

## What Sort of Information does the Midrash Transmit about the Synagogue? Some Reflections from *Leviticus Rabbah*\*

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This study focuses on the accounts transmitted in *Lev. Rab.* about the synagogue in late antique Palestine. The aim is two-fold: 1) to determine the kind of information about the synagogue according to *Lev. Rab.* related to both the building and other associated features, and liturgical, educational and communal data, and 2) to highlight the difficulties inherent in evaluating this information, especially taking into consideration the scarcity of contextual details. This study, then, contributes to the discussion about the connection between the synagogue and the Midrash, shedding light on the perspective of the rabbis regarding this institution in amoraic times and their degree of involvement in synagogue life.

KEYWORDS: Synagogue; Midrash; *Leviticus Rabbah*.

¿QUÉ TIPO DE INFORMACIÓN TRANSMITE EL MIDRÁS SOBRE LA SINAGOGA? ALGUNAS REFLEXIONES A PARTIR DE *LEVÍTICO RABÁ*.— Este estudio se centra en los testimonios transmitidos en *LvR* sobre la sinagoga en la Palestina de la Tardoantigüedad. Su objetivo es doble: 1) determinar el tipo de información sobre la sinagoga según *LvR* relacionada tanto con el edificio y otros elementos asociados, como con los aspectos litúrgicos, educacionales y comunales; y 2) señalar las dificultades inherentes a la evaluación de esta información, especialmente considerando la escasez de detalles contextuales. Este estudio, por tanto,

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contribuye a la discusión sobre la conexión entre la sinagoga y el Midrás, arrojando luz sobre la perspectiva de los rabinos sobre esta institución en época amoráita y su implicación en la vida sinagoga.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Sinagoga; Midrás; *Levítico Rabá*.

The connection between the synagogue in Late Antiquity and the information transmitted about this institution in rabbinic works,<sup>1</sup> especially regarding the midrashic and talmudic corpora, has been broadly discussed for decades. Despite academic efforts to reach a more or less broad agreement on this matter, the question is still under debate; in fact, it seems that scholars will not come to a complete understanding about this issue, at least in the near future. This paper once again confronts the challenge of how to consider this connection focusing on the references contained in the Midrash *Lev. Rab.* about both the synagogue and other features related to this context.

The aim of this study is not to present a firm position at this time, but rather to point out some of the difficulties inherent to this discussion when factors such as the following, among others, are taken into account. a) The perception of the rabbi as the central figure in the synagogue has become outdated.<sup>2</sup> b) Rabbinic accounts of the synagogue do not offer a single, unitary image of communal life; moreover, references are usually subordinate to the (literary) contexts where they appear in the sources.<sup>3</sup> c) The traditional view of *Lev. Rab.* as a “homiletic midrash” has, for the most

<sup>1</sup> The use of the term “institution” for the synagogue is problematic in connection with rabbinic literature. It is used here in the sense of a form of communal and liturgical organization, and never understood as a rabbinic institution. On this issue, see Catherine HEZSER, *The Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Roman Palestine (= Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism*, 66 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997]) pp. 214-215.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Stuart S. MILLER, “The Rabbis and the Non-Existent Monolithic Synagogue,” in *Jews, Christians, and Polytheists in the Ancient Synagogue. Cultural Interaction during the Greco-Roman Period*, ed. Steven FINE (London–New York: Routledge, 1999) pp. 57-70; 57-58. Günter STEMBERGER, *Das klassische Judentum. Kultur und Geschichte der rabbinischen Zeit* (München: C. H. Beck, 2009) pp. 105-106; David KRAEMER, *Rabbinic Judaism. Space and Place* (Routledge Jewish Studies Series; London–New York: Routledge, 2016) pp. 136-137.

<sup>3</sup> Lee I. LEVINE, *Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years. Second Edition* (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 2000) p. 180.

part, become obsolete; any possible echoes of the synagogue sermon on the Midrash as it is known today have been –and indeed still are– a controversial topic.<sup>4</sup> From this perspective, two particular questions provide a starting point to tackle the relationship between synagogue and Midrash:

- 1) what kind of information about the synagogue is transmitted in *Lev. Rab.*, and
- 2) how should the accounts related to this context be evaluated?

Some issues related to these questions must be kept in mind, such as: a) the information is mainly restricted to one source, but it must not be presumed that *Lev. Rab.* presents a single rabbinic viewpoint about the synagogue; b) one set of texts does not convey the complexity of the complete picture; c) the references to this institution are not always explicit, but they can be connected to the synagogue from a specific feature in a given context; and d) the assessment of the accounts is puzzling when attempting to determine the degree of historicity that the Midrash reflects (practices, rites, events) or the particular interests of the Sages in the synagogue. However, these difficulties should not lead scholars to abandon their search for a path to better understand the connection between synagogue and Midrash, but rather on the contrary. As noted above, this study focuses on several of these problems to assess the midrashic information about the institution, offering reflexions on various topics.

## I. INTRODUCTION: INFORMATION ABOUT THE SYNAGOGUE IN *LEV. RAB.*

With regard to the *data about the synagogue* found in the rabbinic texts, Lee I. Levine in his *Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* underscores the lack of an “overall picture” of the synagogue “as an institution.” He notes that the sources are mainly interested in “the liturgical components of synagogue and (private) worship” and the use

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<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Günter STEMBERGER, “The Derashah in Rabbinic Times,” in *Preaching in Judaism and Christianity: Encounters and Developments from Biblical Times to Modernity*, eds. Alexander DEEG, Walter HOMOLKA and Heinz Günther SCHÖTTLER (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008) pp. 7-21: 7-15; also in *Judaica Minora. Teil II: Geschichte und Literatur des rabbinischen Judentums (= Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism*, 138 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010]) pp. 663-675.

of the building as “a place of study,” providing little information about other aspects (whether communal, economic or architectural, among others), which are only mentioned in passing.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, he remarks on the low number of allusions in the Mishnah and tannaitic midrashim (somewhat higher in the Tosefta), although they increase in the talmudim and later midrashim. For this reason, both Levine and other scholars distinguish between tannaitic (second cent.) and amoraic sources (third-fourth cent.).<sup>6</sup>

The increase in the number of references to the synagogue in amoraic material can be explained, according to Levine, by the greater involvement of rabbis in Jewish community life and the “religious profile” that the synagogue was gradually acquiring.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, synagogues became more common beginning in the fourth century (there is only scant archaeological evidence from before that time).<sup>8</sup> In fact, the success of the rabbinic movement in Judaism might well have accompanied this change in attitude towards the institution.<sup>9</sup> Although this is not the appropriate time to fully discuss this question, the way in which the phenomenon coincides with archaeological data is also intriguing. Notwithstanding recurrent explanations (like the destruction of buildings, the use of other sites as houses of prayer, etc.), the lack of archaeological findings that postdate the destruction of the Temple in 70 and the absence of any mate-

<sup>5</sup> LEVINE, *Ancient Synagogue*, p. 179.

<sup>6</sup> LEVINE, *Ancient Synagogue*, 180-181. Regarding prayer, Reuven KIMELMAN distinguishes between both periods as well in his “Rabbinic Prayer in Late Antiquity,” in *The Cambridge History of Judaism, IV: The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period*, ed. Steven T. KATZ (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) pp. 573-611: 573-574.

<sup>7</sup> LEVINE, *Ancient Synagogue*, p. 182. The first factor corresponds to “a changing socioeconomic reality,” as he deduces from *Pesiq. Rab. Kah.* 12:3 (ed. Mandelbaum, p. 205): “At first, when money was available, one would desire to study Mishnah and Talmud; now that money is not available, and, what is more, we suffer from the kingdoms, one desires to hear the Bible or aggadic teachings.” See also STEMBERGER, *Judentum*, p. 104.

<sup>8</sup> See Seth SCHWARTZ, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* (Jews, Christians, and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World; Princeton-Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001) pp. 185, 189, 202-203, 229, and 239, among others.

<sup>9</sup> STEMBERGER, *Judentum*, p. 106.

rial evidence testifying to how much the synagogue flourished after the third century is surprising.<sup>10</sup>

*Lev. Rab.* belongs to the second group of texts from the rabbinic period, i.e. the amoraic works.<sup>11</sup> Throughout the 37 chapters of this Midrash, there are several explicit references to the synagogue, whose materials primarily come from either amoraic sources or the revision –both a reworking and a recontextualization– of tannaitic traditions, although the final version dates back to fifth-cent. Palestine.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the term “synagogue” appears several times throughout this rabbinic work, both with its Hebrew term (בית הכנסת)<sup>13</sup> and in Aramaic (כנישתא).<sup>14</sup> But there are also mentions of other features that may be potentially related to the building or its functions.

What references to the synagogue –whether explicit or not– are found in this Midrash? What are the common themes? Are they consistent with Levine’s assertion about the predominance of liturgy and study over other aspects? And what do they say about the synagogue sermon? The fact that the information about the synagogue is determined by a midrashic context indicates that the sources are not impartial. Accordingly, this partial-

<sup>10</sup> LEVINE, *Ancient Synagogue*, p. 183; STEMBERGER, “The Derashah,” pp. 9-10.

<sup>11</sup> For the Hebrew text, Margulies’ edition was followed: Mordechai MARGULIES, *Midrash Wayyikra Rabbah: A Critical Edition Based on Manuscripts and Genizah Fragments with Variants and Notes*, 2 vols. (New York–Jerusalem: The Maxell Abbell Publication Fund–The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1993 [Jerusalem, 1953-1960]). For the variants in the manuscripts, Milikowsky-Schlüter’s synoptic edition was also reviewed: Chaim MILIKOWSKY and Margarete SCHLÜTER, *Synoptic Edition of Wayyiqra Rabbah*, <http://www.biu.ac.il/JS/midrash/VR/about.htm>. For the English version of *Lev. Rab.*, Neusner’s translation was consulted: Jacob NEUNER, *The Components of the Rabbinic Documents. From the Whole to the Parts. X: Leviticus Rabbah*, 3 vols. (Academic Commentary Series; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> See e.g. H. L. STRACK and Günter STEMBERGER, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (trans. Markus BOCKMUEHL. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996) pp. 288-291. An updated version is available at Günter STEMBERGER, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrasch* (München: C. H. Beck, 2011) pp. 319-323, esp. 322-323.

<sup>13</sup> בית הכנסת: *Lev. Rab.* 6:2 (p. 130); 5:5 (p. 116); 9:2 (p. 176); 23:4 (p. 530); 37:2 (p. 857); בתי כניסיות: *Lev. Rab.* 11:7 (pp. 230-231); 35:1 (p. 817); הכנסת: 16:5 (p. 357).

<sup>14</sup> *Lev. Rab.* 6:3 (p. 133; only in some mss.); 22:4 (p. 511); 32:7 (p. 753); 35:12 (pp. 830-831).

ity highlights the interest of the rabbis by emphasizing a particular aspect of their dealings with the institution. For practical reasons, the accounts will be discussed according to whether the information is liturgical (sections V and VI), educational (section IV) or communal (section III) in nature or using other data related to the building itself, its identification, location or officials (section II).

## II. THE SYNAGOGUE LOCATION AND THE BUILDING

*Lev. Rab.* contains some references concerning *the identification of the synagogue location and other interior aspects related to the building*. On the one hand, some synagogues are explicitly identified in the Midrash by their location. These reports do not directly provide information about the building, but are tangential, i.e. the synagogue is the setting where certain acts occurred according to rabbinic traditions (or at least according to some of their textual versions). On the other hand, the features that are integral parts of the building –whatever the structure– are not the main focus of the texts, but are mentioned in passing.

