



2015

Mormons and Midrash: On the Composition of Expansive Interpretation in *Genesis Rabbah* and the Book of Moses

Avram R. Shannon

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>



Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Shannon, Avram R. (2015) "Mormons and Midrash: On the Composition of Expansive Interpretation in *Genesis Rabbah* and the Book of Moses," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 54 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol54/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Mormons and Midrash

On the Composition of Expansive Interpretation in *Genesis Rabbah* and the Book of Moses

Avram R. Shannon

One of the intriguing things about religious texts is how long of a life and how long of an afterlife they have. Once a text becomes a part of a “canon,” once it becomes in a way fixed, it becomes open to further discussion and elaboration.¹ Different groups and religious traditions create different genres of interpretation to work with and understand their scriptures according to the needs of their traditions. One form of interpretation involves reopening the Bible and expanding on the narrative of the already canonized text, such as is found in the rabbinic genre of midrash and in Joseph Smith’s New Translation (JST) of the Bible.

In fact, some scholars have compared Joseph Smith’s revisions and expansions of the biblical text to rabbinic midrash and targum.² This may be a helpful comparison, but it derives in many ways from a value system where the original intent of the authors equals good, while

1. James Kugel and Rowan A. Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 29–30.

2. Anthony A. Hutchinson, “A Mormon Midrash? LDS Creation Narratives Reconsidered,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 21, no. 4 (1988): 11–72; Hutchinson, “LDS Approaches to the Holy Bible,” *Dialogue* 15, no. 1 (1982): 99–124. See also Kevin L. Barney, “The Joseph Smith Translation and Ancient Texts of the Bible,” *Dialogue* 19, no. 3 (1987): 85–102; and Kevin L. Barney, “Isaiah Interwoven,” *The FARMS Review* 15, no. 1 (2003): 353–402. Krister Stendahl calls parts of a similar expansion in the Book of Mormon “targumic.” Krister Stendahl, “The Sermon on the Mount and Third Nephi,” in *Reflections on Mormonism: Judeo-Christian Parallels*, ed. Truman G. Madsen (Provo: Religious Studies Center, 1978): 139–54.

Avram R. Shannon

This project has its roots in my long-standing interest in the Joseph Smith Translation and its singular contributions to the scriptures. As I grew up and learned about the biblical culture that Joseph Smith and the earliest members of the Church lived in, I was amazed in some ways by the acceptance of the JST by early Church members steeped in the Bible and in Protestant tradition. I often asked myself, “How did the early Saints accept this? What made bringing forth not just new scripture but modifying the Bible acceptable?”



It was not until my graduate work in Jewish Studies that a possible solution appeared. The ancient Jewish midrashic literature was produced by the early rabbis who were part of a biblically literate culture. I had even heard and seen the JST compared to midrash on the Internet and by various individuals over the years. I filed that away as something to look at in the future. The call for papers for the Latter-day Saints and the Bible section at the 2014 Annual Meeting of the Society for Biblical Literature provided the impetus for finally comparing midrash with the JST in greater depth.

As I researched my presentation for the SBL, I discovered both differences and similarities. Researching for this paper increased my appreciation of Joseph Smith’s prophetic calling. The answer to my questions about how the early Saints accepted the JST was found in their (and my own) notions of prophetic authority. Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible was a work that naturally flowed out of his authority as a prophet of God. The Bible was the work of prophets, and the JST was also the work of a prophet. It was his continuity with ancient modes of prophecy that provided the authority for the JST.

interpretation, of whatever stripe, equals bad. The use of this comparison seems often to be a sort of soft pejorative against both the JST and Jewish interpretation, prioritizing historical-critical readings of the Bible over these kinds of interpretation.³ These scholars have also misunderstood midrash in the context of rabbinic literature.⁴ It should be noted that the trend of comparing everything to midrash is a fairly common one, even outside the world of Mormon studies. There is a tendency in scholarship to label any kind of interpretive work “midrash.”⁵ Doing so without attention to the rabbinic character of this genre of literature tends to create more problems than it solves.⁶ Part of the difficulty that arises in this endeavor comes from a certain laxness of usage in applying the term midrash to any kind of expansion or retelling of the biblical narrative, which does not fully express how midrash actually works.⁷

3. For the use of Judaism as a kind of backhanded code in polemics, see J. Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1990), 81–83. A more rounding condemnation of this tendency in Western scholarship is laid out in Elliot Horowitz, “The Use and Abuse of Anti-Judaism,” *The Journal of Religion* 95, no. 1 (2015): 94–106.

4. Anthony Hutchinson suggests that “[midrash’s] fullest examples are found in the . . . targumin.” Hutchinson, “Mormon Midrash,” 14. This statement elides together midrash, which is the topic of this article, and targum, which are Aramaic translations of the books of the Hebrew Bible. The two literatures are related, but they are by no means identical. See the discussion in Zeev Safrai, “The Targums as Part of Rabbinic Literature,” in *The Literature of the Sages*, vol. 3b, ed. Shmuel Safrai, Zeev Safrai, Joshua Schwartz, and Peter J. Tomson (Assen, Netherlands: Royal Van Gorcum and Fortress Press, 2006): 243–78; Robert P. Gordon, “Targum as Midrash: Contemporizing in the Targum to the Prophets,” *Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (1988): 61–73; Arnon Atzmon, “The Targum on the Esther Scroll: A Midrashic Targum or a Targumic Midrash?” [in Hebrew], *Hebrew Union College Annual* 80 (2009): 1–19.

