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“Language Incribed by History on the Bodies of Living Beings”: Midrash and Martyrdom

Indeed the problem becomes one of rethinking the concepts of “inside” and “outside” in relation to processes of interaction between language and the world.

—Dominick La Capra¹

DESCRIPTIONS OF LITERARY THEORY generally maintain that there are two ways of conceiving the relation of the literary text to “history.” One model, which might be broadly called the “formalist” model, sees literature as occupying an autonomous ontological realm, divorced from and “above” the material and social conditions of its production. The other model, the “historicist” one, understands the text to be wholly determined by and to be a reflection of its historical circumstances. Theorists lately have been struggling toward a more nuanced view of this relation than either of the above positions would allow.² This struggle can be usefully engaged in through the study of midrash, the early rabbinic commentary on the Torah.

Reflection on midrash itself has been divided into virtually the same two schools of thought as above. Traditional scholarship has considered it a wholly transparent reflection of the historical conditions obtaining at the time of its creation. This is in spite of the fact that its explicit generic claim is to be interpretation of a text that belongs to another time and place—indeed, it may be because of this claim. Since midrashic interpretation often seems so far from what we might imagine as paraphrase, it seems inevitably to condemn itself to a reading that takes midrash as a reflection of something else, almost as a kind of historical allegory disguised as pseudocommentary. This version of historicism has the virtue of emphasizing the vital, ideological import of midrash, but it undermines the seriousness of reading of the Bible as a factor in that ideology. More recently, theorists working in the “deconstructive” mode have read midrash in terms suggesting that it is a kind of protodeconstruction, a hermeneutics of Dionysian free play with the biblical text.³ This move has had the great virtue of leading to a reconsideration of these texts as a *reading* of the Bible, but it seems to undermine the very significance of that reading for social practice, indeed for life and death.

A revised conception of the hermeneutics of midrash will accordingly allow us to understand anew its relation to history and rabbinic culture and perhaps will lead to some further insight into the possibilities of interaction between words

and world in general. My purpose in this paper will be to study one particular midrashic passage. In my reading of this text, I will try to reveal a much more complex and exciting relationship between hermeneutic and historical practice than imagined by scholars of midrash until now.⁴ Close study of this text from the second-century Palestinian midrash on Exodus called the *Mekilta* will introduce us into the world of midrash and its problematic stance in history and suggest further directions for cultural poetics. The text is a commentary on the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15) and describes a people loving God unto death:

This is my God, and I will beautify Him (Exod. 15.2). Rabbi Akiva says: Before all the Nations of the World I shall hold forth on the beauties and splendor of Him Who Spake and the World Came to Be! For, lo, the Nations of the World keep asking Israel, "What is thy Beloved more than another beloved, O most beautiful of women?" (Cant. 5.9), that for His sake you die, for His sake you are slain, as it is said, We have loved you unto death [*'ad mwat*], "for thus do the maidens [*'almwt*] love Thee" (Cant. 1.3)—and it is said, "for Your sake we have been killed all the day" (Ps. 44.23). You are beautiful, you are heroes, come merge with us!

But Israel reply to the Nations of the World: Do you know Him? Let us tell you a little of His Glory: "My beloved is white and ruddy, braver than ten thousand. His head is purest gold; his hair is curls as black as a raven. His eyes are like doves by springs of water . . . His cheeks are like perfumed gardens . . . His palate is sweetmeats and He is all delight; this is my beloved and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem" (Cant. 5.10ff.).

And when the Nations of the World hear all of this praise, they say to Israel, Let us go along with you, as it is said, "Whither is thy Beloved gone, O thou fairest among women? Whither hath thy Beloved turned, that we may seek Him with thee?" (Cant. 6.1).

But Israel reply to the Nations of the World: You have no part of Him; on the contrary, "My beloved is mine, and I am His; I am my Beloved's, and He is mine; He feedeth among the Lilies" (Cant. 2.16 and 6.3).⁵

Without claiming that any of the following characteristics are definitional for midrash, we can nevertheless see that this text manifests several differences from commentary as traditionally understood:

1) Meaning is produced in the creative interaction between text being read, reader, and other texts, and does not even pretend to be a simple paraphrase of the interpreted text.⁶

2) There is a certain erasure of difference between the text being interpreted and the interpreting text.

