The midrashic homiletic collection entitled Pesiqta Rabbanit evidences an extremely complex redactional history. From the time of Leopold Zunz, scholars have recognized the connection of Pesiqta Rabbanit with other Rabbinic works and collections, and the concept that Pesiqta Rabbanit is an independent work in itself may be a fiction, if we acknowledge its great dependency upon other Rabbinic sources. Jacob Neusner has called it an “imitation,” and this author is in basic agreement with this assessment. However, it should be emphasized that the appearance of the work as an imitation is largely due to its canonization and redaction.

This article illustrates how Pesiqta Rabbanit, Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana, and Midrash Tanhuma are interrelated. The text example utilized is the homily known as va-yehi be-yom kallot mosheh; which, in Pesiqta Rabbanit, shares material with Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana as well as with Midrash Tanhuma. The three versions of this homily are parallel in many respects but exhibit enough differences in homiletical structure and content to warrant considering them three different documents. For their redactional history, we may assume that these Rabbinic works were in a state of fluidity and that each editor integrated midrashim from related materials for the same scriptural verse. We may further assume that this activity of redaction was similar to a preacher’s borrowing different midrashim to advance his point.

The canonization and redaction of Pesiqta Rabbanit involved at least four critical factors. The title of the work, first, describes it as a “great collection” of homilies, a term for which the first known reference derives from Rashi, in his comment on Is. 51:14. This title indicates that a significant objective of the collection was to achieve

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1 L. Zunz, Ha-derashot be Yisrael (Jerusalem, 1931; Hebrew tr. of the 2nd ed., 1892), pp. 117ff; and H. Albeck’s remarks, pp. 378ff.
2 J. Neusner, From Tradition to Imitation, The Plan and Program of Pesiqta Rabbanit and Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana (Atlanta, 1987). According to Neusner, p. 5, Pesiqta Rabbanit does not show a cogency similar to that of Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana.
4 Within the Nasso material, the printed version of the Tanhuma contains the same jelammedenu section as Pesiqta Rabbanit 3; in the Tanhuma this is part of the incomplete homily entitled beyom ha-shemini.
“complete” coverage of an existing liturgical calendar of festivals and special Sabbaths. This plan, to cover the annual liturgical cycle from Hanukkah to Sukkot, is evidenced in the Casanata Manuscript (3324) as well as in the London Manuscript (Dropsie 26). The Parma manuscript (3122) has a more extensive liturgical calendar, which proceeds from Shabbat Ha-Hodesh to Shemini Atzeret. Additionally, there is a tendency to preserve homilies connected to a particular liturgical occasion, as is established by the eight homilies for Hanukkah and the two distinct homilies for Shabbat Nahamu.

Achieving complete coverage of the liturgical calendar was a critical component in the process of canonization. This process occurred very late for Pesiqta Rabbati; relying on the oldest MSS that we have, canonization still took place in the thirteenth/fourteenth century and was continued by the printed editions.

The second factor in the canonization of Pesiqta Rabbati was the compositional demand of the Rabbinic homily, which includes such forms as yelammedenu, petiha, and hatimah. However, not all available source material was in the form of a Rabbinic homily at the time that the redactor inserted the material. Thus, some texts in Pesiqta Rabbati lack the forms that are usually found in a Rabbinic homily, and these texts are radically different from the rest of the compositions in the work. We may surmise that these inserted texts were added to Pesiqta Rabbati in order to make the liturgical calendar complete. This is true especially for homilies 4, 10, 20 and 26.