 Borough Park Symposium V

Midrash and the Bible

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In this paper, I explore the relevance of Midrash for biblical interpretation, including both the Tanakh and the New Testament.

Midrash[[1]](#footnote-1) is a genre of rabbinic commentary on the Tanakh produced by rabbis in the Land of Israel in approximately the first seven centuries of the Common Era. The rabbis studied the full spectrum of the Tanakh’s content, with an emphasis on God’s relationship with Israel. On the basis of their study, they produced comments (midrashim) that embody their interpretations. However, as Midrash scholar David Stern[[2]](#footnote-2) observes, “[M]idrash appears to have been not only an effort of interpretation but a project of organizing and preserving the multiple interpretive traditions of the past” (Stern 2004, 108). This collective effort produced an interpretive tradition that has played an important role in Jewish thought from the rabbis’ day until now.

A great strength of the midrashic tradition is its preservation not only of consensus, but also of argument and dissent, among the rabbis. This has the cumulate effect of casting a spectrum of light on the Tanakh’s important themes and issues and developing them in rich ways. Given the canonical relationship between the Tanakh and the New Testament, many or most of these themes and issues are present in the New Testament as well. Thus, when Midrash sheds light on themes and issues that appear throughout the Bible, it can help us to better understand the New Testament in canonical and traditional contexts.

I illustrate this approach with a narrative woven from a number of biblical texts and three midrashim. All of these relate to God dwelling with his people in Israel, the Body of Messiah, and/or New Jerusalem.

The main ‘character” of the midrashim is the Shekhinah, which is a personification of God. It is typically translated as God’s “Presence.” However, recent study has cast a somewhat different light on the word "Shekhinah."

The Shekhinah does not appear in the Bible. We do not know who coined the word, but it appears among the earliest midrashim, including our three, which date to about 150 to 175 C.E. (This date will prove to be important.)

The noun “Shekhinah" [שכינה] developed directly from the Hebrew verb *shakhan* [שכן], meaning “dwell.” According to rabbinics scholar Steven Fraade, the Shekhinah is not merely a personification of God, but a “personification of the divine indwelling within Israel or a segment thereof” (Fraade, 133).[[3]](#footnote-3), [[4]](#footnote-4)

Our first midrash comments on Genesis 46:2–5, where God speaks to Israel (or Jacob) in visions.

2 And God spoke to Israel in visions of the night and said, “Jacob, Jacob.”. . . Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt . . . 4 I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again, and Joseph's hand shall close your eyes.” 5 Then Jacob set out from Beersheba. The sons of Israel carried Jacob, their father [down to Egypt] . . .

Given the subsequent narrative, this vision is difficult to understand. God seemingly invites Jacob to believe that he, or he and his family, will return from Egypt to the Land, where he will die, and Joseph will close his eyes. Since Jacob died in Egypt, and was returned to the Land only as bones, Genesis 46:2–5 cannot be taken literally. And indeed, commentators generally refer the promise to Jacob’s posterity, who will eventually return to the Land in the Exodus. The rabbis who produced our first midrash took a similar approach.

When Israel went down to Egypt the Shekhinah went down with them, as it is said: *I will go down with you to Egypt* (Gen 46:4). When they came up from Egypt [in the Exodus], the Shekhinah came up with them, as it is said: *And I will also surely bring you up again* (ibid.).

However, the midrash differs from common interpretations in at least two important differences. First, it implicitly refers the promise to Israel (the man Jacob and the people Israel). Second, and equally important for our narrative, is the claim that the Shekhinah went down with them to Egypt and came up with them to the Land. By using the word “Shekhinah,” the midrash claims that God dwelled with or among Israel, beginning when they went down into Egypt.

Our midrash continues with a narrative of the Shekhinah accompanying Israel as they crossed the Sea, travelled through the wilderness, and arrived at the inauguration of the Tabernacle, citing Tanakh verses to support each claim.

Meanwhile, in the Torah, God first dwells among Israel at the inauguration of the Tabernacle, the very event that concludes the first midrash. At Sinai, God prepares Israel for this event, saying to Moses, “I will place my Tabernacle among you, and my soul shall not abhor[[5]](#footnote-5) you. And I will walk among you and I will be your God, and you shall be my people” (Leviticus 26:11–12). These verses form a paradigm that joins God dwelling among Israel to his relationship with them. These verses are later cited in three key biblical verses, one in Ezekiel and two in the New Testament.

Still in Leviticus 26, the next verse, verse 13, God adds, “I am the L-rd your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that you should not be their slaves.” As we know, God brought Israel out of Egypt to free them from slavery.

