



“Reproducing the Text”: Nehama Leibowitz on Traditional Biblical Interpretation
(Parshanut ha-Mikra) in Light of Ludwig Strauss’s Literary Theory

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“Reproducing the Text”:

Nehama Leibowitz on Traditional Biblical Interpretation (Parshanut ha-Mikra) in Light of Ludwig Strauss’s Literary Theory

About sixty years ago, Nehama Leibowitz (1905-1997) penned what would become one of her most fundamental programmatic essays, “How to Read a Chapter of *Tanakh*.”¹ First delivered as a lecture in memory of her mentor Ludwig Strauss (1892-1953), it

1. Nehama Leibowitz, “How to Read a Chapter of *Tanakh*” (Hebrew), in *Nefesh ve-Shir: In Memory of A.L. Strauss* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1954), 90-104. Citations from that essay will be from the English translation by Moshe Sokolow, “How to Read a Chapter in *Tanakh*,” in Sokolow, *Nehama Leibowitz on Teaching Tanakh: Three Essays* (New York, 1986), 1-13, with slight adjustments.

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drew upon his teachings, which emphasized the subjective, singular (“one time”) dimension of reading a literary text in the spirit of what was known in contemporary theory as the New Criticism. During the second half of the twentieth century, a number of Bible scholars applied the New Criticism to open new interpretive vistas that uncover the subtleties of biblical narrative and poetry.² At first glance, the literary theory applied by Strauss—formulated for the analysis of secular literature—seems inimical to traditional Bible interpretation, which operates under different assumptions about sacred scripture. Yet Nehama (as Leibowitz was affectionately known) argued that her teacher’s literary outlook illuminates the theoretical conceptions underlying the exegetical work of the great Bible commentators of Jewish tradition.³

The New Criticism and Tanakh

Ludwig Strauss was a German literary scholar who reconnected with his Jewish roots through his close association with Martin Buber, whose daughter Eva he married. Strauss immigrated to Israel in 1935, having been removed from his Aachen university position by the Nazis. In Israel, he mastered Hebrew and became an influential Hebrew poet and literary critic. Strauss applied the New Criticism to Hebrew, German, French, and English literature, after which he used similar methods to analyze the Bible.⁴ It is not clear whether Nehama knew Strauss already in Germany (having herself immigrated to Palestine in 1930), but she certainly came to regard him as her mentor in the 1940’s, when they taught together in Jerusalem.⁵ The collegial bond between them was profound, and Nehama made substantial contributions to the posthumously published collection of Strauss’s essays, titled *Studies in Literature*, a project initiated by Buber. Nehama took upon herself the

2. The literature on this subject is vast. For a few representative samples, see Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, 1981); idem, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York, 1985); Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (eds.), *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, MA, 1987); Meir Weiss, *The Bible from Within: The Method of Total Interpretation* (Jerusalem, 1984).

3. On the issue of whether treating Bible as literature is religiously appropriate, see Shalom Carmy, “Is Sophocles Literature? Is Anything Not? On the Way to Ramban,” *Tradition* 47:3 (Fall 2014): 1-7.

4. See Aryeh Ludwig Strauss, *Studies in Literature* (Hebrew), ed. Tuviah Ribner (Jerusalem, 1959).

5. Hayuta Deutsch, *Nehama: The Life of Nehama Leibowitz* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 2008), 128-31.

responsibility of editing two important chapters that Strauss dictated to her on his deathbed. In addition to the chapter on Psalms, Nehama produced the introductory chapter, in which Strauss articulates his literary theory and which reflects his allegiance to the New Criticism.⁶

A principle that would later become characteristic of Nehama's work can be found in the following words that she penned based on Strauss's dictation:

[In] the language of poetry . . . word and content are bound together . . . in a living and essential connection . . . [and therefore] the value of the [poetic] word is unlike its value in non-artistic language, and content that is transferred to other words is not the same content that it was at first.⁷

Echoing the famous New Critical notion of the "heresy of paraphrase," Strauss argued that the form and content of a literary text are integrally linked; a mere paraphrase of the content therefore does not truly capture its meaning.⁸

Nehama's article "How to Read a Chapter of *Tanakh*" emphasizes the related principle that a proper act of reading is nothing less than the completion of the literary creation, which brings it from potentiality to actuality. In Strauss's language, "A [literary] creation does not exist fully . . . until it has a reader . . . who brings forth its reproduction with the materials of his voice and spirit."⁹ These words, which echo a central principle of what came to be known as Reader Response Criticism, emphasize the subjective element of interpretation, which is not purely objective, scientific analysis. Since the goal of reading a literary text is not merely to extract its content, but rather to uncover the potential emotive overtones of its unique wording and explicate how they color the content, it is necessarily the reader who endows the text with meaning. As Strauss remarked:

The relationship of the letters to the living creation is like the relationship of the architect's plan to the completed house. The reader builds only according to the plan, but he builds with materials of his voice and spirit.¹⁰

6. See Strauss, *Studies in Literature*, 12 (editor's note). On Strauss's application of the New Criticism to the Bible, see Weiss, *Bible From Within*, 38, and below nn. 8 and 9.

7. Strauss, *Studies in Literature*, 16.

8. See Weiss, *Bible From Within*, 21-24.

9. Strauss, *Studies in Literature*, 16. On the parallels in New Critical theory, see Weiss, *Bible From Within*, 17-21.

10. Strauss, *ibid.*, 16; translation from Weiss, *ibid.*, 18.

Meir Weiss and other scholars have applied this principle in their close readings of Hebrew scripture.¹¹ This essay aims to demonstrate that the “heresy of paraphrase” principle, as well as Strauss’s related notion of textual “reproduction,” likewise illuminate traditional Jewish biblical commentary (*parshanut ha-mikra*), as expounded by Nehama Leibowitz.¹²

An immediate difficulty, however, poses itself when we consider the following question: Don’t the principles of New Criticism, as articulated by Strauss, effectively blur the distinction between *peshat* (the “literal,” “straightforward,” or “plain” sense¹³) and *derash* (homiletics), a distinction with which our great commentators grappled? By emphasizing the subjective dimension of reading, doesn’t Strauss legitimize interpretations that have scant textual basis?¹⁴ Nehama gave thought to this question in the above-cited programmatic essay, as she writes in her typical fashion at its very opening:

“How to Read a Chapter of *Tanakh*.” This topic that I formulated as a title seems to me—now that I see it printed on the galley sheets—to be unparalleled frivolity. Not only because it is not up to me to teach people how to read *Tanakh*, since I have not been entrusted with the keys to this book. Rather, because it is doubtful, in general, whether an individual

11. See n. 2 above.

12. On the promise held in the application of modern literary theory to the study of *parshanut ha-mikra*, see Adele Berlin, “On The Use of Traditional Jewish Exegesis in the Modern Literary Study of the Bible,” in *Tehillah le-Moshe: Biblical and Judaic Studies in Honor of Moshe Greenberg*, ed. Mordechai Cogan, Barry L. Eichler, and Jeffrey H. Tigay (Winona Lake, IN, 1997), 173-83.

13. It was once common to simply render *peshat* as “the literal sense.” However, much attention has been paid to this complex notion in recent scholarship, which has led to more nuanced definitions. See Mordechai Z. Cohen, *Opening the Gates of Interpretation: Maimonides’ Biblical Hermeneutics in Light of His Geonic-Andalusian Heritage and Muslim Milieu* (Leiden, 2011), 15-17; Sara Japhet, “The Tension Between Rabbinic Legal Midrash and the ‘Plain Meaning’ (*Peshat*) of the Biblical Text,” in *Sefer Moshe: The Moshe Weinfeld Jubilee Volume*, ed. Ch. Cohen, A. Hurvitz, and Sh. Paul (Winona Lake, IN 2004), 403-25; Sarah Kamin, *Rashi’s Exegetical Categorization In Respect to the Distinction Between Peshat and Derash* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem 1986), 11-22; Baruch Schwartz, “On *Peshat* and *Derash*, Bible Criticism, and Theology,” *Prooftexts* 14 (1994): 72-76; see also below n. 30.

14. In the words of Meir Weiss, “Does not this theory of interpretation involve the danger of arbitrariness, of excessive subjectivity, and of all kinds of anachronisms?” (*Bible From Within*, 18). Indeed, the point has been made that some modern literary readings of Scripture bear resemblance to Midrash. See James Kugel, “On the Bible and Literary Criticism,” *Prooftexts* 1 (1981): 217-36; Adele Berlin, “On the Bible as Literature,” *Prooftexts* 2 (1982): 323-27; idem, “Literary Exegesis of Biblical Narrative,” in *Not in Heaven: Coherence and Complexity in Biblical Narrative*, ed. Jason Rosenblatt and Joseph Sitterson, Jr. (Bloomington, 1991), 120-28; 240 n. 23; see also below n. 19.

can dictate a reading process for the broad community. Shouldn't each individual attempt to work out his own reading, suitable to his spirit and soul?

