BOOK PROPOSAL

Dr. Sivan Nir, TAU

magitriad@gmail.com

*A Curtain Set with Jewels: The Tales of The Sages in Late Midrash* is a manuscript which expands on my Postdoc work as a 2021-22 Harry Starr Fellow in Judaica at Harvard*.* I am also enclosing a short Table of Contents.

*A Curtain Set with Jewels’* main goal is to describe the literary attributes and themes of the barely studied tales of rabbinic sages that are known *only* from late (post 6th century CE) Midrash compositions. The bulk of the manuscript closely reads *seventeen* of the richest such tales chosen on the basis of the paucity of published scholarship about them and a desire to represent as many a late Midrash as possible. Consequently, the tales are taken from *fourteen* different works running the gamut from the mostly Palestinian Byzantine Midrash on Psalms to the Medieval Provençal Numbers Rabbah. The research methodology combines structuralism and redaction criticism. The manuscript highlights literary devices and human elements. It also systematically compares the tales to their better known partial-parallels and also to more distant midrashic sources of inspiration. The manuscript uses this comparative analysis to extract wider themes and values that also reoccur elsewhere in these late Midrashim, interpreting them as snapshots of the cultural tensions of their anonymous authors.

The book’s Introduction surveys the academic study of sage stories, late Midrash poetics, and imitation in literature. This introductory section lays the theoretical precedents for the analyses, focusing on the works of Jeffrey L. Rubenstein and Gérard Genette, and also establishes the widespread awareness of narrative analogy and analogous narratives in rabbinic literature prior to late Midrash, thereby countering claims of strained comparison (“parallelomania”) associated with the late tales’ imitative discourse.

The Conclusions summarize reoccurring themes and narrative forms. They frame the findings as part of two wider historical changes to the authorship of Midrash, from Talmudic elitism to lay religion, and from orality to mostly written orally-inspired discourse. The Conclusions also attempt to chart the way future studies would be able to identify late authors with their cultural analogues, such as the minor Tosafists. The Conclusions also strengthen the findings by briefly going over their prevalence in fourteen other unique late Midrash tales, which encompasses almost all the extant writings of this sort.

Overall, all late tales have several key features in common. Unlike Talmudic tales which rework their Palestinian sources into at times hard to identify forms, later tales are *all* either clear imitations, sequels, or reactions to better known, mostly Bavli, tales, presupposing audience familiarity and recognition (“hypertextuality”) as their main source of legitimacy and distinction. This imitative quality led to the tripartite structure of the book (see below). The reshaping of older sources is expressive of later authors, whose approach differs considerably from that of their forbearers. Late tales therefore prefer anonymous and marginal protagonists or apologize for established rabbinic characters. This bespeaks of anonymous authors’ medieval sensibility of their own lesser place in history. Moreover, the Talmudic preferences for dialectics, self-criticism, and ambiguous endings are supplanted by clear narrative conformations by sages, God, or miracles at the end of a tale, prefiguring the independent medieval Hebrew narratives, such as those found in Sefer Hassidim. Lastly, the late tales exhibit a heightened interest in questions of “literal” biblical exegesis rather than in Halakha, an equally heightened hostility towards Gentile figures, and a diminished concern with a miraculous present redemption.

Myriad monographs have been written about the foundational tales of rabbinic sages in the Babylonian Talmud as they are the major rabbinic avenue for theological, societal, and philosophical issues. In Israel and in Hebrew, several such books are published each year, usually centered on a few famous tales or on a survey of a theme (for a very recent English example, see *The Return of the Absent Father: A New Reading of a Chain of Stories from the Babylonian Talmud*). In the Anglophone world the trilogy written by Jeffrey L. Rubenstein (e.g., *Talmudic Stories*)remains the premier superior exemplar of this form. Far fewer volumes have focused on tales of sages in other midrashic compositions (e.g., Genesis Rabbah). These are often discussed in the singular in various papers, in summaries in critical editions, or in the lone dissertation based on one Midrash or tractate (for instance, *Form, Function, and Historical Significance of the Rabbinic Story in Yerushalmi Neziqin*). Any attempt to discuss this genre from a broad perspective in the even less studied later Midrashim, is virtually unheard of. Most instances are mere comparisons of later *recensions* of known tales, rather than discussions of seemingly original late exemplars.

