

WHAT IS MIDRASH?

(A look at the First Century Jewish methods of Bible interpretation, as used by Jesus and the Apostles)

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1Timothy 2:15

“Study to show yourself approved by God – a workman who need not be ashamed and who is rightly dividing the word of truth.”

Thought Starter

“To study Scripture is to begin a journey into the infinite mind of God.”

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Section 1: Creed and Deed

This study will begin with a simple proverb devised by the writer: -

*No purity of doctrine means
No purity of lifestyle and
The absence of right belief means
The absence of right practice*

Put simply, this proverb implies; *'no correct Creed means no correct deed.'* The doctrine of any true Messianic faith cannot be severed from their practical outworking. Faith and works are all part of the same package. To fully appreciate this, it is necessary to understand exactly what Scripture is saying. And it is here that three awkward questions arise: -

- 1) *"How is Scripture to be accurately interpreted?"*
- 2) *"How is it to be interpreted in such a way as to be free from all distorting cultural influences?"*
- 3) *"How can it to be interpreted in a manner that both honour's the Lord and his teaching as handed down by his Apostles?"*

In order to answer such questions it would prove useful to ask one more, namely; *"What is Midrash?"* The answer lies in the definition of the term *'Midrash'* itself and also in its origins within Scripture. A list showing the various forms of Midrash as used by the Biblical writers would also prove useful.

Briefly, *'Midrash'* refers to those methods of Bible interpretation employed by Jesus and the Apostles during the first century AD. It is derived from the Hebrew word *'Daresh,'* meaning *'to launch a thorough investigation'* or *'inquisitorial enquiry into something.'* It also has strong associations with such verbs as *'to interpret'* or *'to seek.'* Also present are connotations with the word *'urgency.'* The meaning of a passage is sought out in a mood of urgency rather than of casual interest. This is because Scripture itself is the very word of God. Consequently, Midrash simply means an urgent but rigorous, investigative interpretation into Divine revelation. As a discipline it is underpinned by the assumption that *any investigation into God's word could well be a matter of life or death.* If the results of that investigation are faulty, then the consequences could be truly devastating at the individual and wider corporate level.

However, the employment of the word *'Daresh'* in 2 Chronicle's 13:22 and 24:27 also indicates its association with the concept of *'story.'* Such a story may either be factual, (a record of historical events) or parabolic, (designed to illustrate a Biblical truth). Grasping either aspect is important because provides the key to seeing Scripture through First Century Jewish eyes. It certainly enables God's word to be interpreted in a more full and correct.

Another noteworthy point is that, as a discipline, Midrash grew in complexity over the centuries. This meant that the Midrashic methods employed by a medieval Rabbi would not necessarily have been those of the First Century. This is because the Medieval Rabbi would have had to take into account new challenges to his faith (most notably the presence of Christianity and Islam). Also Jewish scholarship itself continued to develop over the centuries and was responsive to fresh cultural influences (one of these being the rise of Cabalistic mysticism in the Jewish communities of medieval Spain). Interesting though such developments are, little can be said about them here for reasons of space. This booklet will focus almost exclusively upon the first century Midrash of Jesus and the Apostles.

A second key word is *'hermeneutics'* – derived from the Greek word *'hermeneuo,'* meaning *'to interpret'* or *'to explain.'* It is employed in John 1.38b where the word *'Rabbi'* is translated into the Greek Didaskalos meaning *'master'* or *'teacher.'* Very simply, Hermeneutics can be defined as the organised, methodical study and practice of Bible interpretation. More specifically, it examines the merits and demerits of particular methods of interpretation. If Midrash is more concerned with ascertaining, *"What does God's word really say about a particular topic?"* Then Hermeneutics' focus is upon resolving the question *"How can God's word be best interpreted?"* However, despite this difference in emphasis Midrash is an integral part of Bible Hermeneutics. After a long period of neglect within the Gentile Church Midrash is becoming an increasingly important discipline – of great practical value to the Church today.

Section 2: The Forms of Midrash

As an approach to Scripture, Midrash exists in various forms. In order of growing complexity these are: -

1) Basic (or Simple) Midrash

This represents the simplest type of Midrash and consists of: -

- a. A short quotation from Scripture.
- b. Followed by a brief *'running commentary'* that usually concentrates upon the literal meaning of the short quotation.
- c. This in turn is then followed by another brief quotation (or quotations) from other passages of Scripture.
- d. Another running commentary (or set of commentaries) accompanies this other quotation (or quotations). Once again, attention is usually only given to the literal meaning.
- e. Lastly, a concluding sentence (or quotation) may be used in order to sum up the main theme.

A Basic Midrash can either long or short. One example of a simple Midrash is found in Hebrews 2.

2) Comparative Midrash

In this instance, two or three complementary Bible passages are brought together in order to shed greater light upon one main topic or theme. The passages used to do this may vary in length from a few paraphrased verses to whole Books. One particular example of a comparative Midrash can be found in Hebrews 7 where Genesis 14:17-20 and Psalm 110:4 are brought together in order to highlight Christ's eternal Priesthood.

3) Contextual Midrash

This Midrash examines the context of a particular Bible passage in order to obtain its true meaning. Attention is paid to the author of the passage and to its historical and Spiritual background. A particular example of a Contextual Midrash occurs in Galatians 3:17 where Paul shows that the Mosaic Law came "Four hundred and thirty years after" Abraham.

