

# THE BIBLE AND WOMEN

An Encyclopaedia of Exegesis and Cultural History

Edited by Mary Ann Beavis, Irmtraud Fischer,  
Mercedes Navarro Puerto, and Adriana Valerio

Volume 4.2: Rabbinic Literature



# RABBINIC LITERATURE

*Edited by*

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## Introduction

*Tal Ilan, Lorena Miralles-Maciá, and Ronit Nikolsky*

### 1. Prologue

This volume of the international editorial project “The Bible and Women—An Encyclopaedia of Exegesis and Cultural History” is devoted to rabbinic literature. It originated in an international conference held at the Freie Universität Berlin, 4–5 December 2017, with the title Reception of Biblical Women and Gender in Rabbinic Literature. Most of the papers presented there are included in this book in a reworked and expanded version. Other authors were specifically invited to contribute new studies not presented in the conference in order to cover some missing but important aspects related to biblical women and gender in rabbinic literature. This literature, also known as the literature of the sages, encompasses Jewish textual corpora from the period of classical Judaism (from late antiquity to the early Middle Ages), as explained later in this introduction.

Rabbinic literature is male conceived and male expressed. When the rabbis directed their attention to women, they did so in order to regulate how and to what extent women, the “other” with whom they were obliged to live, affected the lives of men. The rabbis considered the biblical text, describing their past, as a mirror in which to reflect on their ideals. In this past, they put biblical women in their places, under their control, according to the rabbinic perception of the world. In their interpretations, they subjected biblical women to a process of rabbinization: On the one hand, they used biblical women to tackle legal issues that affected women in their society (e.g., marriage, divorce, and sexuality, among others). On the other hand, they developed new story lines for the biblical plots, endowing biblical women with additional characteristics and sometimes a new family, or another ethnic and religious identity. As instructive models, the roles of biblical women were revised and, to a greater or lesser extent,

rewritten from a rabbinic perspective: these women exemplified behaviors or demeanor worthy of imitation or disapproval, and were accepted, or not, into the fold. As in all patriarchal societies, the rabbis placed biblical women in the category of the other. For them, biblical women, though considered part of the same society, represented otherness not only as against male biblical figures, but also as against ideal Jewish men, embodied by the rabbis themselves. The characteristics of alterity with which the sages endowed biblical women shed light on the question of how women should—or should not—behave in the ideal rabbinic society, and which values women should—or should not—strive for from a manly, rabbinic point of view. This book explores both the legal aspects that concern women and the psychological, physical, and behavioral patterns that biblical women acquire in rabbinic exegesis and narrative: When are they given a voice? Why are they silenced? Which new roles do they assume? How do the rabbis harmonize biblical laws with their interests? and so on. What we find in the rabbinic texts is not a reading of the biblical law but its updating to fit rabbinic standards; we do not encounter the biblical Eve, Sarah, Miriam, Ruth, and so on, but rather the rabbinized Eve, Sarah, Miriam, Ruth, and so on.

This volume consists of fifteen contributions that feature different approaches to the question of biblical women and gender, and that encompass a wide variety of rabbinic corpora from diverse periods (Mishnah-Tosefta, halakhic and aggadic midrashim, Talmud and late midrash). Some essays analyze biblical law, gender relations, and regulations according to the sages' argumentation: Dvora Weisberg and Olga I. Ruiz-Morell, respectively, examine levirate and divorce in biblical and rabbinic literature; Christiane Hannah Tzuberi looks at how gender works in the inspection of skin afflictions according to the rabbis; and Alexander A. Dubrau analyzes the suspected adulteress rite and exclusion/inclusion of women in the rite of the red heifer in halakhic midrashim and the Babylonian Talmud.

A second group of studies examines either the rabbinic portrayal of a certain figure or a group of women or the role of biblical women in a determined rabbinic context: Cecilia Haendler scrutinizes the information about female figures in the Mishnah and Tosefta; Gail Labovitz focuses on Hagar in *Genesis Rabbah*; Lorena Miralles-Maciá offers a general look at the more outstanding aspects of biblical women in *Leviticus Rabbah*; Susanne Plietzsch analyzes Sarah in *Genesis Rabbah* and the Babylonian Talmud; Judith R. Baskin discusses female prophets in a Babylonian

Talmud passage; Yuval Blankovsky studies a talmudic section on seductive women who albeit were viewed positively because they did what they did “for the sake of heaven”; Natalie C. Polzer focuses on Eve in *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan*; Ronit Nikolsky inspects the way the “woman of valor” (Prov 31) is connected with Sarah in *Tanhuma Yelammedenu*; Devora Steinmetz considers the tradition of Dinah and Joseph being switched before birth; and Moshe Lavee is concerned with the nationality of the midwives in Egypt in a midrash from the Cairo Genizah. Tal Ilan, who is the author of the first contribution in this volume, inquires into rabbinic episodes in which women show acquaintance with Scripture. The following section of this introduction provides a general description of rabbinic literature, illustrated through references to the biblical prophetess Miriam, which it traces by demonstrating the approaches and methodologies represented in this book from the Bible through early and late rabbinic compositions, down to Arab conquest.

As noted above, this book brings together most of the contributions presented at the international congress held in Berlin, where a number of us had the opportunity to exchange opinions and plan this project. Irmtraud Fischer, one of the principal editors of *The Bible and Women*, joined us, as did several students and assistants, who took part in many productive discussions. We are grateful to all of them for giving us the opportunity to learn from each other. Special thanks go to Hannah Tzuberi and Marcel Gaida, who helped organize the congress and sessions.

We want to express our gratitude to the editors of the *The Bible and Woman* editorial project for their guidance: Irmtraud Fischer (Graz, Austria), Mercedes Navarro Puerto (Madrid), and Adriana Valerio (Naples).<sup>1</sup> We would also like to thank SBL Press (Atlanta). This volume, as others in the project, is translated into three other European languages: German (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2020), Spanish (Estella: Editorial Verbo Divino, 2021), and Italian (Trapani: *Il pozzo di Iacobbe*, forthcoming). We thank the editors of the project for taking on this difficult challenge, the translators, and the contributors who made an effort to submit their texts in two languages. We are quite aware of the challenge inherent in this translation work, due to the difficulties that the rabbinic literature entails.

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1. More information about this project is available at “The Bible and Women: An Encyclopaedia of Exegesis and Cultural History,” [bibleandwomen.org](https://bibleandwomen.org), <https://tinyurl.com/SBL6019a>.



## 2. Methodological Introduction: The Case of Miriam in Rabbinic Literature

Rabbinic literature is a name for a very large corpus that was produced by Jews in Hebrew and Aramaic (the two languages spoken and written by the Jews) in the land of Israel and Babylonia in late antiquity (roughly between the end of the second century and the advent of Islam in the seventh century).<sup>2</sup> Although at the time of the composition of rabbinic literature Jews were living not just in the land of Israel and Babylonia but also in other diaspora centers, such as Egypt, North Africa, Asia Minor, Rome, and in other locations along the Mediterranean, and although these Jews probably also produced literatures in these and other languages (mostly Greek but perhaps also Latin), only rabbinic literature was eventually canonized by the Jews the world over and became authoritative.

Rabbinic literature began with the Mishnah (ca. 200 CE), as an attempt at a codification of biblical and postbiblical legal traditions. The ideology behind this composition was that God had given the Jews at Sinai two codes of law, a written and an oral one, and the Mishnah was an attempt to collect the latter and harmonize it with the former. It is a sustained attempt to justify the divine origin of Jewish law, not just the one found in the Bible but also all the legal traditions that accumulated over the years until the Mishnah was compiled and edited at the end of the second century.<sup>3</sup>

Alongside the Mishnah, contemporary compositions have come down to us: the Tosefta and the midreshei halakhah, which are running commentaries on the legal books of the Torah (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), in which an attempt is made to show that the oral law is already evident in the written law. Midrash is in principle a

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2. For a good introduction see Hermann L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 2nd ed., trans. Markus Bockmuehl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

3. There are many introductions to the Mishnah. Two very different examples are, on the one hand, Jacob Neusner, *Judaism: The Evidence of the Mishnah* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); and, on the other hand, Abraham Goldberg, "The Mishnah: A Study Book of Halakha," in *The Literature of the Sages, First Part: Oral Torah, Halakha, Mishna, Tosefta, Talmud, External Tractates*, ed. Shmuel Safrai (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 211–62. Slightly newer is Shaye J. D. Cohen, "The Judaean Legal Tradition and the Halakhah of the Mishnah," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Charlotte E. Fonrobert and Martin Jaffee (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 121–43.

rabbinic form of creative biblical exegesis. All these compositions, namely, Mishnah, Tosefta, and midreshei halakhah, are known as the literature of the Tannaim (literally, “repeaters”). They were all composed in the land of Israel and feature sages who predate or are contemporary with Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi (also known as the Patriarch), the sage who reportedly edited the Mishnah. All these compositions can be subsumed under the category of halakhah (literally “the way of walking,” implying legal issues). Yet from its very inception, the Mishnah did not really succeed in creating a philosophical, impersonal codex of law. Next to its legal parts, nonlegal narratives, legal precedents, proverbs, folk sayings, and even historical anecdotes made their way into the text.<sup>4</sup> In this, the Mishnah was a true foreparent of all other rabbinic compositions that combine in them halakhah and aggadah (literally “what is told,” that is, stories, implying all that is not halakhah).

Immediately with the conclusion of the editorial work on the Mishnah, it was recognized as canonical and distributed throughout the Jewish world. Study houses were founded in which the Mishnah was taught and interpreted, and in two separate centers official commentaries were produced on it: the two talmudim (plural for *Talmud*; literally, “learning”). One was in Galilee, in the land of Israel, not far removed from where the Mishnah itself was edited, but the other was in a far-off land and under another empire, in Mesopotamia, the land into which Jews were exiled after the destruction of the first temple (sixth century BCE) and where many of them continued to reside. The two commentaries are the Talmud Yerushalmi (fourth/fifth century) and the Babylonian Talmud (sixth/seventh century). It is interesting, perhaps even ironic, that several centuries later it was this second composition that gained the status of a canon and became the standard work studied in the standard Jewish study house (*beit ha-midrash*), a position which it continues to hold today.

The rabbis who produced the talmudim became known as Amoraim (literally, “sayers”), and they described themselves as following in the footsteps of the Tannaim. They were a large group of named sages, and they produced, aside from the two talmudim (which are basically halakhic but include a fair amount of aggadic material in them), also a large array of compositions (that were not canonized but were studied and transmitted)

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4. On which see now Moshe Simon-Shoshan, *Stories of the Law: Narrative Discourse and the Construction of Authority in the Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

that are exegetical and homiletical works on various books of the Bible. These are called aggadic midrashim, and they began being composed in the land of Israel at the same time as the Talmud Yerushalmi but continued way beyond late antiquity. Opinions are divided about which compositions still belong to this genre and which postdate it.

In this book, we follow the most recent philological and structural parameters employed by scholars of rabbinic literature, in order to reconstruct the historical background of the various traditions, their relationship with one another, especially chronologically but also geographically. Consequently, we inquire about the possibility of tracing ideological, theological, and literary developments that reflect the changing historical circumstances of traditions on the reception of biblical women.

