ABSTRACT

Lost Aggadic Works Known Only from Ashkenaz:

Midrash Abkir, Midrash Esfa and Devarim Zuta

A Thesis submitted to the Senate of the Hebrew University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, December 2006

By **Amos Geula**

This study concerns *Midrashei Aggada* on the Torah that are of exclusively Ashkenazi provenance. It focuses on three such midrashim – all of them lost – *Midrash Abkir*, *Midrash Esfa* and *Midrash Devarim Zuta*. Scholars had not noticed that these midrashim were known only in Ashkenaz and this fact is one of the basic findings of this work. Moreover, defining these midrashim as belonging to one group is another major finding.

The structure of the study: There are five chapters in the study: an introduction, three chapters constituting the main body of the work and a concluding chapter. Each of the central chapters is an independent study on one of the lost midrashim: *Abkir*, *Esfa* and *Devarim Zuta*. Each chapter covers the following topics: the history of research, the name of the midrash, its circulation, its structure, its sources and parallels, linguistic matters, literary characteristics, historical-cultural context, time of composition and provenance. The fifth chapter points out that which is common to all three midrashim, seeking to prove that they all belong to one group and stem from a single source. This chapter also discusses the relation between this group of midrashim and others known as well from Ashkenaz, giving a number of examples. This chapter concludes with an attempt to identify the source that created these anonymous compositions, outlining its character and creativity. The second part of the study, in a separate volume, presents quotations from the three midrashim along with an introduction discussing the

surviving fragments, an evaluation of the primary textual witnesses, lists and appendices.

Chapter I: Introduction:

1. The starting point of the study: This study grew out of the findings in my master's thesis on *Midrash Abkir*. In that study I found that the map of circulation of *Midrash Abkir* and of additional compositions – among them *Midrash Esfa* and *Devarim Zuta* – centers primarily on the circle of pietists of thirteenth-century Ashkenaz, around the Roqeah (R. Elazar of Worms), his teachers and disciples. No manuscript of these writings has survived. They are quoted in *Yalqut Shimoni* on the Torah, in commentaries on liturgical poetry (*piyyutim*), in Ashkenazi commentaries on the Torah, in writings of Roqeah etc.

2. The state of research and the confusion about the lost midrashim: Up to now the study of these lost midrashim has been characterized by confusion. S. Buber made an earlier attempt to characterize them mainly on the basis of *Yalqut Shimoni*, but he relied on the references in late printed editions, which contain many errors. For example the famous story of Shamhazai and Azael, who fell from heaven (*Yalqut Shimoni*, Genesis no. 44, p. 154) was attributed to *Midrash Abkir*, even though there are no grounds for doing so either in any manuscript of Y.S. or in any other source. Likewise the story of R. Matya b. Harash who put out his own eyes (Ibid., Vayehi, 161, p. 848), which was also attributed to *Midrash Abkir* without any evidence. *Midrash Esfa* was presumed to have been written in Iraq during the time of the Geonim, as a result of a passage in *Yalqut Shimoni* attributed erroneously to that midrash. On the basis of that attribution, more conclusions were drawn, but a thorough examination shows that it is clearly taken from *Midrash Yelamdenu* and not to *Midrash Esfa*. Manuscript fragments were attributed to the lost midrashim on the basis of baseless hypotheses, and came to be thought of as authentic, genuine fragments of the midrash itself. In order to avoid these kinds of errors, my study is based only on quotes that cite the midrash from which they were taken.

3. The reasons that the midrashim were lost: The very fact that these midrashim were lost is evidently highly significant. The study points out several reasons for the loss of works, or of the manuscripts being scarce: their length – brief or long, the need for them, their rarity at the time they were copied and even the contents of the

midrashim and their disposition. Throughout this study a number of hypotheses have been made suggesting possible reasons for the loss of these midrashim.

4. The Ashkenazi library in the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries: The fact that these midrashim are part of the Ashkenazi library is also of significance. Scholars have pointed out the uniqueness of this library between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, which included compositions that were not known from any other source or were found outside it only in other versions. Among these are *Pesiqta Rabbati, Pesiqta Hadatta, Midrash wa-yehullu,* the adaptation of the *Yerushalmi* and others. Some of the traditions and compositions unique to Ashkenaz reached there from Italy. This fact is pertinent with regards to our midrashim.

5. The attitude of Ashkenazi sages towards Aggada: The attitude of the sages of Ashkenaz towards Aggada was unique. Unlike the sages of Iraq or Spain, the scholars of Ashkenaz regarded Aggada as an authoritative source – even for determining Halakha. They made extensive and exceptional use of midrashim in their commentaries on *piyyutim* and commentaries on the Torah, copied midrashim and explicated them, and even prepared handbooks and indices of the midrashim, the most famous of which is, of course, *Yalqut Shimoni*.

6. The provenance of Ashkenazi culture: There are a number of opinions regarding the geographical extent of the rabbinic culture of Ashkenazi Jewry in the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries. Some scholars view Germany and Northern France as one cultural unit, in this period as well as earlier. Others regard Germany as separate from France on a number of matters, and the findings of this study conform to the latter hypothesis.

