

## THE CALLING OF ABRAHAM. A RABBINIC MIDRASHIC INTERPRETATION OF THE STORY OF ABRAHAM

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**ABSTRACT:** In the following article we will analyze the episode of the call of Abraham as it was imagined by the authors of the Genesis Rabbah 39. We will deal with the various aspects of literary devices and structure, and then we will look at the theological worldview that emerges out of Genesis Rabbah. The literary genre of Midrashic Literature employs a number of devices which set this type of literature apart from the others. The formula *lech lecha* (go yourself) functions as the key expression in Genesis Rabbah 39. We will also ask questions about the historical and social background that may have influenced the rabbis in their exposition of the life of Abraham. We will notice that the world in which Abraham lived resembled a palace that was set on fire, an allusion to the world that God created and that, apparently, seems at the mercy of wickedness and evil. It was this context in which God called Abraham, a righteous man whom God spoke to, and used more than any other people of his generations.

**KEY WORDS:** Abraham, Genesis, Midrash, Rabbinic Literature

### **Introduction**<sup>2</sup>

Midrashic Literature is a genre of biblical interpretation typical to the wider Rabbinic effort to interpret the Scriptures; first in the Second Temple

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2 The following paper is based on the project *Genesis Rabba: chapter 39:1-6*, that fulfilled the requirements for the Midrash I class, Dr. Richard Sarason

Period and after the destruction of the Second Temple. In its noun form, *vrđm* appears in the Old Testament with the sense of “story” or “writing” (“written in the story of the Book of the Kings”, 2 Chr 24:7).<sup>3</sup> The word derives from the verb *דרש* “to seek”, “to ask” or “to study” the word of the Lord.<sup>4</sup> The best example for the meaning of the word comes from Ezra 7:10, where Ezra “set his heart to study the Law of the Lord.” The prophet Isaiah, too, spoke about the imperative of “seeking” (*דרשי*) and then “reading” in the Book of the Lord (Isaiah 34:16). In ancient Israel, the act of “seeking” the Lord could also take the form of “inquiring” from a prophet about the will of God in a certain matter. Thus the king Jehoshaphat asked king Ahab if there were any other prophets “whom we may inquire” (*נדרשה*) on the problem of going or not going to war. The act of “inquiring” or “seeking” an answer meant that the prophet would consult with the Lord and then convey the will of the Lord to the king.<sup>5</sup>

The word *מדרש* became a consecrated term in later Rabbinic Literature, where it often appeared with the sense of “studying” the Bible, in general, and “interpreting” the meaning of individual passages, in particular.<sup>6</sup> One

(Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College, 1999).

- 3 Thus the NIV translation reads “annotation,” the RSV, “commentary,” the ESV and the TNK, “story”, and the NAB, “midrash.”
- 4 Hermann L. Strack, Gunther Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 234, and Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, “*דרש*,” *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Norfolk, VA: BibleWorks 10, 2015).
- 5 Thus S. Wagner, “*דרש*,” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 3:293-307. Wagner conjectures that the prophet would have used the proper cultic means in order to find out the will of the Lord in that particular matter. Note, however, 2 Chr 25:15, where king Amaziah was chastised by a prophet for “seeking” the gods of the people, not the God of Israel.
- 6 Myron B. Lerner, “The Works of Aggadic Midrash and the Esther Midrashim,” *The Literature of the Sages*, Second Part, Safrai, Shmuel ed. (Amsterdam: Royal Van Gorcum, 2006), 110, argues that by “the second century BCE investigation of Scripture had achieved pride of place in at least some of the varieties of Second Temple Judaism.”

must not, however, confuse Midrashic exegesis with the verse-by-verse analysis of the text that is typical to modern exegesis. “Midrash is not ‘objective’ professional exegesis – even if at times it acquires such methods.”<sup>7</sup> As Geza Vermes noted, the Rabbis distinguished between “pure exegesis” – an approach that focused on given linguistic problems of the Hebrew text – and “applied exegesis,” which was “not primarily concerned with the immediate meaning of the text but with the discovery of principles providing a non-scriptural problem with a scriptural solution.”<sup>8</sup>

In the following pages we will analyze Genesis Rabba 39, with an emphasis on paragraphs 1 through 6. We will translate and then analyse the text asking questions regarding the literary structure, etymological analysis, and biblical exegesis of the midrashists. Special emphasis will be given to the theological views of the authors as well. We will also attempt to understand the extent to which the rabbis read their own social and religious experience into the Genesis text. Finally, we will ask whether their theological assumptions can inform or confront our own and why.

### **Translation and commentary**

#### *Midrash Rabbah 39:1*

“Then the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go yourself from your land,’ etc.” (Gen.12:1).

R. Isaac opened [his exposition with]: “Hear, O daughter, and see, and incline your ear, and forget your people and the house of your father” (Ps.45:11).”

R. Isaac said: “[An illustration about] a man who was traversing from place to place, when he saw one building burning. He said, ‘Am I to believe that this building is without a supervisor?’ The owner of the building looked out and said to him, ‘I am the owner of the building.’ Thus, because Abraham our father was saying, ‘Am I to believe that this world is without a supervisor?’, the Holy One Blessed be He looked out and said to him, ‘I am the owner of the world.’ “Then the king shall desire your beauty” (Ps. 45:12), [that is], to make you beautiful in

7 Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 237.