Two passages in *Lev. Rab.* openly refer to two synagogues by their location: Tiberias and Lod.<sup>15</sup> The former (*Lev. Rab.* 22:4, p. 511) is related to an episode about a man suffering from boils who went down to bathe in Lake Tiberias; he was said to be healed when he floated into Miriam's well.<sup>16</sup> In this context, R. Yohanan b. Maria asserts that, according to the Rabbis' calculation, Miriam's well was located "directly opposite the middle gate of the *old synagogue of Saringit* (כנישתא עתיקתא)

<sup>15</sup> See HEZSER, *The Social Structure*, p. 217 and nn. 242 and 243.

<sup>16</sup> About this *ma'aseh* in *Lev. Rab.* and its literary context, see Lorena MIRALLES-MACIÁ, "Motivos filo-esópicos en el Midrás. Fábulas y anécdotas de rabinos en *Levítico Rabbá* 22,4," *Sefarad* 69:2 (2009) pp. 281-302: 298-299. About the reference to the location of the well, see e.g. y. *Ketub.* 12:3:35b; y. *Kil.* 9:4:32c; b. *Šabb.* 35a; *TanḥB Ḥuqqat* 50; *Num. Rab.* 19:26 (ed. Mirkin, 10:241); *Qoh. Rab.* 5 to Qoh 5:8. See also Miriam SHERMAN, *A Well in Search of an Owner: Using Novel Assertions to Assess Miriam's Disproportionate Elaboration among Women in the Midrashim of Late Antiquity* (UC San Diego Electronic Theses and Dissertations, eScholarships University California, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9zx60786>, 2006) pp. 100-101.

(דסרינגית),<sup>17</sup> one of the synagogues at Tiberias. According to *b. Ber.* 8a, there were thirteen synagogues in this area.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, this one was referred to by its age.<sup>19</sup> The other reference (*Lev. Rab.* 35:12, pp. 830-831) is found in an episode told in Aramaic in the first person by R. Abbahu about an occasion when he was passing by the “synagogue of the Tarsians in Lod” (כנישתא דטרסייה דלוד).<sup>20</sup> Lod or Lydda (according to its Greek name) held an important number of these buildings during Late Antiquity.<sup>21</sup> The synagogue of the “Tarsians” alludes to an institution founded by the members of a specific community or profession (“Tarsians” were weavers or smelters).<sup>22</sup> Thus, a second characteristic besides its location distinguishes these synagogues from others in the same areas.

In addition to these two passages, another account in *Lev. Rab.* 9:9 (pp. 191-193) merits attention as well, although a synagogue is not explicitly mentioned in this version. It tells the story of a woman who regularly went to hear the tanna R. Meir in session on Sabbath eve. This Midrash does not

<sup>17</sup> Among other variants in the manuscripts and versions, Serungin or Serungaya, south of Tiberias (see Margulies’ edition, p. 511 n.). In editio princeps, “the synagogue of Tiberias.” See LEVINE, *Ancient Synagogue*, p. 336 and the bibliography about the place in n.100.

<sup>18</sup> According to MILLER (“The Rabbis,” p. 58), the number could be a “literary license” in the Babylonian Talmud (*b. Hag* 15a-b). See also Stuart S. MILLER, “On the Number of Synagogues in the Cities of ’Erez Israel,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 49:1 (1998) pp. 51-66: 55-58.

<sup>19</sup> LEVINE, *Ancient Synagogue*, p. 207 and n. 122; see pp. 206-207, and 336.

<sup>20</sup> About this episode see section VI.

<sup>21</sup> LEVINE, *Ancient Synagogue*, p. 206 and n. 117, referring to *y. Šeqal.* 5:6:49b; *y. Pe’ah* 8:9:21b.

<sup>22</sup> HEZSER, *The Social Structure*, p. 216; Ben-Zion ROSENFELD and Joseph MENIRAV, “The Ancient Synagogue as an Economic Center,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 58:4 (1999) pp. 259-276: 264; LEVINE, *Ancient Synagogue*, p. 207 and n. 118 and n. 123. Several synagogues are known as the “synagogue of the Tarsians” in Roman Palestine; see Martin HENGEL and Anna M. SCHWEMER, *Paul Between Damascus and Antioch. The Unknown Years* (London: SCM, 1997) p. 415 n. 820; Ben-Zion ROSENFELD and Joseph MENIRAV, *Markets and Marketing in Roman Palestine* (Supplements to JSJ 99; Leiden: Brill, 2005) pp. 217-218; Louis I. RABINOWITZ, “Synagogue. Origins and History. First Century C.E.,” in *EncJud 2ed.*, eds. Fred SKOLNIK and Michael BERENBAUM, vol. 19 (Detroit: Thomson Gale – Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 2007) pp. 354-355: 354. The *Lev. Rab.* manuscript tradition is not as clear in this passage, since some sources say ארמיא, “Aramaic.”

elaborate on the context in which the event takes place, but the talmudic parallel (y. *Soṭah* 1:4:16d) locates the action in the “synagogue of Hammat” (בבנישתא דחמתא) at Tiberias, while the version in *Deut. Rab.* (5:15, ed. Mirkin, p. 11:95) places it within an academic framework (רבי מאיר הלך וישב לו) (בבית המדרש הגדול).<sup>23</sup> Actually, R. Meir’s scholarly activity is mentioned in the Talmud as taking place in Tiberias on the Sabbath as well (בבית מדרשא) (דטיבריה y. *Hag* 2:1:77b).<sup>24</sup> Regardless of whether the scene in *Lev. Rab.* 9:9 corresponds to historical circumstances or to a haggadic elaboration, this variation suggests that both settings are possible. Does this tradition reflect the particular circumstances of the synagogues, where the rabbis lectured on the Sabbath, either a sermon addressed to the community or some teaching for an academic audience (assuming that the difference between them can be determined)? Could the synagogue of Hammat at Tiberias be the *Sitz im Leben* of this episode, at least in theory, whatever the context? Synagogues might have hosted academic activities, as will be seen below. In fact, rabbinic literature not only interchanges the terms –synagogue and school– to refer to the same building, but also combines them; Hanswulf Bloedhorn and Gil Hüttenmeister note that “it is... no surprise to find in many haggadic texts ‘synagogue and school’ used as a hendiadys.”<sup>25</sup> A good example of this is found in *Lev. Rab.* itself, where in 11:7 (pp. 230-231) “synagogues and schools” (בתי כניסיות ובתי מדרשות) are adduced several times in a midrashic interpretation about a biblical episode (discussed again in section IV).

The texts that mention specific synagogues are exceptional when compared to all of the information in the Midrash regarding this institution, because most of the accounts do not specify the name or location of the synagogue. According to the different contexts, the passages in *Lev. Rab.*

<sup>23</sup> But not in the Libermann edition. The version in *Num. Rab.* 9:20 (ed. Mirkin, p. 9:189), simply: בבנישתא.

<sup>24</sup> See LEVINE, *Ancient Synagogue*, p. 487 n. 90; about the connection between R. Meir and Tiberias or Hammath Tiberias, see e.g. Michael AVI-JONAH, “Hammath,” in *EncJud 2ed.*, eds. Fred SKOLNIK and Michael BERENBAUM, vol. 8 (Detroit: Thomson Gale – Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 2007) pp. 306-307; STEMBERGER, *Einleitung*, pp. 91-92.

<sup>25</sup> Hanswulf BLOEDHORN and Gil HÜTTENMEISTER, “The Synagogue,” in *The Cambridge History of Judaism, III: The Early Roman Period*, eds. William HORBURY, W. D. DAVIES and John STURDY (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) pp. 267-297: 293. See also Catherine HEZSER, *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine* (= *Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism*, 81 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001]) p. 52.



usually apply the term to a particular (although unidentified) building.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, “synagogue” most often refers to a structure with various functions, instead of to the other meanings of the term.<sup>27</sup> In this vein, other texts in which the building is not mentioned should be included in this set of accounts, because the context suggests such a space. For example, there are passages that simply speak of a “place” (אתר). In *Lev. Rab.* 3:6 (p. 69), it is said that R. Hanina b. Aha “went to a certain place (לחד אתר) and found this verse at the beginning of a Seder;”<sup>28</sup> and *Lev. Rab.* 23:4 (p. 531) tells of an episode about R. Eleazar Hisma going to “a certain place” (לחד אתר) and being asked to recite the Shema.<sup>29</sup> Although the texts use this more generic term, from the context this “place” could indicate the existence of a synagogue in both cases.<sup>30</sup>

The Midrash contains scant information on *furnishings and the operation of the building*. On the one hand, the same passage in *Lev. Rab.*, 23:4 (p. 531), mentions a Torah “chest” (תיבה) in reference to the recitation of the Shema prayer in the synagogue, which is accompanied by the gesture of passing before this artefact.<sup>31</sup> This account sheds light on the

<sup>26</sup> About the terminology and its meaning (“congregation,” “gathering,” and “synagogue” as a building) in rabbinic literature, see e.g. BLOEDHORN and HÜTTENMEISTER, “The Synagogue,” pp. 268-270. See also HEZSER, *The Social Structure*, p. 215.

<sup>27</sup> See nn. 13 and 14.

<sup>28</sup> About this passage, see section V.

<sup>29</sup> See Marc HIRSHMAN, “Torah in Rabbinic Thought: The Theology of Learning,” in *The Cambridge History of Judaism, IV: The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period*, ed. Steven T. KATZ (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) pp. 899-924: 912 and n. 35. About the text, see section V.

<sup>30</sup> About the term *'atar* with the meaning of “synagogue,” see Michael SOKOLOFF, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine Period* (= *Dictionaries of Talmud. Midrash and Targum*, 2 [Ramat-Gan: Ilan University Press, 1990]) s.v. “אתר;” BLOEDHORN and HÜTTENMEISTER, “The Synagogue,” pp. 268-269.

<sup>31</sup> About this gesture, see *y. Ber.* 4:4:8b; *Gen. Rab.* 49:8 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, pp. 506-507); see Steven FINE, *This Holy Place. On the Sanctity of the Synagogue during the Greco-Roman Period* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997) p. 86. On the Torah ark/chest, see e.g. BLOEDHORN and HÜTTENMEISTER, “The Synagogue,” p. 280; LEVINE, *Ancient Synagogue*, pp. 376-377; STEMBERGER, *Judentum*, pp. 94-95. Regarding the holiness of the synagogue, FINE suggests the “transformation of the Torah shrine from the scrolls “chest” (*teva*) of Tanaitic literature into an “ark” (*arona*), a name that reverberates with memories of the Ark of the Covenant,” in his *This Holy Place*, 61 (see also pp. 72-79, and 199 n. 125).

idiosyncrasy of the liturgy, rather than on the characteristics of the chest; indeed, it is mentioned *en passant* to describe how to perform the prayer.<sup>32</sup> However, the text is evidence of the existence of this piece of furniture in the building (or at least in some buildings).<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, references to synagogue officials are limited to the hazzan, who leads the service (*Lev. Rab.* 6:2, p. 130, only explicitly in the editio princeps) and also performs other functions (collector of charity funds, *Lev. Rab.* 16:5, p. 357).<sup>34</sup> Accordingly, the allusions to the Torah chest and the hazzan are both directly related to the synagogue space.

