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DIGRESSION AND REDACTION IN THE HOMILETICAL MIDRASHIM:

PESIKTA DERAV KAHANA CHAPTER FIVE

It was customary for some time to view the so-called homiletical midrashim (e.g. *Vayyiqra Rabbah* and *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana)* as collections of sermonic materials which had their origin in the actual preaching which took place in the synagogue (or study house) of late antiquity. From this perspective, the individual chapters, or units within the chapters, consist of oral compositions which have been reduced to writing, but which still essentially represent the form of the oral environment out of which they arose. Such an assumption is not unreasonable in light of the various connections between the homiletical midrashim and the liturgical cycle.[1] Nevertheless, it is still not clear to what extent the written collections which we have today reflect the actual oral context of public preaching, and to what degree they have been shaped and reworked at the literary level. This question, in turn, leads us to ask how much, and what kind of rhetorical strategy one should expect to find in these midrashim. This last question in particular will be taken up here through a study of the *petihah* (or "introductory") section of *Pesikta de-Rav*

Kahana, chapter five. We will attempt to show how recent scholarship on the literary dimension of *petihot* can be used to describe better the redaction of chapters as a whole. We will then conclude with a suggestion as to what this kind of evidence implies about how one should read these midrashim.

Within the various chapters that make up these midrashic documents, the exposition of the Torah verse proper is preceded by a series of "mini-lessons" that usually <u>begin</u> with a remote verse (often taken from the "Writings"), and which generally <u>conclude</u> with a citation of the Torah verse to be expounded. Each one of these "mini-lessons," where a remote verse is cited, discussed, and then connected to the main Torah passage, is called a *petihah* (literally "opening"). Each chapter begins with a number of *petihot,* all or most of which <u>conclude</u> with the Torah passage at hand. After these petihot, the chapter proceeds to the verse-by-verse exposition of the main Torah passage.

Whether the *petihah* was an "opening" homily that prepared the way for the main exposition of the Torah passage for that day, or whether it was the actual sermon itself, given in order to prepare the way for the reading of the Torah passage to follow, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the *petihah* form does represent something of the oral exposition of Scripture

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[1] For example, the thirty-seven "homilies" of *Vayyiqra Rabbah* follow a version of the old Palestinian Torah reading cycle, and *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* treats only passages which served as part of the liturgy (namely, festivals and special Sabbaths.

as delivered before some audience, general or academic, in

antiquity. Cf. *Vayyikra Rabbah* 3:6: ר׳ חנניה בר ר׳ אחא אזל לחד אתר

אשכח הדין פיסוקא (Lev. 2:3) ראש סדר . . . מה פתח עליה

(See b. Megillah 10b-11a [Scroll of Esther] and b. Makkot 10b

[Deut. 19:1-10, cities of refuge] for other accounts of sages

expounding Scripture in this way).

At the same time, it has become increasingly clear that

most of the *petihot* as we see them now have undergone a

considerable degree of editorial re-shaping. The diverse and

eclectic nature of many *petihot* may not, as previously thought, be

the result of careful rhetorical crafting, intended to achieve a

"maximum rhetorical effect."[2] As opposed to this view, more recent

studies have identified various features, especially for the

longer and more complex *petihot,* that reflect significant shaping

at the literary stage (see Richard Sarason, "Toward a New Agendum

for the Study of Rabbinic Midrashic Literature").[3] This would make

the document, rather than the attributed sage or the original oral

setting, the most important context for studying *petihot.*

Features pointing to literary redaction include: (1)

cases where the exposition of the initial *petihah* verse does not

relate in any obvious way to the main Torah passage, and a

stereotyped, document-specific transition phrase was be added in

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[2] Joseph Heinemann, "The Proem in the Aggadic Midrashim: A Form-Critical Study," *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 22 (1972): 107.

order to make the connection;[4] (2) examples in which multiple interpretations are given of the *petihah* verse, some being extremely long and involved, where only at the end is some transition to the main Torah verse made;[5] (3) the technical usage of דבר אחר, where this formula is used "mechanically to indicate the preservation of one or many alternate opinions, whether or not these are related to any central line of exegesis or thematic exposition."[6]