. . . Ludwig Strauss taught us, according to the formulation of Nathan Rottenstreich, that true reading is: "The completion of the work [of literature], as though it were taken from the potential to the actual." Reading a poem is: "A reproduction which the reader accomplishes by means of his voice and spirit." It is true that the reader is bound by means of the printed word. He does not, however, merely absorb it into his spirit; he gives it expression from within his soul in order to bring the letters to life.¹⁵

Nehama goes on to invoke Strauss's analogy of writing and reading to architecture and building respectively, to which she adds:

The responsibility for rebuilding the book anew belongs to the builders themselves according to the instructions of the book and by means of the material of their voices and souls, in which they differ one from the other just as their appearances differ.¹⁶

Nehama offers the following solution, which defines objective standards for literary analysis:

If, in spite of this, we are still trying to teach reading, our justification is that the instructions given to the builder (that is, the architect's blueprint, with all its clauses, words, and letters) are the precise, given, objective facts which impose authority. It is towards the understanding of these and to the acceptance of this authority that we wish to lead the reader, and this is what our teacher Ludwig Strauss taught us in his lectures.¹⁷

The authority of the text is a key element of *peshat* interpretation.¹⁸ Nehama endows it with a creative element by aligning the interpretation of *Tanakh* with the New Criticism.¹⁹

Rashi in Light of The New Criticism

Nehama's literary orientation underlies her indefatigable commitment to Rashi. According to his own words, Rashi is committed to

15. Leibowitz, 90; English trans., Sokolow, 1.

16. Ibid.

17. Leibowitz, 90; English trans., Sokolow, 1-2.

18. As Ibn Ezra at times remarks, "We pursue Scripture." See below at n. 51.

19. The notion that the reader completes the text has been used quite fruitfully to analyze the dynamic—and more obviously creative—hermeneutics of Midrash. See Joshua Levinson, "Dialogical Reading in the Rabbinic Exegetical Narrative," *Poetics Today* 25 (2004): 497-528; idem, *The Twice Told Tale* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 2005).

peshuto shel mikra (the *peshat*, or “plain sense” of Scripture); but this seems incongruous with his regular use of midrashic material. Much ink has been spilled in recent scholarship over this dilemma, often focusing on Rashi’s famous programmatic statement (Gen. 3:8):

There are many midrashic *aggadot*, and our Sages have already arranged them in their appropriate place in *Genesis Rabbah* and in other Midrashim. But I have come only to convey *peshuto shel mikra* (the *peshat* of Scripture) and the *aggadah* that conforms to [*meyashevet*, lit. “settles”²⁰] the words of Scripture, each word in its place.

This statement and others like it seem, at first glance, to present Rashi’s goal—*peshuto shel mikra*—in contradistinction to the “midrashic *aggadot* . . . [of] our Sages.” Indeed, as Sarah Kamin has shown in her classic study of Rashi’s methodology, he does at times clearly demarcate the two categories in what Kamin terms the “double interpretation,” which includes one labeled *peshuto* (“its *peshat*”) and the other *midrasho* (“its *midrash*”).²¹ The problem is that Rashi usually offers only single explanations—drawn from midrashic exegesis. Kamin solves this conundrum by pointing to the remainder of Rashi’s programmatic statement, which indicates his desire to incorporate into his commentary “the *aggadah* that ‘settles’ the words of Scripture, each word in its place.” Kamin concludes that Rashi never intended to limit himself to *peshat*; his goal was to compose a commentary drawn largely from midrashic sources that fit with the syntax and context of—or, as Rashi puts it, “settles”—the language of Scripture.²² By contrast,

20. See below n. 22.

21. Kamin, *Rashi’s Categorization*, 158-208. In his review of Kamin’s work, Eleazar Tuitou (*Tarbiz* 56 [1986]: 447) argues, based on manuscript evidence, that at least some of the “double commentaries” may have been the result of glosses added by Rashi’s students. In other words, Rashi himself gave only one interpretation without any methodological label, and this was later augmented with another, which was differentiated by the label *peshuto* or *midrasho*. For another approach to the “double commentary” phenomenon, see Amnon Shapira, “Rashi’s Twofold Interpretation (*Peshuto* and *Midrasho*): A Dualistic Approach” (Hebrew), in *The Bible In Light of Its Interpreters: Sarah Kamin Memorial Volume*, ed. Sara Japhet (Jerusalem, 1994), 287-311.

22. Kamin, *Categorization*, 57-110. The quotation is from p. 110. On the term *meyashevet*, see pp. 71-74. A different approach to this matter is taken by Benjamin Gelles, who argues that Rashi indeed endeavored to establish a clear demarcation between *peshat* and *derash*. See Benjamin J. Gelles, *Peshat and Derash in the Exegesis of Rashi* (Leiden, 1981), 27, 33, 42. Cf. Kamin’s response in Sarah Kamin, *Jews and Christians Interpret the Bible*, 2d edition, ed. Sara Japhet (Jerusalem, 2008), lxxvii-lxxx.

Rashi's grandson Rashbam, known as a "pure" *pashtan* (practitioner of *peshat*), states, "I have come to interpret the *peshat* of the Scriptures," making no mention of the *aggadah*. Indeed, as Kamin observes, "his commentaries reflect a conception of Scripture as an autonomous unit that must be interpreted—to the extent possible—from within."²³

Nehama advanced a very different understanding of Rashi's use of midrashic material in his commentaries. Manifesting a New Critical orientation, she argued that proper interpretation—by way of *peshat*—must not be limited to what is stated in the text explicitly, to the "content" alone. Close attention must also be paid to Scripture's choice of words, "to their sequence, to the sentence structure, repetition, parallelism; to everything written—and unwritten."²⁴ According to the New Criticism, every literary text presents the reader with gaps to fill, and Nehama identified that as Rashi's purpose in using midrashic material in his commentaries.²⁵ Nehama thus argues that Rashi's concept of *peshat* is wider than that of other *pashtanim*, such as Rashbam; it includes "the *aggadah* that 'settles' the language of Scripture," which she explains with the following paraphrase: "I have come to remove obstacles, to solve difficulties, and not to adorn or beautify or add to Scripture."²⁶ In Nehama's view, all of this is subsumed under *peshuto shel mikra* (and is not merely midrashic elaboration), which was Rashi's fundamental goal.²⁷

23. Kamin, *Categorization*, 263-69. The quotation is from p. 269. On Rashbam's *peshat* methodology as treated in modern scholarship, see Mordechai Z. Cohen, "Rashbam Scholarship in Perpetual Motion," *JQR* 98 (2008): 389-408.

24. Leibowitz, "How to Read," 91; Eng. trans., Sokolow, 2.

25. For a full articulation of this viewpoint, see Nehama Leibowitz and Moshe Ahrend, *Rashi's Commentary on the Torah: Studies in His Methodology* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1990), 354-407.

26. Nehama Leibowitz, "Darko shel Rashi be-Hava'at Midrashim be-Ferusho la-Torah," in *Iyyunim Hādashim be-Sefer Shemot* (Jerusalem, 1975), 503, cited here (with slight changes) from the English translation by Moshe Sokolow, "Rashi's Method in Citing Midrashim in His Torah Commentary," in Sokolow, *Leibowitz on Teaching* (above n. 1), 39. This interpretation of Rashi's words is criticized by Kamin, *Categorization*, 65-66.

27. It would seem that this orientation inspired Ahrend's critique of Kamin; see Moshe Ahrend, "The Concept of *Peshuto Shel Mikra* in the Making" (Hebrew), in *Kamin Memorial Volume*, 246-53. Ahrend (246) regards as "paradoxical" Kamin's conclusion that although Rashi arrived at a clear and well-developed understanding of the *peshat* method, he did not adhere to it himself. Speaking in Leibowitz's terms, Ahrend (248ff.) argues that Rashi's use of Midrash to go beyond what is written explicitly in Scripture is not inconsistent with his *peshat* method, which includes interpretations required for the sake of a comprehensive understanding of the biblical text, including gap-filling, identification of anonymous people, places, and things, explanation for

It is in this spirit that throughout her writings, Nehama demonstrated Rashi's (intuitive) literary sensitivity, revealing how his close readings bring the biblical text to completion by drawing out unstated implications. For example, on Jacob's words to Laban in Gen. 29:18, "I will serve you seven years for Rachel, your daughter, the younger one," Rashi comments:

Why [did Jacob add] all of these descriptions? Because he knew that [Laban] was a cheat. He said to him, "I will serve you for Rachel." Lest you intend [to give me] another Rachel from the street, therefore I say, "your daughter." Should you think, "I will change Leah's name and call her Rachel," I say "the younger one." And even after all of that, it did not help [i.e., Jacob was cheated].²⁸

This commentary is drawn from *Genesis Rabbah* and might be viewed as a mere midrashic elaboration on what is written explicitly in the text. Indeed, the content is quite clear: Jacob names Rachel as his price for serving Laban. Nehama explains, however, that this does not fully explain the text, since we must still wonder why Jacob added the obvious details about Rachel.²⁹ Rashi uses the *midrash* to account for this nuance of the language, showing that in his view, Scripture's content cannot be divorced from its style—which in this case reveals Jacob's suspicions in his dealings with Laban.

Neither Rashbam nor Ibn Ezra comment on Jacob's repetitive language. This is not surprising, as their general approach is to avoid attributing meaning to redundancies in the Bible, as commonly done in rabbinic interpretation. Both of these exegetes—often joined by Radak and Nahmanides, *pashtanim* of the subsequent two generations—justify this reading strategy based on the typically repetitive style of Scripture, which they regarded as an aesthetic or linguistic convention devoid of deeper significance.³⁰ It seems that behind this explanation lies a deeper

people's actions and speech, etc. Ahrend (253-59), however, does acknowledge that in some cases, Rashi incorporated midrashic material that cannot be deemed *peshuto shel mikra*, and here he agrees with Kamin.

28. Rashi's source is *Genesis Rabbah* 70:17. In this spirit, the expression "*be-Raḥel bittekha ha-ketannah*" ("for Rachel, your daughter, the younger one") is used in Modern Hebrew to pin down someone to make a clear, unequivocal commitment.

29. See Nehama Leibowitz, *Limmud Parshanei ha-Torah u-Derakhim le-Hora'atam* (Jerusalem, 1975), 135.

30. There is a great deal of literature on this aspect of the "pure" *peshat* method represented by these exegetes; see, e.g., Weiss, *Bible From Within*, 37, n. 24; Sara Japhet, *The Commentary of Rabbi Samuel Ben Meir (Rashbam) on the Book of Job* (Hebrew)

motive. Even if one were to concede that Rashi is reacting to a genuine difficulty in the text—as Nehama often argued energetically³¹—how can one guarantee that his interpretation, derived from the *midrash*, resolves it correctly? In other words, was that reading really the intent of Scripture?