3) These last two result in an ambiguity of reference in the interpreting text. When and where does this conversation take place?

4) A crucial moment in the reading of this midrash is accomplished by linguistic play; the pun on *'almwt* (maidens) as *'al mwat* (until death).

Scholars of the historical school have universally reduced this text to being a reflection of events that took place in the time of its speaker, Rabbi Akiva, who died a martyr's death. Thus, the leading scholar of rabbinic thought, Ephraim E. Urbach argues, with regard to our text, "Hadrian's decrees and *the consequent facts*

of martyrdom as the supreme expression of the Jew's love for his Creator gave rise to interpretations that discovered in Canticles allusions to Jewish martyrology and to the uniqueness of Israel among the nations of the world. Rabbi Akiva already expounded, 'I shall hold forth'⁷ Notice that Urbach begins his quotation *after* the verse upon which Rabbi Akiva's midrash is presented as an interpretation, thus showing that he regards the claim of the midrash to be interpretation of that verse as irrelevant. Similarly, the historian Isaac Baer argued that "Rabbi Akiva already expounded and said of the verse, 'This is my God': I shall hold forth. . . . The verse 'My Beloved is white and ruddy' *alludes to the ecstatic vision* to which the martyrs were privy in the days of their torture and the hour of their death."⁸ Again no effort is made to account for how Rabbi Akiva's statement is connected as an interpretation to the Exodus verse. Even more explicitly, Gedaliah Alon remarks that "the passage *reflects* memories from after the war of the destruction, or it *describes* a reality from after the war of Quietus,"⁹ all this in spite of the obvious truth that the passage claims to be doing something radically different.

Joseph Heinemann has argued that it is the strangeness and apparent arbitrariness of the midrash, its distance from the plain meaning of the biblical narrative, that leads scholars to read its discourse as a transparent reflection of the time of the midrashists.¹⁰ Such motivation for historicism depends on assuming that the "plain" sense is obvious (and indeed that there is such an entity), and, moreover, that this plain sense was believed in by the rabbis, who nevertheless ignored it in favor of some other discourse about the meaning of the text (or even ostensibly about the meaning of the text).¹¹ I would like to begin, then, by analyzing the interpretative moves of our midrash, as they function in this text to produce its meanings. If we can detect here that the midrashic reading is generated by hermeneutic principles, which although different from ours are not arbitrary or unexpected within their own system, then a major support for the purely historicistic interpretation of midrash will have been weakened.

In an interpretative text, even one that locates meaning in the "shuttle space between the interpreter and the text,"¹² it makes sense to begin by looking at the interpreted text: "This is my God, and I will beautify Him" (Exod. 15.2). This verse presented a certain difficulty to its rabbinic readers: "Is it possible for flesh and blood to beautify their Creator?"¹³ Rabbi Akiva's answer to this wonderment is that people beautify God when they sing His beauty. Up till now, then, we have a paraphrase of the verse. We begin to have midrash, however, with the expansion of this paraphrase into a full-fledged narrative with two protagonists, a conversation that is nowhere signified in the original verse, and the importation to the midrash of an entire passage of the Song of Songs. These are the sorts of moves that have led previous interpreters to locate the meaning of this text transparently in the time of the interpreter. However, it seems to me that this discourse is considerably more complex than such readings suggest, and much more of the story can be shown to have been generated by a practice of interpreting Scripture. I

would like to show through my reading that the interpretation thematizes not the facts of martyrdom or some other extratextual reality but precisely the issue of history itself; that far from being a simple reflection of facts that “gave rise to interpretations,” it is the very issue of the interpretation of those facts as part of a life lived (and died) in a text with which the midrash deals.

