ON THE HISTORY OF A PERICOPE IN THE MIDRASH TANHUMA

BY

IRA CHERNUS

University of Colorado, Boulder

In the scholarly study of rabbinic literature, attention has generally been focussed on either the shortest literary unit—the individual logion—or the longest unit—the midrash book or collection. In temporal terms, scholars have concentrated on the beginning and the end of the process of midrash formation. However an equally interesting problem for study is the composition of the intermediate units—the pericopes which form the temporal link between discrete logia and complete midrash collections. The process of midrash formation must always have involved the creative combination of earlier traditions. At some point this process seems to have entered the realm of conscious literary activity; i.e., large numbers of traditions were assembled with great skill to form an independent and complete pericope marked by an harmonious unity of both form and content 1). In most cases the authors of these small literary works must remain anonymous. But we can learn something about them by studying their work through what might be called “pericope history.”

Such a study can reveal a great deal about the process by which midrashic traditions were combined and reworked to form the extant texts we possess today.

The present study is offered as an example of “pericope history.” We shall examine a pericope from the Midrash Tanhuma, which also appears in Exodus Rabbah, concerning the revelation at Sinai 2). To understand this pericope, however, we must first look briefly at another set of traditions on Sinai. In the third century, a series of

---

1) Many of these pericopes may well have been created and presented as oral compositions, and they may have circulated orally for an indeterminate time before being written down. Nevertheless, we are justified in studying them as literary compositions with individual authors.

2) Tanhuma Sh’mot 25; Exodus Rabbah 5.9; Tanhuma ed. Buber Sh’mot 22 (with some variations).
leading Palestinian rabbis taught that the Israelites, upon hearing the first commandment directly from God's mouth, immediately died:

R. Joshua b. Levi said: At each and every word which came from the mouth of the Holy One blessed be He the soul of Israel expired 3). R. Azariah and R. Aha in the name of R. Jochanan say: When Israel heard "I am" at Sinai their soul burst out. This is what is written: "If we continue to hear the voice of the Lord our God any more we shall die." (Dt. 5:22) This is what is written: "My soul failed when he spoke." (Song 5:6) The word returned to the Holy One blessed be He and said, "Lord of the World, You are alive and enduring and Your Torah is alive and enduring and You have sent me to the dead. They are all dead 4)."

R. Levi said: Israel asked two things of the Holy One blessed be He—that they might see His glory and hear His voice. And they did see His glory and hear His voice, as it is said, "And you said, 'Behold the Lord our God has shown us His glory and greatness, and we have heard His voice out of the midst of the fire.'" (Dt. 5:21) But they did not have the power to withstand it, for as soon as they came to Sinai and He was revealed to them their soul burst out because He spoke with them, as it is said, "My soul failed when he spoke 5)."

R. Simon b. Pazi said: When the Holy One blessed be He was revealed to give the Torah to Israel they heard His voice and died, as it is said, "My soul failed when he spoke." If this is true of Israel, how much more so is it true of the idolatrous nations 6)?

The pericope which we shall study here is significant because it is the only passage in rabbinic literature which denies that the Israelites died at Sinai. Moreover, as we shall see, it employs traditions which were attributed to R. Jochanan, R. Levi, and R. Simon b. Pazi to support this denial. Thus it is an interesting pericope both from the point of view of stylistic construction and tendentious content. The entire pericope reads:

R. Jochanan said: The voice would go forth and be split into seven voices and from seven voices into seventy languages so that all the nations would hear, and each and every nation would hear in the language of that nation and their souls would expire, but Israel would hear and not be harmed. How did the voice go forth? R. Tanhumah said: It was two-faced, and it would go forth and murder the nations who did not accept the Torah, but it would give life to

3) Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 88b.
4) Song of Songs Rabbah 5.16.3; Numbers Rabbah 10.1.
5) Exodus Rabbah 29.4.
6) Exodus Rabbah 29.9.