For example, the word "let there be (*yhy*)," the command God gave in creating the world, is composed of only two Hebrew letters (*h,y*) in order to signify that God created two worlds, this one and the world to come. But why did God select the elements *h* [*heh*] and *y* [*yod*] in particular? The *h* has two properties that determined its selection. Not only, as we saw, does its easy pronunciation signify how effortlessly God created the world, but its configuration or shape also makes it appropriate. Since this Hebrew letter has a large opening at its base, it indicates that the dead descend to the netherworld. Moreover, the smaller gap in its side suggests that an opportunity always remains open for repentance. The *y* was selected for its curved configuration, which suggests that the wicked will not walk erect (GR 12:10).

Similarly, the properties of the letter *b* [*bet*] made it the most appropriate element to serve as the first letter of Genesis. The *b* is the second letter of the alphabet and thus has the numerical value of two. By placing this letter at the beginning of Scripture, God intimated

from the very outset that two worlds were being created. The shape of the *b* is also significant. This Hebrew letter is bounded on all sides except the left. Since one reads Hebrew from right to left, the configuration of this letter indicates that one is permitted to investigate what comes after creation (i.e., towards the left), but not what was before creation (i.e., towards the right). Moreover, the *b* is written with two projections, one pointing to the right and one upward. The one pointed upward is directed towards heaven and signifies that God is the creator. The other projection points backward towards the first letter of the alphabet, the *aleph*, which is the first letter of the word "Lord." It signifies that the creator is Lord (*'dwn*) (GR 1:10).

Once simple compounds are formed, they combine with one another to form complex compounds. Just as a methyl group (CH<sub>3</sub>) and a carbonyl group (COOH) combine to form acetic acid (CH<sub>3</sub>COOH), the words "anger" (*'p*) and "distress" (*'srh*) produce the verb "to insist (*ypsr*)" (GR 50:4). When chemical reactions of this sort occur, elements are sometimes freed to recombine with other compounds. The bonding of zinc (Zn) and sulfuric acid (H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub>), for instance, produces zinc sulfate (ZnSO<sub>4</sub>) and releases hydrogen (H<sub>2</sub>) to bond with other elements. The same is true with reactions among Hebrew words. When God changed Sarai's name (*'sry*) to Sarah (*'srh*) (Gen. 17:15), the *y* was freed and therefore available to combine with the name Hosea (*hwš'*), thus producing the name Joshua (*yhwš'*) (GR 47:1).

In chemistry, precisely the same elements can combine in different arrangements to produce different kinds of compounds. Since these compounds are composed of the same elements, they have the same molecular structure. For example, dimethyl ether and ethyl alcohol have the same molecular formula (C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>6</sub>O) but are structured differently and thus have different properties. Such compounds are called isomers. In a sense, the sages are seeking out isomers in the Hebrew language. Words that share the same molecular formula are related to one another in certain fundamental respects. For example, the first account of creation concludes with the statement, "Such is the story of the heaven and earth as they were created (*bhbr'm*)." The Hebrew word *bhbr'm* shares precisely the same letters as "for Abraham" (*b'brhm*), although the letters appear in a different order. Both of these words, however, could be summarized by the same molecular formula 'B<sub>2</sub>HRM. Consequently, the sages conclude that the words are related and permit the following understanding to emerge: Such is the story of the heaven and earth, [whose creation was] for the sake of Abraham (GR 12:9).

It is not only the composition of words that draws the sages' inter-

est, but also their properties, including their numerical values. Since letters of the Hebrew alphabet have a kind of atomic number, one can also calculate a molecular number for every compound or word.<sup>7</sup> Those words with the same number have similar properties. Thus two words with different letters but similar numerical equivalences can be substituted for one another in sentences. For example, Genesis says that Abraham took 318 men with him to pursue after Lot's kidnappers (Gen. 14:14). According to GR, the text actually means that Abraham took only his servant Eliezer with him, for the numerical value of Eliezer's name is 318 (GR 43:2).