One purpose of this study is an attempt to identify and characterize the school in which these midrashim were compiled. I have made an intensive study of the quotes from the midrashim from a number of aspects. On the other hand, I have not tried to discover manuscripts of these lost midrashim – and I doubt whether they exist – but I have tried to collect quotations from them as much as possible and to reconstruct them in their original order.

Chapter II: *Midrash Abkir*

1. The state of research: There is no systematic study of *Midrash Abkir* or of any of the midrashim discussed in this study. A few comments and selections from it have

been recorded by some scholars. This sub-section provides an exhaustive list, arranged chronologically of everything published to date on *Midrash Abkir*.

2. The Name of the Midrash: N. Brill explained the name on the basis of a quote from Roqeah, according to which it is the initials of the expression:אמן במהרה כן יהי רצון (= "Amen, speedily, so may it be [His] will"), which concluded each section of the midrash. Here I discuss the problems this creates in identifying midrashim quoted from the work on the basis of this expression since midrashim from other sources could also conclude with it. On the other hand, it is possible that the midrash was known elsewhere by another name, such as *Tanhuma*.

3. The dissemination of the midrash: This midrash was first mentioned in Ashkenaz at the end of the twelfth century. All of the quotations from it in the period immediately after that are exclusively from Ashkenaz, and even there only in a small group of scholars from the circle of Ashkenazi Pietists. From the sixteenth century on there is evidence of its having been used in Italy and even in Egypt. We do not know until when a copy of the manuscript survived, and the last evidence of it may be one from Poland in the eighteenth century. Today no manuscript of the midrash is known.

4. The structure of the midrash: From the evidence I have there are no grounds to assume that it went beyond Genesis and Exodus. The midrash was evidently arranged in the order of the weekly portions of the Torah, following the tradition of Eretz Israel, much like *Tanhuma*. However it does seem that the custom that was actually practiced in the time of the editor was that of the annual reading. From a study of the quotations it does seem that the midrash did not only discuss the beginning of each portion, but has homilies on verses from all parts of the portions as well. In this respect the midrash has an exegetical character. However, from the testimony of Roqeah it is evident that the midrash was arranged according to *derashot* [= sermons] that concluded with words of consolation. And indeed there are indications of homiletics in several quotes. It seems that the general framework of the *derasha* was only a formal one.

5. Sources and parallels: *Midrash Abkir* is familiar with classic sources from Eretz Israel, such as *Mishna Sheqalim*, *Sifrei Bemidbar*, *Yerushalmi*, *Bereshit Rabba*, *Mekhilta* and *Mekhilta de-Rashbi* and *Baraitha de Malekhet Hamishkan* as well as *Midrash Tanhuma-Yelamdenu* and *Pirqei de-Rabbi Eliezer*. A group of later midrashim reveal a particular connection to *Midrash Abkir*, among them the works attributed to R. Moshe Ha-darshan – *Bereshit Rabbati*, *Midrash Aggada* and the first part of *Bemidbar Rabba* – and also sections of *Pesiqta Rabbati*, *Shemot Rabba* and *Midrash Vayosha*.

The use that *Abkir* makes of classical sources goes beyond gleaning them to create an anthology. The redactor of the midrash selected them, edited them and, moreover, adapted them, adding material of his own. Some of the texts have no parallels in midrashic literature and must be the work of the redactor. As far as his use of the Babylonian Talmud is concerned, it is difficult to make an unequivocal statement. Several quotes do indicate a certain use of the Babylonian Talmud, but only Hebrew passages in the latter, however I found no quotes of the parallel Aramaic passages in the surviving sections of *Midrash Abkir*. Likewise there is no use in *Abkir* of the terminology of the Babylonian Talmud, and the great majority of sages mentioned are from Eretz Israel. However, the degree of parallels between *Abkir* and the *Tanhuma* literature is high and both have a number of common features: both are *midrashei aggada* (legendary homilies) on the Torah with the same exegetical-homiletic character, they both make the same use of Hebrew, use common expressions and homiletic terminology, are similarly structured, arranged according to the weekly Torah readings; both use a similar style in opening passages (*petihtot*), i.e. circuitous, abrupt and few in number; both conclude with words of consolation. The parallel in contents of these midrashim is both in midrashic traditions and in not a little textual overlap. With regard to the source of these parallels it seems that the redactor of *Abkir* used the *Tanhuma* literature at a stage that preceded the extant version.

6. Literary characteristics: *Midrash Abkir* uses the usual techniques of classic midrash, such as *gezera shava* (drawing parallels from the use of similar terms in different verses) and drawing conclusions from the proximity of two verses or issues to each other. The use of some of these – such as parables, illustrations, dialogues and lists – is noteworthy. Other techniques are not classical – such as basing an interpretation on the final letters of a series of words, or referring to masoretic comments or phonetic phenomena. One of the most common literary forms in *Midrash Abkir* is the parable. There are seventeen parables, most of which are unknown from any earlier source. Many of the *derashot* are the product of illustrating metaphors, epithets or other linguistic expressions, generally arousing a degree of surprise, very often making use of irony or even a sense of the absurd. Not a few of the *derashot* in *Midrash Abkir* are arranged in the form of lists or parallels, which seems to have been a favorite genre for the redactor. Another favorite form is dialogue, which enables the redactor to express ideas in a sharp and polemic form. *Midrash Abkir* makes use of colorful language and proverbial phrasing, even using popular proverbs, but without any explicit transitional

opening. Occasionally it intentionally uses enigmatic language. A number of motives are recurrent in the work: "pamalia shel ma`ala" (the heavenly court), matters concerning the priests, and the names of God.

