Midrash Vayissa’u is an account of three wars fought by Jacob and his sons, the first against the Ninevites, the second against the Amorites, and the third against Esau and his sons. The Hebrew in which it is written is clearly post-rabbinic, and some scholars have suggested that Midrash Vayissa’u is best understood as the Jewish equivalent of Christian stories about knights and Crusaders. ¹ But while developments in contemporary Christian culture may account for the composition of the first chapter of the work and for the work’s appeal to medieval Jews, the significant points of contact between the narratives of the second and third chapters and the accounts of wars fought by Jacob and his sons in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs and the Book of Jubilees demonstrate that Midrash Vayissa’u preserves ancient traditions. How medieval Jews came into possession of these traditions is by no means clear, however, as will be discussed below.

Content
Each chapter of Midrash Vayissa’u offers an account of a series of battles fought by Jacob and his sons to defend themselves against a different enemy who has chosen to make war on them. The work locates the battles in the context of the narrative of Genesis with explicit connection to the biblical text, although in the case of the Ninevites, the enemy of the first chapter, it is a challenge to make the connection. The only mention of Nineveh in Genesis is the report in Genesis 10 of the building of the city by Nimrod (Gen 10:11-12). Midrash Vayissa’u relates the Ninevites to the narrative of Genesis by suggesting that their army passed through Canaan on a campaign of world conquest just in time to hear an account of the sack of Shechem by Simeon and Levi; angered by the account, the Ninevites attack our heroes. The enemies of chapter 2, the Amorites, are one of the nations that preceded Israel in the holy land according to the Torah. The narrative of chapter 2 takes place seven years after the sack of Shechem. Jacob and his sons have again settled in the neighborhood, and the Amorite kings, outraged by this return to the scene of the crime, make war against them. Chapter 3 recounts a particularly despicable attack, this one by Esau and his sons, which takes place while Jacob and his family are mourning the death of Leah.

Perhaps needless to say, Jacob and his sons are ultimately triumphant against each of these enemies. But while all the brothers fight heroically, in every chapter it is Judah who plays the most prominent role. Remarkably, it is not one of the brothers but the elderly Jacob who is second to Judah, singlehandedly holding off the Ninevite army (Midrash

Midrash Vayissa’u

Vayissa’u 1:5-6), slaying several Amorite kings with his bow (Midrash Vayissa’u 2:6), and fatally wounding his brother Esau, also with his bow (Midrash Vayissa’u 3:5).

Manuscripts and Editions
There exist two critical editions of Midrash Vayissa’u. The first, by Jacob Lauterbach, was published in 1933; the second, by Tamar Alexander and Joseph Dan, appeared in 1972. Unfortunately, Alexander and Dan were unaware of Lauterbach’s work, and only one manuscript is common to the two editions. The translation below is based primarily on Lauterbach’s edition, but it takes the Alexander-Dan edition into consideration as well. The paragraph divisions in the translation of chapters 2 and 3 are inherited from earlier translations, but I am responsible for the divisions in chapter 1. I believe that my translation is the first ever undertaken of this chapter.

The evidence of the manuscripts and medieval anthologies indicates that Midrash Vayissa’u had a complicated compositional history. The two editions between them make use of five manuscripts that contain chapter 1 alone as well as two manuscripts containing fragments of chapter 1. Only two manuscripts contain all three of the chapters. Another manuscript contains chapters 2 and 3 without chapter 1. Bereshit Rabbati, an eleventh-century midrashic collection, includes the opening lines of chapter 2 in relation to Gen 35:5 and a complete version of chapter 3 in relation to Gen 36:6 but lacks chapter 1. The Chronicles of Yeraḥmēl, an eleventh-century anthology of rabbinic and post-rabbinic texts, contains a complete version of chapters 2 and 3, also without chapter 1. So too Sefer haYashar, a retelling of biblical stories from the fifteenth or sixteenth century, makes use of only the last two chapters. But Yalqut Shimoni, an anthology of rabbinic exegesis and legend from the thirteenth century, contains all three chapters; it cites chapters 1 and 2 together in relation to the word vayissa’u, “they journeyed” (Gen 35:5), while chapter 3 appears later, at “He went to a land” (Gen 36:6). The evidence just surveyed is compatible with the picture of chapter 1 as a later composition based on chapters 2 and 3, a picture for which I shall argue below. It also suggests that chapter 1 was more popular than chapters 2 and 3 or the complete work and that the earlier version of Midrash Vayissa’u, consisting of chapters 2 and 3, continued to circulate even after the composition of chapter 1.

Genre
In his commentary to the Torah (to Gen 34:13), Nahmanides (1194-1270) refers to the work as “The Book of the Wars of the Sons of Jacob,” a good description of its content. The title “Midrash Vayissa’u” appears in the British Museum manuscript that forms the basis

4. What follows is drawn from the introductions to the editions: Lauterbach, “Midrash Vayissa’u,” 209-11; Alexander and Dan, “Complete Midrash Vayissa’u,” 68. See the editions for more details.
5. They are London (British Museum) 1076 (27,089), known to both editions, and Hamburg 150, known only to Alexander and Dan, “Complete Midrash Vayissa’u.”
7. For the date, Dan, Hebrew Story, 137-38.
of Lauterbach's edition and in Yalqut Shim'on, where, however, it is used of only the first two chapters. The term midrash in the title implies that the text is a rabbinic work with an exegetical relationship to the biblical text; as already noted, Vayissa'u, "they journeyed," appears in one of the verses (Gen 35:5) to which the work attempts to attach its narrative. While it is true that each chapter of Midrash Vayissa'u begins with a verse from Genesis and that the work then proceeds to demonstrate the connection between the verse and the narrative that follows, the establishment of this connection is more or less the extent of the work's exegetical activity. Rather, Midrash Vayissa'u consists almost exclusively of narrative with little of the reference to the biblical text that defines the genre of midrash.

