"The Best of Poetry . . .": Literary Approaches to the Bible in the Spanish Peshat Tradition

Traditional Jewish biblical exegesis, spanning many centuries and lands, offers a number of interpretive approaches to the Holy Scriptures (kitvei ha-kodesh). Despite significant differences, the Midrash, the medieval French and Spanish peshat schools and the traditional commentaries of recent centuries all share fundamental beliefs about the Bible’s divinity and authority. Indeed, each of these sub-traditions saw itself as another link in the continuous chain of Jewish exegesis. Yet, to evaluate the unique contributions of each school, one must examine the intellectual environment in which it was produced and identify the underlying assumptions that guided its exegetical enterprise. Occasionally, a principle formulated in one era is questioned, or even rejected, in a later generation and different milieu. While the notion that such axioms are subject to debate may, at first glance, seem disturbing, this type of controversy in fact ensures the vibrancy of the Jewish tradition of learning, which thrives on differences of opinion.

One such fundamental exegetical issue relates to the following question: Can one apply a literary analysis to the Bible? In other words, can one legitimately analyze God’s word using methods normally applied to human literature? Although contemporary scholars reveal the Bible’s artistic beauty through the prism of modern literary...
criticism, their view of "the Bible as literature," which gives it the value of human literary accomplishments, seems incompatible with its divine origin. For this reason, the "literary approach" is sometimes considered alien to traditional assumptions about the Bible. Yet, a strong precedent for analyzing Scripture in literary terms occurs within Jewish tradition, in the medieval Spanish (Sephardic) pesbat school, albeit not without controversy. The belief that poetic analysis enriches our understanding of Scripture is most clearly articulated by Rabbi Moses Ibn Ezra, the great eleventh-century Spanish Hebrew poet, who aimed to define the Bible's literary artistry according to the poetics current in his day. Although his specifically literary orientation was unique in the medieval tradition, the literary principles he formulates illuminate the exegetical assumptions of medieval authorities such as Sa'adiah Gaon, Abraham Ibn Ezra, Maimonides and Radak. We intend to outline this medieval literary approach and the controversies it sparked, which led to the development of an alternate "anti-literary" approach as well.

1. Maimonides' Literary Principles

It is not surprising that exegetes who themselves wrote poetry, such as Sa'adiah Gaon (882-942) and Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1164), employed poetic principles in their biblical commentaries. But to demonstrate the pervasive, almost inescapable literary influence on Jewish scholars in Muslim countries, we begin our study with Maimonides (1135-1204), a jurist and philosopher with limited interest in poetry. He devotes much of his philosophical work, Guide for the Perplexed, to biblical exegesis, in particular to analyzing allegory (mashal). An allegory is a fictional tale that conveys a true "inner" meaning; for example, the prophet Nathan uses it to rebuke King David for taking Bathsheba from her husband, Uriah. Instead of chiding the King directly, Nathan describes a man with several flocks who slaughters a poor man's only lamb to prepare a lavish meal for a guest. Furious, King David pronounces a death sentence on the wealthy man, whereupon Nathan responds: "You are that man!" (II Sam 12:1-7). Nathan's tale is obviously fictional, and the Rabbis already recognized it as such, labeling it a mashal (Bava Batra 15a; cited below); but Maimonides applies this literary category more broadly, arguing that allegory is a widespread, typical biblical genre.

Maimonides thus classifies as fiction biblical sections which are accepted as historical in rabbinic tradition. This divergence becomes evident when we compare his analysis of Job with that of the Tal-
mud. Among the opinions cited in Bava Batra 15a regarding the time period in which Job lived, we find an attempt to view him as a fictional character:

One of the rabbis was sitting before R. Samuel bar Nahmani and said: "Job did not exist, nor was he created; but was simply a mashal." Said [R. Samuel] to him: "For you Scripture said, 'There was a man in the land of 'Uz, Job was his name' (Job 1:1)."!

The unnamed scholar persists, since, after all, in the above-cited biblical reference, Nathan also speaks of his characters as if they "existed": "What about, 'The poor man had nothing but one small lamb ...' (II Sam 12:3); did he exist? Rather he was merely a mashal; this too then is a mashal." But the Talmud closes the discussion by rejecting this analogy: "If so, why [does Scripture record] his name and the name of his town?" Unlike Nathan's characters, anonymous "stick-figures" obviously invented merely to teach a lesson, the many details presented about Job's life indicate that he really existed. If not, the Talmud reasons, why would Scripture waste words on those details?