7. Language: *Midrash Abkir* is written in Hebrew with very little use of foreign words. The sparse Aramaic used in the passages is Palestinian Aramaic and evidently culled from the sources that the redactor used. More Greek and Latin words are mentioned in *Midrash Abkir* than Aramaic ones. Most of these are words that were used routinely by the sages, but there are some less common words – some taken from the sources the redactor knew, but some of them in unique parables and borrowed from daily language. The language reflects a return to Biblical Hebrew, although it is obviously based on rabbinic Hebrew and has some paytanic forms. In a few cases there is evidence of the translation of foreign words and midrashic expressions into Hebrew, but sometimes the it was the ones who collected the midrashim that translated those words into Hebrew. Between the lines one may discern that the redactor knew Greek, but preferred to write in Hebrew. A renaissance of Biblical Hebrew is characteristic of rabbinic writing in Southern Italy from the eighth century. The Greek words in the midrash are also characteristic of the Byzantine surroundings. The fact that the midrash makes no use of Galilean Aramaic, on the one hand, and the lack of any Arabic in it, on the other, lead us to the conclusion that *Midrash Abkir* was not edited in Eretz Israel.

8. The historical-cultural context: Many *derashot* in *Abkir* reflect an implicit and even an explicit polemic against the Christians and the principles of their faith. From this it is evident that the historical background of the midrash was Christian rule. This rule constrained the Jews, levied taxes on them and was in a religious conflict with them. However attacks and killing of Jews are not reflected in the quotes from the midrash that have survived. On the contrary a number of *derashot* indicate a degree of religious freedom and Hebrew rabbinic creativity, even though they do not hide their hope that this rule will come to an end. Several passages clearly reflect polemic with Christian beliefs and opinions. The daily life described in the passages, mainly in the parables, reflect Byzantine surroundings: titles (cubjustus, ducus, pacostor), ceremonial objects (porphira, zoni, moniac) and various scenes from the emperor's world (a matrona with a defect, courtiers who are jealous for the king's love, a boy heating fueling an oven). One messianic quote (no. 26) describes Esau's end in a unique way, and in my opinion this passage refers to the Arab conquest of Eretz Israel from the Byzantine Empire in 634 C.E., describing the defeat of the Byzantines at Beit Guvrin,

the submission of Bazra and the flight of Heraclius to Constantinople. Another unique quote, concluding *Abkir*, and heretofore not mentioned in research, is also of messianic character and mentions an apocalyptic date: 4745 A.M. (=985 C.E.). An analysis of the passage reveals that the passage was written in that year and it may also refer to the year the midrash was composed. A number of matters pertaining to halakha and custom are also discussed in this sub-chapter. Most of them may be identified as polemics on controversies in the Geonic period.

9. The time and provenance of the midrash: The early dissemination of the midrash in Ashkenaz is indicative of its origins in Italy. It was created in a Chrisitian environment. The parables that occur exclusively in this midrash reflect Byzantine daily life. Linguistic considerations also point to this area. The Hebrew in which the midrash was written together with the Greek and Latin words that occur in it are characteristic of southern Italy after the rebirth of Hebrew there. A more focused hint appears in a polemic quote about the privilege of priests to read the first passage in Genesis (no. 3), which has a clearly Italian background, as Brill already pointed out. The sources of the midrash are primarily Eretz Israel. There is clearly a link between the midash and the *Tanuhuma* literature, the later stages of which are also associated with Italy. We arrive at the date of its composition in a number of ways. The style of the midrash is late. One unique passage discloses that it was written after the Arab conquest. The renewal of Hebrew characterizes southern Italy from the eighth century on. A number of masoretic matters interpreted in the midrash correspond to the time when that material was disseminated – after the beginning of the tenth century. Influences from the Babylonian Talmud that are evident in the midrash conform to the time when that work penetrated Italy, circa the beginning of the tenth century. Some sources from the turn of the twelfth century already quoted *Midrash Abkir*, among them the author of *Leqah Tov* All these factors conform to the date mentioned in a messianic quote concluding "*Abkir*" as the date of its composition: 4745 (=985). In my opinion that is the date of the editing of this midrash, many parts of which precede that date.

Chapter III: *Midrash Esfa*

1. The state of research: The primary scholarly discussion of *Midrash Esfa* concerns an inscription in *Yalqut Shimoni* that appears at the end of the list of the names of the sventy elders whom Moses assembled (*Y.S.*, Behaalotha, no. 736, pp. 212-213). This passage has been attributed by scholars to Esfa for the simple reason that it is based on

the passage "Gather (*Esfa*) for me seventy of Israel's Elders" (Numbers 11:16), which was presumably the opening passage of *Midrash Esfa*, even though there is no such attribution in the source references of *Yalqut Shimoni*. According to the inscription in this passage, scholars have attributed *Midrash Esfa* to the school of Rav Haninai Kahana Gaon (eighth century) and assigned its place of origin to Iraq. On the basis of this attribution scholars have attributed various passages to *Midrash Esfa*. In a special article that I have devoted to this subject, I presented evidence that indicates the quotation under discussion to *Midrash Yelamdenu*. Beyond the discussion of this passage, scholars have almost entirely ignored the midrashim that can be traced to *Midrash Esfa* unequivocally. This attribution by scholars has led to a blurring of the special features of Esfa and no attention has been given to the linguistic findings and historical references in passages quoted from it that do not conform to its presumed Iraq provenance. This sub-chapter opens with a chronological survey of the history of research on the passage mention above in particular and on the work in general.

