



THE FIRST PRINTED BOOKS OF MIDRASH AND THEIR JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN READERS

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A moment of particular vitality in the study of midrash, rabbinic Bible interpretation, can be observed when midrashim were first published as printed texts. Jews who had been exiled from Spain and Portugal in the 1490s initiated an extensive publication programme of midrash in the Ottoman Empire in the early sixteenth century. At presses in Constantinople and Salonica, the printed texts of many midrashim were first compiled from manuscripts and typeset. Many of these midrashim were reprinted several times during the sixteenth century as Hebrew presses in the Ottoman Empire, and later in Italy and in Poland, competed to satisfy a burgeoning market for books of midrash.

The purpose of this talk is to investigate the popularity of midrash in the early modern period by examining who read the first printed midrashim and how they did so. Annotated books of midrash are important sources of evidence. By deciphering the notes of past owners, we gain an understanding how these volumes have been read. The large number of commentaries on midrash that were composed during the sixteenth century are a second source of evidence. Written to accompany the new printed books of midrash, these commentaries show how their authors studied rabbinic Bible interpretation and how they anticipated their readers would do so. In this talk we will turn to a heavily annotated copy of Midrash Rabba, the popular collection of midrashic expositions of the Pentateuch and Five Megillot, to examine how readers studied its midrashim by consulting a newly composed commentary and recording their findings in the margins. As we will see, this copy of Midrash Rabba was read by both Jewish and Christian scholars. It provides a unique insight into the way a seventeenth-century Christian reader interacted with the annotations of his Jewish predecessors in order to gain an understanding of the rabbis' expositions of Scripture.

Midrash Rabba was published at the famous Venetian press of Daniel Bomberg in 1545. In the copy of this edition in the Bodleian Library in Oxford,¹ years of scrutiny by many readers have left their mark in the shape of copious handwritten annotations. Most of these are written in ink in a late-sixteenth-century Hebrew script, of the type common among Sephardic Jews of the Ottoman Empire.² One of the volume's Jewish owners helpfully left his name on the first page where he recorded his ownership of the book: "And I, Aaron son of the honourable Rabbi Solomon ibn

¹ Shelfmark: N 1.15 Jur.

² I am grateful to Professor Malachi Beit-Arié for his assistance in identifying the Hebrew scripts employed in the annotations of this volume.

Ḥasson, acquired it.”³ Aaron Ḥasson may be identified as the scholar active in Salonica in the second half of the sixteenth century.⁴

In addition to these Hebrew annotations, a small number of notes pencilled in Latin and English suggest that this book came into the possession of a Christian scholar. The handwriting is that of Edward Pococke, the seventeenth-century Laudian Professor of Arabic and Regius Professor of Hebrew at Oxford University.⁵ Pococke amassed a significant collection of Hebrew and Arabic books, many of which are now in the Bodleian Library. The annotations in the margins of his Hebrew books show that Pococke studied Jewish Bible interpretation assiduously, partly in order to prepare his Old Testament commentaries.

To show how the Bodleian’s copy of Midrash Rabba was used first by its Sephardic Jewish readers and then by Edward Pococke, we will discuss one of its midrashim and examine the accompanying annotations. The text in question is part of the exposition of the creation narrative in Midrash Genesis Rabba. It is one of a number of aggadic texts which expound God’s use of language in the creation of the universe by according the letters of the Hebrew alphabet a creative function. Cosmological and later kabbalistic works developed this role further by giving the letters a creative power of their own which might even be harnessed by human beings. In Genesis Rabba, though, the letters serve as the tools that God uses to accomplish his creative acts.⁶ We will examine the midrash that focuses on God’s use of the very first letter of the creation narrative, the letter *bet* (ב) of *bereshit* (בראשית), ‘in the beginning’. The midrash reads as follows:

Why was the world created with a *bet*? To inform you that there are two worlds.

Another interpretation: Why [was the world created] with a *bet*? Because it designates blessing (*berakhah*, ברכה). And why [was the world] not [created] with an ‘alef (א)? Because it designates cursing (*arirah*, ארירה).

...

