

Intertextual Remnants in the Study of Midrash

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“So God Created humankind in his image,
In the image of God he created them...”
(Genesis, 1.27)

The word of God—encoded, mysterious and life affirming—has been the issue of much speculation and deconstruction due to its cryptic nature. Daniel Boyarin’s study entitled Intertextuality and the Study of Midrash focuses upon the disjunctured nature of the Torah, which Boyarin calls, “a severely gapped text [where] the gaps are...to be filled by strong readers” (16). As Boyarin furthers, rabbinic interpreters of the Midrash used such gaps to fill in and bring forth a multitude of interpretations, and, more importantly, the “true” word of God. With its constant references to its divine text, these ancient interpreters extracted various views on the Torah through citations of the Bible, often labelling Midrashic interpretation as an intertextual process. Intertextuality—a method of analyzing the texts that calls forth a variety of other texts through tools of literary interpretation such as analogies and metaphors, for instance—was employed in order to support and interpret the Midrashist’s viewpoint on a particular passage(s) or verse(s) in the Bible. From this perspective the Midrash can be analogized as a divine, never-ending intertextual practice because, in a sense, it is a part of a bigger matrix that can continually be reconstructed.

In her study of female roles in Sing, O Barren One, Mary Callaway attempts to define the complex study of the Midrash stating that the interpretive study of the Torah is a field that cannot be limited to a single definition; but, she does provide a condensed version of one in order to

“clarify” (5) the active natures of Midrashic interpretation. Callaway states that

Midrash is first of all a way of interpreting Scripture in the context of one’s life and interpreting life in the context of Scripture. It presupposes a view of Scripture which is dynamic rather than static, in which Scripture is read as the living word of a living God which is addressed to a community living in the present (5).

In this context, (coupled with an active imagination and strong associative skills) the study of Midrash can be viewed as an ongoing process that integrates the words of the Torah into an individual’s life who chooses to “make sense” of its contents. For Callaway, the Midrash is a text that “attempts to make a text of Scripture understandable, useful, and relevant for a later generation” (6), alluding to the ever-changing dialogues that occur within the divine study of the Torah. One manner of looking at Midrashic study is to view it as the analysis of “lives” and how individuals relate it to their circumstances. In order to achieve this process of *relation* between the text and its readers, Callaway claims that readers must bring their own experiences while considering the words of the Bible to form a mould of existence—the word and life. From a theoretical standpoint, the study of Midrash can be compared to the study of intertextuality—which states that a text cannot hermetically exist on its own without allusions to a variety of texts and ideas. In their search to understand texts, interpretive readers engage other influences—e.g., literary, musical, or, even, spiritual works— into their lives, in relation to the Torah, which are inter-relational or intertextual. One word in the Torah can refer to a variety of other words, genres, such as those in a musical composition.

Michael Worton and Judith Still, in Intertextuality: Theories and Practices, examine various perspectives that have made the practice of the intertextual analysis a widely categorized field of study. For Worton and Still (like Callaway), the theory “insists that a text...cannot exist as a hermetic or self-sufficient whole, and so does not function as a closed system” (1). Because writers are readers of texts, “before [they are] a creator of texts” (1), they may use ideas, quotations and/or references from a diverse range of literary genres in order to develop their works. Furthermore, works—that reference other texts or ideas—may take the forms of “conscious and sophisticated elaboration of other...work[s], to a scholarly use of sources” (1), which would classify them as intertexts of a

wider textual whole. It is through this interrelated process of literary production that the formation (or reformation) of prior works can lead to different or new takes of or viewpoints of the “original”.

The study and practice of Midrash lends itself as a good candidate of the intertextual process since the interpreters of the Torah use the Torah’s words in order to create support their interpretations. By referencing the texts of the Bible, the Midrashists, with the use of literary tools such as analogies, metonyms, synecdoches, etc., profess differing views on the Scriptures. But, what exactly does the Midrash have in common with the theory of intertextuality? Well, in more precise terms, the practice of Midrash enables the Bible to be, as stated by Callaway, understood in the historical and social contexts of past and future generations. The Bible can act as a primary text that allows readers to use its teachings and words as a guide to living and modifying aspects of their lives. When readers bring in other notions (especially quotations) from other literary works in the Bible they are, in turn, bringing in a comparative element into the study of the Scripture, which makes it an intertextual practice.