Relation to Earlier Literature
While Midrash Vayissa'u is clearly a medieval work, chapters 2 and 3 contain striking parallels to two ancient texts, the Book of Jubilees, from the second century B.C.E., and the Testament of Judah, part of the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, probably from the second century C.E. Both works offer accounts of wars against the Amorites and Esau and his sons. In Jubilees the account of the war against the Amorites is very brief (Jub. 3:41-9) while the account of the war against Esau and his sons is much longer (Jub. 37-38); in the Testament of Judah the situation is reversed (T. Jud. 3-7 [Amorites]; T. Jud. 9 [Esau and his sons]).

The points of contact between Midrash Vayissa'u and the ancient texts go far beyond the already significant fact of a shared non-biblical tradition about wars fought by Jacob and his sons. Thus, for example, according to the Testament of Judah Judah uses a sixty-pound stone to kill the horse of one of the kings of Canaan so that he can engage him in hand-to-hand combat (T. Jud. 3:3); in Midrash Vayissa'u Judah uses a sixty-sela stone to unseat a different Amorite king from his horse so as to engage him in hand-to-hand combat (Midrash Vayissa'u 2:2). Both texts describe the king in question as a fearsome warrior capable of throwing weapons both in front of him and behind as he rode on his horse (T. Jud. 3:3, Midrash Vayissa'u 2:2).

So too both Midrash Vayissa'u and Jubilees place the war against the sons of Esau just after the death of Leah, when Jacob and his family were mourning her (Jub. 37:14, Midrash Vayissa'u 3:1). The two texts also describe the defense of the citadel where Jacob and his sons were encamped in strikingly similar terms (Jub. 38:4-8, Midrash Vayissa'u 3:6). They agree on the division of Jacob's sons into four squads of three men each and on the identity of the men in each squad despite the fact that the groupings are not based on any biblical precedent. In both texts Enoch the son of Reuben takes the place Joseph should have held in the last squad; Midrash Vayissa'u explains that Joseph had already been sold at the time of the events in question. The two texts also agree on which side of the citadel each of the squads defended, and they list both the squads and the members of the squads in the same order.

There are also some points at which the earlier texts help to clarify difficult passages in Midrash Vayissa'u. The reference in Midrash Vayissa'u to the presence of women as the sons of Judah enter the city of Shiloh in victory (Midrash Vayissa'u 2:8) is confusing to the reader who has heard nothing about women up to this point. The Testament of Judah, however, gives women a role in the battle against the men of Makir (T. Jud. 6:4), which follows the battle against the men of Shiloh (T. Jud. 6:2). In Midrash Vayissa'u the

existence of the iron tower that Judah, Naphtali, and Gad attack in the course of the war against Esau and his sons (Midrash Vayissa'u 3:7) comes as a surprise. But the Testament of Judah reports that the sons of Jacob pursued the sons of Esau to their city, which had an iron wall (T. Jud. 9:4).

There are, to be sure, many important points of divergence between Midrash Vayissa'u and the ancient texts. Midrash Vayissa'u's account of the wars is longer, more elaborate, and bloodier than those of Jubilees and the Testament of Judah. While the Testament of Judah describes battles between small groups with relatively small numbers of casualties, Midrash Vayissa'u describes battles between armies, with hundreds of wounded and dead; Jubilees' account of the war against Esau and his sons is closer to Midrash Vayissa'u in this regard. In addition, the narrative of Midrash Vayissa'u includes elements missing in the narratives of the Testament of Judah and Jubilees, and vice-versa, while some common elements appear at different points in the narratives. Yet the similarities are so numerous and striking that they require explanation.

**Jubilees and the Testament of Judah**

Many scholars believe that the war narratives of Jubilees and the Testament of Judah should be understood as reflecting battles fought by the Maccabees in which local opponents joined the Seleucid armies. This reading is based to a considerable extent on the identification of place names mentioned in Jubilees and the Testament of Judah with sites mentioned in 1 and 2 Maccabees. Not all of these identifications are equally persuasive, and they have been subjected to criticism. Thus one scholar has suggested, on the basis of somewhat different identifications of the place names, that the battles described in Jubilees and the Testament of Judah reflect a war between Judeans and Samaritans from the Persian period, while another scholar has called into question the very enterprise of seeking historical references, arguing that the war narratives serve a function in Jubilees' literary and ideological structure and therefore might well have been invented for Jubilees' own purpose.

Fortunately for us, the determination of whether the battles of Jubilees and the Testament of Judah reflect historical events and, if so, which ones, is not of great importance for understanding Midrash Vayissa'u. What is important is an understanding of the relationship between the narratives in the two ancient works. If, as I believe, the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs is a Christian composition of the second century C.E., it is theoretically possible to understand the accounts of the wars in the Testament of Judah as derived from those in Jubilees, which dates to some time in the second century B.C.E. But while the Testament of Judah's account of the war against Esau and his sons could well be an abbreviation of the longer account in Jubilees made by an author concerned with the glorious deeds of Judah rather than the family drama Jubilees recounts, it is much harder to understand the Testament of Judah's version of the war against the Amorites as an expansion of Jubilees' very schematic treatment. Indeed here it looks as if it is Jubilees

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that is engaged in abbreviation. Even if the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs is a Jewish work roughly contemporary with Jubilees, as some scholars still believe, it is hard to argue that for one war Jubilees abbreviates the account in the Testament of Judah while for the other the Testament of Judah abbreviates the one in Jubilees. It thus seems more likely that the two works drew on a common source that contained full accounts of both wars, but they revised and developed it in different ways. In Jubilees, Jacob is the leading figure in both wars; while Judah plays a prominent role in the defeat of Esau and his sons, he is not singled for special notice in the war against the Amorites. But in the Testament of Judah the focus of the accounts of both wars is on Judah, with Jacob a distant second and the other brothers mere supporting players.