Another interpretation: Why [was the world created] with a *bet*? Just as the letter *bet* has two pointed strokes, one above and the other below behind it, [so if] one says (*omerim*) to the letter *bet*, ‘Who created you?’ it points upwards with its stroke to say, ‘The one who is above created me.’ [And if one says,] ‘What is his name?’ it points with its back stroke to say: ‘The LORD is his name.’ (Genesis Rabba 1:10)⁷

Already in this chapter of Genesis Rabba, the Torah has been designated as the first of God’s creations and the tool or blueprint that God used to fashion the universe. As the first letter of this

³ “וקניתי אהרן בכמהר שלמה ן' חסון”

⁴ David Conforte, David Cassel (ed.), *Kore ha-Dorot* (Berlin, 1846), ff.37a-b, 39a, 43a, 45a, 46a-b, 47a; Barukh Kalai, *Mekor Barukh* (Izmir, 1659), ff.3a, 84b-86a; *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, s.v. ‘Ibn Ezra, Joseph ben Isaac’, ‘Responsa’; Joseph Nehama, *Histoire des Israélites de Salonique* vol. 5 (Salonica, 1959), pp.205, 216; Ḥayyim Azulai, *Sefer Shem ha-Gedolim* (Jerusalem, 1991), pt. i. p.164, pt. ii. pp.17, 88.

⁵ See “More than one way to read a Midrash: The Bodleian copy of Bomberg’s Midrash Rabba” in Scott Mandelbrote and Joanna Weinberg (edd.), *Jewish Texts and their Readers in Early Modern Europe* (forthcoming; Leiden: Brill, 2014).

⁶ See particularly Joseph Dan, “The Language of Creation and Its Grammar” in his *Jewish Mysticism I: Late Antiquity* (Northvale, N.J., 1998), p.133; Ephraim Urbach, Israel Abrahams (tr.), *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), pp.197-202. On this midrash, see also Philip Alexander, “Pre-Emptive Exegesis: Genesis Rabba’s Reading of the Story of Creation” in *Journal of Jewish Studies* 43 (1992), pp.230-45; Michael Fishbane, “Midrash and the Meaning of Scripture” in Michael Fishbane and Joanna Weinberg (edd.), *Midrash Unbound* (Oxford, 2013), pp.17-21; Peter Schäfer, “Bereshit Bara Elohim: Bereshit Rabba, Parashah 1, Reconsidered” in Alberdina Houtman et al. (edd.), *Empsychoi Logoi – Religious Innovations in Antiquity: Studies in Honour of Pieter Willem van der Horst* (Leiden, 2008), pp.281-3. See also Gershom Scholem, “The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbalah” in *Diogenes* 79 (1972), pp.59-80, 80 (1972), pp.164-94; Joseph Dan, “The Name of God, the Name of the Rose, and the Concept of Language in Jewish Mysticism” in his *Jewish Mysticism III: The Modern Period* (Northvale, N.J., 1999), pp.131-59; Rachel Elior, *Jewish Mysticism: The Infinite Expression of Freedom* (Oxford, 2007), pp.35-6, 104-33; Elliot Wolfson, “Before Alef / Where Beginnings End” in his *Alef, Mem, Tau: Kabbalistic Musings on Time, Truth, Death* (Berkeley, Calif., 2006), pp.118-36; Elliot Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York, 2005), pp.257-8.

⁷ למה נברא העולם בבי' להודיעך שהן שני עולמים העולם הזה והעולם הבא. ד"א למה בבי' שהוא בלשון ברכה. ולמה לא בא"לף שהוא בלשון ארירה. ... ד"א למה בבי' אלא מה ב' זה יש לו שני עוקצין אחד מלמעלה ואחד מלמטה מאחריו ואומרים לבי' מי בראך והוא מראה בעוקצו מלמעלה ואומי' זה של מעלה בראני ומה שמו. והוא מראה להן בעוקצו שלאחריו ואומר יי' שמו *Sefer Rabbot* (Venice, 1545), f.2b.

blueprint, the *bet* of *bereshit* is here accorded a primary role in ordering the creation. The midrash explains that, just as *bet* is the second letter of the alphabet and designates the number two, so the created universe consists of two worlds – this world and the world to come. Next, because *bet* begins the word *berakhah*, we learn that the universe was created with the expression of blessing necessary for its continued existence. Had the Torah begun with the letter *'alef* instead, this first letter of the word *'arirah*, 'curse', would have assumed the primary role in ordering the universe and the world would not have been able to endure.