The crucial word of the verse for my interpretation is the smallest, namely the demonstrative *this*. While there are many verses of the Bible in which the demonstrative can be read (or is even most simply read) as *anaphora* or *kataphora*, for the rabbis *this* is compellingly deictic, as certified by the following passage:

This month shall be for you (Exod. 12.12). Rabbi Ishmael says: Moses showed the new moon to Israel and said to them: In this way shall you see and fix the new moon for the generations. Rabbi Akiva says: This is one of the three things which were difficult for Moses to understand and all of which God pointed out to him with His finger. And thus you say: “And *these* are they which are unclean for you” (Lev. 11.29). And thus: “And *this* is the work of the candelabrum” (Num. 8.4). . . . Rabbi Shimeon the son of Yohai says: Is it not a fact that all the words which He spoke to Moses He spoke only in the day; the new moon, of course, He showed him at night. How then could He, while speaking with him at day, show him the new moon, at night? Rabbi Eliezer says: He spoke with him at day near nightfall, and then showed him the new moon right after nightfall.¹⁴

A verse that talks about a month is interpreted as being about the New Moon because it includes the demonstrative *this*, which for the rabbis always signifies seeing and pointing with a finger, even where such an interpretation leads into obvious logical contradictions with other interpretative commonplaces, namely that God only spoke with Moses by day.¹⁵ It is no wonder, therefore, that Rabbi Akiva reads the verse “*This is my God*” as signifying a theophany, an experience in which the Jews could point with their fingers at the visible God. We have, moreover, explicit evidence that this was the reading of our verse from Rabbi Eliezer’s remark in the *Mekilta* that from this verse we learn that “a slave saw at the Sea what neither Isaiah nor Ezekiel nor all of the other prophets ever saw.”¹⁶ That this view was generally accepted is suggested, moreover, by the line from the daily evening prayer, “Thy children saw Thy power, splitting the Sea before Moses, ‘*This is my God*,’ they uttered and sang.”

Another important signifier in the verse is the pronoun *my*. On my reading, it is this morpheme that sets up the very rhetorical situation which Rabbi Akiva’s story expands. If there is a “my” then it seems that there is a “not yours.” Indeed, in this verse the first-person singular pronoun is repeated no less than four times.¹⁷ As James Clifford, following Emile Benveniste, has acutely remarked, “Every use of ‘I’ presupposes a ‘you,’ and every instance of discourse is immediately linked to a specific shared situation.”¹⁸ It is hardly surprising, then, that the midrash understands “*This is my God*” to imply a rhetorical or dramatic situation in which Israel is addressing some other nation and saying “*This is my God*” and not yours.

For the rabbis, the Song of Songs is the record of an historical theophany and, in particular, the description of the Lover in 5.9–16 is the description of God as He was seen on that occasion.¹⁹ Although there is some controversy among the early rabbis as to whether the theophany referred to is the one at Sinai or the one at the Red Sea, our text obviously fits into the view that reads it at the Red Sea. Accordingly, it is entirely plausible that Rabbi Akiva associates the deictic *this* of “This is my God” with the same deictic of “This is my Lover and my Friend, O daughters of Jerusalem” in the Canticles passage. The dialogue with the “daughters of Jerusalem” (who, if the maiden is Israel, must be the Gentiles) produces virtually the whole narrative. The story that Rabbi Akiva tells is then generated, as it were, of itself by the force of the association of the two texts. The chapter of Song of Songs begins with the maiden (to be sure, after some coyness on her part) pursuing her lover through the streets of Jerusalem and being beaten and wounded by the guards. She adjures the daughters of Jerusalem to find her lover for her, in spite of her wounds, and tell Him that she is lovesick for Him. The daughters wonder at this request and ask, “What is thy Beloved, that you have so adjured us”—even though you are suffering so much for His love. Come join with us, “O most beautiful of women.” The maiden, Israel, answers, Let me describe His beauty, as I have seen Him: “*This* is my God, and I will sing His beauty. My Beloved is white and ruddy. . . . *This* is my Lover and this is my Friend, O daughters of Jerusalem.” At this point, the maidens become jealous and want such a lover also, but Israel answers, “My Beloved is mine and I am His.”

This reading of “my God” as mine and not yours was certainly amplified by the “This is my Beloved and this is my Friend, O daughters of Jerusalem” in the Canticles passage, as well as, explicitly by “My Beloved is mine and I am His.” I suggest then that the story is simply for Rabbi Akiva the unpacking of the meaning and rhetorical force embodied in the verse “This is my God and I will beautify Him,” as it is unpacked in that text, which was understood as the key to the meaning of this historical moment, the Song of Songs.²⁰

However, this reading is paradoxical and problematic, because the dialogue between the Jews and the Gentiles certainly could not have taken place alongside the Red Sea. The Jews were not being killed for their God then, nor were there any Egyptians left alive with whom to talk. However, there is no unproblematical locating of this story in historical time either, in spite of the views of the above-mentioned scholars. There simply was no time in which Jews were being killed en masse for the love of God, and there was a simultaneous desire of many Gentiles to convert to Judaism. Accordingly, the arguments of the historians as to whether the text refers to this or that period in the life of Rabbi Akiva only serve to demonstrate this paradoxicality of reference, this impossibility of interpreting our text as an indirect reference to historical events.²¹ Moreover, the deixis of *this* in the Song of Songs verse suggests that an experience of theophany present to those speakers is also being evoked.

