

DIACHRONIC CHANGE AND SYNCHRONIC READINGS: MIDRASHIM ON STATIVE VERBS AND PARTICIPLES¹

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Abstract

Because of the different verbal systems in the Hebrew of the Bible and the Hebrew of the Mishnah, reading the Bible as if written in Mishnaic Hebrew can produce interesting results. This paper analyses rabbinic comments on stative verbs and participles. The uses of both differ significantly in the Mishnah from the uses in the Bible. In the Mishnah, but not in the Bible, the participle participates in a full-blown tense system. Numerous midrashim rely on reading biblical participles as they would have been used in later Hebrew, as a present or future tense verb. Many verbs which were morphologically and syntactically stative in Biblical Hebrew have been 'normalized' by Mishnaic Hebrew, and this, too, created opportunities for midrash. In conclusion, the paper offers some thoughts on the rabbinic conceptions of language that allowed for such midrashim, suggesting that although the Rabbis were aware of diachronic linguistic change, they believed that multiple readings were simultaneously possible for the biblical text.

1. Introduction: Logic within Midrash?

The genre of midrash seems to defy simple categorization: it is simultaneously interpretative and creative, scrutinizing the biblical text and remaining connected to it, and engaging in apparently unfettered storytelling at the same time. Even when engaging in homiletics, rabbinic

¹ An early version of the ideas in this paper was presented at the 2010 conference of the National Association of the Professors of Hebrew, held at Yeshiva University's Stern College for Women in July 2010. Comments on an early form of the presentation by Prof. Moshe Bernstein, and comments at the session by Profs Yona Sabar, Shmuel Bolozky, Chaim Cohen, and Robert Hoberman were very helpful in both formulating the theses and refining the specific examples. At later stages, Profs Tzvi Novick and Moshe Bar-Asher were kind enough to read drafts, and provided valuable criticisms, insights, and references.

midrash is attuned to the biblical text on which it is commenting. A striking example is found in the Bavli, Ta'anit 5b. Rav Naḥman and R. Isaac were sitting at a meal, and R. Isaac shared some words of Torah from his teacher in Eretz Israel, R. Yoḥanan: 'Our forefather Jacob never died'. R. Naḥman reacted with incredulity: 'Was it for naught that the mourners mourned for him, the embalmers embalmed him, and the buriers buried him?!' But R. Isaac explained, 'I am interpreting Scripture (מקרא אני דורש)'. He goes on to explain that since Jacob is found in parallelism with 'his descendants' in Jer. 30:10, Jacob does indeed live on, through his descendants.² R. Isaac does not explain what sparked the claim 'Our forefather Jacob never died' to begin with, but the solution to this problem is not difficult to find; it emerges from an inspection of the death formulae in the book of Genesis:

Gen. 25:8: וַיָּנֹכַח וַיָּקָם אַבְרָהָם... וַיֵּאָסֶף אֶל-עַמּוּי 'Abraham *passed away* and *died* and *was gathered to his kin*.'

Gen. 25:17: וַיָּנֹכַח וַיָּקָם וַיֵּאָסֶף אֶל-עַמּוּי '[Ishmael] *passed away* and *died* and *was gathered to his kin*.'

Gen. 35:29: וַיָּנֹכַח וַיָּקָם וַיֵּאָסֶף אֶל-עַמּוּי 'Isaac *passed away* and *died* and *was gathered to his kin*'.

Gen. 49:33: וַיָּנֹכַח וַיָּקָם וַיֵּאָסֶף אֶל-עַמּוּי '[Jacob] *passed away* and *was gathered to his kin*'.

Surely any close reader of the text would observe, 'Jacob never died!'³ The midrashist is a very close reader of the text, and indeed observed the anomaly in the death formula of Jacob. What makes his comment 'midrashic' is that he then uses the idea 'Jacob never died' for homiletic purposes. He never died, says the midrash, in the sense that he lives on through his descendants, perhaps because, as the medieval commentators observed, only he of the patriarchs had all of his descendants become part of the nation of Israel.⁴

It can be readily seen, then, that midrash is (at least some of the time) interpretation and homiletics interwoven; the challenge for modern researchers is to uncover the interpretation behind the homiletics.

² See the discussion of this story in Joseph Heinemann, *אגדות ותולדותיהן* (Jerusalem 1974), 163–79.

³ This insightful explanation of R. Isaac's midrash was articulated by C. Milikowsky, 'Midrash as Fiction and Midrash as History: What did the Rabbis Mean?', in J.A. Brant, C.W. Hedrick and C. Shea (eds), *Ancient Fiction: The Matrix of Early Christian and Jewish Narrative* (SBL Symposium Series 32, Atlanta 2005), 124–5.

⁴ See, for instance, the comments of R. Solomon b. Aderet in his commentary on Ta'anit *ad loc*.

Indeed, in light of much of the research of the past century, it now seems that most midrashic comments at least begin their lives as responses to legitimate textual and interpretative issues, although they often take on a life of their own after being spawned.

On the other hand, the Rabbis were not only interested in responding to real gaps or problems in the biblical text. They also seized upon ambiguities to multiply the meanings of the text, and found ambiguities where other readers see none. This paper will deal with ambiguities created by reading the biblical text through the lens of Mishnaic Hebrew. In an important paper from in the 1960s, Gad Ben-'Ami Sarfatti showed that rabbinic interpretations of biblical words are sometimes based on meanings the words have only in rabbinic Hebrew.⁵ Richard Steiner has shown that biblical words are sometimes read by midrashim according to the way they were pronounced in later Hebrew.⁶ In other cases, the Rabbis explicitly or implicitly read the biblical text as if it were not Hebrew at all, but another language.⁷ Here, too, however, we can observe the interplay of interpretation and imagination. The interpretative possibility comes first: the midrashist realizes that if the text is read with a different set of lenses on, it can produce an alternative meaning. Once the interpretative possibility is realized, the midrashist creates a homily out of the idea.

The specific examples to be studied here are examples where the midrashic imagination was sparked by changes in the Hebrew verbal system between the Hebrew of the Bible and that of the Rabbis. These diachronic changes allowed the rabbinic interpreters to create

⁵ G. Ben-'Ami Sarfatti, 'עיונים בסמנטיקה של לשון חז"ל ובדרשותיהם', *Leshonenu* 29 (1965), 238–44, and 30 (1966), 29–40. See also I.B. Gottlieb, 'Midrash as Biblical Philology', *JQR* 75 (1984), 134–61, who has examples of serious philology in rabbinic literature, as well as examples of the Rabbis reading the Bible as if it were written in their dialect of Hebrew.

⁶ R.C. Steiner, 'המלים 'מאה' ומאתי' בדרשות שנתיסדו על גביים עממיים של', *Tarbiz* 64 (1996), 33–6.

⁷ Explicit cases are where the Rabbis explicitly indicate that the text is being read as if in another language, such as the midrashic claim that מְכַרְתִּיהֶם in Gen. 49:5 is Greek. There are also implicit interlingual interpretations; for good examples, see N. Waldman, 'Rabbinic Homilies and Cognate Languages', in I. Passow and S. Lachs (eds), *Gratz College Anniversary Volume: On the Occasion of the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the Founding of the College, 1895–1970* (Philadelphia 1971), 269–73, and R.C. Steiner, 'The "Aramean" of Deuteronomy 26:5: *Peshat* and *Derash*', in M. Cogan, B.L. Eichler and J.H. Tigay (eds), *Tehillah le-Moshe: Biblical and Judaic Studies in Honor of Moshe Greenberg* (Winona Lake, IN 1997), 127–38, with discussion. A systematic study of the uses of other languages in rabbinic biblical interpretation remains to be done, and would likely yield important insights as to how, when, and for what purposes other languages were utilized.

midrashim which read the Bible in new and creative ways. Following the analysis of the specific examples, some concluding thoughts will be offered on how the Rabbis conceptualized their interpretative/homiletic enterprise.

2. Participles in Biblical Hebrew and Mishnaic Hebrew

a. *Changes in the Use of Participles*

One of the standard uses of the participle in Biblical Hebrew is to describe a state.⁸

וַיִּקְחוּ אֶת לוֹט וְאֶת רְכֻשׁוֹ בֶן-אֶחָי אַבְרָם וַיֵּלְכוּ וְהוּא יֹשֵׁב בְּסֹדֶם (1)

They took Lot and his property the son of Abram's brother and they left while he was dwelling in Sodom (Gen. 14:12).

מָה תִתֶּן לִי וְאֲנֹכִי הוֹלֵךְ עָרִירִי (2)

What would you give me, while I go disgraced? (Gen. 15:2)⁹

In these sentences, the participle breaks the narrative flow (indicated by the series of *wayyiqtol... wayyiqtol*) and provides background information regarding the status or circumstances of the characters. The circumstantial meaning of sentences like (1) and (2) does not depend on the participle: sentences with similar structures are attested with adjectives and nominal phrases in place of participles.¹⁰

⁸ For documentation and discussion, see M.S. Smith, 'Grammatically Speaking: The Participle as a Main Verb of Clauses (Predicative Participle) in Direct Discourse and Narrative in Pre-Mishnaic Hebrew', in T. Muraoka and J.F. Elwolde (eds), *Sirach, Scrolls, and Sages: Proceedings of a Second International Symposium on the Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls, Ben Sira, and the Mishnah, Held at Leiden University, 1997* (STDJ 33, Leiden 1999), 291–6 and 306–9 (despite Smith's own interpretations in the last section). For some criticism of Smith's explanatory framework (which sees a difference between the grammars of narrative and of direct discourse in the Bible), see J. Joosten, 'Do the Finite Verbal Forms in Biblical Hebrew Express Aspect?', *JANES* 29 (2004), 49–70.

⁹ The translation of ערירי is based on E.L. Greenstein, 'The Language of Job and Its Poetic Function', *JBL* 122 (2003), 651–66, at 655; the reference is courtesy of Tzvi Novick.

