

Aggada in Jewish Thought: Changing Paradigm

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Overview

“Rabbi Chiya bar Ami said in the name of Ulla: Since the day that the Temple was destroyed, the Holy One, blessed be He, has nothing in His world but the four cubits of *Halakhah* alone”¹²³.

It is the halakhah which gives definition to Judaism, and by extension to God Himself. A person can only define himself in relation to his Creator in terms of halakhah. Yet it is aggada which gives life to that relationship. It is the stories and legends of the Talmud and other rabbinic writings which give a human side to our relationship with God.

The distinction between halakhah and aggada is not always so clear. Law and lore blend into a sometimes seamless, inseparable whole. In simple terms halakhah defines the way a Jew must act, the laws and behaviours expected of an observant Jew. Aggada is the stories, history, legends and any other non-legal writings. Ostensibly their purpose is to teach about faith, philosophy and weltanschauung of Jewish life.

123. Brachot 8a

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Shmuel Ha-Nagid defines aggada as “any explanation that comes in the Talmud on any topic which does not concern a mitzvah”¹²⁴. According to *Beit Abaron* the purpose of aggada is to teach “words of reproof, good traits, fine attitudes, and polite behaviour. It teaches us the wisdom of religion with purity and the principles of faith, the unity of God etc, to bring our hearts close to serving God with holiness and purity”¹²⁵.

Chaim Nachman Bialik, who was responsible for making aggada accessible to the wider world¹²⁶, poetically described the relationship between aggada and halakhah:

Aggada is the plaintive voice of the heart’s yearning as it wings its way to its haven; Halakhah is the resting-place, where for a moment the yearning is satisfied and stilled. As a dream seeks its fulfilment in interpretation, as will in action, as thought in speech, as flower in fruit – so Aggada in Halakhah

The simplest understanding of the purpose of aggada is that it contains the philosophical and theological underpinnings of Judaism. Joseph Heinemann wrote, “Aggada can, in a way, be seen as the ‘philosophical literature’ of the rabbinic period”¹²⁷.

There is a fundamental difference in the history of development between the world of halakhah (Jewish law) and hashkafah (Jewish theology and philosophy). Halakhah always builds on texts and sources that came earlier. The halachic arbiters of the medieval period were interpreting and developing laws that were laid down by the authors of the Mishna and Talmud. Later authorities base their rulings on the laws of the medieval authorities. When confronted

124. *Mevo Ha-Talmud* (end of Babylonian Talmud Berachot) p. 90

125. *Beit Abaron* vol. 1 page 204-5.

126. Bialik and Ravitsky *Sefer Ha-Aggada*

127. *Nature of Aggada’ in Midrash and Literature* (1986) Harman G.H. And Budick S. (eds); Yale University Press, New Haven Conn. p. 49.

with a new reality or legal problem halakhah always seeks a precedent which can illuminate and give guidelines for the current issue. Thus, halakhah evolves slowly – the rulings of one generation grow organically out of the rulings of previous generations.

Hashkafah, by contrast, changes in accordance with principles similar to those described by Thomas Kuhn in the scientific world. In his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, he writes that science develops through a series of paradigm shifts. These changes in paradigm do not simply fill in gaps in existing theories, but radically change the way we view the world. A paradigm shift does not merely involve the revision or transformation of an individual theory, it changes the way terminology is defined, how the scientists in that field view their subject, and, perhaps most significantly, what questions are regarded as valid, and what rules are used to determine the truth of a particular theory. Kuhn observes that they are incommensurable — literally, lacking comparability, untranslatable. The new theories were not, as the scientists had previously thought, just extensions of old theories, but were radically new worldviews.

Hashkafah develops in a similar way. Radical changes in Jewish philosophy did not add pieces to previous philosophies, but changed the way that we look at the world and our relationship with God. For example, looking back from our modern vantage point, we cannot even imagine how Rambam's critics could have believed that God has a body.

Like Kuhn's scientific paradigm shifts, major changes in hashkafah are not built on what came before but represent radical shifts from previous thinking. Theological changes are prompted by crises in Judaism, either from the outside world, or from within the Jewish world.

Heineman writes:

Unlike the teachers of the Halakhah, who transmit basic legal traditions which they personally received from their own

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teachers thus creating a reliable chain of tradition linking one generation to the next, the teachers of Aggada are not limited to transmitting what they heard from their own teachers. The aggadist adds, deviates from, changes or permutes the traditions he has received according to his own devices and the dictates of his own will.¹²⁸

The concept that later generations can argue on earlier generations in aggada is implicit in the abrogation of the principle that a son may not argue with his father.

Just as Jewish philosophy has changed radically over the generations, so has the attitude and relationship to aggada – the atomic material of that philosophy. Each new paradigm in theology was accompanied by a paradigm shift in the nature and function of aggada. This essay will explore how the understanding of the purpose and function of derashot (and other allegorical parts of rabbinic writings) changed from the time of the Talmud, through the Gaonim, to the time of the Rishonim.

Introduction

The term midrash is sometimes confused with aggada. In simple terms, anything taken from a verse is called midrash. *Pachad Yitzchak* in the name of *Kitzur Miz'rachi* makes the following distinction between midrash and aggada: “Midrashim from which halachot are learned are called midrashim. Midrashim from which halakhot are not learned are called aggada”¹²⁹. However in his introduction to *Pilpula Charifia* on Nezikin Rabbi YomTov Lipman Heller explains that both midrash aggada and midrash halakhah are called midrash. For the purposes of this essay all aggada can be treated the same way, whether it is derived from a verse or not.

128. (1986) p. 52.

129. *Pachad Yitzchak* ‘Midrash’ cited in *Beit Abaron* vol. 1 p. 203.

Despite the beauty of aggada, it has traditionally been almost entirely ignored by most of the commentators of the Talmud. Similarly, traditional Yeshiva learning either skips it entirely, or glosses over it quickly¹³⁰. Perhaps the reason for this is that it not only difficult to understand, but is potentially dangerous. Though aggada contains the ethical and philosophical underpinnings of Judaism, if it is not understood correctly it can lead to perverted or even heretical beliefs. As we will see, the heretical face of aggada was used by many challengers to Judaism who sought to destroy Judaism with aggada.

The Talmud's View of Aggada

The sages of the Talmud seem to treat aggada very seriously. With only a few exceptions, they give aggada equal weight with all other parts of the Torah and consider it just as holy and also from Sinai. “Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: Torah, Mishna, Talmud, aggada, and even what expert students will teach in the future, were all said to Moshe at Sinai.”¹³¹ Similarly the Babylonian Talmud states in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: “What is the meaning of the verse “on them, like all the words...”¹³² This teaches that at Sinai God showed Moshe the details of the Torah and the details of the Sofrim [Rabbis] and the laws that the Sofrim would add in the future”.¹³³ According to *Menorat Ha-Maor* ‘the details of the Sofrim’ is evidence that aggada was received from Sinai.