4) Creedal (or Doctrinal) Midrash:

Greatly varying in length, this particular form of Midrash attempts to logically arrange Biblical teaching by setting it out in concise summary form. This is achieved in such a way that the connections existing between individual doctrines can be clearly seen. Often used to assist worship and rote learning, Creedal Midrash follows a set structure in which there is: -

- a. A sudden break in the immediately preceding statement.
- b. Formalised instruction, briefly summarising key Biblical truths.
- c. A logical arrangement of doctrines.
- d. A total absence of any visual imagery.
- e. A sudden, at times, almost abrupt ending.
- f. A brief commentary (or exhortation) seeking to elucidate key points and to show how any formal instruction may be applied in daily life.

Of especial note, is the clear distinction made between the more authoritative formalised teaching and the practical moral instruction surrounding it. Moreover, in terms of layout there is some resemblance to the early Creeds of the Church. Strongly reinforced is the possibility that these early statements of faith had their origins in first century Messianic Judaism rather than in third or fourth century Greek Hellenism. A particular example of this Midrash can be found in Ephesians 1:3f and also in Colossians 1:15-23.

5) Exempla Midrash

Here, the lives of those who died long ago are brought into focus and interpreted in a moralistic way having practical implications for those still living. Popular in Hellenistic Judaism, this type of Midrash assumes a structure where there is: -

- a. The statement of a theme.
- b. Selected persons are introduced who, by their lives help to illustrate that theme.
- c. After a brief re-cap of the main theme a practical application is given.

A particular example of this Midrash is found in Hebrews 11:1-12:13.

6) *Exodium (or Proem) Midrash*

This Midrash forms a rhetorical, near poetical prologue, outlining the major themes of a literary work in a forceful and direct manner. Often marking a dramatic start to a work its main purpose is to attract the attention of the reader. A particular example of This Midrash is found in John 1:1-18 (and also in Hebrews 1:1-4).

7) *Homiletic Midrash*

This Midrash offers simple doctrinal instruction by using a four-part structure comprising: -

- a. An introductory formula e.g. *'as it is written.'*
- b. A Harez (or *'pearl stringing'*) of a diverse collection of Bible passages; all gathered together in order to illustrate a key theme.
- c. A commentary showing how this collection of Bible passages confirms and explains the major theme under scrutiny.
- d. A final conclusion, made to sum up key points and to encourage practical application.

A particular example of this Midrash can be found in Romans 3:9-20.

8) *Parabolic Midrash*

This Midrash hopes to convey divinely revealed truth through the employment of vivid stories (parables), designed to gain the hearer's attention and to help him deal with Spiritual realities. It is mainly used with uneducated audiences who think visually, *i.e.* in picture terms. Parabolic Midrash often follows a definite structure comprising of: -

- a. A brief introductory phrase e.g. *'Hear another parable.'*
- b. A short, vivid story employing situations from daily life in order to illustrate one particular point. Sometimes a note of humour is struck; especially when hypocrisy is being exposed.
- c. A building up to a sudden, often surprising climax, designed to provoke thought and to challenge any sinful attitudes.
- d. An interpretation of the story, or the beginning of a *'question and answer'* dialogue. Sometimes, a brief concluding comment or a direct *'lead in'* to more formalised methods of Bible interpretation may be added. In contrast to allegories (where every detail may have significance) parables try only to convey one single point; three examples of this Midrash are found in Matthew 21:28-22:14.

9) *Parishiyot Midrash*

This more complex form of Midrash endeavours to resolve apparent contradictions in **Scripture** by using a definite structure that sets out to provide: -

- a. An introduction to the main theme.
- b. The employment of a standard introductory phrase at key points e.g. *'it is contained in the Scripture.'*
- c. The **Petkah** (or base passage) followed by a running commentary.
- d. An opposing intersecting (apparently contradictory) Bible passage with a running commentary.
- e. A final concluding (or reconciling) passage followed by a brief commentary resolving the apparent contradiction.

Often a Parishiyot Midrash may occur a number of times in order to resolve a whole series of problems. Sadly, over the centuries it has, as a technique, become seriously under-used in ecclesiastical theology. Its absence has perhaps contributed to an unnecessary prolongation of various doctrinal controversies. One possible example of such an unnecessary prolongation has been the long dispute over *'free will'* and *'predestination.'* A particular example of a Parishiyot Midrash can be found in 1 Peter 2:4-10.

10) *Peshar Midrash*

This too is a more complex form of Midrash comprising of: -

- a. A main, (sometimes lengthy or paraphrased) Bible quotation.
- b. An exegesis (simple exposition) usually including: -
 - Smaller re-quotes from the main passage.
 - Quotations from other Scriptural passages used to apply Deuteronomy 19:15 and to reinforce the main line of argument.
 - A practical application that may also include re-quotations and other Biblical material.

Throughout the main quotations the use of paraphrasing may denote the use of **remez**, (*'hinting'*). Here, only a few words, (sometimes the opening and closing words) of a passage are taken to encompass everything contained within that passage. The cry of dereliction in Matthew 27:46 is one example. Here Christ quotes the opening words of Psalm 22, thereby implying that the whole of Psalm 22 was applicable to Him. Similarly, the paraphrase of Genesis 14:17-20 in Hebrews 7:1-2 would have allowed for contemporary Jewish readers to realise that the whole of Genesis 14:17-20 was under review. A particular example of Peshar Midrash can be found in Hebrews 3:1-4:11 (and also in 7:1-8:5).