2. The name of the midrash: In the light of the evidence I have found, it is my opinion that the accepted explanation of the name – *Esfa li* ("Gather for me") – is that the midrash opened with a discussion of this verse (Numbers 11:16). From the findings in my possession it would seem that the extent of *Midrash Esfa* is from this verse to the end of Deuteronomy. It is possible that the midrash reached Ashkenaz lacking the first part. One testimony from *Mafteah haderashot*, which I pointed out, refers explicitly to *Esfa* on the portion *Vayishlah* (Gen. 32-36), and I have not yet succeeding in explaining this reference. In that case there is reason to cast doubt on the name of the midrash.

3. **The dissemination of the midrash**: Various scholars have attributed quotations to *Esfa*, that do not come from it and consequently they have not identified its unique map of dissemination. *Midrash Esfa* is mentioned in various sources, among them *Yalqut Shimoni* on the Torah, Ashkenazi Torah commentaries, works by R. Elazar of Worms and various indices – all of the from Ashkenaz circa thirteenth century. I am not aware of any sources outside Ashkenaz that mentions *Midrash Esfa*.

4. **The structure of the midrash**: Interpretation of the findings indicates that the structure of the midrash was exegetical, and that it was most probably arranged according to the weekly Torah readings. However, the limited number of quotations from it make it difficult to assert this hypothesis unequivocally. From the quotations that have survived it is also difficult to ascertain whether *Midrash Esfa* systematically included *petihtaot* (introductory passages). We have one circular opening passage that

uses the expression “that is what Scripture says…” and other features characteristic of *petihtaot* in the *Tanhuma Midrashim*.

5. **Sources and Parallels**: One of the sources on which *Esfa* is based is *Sifrei Zuta* on Numbers. There is no special use of the *Yerushalmi* noticeable in the surviving quotations. It does have a special connection to various works from the *Tanhuma-Yelamdenu* literature and later adjacent midrashim, such as *Aggadat Bereshit* and *Midrash Tehillim*. This group of works reveals a connection to southern Italy. It also has a connection to *Pirqei deRabbi Eliezer* and to the *Hekhalot* literature. On the other hand, there is no evidence of use of the Babylonian Talmud, nor does it seem that the redactor was familiar with it. He augmented his sources with special parables, changed their language or even their context, sometimes interpreting them on the basis of new *dershot*. Other *derashot* are polemic in character and appropriate to their time and place. Furthermore the quotations reveal a familiarity with Greek and Latin.

6. Literary characteristics: The style of *Midrash Esfa* is often flowery and in some cases the phrasing is like that of proverbs. The parables in the midrash (we have seven of them) are unique and all of them refer to the real world of the redactor of the Mishna. Some of the expressions characteristic of *Midrash Esfa*: among them consideration of the figure of Moses, angels, witches and miracles.

7. Language: The language of *Midrash Esfa* is Hebrew with scattered words in Greek and Latin. The occurrence of such words is normal in Talmudic literature, but they appear here also in unique *derashot*, indicating that the redactor had a Latin-Greek vocabulary from his environment. There is no Aramaic in the midrash, indicative of its lateness. The redactor’s preference for Hebrew is apparent in his use of Biblical language and his translating Greek and Latin words to Hebrew (such as *meqom hahayot*, the Hebrew equivalent of the Latin term *bestiarum*). Esfa contains expressions that are not routine in classical rabbinic literature and some of them are characteristic of Tanhuma literature or even of its late level.

8. The historical-cultural context: The background of the parables is clearly Byzantine Roman culture and a Christian environment. This is apparent in the rest of the midrash as well. Among the *realia* are office holders in the king’s court, corporal punishment inflicted on the offending limb (the Roman *Lex Talionis*), gladiators and circus games, and, according to Zigler, one of the parables “appears to have been written precisely about Comodus.” Some of the quotations from *Esfa* reflect religious polemic, mainly with Christianity, but possibly also with Gnosticism. Among other

things there is a defense of Israel's pure genealogy, an explicit polemic against "the sectarians who deny resurrection of the dead," and war against death or the angel of death on the part of Moses or David.