8 *Post-Biblical Jewish Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 62.

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the world. [Also], “For he is your Lord, so you worship him.” [Thus,] “Then the Lord said to Abram,” etc.

Rabbi Isaac “opened” (פתיחה) the midrash with the quotation of a verse from the Psalms. The opening, or the “petihta”, is a literary device by which the commentators interpret the main verse (here, Genesis 12:1) with the help of “a second, remote verse” that shares a phrase with the main verse.<sup>9</sup> To begin with, a “petihta” – or a proem - is a literary device that the rabbis used at the beginning of a larger sermon in order to interpret a verse by “reference to a second remote verse.”<sup>10</sup> The term comes from the verb פתח (to open) and the noun פתיחה (opening), and is prefacing the “introduction to a lecture.”<sup>11</sup> The petihta contains a verse:

from the Prophets or the Writings, which is usually not obviously related to the subject of the parashah and which stands at the beginning of the petihta. What follows are various interpretations of this distant petihta verse, concluding with some connection made to the parashah verse, cited at the very end. Hermeneutically, the function of the petihta is to make use of the verse from the Prophets or the Writings to shed light on the (usually Torah) parashah verse.<sup>12</sup>

Here the rabbis used Psalm 55:11 in connection with Gen. 12:1 because they both contain an exhortation to leave one’s house (בית אביך) and relatives. In Psalm 45, it is a young girl who is exhorted to forget her

9 Myron B. Lerner, “The Works of Aggadic Midrash and the Esther Midrashim,” 117.

10 *The Literature of the Sages: Second Part*, Shmuel Shafrai ed. (Assen, Netherlands: Royal Van Gorcum, 2006), 2:117, and H.L. Strack, Gunter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Minnesota, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 52-53, for *petihah*, which the authors see as “as a complete short sermon itself.”

11 Marcus Jastrow, “פתיחה” *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Babli, Yerushalmi and Midrashic Literature* (New York: Judaica Press, 1991), 1253.

12 Rachel Anisfeld, *Sustain Me With Raisin Cakes*. Pesikta deRav Kahana and the Popularization of Rabbinic Judaism (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 45-46.

people and her father's house; in Genesis 12:1, it is Abraham. The remaining, unquoted part of Gen. 12:1 shares the phrase "your father's house" with Ps. 45:11. As the girl must leave her people in order to be the king (Ps. 45:12), so does Abraham have to leave his father's house. And as the king of Ps. 45:12 desires the girl's beauty, so does God desire Abraham's devotion in a world that seemed out of control to Abraham.

The image of the building (a castle) that is burning points the reader to the state of Rabbinic Judaism after the Jewish-Roman war of 67-70 AD and the Bar Kochba Revolt of 132-136 AD.<sup>13</sup> The rabbis are trying to make sense of how God calls individuals during a time of spiritual and institutional ruin. What we have here then is the notion of a higher calling. Just as the girl is summoned to pay obeisance to the king, Abraham is called to obey the King of the universe and leave his father's house, even though the world into which one is called resembles a building on fire.<sup>14</sup> The result will be Abraham being made "beautiful" in the world, as he bowed before the King and left his father's house.

#### *Midrash Rabbah 39:2*

"Then the Lord said to Abram, 'Go...'" etc.

R. Berekiah opened [his exposition with]: "Your oil has a fine fragrance" (Song of Songs 1:3). R. Berkiah said: To what was Abraham compared? To a flask of balsam closely covered with a lid and lying in a corner, so that no fragrance was emanating. As soon as it was moved its fragrance was released. Thus, the Holy One Blessed be He said to Abraham [move yourself from place to place so that your name might be exalted in the world]: "Go yourself" etc.

13 For an analysis of the context of Rabbinic Judaism after 135 CE see Aurelian Botica "Pesikta de Rav Kahana and the Concept of the Mourning of God in Rabbinic Literature," in *Semănătorul (The Sower)*. *The Journal of Ministry and Biblical Research*, 2.1 (2021): 110-126. We will return to this subject later on in this paper. 126. London: Marston Book Services Limited, Oxfordshire.

14 For the world being destroyed by "the flames of vice and wrongdoing," see *Midrash Rabbah*, H. Freedman, Maurice Simon eds. (London: Soncino Press, 1961), 313.

The second petihta has Rabbi Berekiah compare Abraham to the “be-loved” in the Song of Songs 1:3 In particular, Abraham is likened to the perfume kept in bottle, which does not release its fragrance unless the bottle is shaken (טליל). If Abraham stays with his father’s house, his life would be closed with a lid and the “beauty,” that is, the fragrance of his witness would not be released into the world. If Abraham obeys God and leaves his father’s house, the perfume would be shaken and its fragrance released, that is, his name would be exalted in the world.<sup>15</sup>

*Midrash Rabbah 39:3*

R. Berekiah opened [his exposition with]: “We have a little sister [אחות]” (Song of S. 8:8).

This is Abraham, who united [אחדה] the whole world for us. Bar Kapparah [said]: Like one who sews the rent [in the garment]. “Little” - that when he was still young he would heap up commandments and good deeds.

“And she has no breasts” (Ibid.) - that [breasts] did not suckle Abraham; neither in commandments nor in good deeds.

“What shall we do with our sister on the day when one shall speak about her?” (Ibid.) - [that is] the day when Nimrod the wicked ordered to throw him down into the furnace of fire.

