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**Inner Biblical Ambiguity, Intertextuality
and the Dialectic of Midrash:
The Waters of Marah**

ONE OF THE MOST PUZZLING features about the way that midrash reads is its apparent willingness to tolerate directly opposed interpretations of the same passages.¹ This has often been taken in both traditional and scholarly literature as evidence for the unseriousness of midrash as *hermeneutic*, that is, for the location of its interest not in a reading of the biblical text but in an either extra-textual space of ideology or an inner-textual realm of semiotic play.² In this paper, I would like to set forth an alternative model for the reading of midrash in which its dialectic is understood as a representation of the inner ambiguity and dialogue of the biblical text itself. I shall be reading closely here a text in which the midrash, in its most typical discursive style, presents a narrative of the Torah in two directly opposed interpretations. I propose to interpret the "scandal" of the fact that the authoritative commentaries on the holiest text of Judaism are presented as a series of controversies in which each of two or more interpretations contradicts and undercuts the other(s). My claim is that the *Mekilta* is a metacommentary whose organization provides an implicit theory of reading and of the biblical text. I shall try to show through this reading that the *Mekilta* is aware of true ambiguities in the biblical narrative, and that while each of the rabbinic readers it presents works towards reduction of the ambiguity, the cumulative effect of the midrash as compiled is to focus on the ambiguity and the possibilities for making meaning out of it.³

Michael Riffaterre has provided precise analyses of ambiguity and intertextuality in literary production. His most powerful notion is that of the "ungrammaticality," by which he means the awkwardness of a textual

moment, at any linguistic or discourse level, which by its awkwardness points semiotically to another text which provides a key to its decoding.⁴ I am interested here in a particular kind of such ungrammaticality, the "dual sign," which by calling up two intertextual codes generates two possible decodings of the text.

... the dual sign works like a pun. We will see that the pun in poetic discourse grows out of textual "roots." It is first apprehended as a mere ungrammaticality, until the discovery is made that there is another text in which the word is grammatical; the moment the other text is identified, the dual sign becomes significant purely because of its shape, which alone alludes to that other code.⁵

The dual sign is thus a moment in the text which does not quite fit the rules of the code (linguistic or literary). This does not necessarily imply a literal violation of grammatical rules; it can often be merely the choice of a less usual form for the context. It, accordingly, suggests to the reader another context in which it is grammatical and that context becomes a key to the discovery of another meaning in the text being read. Since, however, the partial fit of the sign in the present context remains as well, the result is a double reading of the text. Riffaterre's "ungrammaticalities" are it seems closely analogous to the "bumps in the text" that midrash is famous for exploiting in generating its readings; especially close is the analogy to the "prooftexts" which midrash cites to justify its readings of the ungrammatical signs. In this paper, an analysis will be made of a particular passage from the *Mekilta d'Rabbi Ishmael*. Riffaterre's model will permit quite precise description of the production of the tannaitic readings of the biblical story, enabling us to account for the dialectic of these interpretations as well.

The biblical text is the story of the Bitter Waters of Marah (Exodus 15:22-26). The Israelites have just left the Red Sea after their miraculous deliverance there:

ויסע משה את ישראל מים סוף ויצאו אל מדבר שור וילכו שלשת ימים במדבר ולא מצאו מים: ויבאו מרתה ולא יכלו לשתות מים ממדה כי מרים הם על כן קרא שמו מרה: וילנו העם על משה לאמר מה נשתה: ויצעק אל ד' ויורדו ד' עץ וישלך אל המים וימתקו המים שם שם לו חק ומשפט ושם נסהו: ויאמר אם שמוע תשמע לקול ד' אלדיך ודושר בעיניו תעשה והאזנת למצותיו ושמרת כל חקיו כל המחלה אשר שמתו במצרים לא אשים עליך כי אני ד' רפאך:

[22] And Moses led Israel from the Red Sea, and they went out into the Desert of Shur, and they went three days in the desert, and they did not find water. [23] And they came to Marah, and they could not drink water from Marah, for it was bitter (*marim*); therefore its name was called Marah. [24] And the People murmured against Moses, saying, 'What shall we drink?' [25] And he cried out unto the Lord, and He taught (*wayyorehu*) him a tree, and he threw [it] into the water, and the water

became sweet; There He gave him a statute and an ordinance, and there He tested (*nissahu*) him. [26] And He said, if you shall indeed hear the voice of the Lord, your God, and do that which is straight in His eyes, and listen to His commandments, and keep His laws, all of the disease which I put on Egypt, I will not put on you, because I, the Lord, am your physician.

There are several ambiguities which can be located quite securely, I think, in this biblical text itself. The first three are on a lexical level. First, the adjective, *marim*, here translated, "bitter," is very similar to a verb which means "rebellious," as quite frequently used to describe the behavior of the Jews in the wilderness. Here this adjective can refer syntactically either to the (bitter) water or to the (rebellious) people. Another meaning, therefore, echoes ambiguously behind the surface reading. Second, the verb *wayyorehu* is surprising in this context. It generally refers in the Bible to verbal instruction and not the kind of pointing out that seems to be required by the context here, which would generally be expressed by *wayyarehu*, an entirely different verb. The similarity between the two verbs and the incongruity of the one actually used set up richly ambiguous possibilities. Third, the verb form *nissahu*, which in its written form unambiguously means, "He tested him," orally is homonymous with a verb form meaning, "He exalted him."⁶

On the narrative level the nature of Israel's act is extremely unclear here. What is the moral-religious state of the People at this juncture? On the one hand, it seems to be presented as unwarranted rebellion, but on the other, wouldn't such murmuring be expected in a situation where people, having been led into a desert, seem threatened by death of thirst? Next, there is a major gap between the story of the water and its recapitulation in the verse, "There He gave him a statute and an ordinance." Where has the giving of law been mentioned or hinted at? In the same vein, the reference to the "diseases of the Egyptians" and God as a healer seems to be a *non sequitur*. Attempting to join the story and its moral creates various possibilities for interpretation, thus again giving rise to ambiguity.

We find the axiological ambiguity of the biblical story sharply encoded as dialectic in the *Mekilta* in a series of interpretive exchanges between the tannaim, Rabbis Yehoshua and El'azar of Modi'in:

ויבאו מרתה: ר' יהושע אומר לשלשה מקומות באו ישראל באותה שעה שנאמר ויבאו מרתה וגו' ר' אלעזר המודעי אומר לא באו אלא למקום אחד בלבד.

And they came to Marah: R. Yehoshua says Israel came to three places at that time, for Scripture says, "And they came to Marah etc." R. El'azar of Modi'in says, they came only to one place.

