

# POLEMICAL CONSIDERATIONS AMONG THE FOUR CHILDREN: FROM THE BIBLE TO THE HAGGADAH

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One highlight of the Passover Seder is the passage on the "Four Sons" or, as we shall call them, "Four Children." This passage is fertile ground for homily and art, both preserving and updating the ancient tale.<sup>1</sup> The text in the Haggadah is, however, quite puzzling. It becomes even more confusing when we examine the biblical verses that it employs as prooftexts.

The Four Children are derived from the early tannaitic midrash *Mechilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*<sup>2</sup> and introduced into the Haggadah with the statement that: "The Torah speaks of four children: a wise one, a wicked one, a simple one, and one who is not able to ask a question." The biblical source for this interpretation is the requirement in the Pentateuch that Israelites teach their own children. At least four clear biblical references express such a parental requirement, and there are three clear biblical predictions (or mandates) that children will question the parent. The midrash projects that these questions are asked by different children.

The problem is – and this article addresses this problem – the midrash does not correlate the biblical questions with the biblical answers. The reason for this surprisingly cavalier use of the sacred text, I will argue, is that the concern of *Mechilta De-Rabbi Ishmael* seems to be not so much to illumine the text, as to secure the importance of the Oral Law [*Torah she'B'al Peh*] vis-à-vis the Written Torah [*Torah she'B'Ktav*].

In the order of the pentateuchal text, the first question is in Exodus 12:26: *And when your children ask you, 'What is this rite to you?'* The context is the *korban pesach*, the sacrifice of the paschal lamb. The answer given in the pentateuchal text follows immediately in Exodus 12:27:

*You shall say, 'It is the Pesach sacrifice to the Lord, who passed over the homes of the Israelites in Egypt when He at-*

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*tacked Egypt but spared our homes,' and the people bowed and prayed.*

Now, the inquiry and answer are apt for the generation of the Exodus, but future generations, which obviously did not directly experience the drama in Egypt, may not realize the connection between the *korban pesach* and the Exodus.

In the midrash of the Four Children, this first question is assigned to the *rasha*, the "Oppositional" or "Wicked Child." However, the answer the Bible gives is not the answer the midrash gives to the First Question, nor, indeed, to any of the questions posed by the children at the Seder!<sup>3</sup> Instead, the *rasha* is given an answer which the midrash takes from Exodus 13:8: *You shall tell your child on that day that, 'It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went out of Egypt.'* In assigning this query to the *rasha*, the midrash also interprets the First Question to be hostile: "By the words 'to you' he implies that this service is only for *you* – not for himself. By excluding himself from the community, he denies God." The answer, then, is given with corresponding hostility: "It is because of what the Lord did for *me* . . . . For me, not for him; had he been there, he would not have been redeemed."

In fact, in the Bible, neither the First Question, nor the immediate answer (Ex. 26-7), nor even the alternate answer from a different verse (13:8) that the midrash inserted, exhibits any contextual hostility. The words "to you" in the *rasha*'s question appear to be not only innocent, but are the same words placed in the mouth of the "Wise" or "Sage Child" in his query. Moreover, in the midrash the answer given to the *rasha* is the same as given, without any trace of irritation, to the Fourth Child, the one who "Does Not Know How to Ask."

In the pentateuchal order, Exodus 13:8 constitutes the second predicted (or mandated) parental pedagogical duty. Here, the context of the biblical passage is the eating of matzah and the sanctification of the first-born. There is no question at all. The midrash of the Four Children concludes that the parent must open the discussion by himself and explain the Passover, as there are children who do not even know they are supposed to ask, or perhaps do not know the proper way to ask. This questionless explanation is naturally given to the Fourth or "Ignorant" Child, but is surprisingly also, as noted above, given to the *rasha*.