There were some Tannaim who were expert in the field of aggada, and some who were held by their contemporaries to be not so

130. As evidence of this see *Michtav Me-Eliyahu* V p. 511 where Rabbi Dessler writes: This is all because the work of the Satan has succeeded. The great masters of Torah have put all their energy into the halachic component of Torah, and in this area there many who can teach. However the aggadic component has been abandoned and they haven't illuminated it with their lights of truth which shine into every corner of the soul.

131. Yerushalmi Megillah 4: 1

132. Devarim 9: 10

133. Babylonian Talmud Megillah 19b

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capable in that field. For example, even though Rabbi Akiva was the greatest Rabbi of his generation¹³⁴, and was the only one of the four who entered the *pardes* (which is usually understood to be the esoteric aspects of Torah) and left unharmed, when he ventured into the realm of aggada he was not considered an authority and was directed back to halakhah. “Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah said to him [Rabbi Akiva] ‘What are you doing in aggada? Retract your words and go back to [laws of impurity of] leprosy and tents!’”¹³⁵

Conversely there were certain Tannaim who were considered to be experts at aggada. For example Rabbi Yochanan tells us in the name of Rabbi Elazar bar Rabbi Shimon: Whenever you find the words of Rabbi Elazar the son of Rabbi Yossi Ha-Gelili in aggada make your ears like a funnel [to learn as much as possible from him]¹³⁶.

We find similar areas of expertise amongst the Amoraim: Rabbi Shimi bar Akaviah would be present before Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi [when he taught] in halakhah and before Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi [when he taught] in aggada¹³⁷.

There was also clearly some crossover from halakhah to aggada, as we find:

When Rabbi Ami and Rabbi Assi were sitting before Rabbi Yitzchak Nafcha, one of them said to him: ‘Will the Master please tell us some halakhah?’ while the other said: ‘Will the Master please give us some aggada?’ When he commenced an aggadic discourse he was prevented by the one, and when he commenced a halakhic discourse he was prevented by the

134. See Babylonian Talmud Berachot 27b where Rabbi Akiva was suggested to take over as head of the academy, and was not given the position only because he lacked the merit of righteous ancestors.

135. Babylonian Talmud Chagiga 14a

136. Babylonian Talmud Chullin 89a

137. Babylonian Talmud Berachot 10a. See also Bava Kamma 54b which states that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi was expert in aggada.

other. He therefore said to them: I will tell you a parable: To what is this like? To a man who has had two wives, one young and one old. The young one used to pluck out his white hair, whereas the old one used to pluck out his black hair. He thus finally remained bald on both sides.

He further said to them: I will accordingly tell you something which will be equally interesting to both of you: If fire break out and catch in thorns; 'break out' implies 'of itself'. He that kindled the fire shall surely make restitution. The Holy One, blessed be He, said: It is incumbent upon me to make restitution for the fire which I kindled. It was I who kindled a fire in Zion as it says, And He has kindled a fire in Zion which has devoured its foundations, and it is I who will one day build it anew by fire, as it says, For I, [says the Lord] will be to her a wall of fire round about, and I will be the glory in the midst of her. On the halakhic side, the verse commences with damage done by possessions, and concludes with damage done by the person, [in order] to show that 'fire' implies also human agency.

Aggada was the popular favourite of the two approaches to Torah, as is evident from the following story:

Rabbi Abahu and Rabbi Chiya ben Abba once came to a place; Rabbi Abahu expounded aggada and Rabbi Chiya ben Abba expounded legal lore. All the people left Rabbi Chiya ben Abba and went to hear Rabbi Abahu, so that the former was upset. [Rabbi Abahu] said to him: 'I will give you a parable. To what is the matter like? To two men, one of whom was selling precious stones and the other various kinds of small ware. To whom will the people hurry? Is it not to the seller of various kinds of small ware?'¹³⁸

138. Babylonian Talmud Sotah 40a

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According to *Sifri* the purpose of aggada was to know God – which seems to imply both theology and ethical behaviour:

Dorshei Reshumot say: If you wish to know the One who spoke and caused the world to come into existence, learn aggada. Through this you will know the Holy One, blessed is He, and will attach yourself to His ways¹³⁹.

Aggada contains not only the knowledge of God, but also the secrets of His creation according to Midrash Tehillim: “For they will not understand the works of God” - Rabbi Yehoshua says this refers to aggada¹⁴⁰.

On the other hand, there are a few cases where the Talmud implies that aggada was an educational technique not meant to be taken quite so seriously.

Before Rabba commenced his lesson before the scholars he used to say something humorous, and the scholars were cheered; after that he sat in awe and began the discourse¹⁴¹.

We don't know for certain, but it is likely that his introductory humour was something from the realm of aggada, and presumably was not intended to be understood too deeply.

Rabbi Jeremiah said to Rabbi Zeira: ‘Let Master go and teach.’ And he answered: “My heart is weak, and I cannot.” “Then let Master relate some trifling thing from aggada,” said Rabbi Jeremiah¹⁴².

In Israel it seems that aggada was taken less seriously. There is a midrash that says:

139. Sifri Parshat Ekev Piska 13 (p. 79-80 in the 1977 edition with Emek Ha-Netziv commentary).

140. Midrash Shochar Tov psalm 28 verse 5 (s.v. Ki Lo)

141. Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 30a

142. *ibid.* Taanit 7a

Rabbi Akiva once noticed that his students were dozing off. In order to awaken them, he said, “What did Esther see in order to rule over 127 nations? She saw that Sarah lived 127 years.”¹⁴³

Perhaps this is not typical of all aggada, but the fact that aggada was used to wake the sleepers seems to imply that it is not of as much importance as halakhah, which would have been the main focus of the shiur.

In several places the Yerushalmi implies that aggada was not intended to be taken so seriously.

He is a master of aggada, which doesn't forbid nor permit, doesn't render impure, nor pure¹⁴⁴.

Rabbi Zeiri was sitting ... and made fun of those who make derashot... “We don't learn anything from them”. He concludes with instruction to his son Rabbi Yeremiah to stick to halakhah which is superior to aggada¹⁴⁵.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi says one who writes Aggada has no portion [in the World to Come]. One who listens to them doesn't receive reward. In my whole life I never looked at books of Aggada, except for once...¹⁴⁶

And finally asks the rhetorical question:

Is midrash fundamental? Expound and receive reward!¹⁴⁷

On the other hand, we also find statements in the Yerushalmi such as:

143. Bereishit Rabba 58: 3. See also Kohelet Rabba 1: 15 with a similar story of Rabbi waking a dozing audience with aggada.

144. Yerushalmi Horayot 3: 5 (19b)

145. *ibid.* Maaserot 3: 4 (17b-18a)

146. Yerushalmi Shabbat 16; 1

147. *ibid.* Nazir 7: 2 (35a)

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“The rich man is wise in his own eyes; but the poor that has understanding searches him through”¹⁴⁸ – “The rich man is wise in his own eyes” refers to the master of Talmud. “The poor man that has understanding” refers to the master of aggada. [This is analogous to] two men who came to a city. One had bars of gold, the other had small change. The one with the bars of gold couldn’t find food to live, the one with small change could find food to live¹⁴⁹.