Here we have figured perfectly the paradoxical time of midrashic reading. The linguistic transformation of anaphora into deixis thematizes the issue of midrash brilliantly. Anaphora is the very figure of absence: “This which I am telling you about; this which was in the past; this which is history.” Deixis is the very figure of presence: “This which I am pointing at; this which you can see.” The absent moment of theophany is thus transformed into an evocation of a present moment of vision of God both in the form and in the content (or rather in the indistinguishable form-content) of the midrash. The absent moment of revelation is transformed into a present moment of reading. The text of the Text and the text of history (reality) merge, however tensely. When could this theophany be taking place, since it not at the Crossing of the Red Sea itself? A more detailed reading of the text will be required before we can suggest an answer to this question.

The midrash represents the relationship of God and the Jewish People as an erotic one—through the reading of Song of Songs into Exodus. However, Thanatos also introduces itself into this erotic idyll—formally and thematically: “For, lo, the Nations of the World keep asking Israel, ‘What is thy Beloved more than another beloved, O most beautiful of women’ (Cant. 5.9), that for His sake you die, for His sake you are slain, as it is said, We have loved you unto death [*‘ad mwt*], “for thus do the maidens [*‘almwt*] love Thee” (Cant. 1.3)—and it is said, “for Your sake we have been killed all the day” (Ps. 44.23).” Note that the theme of death is a simultaneous intrusion into the world of the text and into text of the world. This intrusion is represented in three ways: first, by the insertion of the verse from the beginning of the Song of Songs into a context that interprets the fifth chapter; second, by the violation of the language of that verse, via the transformation of *‘almwt* (nubile maidens), the very symbol of Eros (here, however, maidens represented as desiring subjects and not as desired objects)²² into *‘al mwt* (until death), the very symbol of Thanatos; and third, by the insertion into this context of another text entirely, the verse from Psalms 44, “We are killed for You all the day.” The violation of textual space that the midrash enacts can be read as a figure for the violation of the erotic relationship between the Jew and God implied by the fact that Jews are being killed in the real world of Rabbi Akiva. Put yet another way, the transformation of *‘almwt* into *‘al mwt*, of love into death, is itself a representation of the question directed at God in other texts as well: If You love us so much, why do You kill us?

However, the text alludes to an answer as well. The claim that I am making is that midrash often signifies by allusion to other biblical passages. These allusions are discovered by observing the ungrammaticalities of the midrashic text, that is, linguistic forms that either do not quite fit their context or belong to another linguistic stratum. While the phrase *‘al mwt* could mean “until death” in rabbinic Hebrew, its grammar is sufficiently unusual to call attention to itself; the normal form would be rather *‘ad mwt*, as the midrash indeed glosses it. I would read this nearly ungrammatical form as an intertextual clue. The only place in

the Hebrew Bible where *'al mwt* occurs in the sense of “until death” is verse 15 of Psalm 48. Moreover, this verse begins also with language strongly reminiscent of the very verse that Rabbi Akiva’s midrash is reading, “*This is God, our God, until eternity. He will lead us unto death.*”

The verse of the psalm overflows with potential meanings. The sober medieval commentator Rabbi A. Ibn Ezra glosses it as follows:

'Almwt like *'wlmwt*, “until eternity” [the written consonants are the same; only the pronunciation varies], for He exists until eternity and leads until eternity. The Massorete has read this as two words, and their meaning is “until our death.” Rabbi Moshe says it is from the root *'lm*, “youth”; He will lead us always as the fashion of the maidens, as He led us in the days of our youth.

We need not choose between these meanings, but from the perspective of contemporary reading practice we can assume that they are all latent in the verse—eternity, death, and eros—a whole world of psychological resonances in a single word.