The Hebrew Bible constitutes, of course, the theological, historical, and cultural foundation of Judaism. Rabbinic literature took it for granted and built its entire worldview based on the veracity and God-given origin of every single word or syllable in this text. When these somehow contradicted themselves, or failed to meet with the Jewish world view of the rabbis, the latter harmonized and explained these textual difficulties away. Gender played a central role in this process—both because gender norms had changed dramatically from the ancient Near East, in which the Bible was composed, and the Roman world, in which the Mishnah was composed (and the Iranian-Sasanian world, in which the Babylonian Talmud later came into being); and because the Bible itself is full not just with contradictory explanations, views, and legal rulings touching on women, but also with many influential women, whose actions contradicted and continue to contradict the views of later Jewish generations on proper gender hierarchies.

One such woman is the prophetess Miriam, Moses's sister, who already in the Bible is an imposing figure, celebrating the victory of Israel on Egypt on the shores of the Red Sea, and at the same time one punished by God with *tzaraat* (leprosy?) for forgetting her subordinate position in comparison with her brother Moses. In the following lines we will trace the major trajectories we have tried to emphasize in this book, showing in each case how Miriam can demonstrate this phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> But first, the biblical Miriam.

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5. Some of the conclusions presented here derive from the different places in which Tal Ilan discussed the Miriam traditions. See Ilan, "Biblische Frauen in Schrift und Tradition in jüdischer Perspektive," in *Geschlechtergerechtigkeit: Herausforderung*

A sister is mentioned in the story of Moses's birth (Exod 2:4). She stands on the shore of the Nile in order to watch over her baby brother, and then she recommends to Pharaoh's daughter, who finds him, her mother as wet nurse. We cannot be certain that in this story the same sister is intended who is later explicitly named Miriam, although later sources connect the two unquestioningly. As Miriam, she is first mentioned after the crossing of the Red Sea. There she is designated a prophetess, is described as the sister of Aaron, and leads the women of Israel in a victory song and dance (Exod 15:20–21). Next, she is mentioned in an enigmatic tradition in Num 12, where she complains to Aaron about Moses's marriage to an Ethiopian woman (אשה כושית) and claims for herself and for Aaron prophetic powers similar to those of Moses (Num 12:1–2). She is afflicted with *tzaraat* as a punishment for this action (Num 12:10). Rita Burns suggests that these traditions contain traces of the dangerous memory of a woman leader from the ancient past who had to be tamed.<sup>6</sup> This was done by making her the sibling of the two other leaders of the day, and by telling a story of how God himself asserted the superiority of Moses (and Aaron) and punished the woman. In Burns's opinion, the way this story is told in the Bible is already a taming of a really wild tradition about a strong and unusual woman.

Indeed, in later layers of the Bible itself there are competing traditions concerning Miriam, one of them certainly bent on taming her. In Deuteronomy, she is only mentioned once in a negative statement. Following a discussion of *tzaraat* we read: "Remember what the Lord your God did to Miriam on the journey after you left Egypt" (Deut 24:9).<sup>7</sup> For those who had intended Deuteronomy to supersede earlier versions of the Torah,<sup>8</sup> this verse would completely erase Miriam's important role as prophetess, while only her punishment would have been remembered. However, the

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*der Religionen*, ed. Christoph Elsas, Edith Franke, and Angela Standhartinger (Berlin: EB Verlag, 2014), 143–56; Ilan, *Massekhet Ta'anit*, FCBT 2/9 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 132–40; Ilan, *Massekhet Hullin*, FCBT 5/3 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 418–23.

6. Rita Burns, *Has the Lord Indeed Spoken Only through Moses? A Study of the Biblical Portrait of Miriam* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987).

7. Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical and rabbinic translations are ours.

8. As formulated by Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11*, AB 5.1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1991), 19: "This does not mean that the author of Deuteronomy sees his code as of lesser value. On the contrary ... Deuteronomy would be seen as replacing the old book of the covenant and not complementing it."

prophet Micah records the trio Moses, Aaron, and Miriam as equal saviors of Israel. He states emphatically: “I brought you up from the land of Egypt, I redeemed you from the house of bondage, and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam” (Mic 6:4). This interpretation recognizes the biblical story of Exodus and Numbers as binding, and does not seek to transform or replace it. And because it is short, it includes no valued judgment. Note, however, that in the ordering of the three siblings Miriam, the woman, is placed last. And since we do not know the birth order of Moses and Aaron, but we do know that Moses had an elder sister, it is clear that this ordering is not chronological, according to birth order. Obviously it refers to a descending order of importance. Moses the leader comes first, Aaron the priest second, and Miriam the sister, the woman, last.

All these traditions are repeatedly discussed and interpreted throughout rabbinic literature. In the following lines they will accompany us as we outline the concepts that have shaped the way this book is conceived, and they will demonstrate concisely the gendered ideas that are evident in different and more sporadic ways in the chapters commissioned for it.

## 2.1. Mishnah

Gender plays a significant role in rabbinic halakhah, as seen from the fact that one of the six orders (*sedarim*) of the Mishnah is called “the Order of Women” (Seder Nashim). Although it has been demonstrated that it is actually less about women and more about the relations between a man and his wife (how she is acquired, what are his responsibilities toward her, and how she is divorced),<sup>9</sup> this order certainly demonstrates well the relationship between the written, that is, biblical laws regarding women, and oral, that is, rabbinic laws on them. We have tried to include in this book a fair number of presentations of the tractates of this order that are based on biblical law. The first tractate in this order (Yevamot, so located because it is the longest tractate in all the order) deals with a very biblical institution—levirate marriage: the obligation of the brother to marry the childless widow of his deceased brother. Weisberg’s contribution in this volume contrasts how the rabbis of the Mishnah incorporate rabbinic views on this institution with the biblical formulation. The second tractate

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9. Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Mishnaic Law of Women* (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 5:13–16; see also Judith R. Wegner, *Chattel or Person: The Status of Women in the Mishnah* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

(Ketubbot) deals with marriage contracts, an issue that is not mentioned in the Bible at all and therefore presents a significant contribution of the oral law to the Mishnah. In this book, which is about biblical reception, we do not discuss this tractate. Other tractates in this order, a fine example of which is Gittin (divorce—on which see in this volume the contribution by Ruiz-Morell), are a balanced mix of biblical and postbiblical law.

One contribution in this volume is devoted to a tractate of the Mishnah that is not in the Order of Women and is not, at first sight, gender relevant. This contribution, by Tzuberi, is devoted to tractate Nega'im (skin afflictions) and offers a rabbinic interpretation of this phenomenon in Leviticus. The importance of this contribution is in that it shows that gender is at play in rabbinic thinking even where the Bible had not seen it as such. Tzuberi shows that, even though Miriam is herself afflicted with a skin disease (*tzaraat*), she is not mentioned in this mishnaic tractate.

Miriam does not show up in any of the mishnaic tractates discussed in individual contribution in this volume; she does show up in tractate Sotah of the same order. This tractate, as has been shown,<sup>10</sup> follows very closely the biblical ritual of the suspected adulteress, described in Num 5, whose suspicious husband brings her to the temple to prove her guilt (or innocence). Chapter 1 in this mishnaic tractate begins by explaining that the *sotah* ritual is built on the divine principle of measure for measure and elegantly shifts its focus from a halakhic discourse into aggadah (which of course makes God's justice of measure for measure serve as inspiration for the human justice system). This, as Haendler shows in her contribution to this volume, is where Miriam shows up, in her only appearance in the Mishnah. She is presented as one of several examples of the principle. On the negative side, the suspected adulteress (the *sotah*) is punished in the temple, detail for detail, as she had betrayed her husband. On the positive side, Miriam is rewarded for a good deed she performed (watching over her brother Moses the infant when he was put in a basket on the Nile) by the good deed the Israelites did on her behalf. When punished by God with *tzaraat*, they waited for her to recover before moving on (Num 12:15). Note that according to this tradition the nameless sister who watched over Moses on the Nile is identified with Miriam. This is something that rabbinic literature never questions.

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10. Neusner, *History of the Mishnaic Law*, 140; but see contra this view, and more recently, Ishay Rosen-Zvi, *The Mishnaic Sotah Ritual: Gender, Temple and Midrash* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), esp. 5–11.

## 2.2. Mishnah-Tosefta

An important principle in the way rabbinic sources are studied, as shown in this book by the contribution of Haendler, is the comparison between the Mishnah and the Tosefta. Both compositions are halakhic Tannaitic, and both are organized topically, according to the same six orders. Yet one—the Mishnah—is canonical, and the other not. The relationship between these two compositions is the topic of much debate: Is the Mishnah older or younger? Are they complementary or oppositional?<sup>11</sup> Finally, from our point of view, is one of them more woman-friendly than the other? If so, why? In a series of articles written several decades ago, Judith Hauptman argued that the Tosefta is more woman-friendly than the Mishnah, and described the traditions present in the Tosefta and absent from the Mishnah as “the way not taken.”<sup>12</sup> It should be stated, though, that this picture is not consistent. One can certainly show places where the Tosefta, because it is more extensive than the Mishnah, includes material hostile to women that is absent in the parallel mishnah, as in, for example, the citation of the text of the prayer a man should utter every morning: “Blessed be He who did not make me a woman” (t. Ber. 6:18; see its absence in m. Ber. 9).

In the present volume, Haendler takes it on herself to compare the presentations of biblical women in the Mishnah and the Tosefta and comes out squarely on Hauptman’s side, namely, that the Tosefta is more

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11. See Jacob Neusner, *The Tosefta Translated from Hebrew: Zera'im* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1986), ix–xi; Shamma Friedman, *Tosefta Atiqta: Pesah Rishon* [Hebrew] (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2002), 9–13; and more recently Robert Brody, *Mishnah and Tosefta Studies* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2014), 111–14, 141–54.

12. Judith Hauptman, “Mishnah *Gittin* as a Pietist Document” [Hebrew], in *Proceedings of the Tenth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Division C (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1990), 1:23–30; Hauptman, “Maternal Dissent: Women and Procreation in the Mishnah,” *Tikkun* 6.6 (1991): 80–81, 94–95; Hauptman, “Women’s Voluntary Performance of Commandments from Which They Are Exempt” [Hebrew], in *Proceedings of the Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Division C (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1994), 1:161–68; Hauptman, “Women and Inheritance in Rabbinic Texts: Identifying Elements of a Critical Feminist Impulse,” in *Introducing Tosefta: Textual, Intratextual and Intertextual Studies*, ed. Harry Fox and Tirzah Meacham (New York: Ktav, 1999), 221–40; Hauptman, “Women in Tractate Pesahim” [Hebrew], in *Atara L’Haim: Studies in the Talmud and Medieval Rabbinic Literature in Honor of Professor Haim Zalman Dimitrovsky*, ed. Daniel Boyarin et al. (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2000), 63–86.

woman-friendly. She claims that “the Mishnah consistently avoids mentioning female characters. When choosing from toseftan material, the Mishnah makes a gendered selection. When adding to the toseftan material, the Mishnah almost never thinks of biblical women as relevant and pertinent examples for its rulings and discourse.” Haendler emphasizes that her conclusions are both quantitative and qualitative. In other words, at least when it comes to the reception of biblical women, the Tosefta is by far more woman-friendly than the Mishnah. This is also true when it comes to our role model, Miriam.

