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Haggadah in Jewish Bible Study

ETAN B. LEVINE

Christian Biblical interpreters adopted and adapted the interpretative principles and methods of their Jewish and Greek teachers and neighbors whenever and insofar as they judged them to be compatible with the Biblical text. One method of Scriptural interpretation and application in Judaism was that of Haggadah. Jesus used a form of this method when in Matt. 12:1-7 He added an interpretative story (Haggadah) about David and his soldiers to the Biblical principle that Yahweh desires mercy and not sacrifice.

Haggadah (literally: "narration") comprises the sayings, legends, anecdotes, homilies, and folklore of Rabbinic literature. In contrast to Halachah, which consists of the legal elements, Haggadah relates narrative, allegory, and non-legal Scriptural interpretations by the Jewish sages. The extensive literature included in the broad term "Midrash" is, in fact, almost entirely Haggadah, as is a full sixth of the Jerusalem Talmud and a full third of the authoritative Babylonian Talmud.

Traditionally, Bible study among Jews was characterized by the fusing of the Biblical text with Haggadah. The two were so intimately interwoven that frequently the distinction was lost between what constituted the actual Scriptural text and what was simply a Haggadic addition. Through the ages Haggadah became a decisive factor in Jewish study, a popular genre incorporating and reflecting reactions both to

Scripture and to contemporary life. Through Haggadah, Scripture was made relevant and contemporary life was rendered coherent, two weighty credentials for analysis by teachers of Bible today.¹

This brief study is intended as an overview of and introduction to the historically effective Haggadah in Jewish Bible study.

On the most familiar level, teachers in ages past used Haggadah primarily as a means of illustration. Consider, for example, this poetic rendering: When Adam awakened from the divine surgery and beheld the beautiful Eve at his side, a Haggadah represents him as asking: "What is going to be the plan of our life together?" She replied: "We shall share a common table; you will seek to provide it with bread, and I shall cover it with fresh flowers." Thus they illustrated ideal union in marriage.²

Another favorite told how the Spirit of Israel³ had arisen and pleaded before God:

¹ Many Haggadic classics have recently appeared in English translation. For example, the various critical editions of the Midrash Rabbah, Mekilta, Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer, Pesikta de Rav Kahana, Abot de Rabbi Nathan; collections such as Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1954); as well as numerous textbooks containing secondary sources of Haggadah.

² For an effective use of this Haggadah in a contemporary context see Raphael Gold, "Sex in Jewish Tradition," *Jewish Heritage Reader* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., 1965), p. 150.

³ That is the "Knesseth Israel" referred to in a third-century homily of Rabbi Jose ben Hanina.

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"Lord of the Universe! The nations of the world have spread out their net before me in order to catch me! They say: Worship idols! If I listen to them, I am condemned by Thy law. If I do not obey them, then they slay me. I am like a thirsty wolf, who stands before the well with a trap on it, saying: If I descend to drink, I will be caught by the snare. If not, then I shall die of thirst."⁴ Thus they described to their students the dilemma and the pathos of existence in exile.

A popular Haggadah was the classic that told how Abraham's brother Haran was not genuinely committed to his faith and deftly managed to avoid taking a stand either on the side of Abraham or on the side of Abraham's persecutors. When the idolatrous King Nimrod decreed that all those who refused to worship idols would be thrown into the fiery furnace, Haran shrewdly reasoned: "Since Abraham is my older brother, he will be called forth before me and will be cast into the furnace first. I will wait and see what transpires. If Abraham comes out of this trial unscathed, then I will declare that my allegiance is to his faith; if not, then I will join his enemies." Haran's predictions initially proved well reasoned; Abraham was called first and was cast into the fiery furnace. When Haran saw how God caused Abraham to be rescued from the fiery furnace, he immediately declared himself to be an adherent of Abraham's faith. Later, he too confidently entered the furnace; but no sooner did he enter than God caused him to be consumed for scheming and