But Maimonides (Guide III:22) validates the rejected view, arguing that the obscurity of Job's time period, which the Talmud never conclusively determines, indicates that, in fact, he never really did exist. And, indeed, Maimonides' analysis of this book, to which two chapters of the Guide are devoted, reveals his belief that it is a mashal. But questions still remain. What does Job teach according to Maimonides? How would he answer the Talmud's concluding criticism? To determine his response to these questions, we must examine his method for interpreting allegory.

Normally, one reveals an allegory's "inner meaning" by identifying a set of parallels between the fictional story and the real situation it describes. In Nathan's story, for example, the rich man and his flocks represent King David and his many wives, the poor man and his lamb, Uriah and his only wife; but the "guest" is puzzling, since David took Bathsheba for himself! The Rabbis (Sukkah 52b), attempting to find meaning in every detail of the allegory, identify him as David's evil inclination, which was satisfied only by Uriah's wife. But Maimonides rejects the assumption underlying this interpretation and argues that sometimes allegorical details can be ignored:

In some prophetic allegories ... the fictional tale, taken as a whole, teaches its entire inner meaning; and in the ... tale there will be very many things, not every word of which adds to the inner meaning (Guide, Introduction).
The opposite approach, Maimonides argues, "... will force you to interpret matters that have no interpretation, and were not placed [in the story] to be interpreted."\(^4\) An allegorical story thus teaches its inner truth when taken as a literary unit.\(^5\) If we apply this principle to Nathan's story, we could derive its meaning simply by observing the rich man's deplorable behavior, without accounting for the "guest."\(^6\) The method Maimonides rejects is found in rabbinic exegesis, which assumes that Scripture cannot contain empty language, "matters that have no interpretation." To avoid this cogent axiom, Maimonides argues that the otherwise meaningless details fulfill a literary function: "to embellish the allegory and arrange its elements" (loc. cit.).\(^7\) Referring to nothing in the real world, they are employed purely for literary purposes, (1) to provide poetic beauty and (2) create a coherent story-line.\(^8\)

Returning to Maimonides' analysis of Job, we find that it illustrates the far-reaching implications of the second, "structural" literary function. The Bible portrays a righteous man, Job, whose possessions and family are destroyed by Satan for no reason. Tortuous dialogues ensue, with three friends who attempt to rationalize his suffering, until God Himself settles the discussion. According to Maimonides, Job and his friends, who did not exist in reality, symbolize four erroneous philosophical approaches to the problem of evil, which anticipate Greek and Arabic thought; the fifth, correct, view is attributed to God. After presenting this "inner meaning" of Job in Guide III:22-23, he writes: "When you see all that I have said ... and study all of the book of Job ... you will find that I have included and encompassed its entire content" (III:23). Recognizing that his synopsis falls short of the forty-two chapter biblical epic, Maimonides adds: "Nothing has escaped us, except that which comes for the structure of the elements and the coherence of the allegorical tale,\(^9\) as I have explained often in this work" (ibid).

For Maimonides, Job's "inner meaning" could have been presented more concisely, in a chapter or two (as Maimonides himself does); but Scripture takes forty-two chapters to develop a drama enacted by Job, Satan, the friends and God. It was precisely this element, Job's elaborate, realistic detail, that the Talmud cited as proof for its historicity, arguing that Scripture would not expend words except to record actual facts. But Maimonides rejects this reasoning. He believes that an allegory might contain elaborate details, such as Job's name and the name of his town, even the names of his friends and their towns, specifically to enhance "the coherence of the allegorical tale," in other words, to make it more realistic. In fact, Maimonides here boldly asserts that almost the entire book of Job consists of such
“matters that have no interpretation.”

But this approach raises a difficulty: Why would Scripture squander forty-two chapters only to weave a fictional tale, even a realistic one? Maimonides does not answer this question directly, but we can perhaps infer his reasoning from a similar dilemma addressed by Rabbi Joseph Ibn ‘Aknin of Fez (twelfth century), an author of halakhic and ethical works, and a friend of Maimonides. An emigré from Muslim Spain like Maimonides, Ibn ‘Aknin was a product of the same Jewish culture as was Maimonides and reflects similar literary conceptions in his commentary on the Song of Songs.

Taken literally, the Song is a love poem, but the Rabbis interpret it as an allegory for the love between God and Israel. Ibn ‘Aknin explains what motivated this tradition: “It is inconceivable that [Solomon] . . . would compose a book in which he described a dialogue consisting of songs of love . . . between a lover and his beloved.” The Rabbis therefore concluded that the Song contains an “inner meaning.” But Ibn ‘Aknin asks why this inner meaning is not expressed directly; in other words, why did Solomon “compose a book . . . consisting of songs of love”? He answers that the “outer meaning,” charming in its own right, is not wasted, nor is it incidental; it was designed intentionally to fascinate readers: “[Solomon’s] purpose of couching his idea in these words was to make it attractive to the masses and fascinate them.” Attracted by the Song’s literary beauty, the masses, “when they became a little more learned . . . would reflect that it cannot be . . . [interpreted according to] the exoteric sense of the husk of the words . . . without noble mysteries.” Applying this reasoning to Job, one would argue for Maimonides that Scripture intentionally employs a drama that compels the reader to ask: Why does a righteous man lose his possessions, family and health? By bringing the problem of evil to life, Job’s story, more than a concise, impersonal philosophical analysis, engages the reader’s sympathy and motivates further reading and investigation.