The basis for R. Yehoshua's view is the three-fold repetition of Marah in the verse. R. Yehoshua reflects here the same literary sensibility as the

modern commentator, U. Cassuto, who remarks on our verse, "The name of Marah occurs three times in the passage, for emphasis, corresponding to the period of three days, which underlines the length of time during which they found no water."⁷ Both the ancient and the modern reader sense that the rhythmic, almost ponderous repetition of the word "Marah" in the verse heightens the growing desperation of the three day search for potable water; R. Yehoshua, to be sure, renders this sensibility in midrashic fashion indirectly by narrating it, while the modern interpreter remarks it directly. We can focus more precisely, however, on R. Yehoshua's interpretation. As shown in a previous text,⁸ this tanna consistently reads the Wilderness period as the one of God's honeymoon with the Jewish people. When the Torah's text seems to contradict this view, he interprets this contradiction away, occasionally with nothing short of hermeneutic violence. By reading the verse as saying that they were disappointed three times in their search for water, coming three times to Bitter Springs, R. Yehoshua certainly justifies, at least partially, their cry, "What shall we drink!?" Rabbi El'azar, on the other hand, is represented throughout as emphasizing the faithlessness and constant rebellion of the people in this period. He, therefore, insists that the complaining about the water here took place after the only relatively minor disappointment of not finding potable water in one place. We find the same bifurcation of their views represented even more explicitly in the next exchange:

וילונו העם על משה וגו' רבי יהושע אומר היה להם לישראל להמלך בגדול שבהם תחלה לאמר מה נשתה אלא עמדו ואמרו דברי תרעומת על משה רבי אלעזר המודעי אומר למדין היו ישראל היות אומרים דברי תרעומת על משה ולא על משה בלבד אמרו אלא כלפי הגבורה לכך נאמר לאמר מה נשתה

And the people complained against Moses, saying etc.: R. Yehoshua says, Israel should have taken counsel with the greatest among them first, saying 'What shall we drink?'; instead, they stood and said angry words against Moses. R. El'azar of Modi'in says, Israel was schooled in angry words against Moses, and not against Moses alone, but against the Almighty. That is why it says, "saying what shall we drink?"

The tannaim are addressing a very real exegetical problem here. Why does the text pejoratively call their natural question here a complaint or murmuring? What could be more natural than this question for a people being led three days in a desert only to find bitter waters? R. Yehoshua answers by saying that they should not have been so quick to complain but should have first taken advice of the greatest of their number (Is Moses himself meant?); instead, they immediately spoke angrily. This is the import of 'stood and,' i.e., immediately. R. El'azar, in contrast, says they were schooled, ready and waiting with angry words against Moses, and the question of water was not asked in good faith at all. Moreover,

we see from the apparently superfluous word 'saying' that they complained against Moses and even blasphemed. The exegetical problems addressed by the tannaim are dealt with until this day by commentators. R. Yehoshua's explanation deemphasizes the pejorativity of the verb "And they murmured," while R. El'azar's emphasizes it. They are each solving the exegetical problem in accord with their general conceptions of the moral state of Israel at that time.

ושם נסדו שם נשא לו גדולה דברי רבי יהושע שנאמר נשא אויל מרודך וגו' את ראש יהויכין ואומר נשא את ראש בני גרשון אמר לו רבי אלעזר המודעי והלא גדולה אינה תלויה אלא בשין וכאן לא כתיב אלא בסמך הא מה ת"ל ושם נסדו שם נסה המקום את ישראל.

There He proved him: [R. Yehoshua says] There He made him great, as it says, "Evil-Merodach raised the head of Yehoiachim" (2 Kings 25:27), and it also says, "raise the heads of the Gershonites" (Num. 4:22). R. El'azar of Modi'in said to him, But indeed "greatness" is dependent on "shin" and here it is written with "samekh." What is then the significance of, "And there he proved him"? There God tested Israel.

This passage requires exegesis for the English reader. R. Yehoshua takes, "He proved him," *nissahu*, as if from the root *nsa*, "to raise," and interprets, accordingly, that God at Mara magnified Israel, as in the cases of aggrandizement in the prooftexts. R. El'azar counters that *nsa*, "to raise," is always spelt biblically with the letter "shin," but here the letter is "samekh," so it must derive from *nsy*, "to try" or "test." We see that these two views are again in accord with the general interpretive tendency of these two tannaim in reading our text. R. Yehoshua is presented as searching for an interpretation which is favorable to Israel, while R. El'azar is emphasizing the negative aspects of these narratives. While a "test" is hardly negative, certainly R. Yehoshua's interpretation is strongly positive, and since it violates the normal linguistic meaning (R. El'azar's philological point is very well taken!), *his* is the view that requires explanation, particularly in the light of his general strong advocacy of "plain" reading. His strong tendency to maximize the positive possibilities of the text is sufficient cause for his interpretation.

But what lies behind this very tendency of R. Yehoshua? What could possibly motivate such radically diverging readings of the same text? Here we have a kind of crux for the interpretation of the midrash in general, a cross-roads in which the nature of the questions that we ask will determine the nature of the answers we receive. One type of interpretive move would be to attempt to isolate a theological or ideological issue outside the text which divides the tannaim and then to assume that each is advocating an interpretation in order to justify this theological position. At the broadest level of the study of midrash, the culmination of this approach is E. E. Urbach's classic study, *The Sages: Their Beliefs and*

Opinions; there Urbach proposes that R. Yehoshua's motivation here is opposition to the principle of the "merit of the fathers (*zekhut avot*, the principle that one receives undeserved benefits from God, owing to the meritorious behavior of one's ancestors)," while R. El'azar Hammada'i is firmly committed to this idea.⁹ The weakness of this traditional research paradigm seems to me to be that it does not account for the role of interpretation of Torah in the *formation* of ideological and theological positions. As in literary research which considers the text to be a reflection of history, the literature itself is not perceived as one of the practices that *creates* that very history. The crux of my reading is the claim that this controversy corresponds to an ambiguity which can be located in the biblical text itself. As mentioned above, our text seems to show a contradiction between its overt plot and the intertextual or generic connections called up by the word, "murmured." I would like to suggest, therefore, that the difference of the tannaitic readings, far from being an extra-textual issue situated, as it were, in tannaitic times, is a profound response to and doubling of a tension within the very biblical text itself.¹⁰ Brevard Childs, along with many other modern commentators, has noted this tension. Childs begins by establishing that the tension is not only in one narrative but in the canon as a whole:

Perhaps the most basic traditio-historical problem of the wilderness tradition has to do with the role of the murmuring motif, which, although it is completely missing from some of the stories (Exod. 17.8 ff.; 18.1 ff.), increasingly becomes the rubric under which these stories were interpreted (Deut. 9.22 ff.; Ps. 78). The problem arises from the apparent divergence within the Old Testament in the understanding of the wilderness period. . . . On the one hand, both within the Pentateuch and elsewhere, the wilderness period was condemned as a proof of Israel's early disobedience and repeated rebellion against God. On the other hand, there are strands within the Pentateuch (Exod. 16) and explicit references in the prophets (Hosea 2.16, EVV 14; Jer. 2.2) which give an apparently positive interpretation of the period.¹¹ Indeed, it is characterized as a 'honeymoon' before the corruption of idolatry set in, caused by contamination with the Canaanites.¹²

The double-voicedness of the Exodus narrative doubly inscribes itself in two different genres. On the one hand, there is a series of narratives in the Torah which tells a story of the people's need in the desert, their (or Moses's) prayer and God's fulfilling of the need. These narratives are ideologically consistent with the positive view of the Israelites in the desert. On the other hand, there is another collection of narratives which tells of a story of unwarranted complaint on the part of the people and God's answering the complaint by ironically fulfilling the false need together with a terrible punishment. These narratives fit in with the negative tradition of the people's state in the desert. Our story is marked by tension. God's immediate response to Moses's prayer in our story

seems to place the text within the intertextual code of the first, that is, the praise genre. However, as Childs has insightfully remarked, the verb "murmured" in the narrative creates a contradictory or ambiguous moment within the narrative by referring intertextually to the blame series. Each of the tannaim may be said, therefore, "to smooth 'the troubled passage between text and reader' by soothing the contradictions within the text."¹³ The midrash, as an edited text, does not soothe these contradictions. Quite the opposite, by presenting two diametrically opposed views, it manifests a powerful awareness of the ambiguity which characterizes the text, of its intrinsic dialogism.¹⁴

Each of the tannaim hears only one of the "voices in the text." The *Mekilta*, on the other hand, hears both voices. We do not have only two antithetical views of what the Torah means, as if in two separate books. What we have is one text, *Mekilta Wayyassa*, in which both of these views are articulated together. The heterogeneity of the midrash is thus a response to the heterogeneity of the Torah. Rabbis Yehoshua and El'azar can be read as hypostases, as personifications of the voices that *we* hear within the Torah itself.¹⁵ It is not necessary to reduce their controversies to polemics and ideological differences grounded in their historical circumstance—even in this most explicitly value-laden of substantive hermeneutic controversies—when we see that these very controversies, arise from within the Text as encoded by its very Author, Himself (that is, the implied author of a given, historical reading practice)¹⁶ any more (or even less) than we reduce the different readings of a great work of secular literature¹⁷ to the political differences of its readers.¹⁸ The interplay between the hermeneutic practice and other cultural/social/political ideologies and practices is complex and dynamic, with each area of practice affecting the others and being affected by them.

We can find the same problematic in the series of comments in the *Mekilta* which has to do with the nature of the "water" and the "tree" which the Torah tells us about and with the cause of the failure to find water:

וילכו שלשת ימים במדבר ולא מצאו מים: רבי יהושע אומר כשמועו.

And they went three days in the desert and found no water: R. Yehoshua says: according to its sound.

R. Yehoshua insists on a "literal" reading of the verse. The text says they did not find water, and that is what it means. This sort of reading is characteristic of R. Yehoshua, as presented in the *Mekilta*.¹⁹ However, the next reading takes the water metaphorically as a symbol for the words of Torah:

דורשי רשומות אמרו ולא מצאו מים: דברי תורה שנמשלו למים ומנן לדברי תורה שהן משולים במים שנאמר הוי כל צמא לכו למים לפי שפרשו מדברי תורה שלשת ימים לכן מדרו לפיכך התקינו הזקנים והגביאים שיחיו קורן בתורה בשבת בשני

ובחמישי הא כיצד קורין בשבת ומפסיקין לאחר שבת וקורין בשני ומפסיקין בשלישי וברביעי וקורין בחמישי ומפסיקין בערב שבת.

The interpreters of *reshumot*²⁰ said, "They did not find water": The words of Torah which are symbolized by "water." And from whence [do we learn] that the words of Torah are symbolized by "water," as it is said, "Ho, anyone who is thirsty, go to water" (Isa.55:1). Because they separated themselves from the words of Torah for three days; that is why they rebelled. Therefore, the Elders and Prophets decreed that they must read the Torah on the Sabbath, Monday and Thursday. How so? They read on the Sabbath and skip the day after; they read on Monday and skip Tuesday and Wednesday. They read on Thursday and skip Friday.

In the discussion below, I shall attempt to account for the reading of the *dorshe reshumot* as a response to the several ambiguities of the Torah's text.

The *Mekilta* next focuses its reading on the nature of the tree. By identifying the tree, it seems, a key to the resolution of the meaning of the story can be found:

ויורה ד' עץ: רבי יהושע אומר זה עץ של ערבה רבי אלעזר המודעי אומר זה עץ של זית שאין לך מר יותר מזית רבי יהושע בן קרחה אומר זה עץ של הרדופני רבי שמעון בן יוחאי אומר דבר מן התורה הראהו שנאמר ויורהו ד' עץ ויראהו אין כתיב כאן אלא ויורהו כענין שנאמר ויורני ויאמר לי וגו' רבי נתן אומר זה עץ של קתרוס ויש אומרים עיקר תאנה ועיקר רמון דורשי רשומות אמרו הראהו דברי תורה שנמשלו כעץ שנאמר עץ חיים היא למחויקים בה.

And the Lord taught him a tree: R. Yehoshua says it was a willow. R. El'azar of Modi'in says it was an olive, for there is none more bitter than the olive. R. Yehoshua the Bald says it was oleander. R. Shim'on ben Yohai says, He taught him a word from the Torah, for it says, "And He taught him [yorehu]"; "And He showed him [yar'ehu] is not [written] here but "He taught him," as it is said "And He taught me and said to me" (Prov. 4:4). R. Natan says it was a cedar and some say, the root of a fig and the root of a pomegranate. The *dorshe reshumot* said, "He showed him words of Torah, which are symbolized by a tree, for it says, 'It is a Tree of Life to those who grasp it'" (Prov. 3:18).

Among these several identifications of the tree, we can discern two competing schools of interpretation of our text. One school identifies the tree as an actual tree, while the other reads it as a metaphor for Torah. Let us focus first on the "literal" reading. R. Yehoshua, in accordance with his general practice, as presented in the *Mekilta*, argues for the simplest possible interpretation of the verse, reading the tree as the willow which would normally be found growing near the water in an oasis. The other tannaim, however, identify the tree more specially. While it is not certain that this is true of all of the readings, it is certainly the case that R. El'azar (explicitly), R. Yehoshua the Bald, and very likely, the "some say" are

concerned to explicate the tree as one which is bitter to the taste. The oleander, in any case, is not only bitter but deadly poison.