**Midrash Vayissa’u, Jubilees and the Testament of Judah**

While Midrash Vayissa’u clearly reflects knowledge of the traditions found in Jubilees and the Testament of Judah, there can be no doubt that Midrash Vayissa’u itself is a medieval work. Its language could not possibly be mistaken for Hebrew of the Second Temple period. Furthermore, its style reflects familiarity with rabbinic literature. It begins each chapter with the citation of a biblical verse (Gen 35:5 in chaps. 1 and 2, Gen 36:6 in chap. 3), and it introduces the narrative that follows with the formula, “Our rabbis said,” thus representing the accounts of the wars as rabbinic tradition. It also includes elements of rabbinic lore. Its two alternative explanations for Esau’s decision to exile himself from his homeland (Midrash Vayissa’u 3:1) are drawn from Genesis Rabbah, a Palestinian midrash completed in the fifth century, while its claim that Esau’s son Eliphaz was Jacob’s student (Midrash Vayissa’u 3:13) is a variant of the view of several late midrashim that Eliphaz was Isaac’s student.  

Based on the features of Midrash Vayissa’u just described, one might argue that it represents a medieval retelling of the source on which Jubilees and the Testament of Judah drew, with the addition of a newly composed war narrative (chapter 1) inspired by those of the source. Yet the relationship between Midrash Vayissa’u and the source is even more complicated, for many of the cities mentioned in Midrash Vayissa’u are called not by their biblical names but by Hebrew names that reflect a Greek form of the biblical name. Thus, for example, in the Testament of Judah one of the Amorite cities is called Asour (3:1); the name is a Greek version of Hazor (ḥṣr/ḥṣwr), a city mentioned many times in Joshua 11 and elsewhere in the Bible. But instead of calling the city by its biblical name, Midrash Vayissa’u refers to it as Hasar (ḥṣr) (Midrash Vayissa’u 2:5-7), apparently a Hebraization of Asour. The impact of Greek on the names of the cities strongly suggests that Midrash Vayissa’u’s source came to it not in Hebrew but in Greek.

Elsewhere in this volume I suggest that the ninth- or tenth-century Book of Asaph made use of a work about Noah that was also used by Jubilees in the second century B.C.E.; the work has not come down to us, and I deduce its existence from a comparison of Jubilees and the Book of Asaph. Here I am suggesting something even more surprising: that medieval Jews made use of a source also used by Jubilees but that the source reached them in translation. We have no concrete evidence for the existence of this translation; we can do no more than speculate about the circumstances under which it was made and

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13. See the translation for references to Genesis Rabbah and the late midrashim.  
15. Not surprisingly, the Chronicle of Yerahme’el corrects the name to Hazor (ḥṣr).
then transmitted. Yet despite our lack of knowledge, it seems to me that such a Greek version of the ancient Hebrew source on which Jubilees and the Testament of Judah drew offers a more plausible explanation for the contents of Midrash Vayissau than the use of the Greek versions of both Jubilees and the Testament of Judah. The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, to be sure, circulated widely in the Byzantine Empire. The Greek text of Jubilees, however, disappeared quite early, and although there is evidence for the transmission of excerpts from Jubilees in the work of the Byzantine chronographers, including the story of the death of Esau at Jacob’s hands, I know of no evidence for the transmission of the account of the war of Jacob and his sons against Esau’s sons or of the brief description of the war against the Amorites.

But even if we could be confident that the relevant material from Jubilees was available in the Byzantine world, the accounts of the wars in Midrash Vayissau are not simply a combination of the narratives found in Jubilees and the Testament of Judah. It is striking that Midrash Vayissau’s account of the war against Esau and his sons, which corresponds largely to the lengthy narrative of Jubilees, includes at least one detail, the iron tower discussed above, that is not mentioned in Jubilees but is clarified by the iron wall mentioned in the brief and obviously abridged account in the Testament of Judah. Altogether, then, it seems more likely that Midrash Vayissau drew on a source that contained the account that lies behind both Jubilees and the Testament of Judah. The assumption that the source was in Greek and thus that its contents had to be translated back into Hebrew explains the post-rabbinic character of the language of Midrash Vayissau.

The War Against the Ninevites
Chapter one’s account of the war against the army from Nineveh drew not on ancient works but on chapters 2 and 3. It follows chapter 2 in placing the war in the aftermath of Simeon and Levi’s attack on Shechem, and it links the war to the same biblical passage with which chapter 2 begins, although it must go further afield to supply Jacob and his sons with an enemy. It also follows chapters 2 and 3 in making Jacob and Judah the most eminent of its heroes. But its style differs to a certain extent from that of chapters 2 and 3 in its more extensive use of biblical phrases, a feature of medieval Hebrew narratives.

Tamar Alexander and Joseph Dan have suggested that the impetus for the composition of Midrash Vayissau was the romance literature of western Europe that recounted the exploits of heroic knights.16 This suggestion is appealing, but it is implausible for chapters 2 and 3 if I am correct about their Byzantine provenance. There is nothing to suggest a Byzantine provenance for chapter 1, however, which is first attested in Yalqut Shimoni, compiled in Frankfurt in the thirteenth century. Alexander and Dan’s theory, then, may help to explain the composition of chapter 1 and the popularity of the work as whole in Western Europe.

