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The Image of Edom in *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah*

In Rabbinic literature, Esau (hence Edom), Jacob's brother, is the character systematically chosen to incarnate the role of Rome, the "wicked empire," both in the pagan (pre-Constantinian) and Christian periods. With this in mind, this article deals with the imagery of Edom in the classical Jewish Midrash Bereshit Rabbah, a compilation of Rabbinic interpretations and aggadic commentaries on the Biblical book of Genesis edited by Rabbinic sages during the late 4th or early 5th century C.E. in order to reflect upon the contemporary events of their time. It will be argued that the Rabbis who formed this text in its final stage merged older traditions and brought them into one coherent composition which may best be explained by the perspective of their time, after the Christianization of the Roman Empire.

L'image d'Édom dans le *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah*

Dans la littérature rabbinique, Ésaü (Édom), le frère de Jacob, est le personnage choisi pour incarner le rôle de Rome, l'empire mauvais. Dans ce contexte, cet article traite de l'image d'Édom dans le Midrash Bereshit Rabbah, une compilation d'interprétations rabbiniques et de commentaires haggadiques sur le livre biblique de la Genèse, rédigée par les Sages (rabbins) à la fin du iv^e siècle ou au début du v^e siècle pour réfléchir sur les événements de leur époque. L'article montrera que, tout en utilisant des traditions plus anciennes, les rabbins rédacteurs de ce texte ont réalisé une composition cohérente, qui peut être expliquée par la perspective de leur temps, c'est-à-dire la christianisation de l'empire suite à la conversion de Constantin.

1. METHODOLOGICAL QUESTIONS¹

The image of Edom in *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah* (henceforth: BerR), the classical collection of Rabbinical interpretations on the book of Genesis (late fourth or early fifth century C.E.), cannot be addressed without considering some methodological issues and caveats. Despite considerable forays in the field of Midrash studies during the last decades, this literature, which emerged in late antiquity within Rabbinic Judaism, belongs to the most controversial topics in the academic study of Judaism. Among others, the following questions are discussed:

a) There is lack of unanimity as to whether, in Midrash texts, the Rabbinic Sages engaged – with their own tools² however distorted it may seem to modern exegetical eyes – in *Biblical interpretation*³ or whether their aim was basically to enter into a *dialogue between Scriptures and their own time*. In the latter case, this would entail a use of the Bible “as an artist uses his colors on the palette, expressing ideas through and with Scripture as the artist paints with those colors and no others”.⁴

b) Insofar as Midrash texts do refer to the Hebrew Bible, there is a discussion regarding whether they are reading the Biblical texts in their larger original context or whether they apply their reading preferably (or even exclusively) as separate from their textual environment, or, in other words, whether they break scripture

1. My thanks go to Luke Neubert and Dr. Paul S. Peterson for their help with issues of language. For any remaining errors and inadequacies I am, of course, solely responsible.

2. For the methodology of the Rabbis (“Midrash Reading Practices”), see Alexander Samely, *Forms of Rabbinic Literature and Thought. An Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 91-93.

3. Cf. Günter Stemberger, “Zum Verständnis der Schrift im rabbinischen Judentum,” *Bibel in jüdischer und christlicher Tradition. Festschrift für Johann Maier*, ed. Helmut Merklein, Karlheinz Müller, and Günter Stemberger, Frankfurt am Main, Hain (Bonner Biblische Beiträge 88), 1993, p. 212-225; James L. Kugel, “Two Introductions to Midrash,” *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1986, p. 77-103.

4. Cf. Jacob Neusner, “The Role of Scripture in the Torah – is Judaism a ‘Biblical Religion’?,” *Bibel in jüdischer und christlicher Tradition*, p. 192-211 (here p. 196). Johanna Erzberger, *Kain, Abel und Israel. Die Rezeption von Gen 4,1–16 in rabbinischen Midraschim*, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 2011, p. 17.

“down into micro-Scripture,” isolating Biblical words “from their neighbors,” changing their meaning and connecting them to a new Rabbinic context.⁵

c) Finally there is a debate surrounding the question of whether one can refer to collections of Rabbinic Midrash like BerR or *Leviticus Rabbah* as identifiable “texts” presupposing a given “Urtext”. This question is discussed, on the one hand, with regard to the divergent manuscript traditions appearing as “various recensions of a work”, which make it difficult to address the problem of the boundaries of each respective work.⁶ The question of whether or not and to what extent we can speak of one continuous and redactionally coherent Midrash text arises again, on the other hand, with regard to the given manuscripts. In these texts the succeeding paragraphs often produce divergent and also mutually exclusive interpretations and appear in many cases as only arbitrarily linked.

Concerning this last question, David Stern comes to the conclusion that the various Midrashic collections “remain to all appearances more like anthologies of traditional Rabbinic interpretations that an anonymous editor selected and recorded than like self-contained, logically structured books in their own right”.⁷ This kind of methodological scepticism favours approaches that are less interested in “texts” than in “motifs” to be tracked diachronically in different works and contexts.⁸ Concerning the topic of Esau/Edom in Rabbinic literature, this approach has been followed in different studies over the last decades.⁹

5. Cf. James L. Kugel, “Two Introductions,” p. 93: “(M)idrash is an exegesis of biblical verses, not of books”.

6. Cf. Peter Schäfer, “Research into Rabbinic Literature: An Attempt to Define the Status Quaestionis,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 37/2 (1986), p. 139-152 (here p. 146-149).

7. David Stern, *Parables in Midrash. Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature*, Cambridge – London, Harvard University Press, 1991, p. 152.

8. Cf. Peter Schäfer, “Research,” p. 140-142; Carlos Bakhos, “Method(ological) Matters in the Study of Midrash,” *Current Trends in the Study of Midrash*, ed. Carol Bakhos, Leiden – Boston, Brill, 2006, p. 178.

9. Cf. Gerson D. Cohen, “Esau as Symbol in Early Medieval Thought,” *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. Alexander Altmann, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1967, p. 19-48; Friedrich Avemarie, “Esau's Hände, Jakobs Stimme. Edom als Sinnbild Roms in der frühen rabbinischen Literatur,” *Die Heiden*, ed. Reinhard Feldmeier and Ulrich Heckel, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck (*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* 70), 1994, p. 177-208;

In the context of his own theory of the “documentary reading” of the canonical documents of Rabbinic Judaism, Jacob Neusner has, on the other side, advanced the idea that the units and paragraphs of the canonical Midrash texts are strung together in order to form a single and seamless whole. Neusner tries to show this with the help of a formal analysis of the documents that are, according to him, held together by structurally recurrent exegetical forms like the *Petichot* and by common motifs.¹⁰ Regarding *BerR* he proposes a coherence in terms of content focusing on the time of the final redaction of the text, “about half a century after the Roman government legalized Christianity and adopted it as the religion of the state”. In this crisis, according to Neusner, the Rabbinic sages “turned to Genesis to find in the stories of the beginnings the rules governing Israel, which would clarify the contemporary events and their meaning”.¹¹

With these methodological difficulties and uncertainties in mind, the author of this present paper tends to side with those who favour, at least heuristically, a reading of *BerR* presupposing some kind of documentary coherence – this not only for practical reasons (an atomistic reading of microtexts would make an investigation like the one proposed here senseless), but also due to recent research on the manuscript tradition.¹² Regarding the divide between the followers of the “Midrash as Biblical interpretation” thesis and the supporters of Neusner’s “artist theory” the assumption of this paper is that the reading strategy of Midrash texts should not be strictly exclusive. Both understandings of Midrash illuminate certain features of our text. We are dealing with a milieu in which, in Alexander Samely’s words, “the rabbinic world is already Bible-shaped and the Bible is

Gerhard Langer, *Esau: Bruder und Feind*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009.

10. Cf. Jacob Neusner, *Midrash as Literature. The Primacy of Documentary Discourse*, Lanham, University Press of America, 1987.

11. Jacob Neusner, *Judaism and the Interpretation of Scripture. Introduction to the Rabbinic Midrash*, Peabody, Hendrickson, 2004, p. 30.

12. Intensive work on the manuscripts of the Rabbinic texts of the fourth and early fifth centuries has shown that the textual variations do not diverge from one another significantly. Cf. Chaim Milikowsky, “The Status Quaestionis of Research in Rabbinic Literature,” *Rabbinic Texts and the History of Late-Roman Palestine*, ed. Martin Goodman and Philipp Alexander, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 67-88, here p. 69-70: “there was one single work known as *BerR*, and after its redaction it was generally considered a closed work”.

world-shaped."¹³ For the Rabbis, the alternative between Biblical interpretation and World interpretation was non-existent. In our Midrash, both endeavours were mingled in one text.

With these considerations, an investigation of the kind proposed here may prove reasonable. Moreover, the topic of this paper, *the image of Edom* in our Midrash, seems to be an appropriate test case to verify the assumptions made by Neusner. First, the topic of Edom as the Rabbinic code name for Rome corresponds to Neusner's dating of the redaction of the Midrash to the fourth and fifth centuries of the Roman Empire – a Roman Empire having already embraced Christianity. Second, the topic of Esau/Edom is sufficiently broadly treated in the book of Genesis, allowing an investigation into the question of coherence that will transcend particular paragraphs and extend over larger portions of BerR.

