

Chapter 1

☞ What Is the *Aggadah* Problem? ☞

The term *aggadah* is so widely used in the Talmud and early related literature that one would think it easy to ascertain its meaning. But the Talmudic masters do not provide us with formal definitions of their procedural terms. As it were, they seem too busy with their Torah work to step away from it and initiate outsiders into the nature of their analytic tools. Their terminological pragmatics was emulated by those who transmitted their teachings and the redactors who reduced these oral records to the written texts we still study. Since the rabbinic study tradition has never died out, this practice is, to a considerable extent, satisfactory. But particularly for those interested in how the rabbis thought about their belief—their “philosophizing” in a quite loose sense of the word—this absence of definition is disturbing and barely relieved by the common expedient of defining *aggadah* in terms of what it is not, namely, that it is Jewish law’s nonlegal accompaniment.

A philological approach to a positive understanding does not help us much. Though the Hebrew root of the term, *n-g-d*, is well attested in the Bible and carries the primary meaning of “tell,” the noun form with its collective sense appears only in rabbinic literature. Wilhelm Bacher’s pioneering efforts to trace a path from the biblical “telling” to the polysemy of the rabbinic usage has not convinced most later scholars and their several alternative proposals have themselves not resolved the issue.¹

Turning to the Talmud, we quickly encounter a reason for some of this terminological indeterminacy when we look at the use of the Hebrew version of this term, *haggadah*. It has three distinct and essentially unrelated uses. It may refer either to: testimony acceptable in the Jewish legal process;² or, the ritual retelling of the Exodus story at the home dinner-service, the *seder*, which begins the Passover festival;³ or,

overwhelmingly, to a surprising diversity of matters whose lack of an integrating character has led to the catchall definition, "any nonlegal passage." As a result, it has become customary to signal that one is not talking about the Haggadah of the seder (or a Jewish court procedure) but a critical kind of rabbinic discourse, by using the term's Aramaic form, *aggadah*.

We can most easily gain some positive insight into the nature of this discourse by studying what the sages directly said about the *aggadah* and then look at what one of its noted practitioners did in his nonlegal Talmudic statements. Specifically, we shall first focus on the rabbis' attitudes toward it compared to their views of the *halakhah*; then, we shall look at its appearance or absence in different lists of components of the Oral Torah; and, lastly, examine its content in the nonlegal teachings of an acknowledged master-aggadist, R. Samuel b. Nahman.

The Unexpected Rabbinic Ambivalence to *Aggadah*: The Positive Side

In the Talmud and other early rabbinic literature there is widespread appreciation of the *aggadah* as a major constituent of the Oral Torah. R. Joshua b. Levi said that at Mt. Sinai God revealed "Bible and *mishnah* [?⁴ sometimes: the general study of the Oral Torah; mostly: R. Judah the Nasi's orderly compilation of these traditions, the Mishnah]; *talmud* [? not yet set texts but a general term for the analytic study of biblical and rabbinic teachings]; *halakhot* [laws] and *aggadot* [? whose meaning is the subject of this study]. Even what an experienced disciple would in the future teach before his *rav* [master] was already told Moses at Sinai."⁵ The reader should bear in mind that in this book the citations adduced for a given point are almost always a selection of the material available. Most of the aggadic passages cited in it could be used to substantiate many other observations about aggadic discourse, but to exhibit as much diverse rabbinic opinion as practical, most texts have been cited sparingly. Thus, the evidence for the various opinions put forward here is not limited to just what is cited in their support but is substantially cumulative; much of the citation in the entire work grounds much of what is asserted throughout. On this type of "logic," see the material on network organization in chapter 7. More generally, "The *Dorshe Haggadot* [the *Aggadah* Expounders, an otherwise unknown group] say: 'If you wish to recognize The-one-who-spoke-and-the-world-came-into-being, study *haggadah*, for by this you will recognize The-one-who-spoke-and-the-world-came-into-being and cling to His ways.' "⁶

As a consequence, study of the *aggadah* is an important duty for a disciple of the sages. Dt. 32:47 is understood to caution against distinguishing between easy and difficult Bible passages to study, even if we wish to concentrate on the difficult ones. So, too, we may not say we've learned enough *halakhot* "for the verse says not 'a commandment' or 'the commandment' but 'all this commandment.' Hence you must study *midrash* [interpretation], *halakhah*, and *haggadah*," a view that Dt. 8:3 is cited as substantiating.⁷ (This is the first of many passages indicating that Talmudic usage often links the term *aggadah* with biblical interpretation that is distinguished from *midrash*.) Elsewhere, R. Dimi chides Abaye for disputing an exegesis of his by asking, "Why aren't you familiar with the *aggadah*?"⁸ In this vein, too, an anonymous view asserts that one cannot really know the mettle of a disciple of the sages until one has heard him teach *midrash*, *halakhot*, and *haggadot*.⁹ Some rabbis are considered masters of *aggadah* (see below), and so R. Yoḥanan advises that when we hear R. Eliezer b. R. Yose Hagelili discoursing in *aggadah* we should "make our ears like a hopper" to take in his words.¹⁰ Yet the study of *aggadah* should not be considered an easy thing (see below). Thus, when R. Simlai came to R. Yoḥanan to study *aggadah*, the master demurred teaching him on the basis of a family tradition not to teach Babylonians or southerners "for they are thick-witted and Torah lightweights"—but he agreed to teach him a halakhic matter which was, in fact, quite complex.¹¹ Instruction in *aggadah* as well as *halakhah* seems the usual practice, as we learn from the tale of R. Ami and R. Assi each asking their master to teach them the other discipline.¹²

Not only is there an imperative to study *aggadah*, but many of the laws concerning the study of *halakhah* apply equally to aggadic study. Thus, when such study has included ten men (the quorum for a fuller liturgy), at its conclusion the group recites the *kaddish derabbanan*, the standard full doxology with a special insertion for the rabbis and their disciples.¹³ Or, as deep mourning precludes study of the *halakhah*, it equally proscribes study of the *aggadah*,¹⁴ and since the observance of the Ninth of Av fast is based on the laws of mourning, aggadic study is also outlawed then.¹⁵