The final part of the midrash explains that *bet* was the appropriate letter with which to order the created world because of its shape. It has an upward stroke to point to God the Creator. Its back stroke points to say, "The LORD is his name." This may mean that the lower stroke of the *bet* points back to the preceding letter in the alphabet, *'alef*. This has the numerical value of one, representing the unity of God, and is the first letter of *'adonai* (אדוני). The midrash thereby demonstrates that, as a sign-post pointing to heaven with one stroke and to the unity of God with the other, the letter *bet* is the ideal letter with which to order the creation of the universe.

Unfortunately, the terse Hebrew of the final part of this midrash presents the reader with a number of difficulties. In the Bodleian copy of Midrash Rabba, previous readers focused on one problem in particular. There is no conjunction joining the two clauses of the sentence "Just as the letter *bet* has two pointed strokes, one above and the other below behind it" and "one says (*'omerim*) to the letter *bet*, 'Who created you?'" One reader responded by correcting the text and adding the relative pronoun, the letter *shin*. This is written in ink in a Sephardic script, the work of one of the book's Ottoman Jewish readers. Then a little further down, an explanation has also been added in the margin. It is not immediately obvious from the text that the back stroke of the letter *bet* points to the previous letter in the alphabet. A reader has explained this by indicating that the stroke points backwards in the alphabet to the letter *'alef*.⁸

The first of these two annotations is one of many that reveal that Jews of the Ottoman Empire read this copy of Midrash Rabba with the guidance of a commentary. The work in question is entitled *'Ot 'Emet*, the magnum opus of Meir Benveniste of Salonica, first published in 1565. Benveniste wrote in his preface that, over many years of reading books of midrash, he had encountered numerous textual errors. By comparing each corrupted text with parallel passages in other works that retained better readings, he corrected many errors and recorded his emendations in his copies of the midrashim. Rather than keeping these helpful corrections to himself, he decided to publish them so that other readers might copy them into their own books of midrash. The result is the *'Ot 'Emet*. This book presents long lists of annotations, each labelled by page number and line number of a designated printed edition. So, if we turn to the *'Ot 'Emet* on Midrash Rabba and look under folio 2, column 4, end of line 25, we find the correction of our midrash on the letter *bet* that Meir Benveniste made in his own copy and would like his readers to write in theirs. He indicated that the text needs an extra letter *shin* and that it should read not *'omerim*, but *she-'omerim*.⁹ This is the change that the reader of the Bodleian copy of Midrash Rabba made at this point.

Meir Benveniste's corrections appear frequently among the annotations written in Sephardic script in the Bodleian's copy of Midrash Rabba. Sometimes the Jewish readers of the volume wrote additional interpretations as well, as in the case of the second note in the midrash we examined. But often the *'Ot 'Emet* is their source. Readers approached this copy of Midrash Rabba pen in hand and equipped with a copy of Benveniste's book. They studied it according to the reading practice advocated in the *'Ot 'Emet*, going through Midrash Rabba cover to cover and annotating it as they went. They thereby improved the text of the midrash so that it could be read fluently and understood more easily.

⁸ "שלאחריו שהוא אלף שה..." (the end of the annotation is hidden within the binding).

⁹ "סוף ש"י כ"ה אומרים צ"ל שאומרים" Meir Benveniste, *'Ot 'Emet* (Salonica, 1565), f.21b.

A second layer of annotations in the Bodleian copy of Midrash Rabba stands out from the work of the readers examined thus far. These are the marginal signs and Latin and English annotations written in pencil by Edward Pococke (1604-91), one of the foremost seventeenth-century scholars of Hebrew and Arabic. We do not know when Pococke acquired this copy of Midrash Rabba, though he bought a great many Hebrew books during his travels in the Ottoman Empire. Soon after he had been ordained as priest in the Church of England in 1629, he served as chaplain to the merchants of the Levant Company in Aleppo where he acquired books for himself and his patrons. On returning to England, Pococke took up the Professorship of Arabic at Oxford University in 1636, but was granted permission to travel to Constantinople the very next year “for the better perfecting himself in the Arabic and Eastern languages”.¹⁰ There he studied Hebrew with Jacob Romano, whom Pococke later described as “a man very inquisitive after bookes, the most that ever I knew any Jew.”¹¹ Romano acted as Pococke’s agent in acquiring books in Constantinople and perhaps also after he returned to Oxford when the two remained in correspondence.¹²