Even though the verse used as a proof text seems to imply that aggada is the true riches, we could understand this Talmudic statement to be simply the parallel of the Babylonian statement above, in which Rabbi Abahu demonstrates that aggada is more popular with the masses than halakhah, even though ultimately halakhah is more valuable.

There is another piece of Yerushalmi which seems to imply that aggada is a more esoteric type of learning, not suitable for all students.

Rabbi Simlai came to Rabbi Yochanan and said to him ‘teach me aggada’. He replied, ‘I have a tradition from my fathers not to teach aggada to either a Babylonian or a southerner, because they are haughty and know little Torah. You are from Nahardea [in Babylon] and live in the South!’¹⁵⁰

However in the parallel piece in the Babylonian Talmud (Pesachim 62b) Rabbi Simlai is asking Rabbi Yochanan to teach him Sefer Yuchasin which was a history book rather than simple aggada. Rashi explains that Rabbi Simlai himself did not come from a family with a long and proud history and therefore Rabbi Yochanan was reluctant to teach it to him.

148. Mishlei 28: 11

149. Yerushalmi Horayot 3: 5 (19b)

150. *ibid.* Pesachim 5: 3 (34b).

So perhaps we can conclude that aggada was held to be less important and less valuable in the land of Israel than it was in Babylon.

Aggada in the View of the Gaonim

The Gaonim were the Babylonian based leaders of world Jewry from the time of the compilation of the Talmud¹⁵¹ until the medieval period of the Rishonim. They were unanimous in denying the obligation to take aggada literally or even as necessarily meaningful. They all held that aggada was non binding and were not from Sinai, but were the insights of the Tannaim and Amoraim.

Rav Sherira Gaon¹⁵² wrote regarding aggada:

These words that are derived from verses and are called midrashim or aggada are estimations (*umdena*)... therefore we do not rely on aggada. The sages have said, “We don’t learn from aggada”... Accept as reliable only those that follow from logic or from the verses¹⁵³.

Similarly his son Rav Hai Gaon¹⁵⁴ writes:

You should know that the words of aggada are not considered received tradition. Rather each person would expound what came into his heart. It is in the category of ‘perhaps’ or ‘possibly’ and is not definitive. Therefore we do not rely on it¹⁵⁵.

He also wrote:

151. According to the view of Rambam (*introduction to Mishne Torah*). Others posit a group of Savoraim for almost a century between the end of the Talmudic period and the time of the Gaonim (e.g. *Seder HaDorot* (p. 171) year 4234).

152. c. 900-c. 1000

153. *Otzar HaGaonim Chagiga* Levine (ed.) (1984) Wagshal publishing. Daf 14a (p. 60) (also cited in the introduction to *Menorat Ha-Maor* p. 47).

154. 939-1038

155. Ibid. (p. 59)

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These explanations and derashot are not something received from Sinai, nor are they halakhah. Rather they are only meant as tentative explanations... the midrashim were only suggested as possibilities¹⁵⁶.

Elsewhere, commenting on the Talmud which says that God sheds tears Rav Hai Gaon denies that God has any physical form, and writes:

These words are aggada, and in this and all similar statements the Rabbis have said ‘we do not rely on words of aggada’... All things that the Rabbis said similar to this were not meant in their literal meaning, rather as an analogy or a metaphor for something that was well known amongst them. Just as the Torah speaks in the language of people, for example when the prophets use metaphors and say “the eye of God”, “Behold the hand of God”, “God’s anger flared – smoke came out of His nose and fire from His mouth” which are not meant literally but are analogies using human language. Similarly these words of aggada.

Shmuel Ha-Nagid¹⁵⁷ writes the following about aggada:

You should not learn anything from aggada except that which makes sense to you. You should know that whenever the sages establish the halakhah regarding a mitzvah it is from Moshe Rabbeinu who received it from God. You may not add to it or subtract from it. But anything that they explained from the verses, each Rabbi did according to what came to him and what made sense to him. Those that make sense to you of those explanations you should learn, and the rest do not rely on.

156. Ibid.

157. 993-1065

Clearly Rabbi Shmuel Ha-Nagid does not agree with the Talmudic statement that everything, including the aggadot, was received at Sinai. It is therefore difficult to accept Rabbi Dessler's assertion that Shmuel Ha-Nagid is of the opinion that all aggadot are valuable and contain deep secrets. Rabbi Dessler writes;

Those parts of aggada that we don't understand we are not obligated to learn them or to base our service [of God] on them. However it is clear that they are the foundations of the Torah. [The difference between halakhah and aggada is that] in halakhah which is practical, we are obligated to do the mitzvot even if we don't understand them. But aggada, which comes to enlighten the heart, if it does not shed light for us (because of our limited understandings) we are not obligated to involve ourselves with it until we merit to reach a high level where we are able to understand it. Furthermore there are great secrets of the Torah hidden in aggada. Until we reach the level where the secrets of each statement are revealed to us there is no benefit in involving ourselves with it [aggada].... This is what Rav Shmuel Ha-Nagid meant when he wrote "You should not learn... learn only from these explanations and don't rely on the rest".... He is not implying that only those [that you understand] are true and the rest are fantasies – Heaven forbid! Rather it must be as we said, that we shouldn't rely on them because we won't be able to serve God in our hearts based on them unless we understand them. Also the [true] meaning of those statements is a secret and is hidden from us¹⁵⁸.

Interestingly, the Gaonim consider the cures and medical knowledge of the Talmud to be in this category of aggada, rather than halakhic. Therefore one may not rely on Talmudic cures unless independently verified.

158. *Michtav Me-Eliyahu IV* p. 353-4

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Rav Sherira Gaon¹⁵⁹ writes:

You have asked me to write about the cures for someone who has *kordiakos* and the opinions of Rav and Shmuel¹⁶⁰. The answer is that I must tell you that the Rabbis were not doctors, and they were giving advice according to common knowledge in their time. Each one said what they thought was best, but there is no mitzvah to listen to the words of the sages. Therefore do not rely on those cures. One should not follow their advice unless it has been confirmed by contemporary medicine, and we know for certain from expert doctors that this will work, and will not put the patient in danger.¹⁶¹

In contrast, the French medieval school of Tosefot seems to consider the medicinal knowledge of the Talmudic sages to be correct. Although they agree with Rav Sherira that nowadays one cannot rely on the cures of the Talmud, this is not because the sages were limited in their knowledge:

Perhaps this [the nature of people or food] has changed, like the cures in the Talmud which are not effective nowadays¹⁶².

We will see later that some of the French Tosafists gave much more credence to aggada than the Gaonim, which explains this different approach to explain why the cures of the Talmud no longer work.