The great attraction of the *aggadah* is its wide and immediate appeal (an attribute that, as we shall see, also makes it troublesome). It is frequently compared to water, which, in an arid climate, "draws the heart of a man,"¹⁶ but occasionally also to wine.¹⁷ The result is that it can be pleasingly taken in by everybody.¹⁸ R. Joshua, informed of the content of the Sabbath *aggadah* lecture that he had missed, called it a "precious pearl" and chided his students for being reticent to tell him

about it.¹⁹ R. Ḥananiah needed the support of R. Ḥiyya b. Ba to walk in Sephoris, but when R. Ḥiyya told him that everyone was running to hear R. Yoḥanan expound Torah, he blessed God for letting him see the fruits of his labor, since he had taught him “all the *aggadah* but that for Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.”²⁰ (R. Ḥananiah apparently considered *aggadah* a special kind of biblical discipline.) R. Joshua b. Levi, praising the person who regularly does charity, says his reward will be sons who are “wise, wealthy and learned in *aggadah*.”²¹

The *Aggadah* Disparaged

Though the *aggadah* is an integral part of God's Sinaitic revelation of the Oral Torah, it troubles many of the Talmudic masters, and this gives us an early indication of what will grow into the later problem more reflective generations had with this discourse. Thus, the rabbis' great appreciation of the *aggadah* is often offset by efforts to denigrate it and give it a status decidedly subsidiary to the *halakhah*, the dialectic study/teaching of mandatory Jewish religious duty. Thus, the glorious restoration of the Jewish people to God's favor is described in Hos. 14:8 as a state in which “they shall make the grain grow, they shall flower like the vine.” The grain, the basic necessity, is *talmud* (the study/teaching dialectic mostly centered on halakhic matters), and the flowers, which provide beauty but not nutrition, are *aggadah*.²² Here, as often, the deprecation of the *aggadah* is tempered by an appreciation of it as another aspect of Oral Torah. The same comparative strategy appears in a rabbinic comment on riches. The one who is rich in possessions and pomp, that is a master of *aggadot*; the one who is rich in money and oil, that is a master of *pilpul* (advanced study dialectic); and one who is rich in goods and storerooms, that is a master of *shemuot* (legal traditions); but all of them have need of the master of grain, *gemara* (the study/teaching dialectic based on the Mishnah).²³

This hierarchy of value is correlated with a sense of the appropriately greater mental demands laid upon students of the *halakhah*, as we see in a tale about R. Jeremiah and his master, R. Zeira. When R. Jeremiah invited the sage to begin the instruction, R. Zeira begged off on the grounds that he was not feeling well. Whereupon R. Jeremiah suggested that he might perhaps still teach some *aggadah*, which he then did.²⁴ A group version of this sense of values occurs in tales about scholars who come to communities and cannot respond to the questions publicly put to them. When, for example, Levi b. Sisi failed to

answer the first question—on a halakhic matter—put to him by the people of Simonia, they thought that, though Judah the Nasi had recommended him, he might only be a master of *aggadah*, so they then asked him a question in that realm to which, as it turned out, he also could not respond.²⁵ Something of this disparaging attitude lies behind the tale of R. Ḥiyya the Elder’s surprising snub of R. Yishmael b. R. Yose in the bathhouse. When asked about this affront, R. Ḥiyya said he hadn’t seen him since he was busy going over the *aggadah* of the whole book of Psalms.²⁶ That this eminent sage considered it appropriate amid the nakedness of the bathhouse to study aggadic traditions is an indication of the lesser seriousness he attached to them.

We get a rare general description of *aggadah* in R. Ḥinenah b. Papa’s exposition of the first commandment of the Decalogue. He understands it as asserting God’s unity despite the many aspects in which we meet God, in this instance the four “faces” shown in His revelation. Where the Bible shows us a threatening “face,” the Mishnah an ordinary one, and the *talmud* a welcoming, explanatory one, the *aggadah* shows us a “playful face.”²⁷ Some rabbis apparently felt that much aggadic teaching and exegesis is simply frivolous (a theme examined in later chapters) and a foray into “entertainment” unworthy of rabbinic leadership. This attitude lies behind the accounts of sages who come to speak in a community, with the one speaking on halakhic matters later disconsolate that most people rushed off to hear his colleague’s aggadic discourse. When this happened to R. Ḥiyya b. Abba, he was consoled by his aggadic colleague, R. Abbahu, by being reminded that when one merchant sells precious stones and the other small wares, the masses naturally go to what they can afford, the cheap goods.²⁸ R. Yitzḥak blamed the same unhappy state on the economic suffering resulting from Roman rule, insisting that when times were good people had been eager to hear a Mishnah or *talmud* lesson but now only yearned to hear a biblical or aggadic teaching.²⁹

To what extent the *aggadah*’s “playfulness” of content and process engendered its secondary status cannot be determined. Yet it is clear that frivolousness may easily cross the murky border into unacceptability even in a religiosity that allows extraordinary openness to the spiritual imagination. Remarkably enough, the rabbinic tradition preserves a reminder of such indecency. The rabbis interpreted Num. 15:30, “But the person who acts defiantly . . . shall be cut off” [from the Israelite people], to apply to “Menasseh b. Ḥizkiyah who sat and expounded [the technical phrase for formal teaching] *aggadot shel dofi*

[tainted or reproachful *aggadot*]. Did Moses have nothing better to write than 'And the sister of Lotan was Timnah; and Timnah was the concubine of Elifaz?' [Gen. 36:12; or] 'And in the days of the wheat Reuben went and found mandrakes in the field?'" [Gen. 30:14]. A Heavenly Voice then uttered several condemnatory verses condemning such behavior.³⁰ Astonishingly, this cautionary tale is then followed by an *aggadah* in which Menasseh's question is reopened and an acceptably serious response to it is given. Aggadic freedom thus threatens to validate near-heretical exposition.