¹⁰ R.C. Steiner, 'Does the Biblical Hebrew conjunction *wāw* have many meanings, one meaning, or no meanings at all?', *JBL* 119 (2000), 260–1; he cites Gen. 18:12 (adjective [stative participle]) and Lev. 7:20 (prepositional phrase) as showing similar structures. See also Steiner, 'Ancient Hebrew', in R. Hetzron (ed.), *The Semitic Languages* (London 1997), 165–6.

A full diachronic discussion of the syntax and semantics of the Hebrew participle is beyond what is necessary for this paper. It will suffice to say here that there are many examples of (especially predicative) participles in which the participle is fully verbal.¹¹ In Late Biblical Hebrew such usage increases; there are examples in which *yiqtol* forms from Standard Biblical Hebrew are replaced in Late Biblical Hebrew by participles.¹² This pattern of increasingly verbal use of the participle continues in Qumran Hebrew¹³ and perhaps the Hebrew of Bar Koseba.¹⁴

Within Mishnaic Hebrew, the participle is a major component of the verbal system, serving for present and future tenses as well as other uses.¹⁵ It is the usual form for the present ('he is going'), the habitual

¹¹ See especially the discussion in P. Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (tr. and revised by T. Muraoka) (Subsidia Biblica 14, Rome 1993), §112, as well as Smith, 'Grammatically Speaking', 278–332 (and esp. 319–20 for historical considerations). A. Gordon, 'The Development of the Participle in Biblical, Mishnaic, and Modern Hebrew', *Afroasiatic Linguistics* 8:3 (1982), 3–59 concludes that there is 'a definite progress towards reanalysis of the participle in MH as a verb', although 'the process is not complete'. See also the provocative proposals of J. Joosten, 'The Predicative Participle in Biblical Hebrew', *ZAH* 2 (1989), 128–59, B.K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN 1990), chapter 37, F.I. Andersen and A.D. Forbes, 'The Participle in Biblical Hebrew and the Overlap of Grammar and Lexicon', in S. Malena and D. Miano (eds), *Milk and Honey: Essays on Ancient Israel and the Bible in Appreciation of the Judaic Studies Program at the University of California, San Diego* (Winona Lake, IN 2007), 185–212, and J. Cook, 'The Hebrew Participle and Stative in Typological Perspective', *JNSL* 34 (2008), 1–19.

¹² Cf. M. Eskhult, *Studies in Verbal Aspect and Narrative Technique in Biblical Hebrew Prose* (Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, Studia Semitica Upsaliensia 12, Uppsala 1990), 113–14, and Gordon, 'The Development of the Participle', 14–15.

¹³ See M. Eskhult, 'Some Aspects of the Verbal System in Qumran Hebrew', in J. Joosten and J.-S. Rey (eds), *Conservatism and Innovation in the Hebrew Language of the Hellenistic Period* (STDJ 73, Leiden and Boston 2008), 34, and T. Muraoka, 'The Participle in Qumran Hebrew with Special Reference to its Periphrastic Use', in *Sirach, Scrolls, and Sages*, 188–204.

¹⁴ H. Gzella, 'The Use of the Participle in the Hebrew Bar Kosiba Letters in the Light of Aramaic', *DSD* 14 (2007), 90–8. Gzella's claim of pervasive Aramaic influence is unpersuasive, I think, since the usages he finds in the Bar Koseba letters are attested in Biblical Hebrew (see especially Smith, 'Grammatically Speaking').

¹⁵ See M.H. Segal, *A Grammar of Mishnaic Hebrew* (Oxford 1958), 155–60, although his synthetic statements about the participle in MH (esp. in §322) lack clarity. For some interesting data, see also J. Dyk and E. Talstra, 'Computer-Assisted Study of Syntactical Change, the Shift in the Use of the Participle in Biblical and Post-Biblical Hebrew Texts', in P. van Reenan and K. van Reenan-Stein (eds), *Spatial and Temporal Distributions, Manuscript Constellations: Studies in Language Variation Offered to Anthonij Dees on the Occasion of his 60th Birthday* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia 1988), 49–62.

(‘he goes’) and the future (‘he will go’), and is also used in other senses.¹⁶ It is worth emphasizing that the Mishnaic Hebrew system does not appear to be the direct descendant of the Late Biblical Hebrew system. In the earlier corpus, the change in the participle is seen mostly in periphrastic constructions, including the use of such constructions for punctual actions.¹⁷

Within Mishnaic Hebrew, as in Biblical Hebrew, the participle can be used to describe a state. However, since the syntax of the participle in Mishnaic Hebrew more generally is fundamentally different than it was in Standard Biblical Hebrew, something auxiliary is often added to mark the participle as indicating a state. The relative particle *-ש* alone, or the word *שהוא* or *כשהוא*, for example, can serve this function.¹⁸

In Standard Biblical Hebrew, we find sentences such as (3):

(3) וַיֵּלֶךְ אַחֲרַי אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים וַיִּמְצְאֵהוּ יוֹשֵׁב תַּחַת הָאֵלֶּה (3)

He walked after the man of God and *found him sitting* (יֹשֵׁב) [ptcp] under the terebinth (1 Kgs 13:14).

In contrast, structures as in (4)–(6) are attested in MH.

(4) מִצְאוֹ שׁוֹיֹשֵׁב (4)

He *found him sitting* (שׁוֹיֹשֵׁב) [relative particle + ptcp] (b. ‘Eruv. 11b).¹⁹

¹⁶ R.C. Steiner, ‘The History of the Ancient Hebrew Modal System and Labov’s Rule of Compensatory Structural Change’, in G.R. Guy, C. Feagin, D. Schiffrin and J. Baugh (eds), *Toward a Social Science of Language: Papers in Honor of William Labov, Volume 1: Variation and Change in Language and Society* (Amsterdam Studies in the Theory and History of Linguistic Science, Series IV no. 127; Amsterdam and Philadelphia 1996), 253–61, esp. 257–8.

¹⁷ Eskhult, *Studies*, 114 points to 2 Chron. 24:12: ויהיו שוכרים ‘they hired’, for example; see also his discussion of Neh. 2:13–15, as well as Gordon, ‘The Development of the Participle’, 23, and n. 25 below with the text there.

¹⁸ This is not to imply that the circumstantial use of the participle has disappeared entirely from MH, but its use has been restricted. Moshe Bar-Asher points out (personal communication) that *pā’ōl* forms, which are fundamentally participial, serve in such constructions regularly; he points to the interchange between ואין רואין אותו ערום (m. San. 2:6) and האיש נסקל ערום (m. San. 6:3).

¹⁹ This simplest construction is vanishingly rare in MH. It is typical of the Babylonian tradition of Mishnaic Hebrew rather than the Palestinian tradition, in which it is typically replaced by שהוא יושב; see M. Bar-Asher, *מחקרים בלשון ספר היובל* (Jerusalem 2010), 1.17–18 (originally in M. Bar-Asher [ed.], *מחקרים בלשון ספר היובל* [Jerusalem 1992]), and 1.106 (originally in *Tarbiz* 53 [1984]). The shorter construction, preserved in the Babylonian tradition of MH, is attested once in a Bar Koseba letter (no. 7 l. 4): ‘לשונן של האיגרות, העבריות והארמיות של בר כוסבה ובני דורו. מאמר שני: האיגרות העבריות’ (1962), 16 (= Z. Ben-Hayyim, A. Dotan and G. Ben-Ami Sarfatti [eds], *מחקרים*

(5) מצאתי את ר' מאיר ויהודה בן פתירא שהם יושבין ודנין בהלכה

I found R. Meir and Judah b. Petera sitting (שהם יושבין [relative + pronoun + ptcp]) in judgment in matters of halakha (t. Nazir 5:1).²⁰

(6) הרואה כהן גדול כשהוא קורא אינו רואה פר ושעיר הנשרפים והרואה פר ושעיר הנשרפים אינו רואה כהן גדול כשהוא קורא

One who *sees the High Priest when he is reading* (קורא [prep + relative + pronoun + ptcp]) does not see the bull and goat which are burned, and the one who sees the bull and goat which are burned *does not see the High Priest reading* (כשהוא קורא) (m. Yoma 7:2).²¹

This difference reflects a broader one. In BH the participle often refers to states or constant actions (depending on the semantics of the verb involved). This is the case in sentences (1)–(3), where יושב and הולך refer not to punctual actions (the act of sitting down or the action of walking), but to state: ‘he was dwelling’ and ‘I go (constantly)’. Within MH, too, the participles are sometimes ambiguous in this way; they can refer to ongoing actions or states — we will call this the durative meaning — or single events, which we will call the punctual meaning of the participle. One passage from the Tosefta Sanhedrin will illustrate the variability:

(7) יצא לצורך נכנס ויושב במקומו... הנשיא יושב באמצע וקנים יושבים מימינו ושמאלו

If he went out for a need, he comes in and sits down (יושב [ptcp]) in his place. ... The nasi sits (יושב [ptcp]) in the middle, and the elders sit (יושבים) to his right and his left (t. San. 7:5-8:1).²²

In this passage, the participle יושב is used both punctually, referring both to a single action (נכנס ויושב במקומו) and duratively, to describe states (הנשיא יושב באמצע), as was pointed out by Mishor.²³

בעברית ובארמית [Jerusalem 1977], 63); and see Pss 133:3 and 135:2, with A. Hurvitz, *בין לשון לשון: לתולדות לשון המקרא בימי בית שני* (Jerusalem 1972), 156–8.

²⁰ The text is here cited from MS Erfurt (available online at www.biu.ac.il/js/tannaim/). MS Vienna shows only minor differences.

²¹ The Mishnah here and throughout the paper is quoted from the Kaufmann manuscript, available at www.jnul.huji.ac.il/dl/talmud/mishna/selectmi.asp.

²² This is the reading of the Vienna MS and the editio princeps; Erfurt reads, נכנס וישב במקומו.

²³ M. Mishor, ‘מערכת הזמנים בלשון התנאים’, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (Hebrew University 1983), 178. The presence or absence of the relative particle -ש is unrelated to the point under discussion.