5. Herman L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. Markus Bockmuehl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 237.

6. Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction*, 258.

7. Thus, the 1998 animated children’s film *Prince of Egypt* has been called a *midrash*. Ismar Schorsch, “Midrash in the Prince of Egypt,” *Learn: Inspired Jewish Learning*, <http://learn.jtsa.edu/content/commentary/shemot/5759/midrash-prince-egypt>. With such loose criteria, any kind of narrative exegesis is subject to being referred to as *midrash*. Such is the case in an article on *midrash* in the Book of Mormon by Angela Crowley, “Midrash: Ancient Jewish Interpretation and Commentary in the Book of Mormon,” *The Zarahemla Record* 57 (1991): 2–4. Crowley at least attempts to show how the midrashic method is applied in the Book of Mormon, although she appears to be basing her approach on New Testament examples rather than rabbinic ones, which makes her work doubly theoretical.

Related to this difficulty is that, in general, the JST has been compared *to* midrash but not really *with* midrash. That is to say, these comparisons have involved a superficial contrasting of broad genres, rather than actually comparing the two literatures. Evaluating the content of these literatures shows that there are places where comparison can be productive but also places where key formal differences can be found.

It is, therefore, insufficient to simply say that the JST is like midrash without understanding both what midrash and the JST are and what they do. In this article, I will first briefly discuss the broad characteristics of midrash and the JST to provide a groundwork for understanding these two literatures. This process of comparing the JST with midrash will lay bare similarities and differences in the impetus behind their production, as well as how they were received by their respective communities. Both midrash and the JST interpret the text from within the world of the text, bringing forth new biblical narratives that live within that world. For the communities that read these literatures, these new narratives stand alongside the previous narratives and have as much normative power as the scripture from which they derive. In both of these literatures, it is the claim to Mosaic authority that makes this type of interpretation possible. This article, then, examines a few examples expanding upon the account of creation and Garden of Eden narrative in Genesis 1–3, showing how the interpretation plays out in the JST and in an early midrash, both in terms of similarities and differences. This portion of Genesis affords rich material in both the JST and in the midrashic literature in about equal measure.⁸

8. I considered using Enoch and Abraham, but they were not equally represented in the two sources. The JST had much more material on Enoch than the Midrash did, while the Midrash had more material on Abraham than the JST did. Enoch is an important figure in both Latter-day Saint thinking and early Jewish apocalyptic literature, but he is not as important in rabbinic Judaism, perhaps as a response to the apocalyptic literature. Hugh Nibley has treated both of these figures at length, including some discussion of the midrashic literature in *Enoch the Prophet*, vol. 2 of *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies [FARMS]; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986); and *Abraham in Egypt*, vol. 14 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, ed. Gary P. Gillum (Provo, Utah: FARMS; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000). For a more recent discussion on Enoch in LDS scripture that contains less midrashic material, see Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and David J. Larsen, *In God's Image and Likeness 2: Enoch, Noah and the Tower of Babel* (Salt Lake City: The Interpreter Foundation and Eborn Books: 2014), 1–188. The book of Abraham provides more material in

Midrash

Midrash involves a very close reading of the biblical text but does so in ways and following a logic that can sometimes be different from traditional post-Enlightenment modes of thinking.⁹ Therefore, rabbinic readings of scripture sometimes fly in the face of scholarly readings of the scriptures. In order to be midrash, a story or legal interpretation must be connected to the biblical text, which provides, then, the parameters for rabbinic interpretations.¹⁰ Generally speaking, midrash does not take on the form of the biblical narrative, and so the narrative units that comprise it are fairly small and discrete. This is a key difference between midrash and the Joseph Smith Translation. Even as the Midrash provides expanded narratives, it never loses the appearance of being commentary.

The rabbinic midrashic method produced commentary on both legal materials and stories because the rabbinic Sages were concerned with both kinds of exegesis. This highlights a difficulty that those who have previously compared the Joseph Smith Translation to midrash have not addressed. Making such a comparison without attention to the different kinds of midrash opens one to the possibility of misrepresenting both the Joseph Smith Translation and midrash. Scholars of midrash make a distinction between halakhic midrashim, which are midrashim on the legal books of the Torah, and aggadic midrashim, which are on the other books in scripture.¹¹ The different categories of interpretation (legal and narrative) are not absolute in the midrashic corpus, but these internal divisions and complexities serve as warnings against too facile comparisons.¹²

Latter-day Saint scripture for comparison, but its production was different than that of Joseph Smith's New Translation, and it seemed best to keep the initial question as constrained as possible.

9. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, "Myth, Inference, and the Relativism of Reason: An Argument from the History of Judaism," in *Myth and Philosophy*, ed. Frank Reynolds and David Tracy (Albany: State University of New York, 1990): 247–85; Naomi Janowitz and Andrew J. Lazarus, "Rabbinic Methods of Inference and the Rationality Debate," *The Journal of Religion* 72, no. 4 (1992): 491–511.

10. According to Irving Jacobs, the rabbinic Sages "acknowledged plain meaning—as they perceived it—to be the boundary within which the midrashic process was obliged to function." Irving Jacobs, *The Midrashic Process* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 3; emphasis in original.

11. This division is much more complicated than explained above, but it will do for the present discussion. Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction*, 239–40.

12. *Halakhah* is a term for a Jewish legal ruling. It is these rulings that rabbinic literature is most concerned with. *Aggadah* is a term that comes from an

Often when people suggest that a nonrabbinic text, such as parts of the New Testament Gospels or the JST, is midrashic, it is not because they follow the midrashic method, but because they produce a product that Old Testament scholars have tended to view as subservient to the biblical text.