9. The time and provenance of the midrash: The dissemination of the midrash – in Ashkenz alone – indicates a source that was connected to Ashkenaz, which could be Italy or Byzantium. The historical-cultural context that be identified in the historical references in the quotations is Byzantine Roman. The surrounding religion is Christian and there seem to be some evidences of Gnosticism. The midrash conducts a polemic with both. Islam, on the other hand, is not mentioned or even alluded to in the quotations from the midrash. Hebrew language with a few foreign words in Greek and Latin reflect a Byzantine background. The tendency of returning to Biblical language and coining new terms in Hebrew pertain to the flourishing of Hebrew in Southern Italy in the ninth-tenth centuries. Likewise the absence of Aramaic. No names of sages are given in *Esfa*, which is indicative of its relatively late date of origin. The midrashic-talmudic sources of the midrash are clearly from Eretz Israel. The clear dependence on the *Tanhuma midrashim* reinforces the connection of the work to Italy and connects it to late midrash. The influence of the Babylonian Talmud cannot be seen in the quotations from *Esfa*, which may indicate that the Midrash preceded the arrival of the Talmud to Italy. The connection between *Esfa* and *Aggadat Bereshit* suggests dating it circa the ninth and tenth centuries. The general atmosphere that is reflected in the midrash, such as magic to stop childbirth, fits this cultural context and resembles the world of *Megillat Ahimaaz*. The flowery and metered style of *Esfa*, in some passages, is reminiscent of the latter work.

Chapter IV: *Devarim Zuta*:

1. The state of research: *Midrash Devarim Zuta* is the least known of all the collections of midrashim discussed in this study. Quotations from it have been known from only one source: Yalqut Shimoni on the Torah. No research has been devoted to this midrash and it has even escaped mention in introductory works and encyclopedias. However a few important comments were written by various scholars, and they are presented in this sub-chapter.

2. The name of the midrash: *"Elleh Hadverim Zuta"* is the term by which the midrash is known in Ashkenaz and there is no way to know whether it had another name elsewhere. Other names of midrashim on Deuteronomy that have not been identified,

such as *Devarim Rabbati*, appear in the sources and the possibility that they refer to *Devarim Zuta* should be explored. The word z*uta* (= small) evidently came to assert a secondary standing to that of *Devarim Rabba*, which was already known in Ashkenaz when this work reached there. Additional midrashic compositions were called *zuta* in Ashkenaz and that was evidently for the same reason, to distinguish them from other works already known that had similar names. There is no way to know whether this name refers to the minimal extent of the composition since we do not have in its entirety.

3. Dissemination of the midrash: Mention of Midrash Devarim Zuta is minimal and it is known from only four sources, all of them from Ashkenaz: *Yalqut Shimoni* on the Torah, the commentary on the prayer book by R. Elazar of Worms and two indices. The minimal number of explicit references to the midrash testifies evidently to its rarity even in Ashkenaz itself.

4. Structure of the midrash: Judging from the evidence about the midrash, it seems to be clear that it related to the book of Deuteronomy alone. The division underlying the midrash is that of the weekly Torah readings, following the custom of Eretz Israel. The opening verses of the each reading discussed relatively at length as were the opening verses of special readings such as "You shall set aside every year a tenth part etc." (Deuteronomy 14:22, the opening verse of a festival reading) or "Remember what Amalek did to you:" (Deut. 25:17, recited on Shabbat *Zakhor*, before Purim). Around these verses we can discern circular *petihtot* – opening with the *Tanhuma* style expression "That is what Scripture wrote" as well as abrupt petihtot and brief ones, also characteristic of midrashim of the *Tanhuma-Yelamdenu* genre. However, in the quotations that have survived there are no regular *petihtot* or those that open with a question of halakha, but there may be some fragments of such *petihtot.* After the homilies on opening verses of the portions there are some on verses from the middle of the reading as well, in some cases in exegetical form. We cannot know whether this midrash originally addressed every verse in Deuteronomy systematically, but it is clear not a homiletic midrash, like *Vayiqra Rabba,* This combined structure is similar to that we found in *Midrash Abkir*.

5. Sources and parallels: An examination of the quotations from *Devarim Zuta* discloses that a significant part of the material – and particularly the parables – is unique. Other parts of it have parallels in Talmudic and midrashic literature and other sources. In many cases the use of known sources with additions modifications can be

identified, but the midrash also preserves sources or versions that we do not possess. The sources used come from Eretz Israel or from the *Tanhuma* literature, and there is no evident use of the Babylonian Talmud. *Devarim Zuta* uses several Tannaitic midrashim usually with additions and modifications. We can point out a connection between *Devarim Zuta* and the *Yerushalmi*, even though the latter is not quoted directly, but new derashot are worded on the basis of material in it. There is a notable connection with *Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana* in the discussion of verses from Deuteronmy in that work. One can also point out to a certain connection with the *piyyutim* of Yanai. The connection with the *Tanhuma* literature is expressed in terms of content, structure, language and style. An examination indicates that there is not a little in common between *Devarim Zuta* and *Devarim Rabba* and it would appear that both made use of earlier *Tanhuma* material that preceded them. Nevertheless, most of the material that has survived from *Devarim Zuta*, which is mainly parables, is not the same as *Devarim Rabba* and is derived directly from the redactor. Some of the *derashot* reveal a connection to external sources from Byzantine-Hellenistic culture. These sources, including the Septuagint, Aesop's fables, the New Testament and a Christian hymn – existed in manuscripts in Greek or Latin, but their contents may have been related orally.