“If she be a wall then let us build upon her” (Song 8:9) - that if Abraham puts up words like a wall [against Nimrod], then [God] will build upon him (lit. “her”).

“And if she be a door, let us enclose her with boards of cedar” (Ibid.) - that if he is needy in commandments and good deeds.

“let us enclose her with boards of cedar” - and just like this drawing is [made] only for a short time, so I will not preserve him except for a short time. [Abraham] said to him: Master of the Universe “I am a wall” (8:10), putting up words like a wall, “and my breasts are like towers” (Ibid.). My sons are Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. “Then I was in his eyes like one who has found peace (Ibid.)” He was brought in [the furnace] in peace and he went out in peace. [“Then the Lord said to Abram: ‘go yourself...’”].

15 M. Jastrow, “טליל” *Dictionary of the Targumim*, 536.

The authors use Song of Songs 8:8-10 in order to build an imaginative narrative where Abraham is again the main character. Rabbi Berechiah derives the verb *אחה* (to unite) from the noun *אחותה* (sister) in order to make the connection between Abraham and the character from the Song of Songs.<sup>16</sup>

Having established the analogy, the rabbis then shape the narrative around Abraham by using verses 8 through 10 in the Song of Songs. In the worldview of the rabbis Abraham united (*איחה*) the world for the people because he proclaimed “the unity and oneness” of God.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, Abraham stored up righteous acts and good deeds as a “little” boy – again, a word-play that the rabbis obtain from the word “little” (Song 8:8). In order to build up the character of Abraham, Rabbi Bar Kappara compares the “little sister” from Song 8:8 (“and she had no breasts”), with Abraham, who had nobody to suckle from in piety or in good deeds, and yet he managed later to unite the world.<sup>18</sup>

Continuing with the verse “what shall we do for our sister in the day when she shall be spoken for” (Song of Songs 8:8), Bar Kappara obtains a word-play from the phrases “in the day...spoken for” (*שידבר*) and the narrative of king Nimrod ordering Abraham “to be cast” (*שגור*) into the furnace for destroying the idols. The furnace episode was narrated earlier, in *Genesis Rabbah* 38:13, where Terah, Abraham’s father, gave Abraham over to the Mesopotamian king Nimrod because Abraham had destroyed Terah’s idols.<sup>19</sup> Linking this episode with Song of Songs 8:9 (“if she be a wall” [*חומה*]), the rabbis have Abraham resist Nimrod like a “wall” (*חומה*) by using his words against Nimrod. Furthermore, they link Song of Song 8:9 (“And if she be a door [*דלת*] we will enclose her [*נצור*] with boards of cedar”) with Abraham, who, though he may be poor (*דל*) in “command-

16 Jastrow, “אחה,” *Dictionary of the Targumim*, 40.

17 *Midrash Rabbah*, 313.

18 Thus *Midrash Rabbah*, 314, in the sense that Abraham had nobody “from whom to draw inspiration,” which made his virtuous character even more laudable.

19 *Midrash Rabbah*, 310-311.

ments and good deeds,” God will “enclose” him with boards of cedar (ארז) “and protect” him temporarily - like a drawing [צורה] is temporary.<sup>20</sup>

In closing the rabbis appeal to the book of Daniel in order to link the story of the fiery furnace with Abraham’s trial at the hands of Nimrod. They also link the Book of Daniel in connection to the text of Song of Songs 8:10; associating the “towers” (מגדלות) – that is, the “breasts of the sister – with Daniel’s companions Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Finally, Abraham enters the furnace in peace (“then I was in his eyes like one who has found peace” - Song 8:10) and comes out in peace.

*Midrash Rabbah 39:4*

“Wisdom shall empower the wise ten times more than the rulers” (Qohelet 7:19).

This is Abraham, [whom wisdom made him stronger] than the ten generations from Noah to Abraham. [God said] “Out of all those I only spoke with you.”

Thus, “And the Lord spoke to Abram” (Gen. 12:1).

In verse 4 the authors linked Genesis 12 with a different biblical text, namely, Ecclesiastes 7:19 (“wisdom shall empower the wise ten times more than the rulers”). They use the literary device שורה שווה (identic category) in order to establish the connection between Abraham and the people of the ten generations from Noah until Abraham.<sup>21</sup> The key word that establishes the congruity is the numeral עשר (ten) in the phrase “than ten rulers” (מעשרה שליטים). Thus, out of all “ten generations from Noah to Abraham,” in a certain unique way God spoke only with Abraham. Hence “And the Lord spoke (said) to Abraham” (Gen. 12:1).]

20 Thus the word-play between נצור (enclosed) and צור (drawing). See Jastrow, “צור”, as “plan, drawing, design,” *Dictionary of the Targumim*, 1270, and *Midrash Rabbah*, 314, for the fact that the drawing “is easily rubbed off.”

21 Ghezerah Shawah means literally “an identic category” or an “analogy between two laws established on the basis of verbal congruities in the text.” Evidently, the rabbinical tradition had to authorize the verbal congruity in order to become accepted. Thus Jastrow, “צורה” *Dictionary of Targumim*, Ruth Belof, “Midreshei Halakhah,” in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, second edition, Fred Skolnik ed. vol. 14 (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing, 2007), 193-204.