As in the Mishnah, in the Tosefta Miriam is only mentioned in tractate Sotah, in the most extended aggadic section in the entire compilation. As Haendler notes, her appearance in the Tosefta is completely different from her appearance in the Mishnah: “The Tosefta ascribes ... to Miriam an active role in the narrative of Israel’s redemption, associating her with the well that provided water for Israel in the desert (t. Sotah 11:8), where Miriam is described as righteous and as a ‘provider’ of Israel’s needs, together with her brothers, Moses and Aaron.”

The idea that water was supplied to the Israelites in the desert by Miriam is repeated often and in many ways in rabbinic literature, but its basic formulation is found in the Tosefta:

Said Rabbi Yosi ben Rabbi Yehudah: When Israel left Egypt three faithful providers were nominated for them. And these are they: Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. For their sake three gifts were bestowed on [Israel]: The pillar of cloud, manna and a well—the well for the sake of Miriam; the pillar of cloud for the sake of Aaron; manna for the sake of Moses. (t. Sotah 11:8)

If we compare this reference to Miriam from the Tosefta, which (although not directly cited) is obviously a midrash (i.e., a rabbinic exegesis) on Mic 6:4—the positive memory of Miriam in postexodus biblical literature—with the reference to Miriam in the Mishnah, which references specifically Deut 24:9—the negative memory of Miriam—we observe that even though in both compositions Miriam is viewed positively, the choice made by the two, concerning what should be remembered about Miriam, shows a basic difference between the two that we saw also in the Bible. Here again we can claim that Mishnah deliberately chose a tradition that disadvantages a woman compared to the Tosefta. It probably implies that whoever canonized the Mishnah was less woman-friendly than other members of the rabbinic circle, and we find this phenomenon repeating itself also where other acts of canonization in rabbinic literature occur.



### 2.3. Midreshei Halakhah

The third group of Tannaitic texts are, as said, midreshei halakhah—compositions that attempt to ground all rabbinic law in the legal biblical text from Exodus to Deuteronomy. They are divided between two schools of thought about how one is to interpret the texts, that of Rabbi Akiva (perhaps the most prominent rabbi of the second century, who allegedly died a martyr's death in the aftermath of the disastrous Bar Kokhba revolt) and his nemesis, Rabbi Yishmael. The compositions that have come down to us in this group divide neatly: two to Rabbi Yishmael (Exodus—Mekilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, and Numbers—Sifre Numbers) and two to Rabbi Akiva (Sifra on Leviticus and Sifre Deuteronomy).<sup>13</sup> Scholars identify the differences between them as based on two differing exegetical techniques: Rabbi Yishmael uses logical inferences, while Rabbi Akiva prefers extreme, out-of-context verbal analogies.

As Tal Ilan has shown, there are also gendered differences between the two schools. While the school of Rabbi Akiva uses exegetical methods in order to exclude women, the school of Rabbi Yishmael uses techniques that are slightly different in order to include them.<sup>14</sup> Ilan argues that this exclusion/inclusion is reflected also in the canonicity of the texts. Although none of the midreshei halakhah became authoritative, Rabbi Akiva is a much more influential sage than Rabbi Yishmael, and the bulk of the mishnaic material is assigned to him, and many of its rulings feature in the midreshei halakhah of Rabbi Akiva. Obviously, it is his (exclusive) approach to women that won the day. Again we see that when canonization could have chosen a more woman-friendly approach, it chose instead the less woman-friendly one.

In his contribution to this volume, Dubrau brings two examples of traditions touching on biblical law and gender. With the first one he suggests somewhat modifying Ilan's conclusions. He shows that, even while applying Rabbi Akiva's exegetical methodology, sometimes his verbal analogies can lead to more women-friendly rulings. Interestingly, he too shows this

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13. On these texts, see Menahem I. Kahana, "The Halakhic Midrashim," in *The Literature of the Sages, Second Part: Midrash and Targum, Liturgy, Poetry, Mysticism, Contracts, Inscriptions*, ed. Shmuel Safrai et al., ASLRL (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 3–105.

14. Tal Ilan, *Silencing the Queen: The Literary Histories of Shelamzion and Other Jewish Women* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 124–59.

by looking at the *sotah* ritual, which he presents in a synopsis between the Sifre Numbers of the school of Rabbi Yishmael and Sifre Zuta on Numbers from the school of Rabbi Akiva (which has survived only in fragments). In his second example, Dubrau verifies Ilan's observations.

Following Miriam in the midreshei halakhah can also demonstrate the differences between the two schools and show again that the school of Rabbi Yishmael is friendlier. We mention here two traditions that fulfill the elementary function of the midreshei halakhah, that is, to learn rabbinic law from the Bible (and in this case from Miriam's actions). The first of these traditions touches on Miriam's substantial presence in the celebrations following the crossing of the Red Sea. This episode ends famously with the Song of the Sea composed by Moses, following which Miriam and the women sing and dance with musical instruments. The midrash in the Mekilta de-Rabbi Yishmael has much to say about this, but for our purpose one sentence is important: "And Miriam chanted for them' (Exod 15:21). Scripture tells us that just as Moses sang to the men, Miriam sang to the women" (Mek. R. Yishm. Shirata 10). Although the biblical story does not actually imply this, this foundational text has for generations served to justify the separation of men and women in Jewish prayer and celebrations.

The second text from the halakhic midrashim that serves our purpose as we follow Miriam is a synopsis of a tradition connected with her rebuke of Moses in Num 12. We bring the conclusion of this tradition in a midrash from the school of Rabbi Akiva and in a midrash from the school of Rabbi Yishmael:

Sifra metzora parashah 5:7–8 (Akiva)	Sifre Numbers 99 (Yishmael)
<p>"Remember what the Lord your God did to Miriam" (Deut 24:9). Why is this [verse] connected to the previous? This proves that she was punished for slander [לשון הרע].</p> <p>This is a case of a fortiori: If Miriam, who did not</p> <p>Speak in Moses's presence, was (punished), so</p> <p>whoever disgraces his fellow</p>	<p>This is a case of a fortiori: If Miriam, who did not intend to disgrace her brother but to praise him, and not to reduce but to increase procreation, and who spoke with herself, was so punished</p> <p>whoever intends to disgrace his fellow and not praise him, and to reduce instead of increase procreation,</p>

in his face, how much more so.

and with others instead of only with  
himself, how much more so.

This pericope in Sifre Numbers is located exactly at the point where the story of Miriam's criticism of Moses is related (Num 12:1–2). In Sifra, however, it is told in association with the description of the affliction of *tzaraat* (the disease with which God punishes Miriam for speaking against her brother). This suggests that the original position of this text is Sifre Numbers.

In both texts presented above, the halakhic principle of a fortiori (traditionally assigned to the logical principles favored by the school of Rabbi Yishmael) is used, but there is a difference. In Sifre Numbers it is employed to teach a lesson from the story of Miriam about how God punishes even those whom he loves and who have positive intentions, and therefore one can only imagine how much worse will be the punishment of those he does not favor and whose intentions are not pure. In fact, it seems to be another measure-for-measure lesson, like the one in the Mishnah that employs Miriam, which also derives originally from Sifre Numbers.

In the Sifra on Leviticus,<sup>15</sup> the a fortiori principle is utilized in order to turn this story into a halakhic precedence. It comes to teach that slander (לשון הרע) is punishable (by God?). Therefore, it begins with a general introduction about slander, absent from the Sifre Numbers version. Then the Sifra further modifies the Sifre Numbers text, so that only one issue—slandering, and more so to one's face—becomes the issue. Miriam's merit is completely erased. Here we see that, in comparison with the school of Rabbi Yishmael, the school of Rabbi Akiva is less careful about the honor of Miriam.

#### 2.4. Between Tannaitic and Amoraic Literature

Amoraic literature is full of cited Tannaitic traditions, sometimes with slight but other times with substantial differences. When manifestations of Tannaitic traditions in Amoraic compilations differ from their original form not just in minor “corrections” or “errors,” it makes sense to try to explain the differences, and scholars have argued that the best way to explain them

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15. See also, from the school of Rabbi Akiva, Sifre Deut. 1, which we consider secondary.

is on both chronological and geographic levels. Since Amoraic literature was composed both in the land of Israel and in Babylonia, the differences between Tannaitic sources and Amoraic sources in the land of Israel could be explained as resulting only from chronological changes, but the difference between them and their appearance in the Babylonian literature results both from the chronological and from the geographical divide.

Gender, too, plays an important role in the way Tannaitic texts are reworked in Amoraic ones.<sup>16</sup> In this volume, Ilan shows how a Tannaitic tradition from Sifre Deuteronomy 307, about a woman quoting Scripture, is used in two completely different ways, both in an aggadic midrash from the land of Israel (Lam. Rab. 3:6) and in the Babylonian Talmud (b. Avod. Zar. 17b–18a). Dubrau shows how a tradition from the midreshei halakhah on the *sotah* in the book of Numbers (5:5–31) is quite surprisingly employed in the Babylonian Talmud (b. Ber. 31b) in an aggadic section on the biblical Hannah.

In the previous sections we had occasion to look at some but not all traditions about Miriam, whose origins are with the Tannaim. Many Tannaitic Miriam-traditions appear in revised and “improved” versions in Amoraic literature, and we will be looking at one of them in order to demonstrate one of the principles of the study of rabbinic literature employed by scholars today.

The tradition about Miriam’s well will be investigated, in order to demonstrate how it changes as it moves from Tannaitic to Amoraic sources. As we saw, in the Tosefta, Miriam is associated with a well that provided water for the Israelites in the Desert, next to her two siblings—Moses, who provided them with nourishment, and Aaron, who provided them with protection. This tradition is further transmitted only in the Amoraic Babylonian Talmud (b. Ta’an. 9a). In the following, the Babylonian give-and-take is presented. The mention of the language in which each part is transmitted shows what tradition the Babylonians received (in Hebrew) and what is their addition to it (in Aramaic).

**Statement (in Hebrew):** Said Rabbi Yohanan: Rain [is sent by God] to an individual, [but] economic relief [only] for the many. Rain to an individual, as it is written: ... economic relief for the many, as it is written: ...

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16. Tal Ilan, *Mine and Yours Are Hers: Retrieving Women’s History from Rabbinic Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 85–120.

**Authoritative tradition contradicts the statement (in Aramaic):** But there is an answer [מִיִּיבִי]:

**The tradition from Tosefta Sotah 11:8 about Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, and their supplying nurture for the whole community, is cited (in Hebrew).**

**Explanation of how the tradition contradicts the statement (in Aramaic):** If you say [אֶלְמָא] [from this tradition] that the individual can bring economic relief [to the whole community].

**Counterargument, supporting initial statement (in Aramaic):** Moses is different [שְׂאֵנִי], since he asked for the many, he is like the many.

