

Midrash

(Some notes CORE 166)

Midrash (pl. Midrashim) is a Hebrew word referring to a method of interpreting Biblical text. The term can be used in one of three interrelated ways:

First: "Midrash" can be used as a verb; i.e. as a way of interpreting a biblical verse. A common way of doing this is by juxtaposing Biblical verses. The point may not appear in any one of the verses by themselves, but taken together the point is implicit. When the rabbis had a specific proposition in mind, they would first write about the general idea, often implicitly instead of explicitly. Then they would cite the biblical verses, knowing that the careful reader would perceive the common elements, and be lead to the desired conclusion.

(All forms of scriptural interpretation are not necessarily midrash. Much of what has been termed "modern midrash" has little to do with the classical modes of literary exegesis that guided the rabbis. Rabbinic midrash uses quotes from scripture to prove a proposition.)

Second: "Midrash" can be used as a noun; in this sense it can refer to a particular verse and its interpretation. Thus one can say that "The Midrash on the verse Genesis 1:1 really means that . . . [and some Midrashic interpretation of the verse would go here].

Third: The term "midrash" also can refer to a book, a compilation of Midrashic teachings, in the form of legal, exegetical or homiletical commentaries on the Tanakh. Thus *Genesis Rabbah* is a book that compiles midrashim on the book of Genesis.

The following **examples** of shorter midrashim on Biblical verses.

Verse: "And God saw all that He had made, and found it very good. And there was evening, and there was morning, the sixth day." (Genesis 1:31)

Midrash: Rabbi Nahman said in Rabbi Samuel's name: "Behold, it was very good" refers to the Good Desire. But "And behold, it was very good" can also refers to the Evil Desire.

Can then the Evil Desire be very good? That would be extraordinary!

But without the Evil Desire, however, no man would build a house, take a wife and beget children.

It is a tradition of interpretation akin to the methods used by both Christian and Muslim theological scholars. The **Muslim** equivalent process is known as **Tafsir**. Interpretation of the Qur'an takes on three forms: 1. As the Qu'ran is the word of Almighty Allah (God) and

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authoritative, and as the verses are closely interrelated with one another, the **Qur'anic** verses can explain and interpret one another. 2. Many verses or words in the Qur'an can also be interpreted or further clarified in the **hadith**, the assembled oral traditions relating to the words and deeds of the Islamic prophet Muhammad. And 3. Many verses can be interpreted by juxtaposing them alongside the **history**. Most Islamic scholars consider it extremely important for commentators to explain how the Qur'an was revealed -- when and under which circumstances. The early tafsir are considered to be some of the best sources for Islamic history. Famous early commentators include at-Tabari and Ibn Kathir.

The **overriding process and purposes** of Midrash and Tafsir theological scriptural interpretations are very similar, having three distinct considerations. Suggested by Bruce Feiler's *Abraham* 2002.

First you attempt to **interpret the text as originally brought forth** and/or from the perspectives of the earliest interpreters. What was the meaning of a text as first intended? Seek an interpretative perspective of the vessels/originators of a revealed Truth. Within the midrash tradition, the Truth is most typically understood as **allegorically or metaphorically revealed**, and seldom literally rendered, which makes the interpretive process all that more challenging.

Second, then see both how that text **applied to the world of the ancients**, as well as applies to **your own times**, to you personally and to your community today. And take the revealed Truth of the original story and **render it relevant to you**. Re-tell the story with an emphasis on what is important to you and your community, an act of interpretation. The act of interpretation is thus an act that seeks **integration**, i.e., you with the Divine. Thus seek to strengthen (i.e., interpret) one's personal and the community's relationship with the Divine, striving to become and live the revealed Truth.

Midrash has one **final** consideration. As humble, fallible humans, always **act with modesty in one's pronouncements** and interpretations. We don't have all the answers, and the one's we are convinced we do have, might just turn out to be misplaced interpretations. It's a constant and vigilant quest of discovery.

Question: how is the midrash method of interpretation similar and different from that of an academic method of interpretation, such as "eye juggling"?

Of note: the midrash tradition is a foundation upon which some of the greatest academic interpreters of the human experience, such as Sigmund Freud in psychology and Franz Boas in anthropology, developed their influential theories. Both Freud and Boas come out of the Jewish tradition.