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*Midrash Rabbah 39:5*

R. Azariah opened [his exposition with]: “We would have healed Babylon, but she was not healed...” (Jer. 51:9).

“We would have healed Babylon” - in the generation of Enosh.

“But she was not healed” - in the generation of the flood.

“Forsake her” (Ibid.) - in the generation of the dispersion.

“Then let each one go into his and” (Ibid.). [Thus], “Then the Lord said to Abram: ‘go yourself...’”

Again, the authors change the petihta and open with a text from Jeremiah 51:9 in order to set up the *Lech Lecha* (“go yourself...”, Gen 12:1) account in a different historical context. The rabbis read large parts of the Genesis narrative into the Jeremiah verse, and vice-versa. In particular, they focus on the phrase *וַיֵּלֶךְ אִישׁ לְאֶרְצוֹ* (“and let us go, each man to his land”, Jer. 51:9). Since both Jeremiah and Genesis 12 use the verb *הִלָּךְ* (“to go”), the rabbis make the connection between Abraham forsaking his land (*אֶרְצוֹ*) and the generation of the dispersion leaving their land, without the current possibility that the land be healed.

*Genesis Rabbah 39:6*

Rabbi Azariah opened [his exposition] in the name of R. Aha: “You loved the righteous, but you hated the wicked,” etc. (Psalm 45:7).

[R. Azariah in the name of R. Aha] interpreted the verse [in light of] our father Abraham. [Thus] when our father Abraham stood to seek mercy on behalf of Sodom, what is written there? “Far be it from you to do [such a thing]” (Gen. 18:25). R. Aha said [concerning this]: You have sworn that you will not bring a flood upon the world. Will you really make void your oath? You will not bring a flood of waters, but a flood of fire. If so, then you have not delivered your oath. R. Levi said [concerning this]: “Shall not the One who judges the earth perform justice?” (Ibid.). If you desire the world [as it is] then there is no justice, but if there is justice then the world [may] not remain. But you are holding the cord from both ends, desiring both the world [as it is] and judgment. Thus if you do not release it a little [from its obligations] then the world will not endure.

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The Holy One Blessed be He said to Abraham: “You have loved the righteous and hated the wicked. Because of this God, your God, is anointing you with the oil of gladness before your fellows” (Ibid.). From Noah and until yourself there have been ten generations. And out of them all, I only spoke with to you. [Thus]: “And the Lord said to Abram.”

The rabbis open verse 6 with a *petihta* from Psalm 45:7. Although the “you” of Psalm 45 is not readily identified, R. Azariah’s appeal to Abraham and the final quotation of the Psalm at the end point toward Abraham. The authors introduce a second verse, this time from Genesis, where Abraham pleads with God not to kill the righteous along with the wicked (Gen. 18:25). Both Ps. 45:7 and Gen. 18:25 contain the words [רש and צדיק (the “evil” and the “righteous”). The connection allows the authors to build up the problem that will need a resolution. The rabbis also allude to the “flood” incident where God vowed not to destroy the world again. In contrast, R. Levi introduces another scriptural position which recalls not the covenant, but God’s attribute of justice. All this material lays the background for a possible conflict between God’s desire to punish the wicked and his wish to maintain the world as it is (i.e., without punishment). The apparent tension is solved by identifying Abraham with the character of Psalm 55, who is anointed with the oil of gladness *above his fellows*. The rabbis qualify this: out of all the people, God *spoke* only with Abraham. Hence, “...the Lord *said* to Abraham” [*italics mine*].

### The function of the *petihta*-verses in paragraphs 1-6

The reader will notice that only the first two paragraphs commence and conclude with the text of Genesis 12:1. The remaining four each introduce different *petihta*ot, but they all conclude with returning to the *theme* verse, Genesis 12:1. The first paragraph contains an extended *mashal* which is bracketed by Gen. 12:1.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the authors use

<sup>22</sup> The noun מַשָּׁל derives from the same Hebrew verbal form, which means “to handle” and in a secondary sense, to “speak metaphorically” or “prophetically.” In 1 Kgs 5:12 the noun is translated with “proverb” (“Solomon uttered

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Psalm 45:11-12 as the *petihta* to the Genesis verse, and the *inclusio* to the illustration of the *burning building*. This paragraph, then, may be outlined in the following way:

**Gen. 12:1** (Ps. 45:11 [MASHAL:] Ps. 45:12) **Gen. 12:1**  
THE BURNING BUILDING

The message of the *mashal* is essential to the rabbis' interpretation of Genesis 12:1. The man who travels from place to place cannot ignore the abnormality of this world, here illustrated by a burning building. His consternation over the fact that no one will intervene to put the fire out is transferred by the rabbis to Abraham himself; thus he asks: "Am I to believe that this world is without a supervisor?" The *petihta*-verse then is used as a textual background to Gen. 12:1. As the rabbis have God acknowledge that he is the Master of this world, they introduce the second part of Psalm 45, namely verse 11. The king, that is God, desires the beauty of the girl (i.e., "to make Abraham beautiful in the world), and because he is king she must worship him. In essence, this means that Abraham must go and leave his father's house.