The statement that precedes this discussion is by the most important Amora from the land of Israel, Rabbi Yohanan, who claims that the merits of an individual will preserve him/her from the effects of famine, but these will not save the entire community. The Babylonian editor (sometimes designated in scholarly literature as the *stama*) now asks: Did not the merits of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam save the entire community of Israel from hunger and thirst and other dangers? This argument is presented with the help of an almost exact citation of the Tosefta Sotah tradition cited above. The tradition is based, as already stated, on the verse from Micah, where the three siblings are described as equal providers. In order to harmonize Rabbi Yohanan's statement with the Tosefta Sotah tradition, the Babylonian anonymous editor counters with the statement that Moses was different: "Since he asked for the many, he is like the many." The individual who sustained the nation, according to this answer, is only Moses. Aaron, and especially Miriam, have disappeared. The Babylonian rabbis often cite Tannaitic traditions correctly but interpret them with new emphases. In our opinion gender plays a very important role in this new interpretation.

The reason we think gender is important here is that, even though the entire tradition from the Tosefta about the gifts of the three siblings is not cited in Palestinian Amoraic sources, one part of it appears both in the Talmud Yerushalmi and in the aggadic midrashim from the land of Israel. In the Talmud Yerushalmi we read: "Said Rabbi Hiyyah bar Abba: Whoever climbs the Yeshimon mountain sees a sort of sieve in the Sea of Tiberias, and this is Miriam's well" (y. Kil. 9:3, 32c; y. Ketub. 12:3, 35b). In aggadic midrashim, also from the land of Israel, this tradition is associated with another, according to which sick people (with a skin disease [שְׂחִיז], or stricken by blindness) went down to the Sea of Tiberias and because they encountered Miriam's well, and they were healed (Lev. Rab. 22:4; Eccl.

Rab. 5:5; TanP, Huqat 1). In other words, Miriam's well (and not Moses's manna or Aaron's protection) was transmitted separately from the Tosefta tradition. Even the Babylonian Talmud knows it as a separate tradition. In a tradition unique to it we learn the following:

It was taught in the name of the school of Rabbi Yishmael: As a reward for three, three were bestowed. As a reward for "curds and milk" (that Abraham provided the angels—Gen 18:8) the manna was bestowed; as a reward for [Abraham having] "waited on them" [Gen 18:8] the cloud was bestowed; as a reward for "a little water be brought" (Gen 18:4) Miriam's well was bestowed. (b. B. Metz. 86b)

In this tradition, the three gifts—manna, clouds (of protection), and water—are tied together, but only water is tied with one of the three siblings, and in a very specific way—it is tied to Miriam, in the form of a well. It appears that the association of manna with Moses and protection with Aaron, which first appears in the Tosefta, was secondary and serves to belittle the role of Miriam, who was, in an initial tradition, the only sibling who was associated with a gift provided to the whole nation in the desert. Thus if, in the end, the Babylonian Talmud uses only Moses to argue about merit of an individual who sustains the whole community, the disappearance of Miriam from a tradition that was initially her own is very significant in terms of gender. Ilan calls this phenomenon, of depriving women their tradition and assigning it to men, "silencing."<sup>17</sup>

## 2.5. The Amoraic Midrashim of the Land of Israel

The Amoraic period in the land of Israel (200–400 CE) is, as stated above, characterized by two forms of literary production: halakhic (the Talmud Yerushalmi) and aggadic (midreshei aggadah, especially Genesis Rabbah and Leviticus Rabbah, but also Pesiqta of Rab Kahana and perhaps also Lamentations Rabbah).<sup>18</sup> Several contributions in this volume discuss the way biblical women are portrayed in the first two mentioned midrashim. Miralles-Maciá inspects the way Leviticus Rabbah portrays biblical

17. Ilan, *Silencing the Queen*, 35–42.

18. On aggadic midrash, see Marc Hirschman, "Aggadic Midrash," in Safrai et al., *Literature of the Sages, Second Part*, 107–32; Myron B. Lerner, "The Works of Aggadic Midrash and the Esther Midrashim," in Safrai et al., *Literature of the Sages, Second Part*, 133–229.

women in general, and Labovitz investigates how the biblical Hagar is portrayed in *Genesis Rabbah*. The sort of conclusions one can reach when the investigation concentrates on women in general or on a specific midrash do not seem to differ much. Miralles-Maciá concludes, concerning all the women that show up in *Leviticus Rabbah*, that the midrash “represented the women based on their perception as ‘the other’ versus the norm (a Jewish man) and on their importance, depending on the role that they played in the male-written past.” Similarly, Labovitz concludes concerning Hagar in *Genesis Rabbah*: “The rabbinic exegeses of Hagar’s story and the additional legends about her found in *Genesis Rabbah* are animated by and embody themes of gender, ethnicity, and class.... Sarah and Hagar compete in the social and religious sphere, but are said to do so in particularly gendered ways.” In other words, regardless of whether the women come from within Judaism or from without, they are viewed as “other” because the rabbinic norm is the male Jew.

Miralles-Maciá already devotes space to Miriam in *Leviticus Rabbah*. We will therefore shortly investigate what role Miriam plays in *Genesis Rabbah*. It should be stated at the outset that, in the Bible, Miriam is never mentioned in the book of Genesis. Thus, wherever she is mentioned in the midrash on this book, it is not a direct but rather a derived reference. Miriam is mentioned three times in *Genesis Rabbah*—once in a neutral context, citing the *Mekilta de-Rabbi Yishmael* (*Gen. Rab.* 80:10; see *Mek. R. Yishm. Shirata* 10), and twice in a very positive context. The two positive traditions are unique to *Genesis Rabbah* and are not derived from earlier sources.

The two positive traditions both associate Miriam symbolically with Moses and Aaron, as provider for Israel in the desert, as in Micah. *Genesis Rabbah* 70:8 interprets *Gen* 29:2:

“There before his eyes was a well in the open. Three flocks of sheep were lying beside it, for the flocks were watered from that well. The stone on the mouth of the well was very large” (*Gen* 29:2). Hama bar Hanina interpreted it [...] “a well in the open” (*Gen* 29:2): this is the well. “Three flocks of sheep were lying there beside it” (*Gen* 29:2): Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. “For the flocks were watered from the well” (*Gen* 29:2): From there each would lead water to his banner and tribe and family. “The stone on the mouth of the well was very large” (*Gen* 29:2): Said Rabbi Hanina: Like the opening of a small sieve.

Note that the real well Jacob saw when he fled from his brother to Haran is interpreted symbolically. Although in the present allegorical interpreta-

tion Miriam is not identified with the well but rather with one of the three flocks of sheep kneeling next to it (her two siblings representing the other two flocks), it seems beyond doubt that it is her well that is implied here, because it is described as having a stone block the size of a sieve. These are exactly the dimensions of Miriam's well, which can be seen from Mount Yeshimon, given in the Talmud Yerushalmi just cited. The term *sieve* (כברה) is rare in Amoraic literature from the land of Israel, and most often it is used in citations from the Mishnah. If a well and Miriam are mentioned next to this term, they probably derive from the same source and describe the same thing. We see here that Genesis Rabbah has maintained Miriam next to the well and next to its unique dimensions and next to her brothers but not as the provider of the well. The well here is taken away from her.

The last unique text in which Miriam is mentioned in Genesis Rabbah is also an allegoric-symbolic interpretation of a verse. On Gen 40:9–10, in which Pharaoh's cupbearer tells his dream, an alternative interpretation to the one found in the Bible is offered in Genesis Rabbah 88:5:

“Then the chief cupbearer [told his dream to Joseph. He said to him: In my dream], there was a vine in front of me” (Gen 40:9): These are Israel [as it is written:] “You plucked up a vine from Egypt” (Ps 80:9). “On the vine were three branches” (Gen 40:10): [These are] Moses, Aaron and Miriam. “It had barely budded” (Gen 40:10): The buds are Israel's redemption; “when out came its blossoms” (Gen 40:10): the blossoms are Israel's redemption.

The allegoric interpretation offered here, unlike the previous one, which was historical, is apocalyptic. Yet just as the three siblings (Moses, Aaron, and Miriam) functioned as the saviors of Israel in the realm of history, in this tradition they function as important components of Israel's future redemption. The three branches in Pharaoh's cupbearer's apocalyptic dream are the three siblings. There is no gender difference suggested here. Thus we can conclude with Labovitz that Genesis Rabbah offers a complex message on biblical women and gender. While it can be very negative and judgmental, it can also be very positive, allowing Miriam an exceptionally important role in Israel's *Heilsgeschichte*.

## 2.6. Amoraic Literature between the Land of Israel and Babylonia

The transition of Amoraic traditions from the land of Israel to Babylonia was frequent, and scholars have often showed the way in which these traditions



underwent changes from subtle to dramatic. Scholars have been looking intently at these changes and interpreted them as based on the different historical and cultural contexts in which the two literatures were produced, and have worked hard to uncover these different contexts.<sup>19</sup>

Ilan had suggested that gender plays an important role in this transmission process and showed that many stories in the Talmud Yerushalmi that involve contemporary women of the rabbinic milieu undergo a devaluation on the way from the land of Israel to Babylonia, and these women, instead of being smart or interesting, as in the Talmud Yerushalmi, become dumb and dull in the Babylonian Talmud.<sup>20</sup> This, she claimed, is not because Jewish women in Babylonia were worse off than in the land of Israel, but rather because each rabbinic culture that was on the receiving side (Mishnah from Tosefta, Amoraic from Tannaitic, Babylonia from the land of Israel) found some of the women mentioned in the traditions they received too powerful and sought to cut them down to size.<sup>21</sup> In her essay in this volume, Ilan shows something like this happening to a woman—Matrona—mentioned often in the aggadic midrash Genesis Rabbah as very learned in the biblical texts, when she arrives in Babylonia.

Ilan does, however, argue that this belittling process in the way women are presented from earlier to later texts is not the fate of biblical women, who were always seen as inimitable. In fact, she shows that when contemporary women acted in ways unsuitable to women according to the gendered perception of the rabbis, they were transformed into biblical women of the mythical past.<sup>22</sup> Thus, Michal bat Kushi, who appears in Mekilta de-Rabbi Yishmael *pisha* 17 as donning phylacteries, is transformed in the Talmud Yerushalmi to the biblical Michal, daughter of Saul (y. Ber. 2:3, 4c; y. Eruv. 10:1, 26). Can this argument be sustained? This is what we are asking in this book. In her chapter on Sarah in Genesis

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19. See, e.g., Alyssa M. Gray, *A Talmud in Exile: The Influence of Yerushalmi Avodah Zarah on the Formation of Bavli Avodah Zarah* (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2005); Ronit Nikolsky and Tal Ilan, eds., *Rabbinic Traditions between Palestine and Babylonia* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

20. Tal Ilan, “‘Stolen Water Is Sweet’: Women and Their Stories between *Bavli* and *Yerushalmi*,” in *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Greco-Roman Culture*, ed. Peter Schäfer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 3:185–223.

21. Ilan, *Silencing the Queen*, 276–78.

22. Ilan, *Silencing the Queen*, 30, 198.

Rabbah and the Babylonian Talmud, Plietzsch argues that, while Genesis Rabbah allows Sarah a role as prominent as if not more prominent than Abraham, “in the Babylonian Talmud, Sarah’s relative predominance over Abraham is reduced,” and Plietzsch brings many examples to show this. Also Miriam traditions traveled from Amoraic midrashim and from the Talmud Yerushalmi to Babylonia. Here are two examples—one from the former and one from the latter.