2. EDMOM IN GOD'S CREATION AND EARLY WORLD HISTORY

The identification of Rome with Edom (hence Esau) in Rabbinic literature is an often cited commonplace.¹⁴ Daniel Boyarin has dealt with the productive as well as with the problematic side of the metaphor of Jacob and his brother incorporating "in a powerful symbol the sense of the highly fraught relationship between Jews and Christians, eventually between Judaism and Christianity, between the Rabbis and the Church".¹⁵ Taking into account the specific character of our Midrash we should not be surprised to find the first reference to Edom in this text occurring many chapters prior to Esau's appearance on stage according to the Biblical chronology. The fact that BerR's first remarks on Edom¹⁶ link this figure to Rome indicate, already at this stage, that the final redactors of this text were indeed deeply preoccupied with the question of the Roman Empire. The Midrashic paragraph in question discusses the usefulness of certain creatures such as fleas, gnats, and flies. According to the Rabbis (BerR 10:7 on Gen 2:1) "the Holy One,

13. Alexander Samely, *Forms*, p. 70.

14. Gerson Cohen, "Esau as Symbol," p. 20.

15. Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God. Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 3.

16. On the first reference to Esau (in BerR 2:3 on Gen. 1:3) see below.

blessed be He, carries out his purposes through everything, even through a snake, a scorpion, a gnat or a frog”.¹⁷

The Midrash then proceeds to elucidate this interpretation with a strange story about R. Ele‘azar, probably R. Ele‘azar b. Shamua‘, a second-century Palestinian Tanna of the third generation¹⁸, who is portrayed quoting a verse from Isaiah linking the figure of Edom (אֶדוֹם [‘*edom*]) to “man” (אָדָם [‘*adam*]). In the context of a running commentary on the book of Genesis, this identification clearly points to “the first Adam” (אָדָם הָרִאשׁוֹן [‘*adam ha-rishon*]) of the Biblical account:

R. Ele‘azar was sitting to ease himself in the privy, when a Roman came and drove him away and sat down [instead of him in the privy]. ‘This has a purpose,’ remarked [R. Ele‘azar]. Immediately a snake emerged and struck and killed him (i.e. the Roman). At that (R. Ele‘azar) applied to himself the verse ‘Therefore I will give a man (אָדָם [‘*adam*]) for thee’ [reading instead] ‘Therefore I will give an Edom (אֶדוֹם [‘*edom*]) for thee’.¹⁹

Although the initial setting of this story verges on a piece of satire, the Midrashic arrangement makes it clear that the Rabbis are being serious, having their bellicose encounter with the Roman Empire in mind that led to the destruction of the second Temple. Fittingly, the episode by R. Ele‘azar is followed by the well-known aggadic story of the Roman general Titus who “entered the Holy of Holies,” “dragged down the veil” and “blasphemed and reviled” God. After his return to Rome, a mosquito entered the Emperor’s nose and began piercing his skull so that the “wicked Titus” (טִיטוֹס הָרָשָׁע [‘*Titus ha-rasha*’]) died.²⁰ While the animal

17. The English translations follow Rabbi Dr. Harry Freedman and Maurice Simon, *Midrash Rabbah. Genesis*, London, Soncino Press, 1939, based on the critical edition of Theodor – Albeck (which follows British Library Ms. 27169), here p. 75. When other manuscript traditions seem preferable, the translation is given in a modified form. In this passage, the Vilna edition and Cod. Vat. 60 have different orders of the animals: see *Midrash Bereshit Rabba Codex Vatican 60*. A limited facsimile edition of 160 copies, by special permission of the Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana, ed. A. P. Sherry, Jerusalem, Makor, 1972, p. 29.

18. The identification of this Rabbi is, however, not clear; he could also be identified with Rabbi Ele‘azar ben Pedat, a Palestinian Amora of the 3rd generation (Günter Stemberger, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrasch*, München, Beck, 1992, p. 96).

19. H. Freedman, *Midrash Rabbah*, p. 76 (modified). The parentheses in square brackets are by Freedman, the ones in round brackets by the author.

20. On this tradition cf. also b. Gittin 56b.

proves its usefulness in God's plan of creation – with this argument the Rabbis pursue their supplementary and annotative exposition (“Midrash as exegesis”) – the reader is informed about the final fate of the wicked enemy of God and of His people who in later paragraphs of this work is continuously and consistently identified as “the wicked” Edom.

It seems that this line of thought – a reference to the destruction of the temple – is further pursued in the Midrashic explanation of the story of Cain and Abel. Here the Rabbis refer to the murder of Abel by Cain which took place, according to Gen 4:8, in the “field” (שדה). This location is to be understood, according to BerR 22:7, as the place where the temple was later built, referring to the “field to be ploughed” after its destruction according to Micah 3:12.²¹ It is noteworthy, in this context, that the Midrash wants to see Cain and Abel as twins²², possibly in the mould of Jacob and Esau, although a clear identification is avoided.

Although the Rabbis did not discuss the problem of “Edom” in an outrageous manner, they found possibilities to treat this subject in their “exegetical” explanations dealing with the Biblical chapters on the beginning of the world. This is confirmed a few pages earlier by astonishing remarks on the four rivers in Paradise according to Gen 2:10-14 (BerR 16:4).²³ In this conception, merging primordial geography (“a river went out from Eden”) with a sketch of world history according to apocalyptic speculations, the information on the Paradise river that “divided and became four rivers” (Gen 2:10) alludes to the four kingdoms known from the eschatological scheme according to Dan 7. The rivers Pishon and Gihon refer to Babylon and Media, the Tigris to Greece, while the Euphrates (פרת [Perat]) is seen as denoting Edom. This assignment, of course, lacks any “territorial” rationale or “chronological” or any other order except that it follows the sequence provided by Dan 7. Thus the description

21. On the identification of the “field” with Mount Sion see also BerR 70:8 (on Gen 29:1).

22. BerR 22:3 on Gen 4:2.

23. See the parallel in LevR 13:5 and Mireille Hadas-Lebel, *Jerusalem against Rome*, Leuven, Peeters, 2006, p. 513. The first mention of the four empires is in BerR 2: 4 where the text disengages the elements of Gen 1: 2 (“The earth was tohu and bohu, and darkness was upon the face of the deep”) assigning “tohu” to the kingdom of Babel, “bohu” to that of Media, “darkness” to Greece and “the face of the deep” to the “wicked kingdom”.

of these four rivers ends with a sketch of world history that embraces the entire history of Israel.²⁴

The Rabbis' reasoning is based, as is typical of this kind of literature, however arbitrarily, on pseudo-etymological attributions put forward in order to make the passages from the books of Genesis and Daniel correspond to one other. To remove all doubts that "Edom" is more than an abstract key word remote from the Biblical context, the Midrash confirms that the text indeed has the identification of this fourth "kingdom" with "Esau" in mind. In this regard, according to the Rabbis, the name of the river Perath alludes in Hebrew to the fact that Edom "increased" (פרה [*parah*]) by the blessing of Isaac, the "old man" (זקן [*zaqen*]).²⁵ This explanation clearly connoting the divine blessing of Gen 1:28 on all humankind (Adam) and, linking it with Isaac's blessing of his first-born son, shows an awareness of the extent to which the history of Rome is linked to the history of Israel.²⁶ The notion of Edom's growth as reflected in the "etymology" of the river Perath mirrors an understanding of Rome's rise and is a consequence of Isaac's blessing. This last benediction consequently has to be understood, according to the Biblical narrative, as the shadow of the Patriarch's first blessing of his second son.

Edom's growth, according to Midrashic historiosophy, found its expression in the historical events that turned Jacob's brother into the last of the four empires (מלכות [*malkhut*]).²⁷ The famous

24. On the four kingdoms see also BerR 65:1 (on Gen. 26:34); BerR 66:1 (on Gen. 27:28); BerR 70:8 (on Gen 29:3); BerR 76:6 (on Gen 32:12), BerR 88:5 (on Gen 40:11) and BerR 99:2 (on Gen 49:26) (Harry Freedman, *Midrash Rabbah*, p. 973-974). Mireille Hadas-Lebel (Jerusalem against Rome, p. 514) remarks that for the Midrash, "any quaternary rhythm is sufficient to suggest the four empires". Ambrose, in his tractate *De Paradiso*, included a chapter (liber I, cap. III) on "quatuor flumina inde orienta, virtutes cardinales, et quatuor mundi aetates designari". The similarity of the early Christian subdivisions of world history with the classification of history in our Midrash is striking; for more examples cf. Roderich Schmidt, "Aetates mundi. Die Weltalter als Gliederungsprinzip der Geschichte," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 67 (1955/56), p. 288-317 (= Roderich Schmidt, *Weltordnung – Herrschaftsordnung im europäischen Mittelalter: Darstellung durch Rechtsakt, Wort und Bild*, Goldbach, Keip, 2004, p. 1-30). These parallels in Patristic literature are circumstantial evidence if not of some kind of indirect influence then of common cultural ground.