⁴ Esther, ch. 7, Yalkut Makiri to Ps. 140:1; cited in Arthur Marmorstein, "The Background of the Midrash," *Hebrew Union College Annual*, VI (1929), 187.

vacillating in his loyalty and faith. This Haggadah was utilized to illustrate opportunism and disloyalty and the fate awaiting those contemporary descendants of Abraham who were calculating in their affirmation or denial of faith.⁵

These are but a few of the countless Haggadic illustrations. Admittedly they were frequently used simplistically. However, at this juncture it might be beneficial to evaluate Haggadah itself, not simply as a body of specific content but as an ancient genre of religious instruction incorporating valuable methods.⁶

Haggadah began to flourish with the coming of Hellenism to the Near East. The Greek theater was the prototype of Haggadah, which used as its own setting the early synagogue service. The Haggadah would be transmitted to the people who had gathered for religious convocations consisting of tripartite offerings of prayer, Scriptural readings, and Haggadah. The term "Haggadah" designated that part of the convocation devoted to a popular presentation to the audience.⁷ Obvious differences notwithstanding, one can easily discern the similarities of purpose and of form that would lend to a fusion of Greek theatrical oratory and Biblical exegesis.

The two favorite forms of Haggadah were the drama and the allegory. Dramatic Haggadah typically expanded, emphasized, and even added material to the Biblical text until there emerged from the simple

⁵ For the Haggadah within its context see Ginzberg, I, 202.

⁶ For an excellent treatment of Haggadic method see Elimilech Epstein-Halevi, *Sh'are b'aggadah* (Tel Aviv, 1963).

⁷ Eventually, of course, the term "Haggadah" was fused with the concept of the sermon and was frequently used interchangeably.

text new creations: richly descriptive accounts, dramatic and lively, thought-provoking on various levels, and quite entertaining. The latitude of ingenuity within dramatic Haggadah can be fully appreciated by the observation that frequently totally new narratives have been created, with only the names of the original Biblical protagonists left intact.

Allegorical Haggadah, without altering the Biblical element, added illustrative and comparative material in order to emphasize some aspect of the Biblical text, be it the tragic or the comic, the sinful or the virtuous. By juxtaposing events, situations, and individuals, allegorical Haggadah elicited wide interest and popular response for a Biblical text that otherwise might have been rejected as irrelevant, simplistic, and uninspiring.

Structurally, Haggadah involved various formats, including the chorus, dialog, proverb, aphorism, and even the riddle. Although many of these were utilized to underscore and intensify the effect that the Bible had intended to convey, many purposefully introduced value concepts that were not implied in the original Biblical account.

In addition to the crucial need for presenting Scripture as relevant, interesting, and vital, the teacher in antiquity also felt the need to explain what he saw as: (a) internal contradictions between Biblical ordinances (which had to be resolved without doing violence either to the text or to the prevailing religious practice); (b) factual dilemmas that confused the historical setting (for example, conflicting numbers, place names, which had to be resolved without altering the text itself); (c) theological difficulties (for example,

the frequent anthropomorphic allusions); (d) Scriptural references that contradicted accepted theology; and (e) syntactical, grammatical, and linguistic difficulties.

Although Haggadah bore definite similarity to Greek literary criticism,⁸ its primary intent was not to reflect upon a past classic but to react to contemporary life. The subject matter may frequently have been Scriptural, but the genuine loci of concerns were contemporary ethics, theology, and aesthetics. Haggadah served as a medium for bringing the classical text into contact with real-life situations, decisions, and persons. The "revealed past" (that is, Scripture) was imaginatively re-examined to shed light on the hidden aspects of the present and the future.⁹

Although Haggadah consists, in the main, of textual elaboration constructed by means of question and answer, extant Haggadah frequently fails to include the question to which it constitutes the answer. This phenomenon is the eventual result of several ancient factors: (a) Frequently the questions were considered to be self-evident, and it was judged unnecessary to formulate the question prior to providing the answer; (b) often the questions were familiar to the students, and the teaching Haggadist was merely providing an alternate answer to a familiar question;

⁸ See Aristotle's *Poetics*, Ch. 25, with its concern for "the impossibilities, illogicals, perversions (i. e., ethical), and contradictions or corruptions (i. e., stylistic)."