This sort of objection is expressed by Maimonides in his hermeneutical discussion of biblical parables (*meshalim*) in the introduction to his *Guide of the Perplexed*. There he argues that in most cases, the deeper meaning of a parable is to be extrapolated from “the parable as a whole,” which symbolizes a general idea. Reflecting a formalist aesthetic orientation characteristic of the Andalusian *peshat* school (represented, for example, by Ibn Ezra), he continues:

In such a parable, very many utterances are to be found, not every one of which adds something to the intended idea. They serve rather to embellish the parable and to render it more coherent, or to conceal further the symbolized idea.³²

Maimonides was well aware of contemporary interpreters who did not embrace this formalist literary explanation, as evident from the cautionary note that he adds:

Inquir[ing] into all of the details occurring in the parable . . . would lead you . . . into assuming an obligation to interpret things not susceptible to interpretation and that have not been inserted with a view to interpretation . . . [and] result in extravagant fantasies such as are entertained and written about in our time by most of the sects of the world, since each of these sects desires to find meanings for expressions whose author in no wise had in mind [Arabic, *lam yaqšid*; lit. did not intend] the significations wished by them.³³

(Jerusalem, 2000), 55-71; Uriel Simon, “Ibn Ezra,” in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of its Interpretation*, ed. Magne Sæbø, Menahem Haran, and Chris Brekelmans, vol. 2, *The Middle Ages* (Göttingen, 2000; henceforth *HBOT*), vol. 2, 378-80; Mordechai Cohen, “The Qimhi Family,” *HBOT*, vol. 2, 400-06; idem, *Three Approaches to Biblical Metaphor: From Abraham Ibn Ezra and Maimonides to David Kimhi* (Leiden, 2003), 241-63; 272-79; 326.

31. See, e.g., her rejoinder to Nahmanides’ critique of Rashi on Gen 12:1 in *Limud*, 25-26.

32. *Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago, 1963), introduction, 12. On the significance of this principle in Maimonides’ exegesis, see Cohen, *Three Approaches*, 180-88; idem, *Gates of Interpretation*, 189-203.

33. *Guide of the Perplexed*, introduction; Pines trans., 14. Arabic text in Moses Maimonides, *Dalālat al-Ḥa’irīn* (*Sefer Moreh Nevukhim*), ed. Salomon Munk and

For Maimonides, genuine exegesis reveals the intent (Ar. *qaṣd*) of the biblical authors; it must not become subjective interpretation projected onto the text by the reader.

A similar conception can be said to motivate exegetes like Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, and Radak; one can be certain only of what is written explicitly in Scripture, whereas inferences from linguistic nuances are nothing more than conjecture. In this vein, for example, Ibn Ezra remarks:

Our early [Sage]s . . . interpreted sections, verses, words, and even letters [of Scripture] by way of *derash* in the Mishnah, Talmud, and Baraitot. Now there is no doubt that they knew the straight path as it is and therefore expressed the rule “A biblical verse does not leave the realm of its *peshat*,” whereas the *derash* is an added idea (*tosefet ta’am*).³⁴

For Ibn Ezra, *peshat* is the actual meaning of the text, whereas *midrash* is a superimposed interpretation. Moreover, for Ibn Ezra *peshat* is singular, unlike the multivalence celebrated by *midrash*. As he remarks:

The words of any author, whether a prophet or a sage, have [but] one meaning (*ta’am*), although those with great wisdom [lit. broad hearted; i.e., the Sages] augment [this] and infer one thing from another thing. . . at times by way of *derash* or by way of *asmakhta*. About this, the early [Sage]s, of blessed memory, said, “A biblical verse does not leave the realm of its *peshat*.”³⁵

Reacting against what they perceived as midrashic “over-interpretation,” the medieval *pashtanim* delineated a disciplined, circumscribed method of philological analysis that aimed to discover the original intention of the Hebrew Bible, which they referred to as *peshat*.

The medieval Jewish interpreters who most clearly articulated a theory of *peshat*, distinguishing it from *midrash*, seem to have discerned two opposed hermeneutical choices: the unbridled creativity of *midrash* vs. a disciplined investigation that aims only to discover the author’s intention—that is, *peshat*. They realized, of course, that even *peshat* interpretation at times requires conjecture, but this was regarded by them as an obstacle to be overcome.

Issachar Yoel (Jerusalem, 1930), 9.

34. Abraham Ibn Ezra, *Sefer Safah Berurah*, ed. Michael Wilensky, *Devir 2* (1924): 288. On the multivalent term “*ta’am*” in Ibn Ezra’s lexicon, see Cohen, *Three Approaches*, 43n, 237n, 243n.

35. Abraham Ibn Ezra, *Yesod Dikduk*, ed. Nehemia Allony (Jerusalem, 1985), 86. On Ibn Ezra’s notion of *asmakhta*, see Cohen, *Gates of Interpretation*, 80–81.

Nehama devised a broader concept of *peshat* based on Strauss's New Critical conception that literary interpretation does not aim to get at the author's intention, but rather to construct one of the potential meanings of the text, a "reproduction" of the text. Even though it is bound by the words of the text, by its very nature, this sort of interpretation is meant to be a creative process, necessarily dependent upon conjecture. True, one cannot know for certain what the Patriarch Jacob was actually thinking when he specified, "Rachel, your daughter, the younger one." But the reader of the biblical account of this episode in Genesis is entitled—even obligated—to fill in the blanks in a "reproduction" of the text. Later in this biblical account, we learn that Laban indeed tricked Jacob, who confronts Laban saying, "Why did you deceive me?" (Gen. 29:23-25). One possible reading might have Jacob as a completely unwitting victim. But Rashi makes the assumption that Jacob anticipated Laban's trickery and aimed to thwart it, although to no avail.

That Nehama characterized Rashi's creative, midrashically rooted method as *peshuto shel mikra* comes across clearly in her discussion of Rashi's gloss on Laban's first words upon meeting Jacob, "Surely [or but; *akh*] you are my bone and flesh" (Gen. 29:14). One could, of course, read this as a genuinely gracious greeting, but Rashi—again drawing upon *Genesis Rabbah*—draws a different portrait by putting additional words into Laban's mouth, or at least into his thoughts:

Actually, I have no reason to take you into my house, since you have brought nothing with you; but because of kinship, I will take care of you for a month.³⁶

This certainly seems to be an unwarranted midrashic elaboration, and hardly *peshuto shel mikra*! Nehama, however, supplies the following linguistic basis for Rashi's interpretation:

As is well known, the word *akh* is always a contrast to what comes before . . . and since in our verse there is no statement before the *akh* to which Laban's words stand in contrast . . . Rashi brought the words of the Midrash, which open our ears to hear the thoughts that Laban did not articulate.³⁷

As Nehama observes, Rashi uses the text as a springboard for imagining what was not stated, yielding his "reproduced" account of Laban's encounter with Jacob.

36. Rashi's comment here is an adaptation of *Gen. Rabbah* 70:14.

37. Leibowitz, *Limmud*, 134.

Nehama was well aware of an alternate approach:

There are, however, commentators who attempt to solve the difficulty of the *akh* in another way, without adding to Scripture what is not written. For example, Radak: “‘*Akh* [you are] my bone [and flesh]’—means *in truth*. And similarly: ‘Indeed (*akh*), [God] is good to Israel’ (Ps. 73:1), ‘Indeed (*akh*), they are my nation’ (Isa 63:8), etc.”³⁸ However, it is doubtful that his words are close to the *peshat* of Scripture.³⁹

Radak here represents the minimalist tendency of the *peshat* school, which prefers to offer simple stylistic solutions to the elaborate scenarios that the *midrash* fabricates based on inferences from the supposedly anomalous language of the biblical text.⁴⁰ But Nehama is adamant that Rashi more fully reflects “the *peshat* of Scripture.” Armed with Strauss’s notion of the reader’s active role, Nehama offers a theoretical foundation that justifies Rashi’s introduction of a conjectural assumption about Laban’s unstated thoughts.⁴¹

38. This interpretation is generally accepted in modern philological biblical scholarship. Although the term *akh* often has a “restrictive” force, in which case it might be rendered “howbeit,” “yet,” “but,” this is not the only sense of the term or even its dominant sense and Biblical Hebrew. In most cases it is used in an “assertive” sense, introducing with emphasis the expression of a truth, and would thus be rendered “surely,” “no doubt.” See, e.g., F. Brown, S. R. Driver and C. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1966), 36, s.v. *akh*.

39. Leibowitz, *Limmud*, 134. The expression “close to the *peshat* of Scripture” is commonly used to describe Rashi’s commentaries; see Kamin, *Categorization*, 63-64.

40. Interestingly, in the preceding example from Gen. 29:14, Radak incorporates (a revised version of) Rashi’s midrashic reading into his commentary, without attributing it to the Midrash, which would indicate that in his view this is *peshat*. While this is not truly exceptional in Radak, it seems to me that he usually follows the minimalist approach of Ibn Ezra; see Mordechai Cohen, “Midrashic Influence on Radak’s *Peshat* Exegesis” (Hebrew), in *Proceedings of the Eleventh Conference of the World Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem, 1994), 143-50. See also below, n. 79. Cf. Yitzhak Berger, “Radak on Genesis and the Meaningfulness of the Pentateuchal Text” (Hebrew), in *To Settle the Plain Meaning of the Verse: Studies in Biblical Exegesis* (Hebrew), ed. Sara Japhet and Eran Viesel (Jerusalem, 2011), 180-92. Berger argues that Radak, in his Pentateuch commentary, should not be regarded as a minimalist on significance. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that, when rejecting what he regarded as unwarranted midrashic interpretations in his Pentateuch commentary, Radak at times invokes the minimalist principles of Ibn Ezra and Maimonides.

41. As for Ps. 73:1, cited by Radak as a proof-text for interpreting *akh* merely as emphasis, Nehama (*Limmud*, 137) shows that Rashi ad loc. is consistent, since he interprets the word *akh* there in a similar way. The Psalm as a whole, he explains, refers to the travails of Israel; despite them, the psalmist declares his faith in God’s goodness. Compare the reading of this verse by Martin Buber:

The speaker is a man of Israel in Israel’s bitter hour of need. . . . Behind his opening sentence lies the question: “Why do things go badly with Israel?” And

The question of how to reconcile Rashi's exegetical practice with his stated *peshat* program ("I have come only to convey *peshto shel mikra*") is an old one. A venerable tradition of supercommentaries on Rashi's Pentateuch commentary diligently endeavored to show how each and every midrashic reading adopted by Rashi was prompted by an extra word or another anomaly in the biblical text. R. Elijah Mizrahi (Constantinople, 1455-1526), author of one of the best known of these works, commonly employs this strategy and remarks that Rashi's commentaries are therefore "close to the *peshat* of Scripture."⁴² In the final analysis, however, this supercommentary tradition is predicated on the "omniscience" of the biblical text, a doctrine defined in the following way by James Kugel:

[N]othing in Scripture is said in vain or for rhetorical flourish: every detail is important, everything is intended to impart some teaching. . . . [A]pparently insignificant details in the Bible—an unusual word or grammatical form, any repetition . . . —all [are to be] read as potentially significant.⁴³

While this doctrine was formulated by Kugel to explain the workings of Midrash and other forms of ancient biblical interpretation, it would seem to likewise characterize the thinking underlying the supercommentaries on Rashi.