In addition to the halakhic and aggadic division, midrash is also further divided by how the commentary is arranged: exegetical midrashim present the biblical interpretation as a running commentary of the Bible, verse by verse, while homiletical midrashim record a series of sermons on scripture.¹³ This article derives its examples from *Genesis Rabbah*, which is among the oldest of the aggadic exegetical midrashim.¹⁴ This text presents a running commentary on the Hebrew text of the biblical book of Genesis and is mostly composed in Aramaic. It is generally dated to the first half of the fifth century CE.¹⁵

The Sages themselves spoke about various hermeneutical principles that guided the formation of midrash.¹⁶ It seems that in many cases these principles were after-the-fact rationalizations of already extant midrashic exegesis.¹⁷ A few broad principles stand out. The first is the omniscience of the biblical text—every portion of the text has meaning for every other part.¹⁸ The next is that every word has meaning,

Aramaic word “telling” and represents essentially all those parts of rabbinic literature that are not *halakhah*.

13. Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction*, 240.

14. Text for *Genesis Rabbah* is taken from J. Theodor and Ch. Albeck, *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah with Critical Apparatus and Commentary* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Wahrman Books, 1965). Readers interested in an English translation may find one in Jacob Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis, a New American Translation*, 3 vols. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985).

15. Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction*, 304. Compare this to the Mishnah, dated to around 200 CE and to its two companion Talmuds, dated to about 600 CE for the Palestinian Talmud and about 700 CE for the Babylonian Talmud.

16. Menahem I. Kahana, “The Halakhic Midrashim,” in *The Literature of the Sages*, vol. 2, ed. Shmuel Safrai, Zeev Safrai, Joshua Schwartz, and Peter J. Tomson (Assen, Netherlands: Royal Van Gorcum, 2006): 3–107, especially 13–15.

17. The most complete discussion on midrash and method is Isaak Heinemann, *Darkhe ha-Aggada* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1949). There is a very accessible English discussion of Midrash and its workings in Barry W. Holtz, “Midrash,” in *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*, ed. Barry W. Holtz (New York: Touchstone, 1984), 177–211. This article includes a section pointing the reader to further resources on Midrash.

18. James Kugel, “Two Introductions to Midrash,” *Prooftexts* 3 (1983): 131–55, especially 144.

and even when words are repeated by the biblical text, the rabbis will derive meaning out of the repetition.¹⁹ Thus, in Genesis 22:11, when the angel says “Abraham, Abraham,” the rabbinic Sages must address why the name is said twice. Both of these principles illustrate the notion that midrash is literature that is dedicated to divining meanings out of material that is already present in the text.

Joseph Smith Translation

From the Midrash, we move to the Joseph Smith Translation, which is the most common name for what Joseph Smith termed the New Translation.²⁰ It was a revision and expansion of the Bible as Joseph Smith had it, and, therefore, worked from the King James Version of the Bible. It represents, in many ways, a specific response to that translation, since it sometimes addresses problems that do not exist in other translations or versions of the scriptures.²¹ Thomas Wayment has observed, “The JST restores, edits and changes. It restores original text that has been lost and restores what was once said but never became part of the Bible. . . . It changes the original text of the Bible from what was written by the original authors.”²² An individual unit in the JST may represent any one of these responses. Like most of latter-day scripture, the JST has only relatively recently come under scholarly review, and there is still work to be done in the process of understanding how it was produced and how it was conceived as part of Smith’s prophetic mission, although great strides have already been made.²³

19. James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 96–134.

20. “Joseph Smith Translation” was coined by the committee who put together the 1979 edition of the Bible, who needed an abbreviation for their footnotes, which had to be differentiated from the New Testament. Robert J. Matthews, “The JST: Retrospect and Prospect—a Panel,” in *The Joseph Smith Translation: The Restoration of Plain and Precious Truths*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Robert L. Millet (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1985), 291–305.

21. Joshua M. Sears, “Santa Biblia: The Latter-day Saint Bible in Spanish,” *BYU Studies* 54, no. 1 (2015): 43–75.

22. Thomas A. Wayment and Tyson J. Yost, “The Joseph Smith Translation and Italicized Words in the King James Version,” *Religious Educator* 6, no. 1 (2005): 51.

23. A good discussion of this point, including the centrality of the JST in the development of LDS doctrine, may be seen in Robert J. Matthews, “The Role of the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible in the Restoration of Doctrine,” in *The Disciple as Witness: Essays in Latter-day Saint History and Doctrine in*

The changes to the biblical record that form the JST differ from Joseph Smith's other major translation projects. The Book of Mormon and the book of Abraham are both, in spite of clear continuities with the biblical text, new scriptural accounts. We should thus be careful about grouping all of Joseph Smith's translation outputs. The JST is, in its very formulation, a revision and expansion of the Bible—in other words, it never stops claiming to be the Bible, although it is clearly a Bible with a difference. The fact that the interpretations of the JST are placed within the text of the Bible is one place where it differs from the Midrash, which never stops presenting itself as commentary.²⁴

This article uses the edition of the JST prepared by Kent P. Jackson in *The Book of Moses and the Joseph Smith Translation Manuscripts*.²⁵ This book contains a critical edition from Old Testament Manuscript 2 and represents a useful resource for examining the textual history of the present-day book of Moses.²⁶

Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000), available online at <http://publications.maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1092&index=14>. Matthews was reacting to a conception on the part of some Latter-day Saints that the JST was not complete or desirable to use, a conception which derived in part from the cool relations between the LDS and RLDS (now Community of Christ). Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion*, Religion in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 153–54.