The rabbinic denigration of *aggadah* also has a substantive foundation. R. Levi interpreted the four gifts of God in Eccl. 6:2 to refer to Bible, *halakhot*, *tosafot* (non-Mishnaic Tannaitic traditions), and great Mishnah collections. But R. Levi said that when the verse refers to one whom God does not give the power to enjoy them, this referred to a master of *aggadah*. Such a teacher, for all his learning, "can neither prohibit nor permit, declare ritually impure nor ritually pure," which functions are God's supreme gifts of religious significance to the master of *talmud*.³¹ Rabbinic Judaism cares preeminently about what one must do—a religious perspective with considerable biblical precedent. The authority for determining this is granted only to those who are masters of the halakhic process and, despite the aggadic competence required to be a sage of the Oral Torah, having that learning alone denies one the most significant Jewish authority.

R. Zeira³² is the most outspoken critic of aggadic method, as we see from an extended passage in yMaas. 3.10. Sitting studying with R. Abba b. Kahana and R. Levi, he upbraided the aggadists, calling their books "magic books." When R. Abba b. Kahana challenged R. Zeira to give him a verse to interpret, R. Zeira produced the unclear Ps. 76:10: "For the wrath of men shall praise You; You will restrain the remainder of the fury." R. Abba b. Kahana interpreted the first phrase as referring to this world and the second phrase as referring to the world to come. This led R. Zeira to demonstrate that one might just as intelligently interpret it the other way around. R. Levi then sought to resolve the conflict by amalgamating the two interpretations into one. This led R. Zeira to say, "This one turns it and this one twists it, but we don't learn anything from it at all! Jeremiah, my son, sharpen up your study of the pruning shear [the halakhic matter they had previously been analyzing], for it is better than all of this [*aggadah*]."

Yonah Frenkel (= Fraenkel) seeks to mitigate the denunciatory effect of this passage and others that disparage the *aggadah*,³³ but not only does the weight of the negative passages count against him, but so, too,

does the practice of serious-minded scholars of rabbinics to belittle the *aggadah* from the rabbis' time to our own. Raphael Patai gave this epitome of their attitude: "[I]n the Yeshivot . . . which to this day are centers of traditional studies as they have been pursued for many centuries, all non-halakhic material is treated with much condescension as mere 'agad' te,' non-serious exercise of fancy, which can well be skipped or glossed over."³⁴ David Stern notes how late this attitude persisted even among university academics. The Hebrew University in Jerusalem, whose Institute of Jewish Studies began when the school was established, took half a century to find a specialist in *midrash* worthy of a professorship (of Hebrew literature, to be sure). Stern calls this "perhaps the ultimate sign that midrash had 'arrived' as a fully recognized subject within the Jewish literary curriculum."³⁵

A somewhat circuitous deprecation of *aggadah* may also be seen in the appearance of books of *aggadot* (discussed later in this chapter) despite a strong polemic attitude against using written works for formal study-recitation.³⁶ Perhaps it was the lesser status of the *aggadah* that made it possible for works devoted to it to begin what some surely saw as the slippery descent to the oxymoron of a written Oral Torah.

This small collection of evidence about the curious realm of religious discourse called the *aggadah* prompts a deeper study of its nature and operation. Since usage seems the soundest way to achieve that, two relatively specific ways the term is often used suggest themselves as the areas with which to begin. The first usage, of which we have already had examples, is in lists of elements of the Oral Torah in which *aggadah* regularly but not inevitably has a place. These should, at least, provide an indication of what sectors of the Oral Torah the rabbis understood to be different from *aggadah* and of the extent to which they employed the "all that is not *halakhah*" definition. The second usage of the term, which derives from the first, is the designation of certain sages as "masters of *aggadah*." Studying what masters of *aggadah* do and what others ask of them should enable us to have an initial sense of what questions should guide our in-depth study of the nature of the *aggadah*.

Aggadah in Lists of Components of Oral Torah: Lists of Two or Three

In the course of many discussions, halakhic and aggadic alike, the rabbis specify various bodies of traditional teaching as parts of Oral Torah. These comments follow no regular form and cannot be said to

supply a homogenous database that might yield a tightly drawn picture of what the rabbis included in Oral Torah and how the parts related to one another. Nonetheless, their statements in this vein are sufficiently frequent that they may give us a significant indication of their attitude to the *aggadah*.

The data quickly discloses that the term *aggadah* mostly occurs in lists with two or three other terms (besides the Bible—the Written Torah), though there are a number of statements that list more items. Nowhere in these enumerations do we find one that states the present general understanding that Oral Torah consists of *halakhah* and nonhalakhic material, the latter termed *aggadah*.³⁷ The closest we come to such a full scale bi-furcation of rabbinic literature is contrasts between public lecturers on halakhic and then on aggadic themes; occasional legal rulings, such as Judah the Nasi's that one who had a nocturnal emission might then teach *halakhah* but not *aggadah*; and the juxtaposition of various study options, such as the anonymous dictum that one asking a formal question about *halakhah* or *aggadah* must do so from a standing position.³⁸ We have here not only a repetition of the rabbinic ambivalence toward *aggadah* for its crowd appeal but also its equivalence with *halakhah* in the one case, offset by its distinction in another.

Two speculative reactions—the one substantive, the other linguistic—seem pertinent. These several rulings all concern public activities. It is not clear what their propounders would say about their relevance in the private realm, such as the solitary disciple's review of the day's learning. Moreover, two of these three texts do not speak of *halakhah* and *aggadah* but rather of *halakhot* and *aggadot*, a usage that, in fact, is predominant in such lists. The distinction between the singular and plural forms suggests the possibility that they refer to different understandings of the terms. The use of the singular lends itself to an integrated vision of the material—a class or a category—while the plural may reflect a less reflective, practical focus on statements which share a certain vague “family resemblance.” But we clearly need much more data before drawing any conclusions here.