Both for the original authors and for the readers of this text the answers to the Genesis 12:1 text have come as profound theological statements. We should not, however, proceed to explain these without becoming aware of the sociological and historical forces that influenced the original authors.<sup>23</sup> For example, in the mind of the authors Abraham

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3000 proverbs), but it can also have the meaning of "prophecy" (it occurs in Numbers 23-24, in the context of Balaam's prophecies). In Rabbinic Literature the meaning of מִשַּׁל is evidenced by including often times an illustration or a story. It may, in this context, take the form of a "fable", "parable" or "allegory." Thus Jastrow, "מִשַּׁל" *Dictionary of the Targumim*, 108; Strack, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 28.

23 This is not to say that every text should be used to reconstruct the socio-cultural history of the authors. The very fact that these texts have undergone editorial processes makes this quest almost unrealizable. But behind the text one can, at times, sense some of the reactions of the rabbis against the circum-

too saw the world as having being abandoned by its Master. This attitude perhaps betrays an ethical reaction on the part of Abraham against evil; most likely, unpunished evil.<sup>24</sup> It is very possible that the same reaction was shared by many of the rabbis of late antiquity?<sup>25</sup>

What is beyond question here is the fact that, in the mind of the rabbis, Abraham displays the inner beauty of the girl who was desired by the king (Psalm 45:11). Abraham, i.e., the *daughter* in Psalm 45:11, is called to “hear, ... and see, and incline” his ear; possibly, in the face of the abnormalities of this world.<sup>26</sup> The rabbis, however, value this text mainly because it contains the phrase “forget ... your father’s house.” In essence, God calls Abraham to leave his father’s house in order to make him “beautiful” before the whole world, the same world that earlier appeared to be abandoned. One possible theological implication might be

stances in which they lived, or against persons or group of persons whom they interacted with.

24 As already noted, “Abraham saw the world being destroyed by the flames of vice and wrong doing.” *Midrash Rabbah*, 313.

25 We have already pointed the reader to Aurelian Botica’s “Pesikta D’Rav Kahana and the Concept of the Mourning of God in Rabbinic Literature” and to Rachel Anisfeld, *Sustain Me With Raisin-Cakes. Pesikta deRav Kahana and the Popularization of Rabbinic Judaism*, esp. 147-162, for references to the time of upheaval in the life of Palestinian and diaspora Jews during the early Medieval Period. The rise of Christianity and, later, of Islam, meant that “Jews had a harder time of defending their identity.” One may also take into account the major blow that Rabbinic Judaism felt especially after the Revolt of Bar Kochba (132-136 AD).

26 One is fully aware that this is one of several interpretations made possible of the verse above. Although the verbs of *seeing*, *hearing*, and *inclining his ear* may not directly apply to the man *seeing* the fire, the parallelism is striking, and may be more than accidental. A more pressing question arises when we relate the first part of Ps. 45:11 to Abraham. In what sense is Abraham exhorted to hear, see, and incline his ear? Perhaps Abraham is called to hear the voice of the King who is calling the “girl,” and not necessarily to see the world that is burning? Or is it conceivable that God calling Abraham and Abraham being exhorted to see the world burning are not two mutually exclusive realities?

that God desires Abraham (“so shall the king desire your beauty”) in order that he may beautify that seemingly disordered world. Secondly, the idea of God making Abraham great in the world may also allude to the promise of a seed and a great nation; both contained in the subsequent verses of Genesis. Finally, for the rabbis God is the king of Psalm 45:11, that is “the Lord” to whom Abraham (i.e., the girl) must “pay obeisance.” In other words, Abraham must go: *lech lecha* (“go yourself”).

The second paragraph is rather simple. The Genesis verse brackets the short illustration of the perfume bottle. The *petihta*-verse comes from the Song of Songs 1:3, and again, it is used as a textual background for how the rabbis interpret the command that Abraham must leave. The fine fragrance of the oil (Song 1:3) becomes the balsam flask (R. Berkiah’s comparison) which must be agitated in order to emanate its fragrance. Note also the relation between this and the preceding paragraph. Based on Ps. 45:11, Abraham is to be made beautiful (or “great”) in the world. Based on Song of Songs 1:3, Abraham must move out into the world in order that his fragrance emanate before others. Thus: *lech lecha* (“go yourself”) Paragraph 2, then, recalls the same notion of beautifying or improving the quality of the world, which is introduced in paragraph 1. One corollary of this may be that Abraham’s *moral beauty* must be accompanied by *obedience* in order that it may become effective in the world. Finally, in the mind of the authors Abraham’s moral qualities are recognized by God himself. The reader, then, should not miss the striking, perhaps impious allusion here to the fact that, in the eyes of the rabbis, *God actually needs Abraham*.<sup>27</sup>

Unlike paragraphs 1 and 2, paragraph 3 begins directly with the *petihta*-verse. In an outline form we have:

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27 According to E. Urbach “the righteous, by their deeds, bring blessing and prosperity to the world,” and at times, they are called “the foundation of the world.” Urbach also cites Rabbinic sources which give the presence of the righteous as one of the reasons why the world still exists. In *The Sages*, trans. by I. Abrahams (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Press, 1987), 494.