Marc Saperstein summarises the views of the Gaonim when he writes:

159. or perhaps his son, Rav Hai Gaon, or perhaps both of them together – see *Milchamot Hashem* p. 84 footnote 18

160. see Babylonian Talmud Gittin 67b

161. *Teshuvot Rav Sherira Gaon* regarding cures in the Talmud cited in *Milchamot Hashem* p. 84 footnote 18

162. Tosefot Moed Katan 11a s.v. kivra

The medicines and cures recommended by the Talmudic sages were repudiated by Hai Gaon as reflecting a state of knowledge more primitive than that of his own time; intelligent Jews should therefore receive their prescriptions from contemporary physicians and not from the pages of the Gemara¹⁶³.

However it is a mistake to think that the Gaonim merely discarded aggada when it didn't fit in with their view of theology. They often try to explain aggada, giving it credence and value and a non-literal meaning. For example, Rav Hai Gaon writes:

This statement is aggada. Concerning it and all that are similar to it, the rabbis said, "We do not rely on the aggada." *The way to interpret them is* to make clear at the outset that both according to reason and according to the words of the sages, there is no doubt that God cannot be compared to any creature, and that no laughter, weeping, sighing, tears, or distress apply to Him. When this statement is explained, it becomes known that all rabbinical statements similar to it were said not in accordance with their apparent meaning but as analogies and comparisons with things known to us by the senses. Just as the Torah spoke in the language of men when the prophets used such metaphoric expressions as the "eye of God", the "hand of God"... so in the case of aggadic statements¹⁶⁴.

The Rishonim on Aggada

In the medieval era we find two distinct approaches to aggada. The majority of works of the Rishonim that we have in our possession today treat aggada similarly to the way the Gaonim treated it. They

163. Saperstein, M. (1980) *Decoding the Rabbis*, Harvard University Press; Massachusetts. p. 9 citing Otzar Ha-Gaonim Gittin p. 152

164. Hai Gaon commenting on Berachot 59a *Otzar ha-Geonim: Berakhot*, "Teshuvot," p. 131

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make statements that it is not considered binding and not to be taken too seriously. On the other hand, there is a school of Rishonim, mainly based in France, which holds that aggada is to be taken literally and must be accepted in the same way that all halakhah which originated at Sinai must be accepted.

Rabbeinu Chananel

The Talmud relates an argument between Rabbi Eliezer and the sages about whether a certain type of oven can become impure. Rabbi Eliezer brought logical proofs to his position. When this failed to convince his colleagues he brought miraculous proofs, culminating with a voice coming out of Heaven declaring that the halakhah is always like Rabbi Eliezer. At that point Rabbi Yehoshua stood up and declared that the halakhah cannot be decided in Heaven, but must follow the majority opinion of rabbis on earth. In *Shitah Mekubetzet* Rabbeinu Chananel is quoted as saying:

Some say that one of the sages of midrash fell asleep during his midrash and saw in a dream that Rabbi Eliezer was arguing with the sages. Rabbi Eliezer said, ‘why are you arguing with me – let the water course prove that I am right.... Why did they not explain that this was a dream? Because they had a tradition that dreams were almost like prophecy. But they concluded that dreams speak falsely and the halakhah remains that they follow the majority ruling.’¹⁶⁵

Ohr Zarua

Shiltei Giborim cites the opinion of *Ohr Zaruah*¹⁶⁶ regarding aggada. He writes:

Because I have seen some of the destroyers of our nation who make fun and mock the words of our sages and teach others to mock our Torah, therefore I have come to explain

165. Bava Metziah 59a

166. R' Yitzchak ben Moshe of Vienna 1200-1270

the concept of midrash and what was the intention of our Torah regarding it. Know and understand that midrashim are of three types. There are some which are exaggerations... there are many which are exaggerations, such as the stories of Rabba bar bar Chana in chapter 5 of Bava Batra. There are some midrashim which describe miracles where God showed His strength and awesomeness.... And some of the midrashim show the intent of the sages to explain the words of the Torah in any way that they are able.... The Sages did not say their midrashim in a way that is fundamental or essential; rather they wanted to give many meanings to the verses and to explain them in many ways¹⁶⁷.

Kuzari

Rabbi Yehudah Halevi devoted a chapter of the Kuzari to various categories of perplexing aggadic statements. He has the Rabbi conclude by confessing his inability to understand some of them.

68. Al Khazari: Indeed, several details in their sayings appear to me inferior to their general principles. They employ verses of the Torah in a manner without regard to common sense. One can only say that the application of such verses once for legal deductions, another time for homiletic purposes, does not tally with their real meaning. Their aggadot and tales are often against reason.

73. ... It is also possible that they applied both methods of interpreting verses, and others which are now lost to us. Considering the well-known wisdom, piety, zeal, and number of the Sages which excludes a common plan, it is our duty to follow them. If we feel any doubt, it is not due to their words, but to our own intelligence. This also applies to the Torah and its contents. We must ascribe the defective understanding of it to ourselves. As to the aggadot, may

167. *Shiltei Giborim* Avodah Zara 6a in the pages of the Rif.

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serve as basis and introduction for explanations and injunctions. ... Statements of this kind are introduced by the word *kiveyakhol* which means: if this could be so and so, it would be so and so. Although it is not to be found in the Talmud, but only in a few other works, it is to be so understood wherever it is found.... Do not consider strange what Rabbi Yishmael said: 'I heard a voice cooing like a dove, etc.' For the histories of Moshe and Eliyahu prove that such a thing is possible and when a true account is given, it must be accepted as such. In a similar sense we must take the words: 'Woe to Me that I have destroyed My house'... Other Rabbinic sayings are parables employed to express mysterious teachings which were not to be made public. For they are of no use to the masses, and were only handed over to a few select persons for research and investigation, if a proper person suitable – one in an age, or in several - could be found. Other sayings appear senseless on the face of them, but that they have their meaning, becomes apparent after but a little reflection.... I will not deny, O King of the Khazars, that there are matters in the Talmud of which I am unable to give you a satisfactory explanation, nor even bring them in connection with the whole. These things stand in the Talmud through the conscientiousness of the disciples who followed the principle that 'even the common-place talk of the Sages requires study.' They took care to reproduce only that which they had heard from their teachers, striving at the same time to understand everything they had heard from their masters. In this they went so far as to render it in the same words, although they may not have grasped its meaning.... Occasionally the teacher concealed from his pupils the reasons which prompted him to make certain statements. But the matter came down to us in this form, and we think little of it, because we do not know its purport. For the whole of this relates to topics which do not touch on lawful or

unlawful matters. Let us not therefore trouble about it, and the book will lose nothing if we consider the points discussed here¹⁶⁸.

Abarbanel

Abarbanel also considers aggada to be unreliable, and non-essential. He writes regarding to the Talmudic discussion whether the people who are resurrected at the end of days will be wearing their clothes, or whether that is a metaphor for their physical bodies:

It is clearly explained that this statement is only words of aggada, and you can't ask questions on it. But the words of great wisdom that were in the words of these men make sense according to what we say¹⁶⁹.