The lists with three components (besides Bible) mostly come in two forms, but there are a few anomalous lists as well. The two frequent forms seem almost formulaic, and perhaps the choice of opening term determines what then follows. Thus, the lists of three that begin with *mishnah* mostly continue with *talmud* and *aggadah*, while the ones that begin with *midrash* mostly continue with *halakhot veaggadot* (note the prior discussion of the plural forms).³⁹ One might conjecture that if *talmud*

is understood as study of the Mishnah, then the lists appear to follow a logical order. That, however, makes it odd to then add *aggadah* to the list, since the Mishnah as it has come down to us includes considerable aggadic material. Furthermore, the absence of the term *halakhah* in this list is troubling, though it might simply be assumed to be part of *talmud* as rabbinic study. The other formula raises its own issues. Since it begins with *midrash*, it seems odd that *aggadot* are later mentioned separately, the two terms being so close, as indicated by the fact that the verb *d-r-sh*, which gives the one domain its name, is frequently used to describe someone teaching *aggadah*.⁴⁰ That leads to the suggestion that, in this list, *midrash* is a comprehensive term for rabbinic study, allowing us to substantiate the common rule that *halakhot* and *nonhalakhot*—that is, *aggadot*—are the constituent parts of Oral Torah. Since we do have works of so-called halakhic *midrash*—namely, *Mekhilta*, *Sifra*, and *Sifre*—as well as numerous books of aggadic *midrash*, the proposal has a certain appeal. Before analyzing it further, the anomalous lists of three should be noted. In *San.* 33b we hear that when R. Meir gave a public lecture, he devoted a third of it to halakhic traditions, a third to *aggadah*, and a third to parables. In *Mek. Vayasa* 1 (H/R 157) God's revelation is understood as *aggadot*, *gezerot* [harsh decrees], and *halakhot*. In *AdRN* 14 the two formulas are mixed to produce *mishnah*, *halakhot veaggadot*.

Louis Finkelstein published the most significant defense of the notion that the *midrash* formula was the earliest curriculum of rabbinic Jewish study, and thus, I infer, a comprehensive introduction to Oral Torah.⁴¹ There are many reasons to question this view. The *mishnah* formula occurs as frequently and, in a number of such instances, Finkelstein can only suggest that the text really should read "*midrash*." Moreover, there are even more four-term than three-term formulas in early rabbinic literature and a few that grow to five or six terms. If we can most reliably try to understand the term *aggadah* by exploring its usage, the bulk of the evidence is against its being understood by the rabbis as one of the two parts that alone make up the Oral Torah.

Aggadah in Lists of Components of Oral Torah: Lists of Four or More

Where the lists including only two or three constituents of Oral Torah largely take two forms, the variety in form increases when we examine the large number of lists containing four components (aside

from Bible). The obvious candidate for a longer list formula would seem to be one that includes both *mishnah* and *midrash*, but almost twice as many more lists follow *mishnah* with *talmud*, an initial sequence popular also in lists with more than four members. And whether the lists of four items begin with either *mishnah*, *midrash* or *mishnah*, *talmud*, these pairs then regularly conclude with *halakhot veaggadot* (with some variation).⁴² None of the previous material prepares us for four additional *mishnah*, *talmud* passages (all found in aggadic works) in which *tosefet*, "supplement" (the Tosefta?) replaces *halakhah*.⁴³ Thus, in these lists, we do not find the *halakhot veaggadot* formula at all, adding a further bit of evidence against its serving as an axiom of rabbinic discourse in this period. Two further variants of the list of four occur, one that follows *mishnah* with *gemara* rather than *midrash* or *talmud*,⁴⁴ and the other with the unique reading *midrash vehalakhot, veaggadot vetoseftot*.⁴⁵

All the major terms—*mishnah*, *talmud*, *midrash*, *halakhot ve-aggadot*—are united in a list of five found in a halakhic passage applying the study rules with regard to mourners to the general observance of the Ninth of Av fast.⁴⁶ What may be called a list of six occurs in a charming colloquy between God and the Torah, personified as a woman. She dresses in mourning because people turn verses from the Song of Songs into drinking-place songs. When God inquires what people should be occupying themselves with at banquets, she responds, "If they are masters of *mishnah* let them occupy themselves with *mishnah*, *halakhot ve-haggadot* and if they are masters of *talmud* let them occupy themselves with the laws of [whichever of the three] festivals [on which they are feasting]."⁴⁷ The curriculum R. Akiba mastered in the tale recounted of his becoming a student at age forty provides us with another list of six study topics: *targum* [the Aramaic interpretive translation of the Bible], *midrash*, *halakhot ve-aggadot*, *sihin* [languages of various creatures], and *meshalim* [parables]. "He learned them all."⁴⁸ A list of eight occurs in an interpretation of Dt. 32:13 and includes *mishnah*, *talmud*, inferences from minor to major, analogies, laws, answers to legal inquiries, *halakhot*, and *haggadot*.⁴⁹

However, the undoubted champion of all lists of study material is detailed in praise of R. Yoḥanan.

They said about R. Yoḥanan b. Zakkai that he did not neglect [studying] Bible, *mishnah*, *gemara*, *halakhot*, *aggadot*, the details of the Torah [text], the details of rabbinic traditions, inferences from minor to major, analogical reasoning, eras, numerical equivalents, launderers' fables, fox

fables, the language of spirits, the language of palm trees, and the language of the ministering angels, a great matter—the Work of the Chariot—and a small matter—the arguments of Abaye and Rava.⁵⁰

We must also take into account that, as even an informal survey indicates, there are a small but not negligible number of lists in this vein that do not include *aggadah* at all. Many of these lists seek to provide a concise indication of what a sage ought to know. Their simplest form is perhaps R. Pinḥas's tradition of R. Joshua's observation that before Vespasian destroyed them, Jerusalem had four hundred Houses of Assembly, each with a general school and a *talmud* school, the former teaching Bible and the latter *mishnah*.⁵¹ R. Joshua describes the study of God's Torah-revelation as divided into the Written Torah, the Bible as a whole, and the Oral Torah, whose major elements are *mishnah* and *talmud*.⁵²