This verse is also (according to rabbinic hermeneutics) a record of a theophany, again because of the deictic *this*. Rabbis of a period only slightly later than Rabbi Akiva animate the rich ambiguity of the Psalms verse by reading *until death* as “maidens” in precisely the reverse move of Rabbi Akiva’s reading of *maidens* as “death” in the Song of Songs verse:

Rabbis Berechia and Helbo and Ula and Rabbi El’azar in the name of Rabbi Hanina have said: In the future God will lead the dance of the righteous . . . and they will point to Him with their fingers, as it says, “*This is God, our God, until eternity. He will lead us until death [‘al mut]*” as maidens [*k’alamot*], in the dances of the righteous.

It seems to me not too much to suggest, therefore, that Rabbi Akiva’s midrashic transformation of *maidens* into “until death” alludes to this very verse, in which death is transformed into maidens by the midrash. It is not only the two signifiers that can substitute for each other but also their signifieds as well. Death becomes Eros and Eros death.

Now it is very important to note that Psalm 48 is itself a meditation on history. The psalmist, speaking at some indefinite time, recalls the distant past of the Splitting of the Sea in a series of blatant allusions to Exodus 15, the same text that Rabbi Akiva is interpreting. Moreover, he claims, “As we have heard, so have we seen” the very transformation of history into present experience that Rabbi Akiva enacts by his transformation of anaphora into deixis. Finally, the psalmist draws past and present together with the future with his “In order that you tell the last generation: *This is God, our God, until eternity. He will lead us until death.*” The psalm replicates in its thematics the very interpretation of history that the midrash makes both in its thematics and in its hermeneutic method. For the psalmist, it seems, the promise of God’s self-revelation, of seeing Him again, as He was seen at the Crossing of the Sea, redeems the vicissitudes of history. Indeed, the

Greek translator of the Bible, Aquila, a contemporary and colleague of Rabbi Akiva himself, translates the *‘al mut* of the verse as “athanasia,” which the Palestinian Talmud, in its turn, retroverts as “the world in which there is no death.” This suggests very strongly to me that Rabbi Akiva’s narrative, with its paradoxical time-reference, is in truth an eschatological narrative. For the rabbis the Crossing of the Sea was the type, of which the final redemption will be the antitype.²³

Strong support for the eschatological reading of this story comes from yet another allusion. The phrase that the “daughters of Jerusalem” use to formulate their request to seek God with Israel, “Let us go along with you,” is an exact quotation from the eschatological prophecy of Zakariah 8.20–23, in which the Gentiles seek to join Israel, and it is couched in an archaic grammatical form, which is only found in biblical Hebrew.

Thus saith the Lord of Hosts: The Nations and the dwellers of great cities will come. And they will go, the dwellers of one by one, saying, “Let us go and seek the face of the Lord, and seek out the Lord of Hosts. I will go, even I.” And there will come many nations and mighty peoples to seek the Lord of Hosts in Jerusalem, and to seek out the face of the Lord.

Thus saith the Lord of Hosts: In those days, ten Gentiles will hold onto the garment of a Jew and say, “*Let us go along with you*, for we have heard that God is with you.”²⁴

We find the same hermeneutical pattern that we have found above. A linguistic anomaly in the midrashic text—in this case the use of an archaic biblical form—is actually an allusion to another biblical text, which provides an important clue to the reading of the midrash. When we combine the midrashic text itself with its biblical subtexts, we can generate a strong reading of it. The interpreter stands in a position of desire. His Torah tells him of a moment of perfection when the People stood in such a marvelous union with God that what a slave saw then, no one has seen since. How can the desire to relive that moment of presence be fulfilled? The distance between the present reader and the absent moment of Presence is the tragedy of history. Rabbi Akiva conquers history by bringing it into the present. For him, as well as for the psalmist, that which we have heard is what we have seen, and if death, time, history interfere, they can be conquered through a reading strategy that eradicates them by effacing the difference between past, present, and future. Anaphora becomes deixis. This reading strategy is called midrash. Perhaps, then, what this midrash has to teach us about textuality is something about the inadequacy of the very oppositions that we make between textuality and history, or between intertextual reading strategies and those grounded in the outside world.