The vocalization of a word is another one of the properties that derives from its elemental structure. Elements have one or more ways of being pronounced, and consequently, a set of consonants may possess more than one pronunciation. For example, the penultimate element of the Hebrew periodic chart, the *sin*, can be pronounced in one of two ways: as an "sh" (*š*), or an s (*s*). Consequently, words in which this letter appears often have dual vocalizations and hence multiple significations. This is why the sages see a relationship between the word "heaven" (*šmy*) and "evaluate" (*šmy*). Since the *sin* sustains alternative vocalizations, one can read the same set of consonants in two different ways. Moreover, different elements, like the *sin* (*š*) and the samek (*s*), are pronounced identically. Consequently, some words, despite differences in composition, share the property of being pronounced alike. When two compounds share this property, one can substitute them for one another in certain sentences. The word "storm" (*s'rh*), for example, has the same pronunciation as the word "hair" (*š'rh*). Thus, when it is reported that God answered Job out of the storm (Job 38:1), one can make a substitution. God is revealed in a person's hair, expressing the paradox that although God fills the earth, God also can be revealed in a person's hair (i.e., a very small place) (GR 4:4).

The sages' linguistic operations are similar to the procedures performed by chemists on matter. Since both communities take for granted the atomic nature of the material under analysis, both seek to break complex compounds into simpler ones in the process of trying to understand how and why basic elements bond together in the ways they do. The comparison to chemistry is helpful as an heuristic device to get outside the present scholarly consensus that most Hebrew words

<sup>7</sup> There is an important disanalogy here between chemistry and the sages' understanding of language. In chemistry, elements have both atomic number and atomic weight, whereas elements of Hebrew, since they have no physical properties, have only a numerical value. In chemistry, the weight of a molecule is the sum of the weights of its atoms. In the sages' understanding of Hebrew, one calculates a molecular number by adding the numerical values of the elements.

are composed of roots or stems. The notion of a stem is similar to the idea of a basic word in English. The word "mortal," for example, serves as a base to which suffixes or other stems can be added (eg. "immortal"). Interpreters of rabbinic literature have always taken for granted that the rabbis understood Hebrew as having stems.<sup>8</sup> In attributing an atomistic understanding of language to the sages, I am suggesting that they had no conception of roots or stems at all. This is why they are willing to divide words into smaller words and to connect words that share the same letters even though the order of those letters is reversed. These moves appear absurd to anyone who thinks of language as having stems, because the notion of a stem has an element of linearity built into it. We understand words as being related when they share a certain number of basic letters and those letters are linked together *in the same order*. Consequently we recognize no linguistic relation between the words "God" and "dog" even though they share precisely the same letters. But a molecular understanding of language makes the order of letters irrelevant. Words that share the same molecular formula are related to one another independent of the structure in which the elements are connected.

An atomistic understanding of language and a theory of language based on the notion of stems sometimes lead to the same sorts of conclusions; both understandings of language, for example, will draw attention to words that share the same letters in the same order. But only an atomistic conception of language will postulate a relationship between words that comprise the same letters in a different order. Attributing a molecular theory of language to the sages explains why their word-modifications both converge and diverge from ours.

It is now clear that the sages possessed an understanding of language that, although incommensurable with ours, is coherent and logical in its own terms. But their linguistic assumptions would have made a dichotomy between activities called philology and word-plays inconceivable.<sup>9</sup> Any linguistic transformation that we might designate as a

<sup>8</sup> Most interpreters will concede that the rabbis did not always realize that Hebrew words had tri-literal stems (see note 3). Indeed, the tri-literal root was not fully discovered until Judah ben David Hayyuj, ca. 1000. Early Hebrew grammarians such as Saaidia Gaon and Menahem ben Saruk had not yet discovered the tri-consonantal system of Hebrew stems (Macfall:3-5). Nonetheless, most scholars of rabbinic literature assume that the rabbis worked with the notion of a bi-literal stem.