Yet in addition to what these observations suggest about the <u>origin</u> and <u>redaction</u> of the *petihot,* it must also be asked what they tell us about the <u>structure</u> of chapters as a whole. I. Heinemann described the Midrashic chapter as consisting in a series of *petihot* (proems) followed by the treatment of the Torah passage.[7] This basic structure can be observed frequently in the chapters of the homiletical midrashim, and has been accepted by most scholars as accurate (e.g., Norman Cohen, "Structure and Editing in the Homiletical Midrashim;" David Stern, "Midrash and the Language of Exegesis: A Study of Vayyikra Rabbah, Chapter 1"),[8] although several have added a third element, the so-called

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[3] See Richard S. Sarason, "Toward a New Agendum for the Study of Rabbinic Midrashic Literature," in *Studies in Aggadah, Targum and Jewish Liturgy in Memory of Joseph Heinemann,* ed. Jakob J. Petuchowski and Ezra Fleischer (Jerusalem, 1981): 55-73.

[4] Richard S. Sarason, "The *Petihot* in Leviticus Rabba: 'Oral Homilies' or Redactional Constructions?" *JJS* 33 (1982): 557-65.

[5] Ibid., 562.

[6] Lewis Barth, "Reading Rabbinic Bible Exegesis," in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism IV,* ed. William Scott Green (Chico, 1983), 85.

[7] Heinemann, "The Proem," 106.

"Messianic" peroration.[9] In general, however, the homiletical midrashic chapter is thought to begin with a series of *petihot,* which are then followed by the exegesis of the main Torah text. This perception is legitimate, in that there <u>are</u> *petihah* materials that <u>do indeed</u> precede the treatment of the main Torah verse. Nevertheless, from a literary vantage point, the presence of major editorial "insertions" into individual *petihot* can also have a significant effect upon the coherence of this first section of the chapter as a whole. An example of this phenomenon, where some material is so expansive and independent as to be a digression at the chapter level, can be seen in chapter five of *Pesikta deRav Kahana.*

The fifth chapter of *Pesikta deRav Kahana* deals with Exodus 12:1-20, the Torah lection for the last of the four special Sabbaths (*Hahodesh*), which occurs just prior to the month of Nisan. The actual exposition of the Torah lection does not begin until paragraph 11, which treats Exodus 12:1-2. The peroration comes at the end of the chapter, paragraph 19, where Exodus 12:11 (how one must eat the Passover in haste) is linked with Isaiah 52:12:

כִּי לֹא בְחִפָּזוֹן תֵּצֵאוּ וּבִמְנוּסָה לֹא תֵלֵכוּן כִּי־הֹלֵךְ לִפְנֵיכֶם יְהוָה וּמְאַסִּפְכֶם אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

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[8] Cf. N. Cohen, "Structure and Editing in the Homiletical Midrashim," *AJSreview* 6 (1981): 1-2; and D. Stern, "Midrash and the Language of Exegesis: A Study of Vayikra Rabbah, Chapter 1," in *Midrash and Literature,* ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 112-13.

[9] Cf. Edmund Stein, "Die homiletische Peroratio im Midrasch, *HUCA* 8-9 (1931-32): 353-72. The perorations for the "homilies" on each Torah passage were connected to their appropriate *haftarot* by Marc Bregman, "The

The *petihah* materials, therefore, are found in paragraphs 1-10. Within these ten paragraphs, there are a total of eight *petihot.* We will first look briefly at the initial two *petihot,* since the first provides an example of a straightforward *petihah,* and the second shows one that is somewhat artificial. We will then survey the rest of the *petihah* section, highlighting in particular two digressions, one in the third *petihah,* the other in the seventh, which illustrate the anthological character of the final written form of *Pesikta deRav Kahana.*

The first *petihah* begins with the citation of Psalm 104:19, עָשָׂה יָרֵחַ לְמוֹעֲדִים שֶׁמֶשׁ יָדַע מְבוֹאוֹ, against which a calendrical problem is raised--namely, how can both the moon and the sun serve to mark times and seasons. After a pair of "wrong" answers have been given, no doubt for the sake of interest, a tradition ascribed to R. Berechiah in the name of R. Simon gives the best answer: while the nations of the world mark their times by the sun, Israel marks its times by the moon. The *petihah* is then neatly concluded by the citation of the Torah verse, Exodus 12:2 (הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רֹאשׁ חֳדָשִׁים וג'). This first case is an example of a relatively straightforward *petihah.*