We might compare this with the formulation of Malbim (Meir Loeb ben Yehiel Michel, 1809-1879):

In the poetry of the prophets, there is no husk devoid of interior, body without soul, clothing without a wearer, language devoid of a lofty idea, a saying within which does not dwell wisdom, for the spirit of the living God is in all the words of the living God.⁴⁴

first he answers: "Surely, God is good to Israel." (Martin Buber, *On the Bible*, ed. Nahum Glatzer [New York, 1982], 200)

Although Buber does not make this connection, his reading of the verse in Psalms works best with the explanation Nehama gave for Rashi—that is, that the word *akh* implies a contrast with a thought that preceded but was not articulated. Accordingly, the word *akh* should be rendered "but," as if to say: things may seem to go badly, but in truth, God is good to Israel. On the affinities between Buber's method of biblical interpretation and the New Criticism, see Weiss, *Bible from Within*, 35-38.

42. For an overview of this tradition of Rashi supercommentaries, see Nehama Leibowitz, "Rashi's Method in Citing Midrashim," in *Nehama Leibowitz on Teaching Tanakh*, 31-70.

43. James Kugel, *The Bible as it Was* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), 20-21.

44. Malbim, Introduction to Isaiah. See Mordechai Z. Cohen, "Malbim: Rabbinic Scholar, Biblical Exegete," in *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, ed.

For Malbim, like the Midrash and the Rashi supercommentary tradition, the language of the Bible merits special interpretive scrutiny because it is a divine text, super-filled with meaning.

On the other hand, commentators of the *peshat* tradition (with the exception of Rashi) sought to explain the supposedly superfluous words or grammatical anomalies that prompted midrashic commentary as nothing more than rhetorical flourish or stylistic convention. For example, it is common for Radak—following Ibn Ezra and earlier commentators—to assert that it is a conventional feature of biblical poetic style to repeat the same idea in different words (*kefel inyan be-millim shonot*). This observation is often used to undercut midrashic interpretations sparked by the supposedly superfluous biblical language, which assume the doctrine of omnisignificance.⁴⁵

Malbim once again formulates the theory of the midrashic mode of analysis:

In the poetry of the prophets, there is no “repetition of the idea in different words” (*kefel inyan be-millim shonot*), no repeated idea, no repeated statement, no repeated expression, no two sentences with the same meaning.

This claim is based on the principle that the divine text of scripture is full of meaning (“omnisignificant”), and therefore requires greater scrutiny than one would apply in the interpretation of a humanly authored text. For their part, the medieval *pashtanim* maintained that Scripture was written according to the conventions of human literary expression, in the spirit of the talmudic axiom, “Scripture spoke in the language of men” (*dibberah Torah ki-leshon benei adam*).⁴⁶

It is against this backdrop that we can appreciate the new turn taken by Nehama, even while adhering to the spirit of the Rashi supercommentary tradition. Unlike those supercommentators, Nehama was inspired by the New Criticism and did not tie her method to the proposition that the Bible is fundamentally different from human literature. Following Strauss, she maintained that the analysis of any literary work requires careful scrutiny of its specific formulation, including redundancies and other anomalies. In other words, even if one assumes that “Scripture

Gershon David Hundert (New York, 2008), 1145–47.

45. See Cohen, *Three Approaches*, 276.

46. On this characterization of the debate, see Mordechai Z. Cohen, “‘The Best of Poetry . . .’: Literary Approaches to the Bible in the Spanish *Peshat* Tradition,” *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 6 (1995/6): 15–57.

spoke in the language of men,” there is still ample room for Rashi’s adaptations of midrashic readings that enable him to “read between the lines” of the Bible.

For Nehama, Rashi applied to the Bible a literary analytic methodology not unlike the one formulated by Robert Alter:

By literary analysis I mean the manifold varieties of minutely discriminating attention to the artful use of language, to the shifting play of ideas, conventions, tone, sound, imagery, syntax. . . . And much else; the kind of disciplined attention . . . which through a whole spectrum of critical approaches has illuminated, for example, the poetry of Dante, the plays of Shakespeare, the novels of Tolstoy.⁴⁷

Rashi, of course, was never exposed to modern literary theory, but Nehama argued that he intuitively developed a methodology of close reading that he defined as *pehuto shel mikra*.⁴⁸

Nahmanides in Light of the New Criticism

While Rashi’s reliance on Midrash makes it easy to use his commentary to illustrate Strauss’s notion of creative literary interpretation, a similar case can be made with respect to stricter *pashtanim*. Nahmanides, for example, opposes the principle of omnisignificance and therefore does not hesitate to chide Rashi for what he perceives as the latter’s midrashic excesses.⁴⁹ In this respect, Nahmanides manifests his “hidden

47. Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 11.

48. Admittedly, even Nehama could not provide a satisfactory explanation for all of Rashi’s more tenuous midrashic readings, e.g., those involving *gematria*. See Leibowitz and Ahrend, *Rashi’s Commentary*, 338–47. However, she (successfully) argued that the majority of Rashi’s readings can be shown to be a legitimate “reproduction” of the text based on a disciplined analysis of its language.

49. See Cohen, “Best of Poetry,” 32–33. Cf. Yaakov Elman, “Moses ben Nahman/Nahmanides,” ch. 33.4 of HBOT I/2:416–32. According to Elman, “Nahmanides was able to translate his sensitivity to matters of structure, proportion, and sequence into . . . omnisignificant approaches to the Pentateuch . . . thereby advancing the rabbinic omnisignificant program” (420). In fact, however, the sensitivities Nahmanides manifests toward structure, proportion, and sequence are often employed to undercut rabbinic midrashic interpretations guided by the omnisignificance doctrine. Instead, Nahmanides offers interpretations in the spirit of the formalist Andalusian literary outlook that was directly opposed to that doctrine. Many of the examples that Elman himself cites illustrate this very point. For example, Elman (422) points to Nahmanides’ comment on Exodus 4:9 as an example of his application of the principle of omnisignificance. However, Nahmanides addresses that passage by citing Rashi’s midrashic interpretation based on a superfluous word and continuing as follows: “There is no

love” for Ibn Ezra’s Andalusian *peshat* orientation, as Bernard Septimus has shown.⁵⁰ Ibn Ezra’s motto, “We pursue Scripture” (used to undercut midrashic assumptions that—in his opinion—are not anchored in the biblical text⁵¹), is applied by Naḥmanides in his introduction to Exodus, which, among other things, is designed to offer an alternative to Rashi’s famous opening comment on this biblical book:

“Now these are the names of the sons of Israel [who came to Egypt].” Even though Scripture enumerated them by name while they were living [and traveling to Egypt; see Gen. 46:8-27], it enumerates them again when it tells us of their death, thus [showing] how dear they were [to God], that they are compared to the stars, which He brings out [at night] and brings in [in the morning] by number and name, as it is said, “He who sends out their hosts by count, He who calls each by name” (Is. 40:26).⁵²

Rashi here responds to a difficulty: Why does the narrative at this point repeat information already provided in Genesis 46? In typical fashion, Rashi resolves this matter using material provided by the Midrash. After developing his own solution to this matter (to which we will turn shortly), Naḥmanides cites Rashi’s comment in full and offers the following evaluation:

These are words of Aggadah, and they are words of truth indicating the love of the Holy One, blessed be He, that he loves them and repeats their

need for his midrashic interpretation because the experts on language have discerned that the convention of many verses is to repeat words for emphasis and to strengthen [the point].” Naḥmanides here invokes the opinion of the great Andalusian linguist Yonah Ibn Janaḥ, who formulated his rule of “repetition for emphasis” specifically to undercut the midrashic tendency to extract meaning from seemingly redundant words in the Bible. See Cohen, *Gates of Interpretation*, 58-59, 120-21. See also below, n. 55.

50. See Bernard Septimus, “Open Rebuke and Concealed Love: Naḥmanides and the Andalusian Tradition,” in *Rabbi Moses Naḥmanides (Ramban): Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA, 1983), 15-22. It is true that Naḥmanides also incorporated a kabbalistic strain in his biblical commentaries, but he does so within the parameters of a systematic philological-contextual methodology largely consistent with Ibn Ezra’s notion of *peshat*. As Septimus writes (“Open Rebuke,” 18): “The immense energy that Naḥmanides devoted to uncovering the plain sense of Scripture . . . shows him entirely free of the frequent kabbalistic tendency to devalue *peshat*.” On this balance in Naḥmanides’ exegesis, see Ḥaviva Pedaya, *Naḥmanides: Cyclical Time and Holy Text* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv, 2003), 47-85 (esp. 72-73); Moshe Halbertal, *By Way of Truth: Naḥmanides and the Creation of Tradition* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 2006), 282-96.

51. See, for example, his long commentary on Ex. 7:24. See also Simon, “Ibn Ezra,” 380; Cohen, *Three Approaches*, 233-38.

52. Rashi’s midrashic source is *Exodus Rabbah* 1:3. Unlike the *midrash*, however, Rashi clarifies the exegetical difficulty he seeks to resolve with this idea.

names always. But the connection of the verses . . . is as I have explained.
(Comm. on Ex. 1:1)

In other words, Rashi's commentary is mere *derash* (what Ibn Ezra might regard as "an added thought"), whereas Naḥmanides, by implication, aims to interpret what the verses themselves actually say (following the Andalusian conception of *peshuto shel mikra*).