The motivation for this interpretation of the tree, as well as its justification, can be found in the continuation of the *Mekilta's* discourse:

רבן שמעון בן גמליאל אומר בא וראה כמה מפורשין דרכיו של מקום מדרכי בשר ודם בשר ודם במתוק מרפא את המר אבל מי שאמר והיה העולם אינו כן אלא במר הוא מרפא את המר הא כיצד נותן דבר המחבל לתוך דבר שנתחבל כדי לעשות בו נס כיוצא בו אתה אומר ויאמר ישעיהו ישאו דבלת תאנים וגו' והלא בשר חי כשאתה נותן עליו דבלת תאנים מיד הוא נסרח הא כיצד נותן דבר המחבל לתוך דבר שנתחבל כדי לעשות בו נס. כיוצא בו אתה אומר ויצא אל מוצא המים וישלך שם מלח ויאמר כה אמר ד' רפאתי למים האלה והרי המים היפים כיון שאתה נותן בהן מלח מיד הם נסרחין הא כיצד נותן דבר המחבל לתוך דבר שנתחבל כדי לעשות בו נס.

Rabban Shim'on ben Gamliel says: Come and see how different are the ways of the Place from the ways of flesh and blood. Flesh and blood uses sweet to cure the bitter. Not so He Who Spoke and the World Was. He uses bitter to cure the bitter. How so? He puts something which spoils into something spoilt, in order to perform therewith a miracle.

Similarly you will say, "And Isaiah said, let them take a cake of figs and spread it on the boils" (Isa. 38:21). But is it not so that when you place a cake of figs on raw flesh, it spoils immediately? How so then? He puts something which spoils into something spoilt, to perform therewith a miracle.

Similarly, "And he went out to the water-source and threw in salt, and said, Thus saith" (2 Kings 2:21), but is it not so that if you put salt into sweet water, it goes bad immediately? How so then? He puts something which spoils into something spoilt, in order to perform therewith a miracle.

R. Shim'on cites two cases motivating his interpretation. Whatever we make of the story of Hezekiah and the cake of figs, in the case of Elisha and the waters of Jericho the explicit meaning of the biblical text is that Elisha is to "cure" the salty waters with salt. R. Shim'on has adopted a classic formula of paradigmatic midrash. In this form, a series of incidents or texts are cited under the rubric "similarly" or a variant thereof with a view to exposing the similar features of each case, thus establishing, as it were, a theological truth, in this case, God's paradoxical, supernatural behavior emphasizing His ability to perform miracles. In the case from Isaiah, we find Hezekiah sick with boils. The prophet tells him to place figs on his eruptions, and he will get well. The rest is clear. In the case from Kings, the verse continues explicitly, "And he threw therein salt saying, 'Thus saith the Lord: I have healed these waters.'" I rather suspect that the third case is the keystone of the whole construction. In other words, we learn to interpret the case of the figs and our case of Marah from the case where the paradoxical "cure" is explicit. Moreover, as Cassuto acutely points out, there are a series of verbal echoes in the Elisha episode

which suggest that it is intended as an imitation (or interpretation, from the hermeneutic perspective) precisely of the Marah incident, "The passage dealing with the healing of the water by Elisha draws upon our narrative (see 2 Kings 2:19–22); there, too, we find *and he threw*, as well as the verb *heal*."²¹ If Cassuto is correct, and it seems that he is, R. Shim'on's exegesis, as well as that of the other tannaim who argued for a bitter tree, was already current at the time of Elisha. We have here an elegant demonstration of how what appears to be homily is really exegesis of Scripture by Scripture. Even more to the point, this reading via the story in Kings solves the several interpretive problems that we have exposed in the Marah narrative. The "law and ordinance" are taken on this view to be the law of God that He cures the bitter with the bitter. I suggest also that R. Shim'on ben Gamliel's reading solves as well the puzzle of the unusual form *wayyorehu*. It is attractive to interpret the lexical ungrammaticality of *wayyorehu* "and He taught" as precisely a reference to the teaching, "Come and see how different are the ways of God from the ways of man." This interpretation of R. Shim'on's midrash has already been offered by a very early interpreter of our passage, the author of the somewhat later midrash, *Tanhuma*, "You find that flesh and blood smites with a knife and cures with a poultice, but the Holy One blessed be He is not so, rather that which He smites with, with that He cures. And so you find that when they came to Marah they could not drink water from Marah, and Moses believed that the Holy One blessed be He would tell him to throw there honey or figs and the water would become sweet. But see what is written there, 'And he cried out unto the Lord, and the Lord taught him a tree.' It does not say, He showed him, but He taught him, He taught him His ways."²² R. Shim'on's reading is thus an elegant solution to the problems of coherence within the Marah narrative. All of the ungrammaticalities are accounted for. The form *wayyorehu* is explained precisely by the paradox of God's act; this is what God teaches here: His ways which are different from those of man. Moreover, this provides a solution to the question of the "law"; it is God's unnatural law to which reference is made.²³ Finally, the strange citing of God as Healer is explained by the echo in the Kings passage where the waters are "healed."

R. Shim'on's interpretation of the story, together with that of the other tannaim who insist on the bitterness of the actual tree, thus chooses and activates the meaning "bitter" for *marim*. The contextual choice made by these readers is to interpret the story in the light of its nearly explicit intertext in Kings. This interpretation resolves several other ambiguities in the text as well, by providing a narrative coherence which the bare biblical narrative lacks. (This coherence is so clearly lacking that modern biblical scholars of the "higher critical school" split the text in the caesura of verse 25 into two incompatible documents.)²⁴

The other interpreters, that is, R. Shim'on ben Yohai and the *dorshe reshmot* interpret the tree metaphorically as the "tree of life," the Torah. Let us see how their reading works on the ambiguity of the text. As we have read above, the Torah line of interpretation begins by taking the "water" of the Torah's narrative not as literal physical water but as a symbol for Torah. This interpretation certainly looks on the face of it like an allegory, that is, an interpretation founded on the assumption that the text is about some "idea" (in the Platonic sense) external to the text itself. The outside idea would be, in this case, the idea of Torah. It seems to me, however, that closer reading will show that this is not the only, nor indeed the most attractive, analysis of what is happening in this text. A crucial clue is that the several statements which make up the metaphorical reading of the narrative all cite verses from a single passage of Proverbs as their "prooftexts." That is, the *dorshe reshmot* cite the explicit metaphor about Torah: "It is a tree of life to those who grasp it" (Prov. 3:18); and Rabbi Shim'on ben Yohai cites: "And He taught me and said to me" (Prov. 4:4). Moreover, in a further interpretation of the "healing" as words of Torah, Rabbi El'azar of Modi'in cites, "They [words of Torah] are life for those who find them, and to all of his flesh a curative. It [the Torah] will be a cure for your flesh" (Prov. 4:21 and 3:8). The claim that I am making is that these several citations of verses from the same passage of the Proverbs are not accidental and amount, in effect, to a tradition that the difficulties and ungrammaticalities of the Marah account are to be resolved by reading them in the light of the figurative usages of Solomon's texts, which as I have argued elsewhere,²⁵ served for the rabbis as hermeneutic keys to the Torah.