In the hour that they took Rabbi Akiva out [to be executed], his disciples said to him, “Our teacher, so far?” [i.e., is this necessary]. He said to them, “All of my life I was troubled by

this verse, 'And thou shalt love the Lord with all thy soul'—even though He takes your soul—and I said, when will it come to my hand that I may fulfill it. Now that it is come to my hand, shall I not fulfill it?' (Babylonian Talmud, Berakot 66a)

Rabbi Akiva's midrash joins Eros and Thanatos, and so do the stories of his death. According to this text, Rabbi Akiva died for the love of God; indeed he died because he held that this was the only way to fulfill the commandment "To love the Lord with all your soul." This is the "reality" to which the historians quoted above were appealing when they interpreted the midrash as a reflection of the events of the rabbi's life. However, these "events" are no less artefactual, no more factual than the very midrash they are purported to be the explanation and referent of. Nevertheless, these texts must be connected. The love joined with death or fulfilled by death seems the same in both the midrash and the historiographical legend. If we do not read the midrash as a reflection of this "historical" event, how can we account for their congruence? I would suggest that we substitute for the language of "reflection" and "referentiality," which explicitly privileges one kind of text over others, a language of intertextuality. Seen in that light, Rabbi Akiva's midrash and the story about his martyrdom belong to the same historical context and complex—neither is the context nor the explanation of the other, but both are part and parcel of the same cultural process. I suggest that Rabbi Akiva's reading of the Torah, his midrash, led him to an apocalyptic view of the religious life. The high moment of union with God that the Jews experienced at the Crossing of the Sea could only be relived in two ways—on the national level at the moment of the *eschaton* and on the personal level by dying a martyr's death.

This ideology of death as the necessary fulfillment of the love of God appears often in texts of the time of Rabbi Akiva. Thus we read in a halakic (religious law) text of his period:

And thou shalt love the Lord with all thy soul: [This means] even when he takes your soul, and so it says, "For Your sake have we been killed all of the day."²⁵

Now this text is particularly significant for us because it brings into the textual complex the same verse of Psalms that I considered an intrusion in the midrash of Rabbi Akiva on "This is my God, and I will beautify Him." It seems that while we cannot speak of any precise historical background that determines the midrash, we can grasp in it a very crucial cultural/ideological moment, the moment of the creation of the idea of martyrdom as a positive religious value per se. True, in the past there also was a concept of martyrdom, but it was very different from this one. The former model was that of the Hasmonean period, in which the martyr refuses to violate his or her religious integrity and is executed for this refusal; now we find martyrdom being actively sought as the only possible fulfillment of a spiritual need. To put this in more classical Jewish terminology: in the past martyrs refused to violate a negative commandment (to

worship idols); in the present, they are fulfilling through their deaths a positive one (to love God).

The astounding thing is that we can almost actually catch this transition happening in our texts:

When Rabbi Akiva died a martyr's death, a verse from Canticles was also applied to him, "Joshua b. Jonathan used to say of those executed by the wicked Turnus Rufus, They have loved Thee much more than the former saints, 'sincerely have they loved Thee.'"²⁶

There were, indeed, saints in former times, that is, those who were willing to die for the faith, so why have Rabbi Akiva and his fellows "loved Thee much more than the former saints"? I would claim that this is because they died with joy, with a mystic conviction, not only that their deaths were necessary but that they were the highest of spiritual experiences. This transition is already identifiable in the parallel story of Rabbi Akiva's martyrdom in the Palestinian Talmud:

Rabbi Akiva was being judged before the wicked Tunius Rufus. The time for the reading of the "Hear O Israel" [which includes the verse "Thou shalt love the Lord with all thy soul!"] arrived. He began to recite it and smile. He said to him, "Old man, old man: either you are deaf, or you make light of suffering." He said, "May the soul of that man expire! Neither am I deaf, nor do I make light of suffering, but all of my life I have read the verse, 'And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your property.' I have loved Him with all my heart, and I have loved Him with all my property, but *until now, I did not know how to love Him with all my soul.* But now that the opportunity of [loving Him] with all my soul has come to me, and it is the time of the Recital of 'Hear O Israel' [once again, the very moment to fulfill the commandment of loving God with all one's soul], *and I was not deterred from it; therefore, I recite, and therefore I smile.*"²⁷