However — and this is the important difference — in the Hebrew of the Mishnah, unmarked participles were *usually* punctual, not durative. Compare the uses of the participles in the following mishnah:

(8) נויר שהיה שותה בין כל היום, אינו חייב אלא אחת. אמרו לו 'אל תשתה, אל תשתה', והוא שותה, חייב על כל אחת ואחת. היה מיטמא למיתים כל היום אינו חייב אלא אחת. אמרו לו 'אל תטמא, אל תטמא', והוא מיטמא, חייב על כל אחת ואחת. היה מגלח כל היום אינו חייב אלא אחת. אמרו לו 'אל תגלח, אל תגלח', והוא מגלח, חייב על כל אחת ואחת.

A nazirite who *was drinking* the whole day is only liable for one. If they said to him, 'Don't drink, don't drink!', and he *drank*, he is liable for each one. If he *was defiling himself* by contact with dead people all day, he is only liable for one. If they said to him, 'Don't defile, don't defile!', and he *defiled*, he is liable for each one. If he *was shaving* all day, he is only liable for one. If they said to him, 'Don't shave, don't shave!', and he *shaved*, he is liable for each one (m. Naz. 6:4 [= m. Mak. 3:7–8]).²⁴

Here the durative reading, 'was drinking', is denoted by *hayah* + participle, whereas the bare participle denotes the single punctual action ('he drank', 'he shaved', 'he defiled'). Although other interpretations of this variation may be possible within this passage, the regularity of this pattern here and elsewhere in MH makes it most likely that the foregoing analysis is the correct one. Indeed, closely parallel syntax is found in Late Biblical Hebrew, as in Neh. 1:4 and 2:13.²⁵

Given this point of syntax within Mishnaic Hebrew, it is unsurprising that the Rabbis tended to assume that unmarked participles were not durative, but punctual.²⁶ This is made explicit in a passage such as the following:

²⁴ This is the order of the lines in the Mishnah in MS Kaufmann both in Nazir and in Makkot; Nazir Parma B (De Rossi 138) has the case of shaving before the case of impurity, but in Makkot its order is the same as Kaufmann's.

²⁵ On the passages from Nehemiah, see Gordon, 'Development of the Participle', 23. For another example in MH, see m. Bik. 3:3: עומדין בשלום, ושואלין בשלומן, אחינו אנשי מקום פלוני, באתם בשלום וכל בעלי אומנות שבירושלים עומדין? 'all the craftsmen of Jerusalem would stand in front of them and ask about their well-being: 'Brothers! People of such-and-such place, have you come in peace?' Other ways of marking this difference were available as well; in the following text from the Mishnah, the punctual sense is conveyed by the *qatal* form, and the periphrastic *hayah* + participle form is used for iterative actions: גלתה את ראשה והיתה מטפחת ומנחת 'She *uncovered* her head and *kept on gathering* and *laying it down*' (m. B.Q. 8:6).

²⁶ Other examples show that within Mishnaic Hebrew, the participle could be durative, but it had to be marked as such. Compare, for instance, יכול יהא מתפלל והולך (t. Ber. 3:6) and שלא יהו עניים יושבין ומשמרין כל היום כולו (t. Pe'ah 1:6).

(9) 'וכהן גדול עומד ומקבל וקורא': (משנה סוטה ז, ח): 'עומד' – מכלל
 דיושב הוא! והאמר מר, אין ישיבה בעזרה...

'And the high priest would stand and take [the Torah] and read' (m. Sot. 7:8): 'stand' (ptcp) — this implies that he was sitting! But did the master not teach that no one could sit in the Temple courtyard?... (b. Sot. 40b).²⁷

The use of the participle with a durative sense in earlier texts provides fodder for the midrashic imagination.²⁸ Note that this case is a 'mid-rashic' comment on a Mishnaic text. Does this indicate that the Mishnah itself was prepared to use the participle in the older durative sense ('was standing'), but that the Talmud was not?²⁹

Another interesting case is the dispute in m. Ber. 8:5 as to whether the blessing on the fire on Saturday night should be **שברא מאור האש** — thus the House of Shammai — or **בורא מאורי האש** — thus the House of Hillel. According to the Rava (b. Ber. 52b), everyone agrees that **ברא** refers to the past, but the Hillelites claim that **בורא**, too, can refer to the past (citing scriptural support), whereas the Shammaites argue that **בורא** refers to the future.³⁰ In other words, the Hillelite version of the blessing relies on biblical language, whereas the Shammaites insist on a text of the blessing that reflects the language spoken by the Sages.³¹

²⁷ Compare also the very similar line on 41b, and see again Mishor, 'מערכת הזמנים', 176.

²⁸ Mishor analyses (9) as a comment on the use of the participle, but it well may be a result of a change in the use of stative verbs between the Tannaim of the Mishnah and the Amoraim of the Talmud. See also below, (31)–(32) and the discussion there.

²⁹ A *JSS* reviewer commented that this need not be the implication of this Talmudic comment, but that the Talmud may simply be exploiting an ambiguity. This is possible, but since the Talmud seems to claim that this is unambiguous, and draws halakhic conclusions from the inference, it seems to me that the analysis suggested in the body of the text here is more plausible.

³⁰ See A. Bendavid, *לשון מקרא ולשון חכמים* (2 vols; Tel Aviv 1967–71), 2.547.

³¹ For related aspects of the language of rabbinic blessings, see M. Bar-Asher, 'Les formules de bénédiction forgées par les sages: étude préliminaire', *REJ* 166 (2007), 441–61. The formulations of the blessings contain intentional archaisms (or biblicisms), as in, e.g., the mishnaic rule that **על פירות האילן הוא אומר בורא פרי** 'on the fruits of a tree [the mishnaic Hebrew word] he recites "creator of the fruits of the tree [the biblical word]"' (m. Ber. 6:1). An apparently parallel issue, of which I was reminded by the reviewer for *JSS*, is the question of **גאל** and **גואל** in the conclusion of the blessing before the Shema, on which Rava comments in b. Pes. 117b. For an overview of the scholarly views on this issue, and the conclusion

One striking text shows that the Rabbis were aware that in biblical usage, the participle could refer to either past events or future events, but that in the colloquial language of their own times, it was a present or future tense verb.³² The Mishnah (Nedarim 3:7) rules:

(10) הנודר מן הילודים מותר בנוקדים, מן הנולדים אסור מן הילודים. ר' מאיר מתיר אף בילודים, וחכמים אומרים, לא נתפון זה אלא במי שדרכו להוליד.

One who vows not to benefit from 'those born' (ילודים [passive ptcp]) may benefit from 'those to be born' (נולדים [nip'al ptcp]); one who vows not to benefit from 'those to be born' (נולדים) may not benefit from 'those born' (ילודים). R. Meir permitted him to benefit from 'those born', but the Sages say: He meant everything whose nature it is to be born.

Regarding R. Meir's view, which seems to restrict the reference of נולדים to the future (i.e., only those who are yet to be born), the Talmud (b. Ned. 30b) cites the following discussion.

(11) אמר ליה רב פפא לאביי, למימרא דנולדים "דמתילדך" משמע? אלא מעתה (בראשית מח) שני בניה הנולדים לך בארץ מצרים (בראשית מח, ה), הכי נמי "דאיתילדך" הוא? ואלא מאי? דיילידו משמע? אלא מעתה, דכתיב הנה בן נולד לבית-דוד ואשיהו שמו (מלכים א יג, ב), הכי נמי דהוה? והא עדיין מנשה לא בא! אלא, משמע הכי ומשמע הכי, ובגדרים הלך אחר לשון בני אדם.

R. Papa said to Abbaye: Is this to say that נולדים denotes 'those about to be born'? According to this, [in the verse said by Jacob to Joseph] 'your two sons who are נולדים to you in the land of Egypt' (Gen. 58:5) — does this also mean 'about to be born'? What, rather? That they were born? According to this, when it says 'behold, a son נולד to the house of David, his name will be Josiah' (1 Kgs 13:2) — does it also here mean that he was already born? Even Manasseh [Josiah's father] was not yet born! Rather, נולד means both 'about to be born' and 'already born', but in vows we follow the way people usually speak.

According to the conclusion reached in the Talmudic discussion, there are biblical examples of נולדים which refer to past events, as when Jacob refers to Manasseh and Ephraim, who *were born* in

that the blessing was *not* originally intended to be a perfect גאל, but either גאל or a construct form of גאל 'the redeemer', see U. Ehrlich, ל"גואל" בין "גאל ישראל" ל"גואל", *Leshonenu* 71 (2009), 421–3.

³² The significance of this text was brought to my attention by Richard Steiner, to whom I am indebted.

Egypt, and there are examples which refer to future events, as when the birth of Josiah, who *will be born* to the Davidic house, is foretold. In rabbinic times, however, נולדים means ‘those who are about to be born’, since the participle is the present and future tense verb. Therefore one who vows not to benefit from הנולדים is permitted, according to this view, to benefit from those already born.

b. The Results of these Changes in the Midrashic Literature

A simple reflection of this change can be found in a comment from Esther Rabbah on Esth. 1:1, which said that Ahasuerus was כוש הוא אֲחַשְׁוֶרֶשׁ הַמֶּלֶךְ מֵהַדוּ וְעַד כּוּשׁ ‘the Ahasuerus who ruled (ptcp) from India to Kush’. The midrash comments, הַמּוֹלֵךְ – וְעַד יֵינן לֹא, מִלֶּךְ ‘who was reigning — but he had not yet reigned’ (Esther Rabbah 1:4).³³ Since in MH the participle refers to a punctual event, in this case it is taken as an immediate future tense, thus ‘he was coming to the throne’, but, the midrash concludes, had not yet really taken power.³⁴ Similarly, the midrash understands that when Lot spoke to his sons-in-law, לִקְהֵי בְנֹתָיו (Gen. 19:14), this refers to those who *were about to marry* Lot’s daughters (Genesis Rabbah 50:14 [p. 525]).³⁵

In what follows, examples are cited from the various strata within rabbinic literature — Tannaitic alongside Amoraic, Palestinian alongside Babylonian. Differences between these with regard to linguistic consciousness, if they exist, are yet to be teased out. Heinemann cites the following midrash, which exploits the change in the use of the participle:³⁶

³³ This is the reading in all the manuscripts in the synoptic edition prepared by Joseph Tabory and Arnon Atzmon, available at <http://www.schechter.ac.il/pdf/%D7%90.pdf>.