This semiotic process can be described quite precisely. It is a perfect example of the kind of ungrammaticality which Riffaterre calls the "dual sign":

The dual sign is thus the lexical equivalent (and because of its ungrammaticality, the hyperbolic equivalent) of two simultaneous, synchronized expansions generated parallel to each other, but separately. . . . Separated in the text, they are again united in the portmanteau word, whose hybrid morphology arouses the reader's curiosity so as to better guide him to the significance.²⁶

This description of two expansions which grow out of the hybridity of a single sign in the biblical text is an almost perfect description of the generation of the readings in our midrash. The entire interpretation is generated by the lexical ambiguity of *marim* and *wayyorehu*. Syntactically, the first reading of verse 24 takes this adjective as referring to the water. However, it is also quite plausible to read it as referring back one more clause to the "they" of the beginning of the sentence. Since "water" is a plural noun in Hebrew, the adjective agrees either with "they" or with "water." This secondary reading sets up whole set of intertextual reso-

nances. First of all, this adjective is almost identical in sound to one commonly used to describe the rebelliousness of Israel in the Wilderness. Thus we read, "And they rebelled against me and did not want to hear" (Ezekiel 20:8), and, "And they rebelled at the Sea, at the Red Sea" (Ps. 107:7), and, "How much have they rebelled against Him in the Desert" (Ps. 78:40). In all of these verses, forms of the verb "mry," paronomastically related to *marim*, are used. Even more pointedly, in a parallel narrative of a rebellion concerning lack of water, Moses addresses the people in the following language, "Hear O you rebels (*hamorim*)" (Numbers 20:10), using a word almost identical in sound to our *marim*. Moreover, in several other cases of etiologies for names of places in the Desert, it is the historical event and not the natural condition that provides the naming; specifically, the name carries with it a memory of the rebellion of the people at that place. Thus, for instance, in the very similar story of a rebellion concerning water in Exodus 17:1-7, the place is renamed "Strife and Contention," because of the rebellious behavior of Israel. Accordingly, all of these subtexts provide strong motivation for reading the verse as: "They could not drink water from Marah, because they were rebellious, and that is why it is called Marah."

As I have indicated above, the verb *wayyorehu* also has two meanings, "to show" and "to teach," but the latter meaning is by far the more common one in the Hebrew lexicon. It is, moreover, the culturally dominant one, by virtue of its being the root of Torah. On the other hand, it is the unusual sense of the verb, namely, "to show," which is initially mobilized by the narrative context in the Marah story. We have, therefore, a kind of syllepsis in the Riffaterrian sense of a special kind of pun, which calls up an intertext by the very awkwardness of its form. Following Riffaterre's description, we can see that the use of *wayyorehu* here is so unusual in fact as to form a dual sign. The dual sign is dual precisely because, by way of referring to two intertexts, it generates two meanings for the text being read. What happens in our text conforms precisely to Riffaterre's description. We begin to read the text by mobilizing the sense of the verb which the context calls for, that is as a story of physical thirst in the desert, but the power of the other sense intrudes. The unusual usage of the verb *wayyorehu* comes to be read as an intertextual signpost to the passage in Proverbs, which then provides the rest of the solution to the mystery of Marah by supplying us with the metaphor of "tree" for Torah as well as the explicit statement that the words of Torah are "healing," that is, precisely the further difficult elements of the Marah narrative. These gaps and the success of the intertextual reading in filling them become a convincing authorization for taking the whole story in accord with the double reading of the verb *wayyorehu* itself. In effect we have two stories—one derived from the meaning "to show" and the other from "to teach." The second story is then to be read in the following fashion: They

went three days in the desert and they did not find water (i.e., Torah, as in the Isaiah verse), and they came to Marah, but they could not drink water (study Torah) in Marah, because they were rebellious. Moses prayed and God taught him a word of Torah, that is a "tree of life," and the bitter waters (rebellious, Torah-less people) became sweet. There indeed, He gave them law and ordinance, and there He tested them, saying, "If you keep the Torah which I have, this day, given you, then, I will not place upon you any more plagues like the plagues of Egypt, for the words of Torah that I give you are healing for you and prevent you from being rebellious and requiring such chastisement." All of the ungrammaticalities and infelicities of the Torah narrative are thus elegantly resolved when it is read as a series of metaphors, decoded through their intertextuality. Again, it seems to me, that while there is a choice for the reader of *what* context to animate in order to provide some resolution of the ambiguities of the text, the requirement that *some* such activity must be undertaken is given by the text itself. The ambiguity is, therefore, in the discourse. Moreover, the particular choices of contextualization involved, while they are not necessary ones (quite obviously, since there are two of them), are not arbitrary either; rather they seem to be actualizations of genuine interpretive possibilities that the Canon offers.

My reading of the text in the *Mekilta* is founded on a theory of ambiguity which locates it in the text (or in the intertextual system) in order to argue that the dialectic of midrash is a response to a genuine textual stimulus. This interpretation is challenged, however, by theories of ambiguity that claim it to be also only an effect of reading. In a recent book, exemplary for its thoughtful and powerful synthesis of scholarship and theory, Lee Patterson denies that there is any such thing as textual ambiguity per se:

Ambiguity is usually recognized as a characteristic possessed by the text, an uncertainty of meaning in fact present in discourse itself. But like other kinds of verbal meaning, whether fixed or indeterminate, ambiguity is also a function of reading: a text is ambiguous only to someone. As recent medieval criticism witnesses, there are many readers to whom no poem is ambiguous. Nor are these readers wrong in ascribing the meanings they do to the poems they interpret: indeed, correctness is clearly a misleading criterion to apply to criticism. Disambiguating is always, and properly, a process of deciding not what a text means but what we want it to mean. We do this, basically, by locating the text in an interpretive context, such as an authorial intention or a genre (e.g., Christian instruction, courtly lyric), that organizes meanings into primary and secondary. Put simply, by privileging one context at the expense of others we decide how the text's ironies should be read, whence they derive their authority, and against whom they are directed.²⁷

According to Patterson everything in the text, including its very ambiguity, is a function of hermeneutic preemption.