The second *petihah* cites as the *petihah* verse Psalm 40:6 (רַבּוֹת עָשִׂיתָ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהַי נִפְלְאֹתֶיךָ וּמַחְשְׁבֹתֶיךָ אֵלֵינוּ). First, this verse is given a lengthy explanation according to which God's thoughts and deeds

were performed in order that Abraham would accept the persecution of foreign kingdoms. When this first long explanation is over, the original *petihah* verse, Psalm 40:6, is re-stated and applied to the thoughts of a man (such as Adam) for his wife, even when she is not in sight, and the comparable longings of merchants for their wives. After this, the *petihah* verse is further applied to the thoughts and wonders with which God tried to coax the nations of the world into accepting the Torah. Finally, as a דבר אחר, the *petihah* verse is related to God's former practice of thinking through the calendar himself, up until the Exodus from Egypt, at which time God turned this responsibility over to Israel. This final point is illustrated by Exodus 12:2, our main Torah verse, which is cited. Unlike the first *petihah,* in this example most of the exegesis of the *petihah* verse, Psalm 40:6, is totally unrelated to the main Torah verse. The *petihah* is composed of a series of different interpretations of Psalm 40:6, with the final segment, connecting to Exodus 12:2, having been tacked on to the end by means of a דבר אחר, perhaps by the editor of *Pesikta deRav Kahana.* In this second case, the *petihah* contains primarily independent materials which do not lead in any way to the final Torah passage, yet which still can all be accounted for as exegesis of the initial *petihah* verse.

Stern include the peroration as the final element in their descriptions of the shape of a classical midrashic chapter.

Now for the first digression. The third paragraph introduces the *petihah* verse, Proverbs 13:12, תּוֹחֶלֶת מְמֻשָּׁכָה מַחֲלָה־לֵב וְעֵץ חַיִּים תַּאֲוָה בָאָה, and applies the two halves of the verse to a man who is betrothed and must wait for his wife (תּוֹחֶלֶת מְמֻשָּׁכָה מַחֲלָה־לֵב), and to the man who is betrothed and takes his wife immediately (וְעֵץ חַיִּים תַּאֲוָה בָאָה). As a דבר אחר, the verse is applied to David, who had to wait to become king (תּוֹחֶלֶת מְמֻשָּׁכָה מַחֲלָה־לֵב), as opposed to Saul, who became king immediately on account of his numerous merits, including Torah study (cf. Proverbs 8:15-16).[10]

It is the mention of Saul, apparently, which triggers the following sequence. The tannaitic tradition is cited:

תני ר' ישמע' עד שלא יחטא אדם נותנין לו אימה ויראה, וכיון שהוא חוטא נותנין עליו אימה ויראה.

This observation is applied in succession, and at some length, to Adam, the Israelites (with a further digression on the effect of Israel's sin on the angels), David, Solomon, and finally to Saul. This long interlude is followed by a דבר אחר which re-introduces the original *petihah* verse (Prov. 13:12), where the two halves of the verse relate to (1) Israel before they were redeemed (תּוֹחֶלֶת מְמֻשָּׁכָה מַחֲלָה־לֵב), and (2) Israel after they were redeemed (וְעֵץ חַיִּים תַּאֲוָה בָאָה). The fact that Nisan was the month in which Israel was redeemed provides the bridge to the main Torah verse, Exodus 12:2, which is cited.

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[10] Proverbs 8: 15, בִּי מְלָכִים יִמְלֹכוּ, and 16, בִּי שָׂרִים יָשֹׂרוּ (where wisdom equals Torah).

It must be observed, in all of this, that the R. Ishmael tradition is so loosely connected with what precedes it, is so lengthy, and is so remotely integrated into its surrounding *petihah,* that one may at first wonder at the reason for its inclusion. We may suggest the following: the positive evaluation given to Saul in the preceding lines required a comment to explain the reason for Saul's later decline. The R. Ishmael tradition, which only dealt with Saul as one of the examples, was imported into the text as a whole, with Saul placed at the end as the "punch line."