Date and Provenance
Only a broad-brush sketch of the context in which Midrash Vayissau took shape is possible at this stage of our knowledge. The Byzantine Empire seems the most likely location. There Jews would have known Greek well, and we have evidence for the circulation of works or portions of works of the Second Temple period in Greek among Byzantine Christians. It is also worth noting that although Bereshit Rabbati, the earliest midrashic

midrash Vayissa’u anthology to make use of Midrash Vayissa’u, was compiled in southern France, it is known to have used material of Byzantine provenance. The eleventh-century date of Bereshit Rabbati provides the upper limits for dating chapters 2 and 3; although Bereshit Rabbati quotes only a single paragraph from the beginning of chapter 2 (Midrash Vayissa’u 2:1, starting from “Our rabbis said”), it is virtually certain, given their common dependence on the source used by Jubilees and the Testament of Judah, that chapters 2 and 3 were composed at the same time. Furthermore, their composition must have taken place early enough to allow them to reach southern France from the Byzantine Empire in time for inclusion in Bereshit Rabbati. Chapter 1, as just noted, is first attested in thirteenth-century Frankfurt.

Impact on Later Literature
As discussed above, Midrash Vayissa’u or parts of it appear in three medieval anthologies: Bereshit Rabbati and the Chronicles of Jerahmeel from the eleventh century and Yalqut Shimoni from the thirteenth century. A reworking of chapters 2 and 3 forms part of the retelling of the biblical narrative in Sefer haYashar, composed in the fifteenth or sixteenth century.

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Chapter 1

1 (As they journeyed,) terror from God came upon (the cities around them). Our rabbis said: When Simeon and Levi killed the Shechemites, fear and trembling fell upon all the nations around them. They said, "If the two sons of Jacob could kill (the inhabitants of) the great city of Shechem, if they all came together against us, how much more so." What did Jacob do? He gathered his possessions to go to Isaac his father. When he had gone a journey of eight days, an army met him, as great as the sand on the seashore. The army had come from Nineveh to take tribute from the whole world and to conquer it. When that army came near Shechem, it heard the report of what the sons of Jacob had done to Shechem. The men of Nineveh immediately became angry and came against Jacob to fight him.

2 When Jacob became aware of the army, he said to his sons, "Do not be afraid, my sons. The Holy One, blessed be he, will fight for you against your enemies. Only remove the foreign gods in your midst and purify yourselves and change your clothes." And Jacob took his sword in his right hand and his bow in his left hand and went out against that army. He began to kill two thousand of the weakest among them. Then his son Judah said, "Father, you have become tired and weary. Allow me to fight against them." Jacob said, "My son, I know how strong and courageous you are. There is no one in the world as courageous as you are. The Fear of your father will be your help. Go and fight against them."

3 Judah went against them with fierce anger, and his face was the face of a lion. He fought against them and killed twelve myriads of the army, all warriors of renown. Then his brother Levi came to help him, and there was fighting around Judah and his brother Levi on every side. Now Judah's hand was victorious in war, and he killed five thousand more of the army, all of them with their swords drawn. Levi came and struck with his right hand, and the army fell before him as the grain falls before the reapers.

4 Then the men of Nineveh said to each other, "How long shall we fight against these destroyers? Let us retreat lest they destroy us so that not one of us remains." But the king of Nineveh said to them, "Where are the mighty warriors, the resolute, the glorious, the strong? What came over you to make you say that you would return to your land? What happened to your courage, you who conquered many lands and many nations, that now you are unable to fight against twelve men? When the nations and kings whom we conquered, who now pay us tribute, hear, they will gather together against us as one and abuse us and do
to us as they wish. You gather together, men of Nineveh, the great city, and let
your glory and your name be great, and do not fall prey to your enemies.” When
(the men of Nineveh) heard the words of their king, they were willing to fight
on. They sent emissaries to all the countries they had conquered, asking them to
come to their aid. So men from all the countries came to the aid of the men of
Nineveh, and they waged war against the sons of Jacob.

Then Jacob said to his sons, “My sons, strengthen yourselves and act like
men and fight against your enemies.” The sons of Jacob divided up into twelve
armies, each at a distance from the next. Jacob their father went before them,
his sword in his right hand and his bow in his left. Jacob fought on that day,
and there was fighting around him on every side, and he dealt them a very
great blow. When two thousand men came against Jacob alone to strike him,
he sprang about two thousand cubits in a single leap so that they did not know
where he was. Jacob’s hand was victorious over the army, and he mowed down
about twenty-two myriads, all of them warriors. But at evening, when Jacob
wanted to rest, there suddenly came ninety thousand (men). So Jacob arose and
stood in the breach and began to kill them as before, but the sword that was in
Jacob’s hand broke.

When Jacob saw that the sword that was in his hand had broken, he took
some large stones and pulverized them in his hand like plaster. Then he threw
it on the soldiers so that they were unable to see because of the plaster and also
because evening time had arrived and night was near, for the sun was setting.
And Jacob rested that night.

The next day Judah said to his father, “Look, father, you fought yesterday,
and you are tired and weary. I shall fight today.” Jacob said, “Judah my son, go
and succeed.” And Judah went and fought on that day. When the men of the
army saw that Judah’s face was like a lion’s face and that his teeth were like lion’s
teeth, they were very much afraid of him, but they strengthened themselves
to fight against him with a high hand. Judah was almost overpowered by the
fighting, but he leapt and sprang into the midst of the army, going from one
to another, striking as he went, as does a flea. And from the morning until the
ninth hour of the day, Judah struck 80,496 men, all with swords drawn and
bows bent.

But Judah was very tired, and his brother Zebulon came from his left to
help him and fight against them. And (Zebulon) mowed down three thousand
of them. When Judah had rested, he arose in anger and wrath and gnashed his
teeth violently as the heavens thunder in the season of Tammuz. The army
heard and fled eighteen mils. And Judah rested that night.