Yet, God had another purpose for the Exodus. In Exodus 29, he explains that he will meet with Israel in the Tabernacle, dwell among them, and be their God. Then “they shall know that I am the L-rd their God who brought out of the land of Egyptthat I might dwell among them” (Exod 29:46).

So, in addition to freeing Israel from slavery, God’s purpose was to dwell among them as their God and for them to know that he brought them out of Egypt for this purpose.

In the biblical accounts, God dwelled among Israel in the Tabernacle, and then in the Temple, for nearly a millenium, during which the Land became increasingly impure due to Israel’s various sins. The question naturally arises, “Why did a holy God continue to dwell among Israel under these conditions?” As far as I know, the Tanakh does not provide an answer to this question.

However, our second midrash[[6]](#footnote-6) does offer one. It reads, “Beloved are Israel, for even when they are impure the Shekhinah is among them, as it is said, ‘for I dwell in their midst [in the Tabernacle] in the midst of their impurities’” (Lev 16:16). The most toxic impurity arose from was bloodshed, which pollutes the Land where Israel lives and where God dwells in their midst (Numbers 35:33–34).

In many places in the Torah, God warns Israel that he will expel them from the Land if they reject him by disobeying his commandments. Our midrash explains the fact that God remained among Israel for so long because they were “beloved” of God. Clearly, God’s “love is patient” (1 Corinthians 13:4).

The point of the midrash is not to minimize Israel’s impurity, but to emphasize God’s love.

Yet, while God’s "love is patient," there came a time when judgment was in order. He withdrew from the Temple as the Babylonians destroyed it and carried the two southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin into exile.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Our third and final midrash comments on God’s presence with or among Israel in exile.[[8]](#footnote-8) It begins, “Rabbi Nathan says: Beloved are Israel, for in every place where they are exiled the Shekhinah is with them.” Then Rabbi Nathan mentions four places where the Shekhinah would be with Israel in exile—Egypt (in the time of Pharoah[[9]](#footnote-9)), Babylon, Elam, and Edom.[[10]](#footnote-10) And the Shekhinah will be with them when they return to the Land. This narrative is supported with a series of biblical citations.

Thus, God is with or among Israel in exile even as he was with or among them in their impurities. And he is with them in both cases because they are beloved of God.

Taken together, or second and third midrashim make the dramatic statement that Israel is beloved regardless of circumstances. For just as God dwelled among Israel even in their impurities, he continued to dwell among them in the exile in the midst of impure and idolatrous nations. Thus, in two ways, the Shekhinah’s presence with Israel demonstrates God’s love for them.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Ezekiel 37 is an account of the vision of the valley of dry bones. Toward the end of the vision, God promises to return Israel to the Land, where the Davidic King Messiah will reign over them. God promises to “set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Ezekiel 37:26–27). This is the first of three citations of the paradigm in Leviticus 26. When Israel has been brought back to the Land, the Messianic Temple will be an expression of what God promised Israel at Mt. Sinai. God’s dwelling place shall be among Israel and his relationship with them will be perpetual.

So, the midrashim fill out the narrative by claiming that God was with or among Israel from their first steps down to Egypt all the way to the inauguration of the Tabernacle, and again in their exile. And they specify that the Shekhinah is with Israel, regardless of circumstances, because they are beloved of God. Taking Midrash and the Tanakh together, God was, and remains, with Israel during their entire communal existence.

Our three midrashim, which were produced about a century after the Temple’s destruction in 70 CE, were not mere exercises in commentary. The community was still experiencing the trauma of that event and the continued absence of the temple as a central component of the Jewish way of life. Since the Shekhinah accompanies Israel at all times and in every place despite their failings, God has not abandoned them now or stopped loving them.

The New Testament

As the books of the New Testament were being written, the Tanakh, though not yet complete, was deemed to be sufficient for the needs of Yeshua-believers, as Paul wrote, “All Scripture [meaning, the Tanakh] is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for reproof,” etc. (2 Timothy 3:16). On the basis of the Tanakh, a person could be “complete, equipped for every good work” (ibid., 17).

Over time, a number of apostolic writings were also deemed necessary for the needs of God's people. It was particularly important to provide them with more explicit elucidations of the person and work of Messiah Yeshua and of the nature of the Body of Messiah, the Church, which is not anticipated in the Tanakh.

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, writes that he was given “insight into the mystery of Messiah, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations . . . that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the Body [of Messiah], and fellow partakers of the promise in Messiah Yeshua through the gospel” (Ephesians 3:4-6). For Jewish and Gentile followers of Messiah Yeshua “are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (ibid., 2:22). Peter describes this as a building made of “living stones” (1 Peter 2:5).

Thus, as God continued to dwell with Israel, a new dwelling place of God had come into existence, born on the day of Shavuot (Acts, Chapter 2).