In this text, we catch Rabbi Akiva in the act, as it were, of discovering that dying is the way to fulfill the commandment of loving God (and, perhaps, as well, the way to relive the experience of seeing God in all His beauty). I am not claiming, of course, that this is "what actually happened" but rather that the text is the representation of a moment in the history of an ideology. Here Rabbi Akiva did not know until now how to fulfill the commandment; in the (later) Babylonian version quoted above he already knew from before what it was he had to do, and was just waiting for the opportunity. These are then not two competing "reflections" of circumambient reality but two diachronically emplaceable stages in cultural history—the history of a practice. Our midrash with its concatenation of Eros and Thanatos, death and the maiden, also represents the ideological, spiritual base and source for this very idea. It is hardly the case, then, that the midrash reflects some privileged external, unsemioticized reality. Reality exists—Rabbi Akiva is not in a prisonhouse of language but in a Roman jail. He will undoubtedly be executed, but it is he who transforms this execution into a consummation of erotic love for the Beautiful King.

This reverses, as well, the hierarchy that Baer assumed for our midrash and

ecstatic vision. He interpreted Rabbi Akiva's midrash of the Song of Songs by claiming, "The verse 'my Beloved is white and ruddy' alludes to the ecstatic vision that the martyrs were privy to in the days of their torture and the hour of their death."²⁸ However, while torture may indeed be an external reality, ecstatic visions of the Godhead are a cultural production—a text. Not only, I would claim, does Rabbi Akiva's midrash not reflect his martyrdom nor allude to his ecstatic visions; rather I suggest that it was the hermeneutic, intertextual connection of the Song of Songs with the Song of the Sea, of "This is my God and I will beautify Him" with "This is my Beloved and this is my Friend, O daughters of Jerusalem" and, indeed, with "This is God, Our God, He will lead us unto death," which inspired the idea of erotic, mystic death, led to the creation of the ideology of martyrdom, and may have produced the ecstatic visions awarded to the martyr. Rabbi Akiva may very well have had the ecstatic vision of the Beloved at the hour of his death, but his midrash could hardly reflect that experience; if he did have such a wonderful experience, it was the reward his life in midrash gave him.

Hardly divorced from history, but even more intimately connected with it than the historians imagined, midrash is a way of reading and living in the text of the Bible, which had and has profound implications for the life of the reader. If my reading has any cogency, Rabbi Akiva is (at least) represented in the tradition as having died a martyr owing to his way of reading. Moreover, his model had profound implications for the development of martyrology. All through the Middle Ages, Jews went enthusiastically to a martyr's death with Rabbi Akiva's words on their lips. Indeed we could well describe midrash as language inscribed by history, or even more to the point, as language self-inscribed in history, on the bodies of living beings.

Notes

This essay was first delivered in the public lecture series of the School of Criticism and Theory, on 27 July 1988. I wish to thank all who contributed helpful comments on that occasion and especially Nancy Miller, who saved me from a very embarrassing formulation. Edward Said, who was present at the lecture, also made very useful and generous remarks. May Prof. Said's struggle be rewarded with justice and peace for both of our peoples. My title is quoted from Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago, 1980), 179.

1. Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1983), 26.
2. Dominick LaCapra, *History and Criticism* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1985), theorizes this issue very clearly. For my use of *formalist*, see pp. 126–27.
3. That is, deconstruction of the American variety. Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses* (Albany, N.Y., 1982), is the most extreme example of this approach to midrash.
4. I will cite the works of some representative midrashic scholars of the "old historicist" school below.