⁹ The authors of Haggadah related to Scripture not only as a historical document but as a prophetic one. Thus there were opened up two main methods of Scriptural Haggadah: the linguistic-logical method and the intuitive-magic method, both attempting to reveal the allusions that Scripture had hidden.

(c) at times, stating the question might have constituted an undramatic procedure detracting from the interest level of the Haggadah; (d) frequently a fully formulated question would have raised greater ideological doubts than the answer could successfully resolve.

These unarticulated questions did not constitute a detriment, however. If anything, they added a most worthwhile dimension: the educational opportunity of eliciting the students' resources in jointly scrutinizing the Haggadah with a view toward rediscovering significance, relevance, and contemporary thrust in it. A creative reconstruction of the "why" of an Haggadic element might well be as educationally productive as learning the "what." Moreover, precedent of method and of models for this exciting dimension of a religious curriculum existed, since the Haggadic authors themselves had utilized Scripture as source material for a literary extrapolation that transcended the confines of the text and became independently revealing.

Halevi has observed¹⁰ that "in truth it may be said that Haggadah stands at the boundary between Free Creativity and the Search for Truth." Thus, for example, in the Haggadic elements dealing with the story of Achan ben Carmi (Joshua 7) and the discovery of his theft by casting lots, there is displayed both a concern for the ancient Israelite beliefs and practices reflected in Scripture and concern for a much wider series of questions. For example, was it morally right of God to punish the other soldiers with defeat as retribution for Achan's having taken the booty? Why didn't God reveal to Joshua who the cul-

prit was rather than cause him to resort to lots? Can lots actually discover and testify against evildoers? Why did Joshua want Achan to confess after the lot and not attempt to hide or deny the theft? Why did Achan readily confess and find the booty for his accusers? Was it proper to align the entire weight of the law against a man who had been tempted to transgress once and who had already confessed?¹¹

On a less sophisticated level, purely from the human-interest point of view, even so dramatic a Biblical narrative as the Cain-Abel confrontation¹² omits the answers to questions being supplied by Haggadah, such as: What was the nature of the actual struggle? What was the reason for its final outcome? What was the tactic and the weapon? What caused the psychological transition from "Am I my brother's keeper?" to "My guilt is greater than I can bear"? Why did Cain receive special protection?

The Achan ben Carmi incident and the Cain-Abel controversy are but isolated examples; one has only to consider the brevity and terseness of the Flood story, the binding of Isaac, the rebellion of Jeroboam ben Nebat, the Jacob-Esau controversy, the overthrow of Sodom, and the countless other fragments that are the sources of familiar Haggadic dramas and allegory. These Haggadic additions frequently involved anticipation, a central incident, and a didactic conclusion; there was easy association (for example, Sodom could be Rome, and the fire and brimstone could be the volcanoes of Sicily and Italy), and the possibilities for continuation or

¹¹ See Joshua 7:1-26.

¹² See Gen. 4:1-16.

¹⁰ See Epstein-Halevi, p. 1 et passim.

contemporary extension and analogy were manifold.

In retrospect, whether ethical, aesthetic, philosophical, ritual, or historic in its concern; whether linguistic or intuitive in its basis, Haggadah effectively utilized Scripture as an imaginal, associational, pedagogic springboard. In reconsidering Haggadah, both as to religious content

and as to educational method, it is worth reflecting on the evaluation expressed by the educators of antiquity: "Do you want to know Him by Whose Word the world came into being? Then study Haggadah!"¹³

¹³ Sifre 49 to Deut. 11:22, ed. Friedman 85a; see Moses Maimonides, *Yad, Habazakah, Melak-him* 12:2.