Edward Pococke’s annotations on Midrash Rabba are concentrated in the first two folios of Genesis Rabba where approximately thirty notes show that he examined these midrashim thoroughly and methodically. His comments include translations of phrases into Latin and English, vocalisations and definitions of Hebrew words and textual corrections. Pococke brought this programme of study to an end when he finished the second chapter of Genesis Rabba. He adopted a different approach for the rest of the book. A small number of disconnected passages throughout Midrash Rabba have been marked in the margin and show that Pococke went in search of particular information and flagged the passages he discovered.

A key to understanding Pococke’s interest in midrash is found in his Old Testament commentaries. Towards the end of his life, he composed and published works on Micah, Joel, Malachi and Hosea. Pococke explained in the preface to his commentary on Hosea that Jewish Bible exegesis was worthy of his (Christian) readers’ attention because Jews regard Biblical Hebrew as their “ancient inheritance” and so strive to attain the highest proficiency by “constant practice and study in it from a young age”, thereby achieving greater expertise than non-Jews usually do. Among Jewish interpreters of the Bible, Pococke says that he favoured the expositors “whose study hath been about the Grammatical part of the [Hebrew] tongue and the text of the Bible” because he considered their insights “very conducive to the literal meaning of the text”. Pococke gave pride of place to the commentaries of Rashi, Abraham Ibn Ezra, David Kimḥi and Isaac Abravanel. On the other hand he claimed that he would not rely on “Talmudical and Kabalistical Writers ... except when backed by better authority”.¹³ Pococke made explicit in his commentaries that midrashic interpretations that did not elucidate the “literal meaning of the text” should be considered in this latter category. He called such interpretations “allegorical”, “to no purpose, as to the understanding of the words” and “often very extravagant, and wide from the scope of the matter”.¹⁴

Despite Pococke’s resolution to restrict himself to medieval interpreters of the “literal meaning” of the Bible, his manner of reading these commentaries repeatedly brought him into contact with midrash. For instance, in his commentary on the divine judgement of Israel recorded at Hosea 4:3, Pococke begins by citing the translation of the King James Bible: “Therefore shall the land mourn, and every one that dwelleth therein shall languish with the beasts of the field ...” He explains the

¹⁰ Gerald Toomer, *Eastern Wisdom and Learning: the Study of Arabic in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1996), pp.121, 133; James Bliss (ed.), *The Works of the Most Reverend Father in God, William Laud, D.D., sometime Lord Archbishop of Canterbury* vol. 5 pt. 1 (Oxford, 1853), p.177.

¹¹ *Selden Correspondence: vol. 2*, Ms. Bodleian Selden Supra 109, f.351r.

¹² See Cecil Roth, “Edward Pococke and the First Hebrew Printing in Oxford” in *Bodleian Library Record* 2 (1948), pp.218-9; Stephen Burnett, *Christian Hebraism in the Reformation Era (1500-1600)* (Leiden, 2012), pp.148-51; Gerald Toomer, *Eastern Wisdom*, pp.121-224; Peter Holt, *Studies in the History of the Near East* (London, 1973), p.5.

¹³ Edward Pococke, *A Commentary on the Prophecy of Hosea* (Oxford, 1685), preface.

¹⁴ Edward Pococke, *A Commentary on the Prophecy of Hosea*, p.228.

‘mourning of the land’ as a figure or metaphor for desolation and proceeds to ask when this came to pass.

