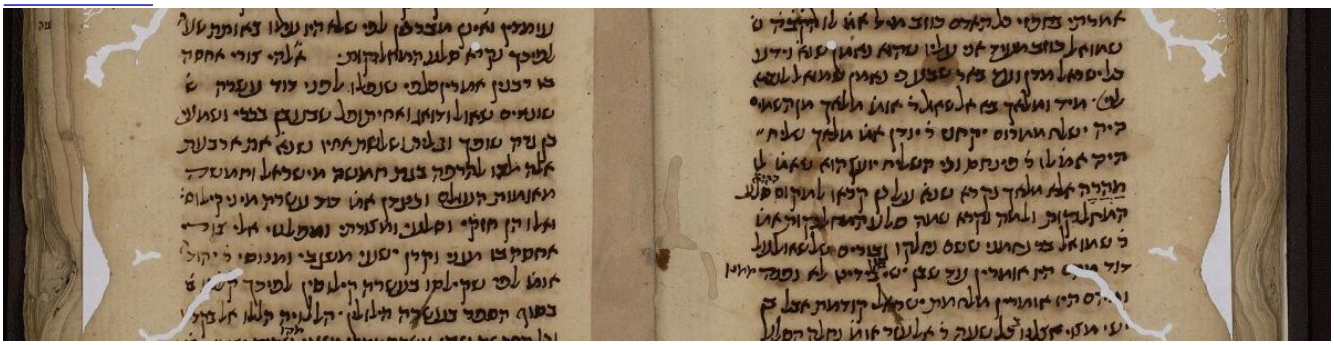
On Interpreting Midrash

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In this study we will address the subject of rabbinic Midrash and Aggadah (the latter term usually designated for talmudic "Midrashim") in the light of five of the leading authorities of the late Gaonic period and that of the early Rishonim, who lived in the tenth through the twelfth centuries. They are not in agreement with each other on all points, but they contain a common denominator regarding Midrash and Aggadah. In the second section we will survey a cross-section of Midrashim and Aggadot drawn from the Talmud and classical compendia of this material, restricting ourselves to those associated with Parashat Beshallah. It is our intention to point out that it is often clear from a careful reading of these sources that the authors did not intend their words to be interpreted literally.

Rab Sherira Gaon (906–1006, head of the Pumbedita Academy) wrote:

Those points brought out from scriptural verses called Midrash and Aggadah are assumptions. Some are accurate—such as Rabbi Judah's statement that Simeon's portion was included in that of Judah, for we find it corroborated in the book of Joshua—but many are not.…We abide by the principle, "According to his

intelligence is a man commended" (Prov. 12:8). As to the Aggadot of the students' students—Rabbi Tanhuma, Rabbi Oshaya, and others—most of them [the realities] are not as they expounded. Accordingly we do not rely on Aggadot. The correct ones of them are those supported by intelligence and by Scripture. There is no end to Aggadot (Sefer ha-Eshkol, "Hilkhot Sefer Torah," p. 60a).

Rab Hai Gaon, son of Sherira (939–1038, head of the Pumbedita Academy):

Aggadah and Midrash, even concerning those written in the Talmud, if they do not work out properly and if they are mistaken, they are not to be relied upon, for the rule is, we do not rely on Aggadah. However, regarding what is ensconced in the Talmud, if we find a way to remove its errors and strengthen it, we should do so, for if there were not some lesson to be derived it would not have been incorporated…Concerning what is not in the Talmud, we investigate—if correct and proper we expound and teach it and if not we pay no attention to it (Sefer ha-Eshkol, Hilkhot Sefer Torah," p. 60a).

Rab Hai Gaon also stated: "You should know that aggadic statements are not like those of shemu'ah ("heard," a passed-down statement). Rather, they are cases of each individual expounding what came to his mind, in the nature of 'it can be said,' not a decisive matter. Accordingly we do not rely on them" (Otzar ha-Ge'onim to b. Haggigah, Siman 67).

Rab Shemuel ben Hofni Gaon (960–c.1034, head of the Sura Academy), in his Introduction to the Talmud (published in the Vilna edition at the end of Massekhet Berakhot, erroneously attributed to Shemuel Hanagid, translated and abridged by Rab Shemuel ben Hananya in the 12th century), stated: "Aggadah constitutes all the explanations in the Talmud on any subject that does not refer to a mitzvah. You do not learn from them except what seems acceptable to the mind…. Concerning the expounding on scriptural verses, each [sage] expounded what chanced to him and what he saw in his mind, so what is acceptable to the mind we learn from and the rest we do not rely upon."

Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089–1164) in his Bible commentary often alludes to the importance of recognizing the inapplicability of Midrash to understanding the intention of the Torah. For example, concerning the variant between the two Decalogue passages in the Torah, wherein one states "zakhor (remember) the Sabbath day to keep it holy" while the other has "shamor (observe) the Sabbath day to keep it holy," he comments:

…The sages said that “zakhor and shamor were said in the same pronouncement” (b. Shebuot 20b)…Heaven forbid saying that they did not speak correctly for our minds are meager in comparison to their minds, but people of our generation think that their words were intended to be taken literally which is not the case…It is not possible that zakhor and shamor were uttered simultaneously except as a miracle, but we must admit that even so there is a question, why was it not written zakhor ve-shamor in both the first and second formulation? And what about those other verses [of Decalogue variants], were they also said simultaneously…? The explanation is that when Hashem uttered zakhor (to remember the Sabbath day) everybody understood it means in order to observe it, so [in Deuteronomy] Moses wrote shamor.

Rambam (Moses Maimonides, 1138–1204), in a number of statements, addressed the basic concept Ibn Ezra was dealing with in the previous citation. He explicitly pointed out that situations that, by definition, are impossible to exist, cannot exist. In his words: “It is no deficiency in the One [God] that He does not conjoin contraries in one substratum, and His power is not affected by this and by other similar impossibilities” (Guide 1:75 [Pines 1974, 224]). “We do not attribute to God, may He be exalted, incapacity because He is unable to corporify His essence or to create someone like Him or to create a square whose diagonal is equal to its side” (226). “It has then become clear that, according to every opinion and school, there are impossible things whose existence cannot be admitted. Power to bring them about cannot be ascribed to the Deity…Accordingly they are necessarily as they are” (Guide 3:15 [Pines, 461]).

Rambam wrote extensively concerning the interpretation of rabbinic Midrash and Aggadah. In his Introduction to Perek Helek he points to the fact that the Mishnah sages themselves assume that even the Torah text must be read with logic and common sense. When confronted with a passage that looked impossible to take literally they resorted to allegorical interpretation. Rambam cites several examples. For example, in 1 Chronicles 11 the text relates some amazing deeds of King David’s warriors, such as killing a lion in the pit on a snowy day, which the sages understood allegorically. The narrative of the book of Job and the account of resurrection in the book of Ezekiel (chapter 37) were also interpreted allegorically by some sages. How much more so, asks Rambam, is it imperative to be rational when dealing with their own teachings, the aggadic and midrashic statements of rabbinic compendia?

Regarding those who interpret all Aggadot and Midrashim literally, he states:

…they destroy the Torah's glory and darken its brilliance; they make God's Torah the opposite of what was intended. He stated in the perfect Torah regarding the nations "who will hear about all these statutes and say, 'What a wise and insightful people this great nation is'" (Deut. 4:6). But when the nations hear how this group relates the words of the sages in a literal manner they will say, "What a foolish and ignorant people this insignificant nation is." Most of these expounders explain to the public what they, themselves, really do not understand. Would that they be quiet or say, "We do not understand what the rabbis mean in this statement or how to interpret it." But they think they understand and endeavor to make known according to their poor understanding—not according to the sages' intention—and expound at the head of the assembly the derashot of tractate Berakhot, the chapter Helek and other sources, literally, word by word. (Introduction to Perek Helek)

The formulations of the sages teach all sorts of valuable lessons. Frequently, they use the Torah text as a springboard to elaborate an idea or as a mnemonic device to anchor an insight and assist in its being remembered. In doing so they are often engaging in moral education and inspirational edification that in their days would have been difficult to accomplish in a straightforward manner. As long as the reader or listener realizes that a proposed interpretation of a text is not necessarily its true meaning, the interpretation often having no genuine (peshat) connection to the actual intention of the relevant verses, and that the highly improbable, often fantastic and sometimes impossible realities portrayed are not literal, no harm is done and a benefit is derived from the lesson.

It may also be that some sages, contrary to Rambam's opinion, employed such methods even when they knew their audience thought that the literal message they expounded was intended to explicate the actual meaning of the passage. It appears that there were cases when they felt it necessary to do so. This would have been probable when they were dealing with minimally educated people who lived in social contexts that precluded them from access to scientific knowledge about realia or historical knowledge about events. Such people already believed in the fantastic, such that their taking an impossible interpretation literally created no conflict for them and only provided the benefit of the lesson.