2. Identifying The Bible’s Poetic Features

MOSES IBN EZRA’S AESTHETIC EXEGESIS

Maimonides saw value in literary design, at least enough to justify what to him were otherwise meaningless biblical verses. But he identified biblical literary techniques only to argue that they “have no interpretation.” As a philosopher, rather than a literary critic or poet, Maimonides subordinated analysis of the Bible’s literary style to a search for its meaning. Even Ibn ‘Aknin, who praises the Song of
Songs' literary beauty, devotes his commentary to its "inner meaning." But Rabbi Moses Ibn Ezra (1055-1138), adopted a different perspective. Although he, too, was a philosopher, his love for poetry attracted him to the Bible's literary features per se and kindled within him a desire to reveal its poetic elegance.

Born and educated in Muslim Spain, Ibn Ezra was a student of Rabbi Isaac Ibn Ghiyath (1038-1089), a talmudist, religious poet, biblical exegete and philosopher. Ibn Ezra mastered all of these fields, but excelled especially in poetry and was known as ba-sallah, the great composer of selihoth (penitential poetry). He was regarded as a mentor by Judah Halevi (1075-1141), a younger Spanish contemporary and great poet in his own right. Typical of his era, Ibn Ezra embraced Greek and Arabic learning, and, like other Spanish poets, adhered to Arabic conventions in his poetry. In addition to poetry, Ibn Ezra wrote expository works relating to biblical exegesis, in which he extensively cites Talmud, Midrash, Targum, and medieval rabbinic scholars, especially Sa'adia Gaon, in addition to Greek and Arabic sources. Although Ibn Ezra apparently did not write biblical commentaries, these expository works of his define fundamental exegetical principles, which were applied by later exegetes. His writings seem to have influenced Maimonides, for example, and are cited explicitly by other exegetes, especially Radak (1160-1235).

Ibn Ezra's most valuable and unique insights appear in his book on poetics, Kitãb al-Muhãdara wal-Mudhãkara (The Book of Discussion and Conversation). The distinctive literary focus of this work is singular in the medieval Jewish tradition. It traces the history of Hebrew literature from biblical to medieval times and justifies the adoption of Arabic literary principles by medieval Hebrew poets. The Kitãb was intended to be a practical guide for writing Arabic-style Hebrew poetry. It therefore includes a lengthy section that defines twenty Arabic poetic devices (Arabic: badi'; Hebrew: kashrutim; lit. "ornaments") appearing frequently in medieval Hebrew poetry. And since, despite their extensive use of Arabic techniques, medieval Hebrew poets regarded their work as an extension of the biblical literary tradition, Ibn Ezra attempts to find precedents for the Arabic ornaments in Scripture. As a result, the Kitãb provides a systematic analysis of biblical style through the prism of Arabic poetics.

Maimonides examines the Bible's meaning; Ibn Ezra describes its beauty. He judges the Song of Songs, for example, on the basis of its poetic imagery. Postulating that elegant poetry "enwraps many ideas in few words" (K [=Kitãb] 76a), he especially admires the simile, "Like a scarlet thread are your lips" (Song 4:3), which "combines three [aspects] of the lips: softness, color, and delicateness" (K 134b).
Revealing delight in a tone uncommon in the medieval tradition, he exclaims: "If the Song of Songs would boast to Ecclesiastes on the basis of this verse, it would be justified!" (K 134b). Others might become this excited about a brilliant idea, but it is specifically poetic beauty that elicits Ibn Ezra's enthusiasm.

Ibn Ezra's Kitâb reveals the conceptual framework behind Maimonides' literary principles. As mentioned above, some evidence suggests that Maimonides, born in Spain a century later, was actually influenced by Ibn Ezra's writings. In any case, the Kitãb is based on the Arabic and Greek learning embraced by Jews in the Golden Age of Spain that was an integral part of Maimonides' education. A citation from Aristotle in Ibn Ezra illuminates Maimonides' analysis of Job: "Aristotle said: philosophy cannot do without the science of poetics and the words of the rhetoricians and orators because . . . poetry and rhetoric are splendor and embellishment for logic" (K 73a-b). The philosophy of Job, for Maimonides, is indeed presented in Scripture according to "the science of poetics," which includes "the structure of the elements and the flow of the allegorical tale." Ibn Ezra explains why allegory, in particular, is most effective for teaching philosophy: "because knowledge of the senses, for the masses, is more immediate and easier than intellectual knowledge." In other words, the "tangible" allegorical tale can convey subtle concepts most clearly and vividly (K 148a).