### III. THE SYNAGOGUE AS A COMMUNAL SPACE

Apart from the liturgical aspects of the synagogue in Late Antiquity, scholars agree that this institution played an important role in Jewish life as a *communal space*.<sup>35</sup> In addition to its liturgical dimension, the synagogue performed secular functions depending on the needs of Jewish communities, groups or even individuals. For instance, as “institutional functions” of the synagogue, Levine distinguishes those based on its consideration as a “meeting place,” “court,” place for the regulation of “charity,” “place of study,” “library,” “place of residence,” and “place for individual needs.”<sup>36</sup> This section looks at the information contained in *Lev. Rab.* regarding all these aspects, excluding the accounts that focus solely on the scholarly dimension, which will be examined in the following section.

Which communal functions of the synagogue predominate in this Midrash? Of all the tasks undertaken in the synagogue as a community centre, the *supervision of charity* (*zedaqah*) and the collection of funds

<sup>32</sup> See section V.

<sup>33</sup> Although materials, like wood, could have not archaeologically favoured the preservation of the Torah ark (BLOEDHORN and HÜTTENMEISTER, “The Synagogue,” p. 280), it was only “in the fourth and fifth centuries” that “the image of the Torah shrine was a fixed component of synagogal iconography” (SCHWARTZ, *Imperialism*, p. 247; see also the following paragraph).

<sup>34</sup> For both texts, see respectively sections V and III.

<sup>35</sup> See e.g. ROSENFELD and MENIRAV, “The Ancient Synagogue,” p. 259; BLOEDHORN and HÜTTENMEISTER, “The Synagogue,” pp. 295-296; STEMBERGER, *Judentum*, pp. 104-105.

<sup>36</sup> LEVINE, *Ancient Synagogue*, pp. 391-411.

are especially important, as can be observed from the following accounts.<sup>37</sup> The Midrash contains not only clear references to this duty in connection with the institution, but also accounts about charity that may be contextualized in this framework as well.

At the beginning of the paragraph in *Lev. Rab.* 16:5 (pp. 356-357), the verse “Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin” (Qoh 5:5) is applied, according to R. Yehoshua b. Levi, “to those who promise *charity* in public and do not give it” (שפוסקין צדקה ברבים ואינן נותנין); the second part of the verse (“And do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake”) refers to “the hazzan of the community/synagogue” (זה חזן הכנסת). From this interpretation, the hazzan appears to be responsible for carrying out the thankless task of collecting what has been publically promised and then not paid. Could he alone be in charge of the community fund in the synagogue, taking into account the regulations applying to the collection of charity?<sup>38</sup> Whatever the case, the hazzan –as the synagogue’s most representative official<sup>39</sup>– links charity to this institution.

*Lev. Rab.* 32:7 (pp. 752-753)<sup>40</sup> presents another interesting account regarding an episode transmitted in Aramaic about a Babylonian *mamzer* (bastard) asking R. Berekhiah for charity.<sup>41</sup> Following the amora’s

<sup>37</sup> About the *zedaqah*, see e.g. Gregg E. GARDNER, *The Origins of Organized Charity in Rabbinic Judaism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015) pp. 26-32; Rivka ULMER and Moshe ULMER, *Righteous Giving to the Poor: Tzedakah (“Charity”) in Classical Rabbinic Judaism. Including a Brief Introduction to Rabbinic Literature* (Gorgias Handbooks. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2014) pp. 45-56.

<sup>38</sup> According to *m. Pe’ah* 8:7, the communal fund (*kuppah*) is collected by two people and distributed by three (ומתחלקת בשלושה), (והקופה נבנית בשניים). See LEVINE, *Ancient Synagogue*, p. 397; GARDNER, *The Origins of Organized Charity*, pp. 78, 143-145, and 174. About these tasks, see Raphael POSNER, “Charity. In the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature,” in *EncJud 2ed.*, eds. Fred SKOLNIK and Michael BERENBAUM, vol. 4 (Detroit: Thomson Gale – Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 2007) pp. 569-571: 571.

<sup>39</sup> BLOEDHORN and HÜTTENMEISTER, “The Synagogue,” p. 295.

<sup>40</sup> The text does not appear in the main ms. (London) used by Margulies for his edition, but it is found in most of the mss. and in editio princeps; see MILKOWSKY’S and SCHLÜTER’S synoptic edition: <http://www.biu.ac.il/JS/midrash/VR/outfiles/OUT32-07.htm>.

<sup>41</sup> Also in *y. Qidd.* 3:12:64c. The poor man who travels from place to place is one of the situations observed in the Mishnah regarding charity (*m. Pe’ah* 5:4; 8:7). See Frederick B. BIRD, “A Comparative Study of the Work of Charity in Christianity and Judaism,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 10:1 (1982) pp. 144-169: 153; POSNER, “Charity,” p. 570.

instructions, the *mamzer* appeared at the *keništa* the next day, where a “collection in the community” (פסיקא בציבורא) was then made for him after R. Berekhiah’s session.<sup>42</sup> Among the meanings of *keništa*, the term is probably understood here as the place for “gathering,” i.e. “synagogue.”<sup>43</sup> Although the synagogue was not the only place to collect charity,<sup>44</sup> according to the description and considering that this act usually took place on the Sabbath,<sup>45</sup> this fictitious or even potentially historical scene could be situated in this context, where R. Berekhiah led a session.<sup>46</sup>

Two other texts that also focus on charity are more controversial, because they do not place the events in a particular context. However, at the same time this is the reason to consider the synagogue as a location where they may have been held. In the first text, *Lev. Rab.* 5:4 (pp. 113-114),<sup>47</sup> during a visit to Bosrah (to the east of Jordan), the amora Simeon b. Laqish (Resh Laqish, 3<sup>rd</sup> cent.) sat next to a certain Abba Yudan, nicknamed “the Deceiver,” as a gesture of recognition for his *mizwot*: he promised to match the sum donated by the community to charity—as described by Rivka Ulmer and Moshe Ulmer—as an “ingenious form of honourable deception in the practice of *Tzedakah*.”<sup>48</sup> A more challenging example

<sup>42</sup> “He found him in the *keništa* sitting and expounding” (יתיב ודריש). About this, see section VI.

<sup>43</sup> בי כנישתא in editio princeps.

<sup>44</sup> E.g. at the market place: *Lev. Rab.* 34:14 (p. 807, according to some mss.) and 37:2 (pp. 856-858); see LEVINE, *Ancient Synagogue*, p. 398 n. 106. About *Lev. Rab.* 37:2, see ULMER and ULMER, *Righteous Giving to the Poor*, pp. 80-81 and n. 29.

<sup>45</sup> LEVINE, *Ancient Synagogue*, p. 396; POSNER, “Charity,” p. 571. About charity and the Sabbath, see ULMER and ULMER, *Righteous Given to the Poor*, pp. 147-150.

<sup>46</sup> See LEVINE, *Ancient Synagogue*, p. 398 and n. 105.

<sup>47</sup> In the paragraph there are two stories about Abba Yudan’s charity, separated by another episode about R. Hiyya b. Abba collecting contributions for the study house in Tiberias. Parallel versions in *y. Hor.* 3:7:48a; *Deut. Rab.* 4:8 (ed. Mirkin, pp. 78-79). ULMER and ULMER (*Righteous Given to the Poor*, pp. 77-79 and n. 27) include this passage among the “miracle stories.” See also GARDNER, *The Origins of Organized Charity*, p. 9 nn. 38-39, pp. 187-188.

<sup>48</sup> ULMER and ULMER, *Righteous Giving to the Poor*, p. 107. However, as noted in BURTON L. VISOTZKY, *Golden Bells and Pomegranates: Studies in Midrash Leviticus Rabbah* (= *Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism*, 94 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003]) pp. 124-126, esp. 126, this text (as well as the other two “tales” in *Lev. Rab.* 5:4) does not “show the rabbis directly supporting the poor,” but “engaged in fund raising efforts for

is the second case, the passage in *Lev. Rab.* 34:14 (pp. 806-807) where R. Tanhuma was asked to decree a fast during a drought.<sup>49</sup> After two failed attempts, the rabbi ordered the community to allocate charity. Where did his address to the people occur? It might have been a synagogue.<sup>50</sup>

This last group of texts must also include a consideration of the passages related to collecting *funds to pay teachers*, which are equally problematic with regard to the context. For instance, in *Lev. Rab.* 30:1 (p. 688), charity managers are not allowed to press people,<sup>51</sup> except if they are collecting funds to pay Torah and Mishnah teachers (חוץ משכר ומופריים ומשנים), because they invest their time in this activity instead of in work that can support them. This kind of payment might have depended –among other remunerations– on the community, probably being handled or at least encouraged in the synagogue.<sup>52</sup> In the same vein, R. Tanhuma, interpreting Job 41:3 in *Lev. Rab.* 27:2 (p. 624), adduces the case of a bachelor who lived in a town and provided wages for “teachers of Torah and Mishnah.”<sup>53</sup> Catherine Hezser argues that

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the establishment and maintenance of rabbinic institutions.” But Visotzky also wonders if “LR may speak/write of rabbis’ identification with the poor” (p. 128).

<sup>49</sup> There is another version of the story in *Gen. Rab.* 33:3 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, pp. 304-305).

<sup>50</sup> Stefan C. REIF notes that “on such distressing occasions as droughts, the people would congregate to perform acts normally associated with mourning... These acts of popular piety... were played out in public places, but not necessarily in a synagogue or similar institution...;” in “The Early Liturgy of the Synagogue,” in *The Cambridge History of Judaism, III: The Early Roman Period*, eds. William HORBURY, W. D. DAVIES and John STURDY (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) pp. 326-357: 330. However, although some mss. place the acts of charity done by men at the market (ed. Margulies, p. 807), the rabbi’s order was not given at any specific site (the text says in Aramaic: על דרש, “he entered and expounded”). Where would the best place to address the community be? The idea of a synagogue should by no means be rejected. On the contrary.

<sup>51</sup> The opinion, attributed to R. Berekhiah and R. Hiyya, his father, in the name of R. Yose b. Nehorai, midrashically interprets Jer 30:20 (“I shall punish all who oppress him”). It is not transmitted in the London ms., but it is found in most of the mss. See ULMER and ULMER, *Righteous Giving to the Poor*, pp. 117-118.

<sup>52</sup> A parallel version in *Pes. Rab. Kah.* 27:1 (ed. Mandelbaum, p. 402). See LEVINE, *Ancient Synagogue*, pp. 396, 443-444. According to the text, children could bring additional payments to their master. See HEZSER, *Jewish Literacy*, p. 51 n. 64, and pp. 56-57.

<sup>53</sup> See HEZSER, *Jewish Literacy*, pp. 56-57; STEMBERGER, *Judentum*, p. 111. Parallel versions in *Pes. Rab. Kah.* 9:2 (ed. Mandelbaum, p. 150); *Tanḥ. ’Emor 7; TanḥB. ’Emor 10.*

“these rabbinic proposals” –i.e. taxes to pay teachers– “...are mere suggestions which are very unlikely to have been followed everywhere.”<sup>54</sup> However, as this custom was more or less widespread in Palestine, who could have been in charge of this charity to be distributed among the teachers? Is it not likely to have been those who collected community funds and allocated them in the synagogue context, or were primary teachers paid privately?<sup>55</sup> Because of the lack of details, these texts are particularly difficult.

