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. 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 begin with a remote verse (often taken from the “Writings”), and which generally conclude 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 conclude 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' חנניא בר ר' אחא אנא ת勒ך אדר
לאשה הרות תספרה (Lev. 2:3)
(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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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 הביאו אמרי, 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 origin and redaction of the petihot, it must also be asked what they tell us about the structure 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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⁶ Ibid., 562.
⁷ Lewis Barth, “Reading Rabbinic Bible Exegesis,” in Approaches to Ancient Judaism IV, ed. William Scott Green (Chico, 1983), 85.
“Messianic” peroration. 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 are petihah materials that do indeed 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:

עַל לָא בֵּיתָהוּ תְּמוּנָה לְאָדָם כָּל לתָּמִים לְאָדָם אֵין תְּמוּנָה לָא בֵּיתָהוּ תְּמוּנָה לְאָדָם אֵין תְּמוּנָה


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, שָׁנָה יָהּ לְמַעֲשֵׂיהֶם שָׁנָה יָהּ נֵבְאוּ, 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 ("גָּלְעָד הַנַּחֶג לָאֵשׁ הֶרְשֵׁיָה נַי") (יְהֵשׁ לְגַם רָאשָׁה תְּכִיָּה נַי). This first case is an example of a relatively straightforward petihah.

The second petihah cites as the petihah verse Psalm 40:6 (רָהַת שֵׁשׁ אֶחָד גוֹדְהָא אֲלָה, נֶבְּאַהאֲלָה, נֶבְּאַהאֲלָה). 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 רַסּוֹן, 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 רַסּוֹן, 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,

and applies the two halves of the verse to a man who is betrothed and must wait for his wife (דַּעְתַּלְתָּה בָּאָמְרָה יָוְסָי), and to the man who is betrothed and takes his wife immediately (הָדָעְתַּלְתָּה בָּאָמְרָה יָוְסָי). As a *רְמָאָרְמָא*, the verse is applied to David, who had to wait to become king (דַּעְתַּלְתָּה בָּאָמְרָה יָוְסָי), as opposed to Saul, who became king immediately on account of his numerous merits, including Torah study (cf. Proverbs 8:15-16).\(^\text{10}\)

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

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 *רְמָאָרְמָא* 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 (דַּעְתַּלְתָּה בָּאָמְרָה יָוְסָי), and (2) Israel after they were redeemed (הָדָעְתַּלְתָּה בָּאָמְרָה יָוְסָי). 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.

\(^{10}\) Proverbs 8: 15, 16, and 16, (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 רבי וו, 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, כל תודיה התורה כג מצר עֵשֶׁה קֹבֶעָה קָשֶׁה קֹבֶעָה. 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 כל תודיה התורה כג 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 אָדָם הָעָמַד and אָדָם אַתָּה 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. Finally, the series is concluded by an interpretation where אָדָם אַתָּה 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, נָרָה הָאָדָם אַתָּה נַאְלָא 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. To these three interpretations is added a statement of R. Yudan, who solves the chronological problem raised above by R. Judah. 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,\(^\text{13}\) 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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\(^{12}\) 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 יָד 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 רַגְלָה. 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.