### 2.6.1. From Midreshei Aggadah to the Babylonian Talmud

We begin with the tradition from Genesis Rabbah just discussed about Pharaoh’s cupbearer’s dream in a synopsis with its Babylonian parallel. The Babylonian tradition presents itself as a Tannaitic one, but we have no proof from any known Tannaitic composition that it is. We can see that the issue of a historical versus an apocalyptic interpretation is present in the Babylonian Talmud as in Genesis Rabbah. We will not be discussing all its details,<sup>23</sup> only those that highlight the role of Miriam. The text in bold is a précis of a longer rabbinic discourse, which we do not discuss.

Babylonian Talmud Hullin 92a

Genesis Rabbah 88:5

Rabbi Eliezer: The vine is the world; the three branches—the patriarchs; its blossoms—the matriarchs; the grapes—the tribes.

Said Rabbi Yehoshua to him: Does (God) show a person what has already come about? (God) only shows a person what is destined to happen. Rather “a vine” (Gen 40:9): this is the Torah.

“Three branches” (Gen 40:10): **these are Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.** “It had barely budded, when out came its blossoms” (Gen 40:10): these are the Sanhedrin. “Its clusters ripened into grapes” (Gen 40:10): these are the righteous of every generation.

“On the vine were three branches” (Gen 40:10): **these are Moses, Aaron, and Miriam;** “it had barely budded” (Gen 40:10): the buds are the redemption of Israel.

23. For which see Ilan, *Massekhet Hullin*, 418–23.

Rabbi Eleazar ha-Modai: The vine is Jerusalem; the three branches—the temple, the king, and the high priest; its blossoms—the apprentice priests; its grapes—the libations.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi interprets these with relation to [divine] gifts, as Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: “Vine” (Gen 40:9): this is the Torah; “three branches” (Gen 40:10): **these are the well, the pillar of cloud and the manna**; “it had barely budded, when out came its blossoms” (Gen 40:10): these are the first fruits [*bikkurim*]; “its clusters ripened into grapes” (Gen 40:10): these are the libations.

Rabbi Yirmiyah bar Abba: The vine is Israel; the three branches—the three festivals; its blossoms—Israel’s time to be fertile and proliferate, as is stated: “and the children of Israel were fruitful and multiplied” (Exod 1:7).

“When out came its blossoms . . .” (Gen 40:10): Israel’s time of redemption has come, as it is said: “Their life-blood bespattered my garments and all my clothing was stained” (Isa 63:3); “its clusters ripened into grapes” (Gen 40:10): Egypt’s time has come to drink the goblet of poison (see Isa 51:17, 22).

“There was a vine before me” (Gen 40:9): this is Israel, as it is written: “You plucked up a vine from Egypt” (Ps 80:9).

“When out came its blossoms” (Gen 40:10): the redemption of Israel blossoms. “Its clusters ripened into grapes” (Gen 40:10): the vine that budded, immediately blossomed, grapes that budded immediately became ripe.

The midrash on Pharaoh’s cupbearer’s dream has, in the Babylonian Talmud, a gendered framing. The first interpretation, assigned to Rabbi Eliezer, claims that “The vine is the world, the three branches—the patriarchs, its blossoms—the matriarchs.” The cosmic parameters of this interpretation are that, while the three pillars of the world are the patriarchs, in order for them to bud and blossom and give fruit, the matriarchs are necessary. And indeed, the interpretation ends with the words: “‘Its clusters ripened into grapes’: these are the tribes.” The role of the matriarchs in this salvation history of Israel is to ensure its survival through procreation.

The last of the series of interpretations of this verse concludes the gendered framing: Rabbi Yirmiyah bar Abba describes the blossoms of

the vine as Israel's time to be fertile and proliferate. The general pattern is the same—Israel is in the center, and its blossoming is Israel's fruitfulness. This process is made possible first by the matriarchs and in later generations by the childbearing women of Israel. Men are the pillars of Judaism, women enablers of its survival, all the way down to the time of salvation.

The case of Miriam, in the middle of this midrash, breaks this pattern down completely. She is not inserted in the enabler part of the metaphor, but rather in the pillars-of-the-world part. Like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the first midrash, she is found in the second midrash, together with her two brothers, as representing the three branches on the vine, which blossom and bring forth fruit. The same can be said about the fourth interpretation, assigned to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, which mentions Miriam like her two brothers only by implication: "‘Vine’: this is the Torah; ‘three branches’: these are the well, the pillar of cloud, and the manna."

The bare-bones structure of the midrash on the cupbearer's dream, as it is preserved in *Genesis Rabbah*, indicates that this was the kernel of the Babylonian composition. The salvation of Israel in the desert included a woman leader, who was responsible for the most vital element for survival in such a hostile environment—water. The Babylonian midrash has not deleted this woman, but placing her in the middle of the midrash, on whose two extremes women are viewed as enablers rather than upholders of the nation, reduces her important role.

What the Babylonian text has failed to do, however, two of its manuscripts make explicit. In Manuscript Hamburg 169 only Moses and Aaron are mentioned. Miriam disappears. While we could have seen this absence as a scribal error, executed in haste, the same cannot be said for the text in Manuscript Munich 95, where next to Moses and Aaron instead of Miriam we find Joshua. Both scribes had evidently felt the Babylonian Talmud's discomfort with a woman as one of the pillars of the world.

### 2.6.2. From the Talmud Yerushalmi to the Babylonian Talmud

The following example from the Talmud Yerushalmi about Miriam, in comparison with its (quite faithful) parallel in the Babylonian Talmud, will further demonstrate this argument. Jerusalem Talmud Yoma 1:1, 38b is a lengthy text that bewails the death of the righteous and what one can learn from it. Among the righteous Miriam is also mentioned. This text is repeated in the Babylonian Talmud but in a different context. We present the two texts in a synoptic table.

Jerusalem Talmud Yoma 1:1, 38b (see Lev. Rab. 20:12; Pesiq. Rab. Kah. 26:11)

Babylonian Talmud Mo'ed Qatan 27b–28a

**Context:** Yom Kippur

**Context:** “And one does not place a [dead] woman[’s bier in the street] ever, on account of honor” (m. Mo’ed Qat 3:8).

**Babylonian response:** Those of Nehardea say: This is only taught concerning women (who died) in childbirth, but concerning other women—one places.

**Land of Israel response:** Rabbi Eleazar says: Even other women, as it is written: “Miriam died there and was buried there” (Num 20:1): next to death, burial.

**Another tradition on Miriam by the same Amora:** And Rabbi Eleazar [also] said: Miriam also died with a kiss, as it is written “there” (Num 20:1) and “there” (Deut 34:5), as with Moses. And why is “by the mouth of God” (Deut 34:5) not said of her? Since it is obscene.

Said Rabbi Hiyya bar Ba: The sons of Aaron died on the first of Nisan. Why is their death mentioned on Yom Kippur? To teach you that just as Yom Kippur atones for Israel, so too the deaths of the righteous atone.

Said Rabbi Ba bar Bina: Why does Scripture present the death of Miriam next to the episode of the red heifer? To teach you that just as the ashes of the red heifer atone for Israel, so too the death of the righteous atones for Israel.

Said Rabbi Yudan ben Rabbi Shalom: Why did Scripture present the death of Aaron next to the breaking of the [covenant] tablets? To teach you that the deaths of the righteous is hard for the Holy One, blessed be He, as the breaking of the tablets.

**Imported tradition:** Said Rabbi Ami: Why is Miriam’s death located next to the episode of the red heifer? To tell you, just as the red heifer atones, so too the death of the righteous atones.

**Babylonian reworking of the imported tradition:** Said Rabbi Eleazar: Why is the death of Aaron located next to the priestly garments? Just as the priestly garments atone, so too the death of the righteous atones.

The differences between the two occurrences of the tradition about Miriam's death as an example that the death of the righteous atones for Israel are quite striking, even though this is clearly the same tradition. In the Talmud Yerushalmi the context is tractate Yoma (or, as it is called in the Yerushalmi, Kippurim), devoted to Yom Kippur. The Amoraic editor of this Talmud inquires why one mentions the death of the sons of Aaron in the tent of meeting on Yom Kippur, in the month of Tishrei, when they had died in the month of Nisan (see Seder Olam Rab. 7).<sup>24</sup> The Amora Rabbi Hiyya bar Ba explains this as resulting from the fact that the death of the righteous atones for Israel. This is rather a strange conclusion in light of the fact that according to the explicit biblical account "Nadab and Abihu ... offered before the Lord alien fire ... and fire came forth from the Lord and consumed them" (Lev 10:1–2). This of course will be one of the reasons for the omission of this tradition from the Babylonian Talmud.

Following this statement about the "righteous" sons of Aaron, another one is presented, this time about the righteous Miriam. Her death is related in chapter 20 of Numbers. Chapter 19 is devoted to the ritual of the red heifer, which is burned and whose ashes constitute the most central component of the cleansing potion sprinkled on any person who has contracted corpse impurity. The proximity of the two chapters is interpreted by the Amora Rabbi Ba bar Bina as an indication that the righteous Miriam's death has a cleansing momentum for the entire community of Israel.

From the death of Miriam the text goes on to the death of Aaron. Here again textual proximity is applied. The Amora Rabbi Yudan son of Rabbi Shalom claims that Aaron's death is situated next to Moses's breaking of the tablets of the law to show how the two events caused God pain. Again there is a problem with this assertion, since Aaron's death is not really mentioned next to the breaking of the tablets, although in one place they are related four verses away from each other (Deut 10:2, 6). This is, of course, also something the Babylonian Talmud will address.

The Babylonian version of this tradition is a typical example of how it treats its sources. The only part of this tradition that it has left intact is the one about Miriam. It begins by fully omitting the tradition that designates the sons of Aaron righteous. In fact, the entire tradition is not told in the context of Yom Kippur, but rather in the context of the funeral rites

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24. On this composition see Chaim Milikowsky, "Seder Olam," in Safrai et al., *Literature of the Sages, Second Part*, 231–37.

of women. The citation of *m. Mo'ed Qat.* 3:8, which states that during a woman's funeral one does not lay down her bier to eulogize her, is followed by an anonymous Babylonian observation, assigned to the people of the Babylonian town of Nehardea, suggesting that the Mishnah refers only to a certain group of women who died in childbirth. This is an excellent example in which a Babylonian praxis is wrestling with a law (and perhaps praxis), imported from the land of Israel. Here Rabbi Eleazar, obviously an Amora from the land of Israel, interposes, rejecting the Babylonian qualification and using the verse about Miriam's death ("Miriam died there and was buried there" [Num 20:1]) to justify this rejection.