Yet, even though one can see the (remote) connection that triggered the inclusion of this material, it is nevertheless still merely an offshoot of the "serial exegesis" of the *petihah* verse, having no relation to the theme of Exodus 12 whatsoever. Instead of viewing this digression as a rhetorical feature of this individual *petihah,* the sheer length and obvious detachment of this material justify that it be considered a digression from the *petihah* altogether. Rather than being part of the exposition of the *petihah* verse, it is rather an interlude, an assorted piece of exegesis that interrupts the *petihah,* from which one must return in order to get back to the genuine *petihah* materials of the chapter. The introduction of this interlude into its current context probably goes back to the redaction of the literary pieces

which make up *Pesikta deRav Kahana,* and is not part of the oral

crafting of an earlier *petihah* homily.

Paragraphs four and five contain brief *petihot,* in both

cases introduced by the phrase: Rabbi So-and-So פתח, and both of

which lead directly and somewhat naturally to the main Torah

verse. Paragraph 6 contains a very straightforward *petihah* on Song

of Songs 5:2, in which different phrases from the verse are

ascribed to the assembly of Israel, Moses, or God, the final step

leading directly into the citation of Exodus 12:2.

What comes next is a block of material which constitutes,

in reality, an exposition of Song of Songs 2:8-13. This literary

block, encompassing paragraphs 7-9, has received only a minimum

amount of editing—that is, some modest attempt was made to bring

its beginning into a recognizable *petihah* form. By and large,

however, it was simply imported into *Pesikta deRav Kahana* as a

discreet unit. Both the independence and the size of this second

digression warrant special attention.

Paragraph 7 begins with a citation of Song of Songs 2:8,

קוֹל דּוֹדִי הִנֵּה־זֶה בָּא מְדַלֵּג עַל־הֶהָרִים מְקַפֵּץ עַל־הַגְּבָעוֹת. We are then told to expect

the views of R. Judah, R. Nehemiah, and the Rabbis. Following

this, we are given three interpretations of the verse, one for

each. Each one relates קוֹל דּוֹדִי הִנֵּה־זֶה בָּא to Moses, who tells Israel

that the month of their redemption has come. In each case, Moses

comes to announce redemption, and the Israelites question the

possibility of such an act based on some technical difficulty. Each time, Moses answers their question, referring to the הֶהָרִים and הַגְּבָעוֹת of Song of Songs 2:8, and supplying an additional prooftext to support his point. For R. Judah, the problem relates to the chronology of the Egyptian oppression, and the concluding support text is Exodus 12:2. In the case of R. Nehemiah, the problem concerns the idolatry of Israel in Egypt, and the final support text is Hosea 4:13. According to the Rabbis, the difficulty stems from Israel's lack of good deeds, and the support text comes from Judges 11:37.[11] Finally, the series is concluded by an interpretation where קוֹל דּוֹדִי הִנֵּה־זֶה בָּא refers to the Messianic king, and the difficulty raised by Israel is that God has not yet persecuted Israel with seventy nations (i.e. the redemption can only occur after this takes place). In this last case, no proof text is brought in to support the counter-argument made by the Messianic king. Instead, ובחדש הזה אתם נגאלין is tacked on as a conclusion, leading into Exodus 12:2.

The way in which this material came to be included here in *Pesikta deRav Kahana* may be reconstructed. The treatment of Song of Songs 2:8 already existed before its inclusion here, as part of a continuous exegesis of at least part of this book.[12] It

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[11] To these three interpretations is added a statement of R. Yudan, who solves the chronological problem raised above by R. Judah.

[12] The chronological solution of R. Yudan appears independent of any of the Song of Songs exegesis in *Genesis Rabbah* (44:18). The same exegesis found here appears later in *Pesikta Rabbati* (15:7) unchanged. It also occurs in a slightly altered form in *Song of Songs Rabbah*, where, interestingly, Exodus 12:2 is inserted not after R. Judah's position, but after that of R. Nehemiah, so that R. Nehemiah has two support verses, and R. Judah does not have

was then imported into *Pesikta deRav Kahana* because of the use made of Exodus 12:2 as part of R. Judah's interpretation. The entire unit, however, was brought in,[13] not just the part that cited Exodus 12:2, and an attempt was made to make a *petihah* out of it by dropping the supporting prooftext for the final argument and adding in its place a short bridge to another reference to Exodus 12:2. Thus, we can see both why this exegesis was selected for inclusion, and how the redactor attempted to integrate it into the *petihah* format.