What We Learn from *Aggadah* in Rabbinic Lists

From the appearance and absence of the term *aggadah* in a variety of rabbinic lists, we see that it is a significant part of Oral Torah, one far more significant than *tosefet*, for example, and one adduced more frequently than *gemara*, though that term may be included in the frequently appearing *talmud*. *Aggadah* mostly appears as a collective singular, as befits its being another of the subgenres of the Oral Torah. However, references to this discourse regularly use the plural form, *aggadot*, with a conjunction linking it to *halakhot* (*halakhot ve-aggadot*, though the conjunction may merely indicate the conclusion of the list as a whole). In contemporary discussions about rabbinic Judaism the singular and plural forms are generally taken as equivalents, but a nuance should also be considered: that while the singular points to an integrated sense of the domain, the plural may signify only an atomistic understanding. These rabbis may only be referring to bodies of traditions rather than a developed realm of discourse (a way of speaking that has not yet developed into a "game"). And despite the possible conjunction of *halakhah* and *aggadah* noted above, the one realm where the two types of discourse are regularly linked and contrasted is public presentations. The audience may be either the community at large or the disciples, but the lecturer is described as speaking in one or the other of the modes or perhaps dividing his time between them in a certain way. Thus far, only in such

circumstances does our evidence indicate that, as the common rule has it, rabbinic discourse operates in either a halakhic or a nonhalakhic, aggadic, mode.

These observations provide a context for understanding some additional data concerning the *aggadah*. We are not surprised when we hear from R. Tanḥuma that he knows how to resolve the clash between the Torah's specification of the dimensions of the Tabernacle and the Holy of Holies because of a *masoret aggadah*, an aggadic tradition.⁵³ Some further examples of data explicitly identified as aggadic traditions are that Nebuchadnezzar was murdered by his mother's husband,⁵⁴ that Jacob's children were the destined conquerors of Esau's descendants,⁵⁵ and that Seraḥ [daughter of Asher] was made a mill slave in Egypt.⁵⁶ Such traditions seem utterly consonant with the orality of the Oral Torah. Then, too, we hear of specialists in this branch of the teaching. Some rabbis—some young enough not to have completed their discipleship—serve their teacher as his *mesader aggadeta*, literally, "orderer" (more likely, "reciter" or "reviewer" of *aggadah*), another clearly oral activity.⁵⁷ Others, as we heard above, are called *baalei aggadah*, masters of this material.⁵⁸ But a variety of terms is used for such scholars, like *baki baaggadah*, steeped in *aggadah*, as we hear of R. Yishmael⁵⁹ and of R. Joshua b. Levi,⁶⁰ and *rabanan deaggadeta*, sages who are specialists in *aggadah*.⁶¹ Elsewhere we are warned not to confuse R. Isaac b. Aḥa, who is a halakhist, *deshemaata*, and R. Isaac b. Pinḥas, who is an aggadist, *deaggadah*.⁶² Occasionally we read of certain teachers who have no aggadic title but are nonetheless reported to have studied *aggadah* intently, such as R. Papa and R. Huna.⁶³ The most outstanding of these untitled aggadic masters is R. Elazar Hamodai, who four times is honored as the resolver of disputes about biblical meanings, with the senior sage involved reciting the formula, "[The matter remaining unsettled] We still need [the teaching of] the Modai."⁶⁴ The prevalence of such experts may perhaps be gauged from R. Joshua b. Levi's account of his effort—despite himself being a recognized aggadic expert—to get a satisfactory explanation of the difficult verse, Gen. 46:1. "I went back and forth among all the *baalei aggadah* in the south and couldn't get a satisfactory answer until I came to Judah b. Pedayah."⁶⁵

That the *aggadah* is so fully a part of the traditions of Oral Torah makes it all the more surprising that the Talmud has numerous references to its being written down, something we do not hear of any other components of the Oral Torah noted above. This practice evoked

considerable controversy, and only occasionally are books of *aggadah* spoken of positively, as when R. Ḥisda directed his student R. Taḥlia b. Abina to write [the meaning of] two uncommon Hebrew words into his *aggadah* book.⁶⁶ Perhaps we may say the same of R. Yaakov b. Aḥa's nonjudgmental citation of a teaching he had seen in an *aggadah* book. However, that dictum turns out to be a halakhic statement pertinent to the rabbinic discussion of the especially lenient procedural laws that apply to prosecutions of non-Jews as against those that apply to Jews.⁶⁷ Many statements about aggadic books are ambivalent toward them, some strikingly so. Thus, R. Joshua b. Levi's anathema of those who write such books, speak from them, or listen to such presentations is followed by his account of the one occasion when he looked into one and discovered an admittedly fine insight into Abraham's longevity. But the account then notes, "Even so, I was fearful that night."⁶⁸ The same play of two attitudes occurs in the report that R. Yoḥanan and Resh Lakish deeply studied an aggadic book on Shabbat. This immediately engenders the (rhetorical?) objection, "But this material was not given so as to be written," and the response—ultimately the classic justification for writing down other bodies of the Oral Torah—"When necessity demands it [we invoke Ps. 119:26] 'It is time to work for *Adonai*, [therefore] they [may] break with your Torah.'"⁶⁹ The ambivalence may also be seen in the practice of respected figures. Both R. Yoḥanan and R. Naḥman are reported to have given their *aggadah* books the respect due them by asking their disciples to hold them when they went into the privy. Yet they did not then take off their phylacteries. They explained, saying that since the rabbis had mandated the phylacteries they would protect the sages in this dangerous locale, but the rabbis had not sanctioned aggadic books, so carrying them into the privy would add to their [spiritual] risk.⁷⁰ And in three places we hear that Rava authorized seizing *aggadah* books and other property inherited by orphans and returning them to a believable claimant to their ownership, because they were articles people customarily lent or hired out.⁷¹

This line of inquiry has expanded our understanding of *aggadah* as one among other constituents of the Oral Torah, but it has only given us some hints about its special area of concern and, more importantly for our purposes, even less information about its particular way of shaping the content it presents. For an initial foray into these matters we take a look at the dicta ascribed to a recognized *baal aggadah*, R. Samuel b. Naḥman (sometimes, "Naḥmani").