³⁴ Other examples are discussed by Bendavid, *לשון מקרא ולשון חכמים*, 2.546–7.

³⁵ Citations from Genesis Rabbah are from J. Theodor and H. Albeck, *מדרש בראשית רבא*, על פי כתב-יד בבירטיש מוזיאום עם שינויי נוסחאות משמונה כתבי-יד אחרים ומדפוסים ראשונים ופירוש מנחת יהודה (Jerusalem 1996 [originally 1912–27]). Following the section number, the page number in Theodor-Albeck’s edition is given.

³⁶ I. Heinemann, *דרכי האגדה*,³ (Jerusalem 1970), 116 (also Bendavid, *לשון מקרא ולשון חכמים*, 2.546). Heinemann and Bendavid also refer to b. Eruv. 19a, where הַפְּשָׁעִים (Isa. 66:24) is contrasted by R. Shimon b. Laqish with שִׁפְשָׁעוּ, and the inference is drawn that שִׁפְשָׁעִים וְהוֹלְכִין לְעוֹלָם ‘they continue to rebel eternally’. Here the point is the present tense of the participle, rather than the punctuality of its reference.

(12) הַבָּאִים מִצְרָיִמָּה (שמות א א). כבר היה להם ימים הרבה שם, ולמה הוא אומר הַבָּאִים? אלא כל ימים שהיה יוסף קיים לא היה עליהם משאוי של מצרים, וכיון שמת יוסף ניתן משואן של מצרים עליהם, לפיכך הַבָּאִים, כאילו אותו היום נכנסין כל הַבָּאִים מִצְרָיִמָּה.

‘Those who are coming (הבאים [ptcp]) to Egypt’ (Exod. 1:1). They had been there for a long time already, so why does it say ‘who are coming’? Rather, as long as Joseph was alive, the burden of Egypt was not upon them, but after Joseph died the burden of Egypt was placed on them — therefore ‘who are coming’ — as if all those who came to Egypt entered that very day.³⁷

The participle הַבָּאִים in its biblical context must be translated ‘(those) who came’. Such use is clear in a number of passages. For example, compare (13) and (14):

(13) הָאֲנָשִׁים הַבָּאִים אֵלַיךְ אֲשֶׁר-בָּאוּ לְבֵיתְךָ

the men who came to you (הבאים [ptcp]), who came (באו [perfect]) to your house (Josh. 2:3).³⁸

(14) וספר טביהו עבד המלך הבא אל שלם בן ידע מאת הנבא לאמר השמר, שלחה עבדך אל אדני

And the letter of Tobiyahu, servant of the king, which came (בא [ptcp])³⁹ to Shallum, the son of Yaddua’ from the prophet, saying ‘Watch out!’ — your servant is sending it to my lord (Lachish ostracon 3, rev. 3–5).⁴⁰

The midrash, however, relies on the fact that in MH, a past tense, such as was required in Exod. 1:1, would be expressed with a *qatal* form (שָׁבְאוּ), rather than with the participle. This allows the verse to be read as a present tense, which of course raises questions, since it is not true that the Israelites were *just now coming* to Egypt. Thus, the midrash is spun: the text is indicating that in a sense, they were *just now coming* to Egypt, because it was only now that the weight of Egypt was to be felt on their backs.

We can now turn to another midrash in which this syntactic change seems to be part of what generates the midrash, although here a semantic difference between BH and MH is probably part of the midrash’s genesis, as well.

³⁷ Tanḥuma Buber Shemot §4. The translation is mine.

³⁸ This example is courtesy of Moshe Bar-Asher.

³⁹ That the form is a participle and not a perfect is indicated by the definite article prefixed to it.

⁴⁰ See, for instance, S. Ahituv, *Echoes from the Past: Hebrew and Cognate Inscriptions from the Biblical Period* (Jerusalem 2009), 63.

c. *A More Complex Example: 'Haman was Falling'*

After Ahasuerus storms out of the banquet upon finding out that his queen and his vizier were mortal enemies, Esth. 7:8 says, וְהַמֶּלֶךְ שָׁב מִגַּן הַבַּיִת אֶל בֵּית מִשְׁתֵּה הַיַּיִן וְהָמֵן נָפַל עַל-הַמֶּטֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶסְתֵּר עָלֶיהָ 'the king returned from the garden of the palace to the banquet room, and Haman was fallen on the bed on which Esther was'. Reading the participle נָפַל differently than was just rendered ('was fallen'), the Rabbis comment (b. Meg. 16b):

(15) אתא לביתה - והמן נפל על המטה, נפל? נפל מיבעי ליה! - אמר רבי אלעזר: מלמד שבא מלאך והפילו עליה.

He came to his house: 'and Haman was falling (נָפַל) on the bed' — falling (נָפַל)?! It should have said 'fell' (נָפַל)! R. El'azar said, this teaches that an angel came and caused him to fall on her.

As Eliezer Segal points out, this 'should...be regarded as a case of the rabbis reading the scriptural text according to the grammatical norms current in their own dialect'.⁴¹ Apparently the midrash is focused on the fact that to describe the completed action of Haman's fall onto Esther's bed, the *qatal* form would be used in MH. So the use of the participle (unaccompanied by *ש* or *שהיה* or *כשהוא* or the like) indicates that he was *just then* falling. Why would he wait until Ahasuerus returned to fall on Esther's bed? He wouldn't, of course, and so an angel must have pushed him.⁴²

There is another aspect to this, as well, however. In MH נָפַל is unintentional (non-agentive), like English 'to fall',⁴³ whereas in BH the word may also refer to the volitional (agentive) act of getting down on the ground, as was noted already by Ibn Ezra.⁴⁴ Thus

⁴¹ E. Segal, *Babylonian Esther Midrash: A Critical Commentary* (Brown Judaic Studies 291–3, Atlanta 1994), 3.110–11 with n. 375.

⁴² As Tzvi Novick commented (personal communication), R. El'azar leaves so much unsaid! Novick further pointed out that Rashi read the midrash differently, claiming that the participle נָפַל meant that Haman was *repeatedly* falling on Esther's bed, thus revealing that it was against his will. I think the interpretation offered above does the most justice to the midrash and the midrashic process, but a note of uncertainty should certainly be registered.

⁴³ This can be seen in m. B.Q. 8:1: והויק ובייש, חייב על הנוק ופטור 'one who falls from the roof and damages and [thus] shames [another], is liable for the damages but exempt from the payments for shaming...one is not liable for the shaming penalties unless he did it intentionally.' Here the protasis נָפַל מִן הַגֵּג is taken to clearly imply that the agent was not acting intentionally.

⁴⁴ See his comments on Gen. 14:10 and Gen. 24:64, for example; both times

Haman's falling can plausibly be understood as a volitional act of falling on the bed in an effort, perhaps, to beg for mercy from the queen, but the Rabbis exploit the reading of נפל as specifically unintentional falling to yield the claim that Haman was pushed onto the bed by an angel.⁴⁵

There may well be similar midrashim regarding other participles, but often the precise motivation for a midrashic comment is difficult to discern (see below, [38]–[39], for possible examples). I would like now to turn to another class of verbs which are ambiguous in ways very similar to participles, and whose syntax also underwent changes between Biblical and Mishnaic Hebrew.

3. Stative verbs

a. *The Ambiguity of Stative Verbs in Biblical Hebrew*

The verbs called stative within Hebrew comprise a class of verbs which in all tenses can be ambiguous in much the same way just described for participles.⁴⁶ In fact, sometimes it is difficult to tell if the ambiguity is present because of the participle form or because of the semantics of the verb itself. Gesenius writes:

The period of time indicated by a participle active...must be inferred from the particular context. Thus מָת may mean either [dying] (Zech. 11,9) or [dead] (so commonly...)...; נָפַל falling, but also fallen....⁴⁷

he explains ויפלו/ותפל as ברצונם/ברצונה. See also the discussion in C. Cohen, 'Jewish Medieval Commentary on the Book of Genesis and Modern Biblical Philology, Part I: Gen 1–18', *JQR* 81 (1990), 8–9, citing Akkadian *maqātu* as semantically comparable. See also the common expression על פניו/הם, and see L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *A Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, revised by W. Baumgartner and J.J. Stamm, translated by M.E.J. Richardson (Leiden 1994–2000), s.v. נפל qal 7 for further references.

⁴⁵ For literary comments on the use of נפל in this context and throughout Esther, see J.D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary* (OTL, Louisville 1997), 104–5.

⁴⁶ There is no diagnostic test that I know of for stative verbs in Hebrew. Early proposals for such tests in English — most influentially, G. Lakoff, 'Stative Adjectives and Verbs in English', in A.G. Oettinger et al. (eds), *Mathematical Linguistics and Automatic Translation* (Report NSF-17, the Computation Laboratory, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts) — have not stood up to criticism; see J. Andor, 'Some Notes on Stativeness', *Linguistic Inquiry* 9 (1978), 294–7, and especially B. Levin and M. Rappaport Hovav, *Unaccusativity: At the Syntax-Lexical Semantics Interface* (Cambridge, MA 1995), 169–72, with references.

⁴⁷ *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, edited and enlarged by E. Kautzsch, revised and adjusted by A.E. Cowley (Oxford 1898), §116d (p. 373).