In his article “Intertextuality and Ontology”, John Frow examines the intertextual practice as a disciplinary comment on the literary process. For Frow, intertextuality is “a play of divergent temporalities” (45). The interrelation of texts, he furthers, assumes that, “[t]exts are...not structures of presence but traces and tracings of otherness...shaped by the repetition and the transformation of other textual structures” (45). In addition to the citation of other literary works, Frow exclaims that the structures and “theoretical construct[s]” (46) are borrowed from another text(s) in order to represent or signify the style and workings of other literary work(s). In Midrashic tradition, this notion of signifying other texts in order to “transform” its contents is obvious. For Rabbis interpreting the Torah, the body of the Torah are two of the main referents that can be dismantled and re-formed in order to conjure new ways of developing its ideas and implicit relevance to a given societal construct. In their extraction of verses and passages within the Scripture, rabbinic interpreters constantly transform its contents to fit their own readings. As a result, those interpretations are used to support and subvert other interpretations within the Midrash—a battle of words and rhetoric.

A major emphasis is placed upon the usage of metaphors and analogies in the study of Midrashic interpretation since, as Frow claims,

such rhetorical devices enable readers to associate abstract notions with objects and influences that are present in the external world. Frow categorizes the metaphorization of the Torah as, “a signifying process...[that] is only ever available to knowledge within and by means of a system of representations...a link in an endless chain of semiosis” (47). In other words, when abstract ideas are paralleled to objects in the real world, the object familiarizes the abstract idea, it signifies its meaning through associative practices. For Frow, “the dichotomisation of the real to the symbolic” (47) can be dissolved making it easier for readers, as well as writers, to establish a wider sense of texts and ideas. The employment of such metaphors allude to the presence of other texts which can be used to understand the contents of the text at hand—and for Midrash this is the Bible.

In his book, Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash, Boyarin analyzes the fundamental and underlying principles that enable readers and theorists to establish a connection between the ancient study of Midrash and the contemporary theories of signification and association. For Boyarin, the disjointed and gapped style of the Scripture enables interpreters to “fill in the blanks” with experiences and ideas that implicitly link the “body” to the text. As a result, many Midrashists draw out their ideas from passages in the Bible that, in theory, relates it to the intertextual process of exterior reference. By signifying another text or, as Frow points out, structure, the paralleling of ideas and experiences allow the Midrash to be classified as a practice that incorporates intertextual ideas. Boyarin underlines this notion of reference in order to draw out interpretations, but, at the same time, places a great emphasis on the social and historical values of the interpretations presented in the Midrash. Interpretations presented in the Midrash are made clear when the signs and signifiers that are used are placed in its socio-historical context. Boyarin highlights this notion stating that

[t]here are cultural codes, again either conscious or unconscious, which both constrain and allow the production (not creation) of new texts within the culture; these codes may be identified with the ideology of the culture, which is made up of the assumptions that people in the culture automatically make about what may or may not be true and possible... (12).

The latter passage alludes to the idea of a codified society—a society that presents a variety of signs and systems that are encoded in order to maintain and subvert authority. It is through these codes, situated at a given time and place, which allow the meanings of a text(s) to be understood within the context of a given period or societal practices.

Within the Midrash, there are various codes that allow readers and interpreters to “pick out” parts and relate it to a holistic referent—the Bible. This, in turn, allow readers of, both, the Bible and the Midrash to understand its notions in direct relation to the socio-historic values in the time of the Rabbis. As Frow points out in his article, not only does the text refer to other texts, the notion of intertextuality implies that the text can also maintain or mimic other structural styles within a given set of texts. In relation to this idea, Boyarin highlights that the practice of Midrash old ideas are bridged with new ones that are “revealed by recontextualizing pieces of the authoritative text” (23). Midrash is an extension of this process of bridging gaps within a text in order to comprehend and incorporate its ideas into an individual’s life or the “wholeness” of the Bible. The most important aspect of the Midrash, Boyarin exclaims, are the “gaps and indeterminacies” (27) of the Scripture. Gaps are the essence of the interpretive practice because they produce further assumptions of other passages within a text, such as the Bible, by the citations of its other texts. But, with that in mind, what are some of the specific stylistic elements allow the Midrash to become an intertextual discipline?