Meiri

In his commentary on Talmud Shabbat 55a Meiri speaks about the principle of 'there is no person who has never sinned', and its implications for free choice. He concludes with the following words:

Even though this opinion remains with a challenge, the fundamentals of faith do not depend on proofs from the simple meanings of verses or aggada. You already know that you don't have to answer questions from aggada.

Rashba

Rashba writes at length about the section of Talmud describing Og's attempt to destroy the Jewish people¹⁷⁰ and about the nature and purpose of Aggada in general. His explanation is the starting point

168. *The Kuzari* part III (translation H. Hirschfeld (1964) Schocken Books; New York pp192-7)

169. *Yeshuot Meshicho* part 2 chapter 4

170. Babylonian Talmud Berachot 54b

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for several other commentators¹⁷¹.

Let me first explain the concept of aggada which comes from the Talmud and Midrashim. Know that some of them appear in deep language for several reasons. Sometimes you will find that they are hinting at very simple ideas, or things that don't need to be said at all. Nevertheless they are stated in strange and deep language until someone looking thinks that there is some great secret hidden there. This is not so. Rather sometimes they said things in very strange language in order to sharpen the intellects of the students and also in order to awaken the eyes of the fools who make mistakes in the words of the sages... There is also a third reason in a few cases which is sometimes the sages would give public lessons and would go on at length on important topics, and the people would begin to fall asleep. In order to awaken them they would say strange things to startle them and awaken them from their sleep¹⁷².

Raavad

Until now we have spoken of aggada as analogies and metaphor. However after the period of the Rishonim and with the revelation of the Zohar (and later the revolution of the Arizal) aggada became the focus of mystical thought. Instead of metaphor, aggada now became esoteric, requiring a lexicon of terminology to make it literally true in the kabbalistic sense, rather than the physical sense. We will now look at how two of the Rishonim who were versed in kabballah understood aggada.

The Raavad was known, along with his son Rabbi Yitzchak the blind, as one of the fathers of kabballah in Provencal. He challenges

171. E.g. Rabbeinu Bachya, Maharsha and Iyun Yaakov.

172. In *Ein Yaakov* Berachot 54b (p. 162)

Rambam's view that someone who believes that God has a body is considered a heretic with the following words:

Why does he call such a person a heretic? Many greater and better than he held this opinion because of what they saw in the verses and even more because of what they saw in the words of the aggada, which confuse the mind.¹⁷³

From here it looks as though Raavad holds that any aggada which appears confusing should be rejected. Yet in another challenge on Rambam he writes the opposite:

'Before' and 'After' are very deep secrets, and it is not appropriate to reveal them to just anyone. Perhaps the author of these words [Rambam] did not know them.¹⁷⁴

Perhaps the resolution is that since aggada contains deep kabbalistic secrets which are not to be revealed to the masses, he calls aggada confusing to the mind, to steer people away from the simple meaning of the words. But only someone not privy to the secrets of kabballah should reject aggada. To those who the secrets each word of aggada contains deep secrets.

Ramban

Ramban was one of the principle Rabbis in the chain of transmission of kabballah. Therefore it is surprising that he seems to consider aggada and midrash to have no necessary deep meaning. In his famous disputation with Pablo Christiani he dismisses aggada when he says:

Further, there is a third kind of writing which we have [in addition to Bible and Talmud, or, halakhah] called *midrash*, that is to say, sermonic literature of the sort that would be produced if the bishop here should stand up and deliver a

173. Glosses on Mishne Torah Hilchot Teshuva chapter 3 halacha 7.

174. Ibid Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah chapter 1 halacha 10

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sermon, which someone in the audience who likes it should write down. To a document of this sort, should any of us extend belief, then well and good, but if he refuses to do so no one will do him any harm. Furthermore, this literature is given to us the title *aggada*, which is the equivalent of *razionamiento* in the vernacular, that is to say that it is purely conversational in character¹⁷⁵.

There are many who claim that this is not the true opinion of Ramban. He was merely answering the challenges of his Christian opponent, but did not intend his words for a Jewish audience. For example Mordechai Eliasberg writes:

It is clear that the words that Ramban was saying with his mouth he was nullifying with his heart. His own opinion is to explain them [aggada] differently – either according to the Abarbanel or others, or perhaps even according to kabbalah¹⁷⁶.

However he continues to explain that his main objection is not to Ramban, but to those more recent thinkers who use these words of Ramban to discard aggada as meaningless. Without evidence from Ramban himself, he projects modern thought back into the words of the Rishonim. Chavel himself also rejects this reading of Ramban and suggests that Ramban is presenting a valid approach to aggada¹⁷⁷.

Lieberman shows that even when writing for a Jewish audience, Ramban still treats aggada in a similar way. In *Sefer Torat Ha-Adam* Ramban states:

These are some of the places where they described *gehinnom* and the pain and suffering there in the Talmud and

175. *Kitvei Ramban* vol. 1: p. 308 ed. Chavel (1963) Mossad HaRav Kook; Jerusalem (translation Sapperstein p. 11)

176. cited in *ibid.* footnote s.v. she-adam megid le-chavero

177. *ibid.*

midrashim, and they measured its dimensions. These and similar things cannot be understood as metaphors or analogies because they mention dimensions, and they also learn halakhah from here¹⁷⁸ ...¹⁷⁹

However according to Lieberman, the continuation of this paragraph is as follows:

Only these kinds of aggada are reliable, but other aggadot and midrashei aggada which do not have any halakhah associated with them – some of them can be considered metaphors or analogies¹⁸⁰.

Lieberman asserts:

Even though professor Yitzchak Beer asserts that “It is not correct that Ramban didn’t believe in aggada...”¹⁸¹ ... but I am almost certain that his [Ramban’s] holy mouth didn’t say a lie.

We can perhaps substantiate Lieberman’s view that Ramban doesn’t consider aggada binding or authoritative from Ramban’s commentary on Chumash. Many times he disregards explicit statements of the sages and innovates a new reading of the verse which he considers to be more correct in the simple meaning of the words. For example, in dating the exodus from Egypt and resolving the contradiction between two verses as to the length of time that the Israelites spent in Egypt, Ramban disregards the writings of the sages of the Mishna in *Seder Olam*¹⁸² and creates his own chronology¹⁸³. If history is considered to be in the category of aggada and is not halachic, we can

178. regarding covering food on Shabbat in the hot pools of Tiberias

179. *Kitvei Ramban* vol. 2: p. 285 ed. Chavel (1963) Mossad HaRav Kook;

180. Lieberman, S. (1992) *Sbeki’in* (Hebrew) Shalem; Jerusalem p. 69

181. *Tarbitz* 1942 p. 184

182. According to the Talmud (Yevamot 82b and Nida 46b) this was written the by second century sage Rabbi Yossi ben Halافت.