24. Here a close examination of how a rewritten Bible and targum work in relationship to the Joseph Smith Translation would be helpful and is a *desideratum* in the study of Latter-day Saint scripture.

25. Kent P. Jackson, *The Book of Moses and the Joseph Smith Translation Manuscripts* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2005).

26. The textual variants between manuscripts are, in general, not very significant. A fuller treatment of this material, encompassing all of the material in Joseph Smith's New Translation is found in Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews's monumental edition of all of the manuscripts of the Joseph Smith Translation. Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith's New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2004). A copy of "Old Testament Revision 1" is also available on the Internet at <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/old-testament-revision-1>.

Authoritative Space

The JST and early rabbinic Midrash both come from a concept of scripture that, to paraphrase the epistle to the Philippians, does not think it robbery to expand upon the Hebrew Bible (Philip. 2:6).²⁷ In this model of scriptural interpretation, the Bible itself is expanded. The resultant literature, instead of being set alongside the text, becomes text itself. These parallel readings can then be seen by Mormon and Jewish readers, respectively, as providing material that expands on the Bible. The narratives presented come from and within the world of the text. In fact, both of these traditions conceive of the interpretation as simply providing material that is as normatively important as the Bible and that is, in some sense, already in the Bible. Even though their specific authority claims differ in many ways, Jewish and Mormon notions of Mosaic authority create space for allowing interpretation to live within the text itself.²⁸ In both communities, the authority of the interpretation enhances the Bible rather than supersedes it.

The relationship between the biblical text and its interpretation may, therefore, be described as symbiotic. By providing “correct” readings of the biblical text, these expansive units actually encourage the reading of the original text and enhance its prestige in the community while at the same time addressing the present needs of the community. Both midrash and the Joseph Smith Translation, in spite of making changes and expansions to the Bible, actually increase the profile of the Bible in their respective communities.

27. They both bear similarity to another ancient genre, that of rewritten Bible, although they are, in certain ways, more similar to each other than they are to that genre. Rewritten Bible presents biblical texts (usually new ones) that rework the Bible in longer narratives. The classic example of this is the Book of Jubilees, which represents the material found in the book of Genesis. Emmanuel Tov, “Rewritten Bible Compositions and Biblical Manuscripts, with Special Attention to the Samaritan Pentateuch,” *Dead Sea Discoveries* 5 (1998): 334–54. For a discussion of the connection between rabbinic Midrash and rewritten Bible, see Steven Fraade, “Rewritten Bible and Rabbinic Midrash as Commentary,” in *Current Trends in the Study of Midrash*, ed. Carol Bakhtos (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

28. This is in contradistinction to modes of interpretation that exist parallel to the text and that do not live within the world of the text. Most of the work of the Church Fathers, and therefore Christian tradition in general, falls into this category.

The very biblicality of the Midrash and the JST points to notions of rabbinic and prophetic authority but also to how the midrashic and translation enterprises were framed by their separate communities. In the case of both of these exegetical traditions, the producers of these materials were viewed by their religious communities not as adding extra interpretations to the biblical narrative but as explicating material that was already there. Both of these literatures were then able to be seen as restoring material to the biblical text that had been removed, or material that could be understood as simply not explicit.

To illustrate this notion, it is necessary to look at statements on authority and scripture in rabbinic literature and similar statements from Joseph Smith and the early LDS Church. The very beginning of the mishnaic tractate *Avot*²⁹ establishes the chain of tradition for the rabbinic Sages:³⁰ “Moses received Torah on Mount Sinai, and transmitted it to Joshua. Joshua transmitted it to the elders and the elders to the Prophets. The Prophets transmitted it to the men of the Great Assembly” (*m. Avot* 1:1).³¹ The chain of transmission then continues through various Second Temple figures understood to be the ancestors of the Sages, including the famous Hillel and Shammai (*m. Avot* 1:12–15), through to rabbinic Sages such as Akiva (*m. Avot* 3:14–17) and Judah ha-Nasi, the traditional compiler of the Mishnah (*m. Avot* 2:1).

Thus, according to this very famous passage in the Mishnah, rabbinic tradition is Torah passed down from Mount Sinai, and the authority of

29. Meaning “Fathers,” implying teachers in this context.

30. All translations from rabbinic texts are my own. The text for the Mishnah is taken from Chanoch Albeck, *Six Orders of Mishnah* [in Hebrew], 6 vols. (repr. 2006; Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1958). A convenient and useful single-volume English translation of the Mishnah may be found in Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), reprinted many times. The Mishnah is divided into six major divisions, known as Seders or Orders, which are then subdivided into tractates. These tractates are then divided into chapters and units called mishnah, which correspond roughly to verses of scripture. Thus a mishnaic passage is cited *m.* (for Mishnah) tractate, chapter, and Mishnah (section).