It is the case today that numerous traditional adherents of the Torah were taught and teach to uncritically subscribe to a literalist view of Midrash and Aggadah and take the details as factual. Some are greatly disturbed by other approaches despite the many writings of our greatest rabbinical authorities, including the

Geonim and Rishonim cited above. Since the methodology employed in our Torah studies accords with the general perspective of the nonliteralists, this is an appropriate opportunity to comment on the matter.

With the enormous advances in knowledge in recent times the situation is radically different from what it had been in past centuries. The most basic general education in modern times—indeed, merely being an alert individual living in present-day society—provides an immense amount of information in many areas and insight into many subjects that the Midrashim and Aggadot continually touch upon. An average person cannot but be deeply impacted by this knowledge, as elementary education, interaction with others, and the mass media are involved in this process. And many people are now accustomed to read widely and critically, think rationally, and approach knowledge with intellectual integrity. Today, as has been the case for well over a century, taking Midrashim literally tends to cause sincere individuals prodigious conflicts between their religious faith and their knowledge of reality.

Attempts to avoid the difficulties have generally promoted apologetics with numerous false harmonizing resolutions. For many, particularly the more educated and rationally oriented, and most seriously for those with intellectual integrity, these explanations have served to merely postpone the problems for a time.

All this has contributed to mass defection from tradition on the one hand and to the development of defensive measures to prevent exposure to contradictory knowledge on the other. The latter often includes discouragement, if not prohibition, of advanced general studies, insisting the Torah be studied without the benefit of modern scholarly research as well as strictly limiting interaction with and participation in the life of the wider society. Of course, such measures create further serious, negative consequences, impacting the psychological, social, and economic well-being of many. The solution requires that it should be acknowledged that the authorities cited above were basically correct and whatever consequences stem from that recognition must be confronted.

The teachings of the sages are often clearly recognizable as nonliteral to anyone who acknowledges that it is possible that they may be so. We will provide a sampling of different types of Midrashim and Aggadot that expounded on Parashat Beshallah. These Midrashim teach many wonderful and extraordinary lessons, which upon thoughtful consideration of text, theme and time frame will

be seen as clearly not the intended meaning of the verses they are attached to. We will thus illustrate an important aspect of classic rabbinic methodology and help clarify the main point discussed above.

Examples of Classic Rabbinic Methodology

1. Rabbi Joshua the son of Levi expounded: ve-lo naham Elokim—God did not find it satisfactory (consoling) to bring Israel to its land quickly (Exod. 13:17). Why? It is comparable to a king who has 12 sons and 10 portions of land. If he distributes his lands then he will cause conflicts among his sons. He will wait until he acquires two more portions of land. Similarly, the land of Israel was not adequate for the 12 tribes. God decided to take Israel the long way around so that in the process they will conquer additional land which the two and a half tribes will take, thus making the land of Israel sufficient for all the tribes (Exod. Rab. 20:14).

This may be good advice to a father but surely not the intention of the verse. It is based on translating the letters of the word n-h-m according to another meaning the word could have, but not in its present context. Additionally, the interpretation counters the verse's main message that the reason for taking the long route was so that the Israelites should not confront war soon. And if taken seriously, what does this comment say about the subject of the two and a half tribes?

2. Israel left Egypt hamushim (Exod. 13:18). The Mekhilta first interpreted that word as "armed" or "provisioned," citing Joshua 1:14 and 4:12, generally considered the more straightforward explanation. It continues with other homiletical explanations based on the fact that hamesh means "five":

[Hamushim means that] only one-fifth of the Israelites left Egypt [the others died], some say one in 50 came out, some say one in 500. Rabbi Nehorai says not even one in 500…as we expound…the Israelite women were giving birth to six children at a time. When did they die? During the three days of darkness, so that the Israelites buried their dead and gave thanks and praise to the Almighty that their enemies did not observe and rejoice in their destruction.

Several lessons are taught in this collection of explanations. It compliments the valor of a minority, in some times and places it is only a tiny minority, who hold fast to their beliefs against the assimilationist tendency of the many. Those who do not remain faithful do not share in the good that God brings to Israel. It stresses the value of keeping matters of national shame private. But surely the

radically different interpretations of the “other explanations” are not addressing the meaning of our verse or describing the historical setting it presents.