To find when this judgement was made good on the land, we shall not need to fly to that which *Kimchi* reports from an ancient Doctor of theirs, that for fifty two years there passed not a man through the land of *Judah*, grounding his conceit on the number that the letters in בהמה [*behemah*] *Beast*, make ...¹⁵

To establish the period of the desolation described by Hosea, Pococke went to the commentary of David Kimḥi. Pococke’s manuscript of Kimḥi’s commentary on the Latter Prophets is now in the Bodleian Library. A trace of his research remains in the margin – Pococke has marked the comment on Hosea 4:3 that he cites here.¹⁶

Pococke was evidently disappointed to find that Kimḥi, famous for his grammatical explanations of the Hebrew Bible, reported a midrashic interpretation that the duration of the land’s desolation could be established by means of *gematria*. As Pococke notes, Kimḥi cited an “ancient Doctor”, meaning a rabbinic authority, who counted the sum of the letters of the word *behemah* in Jeremiah’s lamentation over the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem (9:10, MT 9:9) to establish that the land’s desolation would last for 52 years. Although Pococke considered this interpretation a “conceit”, he nevertheless pursued it to its origin. In a footnote, he identified the rabbinic source of this comment as Midrash Lamentations Rabba.¹⁷ When we turn to the text in question in Pococke’s copy of Midrash Rabba in the Bodleian, we find the very page that Pococke himself read and then marked in the margin.¹⁸

Pococke’s manuscript of Kimḥi’s commentary and his copy of Midrash Rabba show that, when he composed his commentary on Hosea, he consulted the medieval Jewish commentaries he had in his library and located midrashim they cited in his copy of Midrash Rabba. He read the commentaries and the midrash pencil in hand and marked relevant passages which caught his interest. He then summarised the results of his research as he composed commentaries of his own, paraphrasing the medieval Jewish interpretations he had read and calling the reader’s attention to the rabbinic sources they cite.

Although Pococke indicated in the preface to his commentary on Hosea that he was interested exclusively in Jewish interpretations that would help him understand the “literal meaning” of the Bible, his commentaries and annotations suggest that his interest in midrash was broader than he admitted. He pursued Kimḥi’s interpretation of Hosea 4:3 to its source in Midrash Rabba, clearly intent on understanding the midrash itself. Pococke’s continuous annotations of the first two chapters of his copy of Genesis Rabba show that he studied midrash in its own right rather than as a potential source of literal interpretations alone. This is confirmed by his annotation of the midrash on the letter *bet* that we read earlier. He noticed the same grammatical problem that had led the book’s earlier Jewish reader to correct the text by adding the letter *shin*. Pococke showed his approval of this correction by underlining it and copying it above the line, carefully imitating the cursive hand of his predecessor. In the margin, he also provided a graphic illustration of this midrash, writing a letter *bet* with distinct upper and lower strokes that point upwards to the Creator and backwards in the alphabet to the letter *’alef*. Pococke did not pass over the midrash, rejecting it as unhelpful in determining the literal meaning of the Bible. Instead he devoted his attention to deciphering its terse Hebrew text, determining its correct reading and working out the significance that has been given to the shape of the letter *bet*.¹⁹

¹⁵ Edward Pococke, *A Commentary on the Prophecy of Hosea*, p.170.

¹⁶ [The Later Prophets with the Commentary of R. David Kimḥi], Ms. Bodleian Poc. 317, f.208a.

¹⁷ The passage is Lamentations Rabba *Petiḥa* 34.

¹⁸ Second pagination f.52a.

¹⁹ Pococke also translated into Latin the expression of God’s desire that the universe would endure through its creation by means of the first letter of the word *berakhah*. He rendered “והלוי יעמוד”, “and would that it may endure!”, as “utinam subsistere possit”.

Pococke's annotations on this particular midrash are among his most significant in the Bodleian copy of Midrash Rabba because they show that he interacted with the notes of his Jewish predecessor to gain an understanding of rabbinic Bible interpretation. The book's Jewish readers corrected the midrash as part of a painstaking annotation of the volume partly by means of Meir Benveniste's *'Ot 'Emet*. Edward Pococke, though, encountered this text as he studied selected midrashim systematically and looked for the passages cited by the medieval Jewish commentaries he consulted. Although Pococke approached this book with aims different from those of his Jewish predecessors, his manner of reading brought his studies into contact with theirs. He encountered the same textual problems, relied on their annotations and copied their textual insights. In this regard, the Bodleian copy of Bomberg's Midrash Rabba provides a unique record of the study of midrash in the early modern period. Its annotations demonstrate how a seventeenth-century English cleric and scholar became an unanticipated user of the annotations that Meir Benveniste of Salonica furnished a century earlier for Ottoman Jewish readers of the very same book.