

MIDRASH AS CREATIVE HISTORIOGRAPHY: PORTRAIT OF A MISNOMER

CHARLES L. QUARLES*

The term “midrash” is appearing with increasingly greater frequency in discussions among NT scholars today. Unfortunately many students of the NT use the term with completely different intents.¹ Some use it to designate rabbinic methods of Scriptural interpretation. Others use it in a very different sense to designate creative historiography that produces theological tales with little or no connection to actual history. As NT students attempt to sift through this confusing nomenclature, they should consider carefully the explanations of the nature and essential characteristics of midrash offered by those who specialize in rabbinic literature.² More importantly, they should examine the ancient usage of the term to discover its meaning during the NT era.

I. THE IMPORTANCE OF A CLEAR UNDERSTANDING OF ANCIENT MIDRASH FOR GOSPEL RESEARCH

Some NT scholars such as Michael Goulder, John Drury, Robert Gundry and most recently John Shelby Spong have argued that the gospels, in whole or in part, belong to a genre of literature that is nonhistorical by definition. They have suggested that alleged instances of creative historiography in the gospels may be understood in light of the practice of rabbinic midrash.³

Gundry’s analysis of Matthew’s “literary and theological art” sought to justify the presence of alleged nonhistorical elements in the gospel by an appeal to the function of ancient literary genres in general and midrash in

* Charles Quarles is senior pastor at Hickory Ridge Baptist Church, 4221 Crump Road, Memphis, TN 38141.

¹ P. S. Alexander, “Midrash and the Gospels,” *Synoptic Studies: The Ampleforth Conferences of 1982 and 1983* (ed. C. M. Tuckett; Sheffield: JSOT, 1984) 1. See also A. Wright, “The Literary Genre Midrash,” *CBQ* 28 (1966) 120–121.

² A twenty-four-page summary of these explanations from the research of S. Zeitlin, J. W. Doeve, R. Bloch, M. Gertner, A. Wright, G. Vermes, J. Neusner, H. Maccoby and G. Porton is contained in C. L. Quarles, *An Analysis of Midrash Criticism as Applied to the Synoptic Birth Narratives* (dissertation; Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 1994).

³ See M. Goulder, *Midrash and Lection in Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1974); J. Drury, *Tradition and Design in Luke’s Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1976); R. H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982); J. S. Spong, *Born of Woman: A Bishop Rethinks the Virgin Birth and the Treatment of Women by a Male-Dominated Church* (New York: Harper, 1992); *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?* (New York: Harper, 1994).

particular.⁴ Gundry argued that the assignment of gospel material to a non-historical genre permits the midrash critic to deny the historicity of the material and yet affirm both its truthfulness and inspiration:

If then Matthew writes that Jesus said or did something Jesus did not say or do in the way described—we have to say that Matthew did not write entirely reportorial history. Comparison with midrashic and haggadic literature of his era suggests he did not intend to do so. . . . What Matthew wrote bears the stamp of inspiration in the meaning he intended—be it historical, unhistorical, or a mixture of the two.⁵

He later added: “Matthew is not writing as a historian; he is writing as a midrashist and haggadist who bends and shapes his materials to make certain points.”⁶ According to this line of thought, if one classifies gospel portions as belonging to a nonhistorical genre the integrity of the writer is upheld and the theological truth presented by the writer may conscientiously be affirmed even in the face of nonhistorical elements. Thus historical reductionism may become compatible with evangelical faith.

Gundry’s view required the assumption that the nonhistorical genre the writer allegedly used was familiar to both the writer and his readers. Gundry claimed that ancient midrash demonstrated that the mixture of history and nonhistory in a narrative was a “recognized and accepted mode of communication” in the Matthean period.⁷ Despite his caution in other areas of his research, Gundry presented no compelling evidence for his assessment of first-century midrash.

As midrash criticism emerges in NT scholarship as a critical approach in its own right, careful examination of early midrash is greatly needed. Since midrash critics typically assume that midrash was a genre familiar and acceptable to the gospel writers and their readers, it is appropriate to give special consideration to self-described midrash before and during the apostolic period.

II. THE MEANING OF THE TERM “MIDRASH” IN ANCIENT LITERATURE

The only known occurrences of the word “midrash” in literature that were antecedent or contemporaneous to the composition of the gospels are two occurrences in 2 Chronicles, one in the Apocrypha and five in the QL. The references to midrash in the Mishna only shortly postdate the composition of the gospels. This section of the article carefully examines the contextual usage of “midrash” in each of these early sources.