11) Rez-Peshar Midrash

Often integrated within other forms of Midrash, this particular approach attempts to interpret sacred mysteries and locate the fulfilment of particular prophecies through the employment of **Rez-Peshar** [mystery interpretation]. It employs the *'this [occurrence] is that [fulfilment of a prophecy]'* formula. The Apostle Peter employed it with great effect when (in Acts 2:16) he states *"But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel."* Clearly based upon the assumption that God's Word *'the Scriptures cannot be broken'* (John 10:35b), Rez-Peshar is dependent upon the belief that all unconditional Bible prophecies can have a number of literal fulfilments, often separated by long interludes of time. The *'this is that'* formula is a tool to finding such fulfilments. It does this by comparing the behaviour of social and religious actors from the different time periods. If strong similarities exist in their behaviour this formula can be used; indeed, the writer managed to apply it when he uncovered strong similarities in the behaviour of senior Anglican Clergy and the temple priesthood in Jeremiah's time. Although useful in relating contemporary events to divine revelation, Rez-Peshar can suffer from two drawbacks. Firstly, it is a somewhat blunt instrument that cannot by itself distinguish between a fulfilment of prophecy and a final, complete fulfilment which may only take place immediately prior to the Messiah's return. Secondly, it is not an appropriate tool to employ with prophecies (such as Isaiah 52:13-53:1f) which themselves were totally fulfilled at the Messiah's first coming. It should be used with caution when relating Scripture to contemporary affairs. A particular example of Rez-Peshar Midrash can be found in Matthew 3:3a (and also in Luke 4:21).

12) Typological Midrash

This is possibly the most complex form of Midrash, which assumes that past occurrences (events, institutions and personages) can have something to say about present day and future occurrences. Such occurrences may also have something to say about developments in the Spiritual realm. In order to uncover the fulfilment of past prophecies recourse may be made to the Rez-Peshar, (*'this is that formula'*). The following three forms of Typology constitute this particular Midrash: -

a. Historical (or Horizontal) Typology

Here past occurrences (called types) are seen as prophetic foreshadows anticipating present day and future occurrences (known as anti-types). For example, with regard to the first temple the Rez-Peshar formula can be employed to state: *'this building (type) is that anticipation of the Church and the millennial temple (present and future anti-types).'* Such an example shows that this 'type' can anticipate a number of 'anti-types.' Alternatively, it would be possible to say that *'this modern Gentile Church (anti-type) is that particular fulfilment of the Laodocian Church (type) mentioned in Revelation 3:14f.'* As these two examples show, the Rez-Peshar formula can either begin with a 'type' or an 'anti-type.'

b. Spiritual (or Vertical) Typology

Employed is a **Mashal/Nimshal** Formula (seen often in parables) where physical reality (the 'Mashal') is assumed to speak about Spiritual reality (the 'Nimshal'). For example, when the moon is darkened in Isaiah 13:10 (and in Matthew 24:29) it is a sign of darkness covering the nations. Also, any reddish colour is symbolic of large-scale martyrdom where the blood of the saints will be freely shed. More specifically, a Rez-peshar formula could highlight this point by saying *'this darkening of the moon near the Passover (the Mashal) is that growing Spiritual darkness of the nations under the World-wide government of anti-Christ (the Nimshal).'* Alternatively, *'this darkness of the nations (the Nimshal) is reflected by that darkening of the moon (the Mashal).'* These two examples confirm that the Rez-Peshar formula can begin with either the 'Mashal' or 'Nimshal.'

C. Synchronised (Or Combined) Typology

This typology takes place when the previous two typologies are combined within the same occurrence. A synchronised typology occurs with regard to the crucifixion, which was simultaneously: -

- A 'Type,' pointing forward to the various forms of suffering (crucifixion) every faithful believer would have to undergo.
- An 'Anti-Type,' pointing backward, by fulfilling specific Bible prophecies and Mosaic rituals, e.g. the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16.
- A 'Mashal,' pointing upwards to the darkness covering the land conveying the physical expression of separation from Divine blessing.
- A 'Nimshal,' pointing downwards to the terrible Spiritual reality of hell, where like Jesus on the cross, people will be tormented by a raging thirst (Luke 16:24 and John 19:28).

As with the previous two typologies the Rez-Peshar formula may also be used.

When employing a typological midrash, great care must be taken to draw a clear distinction between typology and allegory. In allegory, the story is viewed as containing '*hidden truths*' not available for normal believers.¹ This stance can pave the way for a dangerous form of elitism. Where it occurs, one has a passive congregation relying upon an infallible '*Anointed*' teacher to interpret Scripture for them. Moreover, no form of Typology should ever be used to establish Doctrine. Rather typology's role is only to illustrate those truths, which have already been elicited from the literal interpretation of easily understood Bible passages. The plain meaning of those passages should be clear to all people of good will. A particular example of a Typological Midrash can be found in Hebrews 9:23 where the earthly tabernacle is regarded as built in '*the pattern of things in the heavens*.' Incidentally, Typological Midrash is built upon the assumption that there are regular patterns of behaviour to be seen in God, man and Satan alike. A keen and thorough of those patterns should help devout believers to interpret both Scripture and the social environment in which they live.

All twelve forms of Midrash can be combined to form a Versatile Midrash which occurs when more than one form of Midrash is employed within the same piece of teaching. A particular example of Versatile Midrash is provided in the book of Hebrews, which makes use of most of the previously described forms of Midrash.