At this point something very typical of the way the Babylonian Talmud works happens. The editors feel it their duty to cluster together a number of traditions they have from elsewhere about Miriam's death. The first one seems to be a uniquely Babylonian tradition,<sup>25</sup> taken from elsewhere in this Talmud (*b. B. Bat.* 17a). In this tradition, Miriam, with her two siblings, was God's chosen leader. All three died similarly, as do the righteous, through a kiss of death from the mouth of God. This interpretation is based on the verses describing the deaths of Moses and Aaron "according to the mouth of God" (עַל פִּי ה'). Rabbi Eleazar further asserts that Miriam too died with God's kiss. He derives this from the linguistic principle (גזירה שווא) in which a word referring to her death is also present in the description of Moses's death—"there" (שם). Rabbi Eleazar explains the difference between the way her death is described in Scripture and the way her siblings' death is described based on his claim that the image of God kissing a woman is obscene. This is a strong gendered observation, because only in kissing her (but not her brothers) God's actions are viewed as obscene.

Following this Babylonian tradition, our small snippet from the Talmud Yerushalmi tradition is imported. The editor begins, of course, with Miriam, since her death ties this small tradition to the previous ones. Her tradition is followed, as in the Talmud Yerushalmi, with the tradition about Aaron's death. Note, however, that the editor of the Babylonian Talmud "corrects" this second tradition—instead of the breaking of the tablets, which is not found directly next to the report of Aaron's death, the Babylonian Talmud associates it with the priestly garments. In Num 20:28

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25. Although in the Babylonian Talmud it is cited as though it were a Tannaitic tradition, for it begins with the words "Our rabbis taught" (תנו רבנן). This is a typical Babylonian strategy in which it presents its own traditions as old and revered.

we read: “Moses stripped Aaron of his vestments and put them on his son Eleazar, and Aaron died there.”

From the point of view of the figure of Miriam, even though the tradition about her is transmitted faithfully from the Talmud Yerushalmi to the Babylonian Talmud, associating it with the gendered and segregated character of women’s funerals—along with pointing out that the death of a woman, even a righteous woman, cannot be described in the same terms as that of a man because of its sexual obscenity—certainly takes away from her something of the universal righteousness assigned to her by the Yerushalmi. She is of course still righteous, but only as far as women go.

## 2.7. The Babylonian Talmud

The Babylonian Talmud is a unique composition—it combines halakhah with aggadah like no other, and it is fond of creating aggadic anthologies devoted to a certain topic or event or biblical hero. These anthologies collect older traditions (Tannaitic, but also Amoraic, from the land of Israel, and even from elsewhere in the Babylonian Talmud itself), but their placement together creates an entirely new context and range of meaning for them. These anthologies, like all discrete sections in the Babylonian Talmud, are called sugyot (or sugya in the singular), and they are unique literary units that deserve a rigorous literary analysis.<sup>26</sup> In this book, two contributions are devoted to two separate aggadic sugyot in which biblical women play a major role. Blankovsky discusses a sugya in Babylonian Talmud Horayot that lumps together several biblical women who seduced biblical heroes but were viewed favorably. He shows that the bulk of the material on these women is already found in Genesis Rabbah, but there it is dispersed throughout the composition. It is the Babylonian Talmud that brings all the traditions together in one sugya and adds to them other women of his volition. Baskin discusses a sugya in Babylonian Talmud Megillah that collects together all earlier traditions about female prophetesses, and adds some thoughts and ideas about biblical women whom it classes as prophetesses, though the Bible suggests nothing of the sort.

Miriam is mentioned in the prophetesses sugya in Babylonian Talmud Megillah 14a, as one who prophesized about Moses’s birth. This tradition

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26. For a good general introduction on the Babylonian Talmud, see David Weiss Halivni, *Midrash, Mishnah and Gemarah* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).



is imported from the midrash halakhah Mekilta de-Rabbi Yishmael (Shirata 10). It is also cited in full one more time in the Babylonian Talmud,<sup>27</sup> and we now turn to it. Like the other aggadic Babylonian sugyot discussed in this book, one long aggadic sugya, located as exegesis on the reference to Miriam in the mishnaic tractate Sotah (b. Sotah 11b–13a), collects an impressive number of traditions about her. There they are organized according to the order of the verses in Exodus, so as to create a sort of biography for her. Since this sugya is discussed in detail in an article published many years ago by Steinmetz,<sup>28</sup> we will only list the traditions grouped together here and conclude with some general remarks.

1. (11b) On Exod 1:15–7, Miriam and her mother, Jochebed, are identified as the midwives Shifrah and Puah. Their names are interpreted according to what they did: Shifrah (שפֵּרָה)—Jochebed—because she improved (משפֵּרָת) the newborns, or because she allowed Israel to multiply (שפֵּרוּ וּרְבוּ) in her days; Puah (פּוֹעֵה)—Miriam—because she would coo (פּוֹעֵה) and bring forth the child or because she cooed (פּוֹעֵה) in the Holy Spirit and prophesied Moses's birth. This idea is already voiced in the midrash halakhah Sifre Numbers 78.
2. (11b–12a) On Exod 1:21, on the claim that God rewarded the midwives with “houses” (בֵּתִים), the rabbis argue that these are genealogies of priest and kings, and identify Miriam as the one destined to bring forth kings. This is performed by a complex and imaginative midrash on the genealogy of Caleb in 1 Chr 1:18 and 4:5–7, which interprets all women's names in that list as referring to Miriam, asserting that she married Caleb and became a foremother of the Davidic royal house. This idea too is taken from Sifre Numbers 78. In this volume, this tradition is discussed in some detail in Tzuberi's contribution.
3. (12a) On Exod 2:1, that Amram, Miriam and Moses's father, “went,” it is argued that he “went” after his daughter's advice. Miriam is said to have rebuked her father for having put away

27. And once by allusion; see b. B. Bat. 120a.

28. Devora Steinmetz, “A Portrait of Miriam in Rabbinic Midrash,” *Proof 8* (1988): 35–68 (on the Babylonian Talmud, see 40–48). See also Bracha Elitzur, “Marriage and Childbirth in Exegesis of Chazal on Miriam the Prophetess” [Hebrew], *Massekhet 14* (2018): 11–46.

her mother because of Pharaoh's orders to kill all the Israelites' newborns. This tradition is tied elsewhere and here too, but not in direct sequence, to her prophecy that her father is destined to give birth to the savior of Israel (see Mek. R. Yishm. Shirata 10).

4. (12b–13a) On Exod 2:7, where Miriam asks Pharaoh's daughter whether she should bring for her a Hebrew wet nurse, in a flashback we hear that Miriam prophesies to her father that he will give birth to the savior of Israel, but when it transpires that the baby has to be thrown into the Nile, he rebukes her. For this reason she goes to the Nile to see what befalls Moses (see also Mek. R. Yishm. Shirata 10).

In her analysis of this sugya in the Babylonian Talmud, Steinmetz notes that “the Bavli seems to have had before it both the notion that Miriam was the ancestress of David and the idea that she interfered in her parents' separation and was concerned about the birth of the Israelites' redeemer.”<sup>29</sup> This seems correct, because all the stories brought here are already found in midreshei halakhah from the school of Rabbi Yishmael. The merit of the Babylonian Talmud here (and also often elsewhere) is the order it brings to disparate traditions, collecting them together in a running commentary, interlaced with Amoraic comments. Miriam herself is not the subject of the commentary but rather Exod 1–2, and her prominence here indicates not so much the Babylonian Talmud's concerns as the prominence of Moses's sister in the narrative of chapter 2 in the biblical book of Exodus, and her association in earlier midrash with the Hebrew midwives of 1:15.

## 2.8. Late Midrash

Late midrash is the name of the part of rabbinic literature that includes compositions that are perhaps or certainly dated to the post-Amoraic period, that perhaps or certainly knew the Babylonian Talmud, that perhaps or certainly were composed at the end of late antiquity before the advent of Islam, or very shortly thereafter.<sup>30</sup> These compositions may contain earlier material, but their final redaction can be quite late, start-

29. Steinmetz, “Portrait of Miriam,” 47.

30. The most updated overview is Tamar Kadari, “Amoraic Aggadic Midrashim” [Hebrew], in *Palestinian Rabbinic Literature: Introductions and Studies*, ed. Menahem Kahana et al. (Jerusalem: Yad Yizhak Ben Zvi, 2018), 297–349; see also Anat Reizel,

ing directly after the Amoraic period but extending at times well into the medieval period, even up to the tenth or eleventh centuries. Mostly these compositions are running commentaries on biblical books,<sup>31</sup> in particular the books beyond the Torah; thus we find running commentaries on Esther (Esther Rabbah) or Proverbs (Midrash Mishle) for the first time only in the late midrash. At times, what are called the late midrashic compositions are organized according to the reading cycle of the Torah (e.g., Tanhuma, Aggadat Bereshit, or Pesiqta Rabbati—the latter, according to the readings of the holidays). Once in a while a late-midrashic composition is a commentary not on a biblical book but on another canonical composition (e.g., Avot de-Rabbi Nathan on tractate Avot of the Mishnah).

In late midrash we sometimes find traditions that are not found in earlier rabbinic compositions, and sometimes we even find among them prerabbinic traditions. These midrashim might exhibit attitudes toward women different from those evident in early or classical rabbinic sources. For example, in Midrash on Proverbs, after a long exposition (interlaced with biblical verses) that proves that Miriam was a true prophet(ess) just like Moses and Aaron, we find the statement from Mekilta de-Rabbi Yishmael (Shirata 10, discussed above) in the name of Rabbi Eleazar that, “just as Moses was singing, so was Miriam; how do we know this about Moses? As it says: ‘then Moses and the children of Israel sang’ (Exod 15:1); how do we know this about Miriam? As it says: ‘and Miriam answered and sang to them: Sing to the Lord’ (Exod 15:21)” (Midr. Prov. 14:1). This midrash then leaves out the words “with the men” for Moses and “to the women” for Miriam, which, as we saw above, are found in Mekilta de-Rabbi Yishmael. This is certainly not an accidental omission, after Midrash Mishle had gone to great lengths to prove Miriam’s prophetic qualities (Midr. Prov. 14:1).

The Tanhuma Yelammedenu corpus has a special status within late midrash. This is an extended literature of Palestinian origin that developed over time, incorporating materials from the fourth–fifth centuries, peaking in the seventh–eighth, with even later additions and developments.<sup>32</sup> It

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*Introduction to the Midrashic Literature* [Hebrew] (Alon Shevut: Midreshet Herzog, 2011). On late midrash see esp. 155, but also selectively earlier in the book.

31. Arnon Atzmon termed this type neoclassical midrash. See Atzmon, “Old Wine in New Flasks: The Story of Late Neoclassical Midrash,” *EJJS* 3.2 (2009): 183–203.

32. Marc Bregman, *Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature: Studies in the Evolution of the Versions* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2003), 173–88. On the structure of the Tanhuma Yelammedenu sermons see also Yaakov Elbaum, “From Sermon to Story: The

consists of sermons for the weekly reading portions of the Torah according to the land-of-Israel cycle, which lasted about three and a half years (unlike the current cycle, which is one year long and originated in Babylonia).<sup>33</sup> In many cases, these sermons may have contained an initial paragraph explaining halakhic issues before attending to the reading portion.