(Song 8:8 Song 8:9 Song 8:10 Allusion to Daniel Song 8:10) **Gen 12:1**

Because this paragraph lacks Genesis 12:1 at the beginning, its content and development are dictated by how the rabbis interpret Song of Songs 8:8-10. As such, the *petihta*-verses serve as textual backgrounds to an imagined narrative which spans different times in the life of Abraham (see the full explanation given in parenthesis after the translation of G.Rabbah 39:3). The authors will use either word-roots or word-analogies (like the words “breasts,” “wall,” and “peace”) in order to connect the *petihta*-verses with their own narrative about Abraham. In the conclusion the rabbis interpolate the “trial narrative” from the book of Daniel within their own narrative, which already bears the terminology of Genesis and the Song of Songs 8:8-10.<sup>28</sup> Thus, Abraham (Genesis 12:1) enters the furnace (Daniel) in peace (Song 8:10), and he goes out in peace (Song 8:10). However, the fact that the authors cite Genesis 12:1 only at the very end of the paragraph makes it more difficult to understand how the *petihta*-verses relate to the Gen. 12:1. One possible interpretation may have the Genesis verse as the sequel to the midrashic narrative of Gen. Rabba 39:3. In this sense, God called Abraham only after he came out of the furnace in peace. But what is the image of Abraham that emerges out of this narrative?

The rabbis saw Abraham as the one who united the world for all subsequent generations. One cannot escape the allusion here to monotheism; in particular, to Abraham as one of the first patriarchs who recognized and worshipped the One God.<sup>29</sup> Abraham also distinguished himself even as a youngster when he “heaped up commandments and good deeds.” But in spite of all these qualities God allowed that Abraham would suffer at the hands of Nimrod. Thus we witness again the theme

28 By “their own narrative” we mean the Rabbinic haggadah according to which king Nimrod attempted to kill Abraham after he left the idolatrous house of his family.

29 For the editors of *Midrash Rabba* the phrase “who united the world for us” means that Abraham proclaimed “the unity and oneness of God, the corollary of which is the unity and brotherhood of man.” Thus *Midrash Rabbah, Genesis*, 313.

of the suffering of the righteous, a story not completely unknown among the rabbis of the Roman Empire. In fact, the authors weaved the story of Daniel - another righteous sufferer - into the recreated narrative of the Song of Songs as the righteous Abraham enters and leaves the furnace in peace. As such, for the rabbis Abraham embodies not only the ideal of righteousness but he also becomes the source of comfort for those who suffer while living a righteous life. In the providence of God suffering prepares the righteous for a more profound destiny: "Then the Lord said to Abraham, 'Go yourself...'"

Paragraph 4 is the shortest here, as it only uses one *petihta*-verse from Ecclesiastes 7:19. The authors connect the word עשר (ten) from Ecclesiastes with their own narrative about Abraham, so that the expression מעשר שליטים (more than ten rulers) helps to distinguish Abraham as the only man in the last ten generations whom God spoke with. As such, in order to support the idea of God *speaking* only to Abraham, the rabbis conclude this paragraph with the Genesis verse, namely, "Then the Lord said to Abraham..."<sup>30</sup> But the real element that distinguished Abraham from the rest in the eyes of God is *wisdom*. Since the authors already depicted Abraham as storing up commandments and good deeds at an early age (paragraph 3), it is conceivable that by having *wisdom* they meant that Abraham possessed and practiced the Torah. Is it possible, then, that for the rabbis Abraham's standing apart from the rest echoes the belief that Israel's acceptance of the Law led to her becoming the special nation of God?<sup>31</sup>

30 As with other situations, this analogy is less than perfect. The root used by the rabbis when describing God speaking to Abraham is דבר, while the Genesis employs the root אמר. The point made by the rabbis, however, is rather straightforward: God addressed Abraham in person.

31 This concept has a long and distinguished history in Rabbinic literature. According to *Exodus Rabba, Ki Tissa*, XLVII, 3: "If it were not for my Law which you accepted, I should not recognize you, and I should not regard you more than any of the idolatrous nations of the world." Thus C.G. Montefiore and H. Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1963), 116.

In paragraph 5 the rabbis divide the *petihta*-verse from Jeremiah 51:9 in two parts. They use the first part in connection with different periods in the narrative of Genesis: the Enosh generation (“we would have healed...” Jer. 51:9), the Flood generation (“but she was not healed”), and the generation of the dispersion (“forsake her...”). Abraham’s call came as the climax to the events narrated here, events which are interpreted through the rabbis’ reading of Jeremiah 51:9. The final part of the *petihta*-verse is significant because it uses the verb *הִלֵּךְ*, just like Genesis 12:1 does. Thus Jeremiah 51:9 explains, in part, the call of Abraham as a *solution* implemented by God after the events of the flood and of the dispersion.

The last paragraph is also the longest. The *petihta*-verse comes from Psalm 55:5, but the authors introduce a second verse, from Genesis 18:25, which is relevant to the larger narrative they are trying to form. The structural outline of this paragraph can be drawn in the following way:

(Psalm 55:5a    Genesis 18:25    Psalm 55:5a +b)    **Genesis 12:1**

The authors use the *petihta*-verse to lay the background for a better understanding of why God addressed Abraham in Gen. 12:1. Thus the Psalm is interconnected with the Midrashic narrative of paragraph 5 in order to portray Abraham as mediator for the righteous people. The Noachic covenant is also recalled as the authors are building a potential conflict within God; that is, the apparent incompatibility between absolute justice and the covenantal obligations of God. The extended *petihta*-verse is applied in the conclusion as the authors specify that “God is anointing” Abraham “with the oil of gladness before our fellows.” The rabbis resort again to the idea that out of all the men of the former generations God chose to speak only with Abraham (see paragraph 4). Unlike the “wisdom” of Ecclesiastes 7:19, in Psalm 45 the character is set apart from his fellows by his love for justice, his hatred of wickedness, and by his anointing. Embodying all these, the Abraham of the midrashic narra-

tive s distinguished from all the people of the ten generations when he is *addressed* by God as well. This is why, then: “The Lord *said* to Abraham...”