6. Literary characteristics: The most notable literary genre in these quotations is the parable. In the surviving quotations alone there are 40 parables. A great part of them are unknown from any other source and appear to have been the work of the redactor himself. Some have parallels in rabbinic literature and others in Aesop's fables. Many sentences in *Devarim Zuta* are worded like proverbs, and in some cases it is evident that the redactor incorporated proverbs from some source. Some of the prose sentences also carry a sense of meter. In some of the *derashot* there are verses linked together in the fashion of the *piyyutim* written in Eretz Israel. Several *derashot* are written in the form of lists. One technique used is that of interpreting the connection between adjacent passages and another is allegory. Among the recurrent motives throughout the quotations from *Devarim Zuta* are repeated concern with the figure of Moses, evidently resultant from polemic with Christianity, performing miracles by use of the Divine name, and interest in the priests and the festivals.

7. Language: The language of the midrash is Hebrew, characterized by a return to Biblical language, showing a preference for unique Biblical expressions and translating terms from Greek to Hebrew. Among the quotations from the midrash are about a

dozen Greek or Latin words, most of them also found in Talmudic literature, but a few of them not found there and clearly revealing a connection to life in the Byzantine Empire. This situation would suit life in a Greek-speaking land, but not in central or northern Italy. In addition there are some Aramaic words – also in the dialect of Eretz Israel – in some sentences that have a popular flavor, that seem to be culled from an earlier source available to the redactor. In one of these cases a story is presented in Aramaic, that has a Hebrew parallel in *Midrash Tanhuma*. Our redactor chose, at least in these cases not to translate the passage from Aramaic to Hebrew even though he did translate the Greek terms. In terms of midrashic terms, *Devarim Zuta* is in the middle level of *midrashei aggada*. It has some of the characteristic terms of Tanhuma literature, but it lacks other terms from the *Tanhuma* literature and other works. It does preserve terms from the classical midrash, but only a few of them belong to the early Aramaic midrash. On the other hand it does have midrashic terms that belong only to the later midrashim.

8. The historical-cultural context: From the findings it is evident that the redactor lived in a Christian environment, that had an active religious life, that expressed itself in two ways: Jewish-Christian polemic, well-reflected in our midrash, and a movement of conversion both to Judaism and away from it. The redactor's polemic attitude was informed by a fear that Jews would convert. Many details of daily life in the parables in *Devarim Zuta* reflect life in Roman-Byzantine surroundings. The highly accurate depiction of military affairs, court procedures, the organization of government and the way of life leave no doubt that the redactor was familiar with these things at first hand. Other considerations that I present in this sub-chapter indicate that the midrash was composed in the Byzantine Empire not before the middle of the sixth century, but probably later. From some of the parables it is clear that the midrash is familiar with the institutions of the yeshiva of Eretz Israel in the second part of the Gaonic period, but the redactor himself may have lived in one of the communities that was attached to that yeshiva.

9. The time and provenance of the midrash: *Midrash Devarim Zuta* knows the division of the Torah into weekly readings according to one of the triennial systems practiced in Eretz Israel – "175 portions in the Torah…" (23) – and that may have been the custom practiced where it was composed. This system underlies the division of the midrash. Structural characteristics and parallels in content reflect *Tanhuma* literature. Within this literature the parallels between *Devarim Zuta* and *Aggadat Bereshit* are

noteworthy. In my opinion the redaction of the latter took place at the end of the tenth century. From the parallels with the literature from the school of R. Moshe Hadarshan, it appears that the latter made us of our work. Other parallels are related to works from the Roman-Byzantine cultural realm, which the redactor may have known in Greek or Latin. An analysis of the language of *Devarim Zuta* and the non-Hebrew words in it, together with its tendency towards revival of Hebrew, points towards the Byzantine Empire and particularly southern Italy. The historical-cultural context of the midrash, as revealed in the many details of daily life in the work, is that of Byzantine surroundings, with which the redactor was well-acquainted. These surroundings are Christian and encompassed active religious and polemic life reflected in the midrash. On the other hand the redactor knew the yeshiva of Eretz Israel during the Gaonic period and followed halakhot of Eretz Israel. The most appropriate solution for a time and place that suit these findings, and other findings in the study, is the ninth-tenth Byzantine Empire, perhaps southern Italy.

Chapter V: Looking for the Place of Origin of the Lost Midrashim of Ashkenaz

A. The common features of the known *midreshei aggada* on the Torah from Ashkenaz:

1. This chapter describes the common features of the three midrashim discussed heretofore separately, asserting that there is justification to regard them as all part of one group. These include general characteristics, structural, linguistic and literary features, as well as similarities of content and motives, sources and relations with adjacent works. The historical-cultural context that emerges from all three midrashim is also the same. All of them relate to a Jewish community with strong ties to Eretz Israel, living in a Christain environment within the Byzantine Empire. The first common feature of all three works is the map of their dissemination – twelfth-thirteenth century Askenaz. Opening verses of weekly Torah readings are developed in the *derashot*, which are arranged according to the triennial cycle. That was also the case in the *Tanhuma* midrashim, to which these works are closely related. The three compositions are all aggadic midrashim on the Torah and from the evidence that exists, each one relates only to a part of the Torah (*Abkir*: Genesis and Exodus; *Esfa*, from the middle of Numbers to the end of Deuteronomy; *Devarim Zuta*: Deuteronomy). Despite the fragmented character of the quotations, it is possible to assert that these were