As regards *social affairs of a personal nature* –or what Levine calls ‘individual needs’ (see above)– the synagogue played an important role as well. One exceptional text when determining the relevance of this institution in the life of a Jew is found in *Lev. Rab.* 5:5 (p. 116), in a discussion of the sepulchre of Shebna and his status as a foreigner. Following the midrashic interpretation of Isaiah 22:16 (“What do you have here, and whom do you have here, that you have hewn a tomb for yourself here, you who hew a tomb on the height and carve a habitation for yourself in the rock?”), R. Eleazar asserts: “A person has to have a nail or a peg fixed *in a synagogue* so as to merit to be buried in that place” (צריך אדם שיהא לו) (מסמר או יתד קבועה בבית הכנסת כדי שיזכה ויקבר באותו מקום). David Kraemer underlines the “perplexity” produced by this unique account, considering that “the synagogue should be a place of purity while the corpse is a powerful source of impurity.”<sup>56</sup> But, apart from the rarity of this opinion in rabbinic literature, the saying demonstrates that a Jew’s membership in a community and his right to be buried where he lived was in large part dependent upon his active and regular participation in the synagogue. Levine himself interprets the sentence in this way: “having a fixed and permanent place in the synagogue guarantees such a person a burial place there.”<sup>57</sup> From this rabbinic point of view, the centrality of the synagogue in Jewish individual existence is clearly recognized.

<sup>54</sup> HEZSER, *Jewish Literacy*, p. 57.

<sup>55</sup> See *Lev. Rab.* 34:16 (pp. 812-813) about R. Akiba donating the money R. Tarfon gave; HEZSER, *Jewish Literacy*, p. 57; VISOTZKY, *Golden Bells*, pp. 126-127.

<sup>56</sup> DAVID KRAEMER, *The Meanings of Death in Rabbinic Judaism* (London–New York: Routledge, 2000) p. 77. In the transmission of the record, “synagogue” has been changed to “cemetery” (בית הקברות); see Margulies’ edition p. 116 n.

<sup>57</sup> LEVINE, *Ancient Synagogue*, pp. 406-407.

## IV. SYNAGOGUE AND EDUCATION

In addition to the basic education acquired in the family milieu (through the father or, very occasionally, a private teacher), Jewish primary instruction in Late Antiquity –especially from the third cent. onwards– depended on the school, usually (but not always) located in a synagogue,<sup>58</sup> where teaching and learning the Torah was the main aim, according to rabbinic sources.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, *education* became, in Levine’s terms, a “communal responsibility.”<sup>60</sup>

The following issues must be considered when examining the connection between synagogue and school, as well as the information contained in rabbinic texts.

- a) Teaching was an activity carried out both in the synagogue itself (or in a nearby room) and in other locations: a building exclusively set aside for this task, a teacher’s/rabbi’s house, outdoors, among others.<sup>61</sup> When texts speak of “school,” the function of the building/place in a certain educational context is underscored, but it does not mean that this task was the only one carried out in such a place.
- b) Relying on archaeological findings, only one case is unquestionably recognized as a school (that in the inscription about R. Eliezer ha-Qappar’s “house of study,” *bet ha-midraš*, in Dabbura, Golan), “although” –as Bloedhorn and Hüttenmeister stress– “an almost equal number of references to synagogues and schools exist in the literature.”<sup>62</sup> Consequently, the literary context of the rabbinic texts is

<sup>58</sup> See STEMBERGER, *Judentum*, pp. 107-113. About the different positions of the scholars regarding the Jewish school and the lack of historical information in the literary sources, see HEZSER, *Jewish Literacy*, pp. 39 ff. (about education away from the family sphere, see esp. p. 50).

<sup>59</sup> Marc Z. BRETTLER, “Judaism, Bible in, I. Judaism” in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, vol. 14 (Berlin–Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2017) pp. 902-919: 909. For the centrality of Torah in rabbinic Judaism, see e.g. HIRSHMAN, “Torah in Rabbinic Thought,” pp. 899-924.

<sup>60</sup> LEVINE, *Ancient Synagogue*, p. 399. This idea can be already deduced in *Lev. Rab.* from, for instance, the aforementioned funds collected to pay teachers.

<sup>61</sup> See HEZSER, *Jewish Literacy*, p. 59; STEMBERGER, *Judentum*, p. 115.

<sup>62</sup> BLOEDHORN and HÜTTENMEISTER, “The Synagogue,” p. 293. See also HEZSER, *The Social Structure*, p. 205; STEMBERGER, *Judentum*, pp. 112-113; Paul D. MANDEL, *The*

essential to recognize the function of a place mentioned in a passage that could be connected with a teaching/learning activity. According to these scholars, “it emerges from the linguistic usage in the rabbinic sources that the synagogue seems also to have been used as a school.”<sup>63</sup>

- c) Despite the context or “the linguistic usage,” in rabbinic texts, the terms “synagogues” and “schools” cannot only appear together in the same phrase –Bloedhorn and Hüttenmeister describe the phenomenon as a “hendiadys”–<sup>64</sup> but are also often interchangeable.<sup>65</sup>
- d) Only when rabbinic texts allude to certain aspects of education at elementary schools, synagogue schools or houses of study<sup>66</sup> or to liturgical features can the audience receiving the message be theoretically identified, i.e. children in a *bet ha-sefer* (primary school), teenagers/young adults in a *bet ha-midrash* (house of study), an academic circle in a rabbinic *bet ha-midrash*<sup>67</sup> or the whole community in a Sabbath session. However, in rabbinic works, neither the audience nor the context is usually clear.

Bearing in mind all these issues, this section will only focus on the texts related to the synagogue and its openly or potentially educational function.

Several passages in *Lev. Rab.* highlight the importance of the synagogue in the education system for both the community and the rabbis themselves. As noted above, some of the texts directly associated with the study of the Torah connect synagogues and houses of study in the same phrase. For instance, in *Lev. Rab.* 35:1 (p. 817), *Lev* 26:3 (“If you

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*Origins of the Midrash. From Teaching to Text* (Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 180; Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2017) p. 207 and the bibliography in n. 95. About the ambiguity when it comes to identifying the schools archaeologically, see HEZSER, *Jewish Literacy*, pp. 52-54.

<sup>63</sup> BLOEDHORN and HÜTTENMEISTER, “The Synagogue,” p. 293.

<sup>64</sup> BLOEDHORN and HÜTTENMEISTER, “The Synagogue,” p. 293.

<sup>65</sup> As in *Lev. Rab.* 9:9 and its parallel versions. See section II.

<sup>66</sup> E.g. the mention of a biblical book, as in *Lev. Rab.* 7:3 (p. 156) referring to Leviticus.

<sup>67</sup> The rabbinic schools were called *bet ha-midrash* in Palestine as well (STEMBERGER, *Judentum*, p. 113). MANDEL (*The Origins of the Midrash*, p. 211) notes that “by the third century CE the *bet midrash* had evolved from a house of instruction for the general populace to a house of study for the scholarly elite who claimed the *bet midrash* as their domain.” About the transformation of the *bet ha-midrash*, see pp. 191-211.



walk in My statutes...”) is midrashically explained through Ps 119:59 (“I considered my ways, and turned my feet to Your testimonies”). To illustrate this verse, these words are put in the mouth of King David as he addresses God:

Lord of the Ages, every single day I take thought and say [to myself]: “To such and such a place, I am going to walk,” “To such and such a house I am going to walk,” but my feet bring me to *synagogues and houses of study* (לבתי כניסיות ולבתי מדרשות).

Obviously this interpretation does not echo a biblical episode, but rather recognizes the importance of the Torah for the rabbis in synagogues and houses of study, casting light on this rabbinic position by means of a key figure in biblical history. According to this text, King David used to visit these places to acquire knowledge of the Torah. In fact, in this passage King David is supposed to have been a model of an educated Jew, i.e. he who follows the Torah in synagogues and houses of study.

*Lev. Rab.* 11:7 (p. 230) presents another biblical episode related to synagogues and houses of study. Of the –unfortunate– cases linked to the expression “it came to pass in the days of” (ויהי בימי), one refers to that of the wicked King Ahaz of Judah (Isa 7:1) during the Assyrian period. He is said to have concocted a strategic plan that consisted of closing synagogues and schools according to the following reasoning:<sup>68</sup>

If there are no children, there will be no disciples; if there are no disciples, there will be no Sages; if there are no Sages, there will be no Torah; if there is no Torah, there will be no *synagogues and houses of study*; if there are no *synagogues and houses of study*, the Holy One, blessed be He, will not let His Presence rest in the world.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>68</sup> It is presented as a sort of second *nimshal* of a king-parable about a tutor who hated the son of the king; he planned to kill the child by removing his wet-nurse, so as to avoid being accused of this deed. For parallel versions, see *y. Sanh.* 10:2:28b; *Gen. Rab.* 42:3 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 402); *Esth. Rab.* Intr. 11; *Ruth Rab.* Intr. 7.

<sup>69</sup> אם אין קטנים אין תלמידים, ואם אין תלמידים אין חכמים, ואם אין חכמים אין תורה, ואם אין תורה אין בתי כניסיות ובתי מדרשות, אם אין בתי כניסיות ובתי מדרשות אין הקב"ה משרה שכינתו בעולם.

The texts show how these institutions underwent a “rabbinization” process in the Sages’ eyes, applying rabbinic ideals to the past.<sup>70</sup> Thus, from this perspective in *Lev. Rab.* 11:7, the predictable spaces for teaching-learning Torah in rabbinic times were synagogues and houses of study, where children, disciples and Sages were all involved, according to the different stages of the education system –at least in view of this escalating rabbinic categorization. Moreover, the passage makes the presence of God in this world conditional on the existence of these places of study.<sup>71</sup> Accordingly, this space is the focal point for meeting the divinity. But where did the sanctity of the synagogue lie?<sup>72</sup> In certain activities carried out in this context or in the building itself? Shaye J. D. Cohen stresses that

Most rabbinic passages which refer to the divine presence (*šĕkînâ*) in the synagogue do so in connection with the prayer and study conducted by the Jews [...]<sup>73</sup>

These activities certainly contributed to bestowing sanctity on the synagogue, but Steven Fine already demonstrated that

In Amoraic literature from the Land of Israel... “the sanctity of the synagogue” became an explicit halakhic category. The synagogue becomes a “small temple” where God could be encountered.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> “Rabbinization” is understood to be, according to Isaiah Gafni’s definition, “the representation of earlier figures or institutions of Jewish history —primarily biblical but quite a few post-biblical ones as well— in the image of the rabbinic world in which the sages functioned.” Isaiah GAFNI, “Rabbinic Historiography and Representations of the Past,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, eds. Charlotte E. FONROBERT and Martin S. JAFFEE (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) pp. 295-312: 304.

<sup>71</sup> KIMELMAN (“Rabbinic Prayer,” p. 579) notes that “there are sources that consider the synagogue and academy on a par with the Temple.” About the sanctity of the synagogue, see HEZSER, *The Social Structure*, pp. 220-221.

<sup>72</sup> One example of this holiness in *Lev. Rab.* is related to the citrons of the day of Hoshanah (*m. Sukkah* 4:7) that acquire curative properties (*Lev. Rab.* 37:2, pp. 856-860).

<sup>73</sup> Shaye J. D. COHEN, “The Temple and the Synagogue,” in *The Cambridge History of Judaism, III: The Early Roman Period*, eds. William HORBURY, W. D. DAVIES and John STURDY (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) pp. 298-325: 321. See also KRAEMER, *Rabbinic Judaism*, pp. 132-136, esp. 133.