The third generational interchange in the Bible occurs at Exodus 13:14: *It will happen that your child will ask you in time to come, 'What is this?'* The context here is the dedication of the first-born of Israelite offspring, explaining it in terms of the rescue of the Israelites' first-born in Egypt. The midrash ascribes this question to the *tam*, the "Simple" or "Common Child," and states immediately: *You will answer 'With a strong hand the Lord took us out of Egypt, the house of slavery.'* Though the context in the source is somewhat tangential to Passover, the midrash does correlate this biblical answer with its biblical question, and it is thus inserted into the Haggadah.

The first three interchanges are quoted from the Book of Exodus. The fourth round of question-and-answer appears in Deuteronomy 6:20, which forecasts: *When your children ask you tomorrow 'What are the laws, rules and regulations which the Lord our God commanded you? . . .'* Unlike the similar predictions of the child's questioning in Exodus, the context of the Fourth Question in Deuteronomy is not about Passover at all. In effect, the child is questioning the particulars and/or underlying meaning of Israelite law in general. This question is ascribed by the midrash to the *chacham*, the "Wise" or "Sage Child," and altered so that the Wise Child is directly including himself by asking "What are . . . the laws which God . . . commanded **us** [rather than the biblical '**you**']?"

The biblical response in the next verse reads: *You shall say to your children 'We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and the Lord brought us out with a strong hand . . .'* However, this verse is not given to the *chacham* or to any of the Four Children by the midrash.<sup>4</sup> Instead, the midrash instructs the parent to "Explain to the Wise Child the laws of Passover [specifically Mishna Pesachim 10:8, that] the company is not to disband immediately after partaking of the paschal lamb. There should follow Afikoman." Thus the midrash re-contextualizes this interchange.

What is the intention of the *Mechilta* when it so redacts the sacred text?

## II

It would seem that the aim of this midrash, with its confusing alteration and manipulation of the biblical text, is to demonstrate that the Written Law or Bible must be read in the interpretation of the Oral Law or rabbinic teaching. Indeed, this is a primary concern of the entire Passover Haggadah. A literalist

reading of the Pentateuch, which necessarily focuses on the rituals of sacrifice, must give way to a post-Temple reinterpretation focusing on the contemporaneous authority and vision of the sages. Let us step back and look at the entire structure of the Haggadah to appreciate this project more clearly.

Although, as shown above, the Bible does set forth a series of children's questions, these were not chosen by the sages to begin the *magid* ["relating"] portion of the Haggadah. Instead, the *magid* begins with the four familiar *Mah Nishtana* questions, which are entirely mishnaic. Originally, there were three such questions, and they were altered and added to in the mishnaic and talmudic eras<sup>5</sup> to form what we now call the Four Questions. They were framed by *tannaim*, or Pharisaic proto-rabbis, and have no biblical source whatsoever. None refers to a biblical or historical context. Instead, they now refer to halachic or rabbinic legal questions and are actually phrased in the way a student might ask a teacher, not in a way a child might ask a parent.

When later in the Haggadah, after the *magid* is underway, the Haggadah does recall that the Written Bible itself set forth questions for children to ask, the queries are rearranged and reinterpreted by the midrash of the Four Children. The focus of the midrash of the Four Children is more accurately on types of Jews in this period than on children per se. *Banim* means not just "children" but, more generically, adherents. The late Second Temple and early post-Destruction era was a period of competing sects in Judaism.<sup>6</sup> No single view had yet achieved dominance.

The polemic is subtle but forceful, as we shall see. The word "*chacham*" in rabbinic literature is typically used to describe the Sage, a disciple of the Pharisees and a proto-rabbi, rather than generally a "Wise One." The sage, representing the school of the Pharisees, is interested in the *halacha*, rabbinic law. This is indicated by the very question the midrash puts in the mouth of the *chacham*. In the midrash, the *chacham* wants to know regulations and details of practice. In turn, the *chacham* is instructed in the laws promulgated by the talmudic Mishna – the quintessential Oral Law, the collection of the sages' rules. In particular, the *chacham* is instructed from Mishna Pesachim. Its penultimate line is quoted in response to him, suggesting perhaps that the teacher/parent is to teach the entire Mishna Pesachim to the student. This exchange confirms that the *chacham* will observe the requirement of telling the story of the Exodus from Egypt by studying the Oral Law about Passover.

