

ABSTRACT

‘BINDING CROWNS TO THE LETTERS’ –
A DIVINE SCRIBAL PRACTICE IN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Yakir Paz

In the famous story in b. Men. 29b, when Moses ascends to heaven he sees God binding crowns to the letters of the Torah. To Moses' question 'who holds your hand?' God replies that in the future there will be a man named R. Akiva 'who will expound on every *qots*, mountains of halakhot'. Most scholars assume that the crowns and the *qotsim* are ornaments added to the letters, similar to those found in today's Torah scrolls. According to such a reading, the narrator credits R. Akiva with midrashic virtuosity that included *derashot* on the minutest paratextual elements. Yet in the entire rabbinic literature we do not find even one halakha that was expounded from a *qots* or a crown of a letter, either by R. Akiva or by any other sage. In light of this, Shlomo Naeh has convincingly suggested that one should understand *qots* as *qutsa* – a small textual unit. Such an understanding, however, disconnected the *qotsim* from the crowns, which continued to be interpreted as ornaments. In this paper, I argue that God's scribal actions should be viewed in light of contemporaneous scribal practices. Therefore, the crown should most likely be identified with the *coronis*, a scholarly scribal sign which designated the end of books and textual units, and whose name and form recall a crown. This identification also helps to understand the connection between the *qotsim*, which R. Akiva would expound, and the crowns, which God binds.