The next day, on the third day, the army came again to fight and to take ven-
geance. They blew trumpets, and Jacob said to his sons, “My sons, go and fight
against your enemies.” Issachar and Gad said, “We shall fight against our en-
emies today.” Their father said, “Go and fight, and the rest of your brothers will

a. According to ms Hamburg (Alexander-Dan, “Complete Midrash Vayissa’u”), the brother
who comes to Judah’s aid is Levi.
b. A month in mid-summer.
c. A mil is a Roman mile, mille passus or mille passuum, a thousand paces, estimated at 1618
yards, 142 yards shorter than an English mile. One Roman mile is approximately 1,479 meters.
be on the lookout until you become tired and weary so that they can help you.”
Then Issachar and Gad went out and fought that day. They destroyed 36,000
men of the army, and twelve myriads fled into caves opposite.  
Issachar and Gad
came and took trees from the forest and made a big fire in front of the openings
of the caves. When the fire grew strong, the soldiers said to each other, “Why do
we stay in this cave to die from the smoke and the heat of the fire? Let us go and
fight against them. Perhaps we will survive.” They left the cave in every direction
by way of the north.  
Then they waged war against Issachar and Gad, and there
was fighting on every side. Dan and Naphtali saw and rushed into the midst of
the army and struck to their right and to their left until they came to their broth-
ers. And the four of them did battle, Issachar, Gad, Dan, and Naphtali.

10 That day a people as many as the sand on the shore of the sea came from
other lands to help the men of Nineveh. All the sons of Jacob saw this great army,
and they all came together as one and stood to strike and kill the soldiers with
very great blows without number. Judah’s hand was victorious over that great
army, and he struck them a very great blow. The entire army fled before him.

11 When the sons of Jacob saw that the army was fleeing, they arose in fierce
anger and pursued them. And men of the army said, “Why should we flee be-
fore them? Let us fight with them. Perhaps we shall overcome them for they are
tired.” So they came and fought against them, and the battle was very intense.
When Jacob saw that his sons were being overpowered in battle, he arose and
sprang into the midst of the army, striking to his right and to his left. They fell
before him as grass falls behind the reaper. But the army’s hand was victorious,
and they separated Judah from his brothers. Jacob saw and gnashed his teeth,
and Judah heard and he too gnashed his teeth, and his brothers heard and came
to help him.

12 Judah was very tired and thirsty for water, but he had no water. So he thrust
his finger hard into the ground and water came up against it. The men of the
army saw the water coming out opposite Judah, and they said to each other, “Let
me take flight from these destroyers because God fights for them.” The entire
army fled by way of the forest, but the sons of Jacob pursued them and struck
them great blows without number. A few of them fled for  
their lives, and the
sons of Jacob were unable to pursue them. They blew trumpets and returned
to their tents. But Joseph was not there. The sons of Jacob were very troubled
about their brother Joseph, and they said, “Perhaps they killed him or took him
into captivity.” They blew the trumpets, and Naphtali their brother ran to search
for him. He found him fighting against the army. Naphtali called out, “Is that
you, Joseph my brother?” And he said, “It is I.” Then Naphtali helped him, and
they destroyed soldiers without number. They pursued those who remained and
drowned them in the waters of the forest. The soldiers fled before them, and

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a. The term translated “opposite” is difficult to construe in this context since it is a preposi-
tion rather than an adverb. Perhaps it is a mistake for a closely related term, which differs by
only a single letter and has an adverbal sense: “at a distance.”

b. The text as it stands does not make sense. The problematic phrases “in every direction by
way of the north” are omitted in MS Hamburg.

c. Here I follow MS Hamburg (Alexander-Dan, “Complete Midrash Vayissa’u”), ‘l, rather
than MS British Museum (Lauterbach, “Midrash Vayissa’u”), ‘l, which is difficult to construe.
they stopped pursuing them. About them Solomon said, "Better are the two than
the one." And they came to Jacob their father, and he rejoiced. The remaining
sons of the kingdom did not pursue them. And (Jacob) went safely to his father
Isaac, to Mamre, Qiryat ha-Arba.

Chapter 2

1 As they journeyed, terror from God came upon the cities around them, and they
did not pursue the sons of Jacob. For they said, "If two sons of Jacob could do this
thing, if they all gather together, they will be able to destroy the world:" And the
fear of the Holy One, blessed be he, fell upon them. Therefore they did not pur-
sue the sons of Jacob. Our rabbis said: Although they did not pursue them at this
time, seven years later they did pursue them. For all the kings of the Amorites
came together against the sons of Jacob and sought to kill them in the valley of
Shechem because after that Jacob and his sons had returned to Shechem and
stayed there. When the kings of the Amorites heard that Jacob and his sons
were living in Shechem, they said, "Isn't it enough that they killed all the men of
Shechem? But they also take possession of their land." They all gathered together
and came against them to kill them.

2 When Judah saw this, he sprang into the midst of the array of troops fighting
against them, and he killed first Yishov, king of Tappuah, who was covered
from head to toe in iron and bronze. (Yishov) was riding on a horse and throw-
ing javelins with both his hands from upon the horse, in front of him and be-
hind him. He never missed the spot at which he threw because he was a warrior
mighty in strength and trained to throw with both his hands. When Judah saw
him, he was not afraid of him or his might. He sprang and, as he ran toward him,
he took a stone weighing sixty selas from the ground and threw it at him. He
was at a distance of two parts of a ris, which are 177 cubits and a third. (Yishov)
came toward Judah, armed with weapons of iron and throwing javelins. But Jud-
!ah struck him on his shield with that stone and made him fall off his horse to
the ground.