Paragraph 6 introduces probably one of the most theologically profound issues encountered in our texts so far, namely, the tension between the *divine will* and the *human intercession* of Abraham. The rabbis portray Abraham as a lover of the righteous and an enemy of the wicked (Ps 45:8). These virtues, which invest Abraham with the moral prerogatives required of a pious intercessor, allow him to debate no other than God. As with the book of Genesis, in the world-view of Genesis Rabbah God is willing to be swayed from his destructive actions by the pleading of a righteous man who goes as far as to remind God that he too is subject to the constraints of common sense (i.e. one cannot “hold the cords by both ends”). In essence, for the rabbis God is not only just, but also merciful and aware of the moral shortcomings of his creation. The rabbis may just tell us that the virtues of justice and love which God admires in Abraham are worth pursuing; they can even save a world from destruction.

### **Genesis Rabbah 39: a rabbinical reading of Gen. 12:1-9**

Chapter 39 is a complex text. As a rule, the rabbis used the Genesis passage in connection with other scriptural verses, sometimes placing Abraham as far ahead in time as Nehemiah. This inter-textual “universe” allowed them to render Abraham and his God relevant to the issues faced in their own historical, religious, and cultural experience. Secondly, in the rabbinic hermeneutics of Genesis Rabba, the proof is sometimes established by quoting a verse which appears to contradict the theme at hand, and then interpreting that verse in light of other verses which address a similar concern. For example the promise “I will make you a great *nation*” (Gen. 12:2) could be invalidated by the Noahic narrative where God used Noah’s family to recreate the nations of the earth. The rabbis quote Deut. 4:7, “For what a great *nation* is there, that has a God so nigh to them,” and then qualify the meaning of “great nation” of Genesis 12:2 in light of the “nation” of Deuteronomy 4:7. But what occupies their at-

tention more than anything else is the person of Abraham. Keeping this in mind, the following are some of the ways in which the rabbis read Genesis 12:1-9.

In paragraph 7 the rabbis sensed a potential problem when God commanded Abraham to leave his father's house: "shall I go out and bring dishonor upon the Divine Name, as people will say, 'He left his father in his old age and departed.'" This was a valid concern, since the duty to honor one's parents...was "one of the precepts by the performance of which a man enjoys the fruits in this world and the capital remains for him in the World to come (Peah 1.1)."<sup>32</sup> As a hermeneutical move, the rabbis interpret the preposition "lecha" (lit. "to/of yourself") as "I exempt *you* from the duty of honoring your parents, though I exempt no one else from this duty."

The destiny of Israel rested on Abraham and on the other patriarchs of Genesis. Genesis Rabbah 39 abounds with motives such as this. For example, in Midrash Rabbah 39:10 the midrashists use the *marshal* of the king who lost and found his diadem (מרגלית) in connection with Nehemiah 9:8, "And you *found* his [Abraham's] heart faithful before you," in order to describe the length to which God went to find and bless Abraham. The authors also interpret מרגלית as referring to the "coinage of Abraham" which was current in the world. They define the characteristics of this and other currencies (Joshua, David, etc.) by connecting their narrative with biblical verses like Joshua 6:27, Dt. 33:17, 1Chr.4:4, from which they take elements necessary to form the effigy of the coin (human beings, animals, towers, and the like). The same theme is carried out in 39:11. According to Genesis 12:2,

ואעשך לגוי גדול ואברכך ואגדלה שמך והיה ברכה

And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.

32 Abraham Cohen, *Everyman's Talmud* (New York: Schocken Books, 1949), 180. See also Kid. 30b, 31 b-32a, Deut. R. Debarim, 1.15, Gen. R., Toledoth, LXIII, 6. Montefiore offers a good collection of materials on the topic of filial piety; see *A Rabbinic Anthology*, 500-506.

In what sense was Abraham to become a blessing? By revocalising the unpointed בְּרַכָּה (blessing) the rabbis transform Abraham into a *pool of purification* (berekah) which “purifies the unclean” (i.e., those whom Abraham brought to God from afar). Abraham *as a blessing* also means that he is set “as a blessing in the Eighteen Benedictions” (39:11) or that “rain and dew shall come forth for your sake” (39:12). The blessing can be material (39:12 - the nations of the earth “are wealthier than we”) or come in the form of *counsel*. Reading the “blessing” promise made to Abraham in light of their own experience, the rabbis believed they were the medium through which God would bless the nations of the earth. According to Rabbi Nehemiah, “when [the families of the earth] ... get into trouble they ask our advice, and we give it to them.”<sup>33</sup>

### **Abraham and modernity - bridging the horizons**

The element of sacrifice in Abraham’s call has been noticed both by ancient and modern interpreters. The expression “lech lecha” occurs twice with respect to Abraham: the first time in Genesis 12:1, and the second time in Genesis 22:2, “at the beginning of the section of the Offering of Isaac.”<sup>34</sup> The modern interpreters of Genesis have usually emphasized the historical implications of Abraham’s call. Cassuto believes that “in both cases Abram undergoes an ordeal: here he has to leave behind his aged father...and go to a country that is unknown to him; there (Gen. 22:2) ...take leave of his cherished son forever.” In other words, “in his first trial he is bidden to forgo his past, in the last one, his future.”<sup>35</sup> The call is made difficult to obey because the land is not named. Not only must Abraham

33 For W. Brueggemann blessing “has in purview a large arena of new life that is to be transmitted, via Israel, to the nations....In these traditions of promise, Israel, by its life and its obedience, is entrusted with the well-being of the nations.” In *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 168.