<sup>9</sup> It is significant that the Hebrew term for "word-play" (*mšq mlym*) does not appear in GR and, as far as I can determine, does not appear in rabbinic literature as a whole. The expression "language falls over language" (*lšwn nwpl 'l lšwn*) appears twice in GR. On the surface, this expression may seem to convey the idea of word-play. However, in the two contexts in which it is used it is clear that joking or punning is not intended. For example, the sages say that the Hebrew words for man (*'š*) and woman (*'šh*) "fall over one another" and that this is proof that the Torah was written in Hebrew (GR 18:4). The

pun or word-play would constitute, from the rabbis' linguistic understanding, a reasonable interpretation of a word. The sages' understanding of language provides no space for a concept of pun or word-play, because all linguistic links are intentional and significant.

If all interconnections among signifiers are meaningful, how do the sages account for the larger number of linguistic connections that, on the surface, appear to be senseless? For example, how do they explain that words like separate (*hprd*) (in the imperative) and mule (*prdh*) or fig (*t'nh*) and opportunity (*tw'nh*) share the same letters? The sages assume that when the connections among words are not immediately self-evident, one can discover their meaning in the context of a text, namely, the scriptural narrative. This suggests that some of the links that God established in language were specifically designed to fit certain narrative contexts in the Torah. The sages, then, conceive of the creation of language and the writing of Scripture as interdependent processes.

### Language and Text

We think that texts are possible only after the existence of language, but GR implies that God designed parts of the linguistic system in the process of writing Scripture. The interdependence of these creations emerges in the sages' claim that the Torah existed before the creation of the world (GR 1:1, 1:4, 1:8, 8:2). The images GR uses to describe the relationship between Torah and God—the Torah is a nursling, a tutor, a laborer, or an architectural plan—all assert the preexistence of the Torah.

Since the sages also claim that the Hebrew language preceded creation, it follows that the Torah and Hebrew are inextricably bound up with one another. In fashioning language, it was possible for God to take account of the various scriptural contexts into which words would fit.<sup>10</sup> For this reason, some relationships among words are intelligible

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relation between the words signifies that woman was created from man. When one word is said to "fall over another," GR implies that it was God who created the interconnection between them. The same expression is used in explaining how Moses determined that he was to make the snake out of copper, even though God did not specify what material to use (Num. 21:8). According to GR, Moses deduced God's intention from the language. The word for snake (*nḥš*) "falls over" the word for copper (*nḥšt*). Again GR offers this as proof that the Torah was written in Hebrew (GR 31:8).

<sup>10</sup> The assumption that the Torah was given linguistic formulation from the very beginning is evident in statements which suggest that various patriarchs had access to the Torah as a text. For example, GR 63:6 explicitly says that Joseph studied a chapter of Deuteronomy. Moreover, GR makes several references to the house of study of Eber. These statements imply that Eber and his students, such as Jacob, were studying the Scriptural text (GR 63:6, 63:9).

only within certain narrative contexts. Thus, the interconnection between the words mule (*prdh*) and separate (*hprd*) (in the imperative), which at first sight appears meaningless, becomes significant within a specific context in Scripture. The narrative in question is the story of Abraham and Lot divying up the land after several disputes between their herdsmen. When Abraham says to Lot "Separate yourself," a sensitive reader detects an implied comparison between Lot and a mule. "Just as a mule cannot absorb semen [i.e., cannot conceive], so it is impossible for Lot to mix with the seed of Abraham" (GR 40:6). This is an instance when the relation between words was designed to permit certain implications to surface in the scriptural text.