3 As he tried to get up, Judah ran to try to kill him before he could get up from
the ground. (Yishov) hurried to stand on his feet facing Judah, and he waged war
against him, shield to shield. He drew a spear and tried to cut off Judah's head.
Judah raised his shield against the spear and took the blow of the spear, which
cut the shield in two. What did Judah do? He bent and struck (Yishov) with his

a. The conclusion of MS Hamburg is rather different.

b. MS British Museum mentions two kings, the king of Lishah and the king of Tappuah, but
does not name either (Lauterbach, Midrash Vayissau'). Much of the evidence in the apparatus
as well as MS Hamburg (Alexander-Dan, "Complete Midrash Vayissau'") read "Yishov, king
of Tappuah," which fits the pattern of other mentions of kings. According to the Testament of
Judah, however, Judah killed the king of Hazor before killing the king of Tappuah (T. Jud. 3:1).
The Book of Joshua lists the king of Tappuah as one of the kings defeated by Joshua during his
conquest of the promised land (Josh 12:17).

c. A selo is an ancient coin mentioned in rabbinic literature, weighing approximately 14
grams. Thus Judah's stone was not heavy.

d. A ris is equivalent to a Greek stasion, about 2/15 of a mile, approximately 266 cubits. Thus
the "two parts" of a ris above are two-thirds, and Judah is somewhat less than a tenth of a mile
from his adversary.

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spear and cut both his legs above the ankles. Then (Yishov) fell to the ground, and his spear fell from his hand. Judah sprang up and cut off his head.

4But before (Judah) had stripped off (Yishov's) armor, nine of (Yishov's) companions came against him.⁴ Judah took a stone and struck the first of them to arrive on his head. His shield fell from his hand, and Judah took it and stood facing the eight. Then his brother Levi arrived and came and stood with him. He shot an arrow and killed Elon, king of Ga'ash, and Judah killed all eight companions. Jacob his father approached and killed Zihori, king of Shiloh. None of them rose up again against the sons of Jacob, and they no longer had the heart to stay but only to flee. The sons of Jacob pursued them, and Judah killed a thousand of them that day before the sun set.

⁵The rest of the sons of Jacob went out from the hill of Shechem, from the place where they had been standing by his side, and pursued them on the mountain until they came out to the city of Hasar. The battle before the city of Hasar was even heavier than the battle they fought against them in the valley of Shechem.

⁶Jacob shot arrows and killed Par'aton, king of Hasar, Susi, king of Sartan, Laban, king of Kitron, and Shakhir, king of Mahaneh. Judah engaged the battle first. He went up on the wall of Hasar, and four mighty warriors engaged Judah in battle before Naphtali arrived beside him, having followed him up onto the wall. But before Naphtali came up beside him, Judah had killed those four mighty warriors, and Naphtali sprang up and came up after him. Judah stood on the right of the wall, and Naphtali stood on the left of the wall, and they began to kill them. The rest of the sons of Jacob leapt and came up after them. They passed before them on that day and captured Hasar, killing all the mighty warriors. They did not leave a single man alive, and they took all the captives.

⁷On the second day they went to Sartan, and there too there was a heavy battle against them. It was a high city on a high hill, and it could crush anyone who came near. There was no place to come near the wall because the fortification was strong and very high, and there was no spot from which to seize it. But that day they went up on the wall and took it. Judah went first, going up from the east, Gad went up from the west, Simeon and Levi went up from the north, and Reuben and Dan went up from the south. Naphtali and Issachar came near and set fire to the hinges of the gates. There was a heavy battle against them on the wall until a group of their comrades came up there. They stood against them on the tower before Judah conquered the tower. Afterwards Judah went up to the top of the tower and killed two hundred men on the roof of the tower before he came down from it. Then they captured all the inhabitants of the city and killed all the gentiles, leaving none of them alive, for the men were strong and fierce in

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⁴. According to the Testament of Judah, the companions number eight.

⁵. The text is difficult here. My translation follows Lauterbach's suggestion for understanding his text (Midrash Vayissa'u, 217 n. 2) rather than the reading of MS Hamburg (Alexander-Dan, "Complete Midrash Vayissa'u"), which appears to be an attempt to correct the difficult reading.

⁶. Jub. 34:7-9 offers a similarly self-contradictory description of the outcome of the battle against the kings: first Jacob kills the kings and their armies, and then he imposes tribute and makes peace with them.
battle. They took the captives out of there and turned back and went to Tappuah because the men of Tappuah had come out to rescue the captives they had taken from the city of Hasar. They went from there to (Qiryat) Arba and killed those men who came out to rescue the captives.

On the third day they went to Tappuah at morning time, and as they were gathering the captives together, the inhabitants of Shiloh came to make war against them. Then they girded themselves and went out after them and killed them all before midday. They entered Shiloh after the women and they would not make an agreement with them. On that same day they captured the city and took out all the captives, and a group of their comrades whom they had left in Tappuah came to them with the booty of Tappuah.

On the fourth day they passed opposite Mahaneh Shakkir, and they too came out to rescue the captives. Some of them came down into the valley, and (the sons of Jacob) sprang up and went up after them and killed them before they went up the hill. On that same day men came out against them from Mahaneh Shakkir and threw stones on them. On that same day (the sons of Judah) captured them, killing all their mighty warriors. They took out the captives and joined them to those they had with them.

On the fifth day they went to Mt. Ga'ash because a great number of Amorites had gathered there, planning to attack them. Ga'ash was a strong city, one of the cities of the Amorite kings. They went there and made war against the city until midday, and they were unable to capture it because it had three walls, wall inside wall. (The Amorites) began to trouble them and insult them.