It is not clear that the ambiguity of נָפַל (inchoative ‘falling’ vs. stative ‘fallen’) is due to the participial form, though. The distinction Gesenius is pointing to is the difference between a meaning ‘to be in a state’ and a meaning ‘to enter into a state’. In English, for example, the verb ‘to stand’ (along with many other verbs) is ambiguous in this way; compare (16)–(17):

- (16) When the judge walked into the room, everyone stood.
 (17) There were no seats on the train, so we stood the whole time.

Ray Jackendoff notes sentences with the verb ‘to surround’ such as (18), which can be disambiguated either as (18a) or (18b):

- (18) The enemy surrounded the city.
 (18a) The enemy surrounded the city quickly.
 (18b) The enemy surrounded the city for many days.

Following others, we can call these two senses the *inchoative* sense — in other words, to *enter into a state* — such as is seen in (16) and (18a), and the *stative* sense — in other words, to *maintain a state* — as in (17) and (18b).⁴⁸

The same is true in Hebrew. Contra Gesenius, the ambiguity of נָפַל is not due to the form in which it appears, but to the semantics of the verb itself. Compare, for example, its uses in (19) and (20):

(19) וַיִּפֹּל גַם הוּא עַל הַרְבּוֹ וַיָּמָת

He also fell on his sword, and he died (1 Sam. 31:5).

(20) וַיִּפֹּל עָרֹם כָּל הַיּוֹם הַהוּא וְכָל הַלַּיְלָה

He fell naked all that day and the whole night (1 Sam. 19:24).

In (19), the verb is used in its stative sense: Saul *entered into the state of being fallen*, i.e., ‘he fell’. In (20), however, we need not imagine Saul repeatedly falling and rising, falling and rising, all day and night; rather, the verb is used in the stative sense, and Saul *was in a state of being fallen* all day and night.

Similar pairs are available for the verb שָׁכַב: the *inchoative* reading can be seen in (21) and (23), and the *stative* meaning can be seen in (22) and (24); both examples within each pair come from the same biblical chapter:

⁴⁸ The terms are Jackendoff's. Levin and Rappaport Hovav, *Unaccusativity*, 127, use ‘assume position’ for what we are calling *inchoative*, and ‘maintain position’ for what we are calling *stative*.

(21) וַיֵּלֶךְ שְׁמוּאֵל וַיִּשְׁכַּב בְּמִקְוָמוֹ

Samuel went and lay down in his place (1 Sam. 3:9)

(22) וַיִּשְׁכַּב שְׁמוּאֵל עַד הַבֶּקֶר

Samuel lay down until the morning (1 Sam. 3:15).

(23) וַתְּגַל מְרַגְלָתָיו וַתִּשְׁכַּב

She uncovered his legs and lay down (Ruth 3:7).

(24) שְׁכָבִי עַד הַבֶּקֶר. וַתִּשְׁכַּב מְרַגְלָתָיו עַד הַבֶּקֶר

'Lie down until the morning'. She lay at his feet until the morning (Ruth 3:13–14).

Compare also the uses of the verb *מָלַךְ* in (25), in which the first instance is inchoative ('became king') and the second is stative ('was king').

(25) וַיַּחֲבֹעֵם בֶּן שְׁלֹמֹה מָלַךְ בִּיהוּדָה...וַיִּשְׁבַּע עֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה מָלַךְ בִּירוּשָׁלַם

Rehoboam son of Solomon reigned (= ascended to reign) in Judah... and he reigned seventeen years in Jerusalem (1 Kgs 14:21 and *passim*).

Finally, compare the following contrasting pair ([26]–[27]) for *קָם*, as well:

(26) וַיָּקָם בַּלְעָם בַּבֶּקֶר

Balaam rose in the morning (Num. 22:13).

(27) וַיָּקָם הָעָם כָּל הַיּוֹם הַהוּא וְכָל הַלַּיְלָה וְכָל יוֹם הַמָּחָר

The people stayed up all that day and all that night, and all the next day (Num. 11:32).

Stative verbs such as *נָפַל*, *שָׁכַב*, *גָּדַל*, *מָלַךְ*, then, are ambiguous between inchoative and stative meanings regularly, and the correct meaning has to be inferred from the context.

b. The Changes in the Use of Originally Stative Verbs Evident in Mishnaic Hebrew

In MH the stative verbs are less ambiguous. For most verbs, the inchoative ('to enter into a state') reading has become the default reading, and for the stative ('to maintain a state') meaning, other constructions are used. One way of expressing the stative meaning in MH is with periphrastic constructions made up of *הָיָה* + a participle (examples of which have already been encountered before).

Although MH cannot be seen as a direct descendant of BH in this regard (stative participles, which persist only in frozen form within BH,

Syntactically, the formerly distinctive uses of the stative verb forms in BH, such as the use of the *qatal* form with present-tense reference, are no longer functioning in MH. Biblical expressions such as עָתָה יוֹדַעְתִּי ‘now I know’ (Gen. 22:12) are replaced in MH with יוֹדַע אֲנִי. Similarly, compare BH (28) with MH (29):

(28) אֵיךְ יוֹדַעְתָּ כִּי מֵת שָׂאוּל וַיהוֹנָתָן בְּנָוִי?

How do you know that Saul and Jonathan died/are dead? (2 Sam. 1:5)

(29) הֵיאֵךְ אַתָּה יוֹדַע שׁוֹה חַיִּיב לְזוֹה?

How do you know that he is liable to him? (t. San. 3:6)

In order to express states, the usual structure is *hayah* + participle.⁵⁶ In contrast to the use of עוֹמֵד in (9) above, for example, where the Talmud explicitly comments, מְכַלְל דִּיּוֹשֵׁב הִיּה “he stands” — this implies that he had been sitting,⁵⁷ see the use of הִיּה עוֹמֵד in (30):

(30) הִיּה עוֹמֵד בַּחֲנוּת שֶׁל בְּשָׁמִים כָּל הַיּוֹם אִינוּ מְבַרְךְ אֶלָּא אַחַת.

If he was standing in the spice market all day, he only makes the blessing once (t. Ber. 5:32).⁵⁸

For the Biblical Hebrew way of saying ‘he stood all day’ (וַיִּקָּם כָּל הַיּוֹם), see (27) above.

This process of ‘dynamicization’, or the re-analysis of formerly stative verbs as dynamic verbs, also led to the use of the passive participles of some of these verbs to mean exactly what the active voice verbs meant. We encounter in MH forms such as רָכַב ‘in a riding position’ (m. B.M. 1:3), semantically equivalent to BH רָכַב, and also forms such as מְיוֹשֵׁב ‘sitting’ and מְעוֹמֵד ‘standing’ (b. Meg. 21a), taking the place of the earlier active forms יוֹשֵׁב and עוֹמֵד.⁵⁹ Similarly, כָּשַׁל was replaced by נִכְשַׁל, and כָּבַד by נִכְבַּד; many other examples have been noted by modern scholars, as well.⁶⁰ These developments

⁵⁶ Note that such *hayah* + participle constructions are not limited to stative verbs, as can be seen in (8) above, for example.

⁵⁷ See (33) below, as well, where לעֹמֵד means ‘to get up (in the morning)’.

⁵⁸ Compare also (using יוֹדַע, נוֹדַע, יוֹדַע) ‘If I had known...I would not have vowed’ (m. Ned. 9:2).

⁵⁹ Segal, *Grammar*, 159–60 (§332).

⁶⁰ The example of כָּשַׁל < נִכְשַׁל was discussed by H.L. Ginsberg, ‘מְבַעַד לְמִסוּרָה’, *Tarbiz* 5 (1934), 208–23; the example of כָּבַד < נִכְבַּד was discussed by M. Bar-Asher, ‘וְצוֹתֵךְ אֵל יִכְבַּד לְבָךְ: עַל מִשְׁפַּט אֶחָד בְּמִכְתָּב ‘אֵל פְּלִטְיָהוּ’, *Leshonenu* 68 (2006), 204–5; more examples can be found in Y. Breuer, ‘מְעַבְרֵי שֶׁל פְּעֻלִּים עוֹמְדִים לְבִנְיָנִים’, *Leshonenu* 70 (2008), 145–65.

And if one of them caused damage, the damager became liable (חב)⁶² to pay... Anything for whose guarding I have become liable, I have become prepared to pay for its damage; if I prepared only part of its damages, I have become liable for its damages as if I had prepared all of its damages...when he damages, the damager has become liable to pay (m. B.Q. 1:1–2).⁶³

(32) 'חב המזיק'?! 'חייב המזיק' מיבעי ליה! אמר רב יהודה אמר רב, האי תנא ירושלמי הוא, דתני לישנא קלילא.

'The damager became liable [stative perfect]'?! It should say, 'He is liable (חייב [adjective])'! Rav Judah said in the name of Rav, 'The Tanna was from Jerusalem, and used a "light" (= abridged) formulation' (b. B.Q. 6b).

That חב is merely short for חייב is to be rejected, of course, but that a dialectal issue is involved here seems plausible.⁶⁴ Epstein already observed that the first mishnayot in Baba Qamma are apparently 'ancient'.⁶⁵

c. *The Results of these Changes Reflected in Rabbinic Literature*

i. *Example 1: The time of the shema*⁶

As an example of how these changes affected the rabbinic interpretation of the Bible, one may consider, for example, the halakhic ruling in (33), discussing the outer time limit of the recital of the morning *shema*:

⁶² Since the (3)ms forms of the participle and the perfect of hollow verbs are identical, חב could be a participle rather than a perfect. The syntactic structure, however, argues for it being a perfect: it is the apodosis of a conditional in which the protasis is in the perfect, and in such constructions, the apodosis is always a perfect, as well. I am indebted to Moshe Bernstein for some stimulating emails on this point.

⁶³ For some comments on the syntax of the conditional here, see Azar, *תחביר* חב...משלם, 116 and 156. On p. 49, Azar mentions the construction חב as an example of the use of an auxiliary verb, but this does not seem like an accurate analysis.

⁶⁴ Similarly, recall that in (9) above, the Mishnah used a participle in a durative (= stative) sense, but the Talmud read it as a punctual (= inchoative) sense.