By the same token, the connection between the words "very" (*m'd*) and "Adam" (*'dm*) becomes significant within the Genesis account. The statement "Behold [it] is very good" is not a divine pronouncement on creation as a whole, but is made in reference to the creation of Adam: "Behold Adam is good (GR 8:5)." Similarly, the meaning of the connection between the words "fig" (*t'nh*) and "opportunity" (*tw'nh*) becomes clear in the story of Adam and Eve sewing fig leaves together for clothing, for these are the leaves that brought the opportunity for death into the world (GR 19:6). The links between the words "hairy" (*s'r*) and "demon" (*s'yr*) and between "smooth" (*hlq*) and "inheritance" (*hlq*) also generate powerful associations in the conversation between Rebekah and her son Jacob (Gen. 27:11). Rebekah is attempting to convince Jacob to trick his father and usurp Esau's birthright. But Jacob is hesitant. He objects that Isaac will know what is happening, for "Esau is a hairy man, while I am smooth." Given the interconnections embedded in language, Jacob's statement sets off a train of associations that tells another story. In effect, Jacob has said that Esau is demonic and therefore will not inherit Isaac, but Jacob himself will be the inheritance of God (GR 65:15). Finally, the desert Alush (*lws*) is related to the word "knead" (*lwsy*) in the imperative, to indicate that God gave mana to the children of Israel in the desert of Alush (Num. 33:13) because, in extending hospitality to the angels, Abraham instructed Sarah to "knead" (*lwsy*) some bread (Gen. 18:6) (GR 48:12). In each of these cases, therefore, God purposefully fashioned these words from similar letters to allow these readings to emerge from the scriptural text.

This understanding enables the sages to account for unusual forms of Hebrew words that occasionally appear in Scripture. They assume that God sometimes created unique forms of words to convey the desired nuances in a given narrative context. In summarizing the divine activity of creation, Genesis states that "Such is the story of heaven and earth when they were created." The word "when they

were created" (*bhbr'm*) is a hapax legomenon. The sages imply that God designed this peculiar form to elicit certain nuances that were appropriate only in this narrative setting. When read as an acrostic, it signifies that "with the letter *h*, God created them (*bh br'm*)." When the letters are transposed, the reader understands that the creation was for the sake of Abraham (*b'brhm*).

The rabbinic understanding of Scripture assumes the atomistic conception of language described above. In the sages' view, the Author of Scripture took account not only of the already existing linguistic connections but specifically designed new ones to fit certain narrative contexts. This understanding easily explains why the scriptural text includes no vowels. The very idea of vowel notation is incompatible with the sages' assumption that God created language out of consonants. Since the links among words are based on their consonantal (i.e., molecular) structure, the addition of vowels to the scriptural text would have intimated that a word has only one interpretation. The divine Author, however, intended scriptural words to evoke all the links that had been encoded in language and, consequently, did not include vowel notation.<sup>11</sup>

It follows that a proper interpretation of Scripture is impossible unless one seeks readings that rely on the various sorts of linguistic transformations discussed earlier. Only by transposing letters and breaking words into their constituent parts can one hope to recover the Author's intention. To be sure, the application of these linguistic principles does not always produce intelligible readings. Theoretically, the word "very" (*m'd*) can always be transposed into the word "Adam" (*'dm*). But in most contexts this transposition would be meaningless. The divine narrative, then, serves as a kind of check that prevents the reader from arriving at faulty interpretations. If the reader can produce an intelligible reading by applying any of the principles discussed early, that interpretation was already intended by the divine Author.

The implication is that in writing Scripture God was in control of

<sup>11</sup> I thus disagree with Faur (121) who cites the lack of vowel notation as evidence that the "Hebrew tradition" expects the reader to play a creative role in producing interpretations. "By excluding the vowels from the text of Scripture, Hebrew tradition was in fact excluding semiotic reading. It was also excluding parasitic exegesis, the type of static reading peculiar to the 'readerly' text discussed so brilliantly by Barthes. It is hardly possible to conceive a more 'unreadable' text than one made exclusively of consonants!" In Faur's view, God has given a text that is deliberately opaque so that the reader must participate creatively in the interpretive process. By my interpretation, by contrast, the lack of vowel notation creates only those ambiguities that are already intended by the divine Author. In seeking alternative readings, therefore, the interpreter is simply recovering divine intention, not producing a new text.