The two Biblical occurrences of the noun *midraš* appear in 2 Chr 13:22; 24:27. In these contexts lexicographers define the term as “Auslegung, Erörterung,” “study, exposition,” or “exposition, commentary.”⁸ The translators of

⁴ Gundry, *Matthew* 627–628.

⁵ *Ibid.* 629.

⁶ *Ibid.* 633.

⁷ *Ibid.* 630, 632.

⁸ KB 497–498; BDB 205; S. Wagner, “*dāraš*,” *TDOT* 3.305–306.

the LXX were not aware of any specialized meaning of the noun. They translated *midrāš* in 2 Chr 24:27 as *graphēn* and in 13:22 as *bibliō*. But the use of *midrāš* in 2 Chr 24:27 in construct with the noun *sēper* suggests that *midrāš* had a more specific sense than merely “book” and that it commented upon the *sēper* in some fashion.⁹ Since the precise nature of the relationship between *midrāš* and *sēper* cannot be determined, one should avoid attempts at more specific definitions and uphold the general definitions supplied by the major lexica.

The single occurrence of *midrāš* in the Apocrypha is in Sir 51:23: “Draw near to me, you who are uneducated, and lodge in the house of instruction (*midrāš*).” While some identify the midrash performed at the house of midrash as study or education in general, some clues in Sirach suggest that *midrāš* was specifically Scriptural interpretation.

First, in Sir 10:5 the author spoke of how the Lord conferred honor upon the lawgiver or scribe. This hints that Joshua ben Sirach may have been among the scribes and that his “house of instruction” may have been a place of scribal training.

Second, Sir 38:24–39:11 explained how only the scribe had the opportunity to attain true wisdom. The passage suggested that the exalted task of the scribe focused primarily on Scriptural interpretation, “the study of the law,” and that this was the area of focus in the training offered at the house of midrash. The passage also suggested that Scriptural interpretation was guided by “the sayings of the famous,” which is probably to be identified with the halakah and sought to give a precise interpretation and application of the Scriptural text.¹⁰

Finally, the prologue to Sirach (ca. 132 BC) hints that the purpose of the house of midrash was training in the interpretation and moral application of Scripture. The focus of Joshua in the house of midrash was “the reading of the Law and the Prophets”—that is, the study of Scripture. The study of the “other books of our ancestors” probably focused on the Hagiographa since they were earlier identified as “the Scriptures.” The purpose was to guide others in “living according to the law.” Thus the prologue suggests that Ben Sirach’s house of midrash in Jerusalem was a school where students were trained to interpret Scripture for the purpose of creating halakah. So the term midrash in the OT Apocrypha meant simply “Scriptural interpretation.”

Karl Georg Kuhn found five occurrences of the word *midrāš* in the Qumran literature available to him: (1) 1QS 6:24: *yšptw bm bmdrš yhd*, (2) 1QS 8:15: *hy³h mdrš htwrh*, (3) 1QS 8:26: *ʔm ttm dkrw . . . bmdrš*, (4) 4QFlor 1:14: *mdrš m³šry h²yš*, and (5) CD 20:6: *kpy mdrš htwrh*.¹¹ In Qumran

⁹ The NIV translates *midrāš* here as “annotations,” while the NRSV translates it as “commentary.”

¹⁰ For a more detailed analysis of this passage see P. W. Skehan and A. A. Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira* (AB 39; New York: Doubleday, 1987) 445–453. Di Lella noted that the “sayings of the famous” included “wisdom lore not only of his own tradition, but also of other cultures,” basing his argument on Sir 39:2–3 (p. 452). But Sirach 44–50 identifies the “famous” (44:1) as Jewish ancestors who “were wise in their words of instruction” (44:4).

¹¹ K. G. Kuhn, “*mdrš*,” *Konkordanz zu den Qumrantexten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1960) 115.

usage the term “midrash” appears to have the sense of “study, inquiry, examination.”