⁶⁵ J.N. Epstein, *מבואות לספרות התנאים: משנה, תוספתא ומדרשי-הלכה* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv 1957), 55. I thank Tzvi Novick, who drew my attention to Epstein's discussion of this passage. For further references to scholars who claim antiquity for m. B.Q. 1:1–3, see J. Hauptman, *Rereading the Mishnah* (Tübingen 2005), 165 n. 26; this reference, too, courtesy of Novick. Hauptman herself has a more complex view: she argues that m. B.Q. 1:2 may be old, but 1:1 is a late addition to the Mishnah based on two passages from the Mekhilot (*Rereading the Mishnah*, 164–73). On this interpretation, the specific phraseology (including the use of חב) would have been borrowed from the redactor's sources. According to Hauptman, that itself may not be old, but its sources apparently are.

(33) מאימתי קורין את שמע בשקרים? משיכירו בין תכלת ללבן... עד הנץ החמה, רבי יהושע אומר, עד שלוש שעות, שכן דרך בני מלכין לעמוד בשלוש שעות.

From when may one read the *shema* in the mornings? Once one can distinguish between azure and white... until sunrise, and R. Joshua says, until three hours [into the day], for the way of princes is to rise at three hours (m. Ber. 1:7).

This ruling regarding the recitation of the *shema* is based on Deut. 6:7, which ordains *וּבְשֹׁכְבְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ*... *וְדַבַּרְתָּ בָּם*. In its original context, this enjoins discussion of (דבר ב-) the words of Torah at all times: *בְּשֹׁכְבְךָ* ‘your time of lying down’ (= night-time) and *בְּקוּמְךָ* ‘your time of being up’ (= daytime). Both views in this mishnaic passage, on the other hand, presuppose an inchoative reading of Deut. 6:7: *וּבְשֹׁכְבְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ* ‘and when you lie down and when you rise’. According to the first tanna, ‘when you rise’ refers to the time when most people rise, which in ancient times was with sunrise at the latest. According to R. Joshua, ‘when you rise’ refers to the time in which people could in principle rise: princes, who could afford the oil needed to stay up late, could then sleep late in the morning, so that until three hours into the day was still ‘when you rise’.⁶⁶

It seems that not all the Rabbis agreed that the verbs were inchoative, though. Rabban Gamaliel rules that the night-time *shema* can be recited all night, until dawn, and apparently R. Shimon bar Yoḥai held that the daytime *shema* could be recited all day — from morning to night.⁶⁷ These two authorities apparently read *וּבְשֹׁכְבְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ* as statives — ‘at the time of your being lying down and at the time of your being up’ — with the result that the daytime and nighttime *shema* could be recited at all waking hours and all sleeping hours, respectively.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ This interpretation of the dispute is that presented by M. Benovitz, ‘שינון: קריאת שמע במשנתו של רבי שמעון בר יוחאי’, *Sidra* 20 (2005), 41 n. 35; once again, the reference to this important study is courtesy of Tzvi Novick.

⁶⁷ This position of R. Shimon bar Yoḥai is the central argument of Benovitz, ‘שינון’, 25–56, and is based on a number of passages which Benovitz analyses in detail (m. Shab. 1:2; y. Shab. 1:2 [3a-b]; m. Ber. 1:2; b. Ber. 8b–9a). Benovitz observes that this depends on the understanding of the verbs *וּבְשֹׁכְבְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ*; see pp. 39–43, and esp. 41 n. 35, at the end.

⁶⁸ The next mishnah continues exploring the semantics of these verbs: בית שמאי אומרין, בערב כל אדם יטו ויקרו, ובבוקר יעמדו, שנאמר *בְּשֹׁכְבְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ* (דב’ ו, ז). בית הלל אומרין, כל אדם קורין כדרכו, שנאמר *וּבְלִקְתָּךְ בְּדֶרֶךְ (שם)*. אם כן, למה נאמר *בְּשֹׁכְבְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ*? אלא בשעה שדרך בני אדם שוכבין, ובשעה שדרך בני אדם עומדין say, in the evening every person should recline and read [the *shema*], and in the

ii. Example 2: more on קם

Other examples of rabbinic comments reflecting these changes are more midrashic. The BH verb קם is ambiguous the same way that stative verbs are generally: it may mean ‘to get up’ or ‘to be up/standing’, as seen in (26)–(27).⁶⁹ By MH the verb has all but disappeared from the language, and is typically replaced by עמד (a process already visible in LBH).⁷⁰ The use of קם in MH is restricted to biblically-based discussions, such as (34)–(35):

(34) וְלֹא קָם נְבִיא עוֹד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּמֹשֶׁה (דברים לד, י) – אבל באומות העולם קם. ואיזה זה? זה בלעם בן בעור.

‘No prophet again arose (קם) in Israel like Moses’ (Deut. 34:10) — but among the nations one arose (קם). Who is this? Balaam b. Be‘or.⁷¹

This claim — that the one who ‘arose’ among the nations was Balaam — was presumably inspired by the sentence Num. 22:13, ויקם בלעם (cited above as (26)).

(35) בָּרַב גְּאוּנָה [תְּהִרַס קְמִיךְ] – הרבית להתנאות כנגד מי שקמו כנגדך, ומהן שקמו כנגדך? הן שקמו כנגד בניך.

‘And in your great triumph you destroy those who rise against you (קמו)’ (Exod. 15:7) — you are much glorified by those who rose (קמו) against you, and who are those who rose (קמו) against you? Those who arose (קמו) against your children (Mekhilta Shira §6).

But the loss of the living use of קם does not mean that the shift from stative to dynamic verb did not affect rabbinic readings of BH קם. The midrash still assumes an inchoative reading of the verb (which

morning they should stand, as it is said, “in your lying down and in your getting up” (Deut. 6:7). Bet Hillel say, every person should read in [whatever] way they were, as it is said, “in your going on your way” (ibid.). If so, why does it say “in your lying down and in your getting up”? Rather, *at the time* when people lie down and *at the time* when people get up’ (m. Ber 1:8). Here the semantics of the infinitive are discussed — does בשכבך mean ‘when you lie down’, literally, or ‘at the time of your lying down’, and so to with בקומך — but this is not the same issue we have been exploring.

⁶⁹ Kutscher, ‘בבואה של הארמית בעברית’, *Tarbiz* 33 (1964), 124–5 (= מחקרים 8 בעברית ובארמית, 400–1) argues that in BH קם means ‘to get up’ and עמד means ‘to be standing’, but a sentence such as (27) shows that קם is in fact ambiguous.

⁷⁰ See Kutscher, *ibid.*, Hurvitz, *בין לשון ללשון*, 173 with nn. 298–9, and S.E. Holtz, ‘התפתחויות סמנטיות בצירוף “עמד על” בעברית המקראית המאוחרת’, *Leshonenu* 72 (2010), 7–18, with further references.

⁷¹ Sifre Deuteronomy §357 in L. Finklestein (ed.), *עם חלופי*, גרסאות והערות (New York 2001).

in this case is the more commonly attested use), and therefore that something designated קם must have been previously down. Thus one reads, for example, the following midrash, commenting on Gen. 14:8, וַיִּקָּם קַיִן אֶל-הָבֶל אָחִיו וַיְהַרְגֵהוּ ‘Cain stood over⁷² his brother Abel and killed him’:

(36) אמר רבי יוחנן הבל היה גבור מקין, שאין ת”ל ויקם אלא מלמד שהיה נתון תחתיו.

R. Yohanan says, Abel was stronger than Cain, for the word וַיִּקָּם teaches nothing but that he (Cain) was (previously) under him (Abel) (Genesis Rabbah 22:8 [p. 214]).

Based on the assumption that ויקם is inchoative, R. Yohanan infers that immediately before Cain ‘rises above’ Abel, he must have been under him — and thus that Abel was in fact the stronger of the two.

A similar assumption is found in Genesis Rabbah later on. After Abraham purchases the field from Ephron, the text (Gen. 23:17) reports that the field was his: וַיִּקָּם שְׂדֵה עֶפְרוֹן... לְאַבְרָהָם לְמִקְנָה ‘the field of Ephron remained to Abraham as a purchased possession’. This is the way the verse was understood by Delitzsch,⁷³ who correctly points to Lev. 25:30 (וְאִם לֹא-יִגְאָל עַד מְלֹאת לוֹ שָׁנָה תְּמִימָה וְקָם) ‘if it is not redeemed by the completion of a full year, the house in the walled city shall forever remain [belonging] to the one who bought it’) as a parallel. Contrary to renderings such as NJPS (‘the house...shall pass to the purchaser’), in Leviticus 25 the inchoative reading is not possible, since the purchaser *bought* the house (i.e., it passed to his possession) a year ago. The midrash, though, assumes that ויקם is inchoative.⁷⁴ Further, in this case the uncommon legal use of ל-קם ‘to remain one’s possession’ contributed to the midrashic possibilities, and we read the following:

⁷² NJPS translates אל קם with ‘set upon’ here. For the adversative meaning of קם על/אל, see Holtz (above, n. 70). The rendering above is meant only to show that the stative reading is possible.

⁷³ Delitzsch’s German commentary — I consulted the 1872 edition: Franz Delitzsch, *Commentar über die Genesis*, mit beiträgen von professor Fleischer und consul Wetzstein (Leipzig 1872) — does not include a translation, but he explains his understanding of the verse on p. 364. In Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis*, tr. S. Taylor (Edinburgh 1889), 2.101, the verse is translated as above. Taylor explains in the introduction that the English edition was produced in conjunction with Delitzsch.

⁷⁴ In this case, incidentally, the assumption is shared by the vast majority of modern biblical translators, despite Delitzsch’s insightful comments in the nineteenth century.