31. The legendary prerabbinic legislative body. Kugel and Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation*, 64–66. The connection of the Sages’ chain of transmission to Hellenistic chains of transmission is discussed in Beth Berkowitz, *Defining Jewish Difference: From Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 81–83.

the Sages is essentially Mosaic in character.³² It is “Torah in the Mouth,”³³ which the rabbis did not view by any means as inferior to “Torah That is Written.”³⁴ There were not, in fact, two Torahs, but instead two expressions of the same divine Torah. There is a famous story in the Babylonian Talmud about Moses and Rabbi Akiva, a Sage from the mishnaic period that illustrates this notion well:

When Moses ascended into the Heights, he found the Holy One, Blessed Be He, sitting and affixing crowns to the letters [of Torah]. He said to Him, “Master of the Universe, who waits at your hand [i.e. for whom are you doing this]?” He said to him, “There is a certain man who will be in the future, after many generations, and his name will be Akiva ben Joseph. He will interpret (Heb. *lidrosh*) from every penstroke mounds and mounds of halakhah.” [Moses] said to Him, “Master of the Universe, show him to me.” He said to him, “Turn around.” He went and sat at the end of the eighth row, and he did not understand what they were saying. His strength weakened until they reached a certain matter and [Akiva’s] students said to him, “Whence do you derive this [halakhah]? He said to them, “[This] halakhah was to Moses from Sinai,” [and Moses’s] thought was eased. (*b. Menahot* 29b³⁵)

Although Moses did not recognize what Akiva was teaching his students, he was comforted when Akiva indicated that what he was teaching was the Torah that Moses had received. There is a lot going on in this particular rabbinic story, but at the very least it shows that although the Sages were aware of differences between their laws and biblical laws, they saw themselves in continuity with Moses and his laws.³⁶ For rabbinic

32. Howard Schwartz, *Reimagining the Bible: The Storytelling of the Rabbis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), x.

33. Hebrew *torah shebaal peh*.

34. Hebrew *torah shebiktuv*.

35. Citations from the Babylonian Talmud are based on folios from the earliest printed editions. Thus, this passage comes from folio 29 of the tractate *Menahot*, side b. Text for quotations from the Babylonian Talmud comes from the *Soncino Hebrew/English Babylonian Talmud*, ed. Isidore Epstein, 3 vols. (New York: Bloch, 1990).

36. Note also, however, that the Mishnah itself acknowledges that not all of their legal rulings had a strong basis in written scripture: “[The rules about] release from vows hang in the air and have nothing to support them [from scripture]. The rules about the Sabbath, Festival offerings and blasphemy are as mountains hanging from a thread, for [there is] little Scripture and many rules. [The rules about property] cases and Temple Ritual, and the rules about clean versus unclean and prohibited relations have much to support them, and

Judaism then, the traditions of the Sages represent material that had been handed down simultaneously with the written law of Moses and so was equal in authority to it.³⁷ Thus, for the rabbinic Sages, the midrashic exercise is not to introduce and invent notions that are not there but to clarify ideas that are already present in the text.

So also is the project of the Joseph Smith Translation. We have very little discussion of how Smith translated, although it is clear from places like Doctrine and Covenants 21:1 that translation, however it is to be understood, was an important part of Smith's work as a prophet.³⁸ As with the rabbinic midrash, Joseph Smith does not seem to view his New Translation as "adding to or taking away" from the scriptures, to use the famous words from Deuteronomy 4:2. The idea instead is that he is simply restoring or clarifying material that should have been there all along. As part of his prophetic claims, Joseph Smith claimed authority equal to the apostles and Old Testament prophets. In fact, in Doctrine and Covenants 28:2, he is explicitly compared with Moses: "But, behold, verily, verily, I say unto thee, no one shall be appointed to receive commandments and revelations in this church excepting my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., for he receiveth them even as Moses."³⁹ For Smith and his followers, prophetic authority involves the constant process of receiving, making, and revising scripture. The narrative expansions in the JST are

they are the fundamentals of *Torah*" (*m. Hagigah* 1:8). Michal Bar-Asher Sigal has recently visited this passage again: "Mountains Hanging by a Strand? Re-reading Mishnah *Hagigah* 1:8," *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 4 (2013): 235–56. See also the discussion in Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Judean Legal Tradition and the *Halakah* of the Mishnah," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 121–43, especially 123–25; Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah: Religious Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 1–156; Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction*, 237–39.

37. Kugel and Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation*, 68–69.

38. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible*, 57–61; Samuel Morris Brown, "The Language of Heaven: Prolegomenon to the Study of Smithian Translation," *Journal of Mormon History* 38, no. 3 (2012): 51–71, especially 53–54.

39. Doctrine and Covenants 28:2. Doctrine and Covenants 107:91 gives this Mosaic authority and charisma not just to Joseph Smith, but to the office of the President of the Church. This accords with the observations of Richard L. Bushman that part of Joseph Smith's administrative genius was the investiture of charisma into offices rather than individuals. In "Joseph Smith and Power," in *A Firm Foundation: Church Organization and Administration*, ed. David J. Whitaker and Arnold K. Garr (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2011), 1–13.

therefore part of the process of establishing and confirming Smith's prophetic role. As with the rabbinic Sages, Joseph Smith's work of exegesis by adding to the biblical text flows naturally out of his understanding of his prophetic mission.

This is, perhaps, part of the reason why neither *Genesis Rabbah* nor the Joseph Smith Translation pay any attention to the seams in the biblical text that appear so obvious to source critics.⁴⁰ Both of these interpretive strands treat the biblical narrative as though it were a single whole, and both largely assume Mosaic authorship.⁴¹ The assumption of Mosaic authorship is part and parcel with how the two literatures create space for interpretation by the claim of Mosaic authority. In their respective expansions on Genesis, Moses actually plays a much larger role. He is inserted directly into narratives about the nature and coming of the text of Genesis. In particular, Moses's interactions with God are brought to the fore.