Section 3: The Principles of Midrash

In the previous chapter it was shown that Midrash was a discipline embracing a number of other disciplines including ethics, history, linguistics, sociology and theology. Also implied was the possibility that Midrash contained various principles of interpretation and that these principles were employed by Jesus, the Apostles and virtually all of those who wrote what came to be known as the '*New Testament*.' It is these principles, which form the central focus of this study. However, before looking at them, it is first of all necessary to make a few introductory comments. These will be presented as an Exodium or '*Proem*' Midrash as follows: -

*In his wisdom,
The Lord,
When he inspired his Scriptures
Through his Spirit of Holiness,
Not only gave out His Word
But in his mercy
He also gave out the means
To interpret that Word
So believers
From Jewish and Gentile backgrounds alike
Could grow in grace and display
The fruit of God's Spirit
As found listed in Galatians 5:22-23
It therefore obliges every believer,
On the strength them to: -
'Rightly divide the word of truth.'*

¹ Allegories are rarely used in Biblical literature and can be viewed as a narrative or a story containing a whole array of hidden, underlying truths – known as the '*Sensus Plenior*.'

(2 Timothy 2:15)
 Through employing
 Those means of interpretation,
 That Scripture itself
 Has ordained.
 By so doing,
 They themselves should avoid
 Much error and grow into a fuller
 Understanding of the truth
 Thus, in time,
 They should grow
 To resemble their Messiah
 The Saviour
 Whom they follow

In simple, near poetical language this Exodium has summed up why it is important for believers to both learn and to practise the principles of Midrash. The success of any Bible interpretation can be practically assessed by the degree of holiness it has helped to produce in the believer's life.

Within the discipline of Midrash there exists, various forms of Bible interpretation or Middot (meaning 'method' or 'principle.'). Only a selection will be described here. However, Rabbi Hillel (who ministered around the time of Jesus' birth) or his immediate predecessors had already outlined the first seven Middots. These principles were: -

1) **Qalva-Hama**

That which applies in a less important case will also apply in a more important case.

This principle originated in Genesis 44:8, Exodus 6:12, Deuteronomy 31:21, 1 Samuel 23:3 Jeremiah 12:5, Ezekiel 15:5, Proverbs 11:3 and Esther 9:2. It was used by Jesus in Matthew 7:11, 10:2, Mark 2:25-28 and Luke 12:28 – and by Paul in Romans 5:12-21.

2) **Gezerah-Shavah**

*Similar phrases or behaviour recorded in two or more different passages **mean the same thing** and can be interpreted in the same way.*

For example, the word 'Be-mo Ado' (meaning 'in its appointed time.'). Is used both in regard to the Paschal Lamb (Numbers 9:2) and the Tamid or perpetual offering (Numbers 28:2). From this fact, it is possible to deduce that the Paschal lamb can be offered on the Sabbath as well as the Tamid. To prevent arbitrary interpretations arising from this logical Middot a Gezerah-Shavah can only be advanced if:

- a. It is already present in tradition.
- b. Both passages come from the Pentateuch.
- c. The two words must not only be similar but must also be found in a similar context. The two previously cited verses from Numbers occur in the context of making offerings to the **Lord**. In Romans 4:1-12 Paul, in a somewhat loose way used the same rule when he joined together Genesis 15:6 and Psalm 32:1.

3) **Binyan 'Ad Mi-Katuv' Ehad**

The same considerations apply when the same phrase is present in a number of texts.

In this method the word construction or Binyan acts as a basis to a number of conclusions *i.e.* if work could be done on the Sabbath to gain necessary food, it could also be done on other religious feasts as well. More specifically, in Leviticus 17:13 it is possible to see that the Binyan is that pouring out of the blood by the hand. This word construction acts as the basis for the conclusion that the covering of any blood accidentally spilt on the ground must be done by the hand and not by the foot. In this way, relating two texts together and then applying the outcome to other passages could establish a teaching. However, on occasion a principle can be established based solely upon one passage, especially so if the passage concerned a legal ruling given in the Pentateuch.

4) Kelat U-Ferat

A general principle can be qualified by a specific rule or a specific rule can be extended into a general principle.

In Leviticus 1:2, the term 'cattle' is restricted by the word 'herd' which rules out non-domesticated cattle, although in normal usage 'cattle' covers both domesticated and non-domesticated animals. In Mark 12:30-31 Jesus turned two great commands to love God (Deuteronomy 6:4-5) and to love one's neighbour (Leviticus 19:18) into general principles. By doing so he ruled out the popular Zealot teaching that it was right to hate one's enemies (Matthew 5:43).

5) Perat U-Khelin

General principles determine specific interpretations.

In Exodus 22:9, the word 'beast' includes other animals beyond those specifically mentioned. In 1 John 2:10, love for one's brother should go on to encompass love for one's neighbours and even one's enemies.

6) Ka-Yose Bo Be-Maqom 'Aher

*A difficulty in one text can be resolved by comparing it to another **simpler** text that contains similar subject matter, if not wording.*

The apparent lukewarm stance taken toward Spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 13:8-10 can be resolved by referring to 1 Corinthians 14:1. This plainly teaches believers to 'desire Spiritual gifts' like prophecy. In addition, one could also refer to 1 Thessalonians 5:19-21 which teaches them to 'prove' but not to 'despise' such 'prophesying.'

7) Daviar Ha-Lamed Me-'Inyano

Allow the context to establish the meaning and application of a particular passage.

Paul used this rule (in Romans 4:10), when he stressed that the physical context of Abraham's justification by faith was one wherein circumcision had not yet been introduced. In Galatians 3:17 the historical context was some 430 years before the Law came into being. This principle is important because it can help prevent arbitrary interpretations of God's word. Acknowledged is the saying that states: 'A text without a context is a pretext.'