(37) וַיִּקָּם שָׂדֵה עֶפְרוֹן – דְּהוּת נִפְּלָה וּקְמַת, דְּהוּת דְּבַר אִינֶשׁ זְעִיר וְאִיתְעַבְּדַת
לְבַר נֶשׁ רַב. וַיִּקָּם שָׂדֵה עֶפְרוֹן:

For it was fallen, and it got up, for it had belonged to a small man, and now it became the possession of a great man (Genesis Rabbah 58:8 [p. 628]).⁷⁵

iii. Example 3: Lot and Ephron were sitting

We can turn now to two other midrashim which appear to be based on the loss of the stative reading of the formerly stative verbs and their default inchoative readings. The first is a comment regarding Gen. 19:1. After the angels leave Abraham, whom they visited in Genesis 18, they head to Sodom to visit Lot, and according to Genesis 19, they have no trouble finding him: ... וַיָּבֹאוּ שְׁנֵי הַמַּלְאָכִים ... וְלוֹט יֹשֵׁב בְּשַׁעַר סְדֹם ‘The two angels came..., and Lot was sitting at the gate of Sodom’. The midrash comments:

(38) ‘ישב’ כת. אותו היום ארכי דיינים שבכולם מינוהו.

It is written *yšb*: That day they appointed him chief judge (Genesis Rabbah 50:3 [p. 519]).⁷⁶

⁷⁵ One example, from y. Yoma. 1:1, involves the Hip’il form, הקים, which appears in Num. 7:1: תני כל שבעת ימי המילואים היה משה מושח את המשכן ומעמידו: ... מניין לפירוקין? א”ר ומפרקו וסודר עליו את העבודות וביום השמיני העמידו ולא פירקו. ... מניין לפירוקין? א”ר ‘It was learned: All seven days of the consecration [of the tabernacle], Moses would anoint the tabernacle [with oil], set it up, take it apart, and arrange the sacrifices upon it. On the eighth day, he set it up and did not take it apart. ... How do we know that he took it apart repeatedly? R. Ze’era says: It says, “It was on the day that Moses completed to assemble [לְהַקִּים] the tabernacle” (Num. 7:1) — the day that his assemblings ceased’. In this case, the biblical text implies that for seven days Moses ‘assembled’ the tabernacle, and on the seventh day he completed doing so. Rather than understanding that for seven days he was engaged in the process of constructing the tabernacle, or even that for seven days Moses was keeping the tabernacle assembled, the midrash claims that for seven days, he repeatedly assembled — and then disassembled — the tabernacle, on a daily basis. This seems to depend on the understanding that הקים means to assemble something to completion, rather than just to be involved in its assembling. In other words, the question is about whether הקים is a telic verb. If it is, then ‘Moses הקים the tabernacle for seven days’ is ungrammatical, just like *‘Bill finished a house for a month’. But since this is what the text says, it must mean that Moses built the tabernacle every day for seven days.

⁷⁶ The reading is according to MS Vatican 30, not used by Theodor and Albeck in their edition but available in a facsimile edition: *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah: MS Vatican Ebr. 30* (Jerusalem 1970). For other readings (with minor variations, including one relevant to our discussion [see below, n. 78]), see Theodor-Albeck, 519.

In part the midrash reflects the ancient Israelite reality of judges sitting at the city gates.⁷⁷ When Lot is said to be ‘sitting at the gate’, then, this is taken by the midrash as indicating that Lot was serving in a judicial capacity in his town. Thus is explained the midrash’s claim that ‘they appointed him chief judge’.

But why ‘that day’? This apparently is due to the reading of the verb as inchoative rather than stative. The midrash emphasizes **יֹשֵׁב כְּתִיב** ‘it is written **יֹשֵׁב**’ — as a perfect, not a participle. Therefore, it cannot mean ‘he *was sitting*’; the meaning of **וַיָּבֹאוּ שְׁנֵי הַמַּלְאָכִים... וְלוֹט** [יֹשֵׁב] **בְּשַׁעַר סְדֹם** can only be ‘the two angels came...and Lot *then sat down* at the gate of Sodom’. Here the change in the use of the stative verbs between BH and MH leads the midrash to assert that Lot was appointed chief judge of Sodom the same day that the angels arrived to save him from the forthcoming destruction of his town.⁷⁸

A similar midrash appears slightly later in Genesis Rabbah. After the death of Sarah, Abraham approaches the Hittites in southern Canaan to purchase a burial plot. In particular, **וַיְדַבֵּר אֲתָם... וַעֲפָרוֹן**, **יֹשֵׁב בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי-חֵת** ‘he [Abraham] spoke with them [the Hittites]...and Ephron *was dwelling* in the midst of the Hittites’ (Gen. 23:9–10). Again the midrash comments:

(39) **עֲפָרוֹן יֹשֵׁב בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי חֵת וְגו’, ר’ יצחק בר אמי אמ’. ‘יֹשֵׁב’ כְּתִב. אוֹתוֹ הַיּוֹם מִיָּנֹו אוֹתוֹ אַרְכִי-אַיסְטְרִיגוֹס. דְּלֹא יְהוּי בְּרִנְשׁ רַב זֶבֶן מִן בְּרִנְשׁ זְעוֹר.**

⁷⁷ The Rabbis presumably knew this from the biblical text. The gate is mentioned as the location of the elders (in many laws in Deuteronomy, as well as in Josh. 20:4, Ruth 4:11, and Amos 5:15, alongside other biblical passages) as well as the professional judiciary prescribed in Deuteronomy 16. For archaeological evidence and discussion, see A. Biran, ‘Tel Dan’, *BA* 37 (1974), 44, C.H.J. de Geus, *Towns in Ancient Israel and in the Southern Levant* (Palaestina Antiqua 10, Leuven 2003), 33–7, A. Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible, 10,000-586 B.C.E.* (Anchor Bible Reference Library, New York 1990), 469–70. It is possible that the practice persisted long enough for the Rabbis to have known it directly; see L.I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (New Haven and London 2000), 27–31. For the question of the relationship between the elders and the professional judiciary, cf. B.M. Levinson, ‘The First Constitution: Rethinking the Origins of Rule of Law and Separation of Powers in Light of Deuteronomy’, *Cardozo Law Review* 27 (2006), 1874–5, with references.

⁷⁸ In many of the manuscripts, however (see the apparatus in Theodor-Albeck, *ad loc.*), the reading is **יֹשֵׁב כְּתִיב**. According to this, the midrash relies not on the defective spelling **יֹשֵׁב**, but on the use of the participle, in which case this midrash can be compared with that discussed above regarding **נֹפֵל**. This has to be rejected, however, because the technical term **כְּתִיב** refers to the orthography, not the vocalization, and indeed, the consonantal text has **יֹשֵׁב**, not **יֹשֵׁב**.

Ephron was sitting among the Hittites etc.: R. Isaac said, it is written *וַיֵּשֶׁב*: that day they appointed him to be archistrategos – so that a great man [= Abraham] should not purchase from a small man (Genesis Rabbah 58:10 [p. 625]).⁷⁹

Here there are a number of issues. As in the case of *וַיֵּשֶׁב עַל הַמְּטָה*, there is a semantic issue involved here, and this may have further led to the midrashic reading. The verb *יָשַׁב* in MH means ‘to sit’, and there are no exceptions to this. In BH, however, it means ‘to dwell’ as well as ‘to sit’,⁸⁰ and in the context of Genesis 23, clearly the translation ‘Ephron was dwelling’ is the required one. In this regard, this text is different from the previous example: the locative adverbial phrase ‘at the gate’ in Gen. 19:1 disambiguates the otherwise lexically ambiguous verb *יָשַׁב*, and shows that in that text it means ‘to sit’. In Gen. 23:10, however, there is no such disambiguation, so the meaning of *יָשַׁב* is ambiguous ‘to sit’ or ‘to dwell’. The midrash is therefore free to take *יָשַׁב* not as ‘to dwell’ (as the context strongly suggests), but as ‘to sit’, meaning ‘to be a judge’.

In addition, though, must also be the issue of the stativity of the verb. The default reading of *יָשַׁב*, again, is the inchoative ‘sat down’, and the midrash exploits the orthography, which looks like a perfect *יָשַׁב* ‘sat’. Rather than ‘Ephron was dwelling among the Hittites’, then, the midrash takes the verse to mean ‘Ephron then sat [as judge] among the Hittites’.

4. Conclusions

This paper has surveyed some differences in the verbal system between Biblical Hebrew and Mishnaic Hebrew, and drawn attention to some midrashim which may be the result of such differences. The larger point is that midrash is often generated by possibilities perceived in the biblical text.

In the article on ‘Language and Midrash’ in the *Encyclopaedia of Midrash*, we read a comment on R. Akiba’s use of the accusative marker *אֵת* as meaning ‘including’ (*לרבות*):

⁷⁹ Again, the reading is from MS Vatican 30; for other readings, see Theodor-Albeck 625.

⁸⁰ I am indebted to Prof. Chaim Cohen for emphasizing (in his comments at the NAPH conference [see above, n. 1]) the importance of the semantics of *יָשַׁב* in this context.

In this particular case, Aqiba's interpretations clearly extend well beyond anything one could logically link to the particles of speech. ... To the outsider, there do not even appear to be any controls in place for justifying the connections drawn by the interpreter.⁸¹

This is a major step backwards from the state of knowledge in the twelfth century, when Maimonides already perceived that R. Akiba's derashot on the particle **אִתּוֹ** were based on the fact that there are actually two words **אִתּוֹ**, the accusative marker and the preposition 'with'.⁸²

Indeed, this paper has tried to extend this type of understanding of the enterprise of midrash. The Rabbis were motivated to probe what they perceived to be the plurality of meanings latent in the biblical text. This was not an unfettered enterprise: the idea was to reveal the interpretative possibilities allowed by the text, and this had to begin with the text itself. One area in which this comes to the fore is where the language changed between biblical times and the Rabbis' own era. Whereas modern readings are careful to avoid anachronisms, and to refrain from importing later lexical, phonological, or syntactic values into the biblical text, the Rabbis did not refrain from doing so. Words whose meanings changed were viewed as ambiguous or polysemous;⁸³ words whose pronunciation changes could be read to yield other meanings;⁸⁴ syntactic constructions were multivalent and yielded multiple readings.