As part of *Genesis Rabbah's* interpretation on Genesis 1:26, it records a story similar in outline to Moses 1. For *Genesis Rabbah*, Moses served as a scribe for the preexistent Torah written by God, and when he comes to problematic verses, he dialogues with God:⁴² "When Moses was writing the Torah, he wrote the doings of each day. When he reached the verse that said, 'Let us make man in our own image according to our likeness,' he said to Him, 'Master of the Universe, why do you give an excuse to the heretics?'"⁴³ He said to him, 'Write, and those who wish to

40. For a recent Latter-day Saint attempt to reconcile source critical methodology with Latter-day Saint scripture, see David Bokovoy, *Authoring the Old Testament: Genesis–Deuteronomy* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2014). This same dichotomy between modern critical methodologies and Joseph Smith's scriptural output is also evident in Hutchinson, "Mormon Midrash."

41. This is underscored by the title in the Pearl of Great Price, which is "Selections from the Book of Moses." Previously, and in popular Latter-day Saint parlance, it was called simply the book of Moses, which suggests parallels with biblical books such as Jeremiah or Isaiah as well as the named Book of Mormon books.

42. Fraade, "Language Mix and Multilingualism in Ancient Palestine: Literary and Inscriptional Evidence," *Jewish Studies* 48 (2012): 1–40.

43. The word I have translated as "heretics" is Hebrew *minim*, which is a word with a wide variety of possible signification. It is often associated with Jewish Christians, although there are some difficulties with this position. On this topic, see Christine Hayes, "The 'Other' in Rabbinic Literature," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud*, ed. Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jafee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 243–69; Stephen Miller, "The Minim of Sephoris Reconsidered," *Harvard Theological Review* 86 (1993):

err, may err” (*Gen. Rab.* 8:8). Thus, in *Genesis Rabbah*, Torah comes from God, and was in fact written by him, and then transmitted to Moses, who transmitted it in writing and orally to the Sages. It is the very work of Moses that the rabbinic Sages are placing themselves in continuity with when they interpret scripture.

This same kind of activity can be seen in the JST, in the first chapter of the book of Moses. This passage, which has no direct parallel in the biblical record, is a theophany to Moses and a dialogue between him and God. As part of this, he asks God to explain the creation of the world: “And it came to pass that Moses called upon God, saying: Tell me, I pray thee, why these things are so, and by what thou madest them?” (Moses 1:30). God then promises to give him an account of the world on which Moses lived (Moses 1:31–36).

The account of the creation of the world, the creation of humanity, and the fall of man that follows in the book of Moses and its parallels in Genesis 1–4 are thus presented as a first-person account of God speaking to Moses. Because of this, Genesis 1:3, “And God said, Let there be light” becomes “And I, God, said, Let there be light” (Moses 2:3). This has the effect of bringing the divine personality of God to the fore and making his interactions, whether with Moses or with Adam and Eve, even more immediate. This also increases the authoritative nature of the narrative. The narration that happens in Genesis is no longer simply the words of the Bible’s anonymous narrator but represents instead the very words of God. God himself is telling this story to Moses. This is one case where a very subtle change has far-reaching effects on how the entire biblical passage is read.

Use of Authoritative Space

Both of these literatures use the assumption of Mosaic authority to solve problems that arise from the nature of biblical narrative. The Hebrew Bible is written in a spare, laconic style that leaves many gaps and openings.⁴⁴ It rarely includes either physical descriptions of personalities or their inner thoughts and motivations. As expansive interpretive

377–402; David Instone Brewer, “The Eighteen Benedictions and the Minim before 70 ce,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 54, no. 1 (2003): 25–44.

44. The great literary critic Auerbach famously compared biblical narrative to that of Homer, highlighting this aspect of biblical narrative. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 3–24.

literatures, both midrash and the JST solve apparent problems in the Hebrew Bible through the filling in of gaps present in the text. One place where this may be seen is through the JST and the Midrash's understanding of the purpose and motivations of the serpent introduced in Genesis 3:1.

The conception and the motivations of the serpent highlight one of the key differences between the midrashic approach and the Latter-day Saint one. Both the JST and the Midrash reflect the theological notions of their respective communities. The fall of humanity is not a central issue in Judaism in the way it is in Christian, including Latter-day Saint, thinking. Because of this, although the serpent is a villain in *Genesis Rabbah*, he is not openly satanic, like he is in the JST. *Genesis Rabbah* 19:3 simply reads, "Rabbi Hoshia the elder says, 'It [the serpent] stood upright like a reed and had feet.' Rabbi Jeremiah ben Elazer said, 'He was a skeptic.'"⁴⁵

Where *Genesis Rabbah* presents the serpent as a skeptical figure, the book of Moses introduces the figure of Satan into the story: "And now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field, which I, the Lord God had made. *And Satan put it into the heart of the serpent, (for he had drawn away many after him,) and he sought also to beguile Eve, for he knew not the mind of God, wherefore he sought to destroy the world*" (Moses 4:5–6).⁴⁶ As noted, the narrative preserved in Genesis does not give any motivation for why the serpent seeks to have Eve eat of the fruit of the tree. It simply introduces the serpent, introduces its subtle nature, and proceeds with the dialogue. The JST here introduces a motivation for the serpent or for the supernatural being who is represented by the serpent in the JST. As subtle or clever as the serpent is, it (or Satan, since the text is a little ambiguous here) does not know the mind of God and is therefore trying to destroy the world. The motivation derives from a lack of proper knowledge.