The Aggadic Practice of R. Samuel b. Naḥman

Four stories with a common rhetorical form testify to R. Samuel b. Naḥman's aggadic eminence.⁷² They begin with the flattering formula: "Because I have heard that you are a *baal aggadah*," and then ask "what is the meaning of . . .," a biblical verse troubling them. R. Simon b. Yehotzedek has a feasibility problem and wants to know the source of the light God created for the universe (Gen. 1:3). The other three inquirers are troubled by certain biblical assertions: R. Judah the Nasi II, that God rides the clouds (Ps. 68:5); R. Ami, that God's righteousness extends to the [heavenly] heights (Ps. 71:19); and R. Ḥelbo, that God has now made the clouds a barrier to prayer (Lam. 3:43). R. Samuel b. Naḥman then unhesitatingly gives an explanatory response and generally, but not always, climaxes his statement with a supporting biblical verse.

These accounts provide unique insight into the nature and process of aggadic discourse, for they are the only ones that identify the discourse they are involved in as *aggadah*. R. Simon b. Naḥman is approached explicitly because he is known to be an expert in that realm and is asked a question pertinent to his expertise. There is good reason for considering the rest of the texts adduced in this volume (including many others of R. Samuel b. Naḥman) as *aggadah*, but those texts do not so label themselves; we judge them to be aggadic. The specificity of these four tales about R. Samuel b. Naḥman may tempt us to generalize from them and insist that they constitute a template for all aggadic discourse, but we must soberly consider them only a limited, if excellent, example of *aggadah*. However, limited as this data is, it provides us with valuable guidance for moving on to study our many other texts in considerable depth.

Thus, the questions posed to the aggadic master all concern meaning rather than action. Something in what the Bible says clashes with the way in which these rabbis normally understand things to occur. R. Simon b. Yehotzedek cannot understand how light can be created merely by God's words, and R. Judah the Nasi II, R. Ami and R. Ḥelbo are taken aback by biblical wording that violates their understanding of accepted Jewish teaching. To that R. Samuel b. Naḥman responds in cultural or biblical terms that his hearer will find meaningful and then generally elaborates on his response by the citation of a supporting biblical verse.⁷³ Mostly he does not seek to demonstrate that something in the troubling text itself prompts his response, though he

demonstrates this possibility to R. Judah the Nasi II by reading what seems clearly meant as God's name (here with a preposition) as a word meaning "government," and thus a textual prop for his argument by analogy.⁷⁴ Furthermore, he draws on a considerable body of nonbiblical knowledge for many of his answers. Thus, the response to R. Ami assumes he agrees that the (heavenly) heights—an impersonal designation—are occupied by heavenly creatures; the instruction to R. Helbo is based on the analogy of prayer to a *mikveh*, "ritual bath," and of repentance to the sea; and that given to R. Judah the Nasi II, appropriately enough, refers to the nature of government.⁷⁵

From this limited sample we may say that *aggadah* is principally concerned with biblical interpretation, though in ways that apparently distinguish it from *mikra*, Bible (the Written Torah), and *midrash*, biblical exegesis that embraces halakhic as well as aggadic topics. The relationship of *midrash* and *aggadah* in this period is not clear, though the former seems closely bound to its textual base, while the latter seems here less focused on exegesis—even imaginatively creative exegesis—than on traditions of the text's meaning whose origins are not specified. Aggadists presume that the text is meant to be intelligible to the informed but not specialist reader and that there is an ideal integrity to biblical meaning that the rabbis seek to elucidate and propound to their students and the public. In that effort, they find analogies to ordinary life a useful tool in elucidating this integrated meaning. Yet—and here we move from the data of the four accounts to the contexts in which we now find them—no matter how convincing their teachings seem to us, they are not presented as mandatory, as the way we are required to understand a given text. In fact, aggadic views are often presented to us, as here, as one of a number of informed opinions about this theme.⁷⁶ (It should come as little surprise, then, that, as we shall see later, the multiplication of additional insights into a text is considered religiously meritorious.)

None of our four paradigmatic stories of R. Samuel b. Nahman occurs in the Babylonian Talmud, the classic work that grounds all later Judaism and thus is the major focus of our study. To see what R. Samuel b. Nahman's aggadic practice was as the Bavli records it, we must accept the limited certainty that comes with identifying the data by the commonly accepted definition of *aggadah*: that which is not *halakhah*. By that standard, the aggadic passages attributed to him in the Talmud seem to follow four major patterns: the largest number, by far, explain a verse but with no textual exegesis; some do build on an

exegesis of a biblical text; others merely conclude with a verifying text; and the remaining passages make their point without any reference to a biblical text. Let us look at some examples of each category.

Most of the time, R. Samuel b. Naḥman will indicate what a verse teaches but then provides little indication of how he got from the text itself to what he tells us about it. Thus, when Boaz invites Ruth not only to eat her meal near him at the threshing floor but also suggests that she feel free to dip it into the vinegar condiment, we are told that this foretells that one of her descendants will be the nefarious King Menasseh.⁷⁷ The metaphors used by the proverb about finding joy in the wife of one's youth indicate that there is something delightfully erotic about Torah study.⁷⁸ When the Hallelujah Psalm moves from praising God's mighty acts to glorifying the person who does righteousness at all times, that high ideal becomes an encomium for one who raises orphans and then enables them to marry.⁷⁹ The prophet's ecstatic vision of the precious stones that will decorate the walls of postexilic Jewish settlements is obscure enough in some of its terms that R. Samuel b. Naḥman pictures the archangels Michael and Gabriel in heaven debating the meaning of the word *kadkhod*.⁸⁰