25. Cf. Gen 27:1-2 and BerR 67:3 (on Gen 27:33).

26. Cf. the mentioning of the Jerusalem Temple in the Midrash's comments on the first river (Pishon) flowing around the land of Havilah in Gen 1:11 (BerR 16:2).

27. On Edom as the fourth empire see also BerR 65:1 (on Gen 26:34).

saying according to which “the whole kingdom turned into heresy” presupposes the Christianization of the Roman Empire, and although this saying is found in a later source (*b. Sanhedrin* 97a), we have reason to believe that the awareness of a Christianized Rome is presupposed already in BerR. It is no wonder, therefore, that the next instances of an invocation of Edom in our Midrash occur in the context of Biblical references to several succeeding “kingdoms”.

The first reference to a “kingdom” occurs in Gen 10:8-10:

8 And Cush begat Nimrod: he began to be a mighty one in the earth. 9 He was a mighty hunter before the LORD: wherefore it is said, Like Nimrod a mighty hunter before the LORD. 10 And the beginning of his kingdom was Babel.

BerR 37:2 begins by connecting verse 8 to Ps 7:1: “Shiggaion of David, which he sang unto the Lord concerning Cush a Benjaminite”. When the father of Nimrod according to the book of Genesis is linked to David’s Cush in the Psalms, the reasoning goes, then Cush is a “son of the right hand” (בן ימיני [*ben yemini*]), the son of a Southerner. Implying that the speaker is turned to the east, this constellation roughly suits the geography of Edom. The Midrash continues: “R. Joshua b. R. Nehemiah said in the name of R. Hanina b. Isaac: He [David] composed this with reference to the seat of judgment of that wicked man (בימה של רשע [*bimah shel rasha*])”.²⁸ The Midrash, according to most of the manuscripts, goes on to ask who this “wicked man” was. The text does this in an obscure way, presupposing that there is a third person to be identified with Cush: “Was he a Cushite (וכי כושי הוה [*we-khi kushi hawah*])?”²⁹ In any case, according to Biblical genealogy, the identification of Esau with Cush would be difficult because Esau, twin brother of Jacob, was a descendent of Shem while Cush was a descendent of Ham! The answer is that Esau is called so because *he acted* like Nimrod: “Hence it is written: ‘Like Nimrod a mighty hunter before the Lord’” (Gen 10:9). In its remarks on

28. Codex Vat. 30 reads “with reference to the sons of the wicked Esau” (כנגד בניו של עשיו הרשע). Cf. Michael Sokoloff, *Midrash Bereshit Rabba* Ms. Vat. Ebr. 30. Published by special permission of the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Jerusalem, Makor, 1970.

29. Codex 27169 (British Museum), and Vat. 30 and 60 ask more precisely, mentioning the subject (*lectio faciliior*): “Was then Esau a Cushite?”

the beginning of verse 9 “he was” (הָיָה), BerR 37:3 continues with a numerical sequence in the mould of the numerical sayings in the Biblical Proverbs³⁰:

Five times ‘he’ (הָיָה [hu]) is found (in the Bible) denoting a wicked character, and five times denoting a good one. It is employed five times to denote an evil character: ‘He (הָיָה [hu]) was a mighty hunter’ (Gen 10:9). This (hu) is ‘Esau, the father of the Edomites’ (Gen 36:43).³¹

In the enumeration of the evil characters the reader discovers, however, that there were actually six of them: After Nimrod and Esau the Rabbis mention Dathan and Abiram (Num 26:9) and finally the kings Ahaz (2 Chron 28:22) and Ahasveros (Est 1:1)! The most obvious solution to this riddle would be to regard Dathan and Abiram as “one,” but also the identification of Nimrod and Esau in this list seems possible in order to arrive at the number of five; after all, Esau, like Nimrod, was an impressive “hunter” (Gen25:27)!

This last possibility becomes even more probable if we compare the sequence of bad characters with the good ones as listed in our Midrash. Accordingly, five times in the Bible “he” (הָיָה) also denotes a good character: Avram as identified with Abraham (1 Chron 1:27), Moses and Aaron (Ex 6:26), Hezekiah (2 Chron 32:30) and finally Ezra (Esr 7:6).

Several parameters show the parallelism of the list of good and bad characters: apart from the fact that each example is given a proof text, in each instance, according to Biblical chronology, a new historical epoch is ushered in; twice the characters are combined by the conjunction “and” (וּ [we]). If the two pairs “Moses and Aaron” and “Datan and Abiram” are arranged as parallels, Avram (as identical with Abraham) and Nimrod/Esau appear in parallel, too.

30. On this literary form in Biblical literature (Zahlenspruch), see Wolfgang Roth, *Numerical Sayings in the Old Testament*, Leiden, Brill (VT.S 13), 1965. On this genre in Talmud and Midrash see August Wünsche, “Die Zahlensprüche in Talmud und Midrasch,” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 66 (1912), p. 414.

31. The Vilna edition reads the reverse order: “Five times ‘hu’ denotes a good character, five times a bad one”.

Time	Good characters	Evil characters
Time of the fathers	Avram=Abraham	Nimrod=Esau
Two persons	Moses+Aaron	Dathan+Abiram
Time of the kings	Hezekiah	Ahaz
After Exile	Ezra	Ahasveros

To be sure, the association of Nimrod with Esau is far from being logically consistent: apart from the chronological difficulty – how could Esau be equated with a person who, according to the Biblical narrative, lived generations before him? – nobody can be identical with the father and the son (Cush and Nimrod) at the same time. On the other hand the parallelism of both numerical sequences is striking, and we also know that Midrash texts do not recoil from the difficulties which identifications with several distinct persons engender.³² Although the Rabbis chose not to be explicit,³³ they obviously saw in Esau/Edom an evil principle that was effective from primeval times. This observation is confirmed by the Midrash's remarks on Gen 10:10 ("the beginning of his [Nimrod's] kingdom was Babel... in the land of Shinar"). In a play on words³⁴, the name Shin'ar is here said to signify that Babylon is "emptied" of precepts of the Torah (מנוערת מן המצוות [*menu'eret min ha-mitzvot*]) like *terumah* (offerings), tithes and the Sabbatical year. These laws were observed only in the land of Israel which may account for the fact that observance of these norms was lacking in Babylonia. At the same time this explanation suggests that the figure in question *was* aware of those commandments but chose *not* to keep them. As a matter of fact, this image fits a Biblical figure linked to the heritage of Abraham like Esau/Edom who once "knew" those precepts but currently, to his own disadvantage, does not practice them.

32. Concerning the identification of Hagar with Ketura see BerR 61:4 (on Gen 25:1); on the identification of Shem and Melchizedek see BerR 44:7 (on Gen 15:1) and 56:10 (on Gen 22:14); even Abraham is identified with Isaac, Isaac with Jacob and Jacob with Abraham: see BerR 63:3 on Gen 25:19! In our Midrash Nimrod appears as early as in BerR 23:6-7 (on Gen 4:26) where this figure is set in parallel to the figure of Enosh.

33. It is noteworthy that in BerR 63:10 (on Gen 25:27: "Esau was a cunning hunter") the Midrash fails to draw a parallel to Gen 10:9.

34. Cf. BerR 37:4 and Nr. 4 in Samely's list of "Select Midrashic Reading Practices" (Alexander Samely, *Forms*, p. 91): "the consonants of a word interpreted as another word".

Pursuing our investigation with the Midrash's explanation of Gen 14 (BerR 42:3-4), the narrative featuring Abram/Abraham at war with the four kings, we find another association with the name of Nimrod and a connotation of it which helps us to understand his relationship to Edom as constructed by the Midrash. The account of Lot, the Patriarch's nephew, being taken prisoner by these foreign potentates starts with an enumeration of their names: "Amraphel, king of Shinar, Arioch, king of Elasar, Kedarlaomer, king of Elam, and Tidal, king of Goyim".

The Midrash gives a number of different explanations concerning these rulers; it betrays not only a willingness to provide as many hints and allusions as possible but also remarkable skillfulness in playing with the Hebrew and possibly also the Greek language. The most noteworthy of these explanations is the affiliation of the first king, Amraphel, to Cush and also to Nimrod: "He was called by three names: Cush, Nimrod, and Amraphel". After examining the names of Cush – "because he was entirely black" (כּוּשִׁי [*kushi*]) – and Nimrod – according to the Hebrew root מרד (rebellion) this name refers to the time when the rebellion began (שֶׁהָעֵמִיד מֵרָד בְּעוֹלָם [*she-he'emid mered ba'olam*]) – the Midrash turns to the somewhat more sophisticated explanation of the name Amraphel which is literally translated as "his talk was sinister" (שֶׁהָיְתָה אִמְרָתוֹ אֶפְלָה [*she hayta amirato afela*]).³⁵ This king was dark and negative because, according to the Midrash, he threw Abraham into the oven (cf. BerR 38:13 on Gen 11:28). In the perspective of BerR on Gen 10, where this same Nimrod had been associated to Esau, the logical conclusion is that Amraphel is another name for Esau. But is it admissible to apply the logical rules of transitivity (A=B and B=C, hence A=C, meaning Esau=Cush/Nimrod, Cush/Nimrod=Amraphael, hence Amraphael=Esau) to an interpretation of Midrash? And is this equation not at odds with another explanation proposed by R. Abin³⁶ who identifies the four rulers with the successive

35. August Wünsche (Der Midrasch Bereschit Rabba. Das ist die haggadische Auslegung der Genesis, ed. Michael Krupp, Jerusalem, Lee Achim, 2010, p. 194) has suggested the Greek word "αμαυρός," "grim," in combination with the Hebrew אֶפְלָה.