"exegetical midrashim." In the quotations from all three of them, there are no *petihtaot* (opening passages) in the original sense of the term, nor do they open with the terms "*yelamdenu rabbenu*" (= "may our master teach us") or "*Halakha*" (= "The law"). All three works are written in the same language. They were all written in Hebrew with a few interjected words in Greek. Occasionally a passage in Aramaic is incorporated, but then it is always Western Aramaic and generally a quote from one of the sources available to the redactor. All three works reflect a clear preference for Hebrew. Many terms were phrased making special use of Biblical Hebrew – even when a foreign term was available and other terms were actually coined in Hebrew to replace foreign terms or translating them. Thus we find the combination *meqom hahayot* instead of *bestiarum* (*Esfa*), *temuna shel sa`ava* (= a wax picture) instead of *ikona* (= icon; *Devarim Zuta*), *hashvan* instead of *agronimus* or *calculator* (Ibid.) and more. The foreign words from Greek are usually those generally used in earlier writings, but some of them are unique and fit into the Hebrew language that was used in southern Italy. The same language is used in all three works, a sort of "common vocabulary" as well as recurrent forms of expression. The absence of classical structures indicates the lateness of the midrashim. These works made extensive use of parables as a central mode of expression and in a characteristic way. These are original parables, most of the illustrative, taken from the world of the speaker and often coming one after another in clusters. There are similarities between the parables in all three works. Some of them are taken from the world of sports, athletics and competitions, some from the Christian environment and some from the life of the Jewish community and its institutions. One characteristic that three midrashim have in common is the use of daring parables, the likes of which we have not found at all in early midrashim, and which are not common in later works either. Expanding the Biblical narrative in this group of midrashim is based generally on the elucidation of verse, but following a prosaic story line, unlike the early midrash. This style is influenced by the Apocrypha and Hellenistic works on the one hand, but also calls to mind medieval Hebrew works, such as *Sefer Hayashar* or *Divrei Hayamim shel Moshe*, on the other. Another technique for expanding the Biblical narrative common to the three works is that of invented dialogues between Biblical characters, in some cases lengthy ones. These dialogues are often informed by anti-Christian polemic. This feature also brings to mind Hellenistic works, that stress rhetoric and public speaking.

2. Besides the various characteristics that these three midrashim have in common, which are detailed in this chapter, they also share common motives and even *derashot*. The continuation of the chapter surveys parallel passages between the different midrashim: between *Midrash Abkir* and *Midrash Esfa*, between *Abkir* and *Devarim Zuta* and also between *Esfa* and *Devarim Zuta*; as well as parallels between all three works. The sources of the three works are similar: undisputable use of classical midrash from Eretz Israel, but a more complex picture emerges regarding use of the Babylonian Talmud and it is difficult to determine unequivocally whether it was used. All three works reflect a clear connection to the *Tanhuma-Yelamdenu* midrashim. One may conclude that these midrashim belong to the circle of works adjacent to the *Tanhuma* literature, and in some cases they were even referred to as *Tanhuma*. This link between the lost midrashim and the *Tanhuma* literature has bearing on the background of the midrashim themselves, on the one hand, and also on the development of the *Tanhuma* genre at its broadest extent. A certain link is notable between our midrashim and works in the Hekhalot literature. It is more striking in quotations from *Abkir*, but also extant in *Esfa* and *Devarim Zuta*. All three midrashim share a view according to which an upper world of angels exists parallel to the lower world. All of them reflect works that were written in Greek.

3. In addition to these three midrashim there are other works that are known only from Ashkenaz or found there in a special version. Among there are *Pesiqta Rabbati*, *Pesiqta Hadeta*, *Midrash Wa-yekhullu*, versions of *Midrash Shoher Tov*, the adapted *Yerushalmi* and more. The relations between these works themselves and between them and our midrashim both in terms of language and content are sufficient to allow us to describe a "network" of interrelated compositions. All of them were written in Hebrew, and their formation included adaptations and additions. The common traditions they convey, as well as the same process by which they were created reflect a common environment. In the introduction to my analysis of each midrash I pointed out examples of parallel passages between these compositions and our midrashim. In this chapter the relations between the works in this "network of compositions" is developed further: The custom of tossing the *tzizit* (fringes of the *talit*) behind one's back is incorporated in a *derasha* in *Abkir*, integrated into the adapted *Yerushalmi*, and also appears in another *derasha* in the adapted *Midrash Tehillim* that was extant in Ashkenaz. This custom evidently represents the place where these compositions and adaptations were made. A few additional examples were also discussed in this sub-chapter: the custom of holding

the *tzizit* while reciting the *Shema*, commandments fulfilled by use of the limbs, and gathering in the synagogue for study and reciting the *Shema*.

B. In the footsteps of the place of origin of the lost Ashkenazi midrashim

In the previous sub-chapter I demonstrated that the three midrashim, *Abkir*, *Esfa* and *Devarim Zuta*, have sufficient features to justify defining them as a group. The common motives and unique midrashic traditions reveal their belonging to one school or place of origin. An examination of the various findings – among them the cultural context and historical allusions, linguistic characteristics, foreign words, sources and parallels – led me to conclude that even though the first appearance of these midrashim was in thirteenth-century Ashkenaz, they were not created there. My conclusion – regarding each work independently – is that their place of origin was in southern Italy between the eighth and tenth centuries. This conclusion coincides with the attempt to trace the path of the works to Ashkenaz. Midrashic works were indeed composed in the Byzantine Empire and an examination of their characteristics this group of midrashim, as described in this sub-chapter.