<sup>74</sup> FINE, *This Holy Place*, p. 61. For examples of sanctity through prayer and study, see pp. 62-67.

As Fine showed, the Palestinian amoraim were interested in the “mechanisms for sanctification and desanctification.” In addition, the dedicatory inscriptions found in synagogue remains in late antique Palestine confirm this conception of the building. In this epigraphical evidence in Aramaic and Greek, the synagogue is called “holy place” (*atra qadisha/hagios topos*).<sup>75</sup> Accordingly, the scholarly function of the synagogue/school was not perceived as a secular activity, but rather as another (sacred although not liturgical?) approach to the Torah. Is this teaching-learning Torah conceived as a complementary task to the liturgical use of the text? If synagogues and houses of study are understood as synonyms in a scholarly framework, is *bet ha-midrash* a generic term for all education levels (i.e. children, disciples, Sages)? And could all those levels have existed in the synagogues? According to this account, it may have been so.<sup>76</sup>

The level of education can be identified when a text refers to the audience receiving the lesson, the contents and the type of teacher. But can this information be applied to the circumstance of the synagogue as well?<sup>77</sup>

- a) There are passages in *Lev. Rab.* that differentiate between the types of teachers; for instance, in *Lev. Rab.* 9:2 (p. 175), “teachers of Torah (lit. ‘scribes’), teachers of Mishnah and those who instruct children in the faith (i.e. the right behaviour)” (סופרין ומשמין ומלמדי) (תינוקות באמונה) are mentioned when interpreting Ps 50:23 (“And he who orders the way”).<sup>78</sup> But the Midrash offers no information about the setting where the subjects were taught.
- b) Some texts place the activity in the house of a certain teacher, as in the king-parable in *Lev. Rab.* 2:5 (p. 43), in which the king asks

<sup>75</sup> For the processes of sanctification and the features related to the holiness of the synagogue, see FINE, *This Holy Place*, pp. 67 ff.; about the inscriptions, see pp. 95-105.

<sup>76</sup> See LEVINE, *Ancient Synagogue*, p. 402.

<sup>77</sup> Some texts present the voice of the children in lessons in synagogues and houses of study (as in *Pes. Rab. Kah.* 15:5, ed. Mandelbaum, pp. 254-255), i.e. elementary education; see HEZSER, *Jewish Literacy*, pp. 51-52.

<sup>78</sup> About *soferim*, *mašnin* and *melammedim*, see also *Lev. Rab.* 30:2 (p. 693); for other references to *soferim* and *mašnin*, see *Lev. Rab.* 27:2 (p. 624) and 30:1 (p. 688). For other hierarchy related to Torah, Mishnah, Talmud, Tosefta, Haggadah (whatever the meaning of these terms were), see e.g. *Lev. Rab.* 22:1 (p. 497); 36:2 (p. 839); for other examples, see HEZSER, *The Social Structure*, p. 256.

about his son going to and coming back from “the house of the Torah teacher (בית ספרא).”<sup>79</sup> The context here, then, is clearly not the synagogue.

- c) Concerning the contents taught, a very famous opinion about the first steps taken by children in Torah study is transmitted in *Lev. Rab.* 7:3 (p. 156), attributed to R. Issi. Here, the book of Leviticus is considered the starting point for education (in a primary school context).<sup>80</sup> Was this a widespread habit in all scholarly contexts? And, from this passage, did children always begin their instruction with the book of Leviticus in the synagogue? Even the aforementioned passages in *Lev. Rab.* 11:7 and 35:1, which openly relate the synagogue –and house of study– to the Torah, present problems when trying to define what Torah is and, consequently, to infer the education level: is the Torah the five books of Moses? Is it the whole Bible? Or one of the books (as in the case of Leviticus)? Is the Oral Torah included?

The accounts in *Lev. Rab.* that provide information about the education level place the activity in a location other than a synagogue (e.g. a teacher’s house) or nowhere specific. When a location is specified, it is only in a general sense (e.g. regarding the Torah). This in no way means that the educational function of the synagogue was imprecise or even that there was a lack of interest on the part of the rabbis, but rather that this circumstance is due to an absence of contextual details, which can only be guessed at, but not completely corroborated. The Sages probably did not feel the need to describe in detail what they knew very well. Despite the inherent difficulties, it is clear that, according to the sources in *Lev. Rab.*,

<sup>79</sup> The same is in *Lev. Rab.* 30:1 (p. 688): “the house of the master” (בית רבן). In two king parables (*Lev. Rab.* 10:3 [p. 201] and 11:7 [p. 230]) the Greek term “pedagogue,” פידגג, is used as a –in the words of HEZSER (*Jewish Literacy*, p. 58)– “special type of private teacher-tutor associated with the wealthy, in fact, with the imperial aristocracy only.”

<sup>80</sup> “Why do they initiate children [into education] with the Torah of the Priest (= Leviticus)? They should initiate them at Genesis! Said the Holy One, blessed be He: Since the sacrifices are pure and the children are pure, let the pure come and engage in [the study of] the pure;” see also *Pes. Rab. Kah.* 6:3 (ed. Mandelbaum, p. 118). See HEZSER, *Jewish Literacy*, p. 77; HIRSHMAN, “Torah in Rabbinic Thought,” p. 931; STEMBERGER, *Judentum*, pp. 110-111.

the synagogue is considered one of the focal points for education in the community. Indeed, in *Lev. Rab.* 9:2 (p. 176), shortly after a discussion of the types of teachers, R. Simeon b. Laqish states that Saul came into possession of his kingdom thanks to the intervention of his grandfather Ner (lit. ‘light’),<sup>81</sup> because

There were dark alleys between his house and the synagogue (editio princeps: house of study), and he kindled lights in them in order to illuminate the community.<sup>82</sup>

## V. THE LITURGICAL DIMENSION OF THE SYNAGOGUE

The aspect of the synagogue best represented in the Midrash is probably the *liturgy*. The term “liturgy” is used here for –following Levine– “public religious rituals within the context of the synagogue.”<sup>83</sup> However, studying the relationship between the liturgical expressions and the synagogue is not without its difficulties, such as the following:

- a) Until the end of the first millennium there was no “standardized Jewish liturgical texts,”<sup>84</sup> meaning that oral transmission was the main source of knowledge regarding the liturgy rites, producing a coexistence of simultaneous versions of the traditions from different milieus.
- b) Praying was not necessarily associated with the synagogue, because it could be performed at home, in a public place, among others.<sup>85</sup>
- c) Rabbinic texts do not always offer enough details to locate the *Sitz im Leben* of the Torah interpretation –or simply the reading of a Torah verse/passage– i.e. either in a synagogue service or in an academic session.

<sup>81</sup> See 1 Chr 8:33; 9:35; y. *Šeb.* 3:10 34d.

<sup>82</sup> מבואות אפילין היו מביתו לבית הכנסת והיה מדליק בהן נירות כדי שיאירו לרבים (in EP: *לבית המדרש*).

<sup>83</sup> LEVINE, *Ancient Synagogue*, p. 530 n. 1.

<sup>84</sup> LEVINE, *Ancient Synagogue*, p. 533.

<sup>85</sup> In fact, this circumstance was already highlighted by REIF regarding an earlier period (“The Early Liturgy,” p. 353).

Moreover, the data provided by the rabbinic accounts is not sufficient to fully understand how the synagogue service operated or, particularly, how the rabbis were involved in it; in this respect, Stefan C. Reif highlights prayer as one of the problems for a scholar studying Jewish liturgy, an observation that can be applied to other liturgical questions as well:

Certain attitudes to prayer, its form and its centrality, became almost axiomatic in the Talmudic-midrashic literature and indeed, to a certain extent, in the wider Judaeo-Christian system of religious values [...] A further assumption, unwarranted from a purely scientific viewpoint, was and is that, when a named prayer is cited in an early rabbinic source, its overall content and detailed text are identical with what they came to be in one or other of the rites known to us from the mediaeval period.<sup>86</sup>

In this brief study, which looks at very diverse foci about the synagogue, it is not possible to discuss each aspect related to the communal liturgy in depth, even when all of the questions belong to the same textual corpus, as with *Lev. Rab.* Every topic (prayer, preaching, Torah reading, among others)<sup>87</sup> deserves its own targeted analysis. However, it is worthwhile to emphasize some issues brought up in the Midrash, in order to have, to a greater or lesser extent, a comprehensive approach to the information in this work and the difficulties inherent in evaluating it, difficulties that can certainly appear in other rabbinic corpora as well.<sup>88</sup>

The Midrash refers to various *prayers* several times throughout its text such as, among others, the Amidah, the Shema, the Blessing of the Shofar and the Blessing of the Priests.<sup>89</sup> As a liturgical expression of the community, the *Sitz im Leben* of the prayer was the synagogue. But “synagogue” cannot be understood from a model analogously based on later representations, but rather, according to David Kraemer,

<sup>86</sup> REIF, “The Early Liturgy,” p. 328.

<sup>87</sup> About a possible piyyut in *Lev. Rab.* 5:8 (p. 28), see VISOTZKY, *Golden Bells*, p. 42 and n. 9.

<sup>88</sup> The question about preaching will be analysed in section VI.

<sup>89</sup> Amidah: *Lev. Rab.* 1:8 (p. 21); 7:2 (p. 151); 9:9 (p. 194); 36:2 (p. 840); Shema: *Lev. Rab.* 1:8 (p. 21); 9:9 (p. 194); 23:4 (pp. 530-531); 27:6 (p. 637); Blessing of the Shofar: *Lev. Rab.* 29:1 (p. 668). Blessing of the Priest: *Lev. Rab.* 9:9 (p. 194).

Phenomenologically speaking, the synagogue is the place that is closest to blessings. It is a place that is, in significant ways, a non-place because its place can be anywhere.<sup>90</sup>

In midrashic literature, the context is usually not explicit enough to link prayer to the synagogue alone –even in the broadest sense of the term, as Kraemer does– because prayer was an integral part of other milieus of Jewish life, an important manifestation of individual and family rituals. However, in *Lev. Rab.* some examples regarding this activity can be traced to the synagogue setting, either because the specific passage discloses this context or some feature of the building is adduced. For instance, in one of the interpretations of Ps 51:19 (“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit,” i.e. midrashically interpreted as a penitent) in *Lev. Rab.* 7:2 (pp. 151-152),<sup>91</sup> the Rabbis said,

Whence [do we know] that one who passes before the chest<sup>92</sup> must make mention of the [Temple] Service and bow down, as in this blessing: *Take delight, O Lord, our God, and dwell in Zion, Your city?*<sup>93</sup>

This blessing belongs to the Amidah prayer (the blessing related to the Service), and bowing down expresses repentance. From this viewpoint, when the community prayer leader mentioned the Service, it was as if all the sacrifices in the Temple had been offered. According to this rabbinic opinion, prayer is a superior value, comparable to the Temple service or even higher.<sup>94</sup>

Another example is the above-mentioned episode in *Lev. Rab.* 23:4 (pp. 530-532) that contextualizes prayer in a synagogue building.<sup>95</sup> The Midrash interprets Song 2:2 in connection with the recitation of the Shema. At the beginning of the paragraph, R. Hanan of Sepphoris applies this verse to the “acts of loving kindness” (גמילות חסדים), and speaks of those “ten men that entered in the synagogue to pray and did not know to recite

<sup>90</sup> KRAEMER, *Rabbinic Judaism*, p. 138.

<sup>91</sup> Also in *Pesiq. Rab. Kah.* 24:5 (ed. Mandelbaum, p. 353).