all the possible relations among signifiers. Words were chosen with care to allow only certain acceptable readings to emerge. Misreadings are anticipated and foreclosed by the choice of alternative language. The sages point out that God created two different words (*hbdl* and *hprd*) to signify the concept “separate” (in the imperative). Only the latter, however, shares the same consonants with the word “mule” (*prdh*). The sages conclude that that form of the word is used only when God wants to elicit the concept of a mule. Since God generally wants to avoid such an allusion, the other form occurs much more frequently in Scripture (GR 51:6). By the same token, God controls the possible links among signifiers by altering their spelling. As in the case of English, words in Scripture have alternative spellings. Therefore, by adding or deleting extra elements, God can either establish relationships among words that would not have been operative or rule out links that would otherwise have been present.<sup>12</sup> In describing the results of Noah’s drunkenness, Genesis says that Noah was uncovered (*ytgl*) (Gen. 9:21). The sages argue that the *t* is superfluous because God could simply have used the word *ygl* to convey the same idea. The inclusion of the *t* makes allusion to the concept “exile” (*glwt*), which implies that Noah was the cause of exile for himself and subsequent generations. That nuance would have been unavailable to the reader had the *t* not been added to the word (GR 36:4).

What is important in reading Scripture, therefore, is understanding the divine perceptions and comments that are embedded in the very language of the narrative. A divine commentary to the narrative is encoded at the linguistic level within the narrative itself. The text both tells a story and explicates that story at once. For example, the sages discuss why God describes Joseph’s coat as a coat of *psym*, a word that appears nowhere else in Scripture. They suggest three possible interpretations. First, the word is connected to the word for casting lots (*pss*),<sup>13</sup> and hints that Joseph’s brothers would cast lots to see who would bring the bloodied coat to their father. In addition, the description of the coat can be interpreted as an acrostic that alludes to the various misfortunes Joseph would undergo: the *p* standing for Potiphar, the *s* for the traders (*šhrym*), the *y* for the Ishmaelites (*yšm’lym*), and the *m* for the Midianites (*mdynym*). Finally, the description of the coat signals that ultimately God will split the sea (*ps ym*) (GR 84:8). At the level of the narrative, the word *psym* merely indicates that Joseph was given an elegant coat. But implicit in the coat’s description is a

<sup>12</sup> Other examples include GR 8:7, 12:1, 12:6, 14:2, 17:6, 34:10, 35:2, 41:6, 48:11.

<sup>13</sup> In this case, the interpretation of the word is based on rabbinic Hebrew. I will discuss below the kinds of assumptions that legitimate the appeal to rabbinic Hebrew in explicating the biblical text.

hint that this garment would be the cause of jealousy and ultimately result in Jacob's being sold into slavery, which in turn would lead to the redemption of Israel from Egypt.

The divine narrative, therefore, can be read on two different levels. There is a seemingly unproblematic level that tells a story. But the words that comprise this narrative are linked in various ways to one another and thus force the reader onto the level of commentary. The reading of Scripture thus requires both a horizontal movement (the reading of the story) and a vertical movement from narrative to commentary, which is parasitic on the lower level. Moses himself is said to have understood this principle. After receiving the Torah, God instructs Moses to fashion a snake without telling him what kind of material to use (Num. 21:8). By reflecting on the fact that the word snake (*nḥš*) and copper (*nḥšt*) share the same letters, Moses realizes that he is to use copper in its construction (GR 31:8).