1. The presumed route of the midrashim to Ashkenaz: The library of the Ashkenazi communities included compositions that reached it from various sources, among them Italy. According to one tradition, the sages of Lucca were brought to Ashkenaz by "King Carl" and brought with the esoteric interpretation of the prayer book and "other mysteries". However, the works under discussion here probably did not reach Ashkenaz in the wave of the founders, but at a later date, evidently in the twelfth century. These three works made their first appearance among the writings of Ashkenazi Jewry in the early writings of R. Elazar of Worms, towards the year 1200, and it is reasonable to presume that they reached the area shortly before their first mention there. There were other writings that were unknown in Ashkenaz before this period, among them the adapted *Yerushalmi*, *Pesiqta Rabbati*, *Pesiqta Hadeta*, *Midrash Wa-yekhullu* and others. Judging from various findings it is reasonable to conclude that the adapted *Yerushalmi* reached Ashkenaz from southern Italy by the intervention of R. Samuel b. Natronai, who was active in Ashkenaz in the second third of the twelfth century. That was evidently the time and route by which our midrashim also reached Ashkenaz.

2. Testimonies on midrashic creativity in the Byzantine Empire: The existence of Jewish communities – some of the large and highly developed – in ancient Rome and in the Byzantine Empire from the Second Temple period and throughout the Middle Ages,

is well known both from archeological evidence and written testimony. However, clear information about the intellectual works that were created in these communities is sparse and scattered to the point that those creations are virtually unknown. The reputation of the Jewish center in southern Italy was well known in the centuries that preceded the Tosafists. One of the areas of study and creativity among Jewish scholars in the Byzantine Empire was midrash. One of the best-known works was *Leqah Tov*. Evidence of midrashic creativity in the Byzantine Empire is found in the writings of the Gaonim, *Megillat Ahimaaz* and also the writings of Sephardi sages, such as Maimonides and Abraham Ibn Ezra, who were familiar with it and critical of it.

3. Some characteristics of Byzantine midrash: The midrash of the sages of the Byzantine Empire has certain features, among them the revival of the Hebrew language, using Biblical language and innovative words, the use of sources from Eretz Israel, including Hekhalot literature and Apocryphal books, familiarity with Greek literature, use of wonders, extensive use of original parables based on local surroundings, definitely anti-Christian polemic and possible anti-Gnostic polemic, hints of anti-Karaite polemic and more. Another characteristic feature was dating *anno mundi* and dating from the destruction of the Temple. Counting from the destruction of the Temple is related of course to remembering the destruction and mourning over it. And indeed a number of features that pertain to the "Mourners of Zion" are found in Byzantine works as well. All of these characteristics occur in our midrashim, as well as motives that the three have in common – such as belief in the power of witchcraft, working miracles by use of Divine names and interest in the heavenly host – all of which are known from the world of southern Italy.

4. The attribution of various midrashim to Italy and the Byzantine Empire: Various scholars – among them Rappaport, Zunz, Buber, Bacher, Weiss, Epenstein, Kraus and others – presumed that the place of origin of many midrashic works was Italy or Greece. Among these are *Yelamdenu*, *Midrash Tehillim*, *Pesiqta Rabbati*, *Tanna debei Eliyahu*, *Midrash Tanhuma* (or later strata in its development), *Devarim Rabba*, *Midrash Shemuel*, *Midrash Mishlei*, *Aggadat Bereshit*, *Midrash Abkir*, *Midrash Konen* and more. However, up to now the midrashim written in the Byzantine Empire have not been identified with confidence, nor have their linguistic and literary characteristics been described. Likewise many questions regarding them have not been answered yet. Nevertheless, the path towards discovering the place of origin of these

works has been cleared, and this work, with its conclusions, brings us closer to finding that place.

5. Evidence regarding the time of writing of some Byzantine midrashim: The Hebrew language of midrashim traced to the Byzantine Empire conforms to the period after the Hebrew revival in southern Italy, i.e. from the eighth century on. Other characteristics of these midrashim, such as their cultural context, also fit this period, but cannot be reduced in time to a short span and could reflect a period of a few centuries. In some cases historical allusions can be identified – such as reference to the Arab conquests or to a particular, unique custom – and these need to be analyzed. However some of the compositions that should be attributed to this place of origin have left fingerprints of various kinds – explicit inscriptions, dating by a particular system or messianic expectations – enabling us to give a more precise dating of the writing or editing of the works. One explicit inscription in the famous quotation in *Yalqut Shimoni* on the Torah, with which I have dealt at length in a separate study, and which by all indications must have come from the lost *Midrash Yelamdenu*, tells about the transmission of an aggadic tradition evidently from Iraq to Greece in the eighth century. Dates are mentioned explicitly or implicitly in some of the writings from this place of origin, such as *Pesiqta Rabbati* and *Tanna debei Eliyahu* and more. These dates are between the eighth century and the end of tenth. In this section I demonstrated that several works refer to a precise date between 985 and 988 C.E. These references appear in *Midrash Abkir*, *Aggadat Bereshit* and *Tanna debei Eliyahu*. From these references I conclude that the end of the tenth century is the time at which these works and others were edited in southern Italy.