The rabbis in *Genesis Rabbah* provide a more prosaic motivation for the actions on the part of the serpent: "Rabbi Joshua ben Qorha said,

45. Hebrew *apiqoros*, which probably derives from the Greek philosopher Epicurus and signifies someone who is irreverent or heretical. Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi and Midrashic Literature* (New York: Judaica Treasury, 1974), 104.

46. Wherever there is a difference between the JST and the KJV, I will indicate it by putting the added or changed section in italics in the quote from the JST.

[referencing Genesis 2:25 and Genesis 3:1] ‘It is to inform you what sin that wicked [serpent] encouraged them to do. When he saw them occupying themselves with the custom of the earth,⁴⁷ he desired her [and tried to kill Adam by encouraging him to sin].’” The motivation of the serpent is therefore very personal and, in some sense, more mundane than that attributed to it in the JST.

The desires of the serpent are further examined in a midrash to Genesis 3:14, describing God’s cursing of the serpent. This verse reads: “And the Lord God said to the serpent, Because you have done this, cursed you will be more than any beast and above any wild animal. Upon your belly you will go, and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And I will set enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed.”⁴⁸ The passage in *Genesis Rabbah*, takes each of the aspects of the curse and attributes it to an action or desire on the part of the serpent:

Rabbi Isi and Rabbi Hoshiah said in the name of Rabbi Hiyya the Elder, “[God said to the serpent] four [things]: The Holy One, Blessed Be He, said to him ‘I made you that you should be king, but you did not want it: “Cursed are you above all cattle and above all wild animals.”

“I made you to walk upright like a man, but you did not want it: “Upon your belly, you will go.”

“I made you to eat the sort of food that humans eat, but you did not want it: “And you shall eat dirt.”

“You wanted to kill Adam and marry his wife: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed.”

“Thus, what he wanted was not given to him, and what he had was taken away from him.” (*Gen. Rab.* 20:5)

Note the close association in this passage between the actions of the serpent and the curses sent against the serpent. For the Sages, the crimes of the serpent may be found and extracted from its curses. Thus, the information about the serpent and its crimes are already found within the biblical text. This close attention to the biblical text as a source of answers for the difficulties that it raises is characteristic of midrashic literature. In this midrash, the motives of the serpent are found within the text itself. It is not an extra interpretation but merely a clarification of what the text was doing all along.

47. This phrase is a euphemism for sexual relations.

48. My own translation.

Smoothing Out Difficulties

In the same way that the authoritative space allows the JST and the Midrash to provide information about motivations, it can also smooth out difficulties.⁴⁹ One such difficulty may be seen when God speaks: to whom is he addressing these statements, and especially for whom is he speaking when he uses plural, first-person pronouns?⁵⁰ The JST expands the Genesis account by introducing a dialogue between the Father and the Son.⁵¹ Thus, Moses 2:26, which parallels Genesis 1:26, reads: “And I, God, said *unto mine Only Begotten, which was with me from the beginning*: Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” Reading this as the Father taking council with the Son is in continuity with the Latter-day Saint position on the premortal existence of Jesus and the planned nature of the history of the earth, although as Robert J. Matthews points out, many distinctive Latter-day Saint beliefs are actually first found in the JST.⁵² In fact, one of the major features of change to Genesis found in the JST is an increase in references to Jesus Christ

49. Holtz calls these “gaps” in the text. Holtz, “Midrashic Literature,” 179–81; Kugel, “Two Introductions,” 144–45.

50. Some Hebrew grammarians suggest a plural of majesty for examples such as this. There is some use of honorific plurals in Hebrew nouns, but it does not exist in Hebrew verbs. Bruce Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 122–23; Paul Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, vol. 3 (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2005), 376, 500–501.

51. This is, of course, a position that is not unique to Mormon thought but that has a wide variety of parallels in various Christian sources, both ancient and modern. In fact, this verse was part of a Jewish discussion on binatarianism, a discussion that was certainly part of the Jewish-Christian discourse but that was also part of an internal Jewish discussion. Daniel Boyarin, “Beyond Judaism: Metatron and the Divine Polymorphy of Ancient Judaism,” *Journal for the Study of Ancient Judaism* 41 (2010): 323–65; A. F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1977). Hutchinson’s insistence that this does not refer to preexistent Christ, combined with his suggestion that this is a snippet of a Mesopotamian myth with God conferring with his consort seems to be begging the question. Hutchinson, “Mormon Midrash,” 23, especially no. 8. The idea of God conferring with a divine council is, of course, one with resonances in Latter-day Saint thinking, including the book of Abraham, something Hutchinson does not pick up on in his discussion of the LDS versions of the creation stories.

52. Robert J. Matthews, “Role of the Joseph Smith Translation,” accessed online.

and the notion of the establishment of the plan of salvation from the very beginning.⁵³

The difficulty of God's conversation partner in this part of Genesis was felt by the rabbinic Sages, and provided space for expanding the narrative of the creation of the world, as in the JST. The Midrash presents, in the names of various rabbinic authorities, a number of different possibilities of who it is that God is conversing with about the creation of humanity: the already finished heaven and earth (*Gen. Rab.* 8:3); the ministering angels (*Gen. Rab.* 8:3); specifically named angels representing Love, Truth, Peace, and Righteousness (*Gen. Rab.* 8:5, drawing on Ps. 85:11); and the preexistent souls of the righteous (*Gen. Rab.* 8:7). In several of these narratives, God must trick the angels who are opposed to the creation of humanity in order to bring it to pass. The number of these examples illustrates a key difference between midrash and the Joseph Smith Translation. One of the characteristics of rabbinic literature is its polysemy—there is not one authorized interpretation of the Bible.⁵⁴ All of these options are present within the text, and, characteristically, the Midrash records them all. Where the JST brings forth one authorized interpretation, the Midrash records a conversation.