Consequently, the tales this book analyzes are significant, as they have either *never* been discussed (e.g., Aḥer and R. Meir in Yalquṭ Pitorn Torah) or have enjoyed *one* paper or appendix (e.g., Pesiqta Rabbati 14’s Wicked Gentile), and almost exclusively in Hebrew.

In filling the general gap in scholarship on late midrashic literature, this book could also serve as the missing link between volumes that have already appeared in The Brill Reference Library of Judaism, namely between *Studies in the Tanḥuma-Yelammedenu Literature* and *Medieval Midrash:The House for Inspired Innovation*, none of which focused on the works here studied or on tales in general.

This book then offers not only accessible English readings of underrepresented tales, but the first window into the worlds and conflicting views of the enigmatic later authors in diverse questions of faith, reward and punishment, piety, men and women, rabbis and non-rabbis, salvation, Jewish history and more. The suggested readership thus extends beyond students of rabbinics and Judaism to those interested in Jewish religious tales at large.

In closing, I hope the proposed project is deemed worthy of acceptance for publication, not only because of its case studies’ freshness, but also due to an attempt to provide a first wider frame of reference to the late tales of the sages in English that complements existing works on the Talmud and shows how later redactors continue much of its narrative art, such as “patterning.” The book thus sheds light on the hidden artistry of rarely discussed late rabbinic narratives. The authors of these tales felt that their imitative artistry, much like those heroes challenged by God in a version of a parable unique to the late Midrash Bereshit Rabbati, is a secondary imitation of their rabbinic forebears, as a human curtain set with jewels can compare to the starry sky. Yet jewels their narratives are.

Sivan Nir, PhD

[January 15, 2023]

**Short Table of Contents**

Introduction: Late Tales of Sages

Part One: Reaction Tales and Counter Narratives

R. Zunin and the Doctor [Deuteronomy Rabbah (Lieberman) Aikav =BT AZ 51a]

The Hassid and the Spirit [BR VaYesalach, pp. 145-6= a Polemical Expansion of YT Shabbat 1:3; 8b, Tanh. (Buber) Bereshit 27 and more]

The Disguised Wife [NR 9:3 as a Polemical Contraction of BT Kiddushin 81b]

Pesiqta Rabbati 14’s Wicked Gentile [Anti Dama Ben Netinah]

The Disciple and the Courtesan [Pseudo SEZ 18 inverts Sifrei Num. 115=BT Menaḥot 43b-44a]

The Seven Good Years [Ruth Zutta 4:11, Aba Juden and the Birth of the Messiah]

Part Two: Sequel Tales and Scenes

Another Episode on the Ship on Route to Caesar [Bereshit Rabbati VaYegash]

Lamentations Zuti 43’s Expanded Chronology

Resh Lakish the Bandit’s Redemption before Meeting R. Johanan in PRE 43

R. Meir Redeems Aḥer [Midr. Prov. 6:22-29]

R. Akiva’s Illuminating Daughter in Law [Midr. Ps. 59:3 Continues T. Ketubot 4:7]

Part Three: Imitations with a New Message

Abnimos and the Builder [Exod. R. 13:1]

The Western Wall and R. Akiva Seeing a Fox [SER 28:11]

What Aḥer Thought of R. Akiva’s Death [Pitorn Torah, Leviticus p. 15]

Esther Rabbah II’s Carnival of Beasts [Esth. R. 10:11]

Another Akivan Polemic with Turnus Rufus [BR Lekh Lekha pp. 72-73]

Antoninus as Moses? [BR VaYerah, pp. 86-87 and BT Sotah 12b, Exod. R. 1]

Conclusions: Scribes and Sages