Naḥmanides presents his solution to the difficulty posed by Rashi as part of a general introduction to the book of Exodus:

Scripture completed the book of Genesis, which is the book of Creation, regarding the birth of the world and creation of every created thing and of all the events that befell the patriarchs, who were a sort of "creation" for their progeny, because all the events that befell them were symbolic occurrences, indicating and foretelling all that was destined to come upon their progeny.⁵³

Naḥmanides delimits Genesis as its own literary unit and assigns it a sort of title, a unifying theme: "The Book of Creation." That this can be regarded as the single theme of Genesis, however, is far from self-evident, since only its first few chapters actually deal with the creation of the world. In order to overcome this problem, Naḥmanides draws upon the midrashic principle that "the deeds of the fathers are a sign for the children," which he famously interprets to mean that the narratives about the forefathers in Genesis prefigure or symbolize the history of the nation of Israel.⁵⁴ This allows him to regard the remainder of the book Genesis as a type of "creation," i.e., of the nation of Israel. Naḥmanides thus manifests creativity when he comes to discover—or, one might say, invent—the thematic unity of the book of Genesis.

Following his claim regarding the literary unity of Genesis, Naḥmanides goes on in a similar vein to find a unifying theme of the book of Exodus:

After [Scripture] completed the "Creation," it began another book on the

53. It is interesting to conjecture why Naḥmanides gives a title to the book of Genesis only at this point, at the beginning of Exodus. Perhaps he perceived the literary unity of the book only upon completing his commentary on Genesis, after devising the notion that "the deeds of the fathers are a sign for the children." It is also possible that he considered (or felt a need to write about) the question of the distinct themes of Genesis and Exodus only at this point, when faced with the need to demarcate the boundary between the two books.

54. See Amos Funkenstein, "Naḥmanides' Symbolical Reading of History," in *Studies in Jewish Mysticism*, ed. Joseph Dan and Frank Talmage (Cambridge, MA, 1982), 129-50.

subject of the actions that came from those symbolic events [in Genesis]. And the book of Exodus is dedicated to the story of the first exile . . . and the redemption therefrom.

Just as he identifies thematic unity in Genesis, Naḥmanides defines Exodus as “the book of Exile and Redemption.” As part of his proof for this assertion, he cites the very redundancy that troubled Rashi:

And for this reason, [Scripture] went back and began [this second book of the Torah] with the names of those who went down to Egypt and their number, although this is already written. It is because their descent there was the beginning of the exile, which began from that moment on.

With the assumption that Exodus is an independent, self-contained literary unit with its own theme, Rashi’s difficulty disappears.

For Naḥmanides, the purpose of the repetitive information provided in Ex. 1:1 is to mark the opening of a literary unit, the Book of Exodus. Indeed, Naḥmanides reiterates this point in his gloss on this verse:

“And these are the names . . .” Scripture wishes to recount the subject of the exile from the time they went down to Egypt . . . as I have explained. Therefore it returns to the beginning of the subject, which is the verse, “[Jacob] and all his offspring came with him to Egypt” (Gen. 46:7). There it is written afterward, “And these are the names of the sons of Israel, who came to Egypt, etc.” (Gen. 46:8). This is the very same verse that it repeats here.

Naḥmanides, revealing the methodological concerns of a *pashtan*, goes on to support this reading by showing that such repetition for literary purposes is, in fact, a convention of biblical literature attested elsewhere in Scripture:

A similar case is found in the Book of Chronicles and the Book of Ezra. Chronicles finishes with the verse, “Now in the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, when the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah was fulfilled, the Lord roused the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia to issue a proclamation throughout his realm by word of mouth and in writing as follows: Thus said King Cyrus of Persia, etc.” (II Chr. 36:22-23). The author repeated the very language of these two verses at the beginning of the Book of Ezra in order to connect the narrative. However, since they were indeed two books, he completed the first book [i.e., Chronicles], with the events that transpired before the building of the Second Sanctuary, and he devoted the second book [i.e., Ezra] to the events that happened from the time of the building [of that Sanctuary]. The same thing occurs in these two books, Genesis and Exodus.

As Naḥmanides demonstrates from the opening verses of Ezra, one need not expect new information from every word of Scripture, as some verses seem to be used as markers to provide literary structure.⁵⁵

Naḥmanides here identifies a literary technique in Scripture referred to in modern scholarship as “resumptive repetition,” the repetition of a text in order to create a link between narratives.⁵⁶ With these observations, based on the biblical texts themselves rather than on midrashic sources, Naḥmanides devises a solution to the problem Rashi had raised on Ex. 1:1 that is more consistent with “the way of *peshat*.”⁵⁷

Yet even Naḥmanides’ analysis is the product of his imagination as a creative reader, since—in order to substantiate his identification of Exodus as a literary unit—he must define the theme that ties together its opening and closing. While the opening seems clear enough, the significance of the book’s closing requires greater ingenuity, which Naḥmanides hardly lacks. As he defines it, the book of Exodus “was dedicated to the story of the first exile . . . and the redemption therefrom.” When is the redemption? When the Israelites actually left Egypt? That is described in Exodus chapter 12. At the triumphant victory hymn at the Sea? That is in chapter 15. Perhaps one can regard the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai as the ultimate purpose—and hence the final stage—of the redemption. But even that goes only as far as chapter 24. Naḥmanides, however, must account for all forty

55. Naḥmanides here can be said to apply a version of Maimonides’ principle mentioned above, namely that in some biblical *meshalim*, “very many utterances are to be found, not every one of which adds something to the symbolized idea. They serve, rather, to embellish the parable and to render it more coherent” (above, at n. 33). In a similar vein, Naḥmanides argues that the function of the opening verses of Exodus and Ezra is to render these books “more coherent” from a literary perspective. Hence, Naḥmanides’ *peshat* interpretation of Ex. 1:1—which ascribes a structural literary function to an otherwise superfluous verse—is directly opposed to the midrashic interpretation given by Rashi, which is based on the doctrine of omniscience.

56. See Adele Berlin, *Poetics and the Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Winona Lake, IN, 1994), 126–29. This technique was already noted by R. Sa’adyah Gaon (*Saadya’s Commentary on Genesis*, ed. and trans. Moshe Zucker [New York, 1984], 409–10) and Rashi (comm. on Ex. 6:29).

57. Compare the distinction between *peshat* and *derash* formulated by Leibowitz and Ahrend, *Rashi’s Commentary*, 360, where they define *peshat* as “a completion of the text [*hashlamat ha-katuv*; or, “filling (the gaps in) the text”] based on what is necessary and what is reasonable according to the rules of logic and psychology—and that is anchored in the biblical text, as opposed to its completion on the basis of conjectures and uncontrolled imagination without any real foundation in Scripture.”

chapters of Exodus. He therefore writes in his introduction to Exodus:

Now the exile was not finished until the day “they returned to their place” [see Hos. 5:15] and returned to the status of their fathers. [For] when they left Egypt, even though they came forth from the house of bondage, they were still considered exiles because they were “in a land not theirs” (Gen. 15:13), “wandering in the wilderness” [see Ex. 14:3].

The ultimate redemption is dependent on Israel returning “to their place,” seemingly a reference to the Land of Israel. But at the end of Exodus, the Israelites are still in the desert! Here, Naḥmanides makes his innovative claim:

And when they came to Mount Sinai and made the Tabernacle, and the Holy One, blessed be He, caused His Divine Presence to dwell again amongst them, then they returned to the status of their fathers, when “the company of God graced their tents” [see Job 29:4] and they were those who constituted the “Chariot [of God].” Then they were considered redeemed.⁵⁸

Naḥmanides here defines anew the concept of “redemption” as the union of Israel and the Divine Presence (*Shekhinah*). In a kabbalistic vein, “their return to their place” means *with respect to their proximity to the Lord Himself*, who normally “dwells” only in the Holy Land of Israel, but temporarily dwelled in the Tabernacle.⁵⁹ On this basis, Naḥmanides succeeds in showing that the book of Exodus concludes with the redemption:

Therefore, this book [Exodus] concludes with the completion of the building of the Tabernacle “and the Glory of the Lord fill[ing] it always” (see Ex. 40:35).

Precisely at that moment, Israel left their exile and entered a state of “redemption” and the circle of the book of Exodus was complete.

In order to appreciate the innovative nature of Naḥmanides’ approach, we must turn our attention to the special introduction he writes for the biblical portion of *Terumah*:

When (1) God told Israel “face to face” [see Deut. 5:4] the Ten Commandments and (2) commanded them through Moses some of

58. The notion of the “Chariot” is kabbalistic. See below at n. 63.

59. On the exegetical and kabbalistic implications of this interpretation of Naḥmanides, see Mordechai Z. Cohen, “Interpreting ‘The Resting of the *Shekhinah*’: Exegetical Implications of the Theological Debate among Maimonides, Naḥmanides, and *Sefer ha-Hinnukh*,” in *The Temple of Jerusalem: From Moses to the Messiah*, ed. Steven Fine (Boston, 2011), 237–74.

the other commandments that are like paradigms for the [rest of the] commandments of the Torah—as our Rabbis established for converts who seek to become Jews—and (3) Israel accepted upon themselves to do all that He would command them through Moses and (4) He made a covenant with them concerning all this. . . .⁶⁰

Naḥmanides summarizes here the steps of the narrative leading up to *Terumah*. Why does he do so? At first glance, there does not seem to be any special point or novel interpretation in this synopsis, making it superfluous and out of place in Naḥmanides' commentary, which does not usually feature such introductions or summaries.

The key is Naḥmanides' remark, "in the same way that our Rabbis were accustomed to deal with converts," which makes a connection that is not stated in Scripture, although it is based on the Talmud.⁶¹ Naḥmanides uses this notion for his own purpose—to portray the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai and the subsequent covenant described in Exodus 24 as preparatory activities intended to effect a change in the people's status, their "conversion" to become the holy Jewish nation.⁶² As Naḥmanides continues:

From now on, they were His people and He was their God, as He stipulated with them initially: "Now, then, if you will obey me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession" (Ex. 19:5). And He said: "You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (ibid. 19:6).

Next, Naḥmanides shows why this change is significant:

They were now holy and worthy that there be among them a Sanctuary through which He makes His Divine Presence dwell within them. His first command therefore concerned the Tabernacle, in order that there be among them a sanctified house for His name, from where He would speak with Moses and command the Children of Israel.