8) Shene Khium Ha-Makhhisim Zet Et Zeh Ad She Yavo Ha-Katuv Ha-Shelichi Ve-Yak A Beineihem

Two apparently contradictory texts can be reconciled by a third reconciling text.

Useful in religious controversies and helpful in resolving doubts; one example can be provided from the following three verses:

a. Proverbs 26:4, (*The contradicted text*) this warns, "Answer not a fool in his folly lest you be like unto him."

b. Proverbs 26:5, (*The contradictory text*) this exhorts, "Answer a fool in according to his folly lest he be wise in his own conceit."

c. Ecclesiastes 3:1, (*The reconciling verse*) this counsel's people to remember that: "To everything there is a season and a time to every person under heaven."

In other words, there are times when it is right not to rebuke a fool and times when it is right to rebuke him. People need to know God's will in a particular situation.

Other more specific kinds of Middot may be used. These include:

(I) Al Tikrei

Do not read this, but read that meaning of a text.

A particular meaning maybe amplified, by replacing a word within a text with one that sounds similar but has an added or updated meaning. Hebrews 2:7 replaces the word 'God' in Psalm 8:5 with the word 'angel.' Presumably this is done in order to stress Man's humble state. Obviously, this particular technique can be open to the kind of serious abuse of Scripture as seen in the cults. Hence, it is always wise to put any such changes in brackets beside the original word in the text. A case in point is the Shema whose original meaning is brought out by the bracketed insertion "Hear o Israel the Lord our God is [the Pluralistic] one Lord."

(II) Ein Mikra Yoze Mi-Ydei Feshuto

A Biblical passage never loses its plain meaning regardless of any additional, allegorical or Typological interpretation.

A case was Jesus' own Typological interpretation of the raised serpent in John 3:14. He did not rob Numbers 21:9 of its historical meaning – both levels of meaning could co-exist together.

(III) Gematria

The numerical values of names or phrases may reveal something about their character.

Echoes of this technique may exist in Revelation 13:18 where, in the Hebrew, the letters of Nero Caesar add up to 'God.' In addition, '666' also symbolises sinful incompleteness. The name for Abraham's servant Eliezer in the Hebrew has a value of 318, which equalled the number of soldiers Abraham sent out to battle (Genesis 14:14). Implied here is the possibility that much of his life was a battle!

(IV) Hedqeth

Allegories can only reinforce but not determine a particular teaching or doctrinal issue.

This limitation occurs in Galatians 4:22f where the two wives of Abraham were treated as an allegory for the Old and New Covenants. A variation of this Middot employs arguments from Typology. Two instances of this approach occur in Matthew 12:40, (where Jesus saw Jonah's experience as typifying his own) and Matthew 24:37, (where the corrupt days of Noah typify the World before the Second Coming). Paul himself frequently employed Scripture Typologically – most notably in Romans 5:12-21, 1 Corinthians 10:1-11 and Galatians 3:10-12. Particularly interesting is 1 Corinthians 10:1-11 where certain events in Israel's wilderness wanderings were seen as foreshadowing judgement upon those who abused the Lord's supper. Another case is 1 John 1:11-15 where the hatred of Cain for his brother in Genesis 4:1-9 typifies the hatred of the World for God's people.²

(V) Nekuddat,

Dots, the position of dots over certain letters can call to attention some noteworthy features.

Genesis 33:4, the position of the dots in confirmed that Jacob's kiss from Esau denoted a sincere reconciliation. Jesus himself stressed the importance of Nekuddat in Matthew 5:18. Even the tiniest marks on the Bible manuscript were viewed as having a Spiritual significance.

(VI) Notariqum

Words and names can be treated as character revealing acronyms.

The name Jacob means 'trickster' or 'cheat' whilst Jesus (Yeshua) means 'the Lord saves.' Basically, the assumption was that if you had the name, you also had the character. This fact explains Jabez's anguish in 1 Chronicles 4:9-10, for in the original Hebrew his name means 'pain' or 'sorrow.' He was quite naturally desperate not to live up to it.

² At this point it is necessary to emphasise that doctrine cannot under any circumstances be built upon either allegory or typology. Rather, any true teaching can only be established by referring to the plain, literal meaning of easy to understand passages whose contexts have been fully taken into account. Allegory and typology can be used to illuminate or strengthen the credibility of a particular doctrine. Under no circumstances can they be used as a basis for creating doctrine. Any failure to heed this principle can very quickly lead to error.

(VII) Semukhim

A conclusion based upon the juxtaposition of a number of verses.

Presumably, this Middot was used in order to establish a case on the basis of more than one witness (Deuteronomy 19:15). Paul used this method with great effect in Romans 3:10-20 – where he established his Biblical witnesses before arguing his case for the universal guilt of humanity.

(VIII) The Distinction between Halakah and Haggadah

Halakah legal texts are more authoritative than Haggadah non-legal, devotional or historical texts and should therefore carry greater weight in any disputed interpretation.