The interactions between Moses and God and between God and other heavenly beings show how these narrative expansions are an important part of the religious and theological identity of these groups. Just as the JST provides (and perhaps helped create) a very Latter-day Saint picture of the Father conversing with the Son and explaining notions of salvation to Moses, so also does *Genesis Rabbah* provide a rabbinic picture of a God who interacts with his angels, although he is also willing to go behind their back and create humanity over their objections, and who has Moses, as a faithful scribe, write down the Torah, which God himself authored. These narrative expansions show the nature and character of God, as understood in each of the respective interpretive communities.

Harmonization

Another place where the JST and *Genesis Rabbah* share similarities is in the idea that scripture represents a complete whole and that parts

53. Moses 2:1; 2:27; 5:7; and especially 6:52, where Adam is baptized in the name of Jesus.

54. The polysemy in Mormonism is there but is in tension with Latter-day Saint notions of authority and hierarchy. See the historiographical concerns in Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible*, xiii–xvi.

of scripture from one place can be helpfully used to understand other places. This derives from the notions of authority present in the individual communities. In Judaism, Torah (and therefore Moses) is at the base of the rest of scripture, and so all of scripture works together. Thus, in *Genesis Rabbah*, after Eve has eaten of the fruit and is attempting to get Adam to eat it, she quotes from Ecclesiastes 1:9 and Isaiah 45:18, noting that there will not be another wife created for Adam because “there is nothing new under the sun,” and that God “formed the earth to be inhabited.” The omnisignificance of scripture means that, like a rabbinic Sage, Eve is able to quote from scripture not yet written in order to prove her points. Much like the God of *Genesis Rabbah* is a rabbinic God, so also is its Eve a rabbinic Eve. As part of this, it should be emphasized once again that the answers that the JST and the Midrash provide to their respective communities are different, because the questions they are asking are different.

Thus, Eve in the Midrash is a rabbinic Eve, with knowledge of scripture not yet written, while Eve in the JST is a Latter-day Saint Eve with knowledge of the plan of salvation. In Moses 5:11, after Adam and Eve are taught about what the redemption the Son of God will bring to them and their descendants, Eve says, “Were it not for our transgression we never should have had seed, and never should have known good and evil, and the joy of our redemption, and the eternal life which God giveth unto all the obedient.” Here, as in *Genesis Rabbah*, Eve speaks after eating the fruit, and speaks in terms of a Christian salvation, including the importance of having children and eternal life, ideas with a very Latter-day Saint resonance. The very same notions of authority at play in the presentation of the relationship between God and Moses in the JST and *Genesis Rabbah* are also working in the expansion of the character of Eve.

Conclusion

In spite of the previous pejorative usage of midrash to describe the Joseph Smith Translation, it turns out to be a comparison that has some usefulness, despite their differences in structure and content. The two literatures are by no means identical. The JST is not midrash. To argue otherwise would rob the term midrash of its explanatory power in regard to Jewish literature. The social situations and religious questions that drove the creation of these interpretive literatures were varied and different. Nineteenth-century America is not fifth-century Roman Palestine. Some of the similarities that caused earlier commentators to

draw connections do exist, however, and the chief of these is in notions of scriptural authority and the relationship between the interpreter and the scriptural text. Thus, it might be correct to call the JST, as some have, “midrashic,” but the inverse would be true as well, and it would be appropriate to call the ancient midrash “Smithian.”

Joseph Smith and the rabbinic Sages had different notions about the basis of their authority, but there is a certain similarity in their concepts of authority, which comes out in the JST and the Midrash. Both literatures are able to comment directly on the biblical text because they are produced in environments and by groups and individuals who claim Mosaic authority. Because these literatures are commenting on a text that they, and the communities they led, viewed as essentially Mosaic, a claim to Mosaic authority was an authorization to expand upon and explore the text. These explorations allow both the JST and the Midrash to highlight things that are left unclear in the biblical narrative, such as the motivations of characters like the serpent in the Garden of Eden story.

Thus, within their communities, the ideas and narratives that the interpreters are able to bring forth are not seen as new ideas but instead represent notions that were already present in the biblical text and that only needed to be discovered. The difficulties and gaps in the text, therefore, yield narratives that further explore and establish the character and narrative within the community. The process of discovery in rabbinic Judaism is framed as an intellectual exercise, while the process in the making of the Joseph Smith Translation is described in terms of revelation, but these interpretative strategies thrive because of the view that the changes are not changes to the essential meaning intended by the original biblical authors. Instead, interpreters possessing Mosaic authority are able to bring out to their communities the meanings already living within the text.

Avram R. Shannon is a recent PhD graduate from the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures at The Ohio State University, specializing in rabbinic literature and early biblical interpretation. His research involves examining the rabbinic notion of ritual and how that relates to the rabbinic portrayal of non-Jewish ritual and idolatry. He has an article forthcoming on the oral dimension of the rabbinic representation of Graeco-Roman ritual practices. Avram has also published on ritual within the Jerusalem Temple. He has been married for ten years and has five children.