Not surprisingly, Patterson's model reader is Augustine. Remarking that, "One of the great achievements of Augustinian hermeneutics is to make the preemptive nature of interpretation explicit"²⁸, he cites very approvingly that Saint's claim that

Whoever, therefore, thinks that he understands the divine Scriptures or any part of them so that it does not build the double love of God and of our neighbor does not understand it at all. Whoever finds a lesson there useful to the building of charity, even though he has not said what the author may be shown to have intended in that place, has not been deceived, nor is he lying in any way.²⁹

Taking Augustine's rule of charity as merely making explicit the nature of all interpretation seems to me too extreme. Patterson seems to postulate that there are only two possibilities for theorizing ambiguity and disambiguation: either they are located entirely in the text or entirely in the reader. Are these two extremes really the only possibilities? Midrash is often portrayed as precisely the kind of radically preemptive reading that Augustine calls for and Patterson theorizes as the only available option for readers; that is an interpretation the results of which are given wholly in advance and for which any distortion of the text is permitted to achieve those results. Indeed, both of the readings of the Marah episode in our *Mekilta* passage have been so characterized. Thus, for R. Shim'on ben Gamliel's reading a *Realpolitik* appropriation has been suggested by Ira Chernus:

R. Simeon, too, obviously thought that the tree Moses threw in the water was bitter, but he went on to generalize the principle implicit in this detail and show its applicability to other biblical incidents. Here again we have a paradoxical pattern of divine action in history; did R. Simeon intend it to be a paradigm by which contemporary events could be understood as well? As the highest ranking political leader of his community he surely must have been deeply concerned with the political situation of his day, and it seems fair to hypothesize that this concern would be a major factor in his midrashic activity. Such an hypothesis sheds interesting light on this particular midrash, for it accords well with R. Simeon's political position and political concerns. Certainly R. Simeon found the rule of Rome a bitter reality; he is reported to have said of the Jews' sufferings under Rome: "If we had to write [them] we would never finish." Nevertheless he was against any further attempts at rebellion and urged his people to acquiesce in Roman rule. His motives were apparently compounded of political prudence, a concern to maintain his own position of leadership, and a desire to avoid further war. Thus he opposed any attempt to replace the bitter Roman rule with something "sweet"—either a conquering Persian government or a renewed independent Jewish government in Palestine. Rather he hoped to work through the existing government to improve the lot of the Jewish community; he hoped to use something bitter to cure the bitter situation.

It seems plausible that R. Simeon stated the general principle implicit in the Marah episode to prove that he, in pursuing this political course, was acting according to the ways of God rather than man.³⁰

Chernus assumes that the interpretation of the tree as bitter precedes logically and chronologically the association of our passage with the other ones and particularly with the curing of the waters by Elisha. He accordingly suggests that R. Shim'on's reading of the passage is externally motivated by his political concerns. However, I have tried to show through my reading that our narrative is one that *requires* strong interpretation if it is to be readable at all, and that it is precisely the passage from Kings which provides one possible and indeed very plausible line of interpretation for it, for the story of Elisha and the water seems to have been generated by reading our story. If my suggestion is at all convincing, then the ambiguities of our text and their resolution via the intertexts provide sufficient motivation for reading the tree paradoxically as a real and bitter tree. This does not argue, of course, that there is no correlation between R. Shim'on's political concerns and his reading of the Torah here. Quite the opposite. The theorization of an intertextual reading practice for midrash does not imply that the study of Torah was not imbricated in the social-political practices of the Rabbis. Thus, it is not implausible to assume that there is some connection between R. Shim'on's reading of the Torah, his theory of God's ways and his political beliefs. But the relation between the midrashic practice and the other social, historical practices implied by texts about R. Shim'on ben Gamliel would be considerably more complicated than the simple one of genealogy that Chernus hypothesizes. More precisely, it seems worth considering whether the hypothesized political views held by R. Shim'on might not have been *partly generated* by his midrash rather than his midrash merely reflecting those views or being used as rhetorical support for them. Along the same lines, I have recently argued that a text in the *Mekilta* which is generally read as having been produced by R. Akiva's martyrdom may actually have been a major factor in *producing* that martyrdom.³¹

A similar case can be made for the other interpretation in which the "water" and the "tree" are read as metaphors for the Torah. This is generally read as the parade example of allegoresis in midrash,³² of a reading wholly controlled and motivated by an external ideological construction, namely the typically rabbinic ideology of the moral and spiritual efficacy of the study of Torah and the destructive effects of dereliction therefrom. And, indeed, this reading of the Marah story is located in that cultural realm. The question is again one of explanatory models for that location. If previous scholars have read the midrash as radically preemptive of a simple and literal meaning in order to make its ideological point, I would propose, in the light of my reading, that the Torah authorizes such a spiritual reading of itself, via the gaps, ambigu-

ities and ungrammaticalities of its narrative discourse.³³ Once again, the process I am claiming is an exact fit with that described by Riffaterre. "Bumps in the text"—ungrammaticalities—are naturalized when an intertextual context is chosen. The choosing of this context is, indeed, as Patterson claims, a choice of what we want the text to mean, but I would claim that this choice is limited by what the intertext allows the text to mean.

Close reading of the *Mekilta's* interpretation of the story of the Waters of Marah has led me to the claim that the ambiguities and gaps of that narrative are to be located in the biblical text and not as a pure function of reading. Moreover, while the strategies employed to foreclose and reduce the ambiguities of the story are clearly an effect of reading, these are also not merely an arbitrary choice on the part of the rabbis of what they want the text to mean. These processes of foreclosure of ambiguity are also authorized by choice of different controlling contexts or intertextual allusions given within the textual system for resolving the local narrative and its axiological meanings. While the choice of context involves a complex interaction with ideology, that is, it may function as a moment in ideological production, the possibilities themselves for such choice are not merely arbitrary nor imposed from outside. They arise, once more, from ideological tensions which the Torah (and the Hebrew Bible as a whole) make manifest. We have seen this in a particularly intense fashion within this passage from the *Mekilta*, where I find two independent examples of inner-biblical ambiguity being represented as dialectic in the midrash—the first in the controversies of R. Yehoshua and R. El'azar and the second in the dispute over the genre of the tree. Nor do I think that this example is unique. Based on my experience with the *Mekilta*, I am prepared to claim that most of the dialectics of opposed interpretations can be accounted for by ambiguities within the biblical text.