First century Judaism and the early Church were largely agreed that Halakah should be interpreted more cautiously – with only the plain, literal meaning being followed. Any allegorical or Typological interpretations were barely present. Jesus himself adopted a very strict, literal interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1 when debating the issue of divorce in Matthew 19:3-12 and Mark 10:2-12. Paul also preserved this distinction when he quite ‘literally’ interpreted ethical commands such as Leviticus 19:18 (Romans 13:9 and Galatians 5:14). Overall, it does appear that the resolute veneration for Torah, which prevailed in first Century Judaism acted as a check on more fanciful methods of interpretation being applied to Halakah. The text was viewed as being too sacred for any kind of manipulation playful human speculation.³

What has emerged from this analysis into the principles of Midrash has been the versatility of the New Testament writers when employing Middot. Whilst not being over-rigid in their application of it, they made use midrash principles whenever they saw fit in order to deliver divine truths to needy people. Their particular contribution was to add a Christological emphasis so that Midrash became a means whereby attention focussed upon the one true Messiah to whom the Scriptures testified. Their continued use of a tried and trusted method of interpretation greatly reduced the risk of Scripture becoming a playground for human speculation whilst enabling it to act as a source of life. This already existing Hermeneutic tradition was taken up and used under the direction of the Holy Spirit for a sacred purpose. As a result, many ancient Jewish techniques of interpretation became the Scripture’s own techniques of interpretation. Therefore it is possible to defend most of the methods listed in this article on the grounds that they represent authentically Biblical (as well as Ancient Jewish) guidelines for opening up the Word of God. It is to their own considerable peril that modern Christians dismiss or neglect those methods. These methods are just as readily applicable to Messianic Jews who wish to recover the genuine Hebraic roots of their faith.

Section 4: The Practice of Midrash

Rightly interpreting God’s Word is both a joy and a challenge. It is a practice that every believer must learn to actively avoid that mental passivity, which often acts as a doorway to error. The methods of interpretation can be understood and used by most literate lay people, having the willingness and ability to learn. This section contains examples of the more simple forms of Midrash. Following these, some practical advice is given on what may be termed ‘DIY’ (*‘Do it yourself’*) Midrash. However, it must be clearly understood that all *‘DIY Midrash’* must adhere to the principles of sound Biblical interpretation (as listed in the previous chapter). Should any departure take place from this, it would act as a clear sign that the Word of God was being mishandled – possibly to a person’s own eternal destruction (2 Peter 3:16). Bearing such constraints in mind, it is now possible to forge ahead and show how to construct a basic Midrash.

One advantage of any *‘DIY Midrash’* is that it requires only a few practical resources other than a Bible (preferably containing cross references), a Concordance,⁴ and possibly a simple textbook on theology. Once these resources have been gathered take note of the following guidelines: -

- 1) Begin with the simpler forms of Midrash before working up to the more complex forms.
- 2) Clearly sum up (preferably in one sentence) the area to be examined e.g. *“Divine guidance in the believer’s life.”*

³ It should be stressed that in the various works consulted by the writer; the spelling of the above terms have shown some degree of variation. This is because they represent transliterations from the original Hebrew. Consequently, the spellings employed only represent approximations to the original terms.

⁴ Cruden’s, Strong’s and Young’s are very good

- 3) Employ a concordance or theological textbook to look up appropriate headings, e.g. 'guide' or 'guidance.' Take careful note of any relevant Scripture passages pertaining to these headings.
- 4) Make a note of those Scriptures, which clearly refer to the subject in hand. Disregard those that seem ambiguous or obviously refer to something else.
- 5) Prayerfully note down the theological and practical points which appear to emerge from these passages. Also record the way in which they could be applied to daily life.
- 6) Arrange all relevant citations, quotations and written points into an appropriate Midrash structure.
- 7) Begin applying those points whilst referring back to the Midrash structure for further clarification and to help monitor progress. Neater improved versions of the original Midrash may be created.

It should be possible, at this stage to see that the outworking of Midrash can have many practical benefits in daily living. After all, it is Yahweh's Holy Word that is being dealt with, and not some esoteric piece or technical knowledge, available only to specifically qualified people. In this context it can be seen that Midrash is a discipline not just for the expert, but something that can benefit all Spiritually minded believers. Also, Midrash is best learnt through practice!

Some of the beneficial results of 'DIY Midrash' can be seen in the following Homiletic Midrash on divine guidance. Relevant Bible passages were obtained by looking up the word 'guide' or 'guided' in various Concordances. For ease of reference, this Midrash has been placed in clearly distinguished sections with appropriate subheadings.

A 'DIY Midrash' On Divine Guidance

Statement of the Main Theme

The main theme of this particular Midrash is that of divine guidance in the life of the believer.⁵

Introductory Formula

"As it is written"

Haraz⁶

- 1) *"You in your mercy have led forth the people which you have redeemed: You have guided them in your strength unto your holy habitation,"* (Exodus 15:13)
- 2) *"For the Lord knows the way of the righteous,"* (Psalm 1:6a)
- 3) *"As for God, His way is perfect: the word of the Lord is tried: He is a buckler to all that trust Him,"* (Psalm 18:30)
- 4) *"The **Lord** is my shepherd: I shall not want." (Psalm 23:1)*
- 5) *"Commit your way unto the Lord: trust also in Him: and He shall bring it to pass: He will be our guide even unto death,"* (Psalm 37:5 & 48:14b)
- 6) *"You shall guide me with your counsel and afterward receive me to glory,"* (Psalm 73:24)
- 7) *"But made His own people to go forth like sheep and guided them in the wilderness like the flock,"* (Psalm 78:52)
- 8) *"He keeps the paths of judgement and preserves the way of the Saints,"* (Proverbs 2:8)
- 9) *"I am the Lord Your God which teaches you to profit, which leads [guides], you by the way you should go,"* (Isaiah 48:17b)
- 10) *"For He that has mercy on them [His people] shall lead [guide] them, even by the springs of water shall He guide them,"* (Isaiah 49:10b)

⁵ Sources for the Scriptural passages in this midrash include various Concordances and the writer's own memory.

⁶ Meaning 'The stringing together' of relevant passages.

