Sifra’s substantial materials on leprosy and plagues, given as exe­geses of Leviticus Chapters Thirteen and Fourteen, present a striking contrast to Mishnah-Tosefta’s. Sifra has its own, strikingly polemical, purposes, for which the laws pertinent to, and even shared with, Mishnah-Tosefta are reshaped. Sifra proposes to present a kind of gemara, that is, an essay, worked out dialectically through questions and answers, rapidly and with great economy of expression and thought, moving from point to point within discrete thematic structures. While it often enough simply cites a verse and adds a few words about its interpretation, it much more commonly then goes on to raise a series of logical questions about that primary citation and original interpretation. These questions may vary, but predominant among them, the common one is, Might one think the opposite? How do we know that the original interpretation may withstand the test of reason, the consideration of different, mostly contrary, propositions? This, I think, is the definitive characteristic of gemara and justifies our calling Sifra a sort of Talmud in its own right.

One polemic fundamental to Sifra’s purpose, for example, is to demonstrate the inadequacy of reason unaided by revelation. Time and again Sifra asks, Does this proposition, offered with a proof-text, really require the stated proof of revelation? Will it not stand firmly upon the basis of autonomous reason unaided by Scripture? Sometimes Scripture will show that the opposite of the conclusion of reason is the result of exegesis. Therefore the truth is to be discovered solely through exegesis. At other times Sifra will show that reason by itself is flawed and fallible, not definitive. At important points it will seek to prove not only a given proposition, but also that that proposition is to be demonstrated solely through revelation, through exegesis of Scripture. In all it is difficult to avoid the impression that the primary purpose of the compilers of Sifra is to criticize Mishnah-Tosefta, a document notoriously uninterested in the exegetical foundations of its laws.

The necessity of paying a fair amount of attention to materials of Sifra relevant to Mishnah-Tosefta Negaim requires no explanation. In the Introduction I shall explain the severely limited set of questions I hope to answer here. When I first realized that Sifra’s materials had
to be treated at some length, I thought that at last I might confront
the vexed issue, Do Mishnah’s laws depend upon prior and antecedent
exegeses of Scriptures? Or is it the purpose of Sifra to provide proof-
texts for conclusions already reached in some other way than through
“objective” exegesis of biblical verses? The issues raised in a masterly
way by J. Z. Lauterbach, “Midrash and Mishnah,” originally pub-
lished in Jewish Quarterly Review in 1915 and reprinted in his Rabbinic
Essays (Cincinnati, 1950, pp. 163-256), finally had come to the top of
my agenda. Since Lauterbach had the merit of summarizing nearly
seventy-five years of scholarly thought—from Frankel’s time—and
furthermore of laying out the main lines of the next half century’s
opinion on this central and fundamental issue, it seemed an ideal
occasion. Furthermore, in any event I knew (or thought I knew) the
certain answer to the question. I was confident that I might here de-
monstrate that those who take for granted the priority of the exegeti-
cal process in the formation—therefore in the history—of Mishnaic
law are wrong. Coming to Sifra, therefore, I was certain of what it
was that I should find most interesting.

Sifra rapidly changed my mind. What I found engaging in Sifra
was Sifra itself. Never having devoted sustained attention to its con-
struction, modes of thought, arguments, and literary forms, I did not
imagine that Sifra could be more than a tiresome compilation of dis-
crete exegeses, opinions on this and that, accompanied by proof-texts
which obviously are merely pretexts. From the very beginning, much
to my pleasure I found Sifra a sustained, sophisticated, and compell-
ing essay, important not chiefly in its details and discrete observations,
let alone as a collection of random exegeses of Scripture, but primarily
because of its whole and integrated character. Sifra is anything but a
hodge-podge of proof-texts and propositions to be proved. It is, as I
said, a deftly organized, dynamic, and compelling document, with its
own clearcut and important purposes, its distinctive way of phrasing
issues, its refreshing perspectives.

Once Sifra had established its claim to be interesting in its own
right, I also realized that my original confidence about addressing in
its pages and definitively solving the long-debated issue stated by
Lauterbach as “Midrash and Mishnah” was foolish. First, my dear
friend Geza Vermes disabused me of the notion that, in the period
from Ezra to the destruction of the Second Temple, matters were clear
and one-sided. As he showed in “Bible and Midrash,” [Cambridge
History of the Bible, pp. 221f], we do find both mishnah and midrash,
simultaneously, in the literature of the period of the Second Temple. Both occur in the writings found at Qumran, for one thing. Second, my teacher Morton Smith carefully explained to me the logical and conceptual fallacies of my original definition of the problem (not to mention the solution I thought I could demonstrate). He rephrased for me, through the incomparable logical clarity and critical profundity of his own rigorous mind, exactly how things are to be defined and investigated. Discussions with my co-worker in all things, Baruch Levine, helped me to restate matters in accord with Smith's critical conceptions. I do not hesitate to spell out the fallacies of my original conception of what is to be done here, so that the reader will understand the urgent necessity of the statement, in the Introduction, of my modest purposes and of the choices which have been made in defining these purposes.

It goes without saying that I am much indebted to Professors Smith, Vermes, and Levine. As always, I thank E. J. Brill for publishing my work.

During part of the period in which I pursued studies of Sifra, I had occasion to visit Harry Austryn Wolfson a number of times. When I entered college, he was my freshman advisor, and from that time, September, 1950, to his death, in September, 1974, he remained a counsellor and friend. As during his final illness, so during those twenty-four years, he said many wise things to me, gave much valuable guidance. At the beginning, in 1950, he told me that no one not raised in a yeshiva, preferably in Eastern Europe or in one transplanted, with no perceptible change, to the State of Israel, could hope to accomplish anything of worth in the study, for any purpose whatever (historical, not legal), of Talmudic literature. At the end he told me he saw things differently. When he read *From Politics to Piety. The Emergence of Pharisaic Judaism* (Englewood Cliffs, 1973), I believe one of the last books he ever read, he said simply, "It should have been written fifty years ago." He preserved to the end the openness of mind to discuss problems which, admittedly, no one had ever raised. While I do not represent this work as one to which he contributed in any specific way, I do think of it as one which, written during his last year of life and in a time in which this writer was in frequent touch with him, may be offered as a modest memorial to his name.

J. N.