Patterson seems then to be confuted by this text in his claim that ambiguity is located only in the reader's work. This ambiguity can, it appears, be located in the text. However, it could be argued as well that my analysis confirms Patterson's theoretical point, since each of the readings in the *Mekilta* denies ambiguity. Put in other words, I believe that Patterson is arguing that since "for some readers no text is ambiguous," does this not put into question the very idea of a *textual* ambiguity as such, placing my (perhaps by now, our) perception of ambiguity on precisely the same epistemological level as those readings which foreclose that ambiguity? I think that I can counter that argument in two ways. First of all, the very energy which the tannaim must expend in order to read the text, the penetration and boldness of the hermeneutic moves required to rationalize the ambiguity, serve not to hide or deny that ambiguity but rather to reveal it dialectically. Hence Geoffrey Hartman has argued that, "The heterogeneity of poem or original text by no means disappears in

the older hermeneutics, but it appears only by way of the daring interpretation that is startling and even liberating in its very drive for harmony."³⁴ Each of the tannaitic interpretations, in order to drive toward a harmonious understanding of the nature of Israel in this time is forced to distort the local meanings of certain passages. The strength of these harmonistic readings is placed into relief by contrast to the weak harmonistic way in which later midrash deals with these contradictions. The later tradition almost invariably assigns the positive indices within the Torah to the "true Israel," and the negative ones to the "mixed multitude." The refusal of the *Mekilta* to adopt this move is thus a strong affirmation of the complexity and polyphony of the Torah.³⁵ Thus, R. Yehoshua here, usually presented in the *Mekilta* as a proponent of "plain" reading, presents several very daring interpretations in his desire to understand the story in the light of the "honeymoon" tradition of Israel and God at this period, while R. El'azar works to emphasize the evil of their ways, e.g., by turning their murmuring against Moses into a full scale blasphemy against God. Each of these interpretations, by the very distortion necessary for its maintenance, thus forces us to recognize the ambiguity encoded in the narrative. Sternberg has remarked on the function of such ambiguities in the Bible:

The coexistence of two (or more) mutually exclusive hypotheses—concerning action, motive, character—always enables the author to kill two birds with one stone, using the same materials for different ends. Above all, it enables him to base sequence and effect on the tensions between the two possibilities. Each reading may serve to balance and ironize the other. The emergence of such a hypothesis in a text that equally validates its contrary renders each quite unlike a similar hypothesis appearing unchallenged.³⁶

If this is true of the literary text itself, then it is true, as well, of the midrashic text, which doubles the ambiguity of the Torah's narrative with its own dialectic. Thus, each of the tannaitic interpretations in the *Mekilta* can be said to balance and ironize the other, and it is certainly the case that the presentation of such an interpretation in a commentary that equally validates its contrary renders each quite unlike a similar interpretation appearing unchallenged. The effect of the midrashic text as a whole is to present a view of textuality which occupies neither the extreme of assuming a univocal "correct" reading of the text, nor the extreme of "Whoever finds a lesson there useful to the building of charity, even though he has not said what the author may be shown to have intended in that place, has not been deceived, nor is he lying in any way." Rather, the midrash seems to present the view of an ancient reader who perceives ambiguity encoded in the text itself with various dialectical possibilities for reducing that ambiguity, each contributing to but not exhausting its meaning(s). Our midrashic text here is, in effect, occupying the position of Sternberg the critic himself, observing and commenting on the too single-minded

resolutions of the ambiguity that the text provides. It is in that sense that it is "metacommentary." Moreover, the *Mekilta* does not speak discursively and abstractly in metalanguage about the ambiguity of the Torah. It represents the tension and inner dialogue of the biblical narrative by tension and inner dialogue of its own, providing us with an elegant precursor of Harold Bloom's famous remark that "All interpretation depends upon the antithetical relation between meanings, and not on the supposed relation between a text and its meaning."³⁷

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NOTES

1. See David Stern, "Midrash and Indeterminacy," *Critical Inquiry* 15 (1988): 132-62.
2. For the first position see texts cited below, n. 9; for the second, Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses* (Albany, 1982).
3. My claims are limited in scope to the texts that I am actually analyzing here and some others (from the *Mekilta* as well) which I have treated in other contexts. However, I suspect that these structures of reading are more common in midrash than is generally supposed. Since we know that answers are very often generated by questions, I am proposing on the basis of the readings offered here that we ask more often the question: What tension in the biblical text produced the midrashic reading(s)? and, in particular: What ambiguities within the Bible's narrative have led to the dialectic of readings which the midrash offers? Any statements below to the effect that midrash does this or that should be understood then as positive claims vis-à-vis the passage analyzed, not programmatic ones for midrash in general.
4. This notion takes us one step beyond "gaps" as the intertextuality of the production of the narrative text and into the possibilities of reading that text and its intertextuality. See Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington, 1985), pp. 186-222, for the classic discussion of gaps in the context of biblical poetics and hermeneutics.
5. Michael Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry* (London, 1978), p. 82. See also John Hollander, *The Figure of Echo* (Berkeley, 1981), p. 92.
6. This verb is also ambiguous syntactically; it can mean, as well, that Israel tried God, a reading which is animated in other hermeneutic texts, but not in our *Mekilta*.
7. U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, trans. I. Abrahams, (Jerusalem, 1967), p. 183.
8. Daniel Boyarin, "Voices in the Text," *Revue Biblique* (October, 1986): 581-98.
9. E. E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem, 1975), p. 497. See also, J. Elbaum, "R. Eleazar Hamoda'i and R. Joshua on the Amalek Pericope," (Hebrew), *Studies in Aggadah and Jewish Folklore* (= *Folklore Research Centre Studies* 7 (Jerusalem, 1983): 99-116. Compare also Chernus's interpretive methods discussed below, pp. 42-43.
10. This is not to deny, of course, that some psychological or other factors have led the two tannaim (if, indeed, it is their real historical views represented here, and not a construct of the midrash itself) to adopt their respective positions. However, if each position can be shown to be well founded in the biblical text, these personal tendencies become no more relevant or determinable, in my opinion, than whatever personal tendencies lead one physicist to see light as particles and another as waves.