Some rabbinic interpretations of particular words make no sense in terms of the sentences in which those words appear. I have already discussed how GR interprets *bhbr'm* in Gen. 2:4 to mean "for the sake of Abraham (*b'brhm*)."<sup>1</sup> It is obvious that if one simply attempted to treat the Hebrew word in question as the sages suggest, one would arrive at the following meaningless sentence: "Such is the story of heaven and earth for the sake of Abraham." Interpreters mistakenly cite this phenomenon as evidence that the sages' are playing with the language of the text. The sages' comments are not meant to illuminate the text at the narrative level but are attempts to elucidate the commentary that is already contained in the narrative language. The allusions in the language constitute a kind of running commentary to the sentences in which they are embedded. Just as a commentary cannot be incorporated into the sentences upon which it comments, rabbinic interpretations of words need not fit into the verses in which those words are found. In the example given above, the verse must be read at two levels at once: "Such is the story of heaven and earth as they were created/for the sake of Abraham." The rabbinic linguistic comments, therefore, do not intend to make sense of the text at the level of narrative, but disclose the way the text comments upon itself through its own language. In a sense, then, what the sages are after is to expose the self-reflexivity of the divine text.

### Divine Speech and Other Languages

One set of linguistic transformations seems to defy this account of how the sages' atomistic understanding of language shapes their interpretive practices. In explicating certain biblical words, the sages appeal to rabbinic Hebrew and a variety of other languages including

Aramaic, Arabic, and Greek. If the sages' linguistic modifications represent attempts to understand connections that God has encoded in Scripture, how could the sages possibly justify these linguistic operations? How do the sages conceptualize the relationship between biblical and rabbinic Hebrew, as well as the relationship between Hebrew and other languages?

In interpreting words of Scripture, the sages often appeal to the connotations that those words have in rabbinic Hebrew or Aramaic. For example, GR claims that the verse "We have a little sister" (Ps. 8:8) actually refers to Abraham, who united the whole world (GR 39:3). This reading depends on the similar molecular structures of the word "sister" (*'hw*) and "unite" (*'hy*). But the word "unite" is rabbinic Hebrew and is not attested in the biblical text (Mishnah Sanhedrin 7:5, Jastrow:40).

In making sense of such interpretive moves, the temptation once again arises to invoke the dichotomy that thus far has been resisted. Those favoring a literary perspective would argue that this is surely evidence of the sages' willingness to play with the biblical text. Others would claim that the sages were unaware of linguistic development within the Hebrew language and thus confuse later meanings of a word with their biblical equivalents (Heinemann:112; Holtz:190; Greenspahn:61; Gottlieb:136-7, Sarfatti:29-40). Both accounts miss the point.

GR demonstrates unequivocally that the sages do recognize the difference between biblical Hebrew, on the one hand, and rabbinic Hebrew and Aramaic, on the other. First, in a number of instances the sages simply translate phrases of the biblical text into Aramaic (e.g., GR 84:2) and thereby indicate that they were well aware that Aramaic at least was different from biblical Hebrew. Second, when they give an etymology of a word in terms of biblical Hebrew, in most cases they justify the derivation with the words "as You (i.e. God) say elsewhere" (*hk d't 'mr*) and then provide a biblical reference to support the kind of understanding they are giving (e.g. GR 1:1, 5:1, 28:5). However, when the derivation is based on rabbinic Hebrew or Aramaic, there is no attempt to cite a passage from Scripture (e.g. GR 38:6, 44:4). Indeed, in some cases the sages acknowledge reliance on colloquial and regional idioms (GR 18:1, 26:7). The sages know, therefore, when their linguistic interpretations have support in the biblical text and when they do not.

That the sages knew they were explicating biblical words in terms of rabbinic Hebrew does not necessarily mean the enterprise is playful, joking, or even creative. Rather, other assumptions about language are operative here. The sages take for granted that God created

Hebrew, but how do they understand the relationship between the biblical text and the Hebrew language as a whole? The sages appear to assume that biblical Hebrew represents merely a subset of all the Hebrew God had created and that words were created that never were used in the biblical text.