3. Joseph had Israel swear they would take his bones with them out of Egypt (Exod. 13:19). Rabbi Levi stated: This is like a person who discovered that thieves had stolen his wine barrels and drank the wine. He told them: You drank the wine, but at least return the barrels. Joseph said to his brothers: You stole me alive from Shechem, please return my bones there (Exod. Rab. 20:19). This is valuable advice: A wrongdoer should be considerate of his victim and should minimize his wrongdoing. Even after a theft, the perpetrator could alleviate the harm he caused to the injured party. But this lesson has nothing to do with the true meaning of the verse.

4. Moses took Joseph’s bones with him from Egypt (Exod. 13:19). The Mekhilta comments:

How did Moses know where Joseph was buried? Serah, Asher’s daughter, was still alive and she had seen them bury Joseph. The Egyptians had made a metal casket for him and sunk it in the Nile. Moses stood by the Nile, cast a pebble in and called “Joseph, Joseph, the time for The Holy One, blessed be He’s fulfillment of His oath has arrived, give honor to Hashem, God of Israel, and do not delay us, for you are now holding up our departure. If you do not rise promptly we will be free from the oath.” Immediately Joseph’s casket floated to the top…Rabbi Natan says: Joseph was buried in the royal tomb of Egypt…And how do we know they also took the bones of the other tribal heads (Joseph’s brothers) with them, for he stated [in the oath he placed on his brothers], mi-zeh ittekhem (“from here with you” [Exod. 13:19]).

For some, the lengthy, fantastic account enhances the prestige of Moses and Joseph as well as of Serah, whose keen observation turned out to be so valuable. It highlights the value of proper burial and supports the concept that the individual survives bodily death. It brings out the importance of fulfilling vows made by parents. Rabbi Natan rejected the account outright for a more commonsense approach. In peshat there is no reason to assume that Joseph’s burial place was not known.

5. Rabbi Johanan commented on the verse ve-lo karav zeh el zeh kol ha-laylah (“one could not come near the other all through the night,” Exod. 14:20). When Hashem’s angel moved from being in front of Israel’s camp to the back of it, followed by the cloud—a defining moment in the Egyptians’ downfall—the

ministering angels desired to utter a song. “The Holy One, blessed be He said to them: ‘The creations of My hands are drowning in the sea and you would utter a song?’” (b. Megillah 10b). It is a most elevating concept not to celebrate at the death of God’s creations, but it is not the intention of the passage.

A brief digression is in order: Angels are not independent beings with ability to act contrary to God’s will but are His messengers and manifestations of His activity. From the wind and burning fire (Ps. 104:4) to the “voice” that stopped Abraham from slaughtering his son (Gen. 22:11) to the appearance revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exod. 3:2), the angel represents an aspect of God’s will and endeavors. The term for angel, malakh, related to melakhah (work), appears to designate its definition. In a strictly literary usage, angels served in parables to concretize certain thoughts. Concerning destruction of the wicked pursuers in our passage, an idealistic person would feel jubilation at the rescue of the righteous and sadness that it had to end as it did: with human beings, created in the image of God, dying. As Beruriah said, we should hope and strive to ensure that sins will be terminated from the land, not the sinners (b. Berakhot 10a). Rabbi Johanan represents the conflicting feelings by projecting them to God and the angels.

6. It was taught in a Baraita that Rabbi Meir said:

When Israel stood at the sea the tribes were quarreling, each one said, “I will be first to enter the sea.” The tribe of Benjamin jumped into the sea first, as it states, sham Binyamin tza’ir rodem (“There is little Benjamin their ruler” [Ps. 68:28]), al tikrei rodem, ella rad yam (“Do not read the word as ‘rodem’ [their ruler] but as ‘rad yam’ [he descended into the sea]”). Thereupon the princes of Judah threw stones at them, as it states [in the continuation of that verse], sarei Yehudah rigmatam (v. 28, a play on rigmatam, reading it as ragemu otam [“stoned them”]). Therefore, Benjamin was selected to become the “host” for the “Might” (i.e., the Holy of Holies is located in Benjamin’s portion of land), as it states: “u-ben ketefav shakhen” (“As he rests between His shoulders,” Deut. 33:12).

