

## Emotional Ideals of Total Devotion in Midrash Sifre to Devarim

Pre-defense Abstract by Tamara Holkenov

My dissertation is a part of a collective project led by my supervisor, Laura Feldt, titled *Total Devotion: Passions and Plots in Radical Religion in the Ancient World*. As indicated by the project's name, it focuses on the interplay between emotion, narrative, and ideals of total devotion in antiquity. My part of the project examines ideals of devotion in early rabbinic Judaism, a late-antique religious movement among Jews, later becoming the core of Orthodox Judaism. My empirical material is a third century Palestinian commentary (*Midrash*) to the fifth book of Moses (Deuteronomy, or *Devarim* in Hebrew), entitled *Sifre* (Hebrew for "books"), and the dissertation's main contribution would be the examination of devotional ideals of presented in this *Midrash* with special attention to emotionality.

The central section of *Sifre to Devarim* (passages 55-303) is mostly a legal discussion (*halakha*) of the law in Deuteronomy. Typically, it is characterized by a relatively low level of narrativity. However, the opening and ending sections of the *Midrash* contain more non-legal discussions (*aggada*), and more reflections focused on devotion. These sections are typically characterized by a relatively high level of narrativity and emotionality, which are tightly interconnected (Schaefer 2019, Nikolsky 2021, and Feldt 2023). Accordingly, the analyses of the dissertation focus mainly on these framing sections. In the analyses of the opening section, I mostly use the oldest surviving manuscript which is close to complete – that is, *Vatican 32*. In my analyses of the ending section, I mostly use *London 341* (both manuscripts are available on the *Maagarim* website).

Previous research on *Sifre to Devarim* has not systematically analyzed the whole or parts of it with a focus on emotionality. Hammer (1986) recognized emotion as a central tool for the maintenance of devotees' connection to God (that is, devotion), which he identified as the main goal of the *Midrash*. In terms of devotion, Mihaly (1964) and Hammer (1985) discuss the election of Israel in certain passages of the *Midrash* – thereby mainly emphasizing the relation of God to the devotees, whereas my focus is on the relation of the devotees to God. Several scholars (Fraade 1991, Hirschman 2009, Goldstone 2016) have researched passages of *Sifre to Devarim* that reflect or communicate about Torah study as an ideal of devotion – but again, without special attention to emotionality. Notably, In Neusner's (1987) ambitious and relatively large-scale systematic analysis of emotionality in rabbinic texts, *Sifre to Devarim* is curiously absent, even from his demonstrative survey of exegesis to Deuteronomy 6:5.

The dissertation draws on theories of emotion and religion to approach the analysis of ideals of devotion in *Sifre to Devarim*. By devotion I refer to the relation of the devotee to the religious symbol – mainly the deity – always within a collective context. By emotion I mean such a socially situated relational process, always both conceptualizing and embodied – in resemblance with thoughts in general (Reddy 2001, Scheer 2012, and Rosenwein and Cristiani 2018). However, what distinguishes emotion (according to Spinoza followers such as Burkitt 2002, Solomon 2008, and Schaefer 2019) is its direct concern with the survival and empowerment of the agent. In the context of devotion, mainly following Mermelstein's (2021) research of Second Temple texts, the dissertation examines the emotional aspect of the devotee's relation to the religious symbol – that is, its function as negotiating power relations - within its social setting. Accordingly, I regard my special focus on emotionality a central part of a hermeneutic method (inspired by Tropper 2016), striving to understand the function of devotional ideals within a web of social power relations, especially in the historical setting of Jews in Late Antiquity, and the rabbinic movement in particular, as a minority group within imperial Rome. In this context, I find Douglas' (1993/2001) model of *enclave*, which is central to Feldt's (2023) model of *total devotion*, highly relevant to understanding the ideals of total devotion in *Sifre to Devarim*, as well as Riis and Woodhead's (2010) model of *religious enthusiasm*.

In my first chapter, I examine the measurement and comparison of devotional ideals in selected passages of the *Midrash*. The second and third chapters focus specifically on two of these ideals, both typical to the models of minority groups mentioned above, highly concerned with outside boundaries: unconditional loyalty, and self-labeling by visual identity markers. In the presentation of both these ideals, I find fear dominant, resonating with Mermelstein's (2021) analysis, where fear is understood as disempowering in relation to God, but empowering in relation to outsiders who are seen as deprived of the divine patronage. In the dissertation's fourth chapter, I examine Torah study as an ideal of devotion, and following Appelbaum (2010), Fonrobert (2013), and Rosen-Zvi (2017), also as a special case of textual resistance through the appropriation of conventions from the imperial discourse, in service of the enclave's alternative agenda. In this context, I argue that in *Sifre to Devarim's* presentation of Torah study as a devotional ideal, love plays a dominant role. This aligns with the findings of Diamond (2003), Satlow (2003), and Hezser (2019) regarding this ideal as a rabbinic version of the Graeco-Roman practice of philosophy, identified with study as a form of yearning for the divine. In my discussion, I elaborate on comparative aspects such as the polemic with contemporaneous Pagan and Christian discourses and its role in the emotional shaping of devotional ideals, negotiating the power relations between the rabbinic movement and these groups, within the historical context. To conclude, I summarize the results.