The Body of Messiah is akin to Israel, as Paul argues in Second Corinthians 6:16, where he quotes the now familiar Leviticus 26 as a precedent or analogy for his claim that God dwells among the Body of Messiah. His purpose is to convince the Corinthians to have nothing to do with idols. He writes,

What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we [you who are predominantly Gentile and we Jews] are the Temple of the living God; as God said,

I will make my dwelling among them

and walk about among them

and will be their God,

and they shall be my people.

Paul’s logic is simple. We know from Leviticus 26 that God dwells with Israel, a dwelling that is integrally tied to his relationship with them. In a similar way, God dwells among the Body of Messiah. Paul follows this with a citation of Isaiah 52:11, where Isaiah urges Israel to separate themselves from idolatry. The Corinthians should do likewise.

Paul’s argument is based on the similarity between Israel and the Body of Messiah. Just as Israel is beloved of God, this new dwelling place originates in “the great love with which [Messiah] loved us” (Eph 2:4). And “from Messiah . . . [it] builds itself up in love (Eph 4:5–16). This is especially significant because in Messiah Yeshua, “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell . . . bodily” (Col 1:19, 2:9). The Body of Messiah originates and builds itself up from Messiah, who is himself the complete dwelling place of God.

Our three midrashim apply to this new structure in fairly straight forward ways.

Just as God dwells in or with Israel from their beginning and throughout their imperfect existence, God will do likewise with the Body of Messiah throughout their imperfect existence. And he does all this because he loves Israel and the Body of Messiah with such great love. Thus, although Israel and the Body of Messiah are each unique, neither is entirely unique. They are associated in their origins in God’s love and in their role as dwelling places of God.

In Revelation 21, John the Revelator writes,

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place [or, Tabernacle] of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.” (Revelation 21:2–3).

So, like Israel and the Body of Messiah, New Jerusalem will reflect the paradigm of Leviticus 26. For in New Jerusalem, God will dwell among redeemed humanity; they will be his people and he will be their God. Since “the first heaven and the first earth had passed away” (Revelation 21:1) and “the former things have passed away” (ibid., 4), it would seem that there is no continuity between Israel and the Body of Messiah on the one hand and New Jerusalem on the other. Yet, if we can rely on our narrative, which is dependent on Midrash as certain points, there is a continuity between them that is found in God’s consistent desire to dwell among chosen human communities and his success in doing so.

In this paper, I have referenced three midrashim without claiming or implying that all Midrash would concur with them on every point. But I did my best to choose a few that are representative of the many. I suggest that a more complete study of Shekhinah midrashim would yield a far richer understanding of God dwelling among his people.

1. *Midrash* (upper-case “M”) is the genre; *a midrash* (lower-case “m”) is a single unit of Midrash; *midrashim* is the plural of *midrash*.). Midrash includes two sub-genres: halakhic Midrash, which focuses on implications of the mitzvot, and aggadic Midrash (generally referred to simply as “Midrash”) is concerned with all other aspects of the Tanakh. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In “Anthology and Polysemy in Classical Midrash.” In The Anthology in Jewish Literature, edited by David Stern, 108-139. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Fraade, Steven D. 2019. “The Innovation of Nominalized Verbs in Mishnaic Hebrew as Marking an Innovation of Concept” In Studies in Mishnaic Hebrew and Related Fields: Proceedings of the Yale Symposium on Mishnaic Hebrew, May 2014, edited by Elitzur A. Bar-Asher Siegal and Aaron J. Koller, 129–148. New Haven and Jerusalem: The Hebrew Language Academy Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In early rabbinic writings, the Shekhinah is said at times to be with worthy individuals or among small groups. These roughly parallel the most familiar Tanakh comment on God dwelling with individuals in Isaiah 57:15. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Abhor (Heb, ga’al) indicates the extreme hatred. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. From Sifré Numbers 161 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The ten northern tribes were taken into exile about 150 years earlier. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ezekiel 11:16 records that God was either “for a little while a sanctuary” or, less likely, “a little sanctuary” to Israel in all the countries where he scattered them. I do not wish to rest this part of the narrative on the less likely reading. In my view, there is no way to decide among several interpretative possibilities of either reading. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. “They were exiled to Egypt, as it is said, ‘Did I not reveal myself to the house of your father when they were in Egypt in the house of Pharaoh?’(1 Samuel 2:27).” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. He provides Tanakh references for each of these places. Rabbi Nathan includes Egypt prior to the Exodus among the places where God dwells with Israel in exile. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The rabbis who produced them did not draw only from the scriptures on which they commented, but on verses such as Deut 4:37 and 7:7, which affirm God’s love for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and their descendants—the people Israel.l [↑](#footnote-ref-11)