Michael Riffaterre highlights some common rhetorical devices that are used to convey such a process. In his article “Compulsory Reader Response: The Intertextual Drive”, Michael Riffaterre introduces his concept of the intertextual text. He, like Frow and Boyarin, reinforces the concept of an intertext as being one that refers to other texts. But, as is the case for Boyarin, Riffaterre states that intertexts rely on the notion of filling ungrammatical gaps with references that can be situated within the gaps of the text. Riffaterre furthers this theory when he states that things that are missing from texts, such as gaps, “need to be filled [with] references to an as yet unknown referent” (57). When this process of signification and association occurs the intertextual process also occurs. When readers *come across* “gaps” or “indeterminacies” within a text they can fill these gaps with referents from other textual creations and/or objects within the outside world. As a result, readers become active (interpretive and associative) agents of a text(s) by bringing in former texts, previously encountered, into their study. For Midrashists this is the essential inter-

relational aspect that leads them to develop their interpretations of the Torah.

Riffaterre's notion of intertextuality states that there are certain "signposts" (58) that enable readers to parallel/bring in other texts into the construct of a given literary text, which can *make way* for the intertextual process to occur; these "signposts" can take the form of repetition, allusions, metonyms, and/or dialogisms. In the Midrash, references are constantly made to the Scripture. In many passages of the "Midrash Rabbah" there are various instances where God is analogized as a "king who entrusted his son to a teacher who led him into evil ways, whereat the king became angry with his son and slew him" (227). This anthropomorphic analogy of God as a king, a ruler who kills his children is used to justify God's role in the destruction of the Jewish temples. By painting God in a humanistic manner the abstract notions of His "ways" can be situated in an "earthly", moreover, "bodily" sense making Him more familiar to those who have been dumbfounded by His arbitrary nature of restructuring and deconstruction.

In the "Midrash Rabbah" references in the text serve to highlight the blurred meanings that are contained in the text as well as representing alternate readings of certain Scriptural passages. Lamentations Proems, for example, serves to justify and bring forth understanding on the destructions of the first and second temples. In their search to find meaning in a despairing and sullen tone, the Rabbis of the Midrash employ various references from the Bible as well as allusions of God. Many of the views purported in "Lamentations" begin with references to Scriptural passages from the Bible. In doing so, Rabbis set a backdrop and contextual grounding for the discussion (or deconstruction) that is about to take place. For instance in "Proem II" R. Abba b. Kahana starts his discussion with a reference to a passage from the Bible that states, "who is the wise man, that he may understand this? (Jer. IX, II)" (2), inviting readers to give a thorough analysis of what is about to take place. Immediately following his citation of Jeremiah, R. Simeon b. Yohai provides his teaching on the "fees of the instructors" (2). R. Simeon, in addition to R. Abba's introduction of a passage from the Scripture, extracts another passage from the Scripture—specifically (*ib.* II f). Because both Rabbis introduce passages from the Bible, there is a signification of a "wider" realm of discourse—the Scriptures.

When Rabbis cite Scriptural passages in the Midrash they do so in order support a certain view of God and/or His laws, or the laws that the Rabbi's, themselves, hope to endorse. This form of Biblical referencing allows the Torah to act as a mediator between His word and His citizens, or, in Riffaterre's categorization, "signposts" that allow for the intertextual process to occur. Referring back to Boyarin's discussion of the Midrash and intertextuality, Boyarin claims that this notion of subversion and, in many cases, illumination of the Scriptures is essential to the understanding of the Midrash. The rhetorical gaps within the Scripture are "filled in" with other passages from the Bible; they, in turn, may act as starting points for the further deconstruction of a certain passage in the Torah.

The act of extracting pieces of the Bible in order to reaffirm, or clarify, the idea of a certain theme, furthermore, interpretation, is a common practice of the Midrash. In a sense, the Midrash is a metonym of the word of God—an extension of it. In the Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory various theoretical practices, (such as postmodernism and structuralism), are studied along with the literary notion of intertextuality. Within its focus on the interrelations between literatures, Ian Belfour defines the concept of synecdoche as derived from the ancient Greek notion of, "a trope whose range of definitions overlaps considerably with that of metonymy" (638); again, metonymy signifies the representation of the "whole" through a part of that whole. Belfour also furthers that a synecdoche is a substitution that enables the task of reading to become more lucid and/or clear (e.g., "crown" signifies the monarchy). There are many instances where the Midrash uses the notion of the synecdoche to further an idea or concept in the Torah, since all parts within the text refer to a wider context—the subjectivities of the reader(s).