183. *Ramban commentary on Chumash* Shemot 12: 40

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explain his disregard for earlier authorities if he subscribes to the view that aggada is only sermonic literature.

Rabbi Yehudah He-Chassid

Rabbi Yehudah He-Chassid, in *Sefer Chassidim*¹⁸⁴, has also got something to say about teaching Aggada and Midrash.

He quotes the Yerushalmi: Rebbi said he had a tradition from his forefathers not to teach Aggada to people who have ... little Torah ... and not to tell surprising, astonishing Aggadot to ... (those) who might say “there is nothing in it, and since there is nothing in this branch of Torah there is nothing in other branches of Torah” ... and also to the ignorant and to all those who scoff at the Aggadot.¹⁸⁵

Alternative Views of the Rishonim

According to what we have seen so far, the basic consensus amongst the Rishonim was that aggada is not to be understood literally, but to be taken as metaphorical. However, there was a radical school of Rishonim who held that aggada must be taken absolutely literally. This school included Rabbi Shlomo Min Ha-Har, Rabbi Yosef ben Todros and possibly Rabbeinu Yonah. These Rabbis all held that to treat aggada as analogy or metaphor was to degrade the Torah. In the words of Rabbi Yosef ben Todros: “To make all the words of the Torah and of the prophets into metaphors and riddles, and all the miracles and wonders into mockery ... and to mock the words of the sages... [will eventually lead a person to disregard all the words of the Torah and consider themselves] exempt from prayer and from tefillin”¹⁸⁶.

Similarly Rabbi Shlomo min Ha-Har writes that he heard of people expressing new ideas that had never been part of Jewish tradition “to

184. 297

185. *Pesachim* 5: 3

186 Printed in *Kevutzot Michtavim* 2. Cited in *Torah Shleima* parshat Yitro p. 303

destroy the [words of] the prophets and to make metaphors out of the words of the Torah... to make all the stories into analogies ... and mock the words of our Rabbis. When I heard this I was shocked ... and I argued with them many times.”¹⁸⁷

These Rabbis held that aggada must be taken literally, and to interpret it in any other way was to undermine the foundations of the Torah. Once the aggadot are open to interpretation in a non-literal way (the held), the words of the prophets and the Torah itself may be understood to be metaphorical and not literal (as Rambam actually states in *Moreh Nevuchim*). From there it is a small step to invalidate the mitzvot themselves and claim that they are non-binding, and that they too are not to be understood according to their literal meaning.

This literal understanding of aggada led these Rabbis to claim that God has a body, since His physical form is mentioned many times in the biblical and rabbinic writings. Unfortunately we don't have any writings from them that express this idea explicitly, nor do we know how they would answer obvious theological issues which arise from this viewpoint. However there is one medieval rabbi who was part of this literalist camp whose book still survives to this day.

Rabbi Moshe ben Chasdai Taku was one of the Tosafists. He is mentioned by Ramban¹⁸⁸, Rama¹⁸⁹ and others. His book *Ketav Tamim* is the sole text left today of a school of thought which has all but disappeared from the historical record. This book was written as a response to Rabbi Saadiah Gaon's *Emunot ve-Deot* and Rambam's *Moreh Nevuchim* and their claims that aggada is not to be understood literally, and that it would be logically impossible for God to have any physical form or body.

Rabbi Taku responds to a passage of Saadia as follows:

¹⁸⁷ *ibid* 7.

¹⁸⁸ *Chidushei Ramban* on Gittin 7b

¹⁸⁹ *Responsa of the Rama* siman 123 and *Torat Ha-Olah*

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Ignoramus! Of the words of an amora, spoken through the ruach hakodesh and the sacred tradition, he writes ‘All Israel is not in accord with this’; with his own idle chatter, who is in accord!?’¹⁹⁰

Rabbi Taku argues strongly that all the words of the Torah and of the rabbis must be taken literally. Regarding aggada in general he writes:

It is preferable for us to reject these new opinions which have only recently appeared, than to reject the words of the Torah and the words of the Rabbis which are the words of the Living God.¹⁹¹

Those wise people who argue [with Rabbi Saadiah Gaon] ... the wise men of his generation disagree with him, in order not to contradict the words of the Torah and the words of the Rabbis Though they didn’t write their opinions in books, and in *Emunot ve-Deot* [Rabbi Saadiah] ignores these opinions. He wrote that many things are metaphor or riddles in order to dismiss those opinions.... Anyone who learns Torah, Talmud or aggada will not agree with his words.¹⁹²

Rabbi Taku thus claims that he represents the traditional and authentic view of Judaism and that even in the time of the Gaonim the majority of Rabbis held that aggada was literally true. This lead Rabbi Taku to understand that it is not only possible for God to choose to manifest Himself in a physical form or body, but that whenever the prophets saw God they were literally seeing God (and not a created form, as Rabbi Saadiah proposes).

To fully understand this viewpoint, which has been all but erased from the record (and certainly is not considered today to be a legitimate Jewish view) requires an essay in its own right.

¹⁹⁰ *Ketav Tamim* p. 70

¹⁹¹ *ibid.* p. 83

¹⁹² *ibid.* p. 79

Nevertheless it is interesting to note this strong opposition to the writings of the majority of Rishonim. Furthermore, it seems that Rabbi Taku (and presumably the other rabbis in his ‘camp’) was so extreme in his position because of the perceived threat of the Karaites, who didn’t believe in the Oral Law. Rabbi Taku writes:

This opinion of the minority of the Gaonim and the Karaites [that God does not have a body] is taken from the Kalam movement of the Muslims... You should know that everything that the Muslims said regarding this is all taken from the words of the Greeks and the Arameans.¹⁹³

While the reaction of his contemporaries to the challenges of the Karaites and the Muslims (and indirectly the Christians, from whom the Muslims took some of their theology) was to distance Judaism from the literal meaning of aggada, Rabbi Taku and others responded by insisting on the literal truth of the Torah and the aggadot of the Rabbis.

Rambam’s views on Aggada

In his commentary on the mishna, in the introduction to *Chelek*, Rambam describes three attitudes to aggada:

There are three different types of people when it comes to understanding the midrashim and aggadot. The majority of people I have met or whose books I have read or heard about, take the words of the sages of the Talmud at face value and do not attempt to explain them at all. In their eyes the unreasonable and impossible becomes an article of faith. Their reason for taking this line is simply due to ignorance. They just do not realise what they are doing. Unfortunately they have not come across anyone who could explain matters to them. They honestly think that their simple and superficial understanding of the Midrashim reflects the intention of the

¹⁹³ *ibid.* p. 69

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authors. This simple understanding may contain some impossibilities. Presenting these simplistic ideas to a public or to individuals would cause great astonishment. They would produce a reaction of “... How on earth can anyone say such things and honestly believe them to be true, and find them appealing?” Such people are extremely unfortunate. I pity their foolishness. They think they are elevating the status of the sages whereas in fact they are degrading it to the lowest level ... whilst remaining blissfully ignorant of what they are doing. They destroy the honour of the Torah and blacken its reputation. In fact they convert the Torah into the very opposite of what God intended it to be!