36. The author of this statement is either Rabbi Abin I, a sage of the Land of Israel of the fourth generation of the Amoraic era, or his son, Rabbi Abin II.

kingdoms of Babylon, Greece,³⁷ Media, and Edom? In this last explanation (BerR 42:2 on Gen 14:1), the identification of the fourth king, Tidal, with Edom is certainly required.³⁸ To be sure, the aim of the Midrashic exposition is not a logically consistent explanation, and neither is the purpose of R. Abin's exegesis a conclusive chronology of historic events. As in the exposition above on the rivers emanating from Paradise, the Rabbinic sages want to show that the entire history of Israel is embraced by one all-encompassing plan. In this theological map, the Jewish people have had to confront the evil power of Edom from the very beginning not only of history, but of creation, as BerR 2:3 (on Gen 1:3) states: "'And God called the light day' (Gen 1:5) symbolises Jacob; 'and the darkness he called night', Esau".³⁹ As in this divine plan history started with four empires, the Midrash says, so Israel's history will end with four empires.⁴⁰ In the light of this correspondence between primeval times and eschatology the association of Edom with this first king is not disturbing.⁴¹

This almost cosmological speculation does not prevent the Midrash from laying special emphasis on the explanation of a more concrete historical detail, concerning the last king, Tidal, the ruler of Goyim. Taking advantage of the fact that this last term in

37. The exegesis the Midrash wants to give is not clear, but the text seems to say that the kingdom of Elasar is reminiscent of the "coin struck under King Elasar". On this translation cf. August Wünsche, *Der Midrasch Bereschit Rabba. Das ist die haggadische Auslegung der Genesis. Zum ersten Male ins Deutsche übertragen* (reprint), Jerusalem, Lee Achim Sefarim, p. 194 and Bernard Maruani, Albert Cohen-Arazi, *Midrach Rabba. Genèse. Tome 1*, Lagrasse, Verdier, p. 435 (who concurs with Wünsche).

38. For another reference to the schema of the four kingdoms see BerR 44,16 (on Gen 15:9-10), where the sacrificial animals offered by Abraham are associated to the four empires: the heifer is related to Babylon, the goat to Media, and the ram to Greece, while the turtledove and the young pigeon signify Edom. Cf. also BerR 44:17 (on Gen 15:12).

39. This amazing exposition is followed (cf. BerR 2:4 on Gen 1:2) by an assignment of the main elements of Gen 1:2 to the four empires where Rome (as well as Edom) is not explicitly mentioned, but clearly intended: "The Earth was *tohu*" symbolises Babylonia, "and *bohu*," means Media, while "and darkness" symbolises Greece and "upon the face of the deep" points to "the wicked kingdom".

40. Cf. J. Neusner, *Judaism and the Interpretation of Scripture*, p. 31.

41. In BerR 62:3 (on Gen 14:1) we find explanations referring to Ahaz (with reference to Isa 7:1) and Ahasveros (with reference to Est 1:1) which gives additional reason to read this text as a continuation of the above mentioned Midrash BerR 37:3 on Gen 10:8.

Hebrew means “nations,” R. Levi, a Palestinian Amora of the third generation, links this name *expressis verbis* to a specific place and time in the Roman capital (BerR 42:4 on Gen 14:1): “There is a place there in Rome (ברומי [*be-Romi*])⁴², and its inhabitants took a certain man (אדם [*adam*]) and made him king over them”.

Commenting on the following sentence explaining who this “man” was (“according to R. Yohanan, his name was Tidal”),⁴³ August Wünsche has suggested identifying this king with Vitellius (24 September 15 – 22 December 69), the last Roman Emperor before the Flavian dynasty came to power at the end of the year of the Four Emperors.⁴⁴ Although this interpretation is not certain, it makes sense insofar as the accession by Vespasian, who had been given a special command by Nero to fight the Jewish Revolt in Judaea, marked a turning point in Jewish-Roman relations. The text also says that this empire “levies troops from all the nations of the world (מכתבת טירוניא מכל אומות העולם [*mekhatevet tironia mikol umot ha‘olam*])”⁴⁵ and concludes with a messianic hint put forward by R. Ele‘azar b. R. Abina: “When you see the Powers fighting each other, look for the coming of the Messiah. The proof is that in the days of Abraham, because these Powers fought against each other, greatness came to Abraham”.⁴⁶ A few passages later, the Midrash (BerR 44:23 on Gen 15:18) explains what this greatness will look like in the future: In the days of the Messiah, the possession of Edom, Moab and Ammon (cf. Dan 11:41), territories formerly withheld from Israel according to the divine plan (Deut 2:5.9 and 7:1), will finally be given to Israel. At that time, Israel’s relationship to Edom will be the test case of the realization of God’s final plan in world history.

42. There is no reason to correct the text and read “in Babylon” as Harry Freedman (Midrash Rabbah, p. 346) and Bernard Maruani (Midrach Rabba, p. 435) propose.

43. According to Ms. Vat. 30 and 60 and the Vilna edition.

44. Wünsche, *Der Midrasch*, p. 194; on this text see also M. Hadas-Lebel, *Jerusalem against Rome*, p. 513.

45. According to Krauss, this term is derived from the Greek *τυραννία* (Samuel Krauss, *Griechische und lateinische Lehnwörter im Talmud, Midrasch und Targum*, Vol. II, Hildesheimer, Olms, 1987, p. 265). BerR 70:8 clearly refers to the “Roman kingdom which levies troops from all the nations of the world”. Cf. also BerR 70:8 on Gen 29:3.

46. Harry Freedman (Midrash Rabbah, p. 346) translated according to Ms. Vat. 30 and 60, reading “greatness (גדולה) came to Abraham.” The version of the Vilna edition (גאולה) seems to be the *lectio facilior*.

In the first part of the Midrash, the figure of Esau/Edom is rather vague, designating a kind of evil principle effective from the beginning of creation and of world history, the first and final (hostile) empire in God's plan of salvation appearing, in terms of Biblical chronology, even before the birth of the actual bearer of his name. In this regard, the association of different characteristics of "Edom" with Biblical traces remain fluent. This can be shown in BerR 44:17 (on Gen 15:12) where the lemma deals with the "dread and the great darkness" falling on Abram before the Lord revealed himself to him in the "Covenant of the Pieces". The Midrash explains this by associating the different features of the theophany to the four empires, "the dread" (אימה [*'emah*]) referring to Babel, "darkness" (חשיכה [*hashekha*]) to Media, the word "great" (גדולה [*gedolah*]) to Greece, and "fell on him" (נופלת עליו [*nofelet alaw*]) to Edom, according to Jer 49:21 ("at the sound of their *fall* the earth shall tremble"). After having elaborated on this interpretation however, the Midrash explains that some Rabbinic sages presented this kind of exegesis in a reversed order (יש שמחלפין [*we-yesh she-mahlifin*]). According to this alternative reading, equally supported by suitable Biblical quotations, the word "fell on him" hints at Babylon and "great" signifies Media while "darkness" is associated to Greece. In this rendering, it is the word "dread" (אימה [*'emah*]) which refers to Edom, the scriptural "proof" being the fourth beast, "terrible and dreadful" (אימתני [*'emtani*]) according to Dan 7:7. This juxtaposition of diverging and mutually exclusive interpretations by the Rabbis shows that the Midrashic statement on Edom in this text is firm before the examination of the text even starts. What the Rabbis have to say on this topic is in no way dependent on their exegetical analysis. On the other hand, they chose to express their views in *Biblical* terms, and their picture of the figure of Edom, however volatile it may be, is not totally independent from the pattern of the book of Genesis: Edom owes his growth to the blessing of his old father, he is aware of the divine precepts that are linked to the heritage of his family, and God gave him an existence independent from Israel (Deut 2:5).

In the remaining chapters of our Midrash dealing with those chapters in the book of Genesis that – literally speaking – contain the narrative of the twins Jacob and Esau, the characteristics of the Midrashic "Edom" become in a certain way closer to the biographical

Vorlage. The point of departure in the Biblical narrative is the story about the pregnancy of Rebekah.