At that moment Judah became angry and a spirit of mighty zeal entered him. He sprang up with all his strength and went up first onto the wall. There Judah would have come to his death if it were not for his father Jacob, who drew his bow and killed (men) to his right and to his left until his brother Dan came up beside him. Judah had to rely on him, for they were throwing stones at him from the right and attacking him from the left and in front of him, all trying to drive him off the wall. When his brother Dan came up, he drove them a little distance from the wall. Then Naphtali came up third after them. And Simeon and Levi captured (it?) and went up from the west. The five of them arrived, and they would not make an agreement with them. They killed so many of them that a river of blood flowed from them. They took the city at the time the sun was setting in the west. They killed all the mighty warriors on that day, and taking out the captives, they went and rested outside the city since they were tired.

On the sixth day all the Amorites gathered together and came to them without any weapons of war and bowed before them and sought to make peace.

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a. Thus most of the mss, including ms Hamburg (Alexander-Dan, "Complete Midrash Vayissu"), Lauterbach seems to prefer this reading (Midrash Vayissu, 218 n. 1), but he prints "those who had fled," which is graphically quite similar to "the women." T. Jud. 6:5 gives the women of Makir a role in defending their city from within, which lends support to the reading "the women."

b. The text is difficult here.

c. Or: "the camp of Shakkir." Because Shakkir was previously identified as king of Mahaneh, I prefer to take the two words as the full name of the city.

d. The wording is identical to the difficult language about Shiloh (n. b).
Midrash Vayissa’u

T. Jud. 7:7 | Jub. 34:9

Jub. 34:7 | Jub. 34:8
Jub. 34:8, T. Jud. 7:9

Gen 48:22

Gen 36:6

Amos 1:11

T. Jud. 9:2, Jub. 37:1-13

Jub. 37:14-16

Deut 2:26, Esth 9:30
Jub. 37:17 | Jub. 37:18-23

Deut 2:26, Esth 9:30
Jub. 38:1
Jub. 38:3

with them. Then they made peace with (Jacob and his sons) and gave them Timnah and all the land of Horiab. Then Jacob made peace with them, and they paid the sons of Jacob for all the flocks that they had taken from them two for one, and they gave them tribute and returned all the captives to them. And Jacob built up Timnah and Judah (built up) Dahabel, a and from then on they lived in peace with the Amorites. And this is the meaning of what Jacob said to his son Joseph, “Look, I give you one portion b more than your brothers, which I took from the hand of the Amorites with my sword and my bow.” c

Chapter 3

1 It is written, “He went to a land because of Jacob his brother.” Because of a promissory note. And some say, because of shame. d Our rabbis said: Certainly e though Esau abandoned his weapons because of Jacob and went (away), he did not remove the hatred from his heart. Rather, “His anger takes prey forever, and his rage remains eternal.” f Even though (Esau) went away at that time, some time later he attacked (Jacob). It was the year that Leah died. Jacob and his sons were sitting in mourning, and a few of his sons were comforting him about Leah's death. (Esau) came upon them with a large force of warriors wearing armor of iron and bronze, all equipped for war with shields, bows, and spears, four thousand mighty warriors. They surrounded the citadel where Jacob and his sons were encamped, they and their servants and their children and all that belonged to them, for they had all gathered together there to comfort Jacob in his mourning for Leah.

2 They were sitting peacefully, for it did not occur to them that anyone would attack them, and they knew nothing of this until the whole force attacked that citadel. Only Jacob and his sons were there, and two hundred of their servants.

3 When Jacob saw that Esau had insolently decided to attack and kill them within the citadel and that he was shooting arrows against them, he stood on the wall of the citadel and spoke words of peace, friendship, and brotherhood to Esau his brother. But Esau did not accept them.

4 At once Judah said to Jacob his father, “How long will you go on speaking words of peace and love when he comes upon us as an enemy dressed in armor to kill us?” When Jacob heard this, he drew his bow and killed Adoram the Edomite.

a. MS Hamburg (Alexander-Dan, “Complete Midrash Vayissa’u”): Arbael; T. Jud. 7:9: Rambam. According to the Testament of Judah, it is Judah who builds Timnah (Tannma) while Jacob builds Rambam.

b. The text is difficult here. The word translated “portion” is shekhem, the same word as the name of city Shechem.

c. The point of the quotation appears to be that Jacob himself spoke of having defeated the Amorites, not that Joseph received an extra portion, a claim the narrative of Midrash Vayissa’u does not support. The reference to Joseph is required by the biblical context of Jacob’s words.

d. These alternatives are drawn from Genesis Rabbah's comment to Gen. 36:6 (Gen. Rab. 82:13), where the first opinion is attributed to R. Eleazar and the second to R. Joshua b. Levi.

e. Following MS Hamburg (Alexander-Dan, “Complete Midrash Vayissa’u”) and Darmstadt and witnesses to Yalqut Shimoni (Lauterbach, Midrash Vayissa’u).

f. The verse describes sins for which Edom will be punished; the Bible understands Edom as the nation descended from Esau.
He drew his bow again and struck Esau in his right buttock. Then (Esau) became ill from the arrow. His sons lifted him up and placed him on a donkey foal and he went and died there in Aradin. But there are some who say he did not die there.

Then Judah went out first with Naphtali and Gad to the south of the citadel, with fifty of the servants of Jacob their father. Levi, Dan, and Asher went out to the east of the citadel with fifty servants. Reuben, Issachar, and Zebulon went out to the north of the citadel with fifty servants. Simeon, Benjamin, and Enoch the son of Reuben went out to the west of the citadel with fifty servants. Joseph was not with them because he had already been sold.

At that moment Judah made ready for war. He, Naphtali, and Gad went into the midst of the army and attacked that iron tower. Their shields were hit by smooth stones that (Esau's men) threw and shot at them. The sun was darkened because of the throwing of stones and the shooting of arrows and catapults that they threw down on them. Judah went first into the midst of the army and killed six mighty warriors. Naphtali and Gad went with him, one to the right and one to the left, protecting him so that the army could not kill him. They too killed four mighty warriors of the army, each one killing two. Also the fifty servants who were with them helped them. They went out to battle with them, and each one killed his opponent, fifty mighty warriors.