<sup>92</sup> See *m. Ta’an* 2:5.

<sup>93</sup> ורבנן אמ' מנין לזה שעבר לפני התיבה שהוא צריך להזכיר עבודה ולשוח, מן הדא ברכתא רצה יי' אלהינו ושכון בציון עירך.

<sup>94</sup> See COHEN, “The Temple and the Synagogue,” p. 318.

<sup>95</sup> In section II.

the Shema and pass before the chest (of the Torah).”<sup>96</sup> He who knows how to do it is –as the verse says– “like a rose among thorns.” This interpretation is illuminated by an episode about the tanna R. Eleazar Hisma (2nd cent.), who was asked to recite the Shema in a “certain place” (אתר), i.e., a synagogue. His ignorance of how to lead the prayer is revealed to the community, which goes so far as to question whether he is, indeed, a *rabbi*. To make up for this deficiency, he asks R. Akiba to teach him how to recite the prayer, i.e. למיקרב (‘approaching’ [the ark]).<sup>97</sup> Beyond the information about this prayer in the synagogue context, the text bears witness to the fact that rabbis needed to know not only the blessings,<sup>98</sup> but also how to intone them in the synagogue and direct the congregation. According to this account, a *rabbi* should be able to act as a *hazzan* if the situation arises.<sup>99</sup>

The use of the *biblical text* in the synagogue service –the weekly reading with all that entails (the targum, the sermon)– has been discussed by scholars for many decades. Although the *reading of Scripture* had an outstanding role in the early synagogue,<sup>100</sup> the question about how it was performed in Palestine has not yet been answered in a way that is broadly agreed upon, beyond the acceptance of a triennial cycle (three years or three and a half years) of Torah readings, in which the division of the text differed from one community to another.<sup>101</sup> Moreover, the potential information contained about this in the amoraic midrashim (like *Lev. Rab.*, *Pes. Rab. Kah.*, *Tanḥuma*) is puzzling in terms of form and content.

<sup>96</sup> עשרה שנכנסו לבית הכנסת להתפלל ולא היו יודעין לפרוס על שמע ולעבור לפני התיבה. See also *Tanḥ Wayyehi* 7.

<sup>97</sup> About the meanings of this verb (“come close,” “sacrifice,” “pray”), see SOKOLOFF, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic*, pp. 502-503; FINE, *This Holy Place*, p. 86.

<sup>98</sup> This same passage says that R. Yonah even taught his disciples the blessings for wedding couples and mourners in detail: “You should be masters in every word” (הוון) (גברין בכל מילה).

<sup>99</sup> About the rabbinic authority over these liturgical practices, see HEZSER, *The Social Structure*, pp. 222-223.

<sup>100</sup> See KRAMER, *Rabbinic Judaism*, p. 139 (alluding to Levine’s opinion).

<sup>101</sup> See *b. Meg.* 29b. See e.g. “Triennial Cycle,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica. Second Edition*, eds. Fred SKOLNIK and Michael BERENBAUM, vol. 20 (Detroit: Thomson Gale–Keter Publishing House, 2007) pp. 30-31; LEVINE, *Ancient Synagogue*, pp. 536; STEMBERGER, *Judentum*, pp. 97-98 and *Einleitung*, pp. 266-267.



With regard to the midrashic composition of *Lev. Rab.*, most scholars have long rejected the thesis that the “target-verses” in each of the chapters (i.e. the verse –sometimes several verses– a chapter is devoted to) mainly reflect the weekly reading from Leviticus according to a specific Palestinian triennial order.<sup>102</sup> The compiler/s of the Midrash might have worked with other criteria (still under debate) when choosing the materials related to each verse.<sup>103</sup> Indeed, even if there is general agreement that the use of the biblical text according to a triennial Torah reading cycle in Palestinian synagogues is not represented –at least for the most part– in the formal organization of the *Lev. Rab.* chapters around specific verses, other questions arise when considering some allusions to the biblical text. Does the Midrash reflect this activity in certain accounts? Could the midrashic materials have reproduced –or mentioned– such a situation in occasional episodes, i.e. the Torah reading in a synagogue? How can references to certain Torah sections/verses be understood, like for instance that in *Lev. Rab.* 3:6 (p. 69)?

R. Hananiah b. R. Aha went to a certain place and found this verse at the beginning of the seder: “The remainder of the grain offering is for Aaron and his sons” (*Lev* 2:3).<sup>104</sup>

According to the text, this amora discovered *Lev* 2:3 at the head of the “order,” *seder*, in the Sabbath Torah reading in a certain “place” (אתר, see Section II above). From the context, it seems that he was familiar with a different order of the readings, and was therefore compelled to improvise when he “opened” (פתח) his interpretation with an explanation of *Ps* 17:14. The account reveals not only the local differences in how the Torah was read in Palestine, but also the fact that the rabbis could actively participate in outside communities. However, did this scene correspond to a sermon, or rather an exposition, associated with the weekly reading

<sup>102</sup> See e.g. VISOTZKY, *Golden Bells*, pp. 23-27; STEMBERGER, *Einleitung*, pp. 321-322.

<sup>103</sup> See e.g. Visotzky’s opinion: “LR is simply a collection of aggadic midrashim on selected clusters of Leviticus verses which serve as magnets for traditional materials or as quasi-encyclopedic topic headings” (VISOTZKY, *Golden Bells*, p. 22). Visotzky (pp. 31ff.) emphasizes the miscellaneous nature of the work.

<sup>104</sup> ר' חנניה בר ר' אחא אזל לחד אתר אשכח הדין פיסוקא ראש סדר, הנותרת מן המנחה לאהרן ולבניו. See also *Esth. Rab.* 3:6.

at this synagogue<sup>105</sup> or was the rabbi leading a study session on the reading topic for an audience (whatever the education level)? The context is not precise enough to give an indisputable answer.

Another instance is the *ma'aseh* in *Lev. Rab.* 6:2 (p. 130) in which Reuben robs Simeon and a third party, Levi, discovers this deed. In this fictitious example, Reuben suggests that Levi can divide the spoils with him if he does not disclose the theft, but when Levi enters the synagogue, he hears a voice<sup>106</sup> reciting Lev 5:1 about the witness who does not testify.<sup>107</sup> Does the citation come from a weekly reading from Leviticus? Is it related to some sort of explanation? A sermon? An academic session? Can any of these proposals explain the story in the right framework for the synagogue? The answer depends on the reader's understanding of both the context and all of these activities.

The rabbinic use of the word *parašah* in connection with the biblical text also raises a question. Although the meaning of the term is indeed ambiguous,<sup>108</sup> in some cases the reference to a certain *parašah* clearly indicates a specific portion of the Torah. For example, in *Lev. Rab.* 1:7 and 1:8 (pp. 19-23), the matter prior to Lev 1:1 (the lemma verse in the chapter) is discussed regarding the expression “as the Lord commanded Moses” (כאשר צוה יי את משה). Therefore, the subject referred to –i.e. situated before Lev 1:1 in the biblical text– is that which appears “in the *parašah* of the Tabernacle” (בפרשת משכן). Accordingly, the portion is a very well delimited paragraph of the Torah concerning the construction of this structure and other topics related to the description at the end of Exodus, where “commanded” is mentioned in several verses, as R. Samuel bar Nahman in the name of R. Nathan notes: “Eighteen times *commands* are written in the section of the Tabernacle, corresponding to the

<sup>105</sup> See LEVINE, *Ancient Synagogue*, p. 581.

<sup>106</sup> The hazzan according to the addendum to the first edition; see section II.

<sup>107</sup> “If a person sins... he is a witness, whether he has seen or known, if he does not tell it, then he will bear his guilt.” The verse corresponds to one of the Torah divisions of the Masoretic Text according to Leningrad Codex.

<sup>108</sup> The term entails several meanings, see Marcus JASTROW, *Dictionary of Targumim, Talmud, and Midrashic Literature* (1926) pp. 1243-1244 (Tyndale Archive of Biblical Studies, <http://www.tyndalearchive.com/tabs/jastrow/>); SOKOLOFF, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic*, p. 452.

18 vertebrae of the backbone” (in *Lev. Rab.* 1:8, pp. 20-21).<sup>109</sup> Is *parašah* a synonym for *seder* (as in *Lev. Rab.* 3:6) in this context? Is it associated with the weekly Torah reading in a synagogue or with a public explanation of this section (a kind of sermon)? Does it depend on a division based on academic purposes linked to this matter (lesson)? Indeed, the fact that the passage designates a portion of the Torah can be inferred from the context, but it is more difficult to determine the aim of this division (liturgical/academic? Both?).<sup>110</sup>

## VI. SYNAGOGUE AND *DERAŠAH*

Another question that deserves attention is the midrashic information about *preaching* in the ancient synagogue. This question is linked to the study of the formal structure of the haggadic midrashim and their widespread categorization as exegetic and homiletic;<sup>111</sup> in fact, *Lev. Rab.* has been defined as a “homiletical midrash,”<sup>112</sup> under the assumption that this textual corpus reflects a form of sermon to a greater or lesser extent. This is not the place to examine the various positions taken by scholars for the last two centuries about the possibility that this Midrash, as it is known, represents a sort of homilies throughout its chapters or some parts (*pisqa’ot*) of the chapters –with a more or less literary elaboration– or, on the contrary, to discard this viewpoint completely.<sup>113</sup> It is sufficient to

<sup>109</sup> שמנה עשר ציוויין כת’ בפרשת משכן, כנגד שמנה עשרה חליות שבשדרה. See also *y. Ber.* 4:3:8a; *y. Ta’an.* 2:2:65c; *Tanḥ. Wayyera*’ 1.

The portion about the Tabernacle comprises Exod 38:21-40:38, where “commanded” actually appears 19 times (38:22; 39:1, 5, 7, 21, 26, 29,31, 32, 42, 43; 40:16, 19, 21, 23, 25, 27, 29, 32). This division coincides with the Leningrad Masoretic Text (*Parašah Pequde*).

<sup>110</sup> For other passages with the same problem, see *Lev. Rab.* 9:8 (pp. 186-187); 15:4 (pp. 327-328); 24:5 (p. 557); 26:6 (pp. 597-598), among others.

<sup>111</sup> See e.g. STEMBERGER, *Einleitung*, p. 265. About the usefulness of this distinction, see STEMBERGER, “The Derashah,” pp. 18-20.

<sup>112</sup> See e.g. STEMBERGER, *Einleitung*, pp. 321-322.