In 1QS 6:24; 8:26 *midrāš* seems to describe the activity of a court or community of inquiry. It is unclear whether the midrash practiced by this group was specifically Scriptural interpretation or simply an inquiry into persons who had allegedly infringed the Community Rule, a legal interrogation. In 6:24 the context, which discusses the penalty for infringements of the Community Rule, favors the latter understanding.¹² As CD 20:6–8 makes clear, however, the behavior of the subject in question would have been evaluated in light of careful study of the Biblical text. Even if *midrāš* in this context refers primarily to judicial inquiry, such inquiry included Scriptural interpretation.¹³

In 1QS 8:15 *midrāš* refers specifically to the study of the Law and Prophets:

*Prepare in the wilderness the way of . . . , make straight in the desert a path for our God (Isa. xl,3). This (path) is the study [mḏrš] of the Law which He commanded by the hand of Moses, that they may do according to all that has been revealed from age to age, and as the Prophets have revealed by His Holy Spirit.*¹⁴

The word spoke of an inquiry into the Biblical text (Law and Prophets), thus signifying Biblical interpretation. The centrality of this activity among the members of the Qumran sect is demonstrated by the assertion that midrash prepared the path for God. Evidently the sectarians believed that midrashic activity was crucial to the fulfillment of their eschatological hopes.¹⁵

The word “midrash” also occurred in 4QFlor 1:14:

Midrash of “Happy is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked”; the real interpretation [*pšr*] of the matter concerns those who turn aside from the way of (sinners concerning) whom it is written in the book of Isaiah. . . .¹⁶

This occurrence is significant because of the relationship of *midrāš* to the word *pšr*. According to Maurya Horgan, with one exception the noun *pšr* always occurred in Qumran material as part of a stereotyped formula introducing the interpretation of a Biblical text. The one exception, 1Q30, refers to distinct works of Biblical interpretation, possibly written commentaries.¹⁷

The author of 4QFlor clearly viewed *midrāš* and *pšr* as synonymous in this context. Thus the Biblical interpretation offered in this passage demon-

¹² See Wagner, “*dāras*” 297–298, 307. He demonstrated that the legal sense of the root is fairly common in the OT.

¹³ See A. R. C. Leaney, *The Rule of Qumran and Its Meaning: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966) 210, for a translation of the passage that supports this conclusion.

¹⁴ G. Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (3d ed.; Sheffield; JSOT, 1987) 73.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 52–57.

¹⁶ G. J. Brooke, *Exegesis at Qumran: 4QFlorilegium in Its Jewish Context* (JSOTSup 29; ed. D. Clines and P. Davies; Sheffield: JSOT, 1985) 92–93.

¹⁷ M. Horgan, *Pesharim: Qumran Interpretations of Biblical Books* (CBQMS 8; ed. B. Vawter; Washington: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1979) 233.

strates the basic characteristics of midrash as practiced by the Qumran community. Qumran midrash was directly related to a cited canonical text and attempted to make the ancient text relevant for contemporary readers. This latter tendency is demonstrated by the author's identification of the Sons of Zadok as the fulfillment of the prophecies of Isaiah and Ezekiel.

The Damascus Covenant also used the word "midrash" in the general sense of Scriptural interpretation. In this context the "midrash of the Torah" is the study of Mosaic law for the purpose of establishing halakah. The expressed purpose of the midrash was to provide light in which men of holiness may walk (*mdrš htwrh ʿšr ythlkw*).¹⁸ Thus throughout the QL the term "midrash" consistently described the study of Scripture that attempted to discover the ethical and doctrinal ramifications of the ancient text.

Perhaps the most important source for understanding rabbinic midrash in the first century is the Mishna. While it was not compiled until approximately AD 200, many of the sayings of the rabbis included in it date to the first century. If midrash was evolving from an interpretive activity as in the OT, Apocrypha and QL into a creative activity during the NT era, this evolution would be apparent in the mishnaic references. Hermann Strack and G. Stemmerger have listed four occurrences of the term *midrāš* in the Mishna. First, the term appeared in *m. π bot* 1:17:

Simeon his [Gamaliel's] son said: "All my days have I grown up among the Sages and I have found naught better for a man than silence; and not the expounding (of the Law) is the chief thing but the doing (of it); and he that multiplies words occasions sin."¹⁹

Here the term meant "research" or "study" of the Torah. The contrast between silence and midrash suggests that it may have been an oral activity. The implicit equation of midrash with the multiplication of words hints that the interpretation of the Scriptural text may have been very detailed. In *m. Šeqal.* 6:6 midrash again speaks of the "exposition" or "interpretation" of Scripture and designates Jehoiada's interpretation of Lev 5:14–19, which explained the proper handling of freewill offerings.

In a broader sense the term was used to speak of the study or interpretation of texts other than Scripture. It appeared in *m. Ketub.* 4:6 to describe Eleazar's midrash of the Ketubah scroll formula in which a husband assigned a particular amount of money to his wife in the event that the husband died or divorced her.²⁰ The scroll was the object of careful and precise literal interpretation. Apparently the term broadened in application during the early rabbinic period to encompass the interpretation not only of divine law but

¹⁸ P. R. Davies, *The Damascus Covenant* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1983) 262.