Could one claim that what from our modern perspective are diachronic changes are, from the midrashic perspective, synchronic variants? The strong reading of this claim entails positing that the Rabbis were unaware of the changes that had taken place within Hebrew between the Iron Age and their own day. In some cases, this is no doubt true; the Rabbis were not regular readers of the *Journal of Semitic Studies*, and they were likely not conscious of most lexical and grammatical changes. In cases such as the story reported a number of times (y. Meg. 2:2; b. R.H. 26a = b. Meg. 18a), Rabbis learn the meanings of biblical words from the speech of the maid in the house-

⁸¹ D.H. Aaron, 'Language and Midrash', in J. Neusner and A.J. Avery-Peck (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Midrash: Biblical Interpretation in Formative Judaism*, 2 vols. (Leiden 2005), 408–9.

⁸² This medieval insight was discussed in modern times by, e.g., R.C. Steiner, 'Meaninglessness, Meaningfulness, and Super-Meaningfulness in Scripture: An Analysis of the Controversy Surrounding Dan 2:12 in the Middle Ages', *JQR* 82 (1992), 447–9, who also contextualized this method of R. Akiva.

⁸³ Heinemann, *דרכי האגדה והמדרש*, 112–17, and Yonah Fraenkel, *דרכי האגדה והמדרש* (Masada 1991), 1.98–9.

⁸⁴ See Steiner, 'המלים 'מאה' ו'מאתי' הארמית'.

hold of R. Judah ha-Nasi. Whether this is due to a belief that the common folk preserved older language more stubbornly,⁸⁵ or the Hebrew-infused environment of R. Judah ha-Nasi's household,⁸⁶ cannot be said for certain. What does seem clear is that in these cases, and in many others, the Rabbis seem to genuinely believe that rare words in the Bible may be preserved in later Hebrew, and were therefore prepared to draw from everyday speech in order to elucidate tough biblical passages. And sometimes they may have been correct.

On the other hand, there are a number of passages which indicate that they were aware that the language had changed in some ways. R. Tanḥuma is cited (Numbers Rabbah 14:4) as giving one example: 'The Mishnah calls [the ploughshare] a *mardea*' and the Bible calls it a *dorban*'. R. Yoḥanan is said to have a strong sense of these changes: it is reported that R. Asi used the word *מִסַּךְ* 'to mix (a drink)' in a question he asked R. Yoḥanan, but R. Yoḥanan said, 'Say *מוֹזַג*!' When R. Asi responds that he was relying on a biblical text (Prov. 9:2), R. Yoḥanan said, *לְשׁוֹן מִקְרָא לְחֹדֵד, לְשׁוֹן חֲכָמִים לְחֹדֵד*, 'the language of Torah is one thing, the language of the Sages another' (b. A.Z. 58a).⁸⁷ Similarly, R. Yoḥanan once heard Issi b. Hini (a Babylonian who had moved to Israel) using the form *רְחָלִים* for the plural of *רְחַל* 'ewe'.⁸⁸ R. Yoḥanan corrected him, instructing him that the proper form was *רְחָלוֹת*, with the feminine ending. Issi responded by citing Gen. 32:14, in which the form *רְחָלִים* is actually attested, and again R. Yoḥanan

⁸⁵ Cf. A. Cohen, 'Arabisms in Rabbinic Literature', *JQR N.S.* 3 (1912–13), 227.

⁸⁶ Compare his statements recorded in b. Sot 49b and b. B.Q. 82b–83a regarding the use of Hebrew and Greek as opposed to Aramaic.

⁸⁷ This is the version of the line as found in some manuscripts and as cited by Abraham Ibn Ezra; cf. his commentary on Qohelet 5:1, printed with commentary by J. Yahalom, *שפת השיר של הפיוט הארץ-ישראלי הקדום* (Jerusalem 1985), 189. Printed editions have *לְשׁוֹן חֲכָמִים לְעִצְמָן*, *לְשׁוֹן תּוֹרָה לְעִצְמָה*, and some manuscripts have other, slightly different readings. As the *JSS* reviewer pointed out, this does not necessarily reflect knowledge of diachronic change; R. Yoḥanan may have conceived of *לְשׁוֹן מִקְרָא* and *לְשׁוֹן חֲכָמִים* as contemporaneous dialects or even just registers of language. These possibilities in the understanding of R. Yoḥanan's position were debated in early modern times (the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, as well); see I. Barzilay, 'From Purism to Expansionism: A Chapter in the Early History of Modern Hebrew', *JANES* 11 (1979), 3–15, esp. 7–8 regarding the debate between Isaac Satanow and Hayyim Keslin. See also Yahalom, *שפת השיר*, 7–24.

⁸⁸ Interestingly, this is said to have taken place in Issi's recitation of a Mishnah, thus providing an early example of the phenomenon well known from later copyists and printers, who, ignoring R. Yoḥanan's dictum of *לְשׁוֹן חֲכָמִים לְחֹדֵד, לְשׁוֹן מִקְרָא לְחֹדֵד*, pseudo-corrected the text of the Mishnah to bring it in line with the grammar of Biblical Hebrew. See, for example, the discussions in M. Bar-Asher, 'צורות נדירות', *Leshonenu* 41 (1977), 83–102.

retorts, ‘the language of the Torah is one thing, the language of the Sages another’ (b. Hul 137b).

Although not relating to the biblical text specifically, another text explicitly discusses diachronic semantic change:

R. Hisda said: The following three things changed their designations after the destruction of the Temple: (1) a trumpet used to be called a *הצוצרה*, but is now called a *שופר*, and what used to be called a *שופר* is now a *הצוצרה*; ... (2) a willow used to be called an *ערבה* but is now called a *זפופה*, and what used to be called a *זפופה* is now called an *ערבה*; ... (3) a small table used to be called a *פתורה* but is now called a *פתורתא*, and what used to be called a *פתורתא* is now called a *פתורה* (b. Shab. 36a).

In the continuation of the Talmudic passage, other Rabbis add other examples. This passage raises the possibility that at least some Rabbis may have seen a difference not between — as modern scholars would say — ‘biblical Hebrew’ and ‘post-biblical Hebrew’, but between ‘Temple-era Hebrew’ and ‘post-Temple-era Hebrew’.

In light of all this, it is difficult to accept that the use of Mishnaic Hebrew in midrash was unreflectively based on a belief that Hebrew had remained static since biblical times.⁸⁹ It should rather be compared with their use of Aramaic or Greek or Coptic for midrashic purposes.⁹⁰ In other words, although the Rabbis *were* aware that their language was not the language of the Bible — just as they were aware that the Bible was not written in Aramaic or Greek or Coptic — they were also prepared to read the Bible as if it were written in their language, to produce midrashic readings. The awareness that if the Bible is read as Mishnaic Hebrew the text would yield interesting

⁸⁹ I also find it difficult to accept the claims of M. Banitt, *Rashi: The Interpreter of the Biblical Letter* (Tel Aviv 1985), 140–1, that other languages were mined for their potential contributions to the restoration of the pristine original language spoken before the Tower of Babel: ‘The original tongue was lost; bits of it are scattered among all the languages of the world. Is it then not the prescribed task of the exegete to explore the Babel of tongues in order to restore the pristine significance of the Biblical letter?’

⁹⁰ These midrashim were collected and analysed by A. Brüll, *Fremdsprachliche Redensarten und ausdrücklich als fremdsprachlich bezeichnete Wörter in den Talmuden und Midraschim* (Leipzig: Fritsch, 1869), and see A. Cohen, ‘Arabisms in Rabbinic Literature’, *JQR* 3 (1912), 221–33; to my knowledge, no comprehensive study has been produced of such midrashim in the past 150 years. For recent discussion of such multi-lingual midrashim, with further bibliography, see Y. Moss, ‘The Language of Paradise, Hebrew or Syriac? Linguistic Speculations and Linguistic Realities in Late Antiquity’, in M. Bockmuehl and G.G. Stroumsa (eds), *Paradise in Antiquity: Jewish and Christian Views* (Cambridge 2010), 120–37.

possible meanings was a way of opening possibilities, not of discovering the original meaning of the text.⁹¹ The store of Hebrew lexical data provided by Mishnaic Hebrew furnished the rabbinic mind with new exegetical possibilities to be explored and exploited.⁹²

In sum, to fully understand the midrashim, one must be attuned to the various possibilities the midrashist would have seen in the text, including syntactic and lexical possibilities which may have only come into being in the midrashist's own dialect. The more the various dialects of Hebrew are studied, and the more scholars of midrash spend time paying attention to the nuances of the biblical text and the possibilities available to the midrashist, the more insight we will gain into the midrashic process.

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⁹¹ Compare Steiner, 'The "Aramean" of Deuteronomy 26:5', 138: 'The *derashot* considered here are part and parcel of the overall exegetical program of the rabbis, who were determined to ferret out every imaginable type of ambiguity in the biblical text: lexical and syntactic, homophonic and homographic, synchronic and diachronic, intralingual and interlingual. For them, each *derasha* was quite literally a "search" — a search for new manifestations of the omniscience of Scripture.'

⁹² On the midrashic enterprise and its less-than-serious nature, see especially the sources and discussion in Heinemann, *לרכי האגדה*, 186–95. See also J. Kugel, 'Two Introductions to Midrash', *Prooftexts* 3 (1983), 133–4 ('there is something a bit joking about midrash, too'), Z. Malachi, "'Creative Philology" as a System of Biblical and Talmudic Exegesis: Creating Midrashic Interpretations from Multi-Meaning Words in the Midrash and the Zohar', in S.B. Noegel (ed.), *Puns and Pundits: Word Play in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Literature* (Bethesda, Maryland 2000), 269–87 and the sources cited in M.D. Herr, 'למהותה של האגדה', *Mahanayim* 100 (1966), esp. 66–9.