11. Cf. also, Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford, 1985), p. 304.
12. Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (Philadelphia, 1974), p. 256.
13. Tony Bennet, *Formalism and Marxism* (London, 1979), p. 146.
14. That is, the very dialogism, which in another theoretical paradigm might be harmonized by the "Documentary Hypothesis."
15. This is not to deny, of course, their historicity, nor even the possibility (probability) that the historical tannaim actually held the views ascribed to them, but only to interpret the textualization of these views by the author of the *Mekilta*.
16. This includes, of course, the practice of midrash. I am not prepared to argue at this point whether the *text* encodes such an author or whether this (and maybe any implied author) is located in the reader and the reading. Sternberg, at any rate, claims that the Bible does encode such an implied author (*Poetics*, p. 32). This is a semiotic claim, not a theological one. Even if we assume that the Bible encodes a Divine Author, we are still free to read this encoding as a fiction and, thereby, make no dogmatic claims whatsoever by doing so. For further discussion of this point and explicit consideration of the relation of Source Criticism to midrash as reading strategies, see chapter 3 of my forthcoming book, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington, 1990).
17. For examples of sharply bifurcated interpretive traditions of such works see Barbara Johnson's by now classic reading of the hermeneutic tradition on *Billy Budd*, in her *The Critical Difference* (Baltimore, 1980), pp. 79-110 and Meir Sternberg's discussion of *The Turn of the Screw*, pp. 222 ff. Both of these critics show that the bifurcation of the interpretive tradition is a function of difference and dialectic within the text itself. This is not to deny the ideological dimension of all reading, of course, but merely to oppose a reduction of interpretation to the subjective ideologies of readers. For a review of traditional Jewish commentary on another of the murmuring stories, see Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Exodus* (Jerusalem, nd) [Hebrew], pp. 200-12. Again the commentators split between those who explain that the request was justified and necessarily reduce the pejorative connotations of the text and those who understand that there was no real need, but an unjustified rebellion, and explain away the thirst as lack of faith.
18. Nonetheless, there is an aspect of these readings that seemingly cannot be suppressed or accounted for from within the text which is being read and its "warring forces of signification." I am referring, of course, to R. El'azar's insistent connection of every verse to the "merit of the Ancestors." Admittedly, he is reading the whole story as a case of God's relenting and not punishing an undeserving and ingrate People, and the merit of the Ancestors provides as it were an explanation of His motivations, but surely there were other choices of motivation available to R. El'azar (e.g., the intercession of Moses). Why did he choose, therefore, always to emphasize this one motivation, if not to make some point beyond exegesis? This suggests once again that Rabbi El'azar indeed had some ulterior motivation, some ideological ax to grind in his insistence on the merit of the ancestors here. It may be so, and we may never be able to prove it one way or the other, but this does not seem to me, in any way, to undermine my insistence that the primary motivation for the dialogue of these readings arises in the dialogue within the text itself. Compare Urbach, *The Sages*, pp. 497 ff.
19. As shown in my "Analogy vs. Anomaly in Midrashic Hermeneutic: Tractates Wayyassa and Amaleq of the *Mekilta*," *JAOS* 106 (1986): 659-67.
20. Who are the *Dorshe Reshumot*? The question is much debated. In a Hebrew paper ["Dorshe Reshumot have Said," *Moshe Held Memorial Volume*, Beersheva, Israel, 1988, pp. 23-38], I have dealt with this question. To summarize my results there: There is no evidence from rabbinic Hebrew for the term *rashum* meaning allegory, and therefore, no warrant for regarding the *dorshe reshumot* as allegorists, as Lauterbach had claimed. Moreover, this conclusion is consistent with the fact that most of the interpretations cited in the name of this group have no allegorical elements whatsoever. The term apparently means, "the interpreters of sealed texts," i.e., cruces or obscurities.

21. Cassuto, p. 127.
22. *Tanhuma Exodus* par. 24. I have translated the text from the Yemenite manuscript of the Columbia University Library. I presume that this is the text which Chernus cites as *Exodus Rabba* 23.3, for this language is not found there. Such midrashim as *Tanhuma* are very often best read as commentaries on the earlier midrashic texts. As such, while not definitive, they can be taken to represent the understanding of the earlier texts which their earliest extant readings provide.
23. It is worth noting that the term for law, *hoq*, is traditionally understood to mean a law which is counter to reason.
24. See Childs pp. 269–70 for discussion of such views.
25. "The Song of Songs: Lock or Key?," in *The Book and the Text*, ed. Regina Schwartz (Oxford, 1990).
26. Michael Riffaterre, *Text Production* (New York, 1983), pp. 64–65.
27. Lee Patterson, *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* (Madison, 1987), pp. 150–51.
28. Patterson, p. 151.
29. Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson Jr. (Indianapolis, 1958), p. 30. For a reading of Augustine somewhat different from Patterson's, see Stern, p. 145.
30. Ira Chernus, "History and Paradox in Rabbinic Midrash," in his *Mysticism in Rabbinic Judaism* (= *Studia Judaica*, 11) (Berlin, 1982): 130–31.
31. Boyarin, "Language Inscribed by History on the Bodies of Living Beings: Midrash and Martyrdom," *Representations* 25 (1989): 139–51.
32. See Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Philo* (Cambridge, Mass., 1948), pp. 134–35 and the very insightful remarks of James Kugel, in his *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (New Haven, 1981), pp. 137–38, which in part anticipate the analysis here presented.
33. I will admit that the particular inflection of the midrash's reading in which all that is spiritual is referred to as Torah is a particularly rabbinic move.
34. Geoffrey Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness* (New Haven, 1980), p. 32.
35. I am indebted to Prof. Steven Katz for this insight.
36. Sternberg, *Poetics*, p. 228.
37. Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (Oxford, 1975), p. 76. (emphasis original).

RAYMOND P. SCHEINDLIN

Redemption of the Soul in Golden Age Religious Poetry

SOLOMON IBN GABIROL seems to have been the first of the Golden Age poets to employ the imagery, diction, and prosody of Arabic secular love poetry to describe the love of God and Israel.¹ In doing so, he simply extended the tradition of the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs to the secular poetry of his own day. Daring as the innovation may have seemed, it was not an innovation in principle, for since the very beginning of synagogue poetry, the poets had been drawing on the Song of Songs to compose love poems about God and Israel.²

One characteristic of Arabic and medieval Hebrew secular love poetry that made it well suited for adaptation to synagogue use is the stress it lays on the speaker's frustration in the love relationship. The speaker lauds his beloved for her beauty and uniqueness, but at the same time he laments his separation from her, whether that separation is due to her hard-heartedness or to outside circumstances. Here the synagogue poet found an analogy to one of the chief themes of Hebrew liturgical poetry in every age: Israel's exile and her yearning for restoration. Even the pre-Islamic motif of the poet lamenting over the traces of his beloved's abandoned camp was brought into the circle of the allegory as a symbol for the ruined Temple. Thus Labid Ibn Rabī'a (d. after 661), in an opening typical of the Arabic ode, wrote:³

Waste lies the land where once alighted and did wone
The people of Miná: Rijám and Ghawl are lone.
The camp in Rayyán's vale is marked by relics dim
Like weather-beaten script engraved on ancient stone.

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