¹⁹ All quotations from the Mishna were taken from H. Danby, *The Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1933). While the Hebrew text did not actually designate the Law as the object of midrash here, most translators recognize that the interpretation of the Law was in view. In addition to Danby see *Mishnayoth* (ed. P. Blackman; New York: Judaica, 1963); J. Neusner, *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven and London: Yale University, 1988).

²⁰ See the note in Danby, *Mishnah* 250. This portion of the Ketubah scroll formula also appears in *m. Ketub.* 13:3; *m. B. Bat.* 9:1.

also of human legal documents. This occurrence clarifies the methodology of early midrash. The transfer of the term “midrash” from Scriptural exegesis to legal exegesis suggests a methodological consistency between these two forms of interpretation and hints that the Scriptural interpretation bearing this designation searched for the precise literal sense of the text.

In *m. Šabb.* 16:1; *m. Pesah.* 4:4 the term was used to speak of the “house of midrash.” Here one finds clues that confirm the evidence from Sirach that the house of midrash was dedicated to the study of Scripture specifically. First, *m. Pesah.* 4:4 differentiates between the synagogue and the house of study suggesting that “house of midrash” speaks specifically of a place of rabbinic training. Second, *m. Šabb.* 16:1 states that “certain among the Scriptures” (the Hagiographa) were not read on the Sabbath “lest they make the house of study of none effect.” Since even the Hagiographa were excluded from study in the house of midrash, one is justified in assuming that except for important legal documents noncanonical literature was not an object of midrash.

During and before the apostolic period there is no clear evidence that midrash was viewed as a specific literary genre. In this era the term “midrash” spoke most often of Scriptural interpretation in a general sense. It referred more to an activity than to a genre. The foundations for the rabbinic use of *midrāš* as indicating a specific form of interpretation can be seen even in QL. While *pšr* was the preferable term for describing a fixed form of Scriptural interpretation in which a text was cited and then an explanation given, *midrāš* was used in some contexts as an appropriate synonym.²¹

While it is doubtful that midrash was an established literary genre in the time of the gospel writers, it is even less plausible to define midrash as a distinctly nonhistorical genre during this period. The data of the ancient texts indicate that during the early rabbinic era the word *midrāš* indicated serious and reverent study that attempted to arrive at the original sense of the text. Even during the time of the Babylonian Amoraim when the meaning of midrash was influenced by the broader sense of haggadah, the primary sense of the term designated Scriptural interpretation rather than specifically legendary material.²²

This suggests that NT scholars should not use the term “midrash” to describe alleged creative historiography during the time of the gospel writers. Any appeal to late haggadic midrash to support the possibility of the gospels using a nonhistorical creative genre is anachronistic since one cannot demonstrate that the term “midrash” carried such connotations in the first century. In the NT era, midrash designated the exposition of Scripture and had nothing to do with the assimilation of historical and nonhistorical elements.

²¹ Horgan, *Pesharim* 239–244.

²² For the meaning of the term “midrash” in the targums, Talmud and Midrash see J. Buxtorf, “*midrāš*,” *Lexicon Chaldaicum, Talmudicum et Rabbinicum* (New York: Georg Olms, 1977) cols. 583–585; M. Jastrow, “*midrāš*,” *The Dictionary of the Talmud* (Brooklyn: Judaica, 1903) 735; G. H. Dalman, “*midrāš*,” *Aramäisch-Neuhebräisches Handwörterbuch zu Targum, Talmud und Midrasch* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1967) 226.

Midrash, as applied to first-century literature that is intentionally and essentially nonhistorical, is a misnomer.

III. THE DANGER OF IMPRECISE NOMENCLATURE

Some may object that this challenge to an anachronistic use of the term “midrash” is trivial. After all, “a rose by any other name smells just as sweet.” Evidence that our modern nomenclature fails to appreciate the etymology of the term does not disprove the existence of first-century creative historiography with characteristics like the misnamed midrash genre. Proper labeling of early genres, however, amounts to more than mere quibbling over semantics. Proper labeling of ancient genres may avert serious yet subtle threats to Biblical inerrancy and, more specifically, to gospel historicity.