34 Umberto Cassuto, *Commentary on the Book of Genesis II*, trans. by I. Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1964), 310.

35 Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit*, trans. by Aryeh Newman (Jerusalem: Haomanim Press, 1974), 114.

separate from the societal bonds that essentially meant survival, but he is never told where exactly he is going. According to Gunkel “God lays upon Abraham the most difficult test of faith.”<sup>36</sup>

These views, though informed by a different reading of the Genesis text, are not inconsistent with the Rabbinic reading of Genesis. The idea of sacrifice, for example, is highlighted in Genesis Rabbah 39:7 as well. Here Abraham complains that the people will say “he left his father in his old age and departed.” Did Genesis 12:1 suggest an abrogation of the command to obey one’s parents? Could God contradict himself? The rabbis, then, reinterpret the expression “lecha” as a temporary divine exemption from the duty of filial obedience. Such an exegetical move may seem arbitrary to the modern reader, but one should not forget that the rabbis read Genesis in light of their social and cultural experiences; of which filial piety was an important aspect. The notion of the *call as sacrifice* is also emphasized in Genesis Rabbah 39:9. The rabbis realized the oddity of the command to leave one’s roots to go a land “which I will show you.” Why, then, “did He not reveal it to him [there and then]?” They answer of Genesis Rabbah is: “In order to make it more beloved in his eyes and to reward him for every step he took.”

One could also recall the haggadic tradition which depicts Abraham not only as the victim of Nimrod, but also as the object of the scorn of his own family. The rabbis never tried to minimize the element of suffering involved in the act of obeying God. In spite of all the qualities which made Abraham special in the eyes of God and in the tradition of Israel, the rabbis saw in Abraham the embodiment of their own experiences. That religion should be a private experience which bestows only serenity and happiness on the practitioner, while excluding discipline, suffering

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36 *Genesis*, trans. by M.E. Biddle (Macon, GA: Mercer UP, 1997), 163. The terms “your country”, “your kindred” and “your father’s house” represent the basic forms of social organization in the ancient world. Often times, leaving one’s family meant renouncing the claim to land inheritance. In a world in which agriculture was the main source of income (and thus subsistence) to renounce the land took a lot of courage.

or public scorn, is a modern concept which, if practiced, would engender the survival of the faithful more than organized persecution ever did.

The question asked in Genesis Rabba 39:1, that “Am I to believe that this building is without a supervisor?” remains as poignant today as it was for the rabbis of late antiquity. The Temple had been deserted in 70 CE. The Bar Kochba revolt came as a destructive blow to those who still hoped that someday, somehow, the Temple would be rebuilt and God be worshipped again in Jerusalem. Against this background, the rabbis of Genesis Rabbah imagined The Holy One Blessed Be He looking out and saying: “I am the owner of the world.”

But what is even more unusual is the thought that the King desired a mortal’s beauty in order that he might beautify the world through him.<sup>37</sup> This thought comes both as a bold proclamation and as an intimate understanding of the divine. I believe that the rabbis quoted Psalm 45:11 with the assumption that “beauty,” i.e., loving God and embodying mercy, justice, and love for others (his divine attributes) is a powerful means of saving a world that appears to be dominated by darkness.<sup>38</sup> But they also cautioned that such beauty will not touch anybody just by itself. The flask, though full of balsam, must be shaken. Abraham must move himself “from place to place so that “his name might be exalted in the world. Finally, the *beauty* of Abraham allowed him to provoke God on the matter of absolute divine justice. “You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness” (Ps. 45:8). These qualities of virtue helped Abraham act as a mediator for a less perfect world. According to Genesis Rabbah 33:3 “the prayer of the righteous changes the intention of the Holy One, blessed be He, from the attribute of strict justice to that of compassion.”<sup>39</sup> For

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37 In R. Jose’s words, “so long as the righteous are in the world, there is blessing in the world.” From Sifre Dt. 98 pg. 76; in Urbach, *The Sages*, 494.

38 According to Nehama Leibowitz “Abraham, as he left for the promised land, was to be considered the only glimmer of light wandering through a world of thick darkness, eventually...illuminating the whole of mankind.” In *Studies in Bereshit*, trans. by Aryeh Newman (Jerusalem: Haomanim Press, 1974), 110.

39 Quoted by E. Urbach in *The Sages*, 907.

the rabbis, then, righteousness is not static, but engaging. What is more striking is the view that God himself becomes sensitive in the face of human compassion. One's sense of righteousness must never isolate him or her from the social problems of this world. Moral "beauty," then, is the "beauty" of compassion for those who have been written out and expect nothing but absolute judgment.

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