And the purpose [or "inner meaning"; *sod*] of the Tabernacle is that

60. Naḥmanides does not write this paragraph as a complete sentence; it is a circumstantial clause introducing the events that take place in *Terumah*. After steps (1), (2), (3), and (4), Israel became worthy of housing the Divine Presence, as Naḥmanides goes on to explain in the comment cited below.

61. See *Yevamot* 47a.

62. Naḥmanides here adheres to his view (following Ibn Ezra) that the covenant described in Ex. 24 is in chronological order—i.e., it occurred after Israel received the Ten Commandments, as described in Ex. 19-20. In this matter, he takes issue with Rashi, who argues that the events described in Ex. 24:1-11 occurred before the Ten Commandments were given; see Rashi on Ex. 24:1.

the Glory which dwelt upon Mount Sinai [openly] should dwell within it in a concealed manner. For just as it is said there “The Glory of the Lord abode on Mount Sinai” (Ex. 24:16)... so it is written of the Tabernacle, “The Glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle” (ibid. 40:34).

The sanctity with which Israel was endowed only at this point—and not a moment before—allows the Divine Presence to descend to the world for the first time since the passing of the forefathers, who had been the “Chariot” of God. Only at this point were the people of Israel worthy to build the Tabernacle. Immediately when this opportunity presented itself, Nahmanides reasons, God commanded them to do so.⁶³

It is striking that Nahmanides describes the building of the Tabernacle as the “first commandment,” rather than the Ten Commandments or the laws given subsequently in *Parashat Mishpatim*.⁶⁴ What he means, of course, is that this is the first commandment Israel received as a holy nation, but his purpose is clear. By describing the Ten Commandments and subsequent covenant as stages in the conversion process of the nation of Israel, Nahmanides intends to portray these monumental events not as an end unto themselves, but rather as preparation for the commandment that brings them to redemption, which he defines as their mystical union with God, whose Divine Presence will dwell among them once they build the Tabernacle to house it. For Nahmanides, then, the two ends of the book of Exodus frame a continuous linear progression from the depths of exile to the height of redemption.

To be sure, Nahmanides builds his interpretive edifice on the basis of ample Scriptural evidence, in particular the parallel between Ex. 24:16, describing “the Glory of the Lord [on] . . . Mount Sinai,” and 40:34, “the Glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle.” But the impetus for drawing his conclusions about the structure of the book of Exodus can be traced to his kabbalistic outlook, specifically the notion that God desires to bring His presence down to earth. Philosophically oriented interpreters such as Sa’adyah and Maimonides, on the other hand, for whom such an idea

63. The assumption behind Nahmanides’ reasoning here is that God desires—or even needs—to bring His presence down to earth, and He therefore did so at the first opportunity. (On this aspect of Nahmanides’ thinking, see his commentary on Ex. 29:46; Halbertal, *By Way of Truth*, 279-82; Josef Stern, *Problems and Parables of Law* [Albany, 1998], 80.) Had the Israelites been worthy sooner, the command to build the Tabernacle would have come earlier.

64. Rashi on Gen. 1:1 (cited by Nahmanides ad loc.) refers to the rabbinic tradition that Ex. 12:2 (“This month shall mark for you the beginning of months”) is “the first commandment given to Israel.”

was anathema, understood the verses about “The Glory of the Lord” figuratively or posited that it referred to a miraculous light that He created.⁶⁵ Naḥmanides would have thus known quite well of other ways in the tradition to construe the chain of events in the book of Exodus. Indeed, some earlier interpreters actually viewed the Tabernacle as a response to the episode of the Golden Calf, either as a way of atoning for that grave sin or a concession to people’s need for physical representation of the Divinity that became evident by their actions at that time.⁶⁶ For these and other reasons, the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai could be viewed as the high point of the book of Exodus. Naḥmanides, however, sees it as a stepping stone for the building of the Tabernacle, and it is only with this assumption that he is able to view the steady movement from exile to redemption as the unifying theme of the book of Exodus. From the perspective of the Jewish exegetical heritage he knew, the weak point in Naḥmanides’ approach is the transition from *Mishpatim* to *Terumah*, since others would have viewed the former as the final step in the redemption, endowing Israel with their status as a Holy Nation guided by the Torah. This is why Naḥmanides had to write a special introduction to *Terumah*—in order to present his alternate approach that even the giving of the Torah is merely a preparatory stage for the ultimate redemption at the conclusion of Exodus, when “the Glory of God filled the Tabernacle.”

One might argue that Naḥmanides’ approach is based on a number of leaps of faith. It is reasonable, as modern scholars have argued, to view the book of Exodus as consisting of three separate themes: the redemption from Egypt (chapters 1-15), receiving the Torah (16-24), and the building of the Tabernacle (25-40).⁶⁷ But Naḥmanides argues

65. See *Guide* I:19, Pines trans., 45-46; compare Sa’adyah, *Beliefs and Opinions* II:10. A response to Naḥmanides’ conception on behalf of Maimonides can be found in the strong formulation of *Sefer ha-Ḥinnukh*, commandment 95. For details, see the study cited in n. 59 above.

66. See, for example, Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Shemot* (Jerusalem, 1981), 459-66. This argument is based on the assumption that Scripture does not follow chronological order and that the commandments given in *Terumah* and *Tezavveh* were actually given after the episode of the Golden Calf; see Rashi on Ex. 31:18.

67. There are some variations regarding where precisely to draw the line between the first and second major sections of the book. See, e.g., Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem, 1967), xi-xiv; compare Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York, 1986), 6-7. One could certainly say that the modern division is also the product of an imaginative analysis.

that a single central theme unites the book, and he takes the interpretive steps necessary to support this claim. The literary unity of the book is not an objective fact “in the text”; it is the product of Naḥmanides’ interpretive imagination. This is not a methodological shortcoming. On the contrary, as an active reader, Naḥmanides brings Scripture to completion as a literary work in his “reproduction of the text.” Scripture provided the blueprint and he builds his interpretive house out of the materials provided by his own mind and spirit.⁶⁸

Biblical Multivalence and the *Peshat* Tradition

From our analysis of Naḥmanides, we can draw some general conclusions about the literary nature of medieval biblical exegesis. Despite the desire of some commentators for objectivity and their attendant willingness to appeal to certain minimizing principles, Naḥmanides’ efforts to identify structure, theme and theology in the books of Genesis and Exodus provide illustrative examples of the inescapable subjective component of *peshat* exegesis.⁶⁹ Rashi’s students Joseph Kara and Rashbam, as well as the exegetes of the Spanish-Provençal *peshat* school, tended to avoid midrashic exegesis (to differing degrees, to be sure) that does not adhere to the rules of the language of Scripture or its literary and historical context. *Pashtanim* such as Joseph Kara, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, Radak, and Naḥmanides made impressive strides through their philological-contextual analysis of Scripture, and they were able to reach certain definitive interpretive conclusions about the meaning of the biblical text. Yet other interpretive questions remained, questions that do not have clear-cut answers, since it is possible to read the text in more than one way even when all of the semantic and syntactic issues posed by the text have been resolved definitively. Here the interpreter must apply imagination, as Naḥmanides does in his literary analysis of the structure and themes of

68. One might perhaps argue that this creative dimension of Naḥmanides’ reading stems entirely from his kabbalistic outlook and cannot be linked to his *peshat* method at all. In my opinion, however, this bifurcation is unwarranted. While Kabbalah played a role in Naḥmanides’ thought and would have made the idea of the unification of Israel with the *Shekhinah* particularly important in his view, his characterization of this episode as the completion of the redemption from Egypt is not entirely dependent on a kabbalistic outlook. In other words, the explanation he gives for the conclusion of the book of Exodus is quite reasonable even without its kabbalistic import; the dwelling of “The Glory of the Lord” in the midst of Israel can certainly be regarded as the completion of their redemption from Egypt.

69. I am indebted to Yitzhak Berger for the formulation of this sentence.

the books of Genesis and Exodus, which is not dependent on questions of grammar or philology.⁷⁰

A similar observation can be made with respect to the examples from Rashi cited above. It is possible that Jacob emphasized “Rachel, your daughter, the younger one” because he knew Laban to be deceitful. The question has nothing to do with the meaning of the words, but rather their connotation. As for the second example, while it is true that there is a debate over the meaning of the word *akh*, we still must acknowledge that there is room for both interpretations. Who can know for certain whether or not Scripture is hinting at Laban’s unarticulated thoughts? The text is open-ended and it is up to the reader to decide. It is to no avail to say the single correct interpretation is “what actually happened.” To begin with, we have no way of knowing that. But more fundamentally, biblical narrative is a literary representation, not a historical mirror.⁷¹ As such, its interpretation is dependent solely on the text, not the history behind it, to which there is no direct access. One might regard Scripture as the text of a play, with the responsibility for its actualization in the hands of the director, who must decide how to portray the characters: Laban joyfully and warmly welcoming Jacob into his home (“Surely you are my bone and flesh!”) or disappointed at the obligation to let a pauper stay with him (“. . . but you are my bone and flesh”). Similarly, the director must decide on the tone of Jacob’s

70. On this aspect of literary interpretation in general, see Frank Polak, *Biblical Narrative: Aspects of Art and Design* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1994), 401-3, and references cited there. It is in this vein that Robert Alter contrasts two modes of modern biblical scholarship: (1) A school that advocates “objective” interpretation, perpetuating “the legacy of positivism of modern biblical scholarship going back to 19th century Germany,” and emphasizes the philological, literary and historical tools that can help us to definitively solve many puzzles posed by the biblical text. (2) “Literary” interpretation, which recognizes that “certain kinds of narrative works its art by withholding some of its key meanings. Historical exegesis of the Bible tends to presuppose ‘solutions,’ but a literary exegesis . . . must be able to respect the secrecy of the Bible.” The goal of a commentary written in this spirit “will help readers tune into the multiple reverberations of the secrets.” On this view, “a literary text . . . is more than a potsherd in an archeological find to be fitted together like a jigsaw puzzle. . . . The Bible . . . is artfully contrived . . . to open up a dense swarm of variously compelling possibilities, leading us to ponder the imponderables of individual character, human nature, historical causation . . . and man’s encounters with the divine.” See Robert Alter, “Interpreting the Bible,” *Commentary* 89, 3 (March 1990): 52-59 (citations from pp. 56, 59). My thanks to Prof. Moshe Ahrend for referring me to this essay.