Look at the Torah. How does God describe it? “... It is your knowledge and wisdom in the eyes of the nations who, when they hear of these statutes, will say this great nation is surely a wise and understanding people.”¹⁹⁴ The people we are referring to, explain the words of the sages in such a way that, if the nations were to hear them, they would say “... this petty nation is surely a foolish and worthless people.” A lot of this is achieved by those who try to teach what they themselves do not understand. If only they were to keep silent... it would be the wisest thing they could do. Alternatively, they should state clearly that they do not understand what the sages meant. However, because they think they understand, they allow themselves to relate their ideas to others as they understand them, rather than telling them what the sages actually meant. They quote the aggadot such as those in the last chapter of Sanhedrin and other such sources verbatim and in stark simplicity.

The second group is also very large and is comprised of those who see the words of the sages in their simplicity, believe

194. Devarim 4: 6

them to be as they are, and scoff and mock them. They then consider themselves wiser and more knowledgeable than the sages. The sages are to them fools and idiots, lacking in all wisdom and science. Most of these are people who are educated in secular sciences and consider themselves thinking people. They are worse than the first group.

The third group is so small it can hardly be called a group. These are the ones who really understand how great the sages were and that their words reveal great and deep truths. They know what is the reasonable and possible and what is the unreasonable and impossible. They know that the sages did not speak empty words, but words with a depth and a meaning which go beyond the superficial. Anything impossible said by the sages is simply metaphor. When speaking of lofty ideas, the sages couched them in allegorical terms. This is the style of the wise. Shlomo HaMelech opens Mishlei with the statement "... To understand parables and allegories...the words of the wise and their riddles"¹⁹⁵. Those who understand the Hebrew language know that when he refers to "riddles" he is referring to phrases in which the true meaning is the deep one and not the superficial one. When the very wise speak of great and lofty principles they only speak about them in allegorical form. We should not, therefore, be surprised to see that the sages also couched their teachings of deep ideas in allegories and clothed them in common language. Shlomo HaMelech himself wrote the whole of Shir HaShirim, Mishlei and parts of Kohelet in such a style. Why, then, should it surprise us if we have to seek deep explanations in the words of the sages, deny their superficial meaning, and make their words fit in with that which is sensible and true? They themselves often explained

195. Mishlei 1: 1-2

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many of the words of the Bible as being allegorical, denying their superficial meaning in favour of the deeper meaning.

Similarly we find Rambam wrote so strongly against those who believe that God can manifest Himself in a physical body because of an incident where he met someone who believed that aggadot and derashot are literally true:

I once met a man who was considered to be one of the sages of Israel, and he certainly knew very well the give and take of the details of the Torah. But his theology was based on what he had learnt as a child and he was in doubt as to whether God has a physical form – an eye, a hand, a foot, intestines – as the verses imply, or whether He has no physical form. Yet others who I met from other countries held definitively that God has a body, and they considered anyone who held the opposite to be a denier of God, a min and an apikoros. They understood many of the derashot according to their simple meaning. I have also heard similar theology in the name of others who I have not seen... Their brains are full of crazy old wives' tales and foolish imaginings. Therefore I saw that it was necessary to explain the principles of our Torah without bringing proofs and sources, because these people do not have the intelligence to understand the proofs.¹⁹⁶

Rambam seems to define a new understanding of aggada, which is neither literal, nor completely allegorical, but rather has a deeper, intentional meaning. Unlike those Rishonim and Gaonim who suggest that one can read into aggada any meaning, Rambam seems to explain that the sages had a specific meaning when they said their words. Rambam apologises in the introduction to his *Moreh Nevuchim* that he did not follow through on his promise to write a full commentary of these deeper meanings within the words of aggada:

196. *Letter on Resurrection of the Dead* Mossad HaRav Kook (Rambam Le-Am) *Iggrot Ha-Rambam* p. 345

In our commentary on the Mishna we stated our intention to explain difficult problems in the Book on Prophecy and in the Book of Harmony. In the latter we intended to examine all the passages in the Midrash which, if taken literally, appear to be inconsistent with truth and common sense, and must therefore be taken figuratively. Many years have elapsed since I first commenced those works. I had proceeded but a short way when I became dissatisfied with my original plan. For I observed that by expounding these passages by means of allegorical and mystical terms, we do not explain anything, but merely substitute one thing for another of the same nature, whilst in explaining them fully our efforts would displease most people; and my sole object in planning to write those books was to make the contents of Midrashim and the exoteric lessons of the prophecies intelligible to everybody. We have further noticed that when an ill-informed theologian reads these Midrashim, he will find no difficulty; for possessing no knowledge of the properties of things, he will not reject statements which involve impossibilities. When, however, a person who is both religious and well educated reads them, he cannot escape the following dilemma: either he takes them literally, and questions the abilities of the author and the soundness of his mind--doing thereby nothing which is opposed to the principles of our faith,--or he will acquiesce in assuming that the passages in question have some secret meaning, and he will continue to hold the author in high estimation whether he understood the allegory or not. As regards prophecy in its various degrees and the different metaphors used in the prophetic books, we shall give in the present work an explanation, according to a different method. Guided by

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these considerations I have refrained from writing those two books as I had previously intended¹⁹⁷.

Rashba bases his understanding of Aggada on the principles laid down by Rambam in his introduction to his commentary on the Mishna. There he describes four different categories of Talmudic literature. The fourth category is:

... The derashot that are relevant to each chapter in which they appear. One should not consider that this fourth category of derashot is not important, or of limited value. It serves a very great purpose, in that it contains within it deep allusions and wonderful concepts. If a person will delve deeply into these derashot he will learn from them the ultimate good, and Divine and true ideas will be revealed to him. These include ideas that the scientists have concealed and philosophers of each generation have hidden. [However,] when a person looks at the simple meaning he will find them contrary to logic, and there is nothing greater than it [logic]. They [the Sages] made it like that for several reasons. Firstly they wanted to encourage the understanding of the students. They also wanted to hide it from the eyes of the fools ... since their intellects are unable to fully understand the truth. The Sages would [even] hide the secrets of the Torah from each other.... When God reveals [the secrets] to a person he should conceal them, and only reveal them through hints and only to a person whose intelligence is whole and straight.... Furthermore public teaching can only be done through parable and metaphor, to include the women and young children, so that when their minds reach perfection they will know the meanings of the metaphors.... For this reason the Sages spoke of Divine matters through hints.