<sup>113</sup> For a summary of the different approaches, see e.g. Norman J. COHEN, “Structure and Editing in the Homiletic Midrashim,” *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 6 (1981) pp. 1-20: 1-3; STEMBERGER, “The Derashah,” pp. 7-9; Burton L. VISOTZKY, “The Misnomers “*Petihah*” and “Homiletic Midrash” as Descriptions for Leviticus Rabbah and Pesikta De-Rav Kahana,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 18 (2011) pp. 19-31: 19-22.

note that the scholars' positions regarding *Lev. Rab.* have been moving increasingly in the direction of considering the Midrash a literary composition, a product of the rabbinic school, whose chapters are basically structured into two parts, a first comprising a series of sub-units often, but not always, introduced by the *petihah* formula (“Rabbi X *patah*”, lit. “opened”); and a second, often indicated in manuscripts by the term *gufa* /*gufah*.<sup>114</sup> To explain this, Burton L. Visotzky has used the Hellenistic forms “proem/s” and “soma,” considering *Lev. Rab.* a “miscellany” of materials gathered around some verses of Leviticus, and organized in *petihah* (or rather in plural, *petihot*) and *gufa*’ sections.<sup>115</sup> However, although in the last decades scholars, for the most part, have agreed about the perception of the Midrash as a literary work done in an academic context to a greater extent, they have not reached a consensus about its relation to preaching in the synagogue, neither with regard to its structure nor to the *Sitz im Leben* of some materials.<sup>116</sup>

But can an agreement be achieved concerning this connection when the question of how to understand the *derašah* in rabbinic times is still

<sup>114</sup> In addition, there is usually a *ḥatimah* at the end of the chapter, a formula that closes the composition, a *peroratio*. See STEMBERGER, *Einleitung*, pp. 268-272. About how the structure of a *Lev. Rab.* chapter works, see Alexander SAMELY, “Literary Structures and Historical Reconstruction: The Example of an Amoraic Midrash (Leviticus Rabbah),” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 165 (2010) pp. 185-215 (he, like other scholars, refers to the *gufa*’ as ‘inyan, see p. 194).

<sup>115</sup> *Golden Bells*, pp. 23 ff.; “The Misnomers”, p. 21.

<sup>116</sup> For instance, Avigdor SHINAN (in several works) opts for a return to the idea that the *petihah* might be oral in origin “at least in its initial stages;” see his “Sermons, Targums, and the Reading from Scriptures in the Ancient Synagogues,” in *The Synagogue in Late Antiquity*, ed. Lee I. LEVINE (Philadelphia, 1987) pp. 97-110: 98; see also “The Late Midrashic, Paytanic, and Targumic Literature”, in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, IV: *The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period*, ed. Steven T. KATZ (Cambridge University Press, 2006) pp. 678-698: 684. On the contrary, Gary G. PORTON considers the Midrash a “literary phenomenon that finds its primary locus within the Rabbinic schoolhouses of late antiquity;” in his “Midrash and the Rabbinic Sermon,” in *When Judaism & Christianity Began: Essays in Memory of Anthony J. Saldarini*, eds. Alan J. AVERY-PECK, Daniel HARRINGTON and Jacob NEUSNER, vol. II (= *Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism*, 85 [Leiden: Brill, 2004]) pp. 461-482: 461; see also “Rabbinic Midrash Public or Private,” *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 5:2 (2002) pp. 141-169: 141; “Midrash, Definitions of,” in *Encyclopedia of Midrash*, eds. Jacob NEUSNER and Alan AVERY-PECK (Leiden: Brill, 2005) pp. 520-534, esp. 527-532.

under debate?<sup>117</sup> As Günter Stemberger argues, *derašah* in rabbinic literature means “interpretation, exegesis,” but “not yet a sermon or an edifying discourse in the synagogue, as it became in the Middle Ages.”<sup>118</sup> Therefore, to a certain extent, the academic point of view about rabbis preaching in the late antique synagogue will be based on applying later models to some rabbinic passages in order to interpret them as sermons. In Stemberger’s words,

But how common was it for rabbis to preach? The answer to this question depends on our reading of the rabbinic sources and their relationship with actual sermons.<sup>119</sup>

Taking into account these observations, it is once again necessary to explore the possibility that some traditions in *Lev. Rab.* might contain materials that are oral in origin or passages that refer to –or at least recreate– scenes related to a *derašah* in a synagogue (in the broadest sense of the term) on Sabbath. As has been already noted, in rabbinic literature clear allusions to rabbis expounding in synagogues/schoolhouses are few.<sup>120</sup> But probably the main problem is the scarcity of contextual information in rabbinic texts, which would be central to interpreting the verb *daraš* in a more general (“interpreted, expounded”) or specific (“preached”) way.<sup>121</sup> This circumstance concerns, for example, the passages where a rabbi or certain person is “sitting and expounding.” In *Lev. Rab.*, these cases are not limited to the *petiḥah* sections, but are found anywhere in the composition.

In the passage from *Lev. Rab.* 35:12 (pp. 830-831) discussed above (section II), it says that R. Abbahu went by the “synagogue of the Tarsians in Lod” and heard the voice of R. Samuel b. Nahman, who was “sit-

<sup>117</sup> Regarding the evolution of the term from tannaitic times to amoraic times (i.e. from a term related to “instruction” to a term connected with “interpretation”), see MANDEL, *The Origins of the Midrash*, pp. 222-282.

<sup>118</sup> STEMBERGER, “Derashah,” p. 13.

<sup>119</sup> STEMBERGER, “Derashah,” p. 11.

<sup>120</sup> PORTON, “Rabbinic Midrash,” p. 147; “Midrash and the Rabbinic Sermon,” p. 468; “Midrash, definitions of,” p. 527; STEMBERGER, “Derashah,” p. 13. Porton even underlines that the “synagogues” where rabbis were said to preach “were in centers of Rabbinic activity” (in PORTON, “Midrash, definitions of,” p. 529).

<sup>121</sup> STEMBERGER, “Derashah,” p. 13.

ting and expounding” (יתיב ודריש). In his explanation, he reproduces the discourse of R. Hezekiah, transmitted by the Rabbis, in connection with the harvest (as proof, Ps 65:10 is quoted, which sheds light on Lev 26:4, the target-verse of the chapter). What kind of session did R. Abbahu hear? To whom was R. Samuel b. Nahman expounding? And R. Hezekiah (the supposed author of this speech)? Should it be easily assumed that the audience was the community and that it was a sermon? It is not possible to infer from the –technical– expression “he was sitting and expounding” that he was preaching or that it was an academic session held in a synagogue, or even something in between (e.g. simply commenting on a text). What can be accepted for certain is that the session is situated in a specific synagogue linked to a Scripture interpretation.

In some cases in the Midrash the audience profile is better defined, but the episode referred to is still problematic when trying to identify a *derašah*, such as what is understood to be a sermon. For instance, in *Lev. Rab.* 32:7 (pp. 752-753), a passage analysed above on the *mamzer* who came from Babylonia (section III), R. Berekhiah informs the community of the visitor’s impoverished circumstances in a synagogue on Sabbath. The rabbi is said to be in session, i.e. he “was sitting and expounding” (יתיב ודריש).<sup>122</sup> However, it is not clear who he was addressing with his speech: the whole community as a sort of sermon or merely a plea for help? An academic group, although everybody could attend the lessons? The question about charity towards the *mamzer* concerned the community, but what were the circumstances surrounding the session? In fact, the text distinguishes between the rabbi’s exposition and the attention called to the *mamzer*’s situation.

In this vein, another instance is the aforementioned passage in *Lev. Rab.* 9:9 (pp. 191-193, section II), which recreates the dispute between a woman and her husband about her decision to stay and listen to R. Meir:

R. Meir used to sit and expound on Sabbath eves. There was a woman that used to sit and listen to him. [Once] when his exposition ran on, she remained until he finished that what he was expounding...<sup>123</sup>

<sup>122</sup> See HEZSER, *The Social Structure*, p. 213.

<sup>123</sup> מ' מאיר הוה יתיב ודריש שבתא הוות תמן חדא איתתא יתיבה ושמעא ליה תנתה ר' מדרשיה אמתינת עד דיחסל מה דדריש (p. 191).

The parallel versions in the Talmud (y. *Soṭah* 1:4:16d) and in *Deut. Rab.* (5:15, ed. Mirkin, p. 11:95) respectively place the episode in the synagogue at Hammat and in a *bet ha-midrāš*. As part of the audience, women were allowed to attend the sessions alongside R. Meir's disciples, who intervened at a certain point. Therefore, a heterogeneous audience was present at these sessions. What sort of speech was taking place and who was it addressed to, a popular or an academic audience? It seems to be both at the same time.<sup>124</sup> Stemberger, indeed, stresses that the limits between the sermon and the instruction were blurred (“hier verschwammen die Grenzen zwischen Predigt und Unterricht”).<sup>125</sup>

An example of a *derašah* delivered by a *ḥasid*, “pious man” –not by a rabbi–, is the *ma‘aseh* transmitted by R. Berekhiah in *Lev. Rab.* 15:3 (pp. 324-325), which is related to the interpretation of the word *šetef* (“flood”) in Job 38:25. R. Berekhiah argues that in certain places a hair is called *šitfah* (“follicle”) and then introduces the following story:

There is the case of a pious man who sat and expounded: “You have no single hair for which the Holy One, blessed be He, did not create its own channel.” The next day he wished go out (abroad) to make a living. His wife told him: “Yesterday you were sitting and expounding: ‘You have no single hair for which the Holy One, blessed be He, did not create its own hole, so that one of them should not benefit from its fellow (hair).’ And now you wish to go out to seek your living! Stay and your Creator shall sustain you.” He listened to her and stayed, and his Creator sustained him.<sup>126</sup>

This example sheds light on a verse from Writings, Job 38:25, which midrashically explains Lev 13:2 (“When a man has on the skin of his

<sup>124</sup> Regarding the audience, see Marc HIRSHMAN, “The Preacher and his Public in Third-Century Palestine,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 42:1 (1991) pp. 108-114: 108-109. In this study, Hirshman considers a passage in *Lev. Rab.* (18:1, p. 391), analysed by Saul Lieberman several decades before, about R. Levi's interpretations on Qoh 12:2 differentiating between that addressed to “colleagues” (i.e. “scholars”) and that to “the ignorant.”

<sup>125</sup> STEMBERGER, *Judentum*, p. 102. MANDEL (*The Origins of the Midrash*, pp. 273-274 n. 130) relates the verb *dareš* to “the activity of public discourse.”

<sup>126</sup> מעשה בחסיד אחד שהיה יושב ודורש, אין לך כל נימא ונימא שלא ברא לה הקב"ה תעלה בפני עצמה. למחר ביקש לצאת לפרנסתו אמרה לו אשתו אתמול היית יושב ודורש, אין לך כל נימא ונימא שלא ברא לה הקב"ה גומא בפני עצמה כדי שלא תהא אחת מהן נהנית מחברתה, ועכשיו אתה מבקש לצאת לתור פרנסתך, תיב לך ובוריך קאים לך. שמע לה ויתיב ליה וקם ליה בורייה. See also *Tanḥ. Tazria* '6; *TanḥB. Tazria* '8; *b. B. Bat.* 16a.

body”). Although R. Berekhiah transmits the story, the supposed author is someone not related to rabbinic circles, but a pious man who is able to speak in a session (a Sabbath session), which his wife is allowed to attend. Therefore, his speech is addressed to a popular audience. Could the *ma‘aseh* simply be understood as a fictitious deed attributed to R. Berekhiah or did this rabbi reflect the situation of a more or less professional preacher when mentioning this story? Does his speech differ from a rabbinic explanation about a specific topic?<sup>127</sup> As far as can be deduced, the answer is no.

According to all these accounts, it does not suffice to pay attention to the formation of the literary units, but is necessary to consider factors like the subject matter, context and audience. Unfortunately, there is almost no data in this respect. But, in spite of the paucity of information, the discourse that was taking place in these texts seems to be more along the lines of a didactic activity for the community—or part of the community—than a sermon in the traditional sense of the word.