71. On this point, see Berlin, *Poetics and the Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, 13-14. As mentioned below (n. 92), in this essay we focus on narrative in particular as a representative of other biblical genres.

voice when he says, “Rachel, your daughter, the younger one.” Does Jacob carefully and deliberately spell out each appellation in suspicion of Laban’s intentions, or does he simply speak unselfconsciously in this redundant manner?

The Rabbis already seem to have recognized this openness of the text, which they expressed with the maxim that “Both opinions [lit. these and these] are the words of the Living God”—i.e., two different and even contradictory interpretations can be equally legitimate. The Talmud applies this not only with respect to legal decisions (*Eruvin* 13b), but even to a historical biblical narrative (*Gittin* 6b).⁷² Strauss’s literary theory provides a conceptual basis for this. The reading of a literary text is not an archeological dig to reconstruct a historical event, but rather the appreciation of an artistic work that requires the active participation of a viewer.⁷³ Since the time of Strauss, literary theory has advanced further in this direction. Meir Sternberg, for example, speaks in this vein of “mutually exclusive systems of gap filling.”⁷⁴ In other words, there are gaps in every text that the reader must fill according to his or her intuition, but the literary text itself, by its very nature, is open to different and even contradictory interpretations.

The medieval *pashtanim* admittedly did not see things this way, at least not in their explicit pronouncements about interpretive theory. Ibn Ezra is quite clear on this point, as evident from his remarks cited above (at n. 35). For Ibn Ezra, *peshat* is singular; it reflects the author’s intent, and its discovery lacks the creative dimension of *midrash*.⁷⁵ In a

72. It is true that the talmudic discussion goes on to say that each interpretation partially reflects the historical event in question. It would seem, however, that the very fact that the Rabbis applied this rule to a historical narrative indicates their awareness that legitimate conflicting interpretations will inevitably occur even in such contexts.

73. Admittedly, one might point to a theoretical difference between the Rabbis’ view and the modern theory of literary openness. In the words of Adele Berlin (personal communication):

While it is true that they [the Rabbis] permit, even revel in, providing multiple meanings . . . their attitude towards the text is in a way diametrically opposed to ours. We tend to see the text as an empty vehicle, waiting to be filled with meaning by the reader. The Rabbis, on the other hand, see the biblical text as super-full of meaning and all the interpretations in the world cannot reveal all of its inherent meanings. Perhaps the modern and rabbinic attitudes lead to the same thing in the end—limitless interpretations—but they are coming from very different places.

74. See Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington, 1985), 186-229.

75. This can be compared to Maimonides’ construal of the maxim that “Scripture does

similar vein, it would seem, as a number of scholars have argued recently, that Rashbam's methodology rests on the assumption that only one interpretation can represent "the true *peshat* of Scripture."⁷⁶

Notwithstanding this tendency among key *pashtanim*, the range of *peshat* interpretations actually devised within the Jewish exegetical tradition would suggest otherwise. Even upon opening the *Mikra'ot Gedolot* (Rabbinic Bible), which is now augmented by newly published medieval *peshat* commentaries, we often are faced with different interpretations that all seem reasonable, and it is difficult to decide which among them is "correct."

In the story preceding Jacob's first meeting with Esau after years of separation, for example, we read of how he sent gift-bearing messengers to his older brother, and they returned saying, "We came to your brother, to Esau; and he is also coming to meet you, and there are four hundred men with him" (Gen. 32:7). Rashi comments:

"To your brother, to Esau"—the one of whom you had said "he is my brother." But he acts with you as Esau the wicked—he is still [harboring] hatred.⁷⁷

Rashi, drawing upon *Genesis Rabbah*, makes an assumption about Esau's intentions, which are not explicit in the text. This leaves the door open for Rashbam to advance a completely different reading:

"We came to your brother, to Esau"—and you found favor in his eyes, as you had said [i.e., hoped; see Gen. 32:6].

"And also" (*ve-gam*)—since he is happy about your arrival, and in his love for you—

"He is coming to meet you and there are four hundred men with him"—to honor you.

not leave the realm of its *peshat*" in his *Book of the Commandments*, principle #2, where he differentiates between "the *peshat* of Scripture" and other matters derived from the biblical text by way of "inference and commentary." See Cohen, *Gates of Interpretation*, 287-304.

76. See Sara Japhet and Robert Salters, *The Commentary of R. Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam) on Qoheleth* (Jerusalem—Leiden, 1985), 61; see also Eleazar Tuitou, *Exegesis in Perpetual Motion: Studies in the Pentateuchal Commentary of Rabbi Samuel ben Meir* (Hebrew) (Ramat Gan, 2003), 75-76. This is distinct from the question of Rashbam's view of the status of Midrash in relation to *peshat*; see Cohen, "Rashbam Exegesis in Perpetual Motion." In other words, regardless of the validity of alternate modes of interpretation, Rashbam believes that only a single interpretation can be regarded as *peshuto shel mikra*.

77. Rashi's comment is based on *Gen. Rabbah* 75:7.

This is the essential *peshat* (*ikkar peshuto*). Similarly, [it is said in connection with Aaron's meeting Moses], "And also (*ve-gam*) he is setting out to meet you, and he will be happy to see you" (Ex. 4:14).

By labeling his explanation "the essential *peshat*" (as he does occasionally), Rashbam intends to dismiss Rashi's midrashically based reading. But we must consider his evidence carefully. While the language of Ex. 4:14 is indeed similar, that proof-text is hardly decisive because the situations are quite different; Scripture there actually says that Aaron will be happy to meet Moses, whereas Esau's intention to kill Jacob is well known (see Gen. 27:41-42).⁷⁸ Moreover, Rashi's reading makes perfect sense in light of Jacob's great fright upon hearing the messenger's remarks, indicating the he—like Rashi—certainly understood them as an indication of Esau's hatred (Gen. 32:8).⁷⁹

Rashbam has an answer for this as well in his gloss on that verse:

Jacob became frightened—in his heart. Even though he [Esau] represented to the messengers that his intention was to honor him, he did not believe that Esau's intentions were good, but [suspected] that they were evil.

According to Rashbam, Jacob's suspicion was misplaced.

Perhaps Rashbam might have also brought evidence from the actual meeting of the two brothers, where we read that "Esau ran to greet him, he embraced him, and, falling on his neck, he kissed him, and they wept" (Gen. 33:4). Consistent with his opinion, Rashi (*ad loc.*) explains that Esau had a change of heart when he saw Jacob.

In the end, then, it is difficult to determine who is "correct" and what implications (if any) regarding Esau's intentions can be drawn from the cryptic words of the messengers. Notwithstanding Rashbam's confidence, the textual gap can be filled in more than one way. In fact, in his gloss on this verse, Joseph Bekhor Shor (thought to have been a

78. The proof-text thus seems like a *gezerah shavah*, one of the rabbinic hermeneutical methods based on verbal similarity in disparate contexts; but the use of such midrashic tools is out of character for Rashbam.

79. Interestingly, Radak (*comm.* on Gen. 32:7) follows Rashi in inferring from the redundancy "your brother, Esau" that his intentions were bad. It is likely that Radak does so because this reading can be supported (although not proven absolutely) by the immediate context. Normally, however, Radak avoids making inferences from redundancies in the biblical text, following Ibn Ezra's minimalist *peshat* approach (see above, n. 40). On Radak's departure from Ibn Ezra in this respect when the context can support midrashic or Midrash-like elaboration, see Cohen, *Three Approaches*, 279-332.

student of Rashbam's younger brother, Jacob Tam), opens a new possibility by paraphrasing the messengers' words in a way that is sensitive precisely to this gap:

We do not know his intentions, whether good or bad, because he did not respond to us at all. Rather, he said, "I will go to him and will speak to him face to face, and since I will speak with him, what should I say to you?"⁸⁰

Bekhor Shor's reading might seem more successful in negotiating the conflicting signals regarding Esau's intentions given by the subsequent narrative. Still, this is yet another conjecture, as we cannot know for certain that Esau himself did not reveal his intentions or whether the biblical narrator simply chose to conceal that information.

In the end, no single interpretation can be proven correct. Rather than being forced to regard this as a failure of interpretation, we can draw upon Strauss's literary theory to view this as a manifestation of the openness of the biblical text, which allows for multiple readings. The reader cannot be "objective" and simply let the text speak for itself; he or she must take an active role and fill the gaps in one way or another in order to "reproduce" the text.

The necessity of conjecture to fill in gaps in the biblical text even within a *peshat* approach is dramatically illustrated by a comparative study of medieval *peshat* commentaries on the Song of Songs. This can be seen in a recent study by Baruch Alster, who compares the ways in which Ibn Ezra and a variety of northern French *pashtanim* interpreted the literal sense of that biblical book.⁸¹ Although these exegetes believe that the book has a deeper allegorical meaning that depicts God's love for Israel throughout history, they all rely upon the rule that "Scripture does

80. A similar approach is advanced by Naḥmanides (comm. on Gen. 32:8), who argues that Esau did not respond to the messengers at all; see Leibowitz and Ahrend, *Rashi's Commentary*, 355-56. It is possible that Naḥmanides thought of this independently (indeed, his scenario is more elaborate, as he posits that Esau refused to even greet the messengers). However, it is also conceivable that Naḥmanides was influenced by Bekhor Shor, as there is other evidence of such influence elsewhere in his commentary on the Pentateuch. See Hillel Novetsky, "The Influences of Rabbi Joseph Bekhor Shor and Radak on Ramban's Commentary on the Torah" (MA Thesis, Yeshiva University, 1992), pp. 6-33.