He can, however, also move to his message by direct exegesis. Sometimes this involves meticulous attention to the details of the text. If the place name Ramat-Zophim concludes with a plural there must be two such places;⁸¹ if we read that one "goes up" to Timnah as well as one "goes down" to get there, that must be because there are two such places,⁸² and if a verb in the singular introduces the Judean exiles to Babylonia—namely, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah—it must be because only Daniel was a descendant of the tribal progenitor Judah.⁸³ At other times, the exegesis seems more a product of the imagination. At its simplest, this involves direct word-association, as when the exegete notes that the same verb is used to describe a victory of Moses as well as one of Joshua, indicating that the sun stood still for both of them.⁸⁴ Mostly, however, the associations are more creative than textually motivated: as when the reward of "precious," *toafot*, silver promised in Job 22:25 means it will fly directly to you, since the verb "to fly," *uf*, is implied by the adjective;⁸⁵ or when the vowels of *befarekh*, "rigor[?]," used to describe the workload of Egyptian slavery in Ex. 1:13, are changed and the letter *heh* is added to make *beferikah*, which may, perhaps, be freely read as "by the book";⁸⁶ and where King Asa's bier was piled with *besamim uzenim*, diverse [?] spices, R. Samuel b. Naḥman, noting the similarity of *uzanim* to the verbal root *z-n-h*, meaning "to whore,"

disparages this rabbinic villain by saying that even in death he wallowed in aphrodisiacs.⁸⁷ His imagination can also reach quite far: the condemnation of foolish behavior in Prov. 30:32 is inverted to praise one who suffers in order to learn and condemns the withdrawn student;⁸⁸ the shift of noun from *naarah*, lass, to *almah*, young woman, in Ex. 2:8 points by means of the root of that term (^c- *l-m*) to Jochebed having hid her familial interest in rescuing the baby Moses from the Nile;⁸⁹ and the vision in Ez. 47:12 of streams emerging from a restored Temple producing trees whose leaves heal illness becomes in the aggadist's view leaves that make scholars' faces beautiful.⁹⁰

On occasion R. Samuel b. Naḥman will state his message first and only adduce a substantiating biblical text as the climax and conclusion of his teaching. Thus, his response to a community beset by famine and pestilence asking which of these to petition God to take away counsels praying instead for abundance, since it is given for the living, a notion he sees in Ps. 145:16;⁹¹ in Ex. 2:3 the basket with the baby Moses is laid in the *suf* along the Nile's banks, which brings to mind the reeds of Is. 19:5;⁹² agreeing with sages who deprecate starting a task but not finishing it, R. Samuel b. Naḥman adds to the punishments of incompleteness that the miscreant will bury his wife and children, as happened to Judah, according to Gen. 38:12 and 46:12;⁹³ he touchingly says, "All things can be replaced except the wife of one's youth" and cites Is. 54:6 to "prove" it;⁹⁴ and after two other statements are given about the length of time the sun stayed still for Joshua, he is cited as agreeing that it did the same for Moses and then quoting Dt. 2:25.⁹⁵ This final Talmudic text is of particular interest, because R. Samuel b. Naḥman introduces his text by saying, "*Migufeih* [from the body of the text] you learn this," but the verse only talks about peoples fearing Moses so that "they shall tremble and quake because of you." He assumes that everyone will hear in these words the echo of what was later said to Joshua, thus allowing the identification of what happened to the one to be true of the other. It is an extraordinary example of what "close reading" can become when practiced by an aggadist.

Were this all the aggadic material in the Talmud attributable to R. Samuel b. Naḥman, we would be justified in presuming that aggadic discourse was a special variety of biblical study, one less focused on the text than *mikra* or on its exegesis than is nonlegal *midrash* (with which, clearly, it overlaps). But we also find a small but significant number of his nonhalakhic teachings that have no relation to a specific biblical text. Two of these bear on biblical personalities. In the first

case, a disciple asks why, when Jacob removed the birthright from Reuben, he bestowed it on Joseph. He is answered by an analogy from the case of a grateful orphan who, on becoming rich, showered his benefactor with kindness (as Joseph did to Jacob and his extended family in Egypt).⁹⁶ The second case is simpler, R. Samuel b. Naḥman simply saying that the angel who wrestled with Jacob at the ford of the Jabbok had the appearance of a heathen.⁹⁷ The three other instances are completely independent of the Bible: the *maamad*, the community representatives at the Temple for a certain period, had to fast on Sunday because that was the third day after the creation of man;⁹⁸ one who has the merit of having studied *mikra* and *mishnah* but has never given a disciple's personal service to a master is simply a boor;⁹⁹ and the returnees from exile could find the site of the innermost structure in the utterly destroyed Temple area by the smell that the old incense still gave off, and so, too, they could find the site of the altar by the odor of the limbs that had been sacrificed there.¹⁰⁰

This data, preliminary though it be, prompts a critical question with regard to the nature of *aggadah*: how did what appears at this stage to be an area focusing on biblical meanings and associations come to be understood as one embracing every nonlegal statement, regardless of a relation to the Bible? Moreover, most of R. Samuel b. Naḥman's dicta occur as one of several differing opinions, and some of these are objected to by other sages on the basis of contrary data or opinion. Considering, too, the hints we have had about how strongly imaginative aggadic exegesis can be, one cannot help but wonder with R. Zeira what the point is of such freely flowing aggadic discourse.

Extending our coverage of R. Samuel b. Naḥman's teaching to include the Jerusalem Talmud (the Yerushalmi) and early *midrash* collections like *Genesis Rabbah*, *Leviticus Rabbah*, and *Lamentations Rabbah* does not resolve these issues. If anything, such broader study of his aggadic discourse gives us further reason for puzzling over them. The Yerushalmi has forty-six different aggadic passages attributed to R. Samuel b. Naḥman (plus ten others that substantially duplicate some of these), about the same amount of aggadic material we find in the Bavli. These readily conform to the four patterns of his aggadic utterance in the Babylonian Talmud. Again the bulk of his *aggadah* is in the form of general, nonexegetic comments on biblical verses, but the Yerushalmi has hardly any aggadic statements by him grounding his interpretation of a verse on its close reading.¹⁰¹ The rest of his comments are about evenly divided between those climaxing the teaching by citing a supporting bib-

lical verse and dicta made without reference to a verse, about the same distribution of these forms that we found in the Bavli.¹⁰²