3. ELEMENTS OF ESAU'S "BIOGRAPHY" ACCORDING TO THE MIDRASH

3.1 The account of Esau's Birth

The Biblical account of the birth of Esau, however, is at the same time also the account of the birth of his brother Jacob who later shall be renamed Israel.⁴⁷ When the Midrash fashions this narrative, the last point – which is, of course, theologically the most important – seems to be the decisive factor. Elsewhere I have argued that the Midrash constructs a narrative of the miraculous birth of Israel, and that some traits of this story can be best understood if taken as a counter-narrative to the birth of Jesus in the New Testament.⁴⁸ One of the first indications for this is the fact that the Midrash (BerR 60:5 on Gen 24:16) largely discusses the question whether Rebekah was a virgin before she was married to Isaac; the Rabbis deal with this subject in a context where the Biblical text does not give any reason to speculate about her virginity. The Midrash interprets Gen 24:16 (“the maiden was very beautiful, a virgin whom no man had known”) as containing two different statements referring to different aspects of virginity: she was not only (technically) a virgin (בתולה [betulah]), but had – contrary to the ‘daughters of the idolaters’ that surrounded her – so far also refrained from any other sexual contact with men; she was so to speak a “double virgin”.⁴⁹

By extension, the Midrash uses every possibility to develop the narrative of Rebekah's pregnancy and birth in the most miraculous way. In BerR 63:5 (on Gen 25:21) we read a comment on the Biblical note that Rebekah, Isaac's wife, was barren (עקרה [‘aqarah]). R. Yudan, a Palestinian amora of the fourth century⁵⁰,

47. Cf. BerR 60:4 (on Gen 24:15f). On the Biblical and Midrashic setting of this story, see Lieve M. Teugels, *Bible and Midrash. The Story of the Wooing of Rebekah (Gen 24)*, Leuven – Paris, Peeters, 2004, p. 193-212.

48. Matthias Morgenstern, “Beobachtungen zur Neukonfiguration der Erzvätergeschichte im rabbinischen Midrasch: Die gebärmutterlose Geburt Rebekkas – oder: Warum Jakob Abraham errettete,” *Judaica. Beiträge zum Verstehen des Judentums* 64 (2008), p. 37-53.

49. L. Teugels, *Bible and Midrash*, p. 204.

50. G. Stemberger, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrasch*, p. 100.

is quoted as saying in the name of Resh Laqish that “she lacked wholly/altogether (עיקר [‘*iqar*]) an ovary (מטרין לא הוה לה [*matrin lo hawa lah*]), whereupon the Lord fashioned an ovary for her”. The text clarifies that her barrenness had a manifest anatomical reason, but God provided her a uterus so that Jacob (and, of course, also Esau) could be born.

This Midrashic explanation is very daring. It is laconically short – no reason for this explanation is given, apart from the fact that the Hebrew reader is supposed to realize the equivalence of the root for the Hebrew words “barren” and “altogether” (עקרה–עיקר [‘*iqar* – ‘*aqarah*]).⁵¹ Although the Rabbis could have expressed themselves perfectly clearly in the Hebrew or Aramaic idiom⁵², they employed a Greek word for ovary⁵³ which may indicate a situation of (probably implicit) dialogue or discussion with a (probably Greek-speaking) partner.

According to the Biblical account, Isaac then entreated the Lord, and his wife became pregnant with two children. In the account of Gen 25:22 (“the two twins began struggling within her”) we read a number of Midrashic explanations alluding to the fact that one of the sons will be the future enemy of Israel. This indication is reinforced by the mentioning of the Roman Emperor Hadrian (BerR 63:7): “Two nations (גוים [*goyim*]) are in thy womb: there are two proud nations (גיא גוים [*ge’e goyim*]) in thy womb, each taking pride in his world, and each in his kingdom. There are two proud nations in thy womb, Hadrian of the Gentiles,⁵⁴ Solomon of Israel”.

A few lines before (BerR 63:6 on Gen 25:6) the Palestinian Amora Resh Laqish (3rd century) is presented as giving the reason for the dastardliness of Esau: he will cancel the laws of his brother (מתיר ציווי [*matir tziwuyaw*])! This assumption presupposes that he (like Christianity) shares some kind of spiritual heritage with Judaism but has chosen to deny the binding nature of the prescriptions of the Hebrew Bible. R. Berekiah (a Palestinian Amora of the fifth

51. On this root, cf. Johanna Erzberger, *Kain, Abel und Israel*, p. 94 and BerR 19:7 (on Gen 3:8).

52. S. Krauss, *Griechische und lateinische Lehnwörter*, vol. II, p. 334.

53. Cod. Vat. 30 and Vat. 60 read מטרין.

54. Cod. Vat. 30 and Cod. Vat. 60 read אומות (Gentiles), the Vilna edition עובדי כוכבים (idolaters).

generation)⁵⁵ is then quoted with the aggadah that when the mother passed a pagan temple, “Esau struggled to come out,” because already in his mother’s womb he was inclined to idolatry.⁵⁶

What follows is a Midrashic explanation (BerR 63:6 on Gen 25:22), the longest and the most surprising in this context, which is quoted according to R. Nehemiah. This Palestinian Tanna (ca. 130–160) seemingly tries to achieve the impossible, to exclude Esau from the narrative entirely:

It was taught in Rabbi Nehemiah’s name: Rebekah merited that the twelve tribes should spring directly from her. ‘Two nations are in thy womb’: ‘Two nations’ – there you have two. ‘And two peoples’ – that is four. ‘And the one people shall be stronger than the other people’ – six. ‘And the elder shall serve the younger’ – eight. ‘And when her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb’ – ten. ‘And the first came forth ruddy’ – eleven. ‘And after that came forth his brother’ – total, twelve.⁵⁷

In order to come to grips with this exposition, there is no need to complain that R. Nehemiah did not understand the parallelisms of the Biblical text. The Midrash explains the struggle in Rebekah’s womb by taking the verse entirely out of its literary context: she could have given birth to twelve children. The effect is that all her descendants were “worthy” – there was no “unworthy” (פסול [*pasul*]) among the twelve tribes of Israel because Esau does not appear any longer in the text! In reality, of course, the Rabbis knew that Rebekah was not the mother of twelve, but of two sons. In proposing this explanation the Midrash seeks to solve a theological problem which must have annoyed the Rabbis.

As a matter of fact, according to the Biblical narrative, Esau was the elder of the two twins. Daniel Boyarin has, in this respect, argued that Christian writers may have seen the opportunity of naming “the Jews” the elder son (Esau), while identifying themselves with Jacob, the younger. One of the earliest instances of this patristic tradition is found in the opening section of Tertullian’s tractate *Adversus Iudaeos*:

“For thus unto Rebekah did God speak: ‘Two nations are in thy womb, and two peoples shall be divided from thy bowels; and people shall overcome people, and the greater shall serve the less’.

55. On R. Berekiah see Wilhelm Bacher, *Die Agada der palästinensischen Amoräer*, Hildesheim, Olms, 1965, vol. III, p. 344–396.

56. BerR 63:6 (on Gen 25:22).

57. In Cod. Vat. 30, this text is added, by a second hand, as a note in the margin.

Accordingly, since the people or nation of the Jews is anterior in time, and 'greater' through the grace of primary favour in the Law, whereas ours is understood to be 'less' in the age of times, as having in the last era of the world attained the knowledge of divine mercy: beyond doubt, through the edict of the divine utterance, the prior and 'greater' people – that is, the Jewish – must necessarily serve the 'less'; and the 'less' people – that is, the Christians – overcame the 'greater'.⁵⁸

It is exactly this theological problem that a woman called "Matrona"⁵⁹ discusses in our Midrash, a few lines later (BerR 63:8 on Gen 25:24), in this same context with Rabbi Jose b. Halafta:

Matrona inquired R. Yose ben Halafta as follows: Why did Esau emerge first? He replied: (Esau may have emerged first, but) the first drop (of semen) was Jacob's. He gave her an example: If two diamonds are placed in a tube, does not the one put in first come out last?⁶⁰

This woman was, it seems, concerned about the theological implications of Esau's birth narrative. Obviously she was aware of the theological dispute on this chapter and was challenging the Rabbinic position. In this spirit, she contended that scripture presented Esau as the first-born, the legitimate heir to the covenant, while Jacob, by implication, was a usurper and that Esau's biological primacy indicated also his spiritual primacy.⁶¹ R. Yose answered this claim with a daring and far-fetched "gynecological" assumption.⁶²

58. Cf. D. Boyarin, *Dying for God*, p. 4, quoting the incipit of Tertullian, *Adversus Ioudaios*. According to Tertullian's reading of the verse, one of the peoples was to overcome the other. Since the Christians already were both younger and more powerful than the Jews by Tertullian's time, it would have seemed obvious to Tertullian that only the Christians could be read as Jacob – and the Jews as Edom.