81. See Baruch Alster, "Human Love and Its Relationship to Spiritual Love in Jewish Exegesis on the Song of Songs" (Hebrew) (Ph.D. Dissertation, Bar-Ilan University, 2006), 23-69. Alster deals with a wide range of exegetes spanning from the twelfth to twentieth centuries, but our interests focus on the medieval *pashtanim*.

not leave the realm of its *peshat*” to interpret the Song in the literal sense as a drama depicting a love story. Ibn Ezra, in fact, divides his commentary into three separate levels, as he writes in an introductory poem:

And, that I may be perfect in its ways, I have made three expositions:
 In the first, I shall reveal every obscure word.
 In the second, I shall point out its natural meaning after the *peshat*
 In the third, I shall comment on it after the Midrash.⁸²

The “first exposition” is actually a rather narrow grammatical-philological analysis of the text, which can indeed be regarded (for the most part) as a scientific, objective endeavor. We would, of course, expect the third exposition, which is allegorical and rooted in the Midrash, to be a creative and highly subjective reading. Yet the “second exposition,” which Ibn Ezra labels as *peshat*, actually requires a great deal of interpretive creativity in order to make sense of the story line behind the brief and often disjointed love lyrics that make up the Song. Indeed, as Alster has shown, there is great disparity among the *pashtanim* in this endeavor, each employing different strategies to trace the story of the lover and beloved, leading to highly divergent conclusions.⁸³

The book of Job similarly offers strong evidence for the necessarily creative dimension of the interpretive process. Here again, Ibn Ezra divides his commentary, this time into two. First, he explains the language of the text in what he refers to as “the interpretation of the words” (*perush ha-millot*); then he presents the philosophical debate that emerges from the dialogues between Job and his friends in what he terms “the interpretation of the ideas” (*perush ha-te’amim*).⁸⁴ This bifurcation reflects the fact that overcoming the (substantial) linguistic difficulties in the text is only a preliminary step, because the interpreter—even one

82. *Abraham Ibn Ezra’s Commentary on the Canticles*, ed. and trans. H.J. Mathews (Oxford, 1874), 3 (Hebrew section); 1 (English section). The poem appears separately only in the early recension of Ibn Ezra’s commentary (edited by Mathews), but it is embedded in the introduction to his later recension, which appears in the Rabbinic Bible; see Cohen, *Three Approaches*, 48n; Alster, “Human Love,” 177n.

83. In fact, the conjectural nature of this endeavor prompted many contemporary scholars to reject the so-called “dramatic theory,” the belief that there actually is a story line in the Song of Songs, in favor of viewing the work as a collection of lyrics. See Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York, 1977), 34-37; see also Alster, “Human Love,” 23, and references cited there.

84. See Mariano Gómez Aranda (ed. and trans.), *El Comentario de Abraham Ibn Ezra al Libro de Job: Edición crítica, traducción y estudio introductorio* (Madrid, 2004), xxxix-xliv; 4-6, 337-342 (Spanish), 5*-6*, 90*-94* (Hebrew).

engaging in *peshat* exegesis—must then investigate the purpose of the book and the ideas that it was intended to convey. As recent scholarship has shown, this led to widely varying approaches among the medieval exegetes, all of whom believed that they discovered the true theological or religious message of the book.⁸⁵

Yet even before getting to the conceptual dimension of the book, on the level of what Ibn Ezra calls “the interpretation of the words,” the *peshat* interpreter must employ conjecture. Both the lengthy dialogues that make up the bulk of the book of Job and the narrative frame that surrounds them leave many gaps for the reader to fill. For example, in Job 1:22, the biblical narrator recounts that even after all of the calamities that befell him, “With all this, Job did not sin”—that is, he did not curse God, as the Satan had wagered with God (Job 1:11). After the further calamities that occur to Job—his being stricken with painful boils—we read: “With all this, Job did not sin with his lips” (Job 2:10). From a philological perspective, this verse is clear. But why did the narrator add the words “with his lips”? Rashi, following the Talmud (*Bava Batra* 15a) infers from this that “he [Job] sinned in his heart.” Responding to his grandfather’s midrashic reading, Rashbam writes:

With his lips—Scripture does not wish to testify regarding the thoughts of his heart, but only on what he expressed with his lips. According to the *peshat* of Scripture, he did not sin [at all], neither in his heart nor with his lips. But the language of Scripture can say this.⁸⁶

Rashbam’s authoritative tone belies more than a small measure of bias against midrashic inference, even when it might be indicated by the context.⁸⁷ Notwithstanding Rashbam’s protestations, the text is open to

85. See Mordechai Cohen, “A Philosopher’s *Peshat* Exegesis: Maimonides’ Literary Approach to the Book of Job and Its Place in the History of Biblical Interpretation” (Hebrew), *Shenaton: An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies* XV (2005): 213–64. This disparity becomes more evident when we widen the net of exegetes examined, as evident from the treatment of the “philosophical” exegetical school traced in Robert Eisen, *The Book of Job in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (New York, 2004). Eisen (4) differentiates sharply between the philosophical and *peshat* schools; to me, however, it seems that in the medieval tradition they were closely related. See Mordechai Z. Cohen, “Review of Robert Eisen, *The Book of Job in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*,” *The Journal of Religion* 87 (2007): 137–38.

86. Sara Japhet, *Rashbam on Job*, 351. In the closing remark of this comment (“But the language . . .”), Rashbam means to say that this is a sort of conventional phrase, from which nothing is to be inferred; see Japhet, *Rashbam on Job*, 65–71.

87. Japhet, *ibid.*, 69, argues that Rashbam is correct. However, there does seem to be ample room for Rashi’s interpretation, as argued, e.g., by Meir Weiss, *The Story of Job’s*

interpretation; the stage director must present the matters according to his taste and perception.

As for the dialogues in Job, they pose a constant challenge to the reader, who must decide the tone in which each was uttered, whether critical or praising, warning or comforting. And the content of the language goes only so far in making this determination from the mute text before the reader. Intriguingly, Naḥmanides seems to have recognized this, although he acknowledges it only in an ironic rejection of Rashi, when grappling with the difficulty posed by the speeches of Elihu (formulated clearly by Maimonides in his *Guide of the Perplexed*).⁸⁸ This enigmatic character, who enters the fray after Job's three friends have been silenced, criticizes them for failing to find an appropriate response to Job (see Job 32:3). Yet he goes on to simply reiterate what they already said. Moreover, at the end of the book, we read that God scolds Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar for "not speaking what is right" (Job 42:7), whereas Elihu is spared from His wrath. All indications, then, suggest that Elihu was somehow superior to the others in his response to Job. Naḥmanides cites a comment by Rashi that seems to address this difficulty:

I saw that R. Solomon [Rashi], of blessed memory, wrote: "All of the words of Elihu were complete consolation and were not words of criticism: 'Do not worry about the suffering, because it is for your benefit.'"⁸⁹

Naḥmanides notes, however, that the points Elihu raises seem no different from those of Job's three friends. He therefore writes:

But I do not know in what way these [words] were a consolation and why he [Rashi] considered the [same] words of the friends' to be criticism. Perhaps he [Elihu] said them pleasantly and in a soft voice and the friends said them in a loud voice?⁹⁰

Naḥmanides offers this last possibility ironically, as if to say to Rashi: Who knows what was Elihu's tone of voice? But Naḥmanides actually touches here on an important issue—we do not, in fact, have any way of knowing for certain from the mute text what actually happened. Even if

Beginning (Jerusalem, 1983), 71-73.

88. See Cohen, "Philosopher's Peshat," 234-38.

89. Naḥmanides on Job 36:9, in *Kitvei Ramban (The Writings of Naḥmanides)*, ed. Ḥayyim Dov Chavel (Jerusalem, 1964), vol.1, 109.

90. Naḥmanides, *ibid.* For the alternative solutions that Naḥmanides—and Maimonides—offer to solve this problem, see Cohen, "Philosopher's Peshat," 233-43.

we grant that the tale of Job is historical—a matter debated in rabbinic sources—the literary text is open to interpretation, and the reader must decide how to interpret the words of Elihu.

• • •

The notion of the “untold” part of the story that the reader must supply when “reproducing” the text has been applied productively to Midrash in modern literary scholarship.⁹¹ Clearly, the midrashic authors were not bound by what is written in the text or even what can reasonably be inferred from it directly. While this type of non-philological “interpretation” was once largely disparaged, new approaches to literature that emphasize the dynamic dimension of reading have brought Midrash in particular into favor with modern critics. But this shift in attitude also has implications for “the way of *peshat*.” Inspired by the literary teachings of her teacher Ludwig Strauss, Nehama showed how Rashi integrated midrashic creativity into a *peshat* approach. Going a step further in this vein, we have endeavored to show that even the subsequent *pashtanim* who eschewed the “ways of *derash*” manifested substantial creativity, proving that every act of reading is subjective and is the interpreter’s own “reproduction of the text.”⁹²

91. See references above, n. 19. Related to this is the idea of the “interpreted Bible” developed in James Kugel, *The Bible as It Was*; compare the idea of the “re-written Bible,” as described, e.g., by Piero Boitani, *The Bible and Its Rewritings* (New York, 1999).

92. We have focused in this essay on the interpretation of biblical narrative, but a similar exploration can be carried out with respect to other biblical genres. In the case of poetry, for example, the notion of the openness of the text might seem less problematic because there is no “real (hi)story” to match with a purported “correct interpretation.” Indeed, the theory of New Criticism was often formulated specifically for poetry. See, e.g., Strauss, *Studies in Literature*, 15-32. The genre of biblical law, of course, poses its own complexities, since the Halakhah—a divinely sanctioned legal code—is dependent upon it. Yet the notion that biblical legal texts are open to multiple and even contradictory valid interpretations is precisely the one expressed in the Talmud in the maxim that “Both opinions (lit. these and those) are the words of the Living God” (cited above). On the ways in which Maimonides negotiated the tension between legal interpretive creativity and the objective divine will expressed in the biblical text, see Cohen, *Gates of Interpretation*, 257-80, 287-304, 466-81. On the approach to this matter formulated by Nahmanides, see Avi Sagi, “Canonical Scripture and the Hermeneutical Challenge: A Critical Review in Light of Nahmanides” (Hebrew), *Da’at* 50-52 (2003): 121-41; Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book* (Cambridge, MA, 2007), 50-67.

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