Despite this Judah, Naphtali, and Gad were unable to drive the army from the south of the citadel or to move them from their place. Then (the sons of Jacob) made ready for war, and they all gathered together and fought against them, and each man killed his opponent. But despite this they could not chase them from their place, and the army stood against them, arranged for war in its divisions. Then Judah, his brothers, and their servants strengthened themselves and gathered together and fought against them, each one of them killing two from the (opposing) army.

When Judah saw that the army was standing firm and that they were unable to move it, Judah, Naphtali, and Gad clothed themselves in the spirit of strength and the counsel of mighty warriors and all of them joined together to go into the midst of the warriors and kill them. Judah killed twenty mighty warriors, and Naphtali and Gad killed eight mighty warriors. And when their servants saw that Judah and his brothers had strengthened themselves and gone into the depths of the battle, they too strengthened themselves to stand with them to fight against (the enemy). Judah struck a hundred mighty warriors of the army on his right and on his left. Naphtali and Gad followed after him, killing

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a. The passage is difficult. According to almost all of the witnesses, the arrow strikes Esau's right "chair." "Buttock" is my attempt to find an anatomical equivalent of chair. I have been unable to find any other examples of such a use, however. In Jubilees' account of the battle, Jacob hits Esau in the right breast (Jub. 38:2).

b. This place name does not appear in the Bible. According to Jubilees the battle takes place near Hebron, and Esau dies on the spot (Jub. 36:20, 38:2), but Jacob buries Esau in Aduram (Jub. 38:9). Adora was a major city of the Idumeans, as the Edomites were called during the Second Temple period.

c. At the beginning of the chapter, Jacob and his sons are in the citadel and can apparently shoot down on Esau and his men. The appearance of the iron tower, not previously mentioned, reverses the situation. Now Esau and his men can shoot down on Jacob and his sons.
them until they drove the whole army from the south of the citadel, and (the men of the opposing army) turned their backs to flee. When the whole army saw that those whom Judah encountered had been destroyed before him, they trembled as they gathered together for battle. They waged war against Judah and his brothers, but they all stood their ground, fighting with power and strength. Thus did Levi and those who were with him, Reuben and those who were with him, and Simeon and those who were with him. Thus they stood against them for battle and gave over their souls to fighting them fiercely.

11When Judah saw that all (the men of) the army had strengthened themselves and gathered together for battle, unifying themselves to fight against them and standing firm to wage war against them, he raised his eyes to the Holy One, blessed be he, (asking) that he help him and his brothers, for they were exhausted by the pressure of battle and were unable to fight against them any longer.

12At that moment the Holy One, blessed be he, accepted their prayer. He looked upon their trouble and came to their aid by bringing a storm wind from his storehouse. It blew against (the army's) faces, and their eyes filled with darkness and deep gloom, and they could not see to fight. But the eyes of Judah and his brothers were illumined because the wind hit them from behind. So Judah and his brothers began to kill (their enemies), and they made the dead fall to the ground as the thresher makes the threshing and bundles of sheaves fall, piling them into heaps, until they had killed the whole army that came against them at the south of the citadel.

13Reuben and Simeon and Levi with them stood ready for battle against the army before them. After Judah and his brothers had killed the men of the army before them, they went to their brothers to help them. A storm wind filled the eyes of their enemies with dust in darkness and deep gloom. And Reuben, Simeon, and Levi and all who were with them fell upon them and killed them, making them fall to the ground in heaps, until they had killed all the forces that had come against Judah, Reuben, and Levi. And there fell four hundred mighty warriors of those who did battle against Simeon, and the remaining six hundred fled. These are the sons of Esau: Jeush, Jalam, Korah, and Reuel. But Eliphaz did not want to go with them because Jacob our father was his teacher.

14The sons of Jacob pursued them to the city of Arodin, so the (sons of Esau) left their father Esau dead, laid out in Arodin, and fled to Mt. Seir at the ascent

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a. The phrase is difficult, and my translation is a guess. A literal translation would be "they did/made in a single way."
b. Or "rabbī" "master." Ms Hamburg (Alexander-Dan, "Complete Midrash Vayissahu") reads, "Eliphaz did not want to go with them because he had become a son to Isaac our father." Several late midrashim claim that Eliphaz became a righteous man despite his ancestry because he was raised by Isaac (Tanhumah [Buber] to Gen. 21:2 [Vayera' 38], Deut. Rab. 2.20, Midrash haGadol to Gen 36:6; Midrash haGadol notes Eliphaz's unwillingness to make war against Jacob and his sons in relation to this information about his upbringing, but the war in question is the war waged by Eliphaz's son Amalek when the children of Israel left Egypt). Louis Ginzberg, Legends of the Jews (Philadelphia, Pa.: Jewish Publication Society, 1935), 5:322 n.318, suggests emending "Jacob" in the version of Midrash Vayissahu translated above to "Isaac" on the basis of these midrashim. I suspect that the reading of the Hamburg Ms is evidence of just such an emendation, but it seems to me far from certain that "Isaac" was the original reading of Midrash Vayissahu.
The sons of Jacob entered (Arodin) and rested there that night, and when they found Esau dead and laid out, they buried him out of respect for their father. And some say that (Esau) did not die there but that he left Arodin ill and fled with his sons to Mt. Seir. The next day the sons of Jacob girded themselves and pursued (the sons of Esau). They went and caught them at Mt. Seir at the ascent of Aqribim. The sons of Esau came out, and all of the men who fled, and fell down before the sons of Jacob and prostrated themselves before them and beseeched them until they made peace with them and gave them over to forced labor.

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a. This place name appears in Num 34:4, Josh 15:3, and Judg 1:36.