- 11) *“And the Lord shall guide you continually and satisfy your soul in drought, and make fat your bones,”* (Isaiah 58:11)
- 12) *“Take no [anxious, fretful] thought for the morrow, for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof,”* (Matthew 6:34)
- 13) [He] *“guides our feet into the way of peace,”* (Luke 1:79b)
- 14) *“And the sheep hear His voice: and He calls His own sheep by name, and leads [guides] them out,”* (John 10:3)
- 15) *“I am the good shepherd [who] gives His life for the sheep,”* (John 10:11)
- 16) *“When He the Spirit of truth is come, He will guide you into all truth: for what He shall hear that shall He speak: and He will show you things to come. Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure, [but] prove [test carefully] all things,”* (John 16:13, Philippians 2:12-13 & 1 Thessalonians 5:20)
- 17) *“If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God that gives to all men liberally and upbraids not and it shall be given to him,”* (James 1:5)
- 18) *“Beloved, believe not every Spirit [who tries to guide you] but try [that is test] the Spirits [to ascertain] whether they are of God, because many false prophets [offering false forms of guidance] have gone out into the World,”* (1 John 4:10)

Commentary

*From such passages it is possible to see that, in His mercy, the **Lord** promises to guide every single believer, no matter how aware or unaware they may be of His presence. However, this guarantee does not absolve them from such responsibilities as the need to seek **God’s** will, to work out their own **salvation** and to rigorously check that their guidance emanates from the right **Spiritual** sources.*

Concluding exhortation

Therefore, take encouragement from God’s repeated promises to guide His people. Be willing to ask for His guidance in prayer. However, do not forget to rigorously test that any prophetic guidance being given originates in the Holy Spirit and not from some unclean Spirit whose utterances mislead people to destruction.

From this DIY homiletic Midrash on ‘Divine Guidance’ it is possible to see that a return to first century Jewish methods of Bible interpretation can still do much to open up God’s word for today. Especially noteworthy is the way various passages were brought together in order to emphasise a key point, along with carefully highlighted amplifications used in order to bring out the full meaning of a passage.⁷

Midrash can also be fun. A playful element may enter with Parabolic Midrash where sometimes-humorous stories are used to illustrate what is often a very serious point. This is done in order to challenge conventional thinking and to present what may be an unpalatable truth in an acceptable manner. An instance of this is the following Parabolic Midrash, illustrates the point that God will, in the end totally reject those who give themselves over to the influence of unclean Spirits even though they may profess to be His people. In order to highlight the Biblical basis of this point the Parabolic Midrash will be preceded by an appropriate passage from Scripture.

Introductory Formula: “Divine revelation warns”

Scripture Reading: *“He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still. For without [the New Jerusalem] are dogs, and sorcerers, and whoremongers, and murderers, and idolaters, and whosoever loves and makes a lie. Their part [shall be] in the lake of*

⁷ By way of a slight digression, it is worth mentioning that modern information technology’s ability to attractively format Bible Commentaries could greatly facilitate the growing importance of Midrash Hermeneutics.

fire which burns with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.” (Revelation 22:11a, 15 & 21:8c)

A Parabolic Midrash: The Parable of the Drunken Knight

“There was once a man who was going to be knighted by a King in a far off country. Now this king was very stern and was known to expect the very highest standards from all of his subjects. The night before his honour the man stayed in a very luxurious five star hotel next to the King’s palace. There he fell in with bad company; he got drunk and started to boast of his greatness. So drunk did he become that he vomited all over the place – even on the expensive suit he was to wear to the palace. The next day he woke up with a dreadful hangover and was sick a few more times. Suddenly realising that he was late for the ceremony, he brushed his hair, cleaned his suit as best he could and rushed off to the palace. There he was stopped by a stern looking guard who refused to give him entrance.”

“Let me in, let me in” the man pleaded “I’ve got an appointment with the King. He wants to honour me, for I love him as a loyal subject.”

To which comment the guard replied “No one who really loves the King arrives late at the palace smelling of vomit.”

So it is with all those Messianic Jews who have received the Toronto Experience.”

Perhaps the last remark came as a shock; it was meant to! This is because in simple visual terms, it portrayed the tragic folly of Messianic Jews coming under the influence of those same pagan Spirits, which helped drive Nazism and other anti-Semitic movements. Unless repented of, the long-term result of being intoxicated by such Spirits is exclusion from the Messiah’s presence. Parables indeed can have a sting in their *‘tale.’* It is hardly surprising that their use, helped get Jesus into a lot of trouble.

Further light can be thrown onto such deceptions as the *‘Toronto Experience’* (and its subsequent Pensacola offshoot) by the employment of Rez-Peshar Midrash. Here, it is possible to resort to a *“this is that”* formula by saying *“this Toronto phenomenon is that fulfilment of the warning Paul gave in 2 Thessalonians 2:11. This warns ‘God shall send them [those who do not love the truth] a strong delusion, that they may believe a lie.’”*

Obviously, care must be taken to distinguish between a fulfilment of Prophecy and the final fulfilment that will occur immediately prior to the Messiah’s return. Nevertheless, Rez-Peshar can to some degree, show how present day events fit in with the overall pattern of Biblical prophecy. A case in point was the Arafat-Rabin Peace Accord, signed in 1993. Through Rez-Peshar it is possible to see that *“This event was a fulfilment of that Covenant with death mentioned in Isaiah 28:15.”* Lending weight to this view was Rabin’s own assassination just over two years later. For him at least the Palestinian peace accord had been a *‘covenant with death.’* The same could be said for all Jews and Palestinians who have been killed in subsequent Israeli-Palestinian disturbances.