59. In scholarly studies, the identity of this "Matrona," mostly translated as "a Roman lady," "a matrona" or "the Matrona" has been dealt with in the context of the famous Matrona-and-Rabbi-Yose tradition, a corpus of texts in Midrashic literature showing a woman in dialogue with Rabbi Yose ben Halafta. Tal Ilan has recently pointed to the fact that the word (which appears here without an article!) may well be a nomen proprium. Tal Ilan, *Mine and Yours are Hers*, Leiden, Brill, p. 243. See also Tal Ilan, "Matrona and Rabbi Jose: An Alternative Interpretation," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 25 (1994), p. 18-51. I plan to address the question of the identity of this woman in a later publication.

60. In Cod. Vat. 30, this text is added, by a second hand, as a note in the margin.

61. Rosalie Gershenzon, Elieser Slomovic: "A Second Century Jewish-Gnostic Debate: Rabbi Jose ben Halafta and the Matrona," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 16/1 (1985), p. 1-41 (here p. 32).

62. We may assume that this explanation corresponded to the Rabbinic understanding of the biological process of procreation.

3.2 Jacob's life with Esau

According to the Biblical account, the disaster between the two brothers gathered pace the day when Jacob had prepared his pottage and Esau came home from the field famished (BerR 63:12 on Gen 25:29):

‘And Esau came in from the field (שדה [*sadeh*]),’ which means that he violated a betrothed maiden, as it says, ‘but if the man find the damsel that is betrothed in the field (שדה [*sadeh*]), and the man take hold of her and lie with her’ (Deut 22:25).⁶³ While ‘and he was faint’ signifies that he committed murder, as in the verse, ‘for my soul fainteth before the murderers’ (Jer 4:31).

As a consequence of these considerations the Midrash misses no opportunity to insult Esau and call him names. He is considered an adulterer⁶⁴, a robber and plunderer⁶⁵ – allegations reminiscent of the atrocities committed during the Roman wars against the Jews –, and generally called “wicked” (רשע [*rasha*]).⁶⁶ He is even identified with demonic forces (גבר שידין [*gever shidin*]).⁶⁷ Needless to say that Esau holds wrong religious beliefs: When he sold his birthright, he rejected the belief in resurrection.⁶⁸ Subsequently he is responsible for the Holy Spirit departing from his father Isaac.⁶⁹ When then Isaac “justified” him he became blind which subsequently lead to the fatal distribution of the blessings.⁷⁰ When Esau came into the house of his father, hell (גיהנום [*gehenom*])

63. On this tradition see also BerR 65:1 (on Gen 26:34): “For forty years Esau used to ensnare married women and violate them, yet when he attained forty years he compared himself to his father saying: ‘As my father was forty years old when he married, so I will marry at the age of forty’”.

64. On Gen 36:5 where information about Oholibamah, the wife of Esau, and her sons is provided, the Midrash comments (BerR 82:12): “Thus it is written: ‘But I have made Esau bare, I have uncovered his secret places’ (Jer 49:10)... And why have I done so? ‘I have uncovered his secret places’ in order to reveal his bastards”.

65. BerR 65:13 on Gen 27:5. Cf. the mashal of a “chief robber” in BerR 75:3 (on Gen 32:4). In BerR 77:2 (on Gen 32:25), Esau appears to Jacob in the disguise of the man who “wrestled with him” and looked like “one of the heads of the brigands” (ארכילהסטים [*arkhilestim*]).

66. BerR 63:12 on Gen 25:30; BerR 63:14 on Gen 25:34; BerR 65:6 on Gen 27:1; BerR 65:10 on Gen 27:1.

67. BerR 65:15 (on Gen 27:11). In some texts this demon is also called “the guardian angel of Edom” (שרי של אדום); cf. BerR 77:3 (on Gen 32:26).

68. BerR 63:14 (on Gen 25:34).

69. BerR 65:4 (on Gen 26:35).

70. BerR 65:6 (on Gen 27:1).

entered with him.⁷¹ Accordingly, his cultural predilections are not the synagogues and the house of study, but theatres and circuses.⁷² When Jacob came back after years in the service of Laban, he met his brother again. In the night when he crossed the ford of the river Jabbok, he wrestled with an anonymous “man” (אִישׁ) whom the Midrash again identifies with Edom or his “guardian angel” (שָׂרוֹ שֶׁל אֶדוֹם [*saro shel edom*]). When this sinister enemy touched the hollow of Jacob’s thigh (Gen 32:26) this signified “the time of destruction,” i.e. the generation that suffered persecution in the Hadrianic wars.⁷³

After these atrocities, it is no wonder that the Midrash delves into the idea of divine retaliation. Already the ominous scene of Esau eating his brother’s pottage bears in itself the germs of divine retribution: “He was red, his food red, his land red, his warriors were red, their garments were red, his avenger will be red”.⁷⁴

The colour red is here seen as a symbol for Roman warfare, and this same spirit would one day destroy the Romans, when the “beloved one” (Cant 5:10) who is “radiant and red” rises and defeats them. Because Esau had told his father to arise and eat of his game with that very term he will be requited: “Let God arise, let His enemies be scattered” (Ps 68:2).⁷⁵

On the other hand we find indications that the relationship between the brothers is not entirely without hope. Esau is still considered Jacob’s brother, and the Midrash observes not only parallel developments between Jacob and Esau – the weddings of both brothers are commented with a quote from Ps 68:7 “God maketh the solitary to dwell in a house”⁷⁶ –, but looks also forward to periods of peaceful coexistence and calmness: “Whoever is able to calculate the period of [Israel’s] exile will find that one day Jacob dwells in peace under the shadow of Esau”.⁷⁷

When the brothers meet, Esau sees Jacob “wearing five amulets” – his own merit, the merit of his father, of his mother, of his

71. BerR 67:2 (on Gen 27:33).

72. BerR 67:3 (on Gen 27:33).

73. BerR 77:3 (on Gen 32:26).

74. BerR 63: 12 (on Gen 25:30).

75. BerR 66:7 (on Gen. 27:31).

76. BerR 65:2 (on Gen 26:34) and BerR 68: 4 (on Gen 28:10).

77. BerR 63:13 (on Gen 25:31).

grandfather, and of his grandmother.⁷⁸ Given Esau's descent, the protective force of at least four of these amulets would have been at Esau's disposal as well. What then about the famous scene of reconciliation between the twins when Esau is reported to have kissed his brother? The Midrash observes that in the Biblical text

the word is dotted. R. Simeon b. Eleazar said: Wherever you find the plain writing exceeding the dotted letters, you must interpret the plain writing; if the dotted letters exceed the plain writing, you must interpret the dotted letters. Here the plain writing does not exceed the dotted letters, nor do the dotted letters exceed the plain writing: hence it teaches that he kissed him with all his heart.⁷⁹

This conciliatory statement is, however, somehow contracted by another assertion by R. Jannai:⁸⁰ Esau wanted to bite his brother but Jacob's neck "was turned to marble" and consequently the teeth of this wicked man (רשע [*rasha'*]) were blunted and loosened. The juxtaposition of these divergent alternatives makes it clear that the fate of Esau is not without alternative: "Though Esau, he is still his brother".⁸¹ BerR 78:11 on Gen 33:9 where Esau is reported to reject the gifts brought to him by Jacob follows this line:

R. Eleazar said: The validity of a document is established by its signatories. Thus lest you say, had not Jacob deceived his father he would not have received the blessing, Scripture states, 'my brother, let that which thou hast be thine.'

However the encounter of the two brothers turned out, the outcome could not question the blessing Jacob had received. But paradoxically the validity of this benediction is dependent in some way on Esau's recognition. In this perspective, even after the brothers had departed from each other, Jacob's life and fate continued to be determined by their coexistence. On Gen 36:6 ("and Esau went into a land away from his brother Jacob"), BerR 82:13 considers two possibilities regarding the reasons for his going

78. BerR 77:3 (on Gen 32:26). This tradition is put in the mouth of R. Hanina b. Isaac, a Palestinian Amora of the fourth generation; see Günter Stemberger, *Einleitung*, p. 100; W. Bacher, *Die Agada der palästinensischen Amoräer*, vol. III, p. 681-685.

79. BerR 78:9 on Gen 33:4. This tradition is put into the mouth of R. Simeon ben Eleazar, a Tanna of the fourth generation; see Stemberger, *Einleitung*, 87; Wilhelm Bacher, *Die Agada der Tannaiten. Von Akiba's Tod bis zum Abschluss der Mischna*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 1966, vol. II, p. 422-436.