The Tanhuma Yelammedenu corpus is, overall, of Palestinian origin; it exhibits a good acquaintance with Palestinian geography, and a sound knowledge of Palestinian rabbinic literature. However, it also displays familiarity with the Babylonian materials.<sup>34</sup> The Tanhuma Yelammedenu corpus demonstrates a strong affinity to the synagogue culture of late antique Palestine, both in its homiletic arrangement and in its linguistic and thematic closeness to the Palestinian *piyyut* corpus.<sup>35</sup> The Tanhuma Yelammedenu may have served as a handbook for preachers, providing them with material for their weekly sermon. Originally, it may have circulated as separate pamphlets for the weekly readings.<sup>36</sup>

Tanhuma Yelammedenu material is scattered in many fragments and compositions, but there are three large collections of mostly Tanhuma Yelammedenu material: the printed Tanhuma (TanP), the Tanhuma of the Buber edition (TanB), and fragments of a composition called Yelammedenu. There are also compositions that are heavily influenced by Tanhuma Yelammedenu and are therefore described as adjacent to Tanhuma Yelammedenu; these are Aggadot Bereshit, Pesiqta Rabbati, and Midrash Hadash Al Hatorah. Medieval midrashic collections (Lekah Tov, Sekhel Tov, and the very late Yalqut Shimoni) include much Tanhuma Yelammedenu material, and midrashic collections of the Midrash Rabbah that are not just post-Amoraic but actually medieval (parts of Exodus

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Transformation of the Akedah,” *Proof* 6.2 (1986): 97–100; Arnon Atzmon and Ronit Nikolsky, “Let Our Rabbi Teach Us: An Introduction to Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature,” in *Studies in the Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature*, ed. Ronit Nikolsky and Arnon Atzmon (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 1–17.

33. Shlomo Naeh, “The Torah Reading Cycle in Early Palestine: A Re-examination” [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 77 (1998): 167–87; Yosef Ofer, “The Haftarah for Shabbat Haggadol” [Hebrew], *Hamaayan* 36.3 (1996): 16–20.

34. Bregman, *Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature*, 183–84; Ronit Nikolsky, “From Palestine to Babylonia and Back: Parallel Narratives in the Babylonian Talmud and in Tanhuma,” in *Rabbinic Traditions between Palestine and Babylonia*, ed. Ronit Nikolsky and Tal Ilan (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 284–305.

35. Bregman, *Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature*, 182.

36. Bregman, *Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature*, 180.

Rabbah, Numbers Rabbah, and Deuteronomy Rabbah) also contain much Tanhuma Yelammedenu traditions. Tanhuma Yelammedenu also influenced material found in extant fragments, mainly from the Cairo Genizah.

The material in the Tanhuma Yelammedenu corpus comprises midrashic material that is known from the Tannaitic or Amoraic periods, but in many cases the Tanhuma Yelammedenu reworks it by either reorganizing and adding to it, or by combining it with other traditions in order to construct a meaning that would fit a synagogue audience. As mentioned above, Tanhuma Yelammedenu also contains halakhic material, which is reworked to fit the same synagogue audience. This material mostly opens with the formula *yelammedenu rabbenu* (“let our rabbi teach us”), explicating Tannaitic halakhah. The composition Yelammedenu, mentioned above, is organized according to such halakhic questions.

In this volume, several essays address late midrash. Polzer discusses Eve in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan, concentrating especially on version B. Nikolsky reconstructs a unique midrashic text, in which Prov 31 on the woman of valor had once been interpreted verse by verse about Sarah, but the midrash is only partially preserved in both Tanhumas and parallel literature. Steinmetz bases her analysis on the twin properties of Joseph and Dinah first and foremost on a tradition embedded in the late Targum Pseudo-Jonathan to Genesis.<sup>37</sup> Lavee shows a unique interpretation of the midwives of Exod 1 in an otherwise-unknown midrash that was discovered only in the Cairo Genizah.

### 2.8.1. Miriam in Late Midrash

Of course, Miriam shows up also in late midrash. In the following lines we trace both the tradition about her speaking ill of Moses and the tradition about her well as they are reworked in the Tanhuma Yelammedenu corpus. As we saw above, in the biblical tradition of Num 12, Miriam the powerful leader is transformed into a tamed sibling.<sup>38</sup> This is expressed inter alia in the motif of Miriam slandering Moses and being punished with *tzaraat* for it, as also found in the Tannaitic as well as in the Amoraic midrash.<sup>39</sup>

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37. Steinmetz’s contribution is unique in this book, in that she follows a certain midrashic motif over a long span of midrashic time, ending with the post-Islamic Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer.

38. See Burns, *Has the Lord*.

39. Tannaitic: in the biblical context of *tzaraat* laws both in Sifre Num. 99

The Tanhuma Yelammedenu corpus also preserves and transmits this tradition, but the discussion about Miriam's slander of Moses and the following *tzaraat* punishment is reworked in it in a way that alters its original meaning. This happens in one of two ways: The first connects to the slander and story about *tzaraat* to the following story, about sending out the twelve men to spy on the land of Canaan in Num 13 (Yalkut Talmud Torah, Shalah 51a;<sup>40</sup> TanB, Shalah 6; TanP, Shalah 5); these men later returned and slandered the land. Miriam's punishment had been intended as a warning to them that whoever speaks ill of another is punished; however, the spies failed to learn the lesson, slandered the land, and as a result all the Israelites rebelled against God and were punished (Num 14:28–9). The connection between slander and *tzaraat* is reworked here in a new context. The harshness of Miriam's punishment is explained as a didactic act on God's part, and while not less horrible, the blame is removed from Miriam and put, surprisingly enough, on God himself.<sup>41</sup>

The second way this narrative is reworked in the Tanhuma Yelammedenu corpus involves more than recontextualizing. We find a tradition both in Tanhuma Buber (Metzora 6) and the printed Tanhuma (Metzora 2) repeating the Tannaitic midrash but reintroducing the biblical aspect of the story, according to which not only Miriam spoke against Moses but also Aaron. The Tanhuma Yelammedenu texts assert that Aaron was also stricken by *tzaraat*, the only difference being that he was healed immediately, while Miriam's recuperation took seven days. The Tanhuma Buber

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(according to Rabbi Yishmael), and in Sifra *metzora parashah* 5:7–8 (according to Rabbi Akiva). Amoraic: Leviticus Rabbah, as discussed by Lorena Miralles-Maciá in her contribution: “Most of the passages present her [i.e., Miriam] as an example of someone who sinned through her mouth and was therefore struck by leprosy (Lev. Rab. 16:1, 5; 17:3) and recovered from this illness (Lev. Rab. 15:8).”

40. Jacob Mann, *The Bible as Read and Preached in the Old Synagogue: A Study in the Cycles of the Readings from Torah and Prophets, as well as from Psalms, and in the Structure of the Midrashic Homilies*, vol. 2, *The Palestinian Triennial Cycle: Leviticus and Numbers to Seder 106* (Cincinnati: Beit Midrash Le-Rabbanim, 1966); in the Hebrew section, p. קמז.

41. See on the Tanhuma Yelammedenu literature's oft-repeated bold accusations directed against God in Dov Weiss, *Pious Irreverence: Confronting God in Rabbinic Judaism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 161–82; Ronit Nikolsky, “Parables in the Service of Emotional Translation,” in *Parables in Changing Contexts: Essays on the Study of Parables in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism*, ed. Eric Ottenheim and Marcel Poorthuis (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 37–56.

also suggests that Aaron and Miriam were stricken not because they said anything bad (since they only expressed their worry that Moses had no intention of procreating any further), but because they experienced a divine revelation, after which they, as anyone else who experiences something like this, needed to be purified by water.

From this material, one gets the (in our opinion correct) impression that the Tanhuma Yelammedenu holds a more favorable view of the woman leader of the biblical Israelites than the Tannaim or the Amoraim. However, the tradition about Miriam the slanderer from Num 12:1 is added elsewhere into the Tanhuma Yelammedenu corpus in a different context, now with a negative tone; this case can exemplify nicely the intricate relationship between Amoraic midrashic material and Tanhuma Yelammedenu.

Genesis Rabbah argues in a few places (18:2, 80:5) that God created Eve from Adam's rib and no other body part so that she would be modest. Had Eve been created from any other limb, claims Genesis Rabbah, she could have had negative character traits: from the head—she would have been rude; from the ear—she would have been an eavesdropper; and so on. Each of these traits is then demonstrated by reference to a biblical woman with a proof verse (missing a biblical woman and a verse regarding the mouth). Yelammedenu and the printed Tanhuma, apparently based on Genesis Rabbah, bring the same tradition, not in the context of the creation of Eve but when talking about the negative characteristics of women in general:<sup>42</sup>

When the Holy One, blessed be He, wanted to create Eve, he was pondering from which limb [lit. place in Adam's body] to create her.... He did not create her from the eye, so that she would not be curious; [however,] Eve did turn out to be curious, as it says: "and the woman saw that the tree was good for food [and delight for the eye] etc." (Gen 3:6). He did not create her from the mouth, so that she would not be talkative; [however,] **Leah was talkative, as it says: "Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband [and now you take my son's mandrakes also?!]" (Gen 30:15). And also: "And Miriam and Aaron spoke about Moses"** (Num 12:1). He did not create her from the ear, so that she would

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42. On Yelammedenu here see Jacob Mann, *The Bible as Read and Preached in the Old Synagogue: A Study in the Cycles of the Readings from Torah and Prophets, as well as from Psalms, and in the Structure of the Midrashic Homilies*, vol. 1, *The Palestinian Triennial Cycle: Genesis and Exodus* (Cincinnati: Beit Midrash Le-Rabbanim, 1940), in the Hebrew section, p. שלד (106a to Gen 39:12).

not be an eavesdropper; [however,] Sarah was an eavesdropper, as it says: “And Sarah was listening at the tent door” (Gen 18:10). He did not create her from the hand, so that she would not be a thief; [however,] Rachel was a thief, as it says: “And Rachel stole her father’s household gods” (Gen 31:19) etc. (TanP, Va-yeshev 6)

The sentences in bold are of interest to us. This tradition is similar to the traditions found in Genesis Rabbah 18:2 and 80:5, but here we find a woman and a verse, even two women and two verses, regarding the mouth, the second being Miriam and our verse from Numbers. The example of Miriam gives the impression of being a later addition, primarily because it begins with the words “and also” (וְכֵן). However, once this addition was inserted, it became an integral part of the narrative, and Tanhuma Buber (Va-yishlah 17) even removes Leah (who fits well with the original Genesis context), leaving Miriam alone as an example of a talkative woman. We thus observe a progression from a tradition about the creation of Eve, not mentioning Miriam (in Genesis Rabbah), to her being added as a second example of talkativeness (printed Tanhuma), to one where Leah is removed, leaving Miriam alone as the only such example (Tanhuma Buber).