Turning our attention now to citations of R. Samuel b. Naḥman in *Genesis Rabbah*, *Leviticus Rabbah*, and *Lamentations Rabbah* does not materially alter the view of *aggadah* we have thus far gained. True, the proportion of his nonhalakhic comments that do not cite a biblical verse is drastically lessened in these works—seven out of a total of one hundred twenty-eight—but that is not surprising in works devoted to teaching about the Bible. In each of these *midrash* works the use of a text to clinch a previously stated position is the predominant form of the passage, but, in contrast to the Yerushalmi, *Gen. R.* and *Lev. R.* report him often closely reading the text he is expounding, as seems appropriate for a *midrash* book.¹⁰³ We encounter some relatively lengthy aggadic passages in these books, though it is difficult to determine how much of them after the introductory exposition is his teaching or the work of energetic redactors. In the uncommon series of introductory presentations that precede the comments on the book of Lamentations, there is one of considerable length that demonstrates considerable artistic merit and is attributed to R. Samuel b. Naḥman (but would be quite uncommon for a single sage).¹⁰⁴ Rhetorical and redactional considerations seem to lie behind other such lengthy statements. *Genesis Rabbah* and *Leviticus Rabbah* record slightly different versions of the master's rule that the verb form *vayehi*, "and it came to pass," connotes trouble, while the same verb in the form *vehayah*, "and it happened," connotes joy. This assertion unleashes a cascade of objections that allow the aggadist to teach the proper interpretation of many other Bible texts. This structure is rhetorically grounded, since aggadic discourse is broadly hospitable to diverse opinion, as demonstrated by R. Yoḥanan's contrary view that introduces this passage.¹⁰⁵ However, other such rhetorical devices may similarly be deployed. Commenting on why Gen. 38:2 says "These are the generations of Jacob" and then immediately names Joseph and not Reuben, Jacob's firstborn, the aggadist responds with a torrent of parallel happenings in the lives of Jacob and Joseph (but without mentioning the biblical verses to substantiate this, apparently because he expects his hearers will be able to do this for themselves).¹⁰⁶ Or, in another such lengthy, rhetorically shaped passage, we have the unhesitating comparison of God's mourning over the destruction of the Temple, Lam. 3:28, to the mourning of an earthly king. Anthropomorphic teaching shows its special power as R. Samuel b. Naḥman introduces his theme by having

God inquire of the Ministering Angels, "What does a human king do [in such a situation]?" and, on receiving their response, poignantly saying, "That is what I will do."¹⁰⁷

Some exceptional, briefer texts demand citation here. One charmingly relates the childhood circumstances (and gives us some insight into how the rabbis lived) in which R. Samuel b. Naḥman heard about R. Meir's Torah scroll. This text did not have the usual statement that the creation was very (*meod*) good, but that death (*ma'et*) was good. The tale says he heard about this when R. Simeon b. Elazar discussed it one day as the youngster was seated on his grandfather's shoulder during the walk from their town to Kefar Ḥana.¹⁰⁸ Perhaps the most astonishing of all the imaginative exegeses of R. Samuel b. Naḥman is that of Gen. 35:8, which says that the oak under which Deborah, Rebecca's nurse, was buried was therefore called *Alon Bakhut*, customarily understood as "the oak of weeping." R. Samuel b. Naḥman blithely says of this name, "It is Greek, in which *alon* means 'another,' " and he goes on to say, without direct textual basis, that his mother had also died.¹⁰⁹ If aggadic discourse allows one to interpret the Bible as written in languages other than Hebrew (and Aramaic), one wonders what limits, if any, there are for its grant of freedom and what sense of this discourse its hearers must have brought to such potentially uninhibited instruction—and this becomes an important aspect of the "*aggadah* problem" already at this early stage in rabbinic discourse.

We might gain some insight into these matters if we could resolve the baffling dictum of R. Samuel b. Naḥman extending the view of his teacher, R. Jonathan, that God permitted three people to ask things of Him, Solomon, Ahaz, and King Messiah. To this R. Samuel b. Naḥman is reported to have said, "We can adduce two more from the *haggadah*." He then cites two verses indicating that Abraham and Jacob thanked God for what God would be giving them—from which the master aggadist infers that the assurance that prompted the thanks must have come from God's previously inviting them to ask.¹¹⁰ But what does R. Samuel b. Naḥman teach us about the "*haggadah*" here? Surely R. Jonathan's remarks are also "*haggadah*," being a nonlegal statement based on explicit biblical instructions. Is the disciple saying that his additions, despite their being a considerably inferential interpretation of texts, are also *haggadah*? If that is all he is saying, then why only two additions, since such imaginative reading would allow for many further candidates for this honor? Or is R. Samuel b. Naḥman saying that he is applying a special form of discourse that yields his lesson? Intriguing as

the usage is here, I do not see that we can find anything in this text that enables us to resolve the enigma of the character of "*haggadah*."

If we are to get some deeper insight into the nature and process of *aggadah* we must change the scope of our investigation, moving from a direct study of the term "*aggadah*" to a study of a substantial sample of the Rabbis' nonhalakhic discourse. This shift to a description and analysis of NHD itself again comes with the lessened certainty that all the data is *aggadah*, since these statements are not explicitly designated as in that category. However, working inductively with the material that the common scholarly definition (NHD) says is *aggadah* should allow us to say what can be said with a textual basis about its character and the manner in which its kind of thinking is shaped. Our inquiry, therefore, will now proceed in two major steps. First, we shall select a substantial sample of NHD in the Babylonian Talmud, the classic Jewish rabbinic text, and see what its details indicate about the nature and process of aggadic discourse. Second, after extending our database to include further material from the Talmud as well as data from the Yerushalmi and the early *midrash* books, we shall seek to determine what limits aggadic discourse and then consider what might explain the uncommon character of the *aggadah*. The book closes with a brief personal reflection on how these findings might bear on the work of Jewish theology today.