80. Probably the Tanna of the first generation.

81. BerR 75:4 on Gen 32:4.

away: According to R. Eleazar he left because of an obligation (מפני שטר חוב [*mipne shtar hov*]) which was incumbent upon Abraham's descendants for them to become "a stranger in the land not theirs" (Gen 15:13). In this explanation, R. Eleazar links Esau directly to Abraham and to the promise given to him, albeit in a negative way.⁸² Esau went away because he wanted to avoid the fate decreed upon Abraham's descendants, "to be a stranger in a land not theirs" (Gen 15:13). Alternatively R. Joshua explained that he went because of shame (מפני בושה [*mipne bushah*]) which probably means that he left because he had sold his birthright.⁸³ This contrast between the two brothers is mirrored in the Midrash on the Edomite kings according to Gen 36:31. What the Rabbis have to say here is an astonishing statement which pursues the opposition between Jacob and Esau even further: even Israel's production in the spiritual realm and in the field of jurisprudence (משפט [*mishpat*]), even the repercussions and elaborations on the Torah can be perceived in the framework of the ancient antagonism with "Edom" becoming "Rome":

'And these are the Kings that reigned in Edom before there reigned any king over the children of Israel [...]' R. Jose b. R. Hanina said: When one [Edom] set up kings (מלכים [*melakhim*]), the other [Israel] set up judges (שופטים [*shoftim*]).⁸⁴ When the former set up chiefs (אלופים [*alufim*]), the other set up princes (נשיאים [*nesi'im*]).⁸⁵

4. EDMOM IN THE DIVINE PLAN OF SALVATION

It is in the Midrash's explanations on Gen 25:24 ("when her days to be delivered were fulfilled"), immediately after the episode of Matrona enquiring about the chronology of the birth of the twins, that we read a remarkable story about the Roman Emperor Diocletian (284–305).⁸⁶ This story, one of the best known in the entire Midrash, is crucial for the interpretation of our text. On the one hand, the mentioning of this Emperor, one of the rare occurrences of a clearly

82. This explanation is repeated in BerR 84:2 (on Gen 37:1).

83. See August Wünsche, *Der Midrasch*, p. 404; according to Harry Freedman (Midrash Rabbah, p. 762), he fled out of shame because of his impure children.

84. This is obviously an allusion for being busy with the Torah, with משפט [*mishpat*].

85. BerR 83:2 (on Gen 36:31). The title "prince" (נשיא [*nasi*]) hints at R. Jehuda Ha-Nasi, the redactor of the Mishna.

86. BerR 63:8.

identifiable Emperor being referred to by name, offers a fixed point (*terminus a quo*) for dating the Midrash.⁸⁷ On the other hand, the Midrash places this story in the centre of the account of the birth of the two twins linking this event to one of the major Roman Imperial figures – indeed a strong indication for a connection between Esau/Edom and the Roman Empire:

The emperor Diocletian⁸⁸ was [originally] a swineherd near Tiberias. Whenever he came near a school, children would come out and beat him. Later he became emperor, and went and stayed at Paneas (Caesarea Philippi), and sent letters to Tiberias just before the eve of the Sabbath, with the order: 'I command the Rabbis of the Jews to appear before me on Sunday morning.' He further instructed the messenger not to give them the message until just before Friday evening. When R. Samuel b. Nahman went down to bathe, he saw Rabbi standing before his academy with his face all pale. On inquiring why he was so pale he told him of the letters sent him by the emperor. 'Go and bathe', he told him, 'for God will perform a miracle for you'. So he went in to bathe, and there a bath sprite came jesting and dancing toward them. Rabbi wished to scold him, but R. Samuel b. Nahman said to him: 'Leave him alone, for sometimes his coming heralds a miracle. Your master is in distress, yet you frolic,' he rebuked him. 'Go home, eat and keep the Sabbath with good cheer, for your Creator will perform a miracle for you and I will set you Sunday morning where you desire'. At the termination of the Sabbath, after the Service, he [the sprite] took them and set them before the gates of Paneas. He [the emperor] was informed: Lo, they are standing before the gates. Then let the gates be closed, he ordered. Thereupon he [the demon] took them and set them on the rampart of the town. On being apprised of this he [Diocletian] exclaimed: 'I command that the baths be heated for three days, then let them go and bathe therein and then appear before me'. The baths accordingly were heated for three days, but the sprite went and tempered the heat for them, after which they entered, bathed, and appeared before him. 'Because you know that your God performs miracles on your behalf you insult the emperor,' he upbraided them. 'Diocletian the swineherd we did indeed insult, but to Diocletian the emperor we are loyal subjects,' they answered. 'Even so,' he replied, 'you must not insult the humblest Roman (ברומי זעיר) [*beRomi za'ir*] or the meanest soldier (בגולליר זעיר) [*begolyar za'ir*]'.⁸⁹

87. For the reference to Licinius see below. In BerR 86:10 (on Gen 26:28) our Midrash seems to refer also to the order by Julian to have the Jerusalem temple rebuilt; see G. Stemberger, *Einleitung*, p. 275.

88. Vilna edition: דוקליטינוס (?); Cod. Vat. 60: דיקליטיאנוס.

89. Cf. the parallel tradition in the Talmud Yerushalmi, Terumot 46b (Gerd A. Wewers, *Terumot. Priesterhebe*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 1985, p. 180).

How is this strange story to be understood? Why has the Midrash placed it in this context, in its explanation on the birth story of Esau and Jacob? As in many instances in this Midrash the attention of the reader is directed away from the heroes of Biblical times to the founding fathers of Rabbinic Judaism, and the scene is shifted from the south of the land of Israel⁹⁰ to the northern town of Tiberias,⁹¹ a central region for the rebirth of Judaism after the wars of the first and second centuries. Jewish children appear on stage beating a Roman swineherd, possibly a parody of Esau and Jacob struggling in Rebekah's womb. Subsequently we see the founding fathers of Rabbinic Judaism, first of all R. Jehuda ha-Nasi, the redactor of the Mishna (end of the 2nd century CE), anachronistically pitted against Diocletian who is said to have settled down in Caesarea Philippi. Of special interest is the "sprite," or "argonaut" (ארגוניטון [*arginiton*]).⁹² Should we compare this enigmatic figure seemingly disposing of quick and effective means of transport to the argonauts in Greek mythology, who sailed with their legendary ship Argo? Is this sprite a parody of the "angel" fighting with Jacob while he crossed the ford of the river Jabbok? While there is no way to give unequivocal answers to these questions, it seems clear that this story reduces the encounter between Rome and the Rabbis to ridiculousness. Part of the absurdity is the imagery of the pigs being herded by the future Emperor.⁹³ The mentioning of the humblest Roman (ברומי

90. According to the Biblical setting, the birth of Esau and Jacob took place near Beer-la-hai-roi, the "well of one who sees and lives," between Kadesh and Bered; cf. Gen 16:14; 24:62; 25:11.

91. The building of the city of Tiberias (together with the cities of Alexandria and Antiochia) is mentioned in BerR 23:1 on Gen 4:17 ("Cain knew his wife...").

92. See Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, New York, Pardes Publishing House, 1950, vol. I, s.v. ארגוניטון; Jacob Levy, *Wörterbuch über die Talmudim und Midraschim*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963 s.v. ארגוניטון; S. Krauss, *Griechische und lateinische Lehnwörter*, vol. II, p. 126 ("der Schnelle, Beinamen des Blitzes und eines Cyclops bei den Griechen").

93. In BerR, this imagery is firmly linked to Esau. In BerR 63:8 (on Gen 25:25) we read: "You have given a name to your swine [Esau]; then I too will name My firstborn, as it says 'Thus saith the Lord: Israel is My son, My firstborn'" (Ex 4:22). See also BerR 65:1 (on Gen 26:34) and LevR 13:5. With regard to the presentation of the Emperor as a shepherd, one might think of David, the future king of Israel who, by the way, shared Edom's "reddish" quality (1 Sam 16:12). On the interpretation of the colour red in this context, see Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, "The Handmaid, the Trickster, and the Birth of the Messiah," *Current Trends in the Study of Midrash*, p. 245–275, here p. 254. On the imagery of the

זעיר [*beRomi za'ir*]) or the meanest soldier (בגולייר זעיר [*begolyar za'ir*]) at the end of our narrative may be an allusion to the land of Seir (Gen 32:4).⁹⁴ These images may indicate the encounter with an emperor with whom the Jews, to be sure, lived in tension but who, unlike Hadrian, did not endanger their entire life and existence. Do the Rabbis have in mind that Diocletian, the last great Emperor before Christianity received official support, is remembered as the persecutor of Christianity rather than of Judaism?⁹⁵ Diocletian was also the first Emperor who after twenty-one years of reign abdicated his position voluntarily, spending the remaining years of his life in peaceful retirement, thus becoming one of the few Emperors of the third and fourth centuries to die naturally.⁹⁶ During his reign he was regarded as a kind of final incarnation of the highest institution of the Roman Empire, assuming the title *Iovius*. Once he had retired, however, his tetrarchic system collapsed, and the Empire fell into anarchy and civil wars. These events, in hindsight, make his reign a turning point in Roman history. Do the Rabbis therefore see his epoch, in a historically inaccurate way, as the beginning of the era of Christianity? After all, Diocletian is portrayed here as a Roman ruler who knows enough of the Jewish laws, especially concerning the Sabbath, in order to lead them into temptation. These questions remain open for the Midrash reader, and it seems probable that they remained open for the Rabbis as well.

Insofar as the Rabbis wished to measure history in a larger perspective, there was one Biblical chapter which seemed to offer some insight for an in-depth enquiry into the development of Rome: the list of the Edomite kings in Genesis 36. What the Rabbis had in front of them in this chapter was a list of rulers that, unlike other

pig linked to Rome see Mireille Hadas-Lebel, "Rome, 'Quatrième Empire', et le symbole du porc," *Hellenica et Judaica. Hommage à Valentin Nikiprowetzky*, ed. André Caquot, Mireille Hadas-Lebel et Jean Riaud, Leuven-Paris, Peeters, 1986, p. 297-312.