Rabbi Judah said, that was not how it was. Rather, each tribe said, “I will not be first to enter the sea,” whereupon Nahshon the son of Amminadab (the prince of the tribe of Judah) jumped into the sea first. This is as stated, “Ephraim surrounds Me with deceit, the House of Israel with guile. But Judah stands firm with God and is faithful to the Holy One” (Hos. 12:1), which is elaborated [by expounding several verses in Psalms] as follows: “Save me O God, for the waters have reached my throat, I am sunk in deep mud and have no standing” (Ps. 69:2–3)

together with “Do not let the floodwaters sweep me away” (v. 16). Meanwhile, Moses was lingering in prayer. The Holy One blessed be He said to him, “My beloved are drowning in the sea and you are lingering in prayer before Me?…‘Speak to the Israelites that they should travel and you raise your staff and incline your hand over the sea and split it’ (Exod. 15:15 ff.).” Therefore Judah merited rulership in Israel, as it states, “When Israel left Egypt…Judah became His holy one, Israel, His dominion” (Ps. 114:1-2), Why did Judah ascend to the status…because “the sea saw [the he descended into the sea first] and fled” [ibid v. 3]). (b. Sotah 36b–37a)

There are several lessons here in faith and courage, in psychology and in proper behavior in an emergency. But neither side in the dispute between the sages is expounding the straightforward meaning of the Exodus passage or the other passages marshaled for evidence.

7. Upon the defeat of Pharaoh and his troops, the Torah states (Exod. 14:28): lo nishar bahem ad ehad (generally translated: “there did not remain from them even one”). Taking ad ehad to mean “until one remained,” Rabbi Nehemiah in the Mekhilta states that Pharaoh was spared. Pirkei Rabbi Eliezer (42) added in the name of Rabbi Nehuniah the son of Hakaneh:

When Pharaoh said, “Who is like You among the elim, Hashem, Who is like You, majestic in holiness” (Exod. 15:11), the Holy One, blessed be He saved him from the dead so that he would relate His power to others, in accordance with what is stated: “for this purpose have I allowed you to stand…and in order that My name be recounted throughout all the land” (9:16). Pharaoh became king in Nineveh…When the Holy One, blessed be He sent Jonah to prophesy that Nineveh will be destroyed, Pharaoh heard, rose from his throne, rent his garments, donned sackcloth and ashes [and brought the city to repentance].

Surely this is a most potent cluster of messages about repentance. It also is an extravagantly imaginative tale spreading over many centuries based on a most fanciful interpretation of a verse.

8. Israel called out, “Who is like You among the elim, Hashem?” (15:11). Among its explanations of the difficult word elim, the Mekhilta proffers the following:

“Who is like You among the illemim?” (interpreting elim as illemim, “mute,” based on their having similar letters and sounds). Who is like You that You can hear Your sons’ humiliation and be silent, as it states, “I have been silent from ages ago, I

have been still and restrained, I will now cry as a woman in labor, both gasping and panting" (Isa. 42:14). That means to say, in the past God was silent and restrained, but from now on it will be different. "I will scorch mountains and hills, and dry up their vegetation, make rivers into islands and dry the pasture lands, I will lead the blind by a route they knew not, by a path they did not know will I guide them, I will make the darkness before them into light and the craggy places into a plain" (vv. 15–16).

This is a beautiful thought concerning the Exodus in the light of Israel's past affliction. It is also a relevant hope and inspiration during the crushing difficulties the Jewish people were enduring at the time of the author of this Midrash, but surely it is not the meaning of the verse it is expounded upon.

9. Following the crossing of the sea, the Torah states: Then Moses caused Israel to set out from the Sea of Reeds (va-Yassa Moshe et Yisrael mi-Yam Suf) (Exod. 15:22). In a masterly synthesis of Midrashim, Rashi comments on the active causative verb: "Moses had to force Israel to travel because the Egyptians had decorated their horses with ornaments of gold, silver and precious stones, and Israel was finding them in the sea. The spoils of the sea were greater than the spoils in Egypt." This constitutes an insightful commentary on the folly of the haughty and overconfident, as well as on the huge temptations Israel must rise above in order to serve Hashem. These include the problems often presented by opportunities, even those stemming from Hashem's graciousness. But this interpretation is not an actual description of the circumstances of the verse being expounded.