Significantly, the *chacham* is not instructed in the biblical account at all. Nor does Mishna Pesachim retell or even interpret the story of the Exodus from Egypt. This is remarkable because the Torah gives four prescribed ways of telling one's child the story of Passover, in response to three different questions, which a child would, or should, ask. The clear import is that the study of the Oral Law, in the context of the Seder, is more important than the words of the Torah.

The *rasha*, in the guise of an "Opponent" or "Evil Child," is the adversary of the Oral Law. Opposition to the Oral Law was identified with sects (e.g., Samaritans, Sadducees and Boethusians) and others who insisted on reading and applying biblical texts literally. (Opposition to Pharisaic interpretive license persisted even when the Sadducees disappeared as a party, and re-emerged in the form of Karaism, long after rabbinic Judaism had become normative.) One of the most important principles for which the rabbis struggled was their view that it is never proper to read the Torah without the Oral Law. Indeed, some interpretations "trump" the plain meaning of biblical text.

The midrash of the Children skillfully demonstrates the rabbinic view. The *rasha's* or Opponent's Question is taken from the Torah, but the Bible itself suggests no impropriety in a future generation asking *What is this rite* [sacrifice] *to you?* The *rasha* passage suggests that the Torah, when read literally without the Oral Law tradition and interpretation, might result in alienation from Torah of generations that did not exit Egypt and will reject the Torah's commands. In fact, in the thinking of the sages, the literal questions and answers might have rendered the celebration of Pesach an obligation only for the Exodus generation which left Egypt. In the polemic of the rabbinic, Pharisaic, author of the midrash, such an approach was regarded as a sectarian, anti-rabbinic, Sadducean view, and would lead to divorce from the Torah entirely.

Now, the Torah actually is susceptible of an interpretation, which leaves its Passover rites to the Exodus event alone. This will be clear to anyone who re-reads the narrative and law codes set forth in the Book of Exodus.<sup>7</sup> The Oral Law (the rabbinic view) therefore carefully distinguished between *Pesach Mizraim* and *Pesach Dorot*. *Pesach Mizraim* [the Egyptian Passover] was the unique celebration of the event in Egypt, including such later-discarded rites as the painting of doorposts with blood, home sacrifice and hasty consump-

tion of the paschal lamb, remaining indoors, et cetera. *Pesach Dorot* [Passover of the Generations] was the celebration applicable to future generations, as interpreted and codified by the Pharisees.<sup>8</sup> This rabbinic distinction prevented biblical literalism from undermining the continuing relevance of the Passover ritual. Once the sacrificial rite had been eliminated, only rabbinic authority would preserve the vitality of Passover, as Baruch M. Bokser demonstrated.<sup>9</sup>

There was, however, a textual problem with the midrashic polemic. The biblical question placed in the mouth of the *rasha*, and the biblical question placed in the mouth of the *chacham*, both literally express the same "generation gap" with respect to Passover. The *rasha* is faulted for asking, "What meaning has Passover to **you**," and the *chacham* also asks, "What obligations Passover imposes upon **you**." If the *rasha* is excluded from the community by using the word "you," so should the *chacham* be, apparently.

This problem was obviated in the midrash of the Four Children by an outright emendation of the biblical text, so that the *chacham*'s question would read, "What are the laws. . . which . . . God commanded us?" This neat solution became the standard Haggadah text. It is further proof of the license which the Oral Law permitted itself to take, even with the text of the Torah.<sup>10</sup> The anonymous tannaitic author had to make the polemic "work," even at the expense of the biblical text – a fact which is itself a remarkable proof of the authority of the Oral Law.