94. Cf. BerR 63:12 on Gen 25:30; note, however, the different spelling of "Seir" (שעיר [Se'ir]).

95. On the developments during the reign of Constantine (306-337 C.E.), see Averil Cameron, "Constantine and the Peace of the Church," *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, ed. Margaret M. Mitchell and Frances M. Young, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, vol. I, p. 538-551.

96. Cf. A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284-602. A Social Economic and Administrative Survey*, ed. David M. Gwynn, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1964, p. 40.

lists of names and places, did not suggest an exegetical distribution according a quadruple scheme. First, this list contained more than four names, and second, the connection of this list with Edom, the last of the hostile empires, was firmly established. In their analysis of this text the Rabbis provide, first of all, an explanation for the fact that the Biblical text (v. 31-39) names eight kings, which, as they explain, may formally be seen as a parallel to eight kings in Israel (BerR 83:1 on Gen 36:31). On the other hand, the Sages say, the two sequences of kings follow each other: *before* there arose a king in Israel, there *were* kings in Edom; but after kingship arose in Israel, a deputy (or governor) reigned in Edom when Edom became subservient to Israel (cf. 1 Kings 22:48). The events in the wake of the destruction of the first temple then led to a disaster for both brothers (BerR 83:2 on Gen 36:31): “Nebuchadnezzar came and overthrew [the Kingdoms] of both: ‘That made the world a wilderness and destroyed the cities thereof’ (Isa 14:17)”.

But even after this catastrophe history went on, and this continuation was again a parallel one for both peoples (BerR 83:2 on Gen 36:31): The evil Babylonian King Merodach “came and conferred greatness” upon the royal son of Jehoiakin,⁹⁷ and subsequently the Persian ruler Ahasveros “came and conferred greatness upon Haman” who is identified, in this context, to be “Edomite”.⁹⁸ How can it then be understood that Edom, after having been destroyed by the Babylonians and again in the episode of Esther,⁹⁹ came to power again? How could Edom rise out of the ashes and now endanger Israel again? The Midrash seems to be aware of the subsequent crisis in Roman history without giving a clear indication how to assign them to the Biblical text.¹⁰⁰ What is of interest, however, is less the ups and downs in Roman history than the eschatological question regarding the end of the Empire. Can the last Emperor, after whom the redemption will come for Israel, be identified?

97. Cf. 2 Kings 25:17–30.

98. Cf. Est 3:1.

99. Cf. Est 9.

100. BerR 83:3 (on Gen 36:33) says that the kingdom had “already been uprooted from Edom (מלכות עקורה מאדום) [*malkhut ‘aqurah me’edom*],” but then “somebody came from Bozra and supplied Edom with kings”. Cf. the tradition in b. Makkot 12a telling us that in Bozra the Kingdom of Edom will also come to an end.

The Rabbis link this discussion to the interpretation of Magdiel, the Chief of Iram, the last of the Edomite kings according to Gen 36:43 (אלוף מגדיאל אלוף עירם) [*aluf magdi'el aluf 'iram*].¹⁰¹ To be sure, the Midrash on this verse – let alone, of course, the Hebrew Bible – neither openly mentions “Rome” nor gives any other indication in order to solve this riddle, and it seems that the reason for this failure has to do, again, with eschatological speculations. In the Midrash, immediately following the lemma of “Aluf Magdiel, aluf Iram,” the following story is told (BerR 83:4):

On the day Lutianus ascended to the throne, a vision appeared to R. Ammi in a dream: ‘Today Magdiel has become king’. He said: ‘Yet one more king¹⁰² is required for Edom’. R. Hanina of Sepphoris said: ‘Why was he called Iram? Because he is destined to amass (לערום [*la'arom*]) treasures (תסוריות¹⁰³ [*tisworyot*]) for the King Messiah’.

Identifying this ruler would help to understand how “Edomite” history is constructed here and when exactly the redactor of this passage awaited the Messiah. It seems, however, to be no accident that the manuscripts and printed editions of this passage give different spellings of the name of this king¹⁰⁴ and that secondary literature presents diverging options for interpreting this name. While Graetz (along with Johann Theodor and Harry Freedman) opts for Diocletian (285-305),¹⁰⁵ Leopold Löw points to Valentinianus II

101. Commenting on this verse, Rashi adds here on Gen 36:43 “this is Rome” (היא רומי) [*hi Romi*]; see also in PRE 38 (Börner-Klein, *Pirke de-Rabbi Elieser. Nach der Edition Venedig 1544 unter Berücksichtigung der Edition Warschau 1852 aufbereitet und übersetzt*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2004, p. 484).

102. Bernhard Beer, “Beleuchtung mehrerer Ortsnamen im Josephus und damit zusammenhängende Erläuterungen von Talmud- und Midraschstellen,” *Monatsschrift zur Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums*, 1860, p. 109-115 (here p. 115) proposes the reading מלך אחר [*melekh aher*], “another king”.

103. This word is probably derived from the Greek “θησαυρός”; cf. S. Krauss, *Griechische und lateinische Lehnwörter*, vol. II, p. 587, s.v. תיסור; M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary*, vol. II, s.v. תסברא. See also B. Beer, “Beleuchtung mehrerer Ortsnamen im Josephus,” p. 113-115; according to Beer, “Iram” may be interpreted as עיר רם, “high city” (*urbs Roma*).

104. Vilna edition: לוטיניוס [*Lutyanus*]; Cod. Vat. 60: ליטיניוס [*Litinus*]; Cod. Vat. 30: ליטניס [*Litinas*]; J. Theodor amended to “Diocletian” (see also H. Freedman, *Midrash Rabbah*, p. 768).

105. See Heinrich Graetz, “Zur römischen Kaisergeschichte aus jüdischen Quellen,” *Monatsschrift zur Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums*, 1879, p. 1-16 (here p. 6-7); Graetz points to a parallel in the Palestinian Talmud [y. Ter. 47b] where Diocletian is shortened to Diklut. See also Heinrich Graetz, *Geschichte*

(376-379).¹⁰⁶ According to Levy, however, he was the Emperor Lucinius (*Gaius Valerius Licinianus Licinius Augustus*).¹⁰⁷ It would make sense to identify the ruler with this king, who reigned from 308 to 324, because Licinius, for the majority of his reign, was the colleague and rival of Constantine I, with whom he co-authored the Edict of Milan granting official toleration to Christians in the Roman Empire. In this perspective, the reign of this emperor may have been seen as marking the end of the old Empire and ushering in the beginning of a new one. The question regarding why a clear identification of this “king” is avoided seems to have to do with the perplexing events – for the Rabbis – that followed the reign of Constantine and the Christianization of the Empire.

CONCLUSION

Our investigation of *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* has led us to an understanding of this text that is half-way between Stemberger’s approach of “Midrash as exegesis” and Neusner’s “Midrash as art” theory. As a matter of fact, from beginning to end, BerR is interwoven with a special interest in Edom, and the text does not fail to address this question in many instances where the Biblical text cannot offer more than an excuse. At the same time, the Biblical pattern is not disregarded completely, and in chapters 63–65 of the Midrash (referring to Gen 25–32) reference is made to Esau/Edom in a clearly disproportionate way. The presentation of our Midrashic picture of Edom is, to be sure, not without contradictions, but by Midrashic standards remarkably consistent. Our results may be taken therefore to confirm the conception of BerR as a redactionally more or less consistent work pursuing its own theological approach after the Christianization of the Roman Empire. In doing this, the Midrash uses older traditions (from a time before the Constantinian

der Juden. Vom Untergang des jüdischen Staates bis zum Abschluß des Talmuds, Leipzig, Leiner, 1908, vol. 4, p. 555.

106. Leopold Löw, “Die neueste Geschichte der Kabbala,” Ben Chananja VI (1863), No. 45, p. 822-828 (here p. 825 and 828) proposes the reading ולנטינינוס [Valentinus].

107. Jacob Levy, *Neuhebräisches und Chaldäisches Wörterbuch über die Talmudim und Midraschim*, Leipzig, Brockhaus, 1879, p. 482b; see also W. Bacher, *Die Agada der palästinischen Amoräer*, vol. II, p. 149.

turn) and merges them into its own coherent composition. Accordingly, not in every detail is the Christian “colouring” of Edom discernible, but the Midrash, from its own perspective, chose to address the phenomenon of “Edom” as a whole. On the one hand, even after Lucinius and Constantine (and Julian), for the Rabbis, “Edom” remained “Edom,” on the other, the contemporary events in the time after Constantine helped them to draw one consistent picture of this scary and also mysterious brother of Israel. It was the same evil power that had once destroyed the temple and brought disaster to the Jews that was now threatening and disturbing them. The way the Rabbis arranged their material clearly betrays their perspective from the fourth and early fifth centuries.

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