The sages appear to be working with a concept that somewhat resembles the distinction made by de Saussure between *langue* and *parole*. Saussure (14) noted that no single individual knows the whole language he or she speaks. One knows only a small proportion of the entire language. What an individual knows and uses is *parole*. Language or *langue* is the sum product of what all the individual speakers of that language know. "For language is not complete in any speaker, it exists perfectly only within a collectivity."<sup>14</sup> The biblical text, in this case, constitutes divine *parole*; it does not exhaust the full extent of the Hebrew language. All Hebrew is divine language, but some of it is used in the text and some of it is not. When the sages preface an etymology with the words "as You say [elsewhere]," they are appealing to divine *parole*, that is, to the way God has already used that word in another context. But when they have no precedent in the text, they are appealing to other words God had created but that do not appear in Scripture. Paradoxically, although the sages recognize a distinction between what we call biblical and rabbinic Hebrew, they would find our terminology problematic because they deny development within the Hebrew language. For them, biblical Hebrew is to be contrasted with "extra-biblical" Hebrew, but both are divine creations and part of the Holy Tongue.

This is why the sages subject rabbinic Hebrew to the same sorts of operations that they apply to biblical language. The rabbinic word for "condiment" (*lpt*), for example, is understood as being the contraction of two words "not food" (*l'pt*). The sages are convinced, moreover, that subjecting this word to linguistic analysis provides theological insight. According to one sage, condiments are called "not food" because prior to Adam's sin tasty loaves of bread sprung fully formed from the earth. At that time, condiments were unnecessary. Another sage argues that the word makes reference to the world to come, for at that time spicy loaves of bread will grow from the earth (GR 15:7). If linguistic analysis of rabbinic Hebrew provides information about life in Eden or the world to come, it does so only because it too is a divine creation. Thus God created non-biblical Hebrew according to the same principles used in constructing biblical words.

<sup>14</sup> There is, of course, an important disanalogy here. Whereas for de Saussure no individual could know the entire language, the sages would claim that God not only knows the language but created it.

It follows that the links between biblical and extra-biblical Hebrew were part of the divine plan in constructing language, and consequently, one can legitimately appeal to non-biblical Hebrew to explicate biblical terminology. It is no accident, for example, that the biblical word God uses to refer to a snake's belly (*ghnk*) (Gen. 3:14) shares the same consonants with the word "bent" (*ghn*) in extra-biblical Hebrew. According to the sages, God made the serpent crawl on its belly to signify that it bore responsibility for human mortality and thus caused people to be bent with grief over the death of loved ones (GR 20:5). By implication, the sages are suggesting that God took account of a link between signifiers in biblical and extra-biblical Hebrew in recounting the serpent's punishment. By the same token, one can only determine why God refers in Scripture to earth as "tebel" (*tbl*) by realizing that the same word means "to spice" in non-biblical Hebrew (Jastrow:1644). God uses the term "tebel" to refer to the earth during the period of the summer solstice, when the earth lends savour to the crop (GR 13:12).

The use of rabbinic Hebrew to explicate biblical terminology is not symptomatic of a playful attitude towards the text. Rather, it represents a legitimate interpretive move within the sages' assumptions about the divine origin of rabbinic Hebrew. This interpretation, however, does not yet account for the sages' willingness to understand scriptural words in terms of other languages, such as Aramaic (GR 30:7), Greek (GR 29:1,31:10, 40:4, 46:10), Arabic (GR 36:1, 79:7) or Syriac (GR 74:14). According to one remarkable passage, for example, two sages are reported to have gone to an Arab marketplace to recover the meanings of certain biblical words they had forgotten.

Rabbi Hiyya the elder and Rabbi Simeon b. Halafta forgot the translations of certain words and went to an Arab market to learn their translations. One sage heard a person use the word *ynbh* when saying, "Hang this load (*yhbh*) on me." [This statement enabled him to understand the verse], "Cast your burden (*yhbk*) on the Lord who will sustain you. God will never let the righteous collapse" (Ps. 55:23). [They also heard] a person use the word (*m'sy*) when saying "Don't trample (*m'sy*) me." This enabled them to understand the verse, "You shall trample (*'swtm*) the wicked to a pulp" (Mal. 3:21) (GR 79:7).

As is obvious from this story, the sages assume that obscure scriptural words can be recovered from other languages.