In proem twenty-one of "Lamentations" R. Alexandri opens his discourse with a reference to the Scripture, "And the leper in whom the plague is (Lev. XIII, 45)" (25). With his discussion of the destruction of the temple, R. Alexandri parallels two dissimilar concepts—the temple to the life of a "leper" (25). For R. Alexandri the destruction of the temple is analogized with the degeneracy of the leper's body stating that, "idolatry which defiles is like a plague, as it is said, And they profaned My sanctuary and defiled it" (25), further symbolizing God's distaste towards the Jews. R. Alexandri continues his discussion of the leper by giving his "piece by piece" reference on how the leper's "unclean" (25), and degenerative nature leading to the destruction of sin, which is further symbolized by the annihilation of the temples. In this passage he states that

“His clothes shall be rent,” i.e. the priestly vestments; *‘the hair of his head shall go loose’*; and so it is said, *And the covering of Judah was laid bare* (Isa. XXII, 8)—that which should have been covered He disclosed. *‘And he shall cover his upper lip’*; when Israel was exiled among the nations of the world, not one of them was able to bring a word of Torah out of his mouth. *‘And shall cry, Unclean, unclean’*; i.e. the destruction of the first and second Temples (25).

In the latter passage, R. Alexandri uses familiarized, everyday notions—such as that of garments, hairs and lips of a leper—as synecdoches for the temple; they are parts of the whole, which lead to the destruction of its host. When R. Alexandri refers to the passages in Isaiah, he is using the image of the leper’s disintegrating body to allude to the destruction of the temple in a positive, defamiliarized context. As defined in Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory, R. Alexandri uses the notion of a synecdoche to represent the wholeness of the temple allowing him to signify the temple by its parts. And because Israel “profaned” and “defiled” God’s sanctuary, “the hairs on the head of” the temple loosen and, in turn, fall out.

There are many instances in the Midrash where the metonymic representations of objects are used to make abstract ideas more familiar. The notion of Midrash as a process of familiarization through the referencing of other texts is investigated by Susan Handelman in her article entitled, “Freud’s Midrash: The Exile of Interpretation”. In her analysis, she compares the process of Midrashic interpretation with psychoanalytic studies of the dream interpretation of Freud. In terms of their formulations of Midrashic interpretations, Handelman claims that,

[t]he Rabbis sought to penetrate the inner meaning of the law; the interpretation was an exigesis, a reading “in” what was already there. Thus any new *halakha* was tied to the Written Law in an internal way, considered to be embedded in the letter and disclosed in the Midrash. The Rabbis were not, to their minds, adding anything *new* but only bringing forth what was already there... (102).

As Boyarin does in his study, Intertextuality and the Study of Midrash, Handelman highlights that the Rabbis did not claim to introduce “new”

ideas, but modify the ideas that were already present in the Torah. Once again, using R. Alexandri's discourse as an example, R. Alexandri does not lay claim to originality, but refers to passages in the Bible in the hopes of binding certain gaps in the Torah.

In the Midrash, Handelman states, there are various elements that allow it to be categorized as an intertextual work such as, "word plays and intentional misreadings, distortions and interpolations" (103). These elements—like synecdoches and metonyms—act as bridges for the gaps that occur within the Midrashic text since they help familiarize abstract ideas into a more cohesive whole. The Midrashist takes a certain passage from the primary text (the Torah) and uses analogies of the external world in order to bring a clearer understanding of the metaphysical world. Furthermore, these "distortions" of the main text are what allow the (modern) Midrashist to generate his (or her) interpretations, which are to be then applied on a personal level—the everyday lives of its interpreters. For Handelman this method of association and representation enable Rabbis to "displace the center of his rational analytic consciousness and *partake* of the very thought-process that is the object of his interpretation...[while abandoning] his scientific objectivity" (109). Handelman furthers that in order to displace the narrative text that is present in the Torah the Midrashist must "decentre" his/her self and, in turn, interpret the contents of the Torah. But, what are the main elements that are used to enable Midrashist to formulate certain assertions on the Torah?