This, however, is not where the story ends. Aside from Gen. Rab. 18:2 and 80:5, a similar tradition is also found in Gen. Rab. 45:5, in the context of Sarah’s complaint to Abraham regarding Hagar (Gen 16:5). This tradition, unlike Gen. Rab. 18:2 and 80:5, shares with the traditions from Tanhuma Yelammedenu just cited the identification of Miriam (and not of Leah) as talkative:

The rabbis say: There are four traits in women: greediness, eavesdropping, laziness, and jealousy. Greediness: “and she took of its fruit” (Gen 3:6); eavesdropping: “and Sarah was listening” (Gen 18:10); laziness: “Quick! Three seahs of fine flour!” (Gen 18:7); jealousy: “Rachel ... envied her sister” (Gen 30:1). Rabbi Yehoshua bar Nehemiah said: Also vengefulness and talkativeness. Vengefulness: “Sarai said to Abram, May the wrong done to me be on you!” (Gen 16:5); talkativeness: “And Miriam and Aaron spoke about Moses” (Num 12:1). (Gen. Rab. 45:5)

The verse proving the talkativeness of women, as in the printed Tanhuma and Tanhuma Buber cited above, is the one about Miriam slandering Moses. Here also, as in the case of the printed Tanhuma discussed above, talkativeness is an addition to the original tradition, which spoke of four negative traits. The addition is clearly marked with “Rabbi Yehoshua bar Nehemiah



said: Also vengefulness and talkativeness.” Since, as was concluded above, Genesis Rabbah is typically positive with regard to Miriam, in contrast to the Tannaitic and the Babylonian literature, and since the additional (and probably late) material is here clearly marked, we think that the extant version of Gen. Rab. 45:5 is influenced by Tanhuma Yelammedenu, and the original tradition did not include Miriam as the example of a talkative woman. We even have a clue as to what the original tradition had been: it is the one found in the Yelammedenu and in the printed Tanhuma as the first case of a talkative woman: Leah’s talk to her sister in Gen 30:15, “Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband [and now you take my son’s mandrakes also]?” This process exemplifies the intricate textual relationships within rabbinic literature, which result from constant interaction between textual witnesses and from active scribes who add and correct traditions according to their cultural understanding and knowledge.

This example shows a typical late antique Jewish cultural process, where a narrative that was initially composed in one context, and in relation to a specific biblical verse, acquires a life of its own and is utilized for making statements in other contexts. The pool of narratives and verses being used to make such changes was part of the cultural canon of Jewish culture of late antiquity, and it was used by the various social groups within this society in a way that answered their cultural needs. Compositions of the Tanhuma Yelammedenu corpus represent a social sector that is not, strictly speaking, a rabbinic *beit ha-midrash* context. Its community is much better defined as that of synagogue-goers and their preachers, who viewed the strict legalistic or intellectual approach of the rabbis as a source of authoritative knowledge. We were able here to follow the process of elite Jewish knowledge being translated into the wider Jewish society, because we are observing a culture that persisted, albeit in a transformed form, for a relatively long stretch of time.

However, there are also cases in which early traditions disappear in late midrash. The tradition about Miriam and Jochebed being identified with the midwives Puah and Shifrah, which is widespread in Tannaitic and Amoraic literature, is almost nonexistent in the current Tanhuma Yelammedenu corpora. It is only hinted at once, in order to explain something completely different: a passage in Tanhuma Buber, Va-yaqhel 5, focuses on one verse, “and he [i.e., God] made houses [i.e., important offspring] for them [i.e., the midwives]” (Exod 1:21), and explains that this refers to Bezalel the artist, Miriam’s offspring, who built the tabernacle in the desert.

In this context the midrash discussed by Lavee in this book is of special interest, because, in his words: “The existence of the tradition of Shifrah and Puah ... the midwives as Egyptians is novel.” Miriam, as we saw above, is interpreted in most rabbinic compositions as being one of these midwives. In other words, this late midrash erases Miriam from a tradition that is clearly assigned to her elsewhere. As Lavee points out, however, rather than seeing this as a removal of Miriam and Jochebed, one should perhaps view it as a return to an interpretive tradition that predates the identification of the midwives with Miriam and Jochebed. The interpretation of the midwives as Egyptian is evident in the LXX translation of Exodus, in Josephus, and in Christian circles.

#### 2.8.2. Miriam in Nonrabbinic Sources: Pseudepigrapha and Piyyut

The identification of an earlier Jewish interpretive tradition in rabbinic literature is of great interest to many scholars.<sup>43</sup> In this book, several scholars mention such possible parallel interpretations: Concerning Tamar of Genesis, Blankovsky mentions Jubilees and the Testament of Judah. Concerning Hagar, Gail Labovitz mentions the Qumranic Genesis Apocryphon, Josephus, and Philo. Both, however, come to negative conclusions concerning any parallel interpretations between the rabbinic compositions and the apocryphal ones.

In the case of Miriam, however, a positive parallel with a nonrabbinic tradition can be shown. In the book known as *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum*, the following tradition is found. We present it parallel to the tradition from the Tosefta presented at the head of this introduction.

Liber antiquitatum biblicarum 20.8  
(see LAB 20.7)

Tosefta Sotah 11:8

And these are the three things that God gave his people for the sake of three persons, that is, the well of the water of Mara for the sake of Maria [Miriam], and the pillar of cloud for the sake of Aaron, and the manna for the sake of Moses.

Said Rabbi Yosi ben Rabbi Yehudah: When Israel left Egypt three faithful providers were nominated for them. And these are they: Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. For their sake three gifts were bestowed on [Israel]: the pillar of cloud,

43. See, e.g., Steven Fraade, “Rabbinic Midrash and Ancient Jewish Biblical Interpretation,” in Fonrobert and Jaffee, *Cambridge Companion to the Talmud*, 99–120.

manna, and a well. The well for the sake  
of Miriam. The pillar of cloud for the sake  
of Aaron. Manna for the sake of Moses.

The similarity between the texts is striking.<sup>44</sup> Most scholars have defined *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum* as a prerabbinic composition of the type usually known as “rewritten Bible.” The similarities between it and many rabbinic texts have been described as resulting from this composition being the “missing link” between Second Temple Literature and the rabbis. Ilan, however, has argued that one should place *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum* in the context of the Jews of Rome in late antiquity and date it as post-Amoraic and influenced by rabbinic tradition.<sup>45</sup> In this case we only point out that it is hard to decide who influenced whom here, but there is no doubt that the texts are closely connected.

As has often been argued, rabbinic literature worked hard to erase from Jewish consciousness prerabbinic biblical interpretations, but late midrash evidences the return of the repressed.<sup>46</sup> Lavee’s example is an excellent one for this trend. The openness of late midrash to other influences is demonstrated by Polzer, Steinmetz, and Nikolsky, but from another direction. All three show that late midrash was in dialogue with very early, pre-Islamic *piyyut*—a liturgical genre that is post-Amoraic but contemporary with late midrash, that, like late midrash, spills over into the Middle Ages and continues to be composed throughout Jewish history, and that, like late midrash, is in direct dialogue with all strands of rabbinic literature.

Miriam’s well tradition, as reworked in the *Tanhuma Yelammedenu*, also demonstrates well the connection between this corpus and the genre of *piyyut*. As we saw above, there was a tradition about Miriam providing the Israelites in the desert with water from a well. In Tannaitic literature this tradition is coupled with two other benefits the people received from

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44. For another very good parallel about Miriam, see LAB 9.10 versus, e.g., Mek. R. Yishm. Shirata 10.

45. Tal Ilan, “The Torah of the Jews of Ancient Rome,” *JSQ* 16 (2009): 363–95, and see there a full bibliography of previous scholarship on the book.

46. This is also the title of a book on a well-known late midrash *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*. See Rachel Adelman, *The Return of the Repressed: Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer and the Pseudepigrapha* (Leiden: Brill, 2009). On a similar observation concerning the midrash *Pesiqta Rabbati* see Rivka Ulmer, “The Culture of Apocalypticism: Is the Rabbinic Work *Pesiqta Rabbati* Intertextually Related to the New Testament Book *The Revelation to John?*,” *RRJ* 14 (2011): 37–70.

Miriam's two siblings. We have also seen that, in the Amoraic period, while Miriam is still one of the three siblings that sustained the Israelites, she is no longer asserted as providing the well (Gen. Rab. 70:8), and in spite of the fact that in Palestinian Amoraic traditions there are references to "Miriam's well" (in the Yerushalmi), in the Babylonian Talmud Miriam is not associated with the well at all. However, in the late midrash Miriam's well makes an impressive comeback. Not only is it described in detail (TanP and TanB, Ba-midbar 2), together with its beneficial qualities (being buried in the Sea of Galilee, TanB, Huqat 1), it is also coupled with a positive view of Miriam's singing: "The well [was given] because Miriam sang on the water [of the Red Sea]" (והבאר בזכות מרים שאמרה שירה על המים) (TanB and TanP, Ba-midbar 2). Precisely because Miriam sang the Song of the Sea, she merited endowing the Israelites with a well. This is an example of how late midrash creates a new tradition by combining two old ones. The prominence of Miriam's well in the Tanhuma Yelammedenu corpus can perhaps be explained by the connection of this well to the synagogal liturgy: Miriam is mentioned in a *piyyut* for the third day of the Hoshanaot celebration in the festival of Sukkot, in which it is customary to ask for beneficial winter rain. The following *piyyut* is attributed to Eleazar berabbi Qillir, a poet from the sixth–seventh century, and in it Miriam is celebrated as a prophetess, as the provider of a well, and possibly as a leader.

למען נביאה מחולת מחנים  
 לכמהי לב הושמה עינים  
 לרגלה רצה עלות ורדת באר מים  
 לטובו אהליו, הושע נא והושיעה נא,  
 אבינו אתה

For the prophetess—camp dances  
 For those with wishful hearts she was placed as eyes  
 to her feet, the well of water rises and falls [lit. runs up and down]  
 to the goodness of his tents *hoshaanna*, please save,  
 you are our father.<sup>47</sup>

And another example: this poem is the work of Pinhas ha-Kohen, who is mentioned by Saadya Gaon among the earliest *paytanim*, and indeed from the contents of his poems (all discovered in the Cairo Genizah) he is

47. This *piyyut* is discussed by Yael Levine, "Lemaan Neviah Meholat Mahanayim: Miryam Be-Fiyutei Sukkot U-va-Hoshaanot" [Hebrew], *Yeda-Am* 69–70 (2010): 63–73.

clearly of the eighth century.<sup>48</sup> In his composition on the month of Nisan we read:

פסח ודרור בא בו  
 צום מרים בעשרה בו  
 ניסן / קבוע עשות ניסים בו  
 רגלי מבשר בוא יבוא

Pesah and Freedom come in it  
 The fast of Miriam is on its tenth  
 Nisan / Constantly miracles are performed in it  
 The feet of the savior will come<sup>49</sup>

The tradition that Miriam died on the tenth of Nisan is found in Seder Olam Rabbah 10. It is a rather unorthodox composition, positioned somewhere between the late rabbinic and earlier Hellenistic Jewish literature.<sup>50</sup>

Here we end this introduction, which is at the same time an overview of rabbinic literature and an overview of Miriam in it. The case of Miriam has proved indicative to both the manner in which various strata of rabbinic literature dealt with women, and to the differences between its attitude and that of other parts of Jewish society.

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48. Shulamit Elizur, *The Liturgical Poems of Rabbi Pinhas ha-Kohen: Critical Edition, Introduction and Commentaries* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 2004), 4–9.

49. Elizur, *Liturgical Poems*, 690.

50. See Milikowsky, "Seder Olam."

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