What assumptions about language could possibly justify this procedure? To answer this question we must know how the sages understand the origin of other languages. An important clue is found in the interpretation GR gives to the Tower of Babel story. According to that story, God confused people's language as a punishment for humanity's

sin. It is important to note how GR describes the consequences of this incident. After the confusion of language,

one worker would say to another, "Bring me water," whereupon the latter would give him earth, at which point the one who made the request would strike him and split his skull; [Similarly, one said to another] "Bring me an ax," but the latter would bring him a spade, at which point the one making the request would strike him and split his skull. (GR 38:10)

The sages do not claim that people's languages became totally incomprehensible to one another. Since only crucial words were changed, some measure of understanding was still possible. If one person asked another to bring an ax, the latter would understand that he was to bring an implement, but he would bring the wrong one. By implication, GR suggests that God confused languages by changing the relationship in people's minds between words and concepts. What originally meant "ax" subsequently meant "spade." Stated more formally, languages shared many of the same signifiers but in many cases what was signified had been altered. Some signifiers, however, still referred to the concepts they originally designated. This is why each person understood part of what the other was saying; in fact, the implication of the sages' comment is that chaos resulted precisely because partial understanding was possible.

This understanding has two important implications for the problem at hand. It means that the sages regard all languages as bastardizations of one autochthonous language, which was Hebrew. Moreover, Hebrew itself was altered at the Tower of Babel incident, and presumably certain original meanings of Hebrew words were also lost. Consequently, other languages, including even Greek or Arabic, contain words that may preserve the earlier meaning of certain Hebrew words. By turning to other languages, therefore, one can sometimes recover original meanings of the scriptural text.

In one sense, the sages end up treating Hebrew as Hebrew linguists do, but they do so on the basis of quite different assumptions. Linguists show how Aramaic and Rabbinic Hebrew develop out of biblical Hebrew. The sages often make many of the same connections between biblical words and their equivalents in rabbinic Hebrew or Aramaic. However, for the sages these connections do not illustrate the development in language but provide a way to get back to original meanings in divine language.

### Conclusion

The resemblances between rabbinic interpretive practices and those of post-structuralist literary theorists by no means suggest that

the rabbis anticipated recent developments in critical theory. Such resemblances simply dissolve once rabbinic practice is viewed against the background of the sages' own linguistic, textual, and theological assumptions. The rabbis' linguistic transformations do not represent a playful, joking, or creative practice that intentionally suspends the rules of language. Nor do they constitute an attempt to go beyond the meaning of Scripture as intended by the divine author. On the contrary, given the sages' understanding of language—its divine origin, its molecular structure, and its degeneration over time—their linguistic operations are straightforward attempts to recover divine perceptions encoded in language and in the Scriptural text. To be sure, their understanding of language provides them a great deal more freedom and flexibility than the theory currently held by linguists. Consequently, they can easily turn the scriptural text against what appears to be its surface meaning. But that does not mean that they are knowingly defying the rules of the language or ignoring the intention of the divine author. If an interpretation departs from the surface meaning of Scripture, that is because the surface meaning is only the superficial meaning. The real point of Scripture lies in the commentary which is embedded in the text, a commentary that sometimes mocks the text upon which it comments.

Recent interpreters of rabbinic literature have strong motivations for wanting to collapse the distance between the ancient rabbis and contemporary criticism. The emergence of post-structuralist criticism with its critique of the Western philosophical tradition provides a unique opportunity to rehabilitate the reputation of the rabbis. The claim that recent critical views are anticipated in rabbinic practice in effect asserts the superiority of this tradition to others, such as Christianity and Greco-Roman philosophy, which have had a more powerful impact on the Western intellectual tradition. But there is a cost to making the rabbis into contemporary critics. By seeing them as a version of ourselves, we relinquish the task of trying to understand what it might have meant to live in their world.<sup>15</sup>

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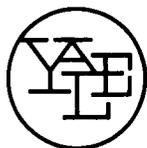
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