10. Regarding the manna, "When the sun became hot it would melt" (16:21). The Mekhilta states: "Melted manna would flow into rivers and into the great sea, animals would drink that water, hunters would capture the animals and members of other nations would eat them and get a taste of the manna that descended for Israel." This is an instructive lesson regarding indirect influence, perhaps reflecting the Mekhilta's view of how the Torah's message spread to the world, but not a depiction of a particular physical process.

11. In the battle against Amalek, Moses' hands were faithful until the sun set (17:12). Midrash Tanhuma (Beshallah 28), cited by Rashi, asserts: The Amalekites were calculating through astrology the propitious time that they could be victorious. Moses stopped the sun and confused their calculations. The message is clear. The enemy may possess many skills and use all sorts of means against

Israel, but steadfastness in commitment to Hashem will thwart them. The scientifically knowledgeable individual knows that such a statement, were it literal, would be depicting a miracle of the very highest order, which is not even hinted at and has no foundation in the text, and which was not cited by the other schools of sages. Clearly, it was not intended to be taken literally. And God cannot be manipulated by astrology or by any other means.

12. The following passage, dealing with topics of our parashah, appears in a talmudic discussion on the Mishnah's statement of reciting Hallel toward the conclusion of the Passover seder (b. Pesahim 118b):

Rabbi Natan said, the verse "The faithfulness of Hashem is forever" (Ps. 117:2), was said by the fish in the sea. This is in accordance with Rab Huna, who said that Israel in that generation [of the Exodus] were of little faith. This is as Rabbah bar Mari expounded: What is the meaning of the verse "They rebelled at the sea, the Sea of Reeds" (Ps. 106:7)? This teaches that the Israelites were skeptical at that moment [upon crossing the sea] and said: "Just as we are ascending from the sea on one side so are the Egyptians ascending on the other side." The Holy One, blessed be He then told the Minister of the Sea to spew forth [the dead Egyptians] upon the dry land. He answered, "Master of the Universe, does a master give a gift to his servant [the many corpses, food for the fish] and then take it back?" He responded, "I will give you [in the future] one and a half times their number." He replied, "Can a servant make a claim to collect from his master?" He told him: "The Brook of Kishon will be My guarantee." Immediately he spewed the bodies forth upon dry land and Israel came and saw them, as is stated, "Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the seashore" (Exod. 14:30). What is the meaning of "one and a half times their number?" Regarding Pharaoh it states, "six hundred choice chariots" whereas in the case of Sisera it states, "nine hundred chariots of iron" (Judg. 4:13). When Sisera came… Holy One, blessed be He brought the stars out of their orbits against them [Sisera's army]…they became heated whereupon they went to cool themselves in the Brook of Kishon. Holy One, blessed be He said to the Brook of Kishon, "Go and deliver your guarantee." Immediately, the Brook of Kishon swept them away and cast them into the sea, as it states, Nahal Kishon gerafam, Nahal Kedumim (5:21). What is the meaning of Nahal Kedumim, the ancient brook?" The brook that had been the guarantee in ancient times. At that moment the fish said, "The faithfulness of Hashem is forever."

Major values are expounded here. In the midst of an enormous miracle on behalf of the Israelites, God regarded and alleviated their skepticism by further altering

the natural order. Since this action clashed with another's expectations of a benefit for his charges, God repaid the latter's loss with interest. He accepted the argument that it was proper to have a guarantee and gave one. He permits His creations to think independently and present their viewpoints to Him. And He is interested in justice even for the fish. Many precedents for appropriate human behavior are exemplified here, particularly to counteract the hubris and disregard of others sometimes found among the affluent. Nobody should disappoint another with merely, "Sorry, I changed my mind, something came up." Nobody should say, "I'm good for my commitment, you do not need a surety." People are expected to argue for those who cannot do so for themselves. And everybody should be concerned with the welfare of even lower creatures, how much more so the lowly among man. But this finely crafted homily has nothing directly to do with the intention of the verses being expounded or of the existence of heavenly ministers complaining to God. As midrashic interpretations generally do, it views the whole Tanakh as one integrated unity from which snippets of verses may be expounded and linked with other snippets of verses regardless of their literary context or historical setting to produce a moral that is independent of the verses expounded.

Between the Talmudim and classical compendia of Midrash there are many thousands of statements commenting and elaborating on words and verses of Tanakh that contain great wisdom but are not the actual interpretation of those words and verses. And in subsequent times many rabbinic authors wrote in that style. Great caution must be taken in studying and teaching this material to gain the benefit without the harmful consequences described in the first part of this study. Rambam's words are as relevant today as ever.