5. I have generally followed here the elegant translation of Judah Goldin, *The Song at the Sea* (New Haven, 1971), 115–17, only modifying it where my manuscripts have a better reading.
6. It is this feature that has led many scholars to define “midrash” as the “other” of the “plain interpretation” of the Bible. See Gary Porton, “Defining Midrash,” in *The Study of Ancient Judaism*, ed. Jacob Neusner (New York, 1981), 59–60. However, as Porton has argued, “The distinction between ‘hidden’ and ‘plain’ is often a result of our present view of Scripture.” Moreover, in the present state of literary theory, the very concept of “plain” meaning is often called into question. See Frank Kermode, “The Plain Sense of Things,” in Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick, *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven, 1986), 179–95.
7. Ephraim E. Urbach, “The Homiletical Interpretation of Canticles,” *Scripta hiersolymitana*, vol. 22 (Jerusalem, 1971), 250; emphasis mine.
8. Isaac Baer, “Israel, the Christian Church, and the Roman Empire” [Hebrew], *Zion* 21 (1956): 2–3; translation and emphasis mine.
9. Gedaliah Alon, *The History of the Jews in Eretz Israel in the Days of the Mishna and the Talmud* [Hebrew] (Tel-Aviv, 1956), 327, n. 25; my translation.
10. Joseph Heinemann, *Aggadah and Its Development* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1974), 75; my translation.
11. Note that even were we to grant the first assumption, that the text does have a univocal, original meaning, the second would still be questionable. See on this R. Loewe’s fine study, “The ‘Plain’ Meaning of Scripture in Early Jewish Exegesis,” *Papers of the Institute of Jewish Studies* 1 (1964): 140–85.
12. Hartman and Budick, introduction to *Midrash and Literature*, xi. I would perhaps rephrase this as “between the text and the interpreter.”
13. The words are of Rabbi Ishmael, (the contemporary and colleague of Rabbi Akiva), as preserved in the *Mekilta*. In Goldin’s *Song at the Sea*, they are on p. 113.
14. Jacob Z. Lauterbach, ed. and trans., *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* 3 vols. (Philadelphia, 1961), 1:15–16.
15. Porton, “Defining Midrash,” 83, completely misses the import of this passage. He remarks that “we have several different comments on the verse. . . . All of the comments are not really related to one another.” But of course they are, and that is precisely the issue. The question raised by Rabbi Shimeon and answered by Rabbi Eliezer only arises because Rabbi Akiva reads the *this* as deictic and takes the verse to refer, therefore, to God’s pointing out the new moon to Moses.
16. Goldin, *Song at the Sea*, 112; Lauterbach, *Mekilta*, 2:24.
17. Although this is obviously not the only possible way to read the pronoun, it does seem typical of the midrash; in several cases in the same midrash where this pronoun appears, it is also read as excluding others (at least partially). Thus, on the previous verse we read:

Another interpretation of *My strength* [‘zy]: Thou art the Helper [‘wzr] of all the inhabitants of the world, but mine above all! *And the Lord is my song*: Thou art the theme for song for all the inhabitants of the world, but for me above all!

Goldin, *Song at the Sea*, 108–9.

18. James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Authority,” *Representations* 2 (1983): 133.
19. See the classic article of my teacher, Saul Lieberman, “The Teaching of *Song of Songs*” [Hebrew], in Gershom Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (New York, 1965), 118–27, and esp. 123. See also my “Two Introductions to the Midrash on the *Song of Songs*” [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 56 (1987): 479–501; and my “The

- Song of Songs: Lock or Key,” to appear in *The Book and the Text*, ed. Regina Schwartz (Boulder, Colo., forthcoming).
20. See Boyarin, “Song of Songs,” for further development of this issue.
 21. See M. D. Herr, “Persecutions and Martyrdom in Hadrian’s Days,” *Scripta hiersolymitana*, vol. 23 (1972), 13.
 22. As emphasized to me by Jonathan Boyarin. Indeed the very passage of Song of Songs itself here is a very eloquent representation of feminine desire, and the description of the Beloved, with its separation into his beautiful parts, is nothing if not a blazon, traditionally in Europe a representation of masculine desire and reification of feminine beauty. See Nancy Vickers, “The ‘blazon of sweet beauty’s best’: Shakespeare’s *Lucrece*,” in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York, 1985), 95–116. Does this render ancient Hebrew society any less patriarchal? I rather doubt it, but it does perhaps further unsettle “literature” as a univocal reflection of other social practices.
 23. This is, in fact, one of the few examples of true typology in midrash.
 24. Alon Goshen-Gottstein pointed out to me the importance of this passage for understanding Rabbi Akiva’s midrash, although he does not accept my interpretation.
 25. *Sifre Deuteronomy* 6.5.
 26. Urbach, “Interpretation of Canticles,” 251.
 27. Palestinian Talmud, Berakot 9.5.
 28. Baer, “Israel, Christian Church, and Roman Empire,” 2–3.