Referring, once again, to Boyarin's book, the ability to decipher the contents of the Midrash and present it in an understandable manner occurs when gaps in the Scripture are analogized with familiar objects /themes—e.g., God likened to a king. In his chapter on "Dual Signs, Ambiguity, and the Dialectic of Intertextual Readings" Boyarin takes the gaps of the Biblical texts one-step further. In an earlier chapter, Boyarin states that the gaps within the Scriptures are to be "filled by strong readers" (16); the gaps are the essential driving forces of the Midrashic text since it allows for a play on the contents of the Midrash. But, in chapter four of his book, Boyarin cites Michael Riffaterre's notion of intertextuality, stating that Riffaterre's most important notion is the concept of the "ungrammaticality," the awkwardness of a textual moment, at any linguistic or discourse level, which by its awkwardness points semiotically to another text which provides a key to its decoding" (57). But, given this idea of the ungrammaticality of the Scripture, how can individuals apply

this aspect in their own decoding of the Bible? Are all interpretations valid, or is this claim a fallacy?

In many instances, the Bible characterizes humanity as an extension of God. In chapter one of “Genesis”, verse twenty-seven, humankind is likened to the image of God. Genesis states that, “God created humankind in his image” (1). If humankind was created in the image of the Lord, can it not be argued that humans possess the capability to contact/extend themselves to God since they are, in essence, an extension of Him? The Midrash, moreover, the Bible, allows this notion of the written word of God to be explored in various manners and interpretations. Many of the Rabbis in the Midrash draw different conclusions concerning the text because the ungrammatical nature of the text allows for a plurality of readings. The Midrashists, in most cases, rarely condemn and/or resolve their own (or other) interpretations in order to promote their own (self-interests). The main ideas concerning the Midrash are that it is an exclusive text, but with many openings that directly point to the gapped text of the Bible—both need each other in order to make the other relevant. You cannot have an interpretation without the interpreter.

When Midrashists refer to the Bible, they treat the passages that they cite as a part of a wider, greater whole. And because the Midrash contains many opposing and divergent viewpoints, it seems, that the word of the Lord, as a result, can be fully expressed. By showing more than one alternative to certain passages of the Torah the Rabbis implicitly acknowledge that the Bible does not contain any fixed meanings, but instead pose various possibilities that can be grasped by its interpreters. The act of decentring and displacing of the Bible shows the Bible’s ambiguous nature—which invites interpreters to examine its contents. In the Midrash, the clarity of an interpretation depends on the interpreter’s ability to successfully analogize and include citations of the Bible that can sometimes be viewed as arbitrary referents. The spontaneous nature of the Midrash is exemplified when the Rabbis *jump* around from citation to citation in the hopes of unifying the gaps in the Torah. Once again, the success of an interpretation depends on the interpreter’s ability to displace (or re-place) a narrative, while comparing it to another verse or passage. If, for instance, a comparison of one Rabbi is feasible, other Rabbis can use the same interpretation as a “starting-point” for their own interpretation—that can, consequently, displace or restructure the themes of different texts; it is a never-ending process of decoding and subversion. The ability for one Rabbi to play on the concept or ideas of another represents the

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Midrashist's skill in being able to play on the words that are contained within its own text; as a result the Midrash is an example of intertextual text since it is mediated by, both, the Bible and interpretations of other Rabbis.

In a general sense, Intertextuality assumes that no text can exist without its relation to other texts. When considering the nature of the Midrash, the definition of intertextuality is fitting since within the Midrash there are constant references to the meta-text, the Bible. From the notion of intertextuality, there stems the notion that through the decoding of signs the main idea or theme of a text can be extracted and further deconstructed. Keeping this in mind, contemporary readers of the Bible can use the Midrash as points of reference that may enable them to understand the complexities of the Scriptures, while at the same time clarifying its positions. Since the process of interpreting the Midrash is, both, an ancient and continuing process, future generations will continue ponder on the meanings that are embedded within the Bible and relate it to their own lives. As a result, the text of the Bible can be viewed as a self-reflexive text that will continue to baffle and generate infinite, yet bridging notions of its contents and meanings.

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