On an even grimmer note, it is also possible to see that *“This Peace accord is that foreshadow of an even deadlier agreement that will be made by Israel with a false Messiah shortly before the outbreak of World-wide tribulation,”* (Daniel 9:27). In other words, both the Toronto Experience and the Arafat-Rabin peace accord represent the devil’s *‘dress rehearsal’* for even more extreme evils. History has clearly shown that one major obsession of the devil is with the destruction of Jewish people and Gentile believers alike. This is because both groups witness to the fact that the devil can never succeed in his attempt to usurp the place of the one true God. They also remind him of the crushing humiliation he suffered when the true Messiah atoned for the World’s sins at Calvary. With his doom sealed, the prince of darkness is determined to drag as many down with him to Hell as possible. Any correct understanding of the many tragedies to have taken place within a Judaic-Christian setting can only really be gained made from a Biblical rather than a secular standpoint. However, such an understanding will, in this World, remain only partial. Paul acknowledged this point in 1 Corinthians 13:12a, when he stated, *“For now we see through a glass darkly.”*

Section 5: The Beauty of Midrash

One of the beauties of Midrash is that it allows people to find their own level in interpreting Scripture. It can either be very simple or very difficult. Also Midrash is a discipline, which embraces a number of other disciplines such as history and poetry. To successfully interpret God’s word it is necessary to combine keen powers of analysis with imaginative storytelling and a

devoted prayerfulness, with each being open to the influence of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, there must be a dogged willingness to accept the authority of all Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16). Also included must be a desire to follow the sound principles of Bible interpretation (as outlined in Section 3). One further point is that Midrash should enable all interested parties within the Church to make a discerning return to first century Jewish methods of Bible interpretation. In this matter, as in all others it is Scripture that must have the last word. However, this return to Jewish Methodology is something, which is both very ancient and very good. Admittedly, the past cannot be relived but it can still act as a living source, nurturing our own contemporary Spiritual and personal development. The past is drawn upon to influence the present. Midrash performs a vital task by establishing firm links between the past, present and future.

It should now be reasonably clear that Midrash, if wisely used not only throws greater light upon the teaching of God's word; but also provides a tool to see the significance of present day events. Confusion is reduced as events are fitted into a wider scheme of things. Midrash can be used to interpret both human history and current events. Some of the laws governing human behaviour at both an individual and mass social scale are uncovered. As the writer began to discover in November 2003, the tools used to interpret human behaviour as recorded in Scripture, can also be used to interpret behaviour that has occurred outside the Biblical record. The discipline of Midrash can therefore be applied in non-theological subject areas like sociology and psychology. It can also provide a great deal of insight into why human organizations and societies fail (through either becoming highly destructive or totally ineffective). Admittedly, Midrash cannot explain every aspect of human behaviour – but it can offer a wider explanation than that provided by current theories whose basis often lies in a secular (non-religious) view of the World. Midrash does indeed have the potential to contribute to some major theoretical breakthroughs in the Social Sciences.⁸

Midrash possesses a number of other benefits too; among these are its assistance in the understanding of doctrine and the promotion of Spiritual growth with its stress upon the eternal truthfulness of God's word. It is also a versatile discipline offering a whole range of perspectives to both the layperson and scholar alike. People are free to find their own level of competence in handling Scripture. Another advantage is that it can be adapted to different learning styles – appealing both to auditory (who learn through hearing) and visual (who learn through seeing) learners.

Moving onto a wider corporate level, the large-scale adoption of Midrash could help counter the many Spiritual deceptions that have been to rampage unchecked throughout the Church. On a more positive note, Midrash can actively buttress true doctrine, especially in relation to the more controversial such as the Trinity. Midrash simply confirms that all true doctrine has a solid basis in divine revelation. The myth that it represents as a strange offshoot of Greek Philosophy, or was solely the outcome of Church politics would (at least amongst serious opinion), be utterly discredited. The introduction of Midrash could well lead to a revival of confidence in Creed- based doctrine.

Above all, by adopting the Midrashic method of interpretation people would be encouraged to see for themselves who the Messiah is. With His Jewish identity thrown into sharp relief, they would then be free to make up their own minds over the validity of His claims. No high-pressure sales techniques would be needed, for the truth can stand upon its own merits. Indeed, such techniques are a blasphemy because they ignore the Scripture dictum, which states "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts." (Zechariah 4:6b) If nothing else Midrash can at least encourage a humble dependence upon the Holy Spirit to actively interpret God's word. Midrash achieves this by focusing the listener's attention upon the word itself. They are encouraged to relate to it directly at every level of their personality. Midrash can simultaneously engage the mind, the heart and the will.

All of the benefits already outlined are available because Midrash represents the means whereby divine revelation is actively accessed and interpreted. This is simply because it interprets the Bible in the way in which it was meant to be interpreted. Its great strength lies in the fact that it recognises that Scripture is its own best interpreter. The practice of Midrash is the equivalent of applying Scriptural teaching in the all-important area of Hermeneutics. Rarely before has a theological discipline, appeared more relevant; its revival, if wisely handled, could be a source of great blessing, both to Jewish and Christian communities alike.

⁸ Apart from the first two sentences this paragraph was first word processed on Wednesday, 31st January 2007, whilst the writer was looking back on how Midrash had helped him to acquire a greater understanding of human behaviour.

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It should be stated that the inclusion this selective Bibliography should not be taken as an endorsement for either their content or their style.⁹

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⁹ (H/B) refers to hardback books and (P/B) refers to paperback versions.