## VII. CONCLUSION

As noted at the beginning of this study, the information about the synagogue is restricted to a set of references transmitted in a single source: *Lev. Rab.* Moreover, in some texts the term “synagogue” (בית הכנסת, *כנישתא* and its slight variants) is specified, but in others the context is assumed from certain indications (features belonging to the building, activities carried out in particular moments, etc.), which obviously involves a margin of error. It is, admittedly, impossible to obtain an overall view of the synagogue from rabbinic literature, both because of the scarcity of the information and due to the Sages’ own interests. In fact, the synagogue is usually mentioned in passing and is not the main focus of attention, as can be seen in the accounts in *Lev. Rab.* But precisely for these very reasons the—explicit or potential— allusions to the synagogue are extremely

<sup>127</sup> MANDEL (*The Origins of the Midrash*, p. 226 n. 12) notes that this story is one of the “clear examples (from the amoraic literature) of *darash* used to indicate public utterances unrelated to Scripture.” In fact, the *ma‘aseh* is only related to Scripture by the midrashic context.



valuable. Through these *en passant* references, the rabbis not only offered details about the different functions of the synagogue, but also revealed their position about it and their degree of involvement in its operation.

1. The term “synagogue” appears more than ten times in the Midrash,<sup>128</sup> with a predominance of the meaning “synagogue-building” (or at least a place performing the functions of the synagogue). This number of allusions may seem low in a long textual corpus like *Lev. Rab.*, but a lack of a clear context often characterized the deeds and stories told in the rabbinic sources. Therefore, this number of references should be assessed with this fact in mind. Indeed, other accounts can be related to a synagogue context, such as those passages where the term *'atar* (“place”) implies the existence of a “synagogue” (*Lev. Rab.* 3:6; 23:4) and others with features related to this context: the mention of a hazzan or the Torah chest (*Lev. Rab.* 6:2 and 23:4, respectively). Even though the accounts do not represent historical events, but rather fictional scenes, the rabbis, especially the amoraim, were aware of the importance of this institution for Jewish communities, and they accepted it as part of their social reality.

The passages that mention a specific synagogue are very few: “the old synagogue of Saringit” in Tiberias (*Lev. Rab.* 22:4) and “the synagogue of the Tarsians in Lod” (*Lev. Rab.* 35:12) are both characterized by their geographic location and by some particular identifying feature. Moreover, a talmudic parallel to *Lev. Rab.* 9:9 (*y. Soṭah* 1:4:16d) contextualizes the action at the “synagogue of Hammat” at Tiberias as well. The rabbis not only participated in their operation, but were apparently well acquainted with these synagogues. Are these places connected to the archaeological remains found in those areas or were the synagogues mentioned in *Lev. Rab.* and its textual parallels different from those known from archaeology?

2. In Levine’s opinion, two aspects predominate concerning the rabbinic information about the synagogue: liturgy and study.<sup>129</sup> On the one hand, the best represented dimension in the Midrash is likely that related to liturgy, as seen in sections V and VI. Study was also recognized as an important activity in the synagogue sphere according to the

<sup>128</sup> See notes 13 and 14.

<sup>129</sup> LEVINE, *Ancient Synagogue*, p. 179.

texts in section IV. But charity, an aspect with a communal dimension, is also a focus of interest in this Midrash, even though not all the references can be linked to the synagogue. These three groups of data about the institution can be summarized by the saying of Simeon the Righteous in *Abot* 1:2: “Upon three things the world is established: upon the Torah, the Service, and deeds of loving-kindness.” In other words, Torah is study; the Service (i.e. the Temple Service) could no longer be offered in rabbinic times, but prayer played a role in this vein (although it was not a viewpoint shared by all the amoraim);<sup>130</sup> and charity is one of the deeds of loving-kindness. Accordingly, the Midrash transmits the idea that the rabbis were especially interested in these three aspects of the synagogue.

3. Of the communal functions of the synagogue, *zedaqah* (the supervision of “charity”) is better represented in the Midrash than other secular activities. *Lev. Rab.* provides information about the role of the hazzan as the collector of charity (*Lev. Rab.* 16:5), and the importance of the synagogue and the Sabbath as the place and time to receive charity from the community (*Lev. Rab.* 32:7). However, should other texts such as accounts of the synagogue where the context is not so clear be rejected, such as for instance *Lev. Rab.* 5:4 and 34:14 (about charity performed at certain times), and *Lev. Rab.* 30:1 and 27:2 (concerning the collection of funds to pay teachers)? Obviously, they cannot be accepted as unquestioned evidence of this practice at the synagogue, but they may at least be considered potential accounts, according to what is known from other sources.

With respect to social affairs of a personal nature, a striking saying attributed to R. Eleazar highlights the need for a Jew to participate regularly in synagogue issues (*Lev. Rab.* 5:5). By stating that “a person has to have a nail or a peg fixed in a synagogue so as to merit to be buried in that place,” this rabbi recognizes the relevance of the synagogue in the social life of a Jew as a member of the community. But, was this the most widespread opinion among the rabbis?

4. The accounts in *Lev. Rab.* about the scholarly dimension of the synagogue confirm the importance of this institution in the education sys-

<sup>130</sup> See COHEN, “The Temple and the Synagogue,” pp. 317-318.

tem: the study of the Torah connects synagogues and schools, assuming the continuity of Torah instruction throughout their existence (*Lev. Rab.* 35:1; 11:7); in fact, the Midrash anachronistically dates the appearance of synagogues to biblical times as a positive event for the enlightenment of the community (*Lev. Rab.* 9:2). Therefore, *Lev. Rab.* presents a positive perception of the synagogue in this respect. However, the texts raise several problems due to the lack of contextual information.

- a) Which levels of education were addressed in the synagogues? When the texts mention, for instance, the teaching content (*Lev. Rab.* 7:3) or the kinds of teachers (*Lev. Rab.* 9:2), the context is not specified (i.e. there is no mention of a synagogue). Even when the Torah instruction is located in a synagogue context (*Lev. Rab.* 35:1; 11:7), there is still an unresolved question: how should the term Torah be understood?
- b) The passages allude to “synagogues and houses of study,” equating them. But is *bet ha-midrash* a general term in amoraic times for all the levels of education related to “children,” “disciples,” and “Sages” (*Lev. Rab.* 11:7)? And if it is, could all those levels be attended to in a synagogue?
- c) How was the educational function of the synagogue perceived by the rabbis? According to the texts, was the study of the Torah considered a (religious) activity that complemented the liturgical use of the text? It seems so.

5. The liturgical dimension of the synagogue is essentially represented in the Midrash by three aspects: prayer, the use of the biblical text and the speech (preaching?) addressed to the community/group. The main problem when dealing with these activities is the almost complete absence of specific details and descriptions in rabbinic literature in general and in this Midrash in particular. This scarcity of information does not make it possible to either fully understand how these activities were carried out or the degree of participation of the rabbis. As Reif notes concerning prayer, “certain attitudes.... became almost axiomatic in the Talmud-midrashic literature...”;<sup>131</sup> in fact, this circumstance can be applied to other liturgical aspects as well.

<sup>131</sup> REIF, “The Early Liturgy,” p. 328.

Regarding prayer, the Midrash refers to several blessings,<sup>132</sup> but the information is too sparse to place them in a synagogue building/context. However, two blessings are explicitly connected to a scene in a synagogue: the Amidah, cited using a version of one its blessings (*Lev. Rab.* 7:2), and the Shema (*Lev. Rab.* 23:4). Both passages concern the way to perform these prayers during the service, accentuating their centrality in the liturgy. In addition, *Lev. Rab.* 23:4 can be adduced as proof of the need for the rabbis to know both the prayers and how to recite them before the community (i.e. acting as a hazzan). Indeed, R. Eleazar Hisma's status as rabbi was even questioned when he was asked to intone the Shema and did not know it. Was this the general opinion about the skills required to achieve the position of "rabbi" in amoraic times?

With respect to the biblical text, the information is puzzling. Scholars have already demonstrated that the target-verses in the *Lev. Rab.* chapters do not reflect—at least for the most part—the division of Leviticus according to a triennial reading cycle. Nevertheless, some passages in the Midrash are valuable in this sense, because they apparently show a particular use of the biblical text. The reference in *Lev. Rab.* 3:6 to “the beginning of the *seder*” in a “certain place” is evidence of the different Palestinian divisions of the Torah. But it is also proof of the participation of the rabbis in synagogue life, even in communities foreign to them. However, the passage does not clarify the kind of activity that R. Hananiah b. R. Aha was taking part in: some preaching related to the weekly reading or a study session about this portion? The case in *Lev. Rab.* 6:2 about the voice reciting Lev 1:5 is equally difficult: which activity regarding the biblical text is being referred to? In addition, the question of the terminology must be considered as well: what, indeed, does *parašah* mean in relation to the biblical text in cases such as *Lev. Rab.* 1:8? Is it a synonym for *seder*, does it represent a different use of the text or does this division have another aim? Without determining the audience, the debate remains open.

7. Most scholars in recent decades agree that the *Lev. Rab.* chapters are a composition from the rabbinic academy, characterized by their division into two main parts (*petihah/petihot* and *gufa*). However, scholars do not

<sup>132</sup> See n. 89.

agree about the relationship between the literary structure and preaching in the synagogue of Late Antiquity, or about the role of the rabbis as preachers. How is it possible to reach a consensus about this question if the very definition of *derašah* differs among scholars? Once again the problem is the lack of specific information in the sources about various important aspects (the audience, content of the discourse, context, etc.) that could help us to understand *derašah* (lit. “interpretation”) in a more specific way, as happened in the Middle Ages (“sermon”).

Like other midrashic and talmudic works, *Lev. Rab.* transmits traditions about a rabbi or someone else “sitting and expounding” in a synagogue on Sabbath eve, such as those about R. Samuel b. Nahman (in the “synagogue of the Tarsians in Lod,” *Lev. Rab.* 35:12), R. Berekhiah (*Lev. Rab.* 32:7), R. Meir (*Lev. Rab.* 9:9) and “a pious man” (15:3). Does the expression “was sitting and expounding” allude to a sermon for the community or an academic session that was open to the community as well (a didactic and popular explanation related to a specific topic or text)? Were the boundaries between the two situations clear? As Stemberger points out, the participation of the rabbis in this activity “depends on our reading of the rabbinic sources and their relationship with actual sermons.”<sup>133</sup> But what should the criteria be, if the sources do not often refer to the audience, the subject of the session or even the context, or at best they contain a few details?

8. Concerning the rabbis’ involvement in the different aspects of the synagogue, the data in *Lev. Rab.* fit scholarly observations about the increase of rabbinic activity in amoraic times. Even though some tannas play a role in the passages related to the synagogue, the traditions appear for the first time in amoraic sources: either the materials in *Lev. Rab.* date from this period or they were tannaitic traditions that were revised and re-contextualized in amoraic sources. But, despite the active participation of some rabbis in synagogue life, the Midrash does not provide evidence of leadership positions in the Palestinian synagogues.<sup>134</sup>

In conclusion, the accounts in *Lev. Rab.* transmit a positive –or neutral– attitude on the part of the rabbis towards the synagogue, at the same time that the data are partial and scarce, and usually conditioned by a her-

<sup>133</sup> STEMBERGER, “Derashah,” p. 11.

<sup>134</sup> See HEZSER, *The Social Structure*, p. 223.

meneutic aim. It is not possible to obtain a defined picture of the Palestinian synagogue of Late Antiquity, but valuable pieces of information are transmitted in the Midrash that shed light on certain features, customs and practices. Thus, although solving the puzzle and establishing a complete picture still seems to be an elusive goal, the Midrash offers a few more pieces about the synagogue in a certain place (Palestine) and at a certain moment (the amoraic period).

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