Yet, it is perfectly clear from what follows that the Song of Songs material remains a discrete literary block, even in its present context. After the citation of Exodus 12:2 at the end of paragraph seven, the text moves on to an exposition of Song of Songs 2:9 in paragraph eight. A lengthy exposition of 2:9 follows, ending with another Messianic interpretation. Paragraph nine continues on with the Song of Songs, starting with 2:10 and working through the text all the way to 2:13. Again, paragraph 9 concludes with a citation from Psalm 89 and a Messianic theme.

There is no need for our purpose to go through this material in detail. It suffices to say that none of it relates in any way to the main Torah verse, Exodus 12:2. Neither paragraphs eight nor nine contain any attempt to tie the material back into the *petihah* format. It seems that once the exegesis of Song of

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even one. The location of Exodus 12:2 in *Song of Songs Rabbah* makes less sense. The version found here in *Pesikta deRav Kahana* may be considered closer to the "original" Song of Songs exegesis.

Songs 2:8 had been included, on the basis of its use of Exodus 12:2, and once it had been superficially presented as a *petihah,* the rest of the Song of Songs exegesis was included, apparently for the sake of completeness.

After the Song of Songs digression, the compiler returned to his task for one more *petihah* in paragraph 10. This *petihah,* introduced with the word פתח for the first time since paragraph five, cites Hosea 3:2 as the *petihah* verse and finally brings in the Torah verse, Exodus 12:2, with a דבר אחר. This case is not unusual in and of itself. From the perspective of the chapter as a whole, however, this final *petihah* is significant. It shows that, no matter how far astray the text seemed to go in presenting the Song of Songs exegesis, paragraphs 1-10 still represent the "*petihah* section" of the Midrash, so that its contents may on some level be termed "*petihah* materials."

Nevertheless, considering the size and nature of the digressions we have seen, it is justifiable to ask whether the traditional description of "*petihot* followed by exegesis of the base text" is sufficient to account for what is actually present in this chapter. It is not merely that many *petihot* contain exegeses of the *petihah* verse which are unconnected to the main Torah verse. The issue relates more to major digressions, whether they be thematic (like the tradition relating to Saul ascribed to

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[13] This material must have already contained the chronological solution of R. Yudan; see note 12.

R. Ishmael in paragraph three) or exegetical (like the Song of Songs exegesis in paragraphs 7-9). In order to emphasize the scope of the problem, it may be mentioned that, based on a page count of Mandelbaum's edition, the exegesis of Song of Songs 2:8-13 represents approximately half of the total material in the "*petihah* section" of *Pesikta deRav Kahana* chapter five. Since only a superficial attempt was made (in paragraph seven) to integrate this material into the *petihah* form, with the bulk of the exegesis proceeding on its own course, it is somewhat problematic to identify this first part of the chapter as "*petihot.*" Roughly half of the chapter has nothing to do with the *petihah* form at all.

In sum, it must be acknowledged that the redactor's primary intention for this first section of the chapter was certainly to gather together *petihot* for the Torah lectionary verse, Exodus 12:2. One can, in that sense, justify the practice of referring to the first section of the homiletical midrashic chapter as "*petihah* material." Yet, one must also recognize that the first section of the homiletical midrashic chapter can contain materials which are not *petihot* themselves, and which are not even part of a *petihah.* Therefore, it may be more accurate to describe the contents of the first section of a homiletical midrashic chapter as "*petihot,* with possible thematic or exegetical digressions."

Indeed, these digressions point to another purpose of the midrashic collections, to anthologize. In other words, sometimes traditions are included because they needed to be included somewhere, for the sake of preservation, and the present spot seemed to be the most handy. This being the case, one must resist trying to impose a literary (or homiletical) coherence to a given midrashic text, if in fact some component within that text does not reflect intentional crafting, but rather wound up in its present spot, one might say, "by accident." Of course, crafting and rhetorical strategy, whether oral or literary, can often be discerned in larger and smaller units within the homiletical midrashim. Nevertheless, a skilled reading of midrash requires the reader both to look for the shaping that may be in the text, and to accept the fact that some parts may not fit well into the overall design.