### III

The literalist reading of biblical text might also acceptably be called *peshat* [plain meaning, original intent], or reading the text as an historical document. Biblical literalism may be "historical" in the sense that it aims at reading the ancient text as it is written, but it is also conservative. The Pharisaic view was meta-historical, giving the rabbis liberty to innovate and thus, probably, to save Judaism during the volatile epochs of history.<sup>11</sup>

In all likelihood, the rank-and-file Jew of the era was neither a Pharisee nor a Sadducee. For the masses, what mattered most in Passover was its overriding message of national liberation. This is represented by the *tam*, the "Common" or "Simple Child." The answer given to this type – '*With a strong hand the Lord took us out of Egypt, the house of slavery*' – is an appropriately "relevant" response. The Fourth Child also exemplifies the Oral Law at work. The midrash cleverly uses this fourth type to correct a numerical disparity in

the Torah, to reconcile the fact that the Bible instructs us to explain *four* times even though it cites children's questions only three times. The filling of such gaps was part of the Pharisaic-rabbinic project. The answer given without a question represents the instruction of those who did not know enough or, perhaps, those who do not care enough, to inquire.

The focus of the Passover mandate, in this view, was therefore education; that is, transmission or perpetuation of the developing tradition. As Bokser demonstrated, this focus necessarily shifted away from the centrality of the *korban Pesach* [the cultic meal] in biblical and Second Temple religion, to a home ritual of family learning, the Seder, which supplanted the entire sacrificial schedule.

The actual practice now at the Seder as a kind of "cultic meal" is verified by a creative reading of biblical text: since the telling is "because of" the matzah and maror, it should be done when they are being eaten. Significantly, the presentation of the paschal lamb has been dissociated from the *magid*, and is actually deleted from the biblical reference in the Haggadah. This is the quintessential Pharisaic approach – creatively to link updated custom with biblical text by means of language and reasoning.

#### NOTES

1. See e.g. N. Zion and D. Dishon, *A Different Night: The Family Participation Haggadah* (Jerusalem: The Shalom Hartman Institute, 1997) pp. 56-71. This process of "transvaluation" is simultaneously conservative (as it retains an apparently outmoded text) and revolutionary (as it entirely changes the prior or accepted meaning of the text for contemporaneous purposes).
2. Pische 18:119-130, see also 17:96-105, in J. Z. Lauterbach, tr. *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1933) Vol. I, pp. 166-167, 149.
3. The biblical answer is instead recited later in the Haggadah as a proof-text for the requirement of Rabban Gamliel that, in order to fulfill the requirements of celebrating the holiday, one must explain three of its rituals.
4. A modified version of this answer is given in the *Avadim Hayinu* recitation at the start of the Haggadah's *magid* portion.
5. H. Guggenheimer, *The Scholar's Haggadah* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1995) pp. 247-252.
6. See, e.g., J. Neusner, *From Politics to Piety, the Emergence of Pharisaic Judaism* (Englewood, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1973); L. H. Schiffman, "New Light on the Pharisees," in H. Shanks, ed. *Understanding the Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993) p. 218; S.J.D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987) p. 228.

7. The biblical narrative and law codes of Passover are, of course, entirely missing from the Haggadah – further demonstration of the primacy of Oral Law over Torah in rabbinic Judaism.
  8. The original paschal community rite was modified into a national ceremonial. See S. Zeitlin, *The Rise and Fall of the Judaeon State: A Political, Social and Religious History of the Second Commonwealth* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1962), Vol. I, pp. 227-231.
  9. Baruch M. Bokser, *The Origins of the Seder: The Passover Rite and Early Rabbinic Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
  10. Guggenheimer (pp. 270-271) notes that the reading "us" is found in the Septuagint, the pre-Pharisaic Greek translation of the Bible made in Ptolemaic Egypt, which might explain the midrash's "mistake." However, the Septuagint was generally not relied on by the exponents of the Oral Law. It is thus far more likely that the midrash deliberately changed the word to "us" to maintain the midrashic argument.
  11. Y. H. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996).
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