The danger of the term “midrash” as used by many NT scholars today is the confusion that arises through the use of a single term to describe both legitimate interpretive activity and creative historiography. Certainly NT writers affirmed and utilized rabbinic methods of Scriptural interpretation. The NT is filled with midrash in this historic sense of the term.²³ This does not imply that they would regard creative historiography, a completely different issue, as a “recognized and acceptable mode of communication.” But by lumping both the interpretive activity and the creative genre under the same label, many fail to see the distinction between the two different senses of midrash. They incautiously assume that the Biblical writers’ usage of midrash as an interpretive method implies their acceptance of midrash as creative historiography that invents accounts with no real connection to history for the sake of communicating some spiritual truth.

A better term for describing first-century creative historiography is the more candid label “Jewish myth.” This description has the advantage of being the label explicitly applied to the genre by a NT writer who was familiar with first-century Jewish genres. It also avoids the confusion between midrash as a method of Biblical interpretation and midrash as creative historiography. This nomenclature prevents the incautious assumption that the NT writers’ use of the midrashic method implies their acceptance of the midrash genre.

The use of the Biblical nomenclature highlights the early Church’s abhorrence for an artistic and imaginative narrative presented as authentic historical tradition. In 1 Tim 4:6–7 Paul wrote: “If you point these things out to the brothers, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, brought up in the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed. Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives’ tales; rather, train yourself to be godly.” The Greek construction translated as “godless myths and old wives’ tales” is *bebēlous kai graōdeis mythous*. The first adjective described

²³ A succinct but persuasive discussion of Paul’s use of rabbinic midrash techniques is J. Jeremias, “Paulus als Hillelit,” *Neotestamentica et Semitica* (ed. E. Ellis and M. Wilcox; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1969).

myths as “profane,” “unhallowed,” or “worldly.”²⁴ G. Stählin wrote concerning this description: “It can hardly be said more plainly that the *mythoi* and NT religion are mutually exclusive.”²⁵ The second adjective described myths as “characteristic of old women.” It portrayed the myths as “childish” and “unworthy of a man.”²⁶ It was a term of contempt. One must not view the adjectives as an attempt to prohibit only a particular kind of myth, thereby approving other types. In 1 Tim 1:4 utter disregard for the use of “myths” by Christians was expressed and no special categorization was offered. Evidently the writer viewed all myth as *bebēlos* and *graōdēs*.

The myths to which Paul referred in the pastorals were probably examples of Jewish haggadah, the very genre to which some gospel narratives are assigned by midrash critics.²⁷ Three evidences stand in favor of this identification: (1) This was the view of many of the early Church fathers in both the east and west; (2) in 1 Tim 1:4 myths are linked with “genealogies,” which were given particular emphasis in Judaism; and (3) in Titus 1:14 the myths were described as particularly “Jewish” (*Ioudaikoi*).²⁸

The contempt of the apostle for myth, including both Jewish and pagan myth, was shared by subsequent generations of orthodox Christians. According to Tertullian’s treatise on baptism, though the presbyter who wrote the *Acts of Paul* did so out of love for the apostle he was displaced from office without hesitation.²⁹ Furthermore the apologists Aristides, Tatian and Athenagoras, as well as the Alexandrians Clement and Origen, disparagingly contrasted myths with the gospel accounts and unanimously rejected these myths.³⁰ The clear prohibition against usage of this genre by Paul and the early Church makes assignment of the canonical gospels to this genre implausible.

While a rose by any other name may smell just as sweet, when the genre midrash is given the more historically accurate label “Jewish myth” a definite stench suddenly arises. When one moves beyond the slippery term “midrash,” the genre that midrash critics portray as a “recognized and acceptable form of communication” to Matthew and his early Christian readers becomes unacceptable.

²⁴ BAG 138. See 1 Tim 1:9, where the adjective is grouped together with the descriptions of certain people as lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and *bebēlois*.

²⁵ G. Stählin, “*mythos*,” *TDNT* 6.787.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 788.

²⁷ I have argued elsewhere that several of the alleged instances of early Jewish or Christian creative historiography (1QapGen, *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*, the works of Josephus, and the Protevangelium of James) do not belong to the midrash genre (Quarles, *Analysis* 86–95). The first three works are probably the product of evolving tradition rather than intentional invention of nonhistorical narratives. While the Protevangelium is a clear example of creative historiography, internal evidence suggests that it was produced by a gnostic writer holding truth ideals that were very different from orthodox Christianity. But though many of the supposed examples of early creative historiography are unconvincing, the clear reference to Jewish myth by the apostle makes it unwise to insist with some that creative historiography did not exist in the early Christian era.

²⁸ Stählin, “*mythos*” 786–789.

²⁹ Tertullian *De Baptismo* 17.

³⁰ Stählin, “*mythos*” 792.