Therefore if a person finds some of their words [of the

197. Introduction. M. Friedländer Translation (1903) p. 4-5

Sages] to go against logic, he should not attribute the fault to those words, but rather to his intelligence. When he finds a parable which seems far from his understanding he should be upset that he is not able to understand the idea.... Each person has a different type of intellect. There is no doubt that the intellect of someone who knows these lofty concepts is greater than that of someone who does not know them, for one has realized their intelligence in actu, while the other only has it in potential. For this reason there are some things that certain individuals find to be correct and perfectly clear, while others find them to be impossible, each according to their level of wisdom.

Rambam, according to Rashba's understanding, clearly attributes very great value to Aggada. Not only does it contain the principles of faith and an understanding of Divinity, but it is this area of learning that separates those who have actualized their intelligence from those who have not. Rambam does not make this claim about any other type of Talmudic study. In his letter on astrology to the Rabbis of Southern France Rambam states:

I know that you may search and find sayings of some individual sages in the Talmud and Midrashim whose words appear to maintain that at the moment of a man's birth the stars will cause such and such to happen to him. ... it is not proper to abandon matters of reason that have already been verified by proofs, shake loose of them, and depend on the words of a single one of the sages from whom possibly the matter was hidden.

Perhaps you will say to me, as many say: You call words in the Talmud "aggada!" I reply: Yes! All these words and those similar to them are aggada in their content, whether they be

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written in the Talmud, or in books of derashot, or in books of aggada.¹⁹⁸

According to Netziv¹⁹⁹, Rambam holds that one who learns aggada comes to understand both maaseh bereishit and maaseh merkava – the workings of the universe. He claims that this is Rambam’s intent in chapter 2 of Hilchot Yesodei Ha-Torah, where he paraphrases the midrash, saying:

I will explain important principles in the works of the Master of the Universe, in order that you should have a beginning of an understanding of how to love God. This is the meaning of what the sages wrote regarding love “that through this you will recognise the One Who spoke and the world came into being”.

Saperstein describes Rambam’s approach to aggada, and the reason he chose such an approach:

Unlike Karaite, Muslim and Christian polemicists, Maimonides does not ridicule or dismiss such aggadot. Yet they create problems that he cannot ignore. He discusses these passages because he knows that any Jew reading his work will think of the rabbinic pronouncements as a counterexample. Unless they can be explained away, they will undermine the foundations of his exposition²⁰⁰.

It is clear that aggada, which is the basis of Jewish theology and philosophy, actually causes theological and philosophical problems because many of the aggadot apparently contradict basic tenets of Jewish thought and religion.

198. *Teshuvot ha-Rambam* p. 739 in Saperstein p. 9

199. *Emek Netziv* on Ekev piska 13

200. Saperstein p. 6

The Problem of Aggada

What caused the Gaonim and Rishonim to abandon the literal meaning of aggada (with only a few exceptions)? Obviously they understood that this was the intent of the Talmudic sages when they wrote aggada, but there were external factors which also created the need to explain aggadot in non-literal ways. Aggada not only led to theological problems, but also opened Judaism to attack by Christians, Muslims and Karaites. The primary danger in aggada, as we have already seen from Rambam's letter on the Resurrection of the Dead cited above, was that aggada often implies that God is corporeal or has physical manifestations. This implies theology caused a serious external threat to Judaism, which ultimately led to the burning of the Talmud, forced conversion and the loss of the elevated status of Dhimmi in certain Muslim countries (without such status Jews were forced to pay higher taxes, and faced the threat of expulsion from Muslim countries).

Saperstein describes the historical problem of aggada:

Detailed knowledge of the aggadot was introduced into medieval Christian literature by Petrus Alfonsi, a Spanish Jew who converted to Christianity in the first decade of the twelfth century and spent the rest of his life in England. Following his apostasy, he wrote a polemical work against the religion he had abandoned in the form of dialogues between "Peter", his name as a Christian, and "Moses", his name as a Jew. The first chapter of these *Dialogues* is devoted, in large part, to a critique of the aggada. Many of the passages cited speak about God, and they are introduced by the charge that "you sages... assert that God has body and form, and attribute to His ineffable majesty such things as are inconsistent with any manner of reason."

A generation after Alfonsi's *Dialogues*, Peter the Venerable, abbot of Cluny and a towering figure in twelfth century Christendom, turned

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to the aggada in the fifth section of his *Tractate* “Against the inveterate obstinacy of the Jews.” In this work he mocks Jews, insults them, reviles them, heaps upon them torrents of scorn and abuse, all because of “the absurd and utterly foolish fables” of the Talmud.

Ultimately the challenges on the aggada of the Talmud led to putting the Talmud itself on trial, in the famous Disputation of Paris. New charges were made against the aggadot of the Talmud by Nicholas Donin. These included “blasphemies against the Christians” and “blasphemy against the humanity of Christ.” Included in this category is the accusation that Jews curse the clergy of the Church, the king, and all other Christians three times each day in a blessing considered to be extremely important, known as *birkat ha-minim*.

In the Muslim world the challenges on the Talmud and Judaism were equally damning. In his *Treatise on Contradictions and Lies*, the eleventh-century Spanish Muslim, Ali ibn Ahmad ibn Hazm attacks the Torah for proffering a blatantly anthropomorphic portrait of God. He claims that Jews are thus not monotheists and do not deserve the status of Dhimmi. A Dhimmi is a non-Muslim subject of a state governed in accordance with sharia law. The term connotes an obligation of the state to protect the individual, including the individual's life, property, and freedom of religion and worship, and required loyalty to the empire, and a poll tax known as the *jizya*. Losing this status would lead to expulsion, conversion or death as an infidel.

The Gaonim and Rishonim were forced to respond to the Christian and Muslim challenges based on aggada. The majority (certainly the opinion which ultimately became ‘mainstream’ Jewish thought) removed any theological truth to implied anthropological descriptions of God by denying the literal meaning of aggada. Others, such as Rabbi Moshe Taku, responded to external challenges, and the perceived heresies of their contemporaries, by formulating a theology which allowed for the aggadot to be understood literally. This led to the denial of the incorporeality of God, and allowed for a

Judaism which held that God could manifest Himself in physical form.

There were similar challenges from Karaites, who claimed that Rabbinic Judaism had distorted the truth of the Torah, and from philosophers who held that Judaism was no longer monotheistic since it held of physical descriptions of God.

Conclusion

It appears that from the time of the Talmud (and presumably earlier) until the late Gaonic period aggada was accepted as literally true. There was a paradigm shift in the time of the Gaonim, which was accepted and continued by most of the Rishonim in the attitude towards aggada. No longer was it to be accepted as literally true, but rather it was metaphorical. Furthermore aggada could be sacrificed for the sake of theology.

This was probably a reaction to the competing theologies of the time; Christian, Muslim, Karaite and the challenges of Greek philosophy. This later led to direct attacks on the Talmud and Jews throughout the world. These challenges and attacks led the majority of Gaonim and Rishonim to abandon the apparent Talmudic view of aggada (though strengthening the faith of others such as Rabbi Moshe Taku), and caused Rambam to formulate his new understanding of aggada.