The notion of literary embellishment that Maimonides applies to allegorical details derives from the elaborate Arabic system of poetic "ornaments" delineated in the Kitãb. Ibn Ezra observes that this system illustrates the relationship between the Greek and Arabic literary traditions:

[Aristotle] enumerated the features through which poetry is improved and embellished, and found them to be eight . . . [including] the strength of the words, the pleasantness of the ideas, enwrapping many ideas in few words, the beauty of the similes, and the quality of the metaphors. . . . But the Arabs divided them into many more than this number and were very precise in this study, as you shall see in this work (K 76a-b).

Aristotle described poetic beauty in general terms, but the Arabs developed a range of specific devices, the badi' ("ornaments"), to adorn their poetry. These include universal techniques, like imagery and hyperbole, and more characteristically Arabic ones relating to word order and verse structures. Ibn Ezra considered the badi' a defining characteristic of Arabic and medieval Hebrew poetry. To
establish the Bible's literary beauty, he cites precedents for them in biblical Hebrew: "For each . . . [ornament] I will cite an Arabic verse, and a corresponding verse found in the Holy Scriptures, lest . . . it be assumed that . . . our language is devoid of them" (K 116b). Realizing, however, that Arabic poetics was unknown in biblical times, Ibn Ezra admits that such examples merely resemble, but cannot be regarded as genuine applications of, the badi' (ibid.). In other words, the prophets intuitively employed literary techniques later delineated systematically by Arabic poetics.

The Kitãb directly addresses a fundamental question that arises naturally from this assumption: Does the Bible, like the Greek and Arabic traditions, distinguish between poetry and prose? Following those traditions, Ibn Ezra defines poetry (Ar. ṣîr [ṭwî]) as rhymed, metrical verse, and prose (Ar. nathr) as verse that is not formally confined.26 Given the greater stature of the former, especially in Arabic theory, it is not surprising that Ibn Ezra formulates his question in the following manner: Is there genuine ṣîr in the Bible?27 A medieval author might have been tempted to classify as poetry biblical passages explicitly labeled sbin (ḥab), the medieval Hebrew term for poetry (phonetically similar to Arabic ṣîr). But Ibn Ezra, careful to distinguish between biblical and medieval usage, argues that this label does not imply poetic form.28 He insists on measuring biblical genres using Arabic categories:

We have found nothing in [Scripture] departing from prose save these three books: Psalms, Job and Proverbs. And these, as you will see, employ neither meter nor rhyme in the manner of the Arabs, but are only like rajaz29 compositions (K 24b).

These "depart from prose" since they manifest a certain metrical form, being composed of balanced couplets and triplets, and written stichographically rather than continuously.30 Even Psalms, Job and Proverbs, however, manifest neither strict meter nor rhyme "in the manner of the Arabs," and cannot truly be regarded as poetry in the Arabic sense. Ibn Ezra likens them to rajaz, the least rigid, and least elegant, Arabic poetic form; and even this is a loose comparison, since rajaz is normally rhymed.31

Ibn Ezra's desire to identify the Bible's poetic features must be seen within his overall aesthetic philosophy. His outlook informed by Greek and Arabic thought, Ibn Ezra appreciated the powerful effects of art, in all of its manifestations, on the human mind and emotions. Ibn Ezra discusses the capacity of music to elevate man's soul, which he views as the reason for its central role in the Temple service and prophecy.32 Citing "ancient philosophers," he describes how it "stir[s]
up the noble forces of the soul" by awakening man's unique aesthetic sensibilities, which were implanted in his nature "when God . . . attached the individual souls to animals' bodies." Music, Ibn Ezra explains, "corresponds to [man's] four temperaments and harmonizes [their] differences," he thus analyzes how each musical tone produces a distinct spiritual effect in the listener. Ibn Ezra describes the effects of poetry on man's spirit in similar terms. Stimulating his aesthetic sense, poetry captivates man's soul and becomes indelibly absorbed into his heart like "engraving in a stone." Its melodic rhythm, uniform meter, clever sound-plays, noble diction, beautiful imagery, and other ornaments all cause poetry to be "most strongly fastened to the ears and most closely attached to [man's] nature" (K Hb-lSa). Ibn Ezra thus believed that the Bible's poetic language stirs man's aesthetic sense and fastens God's word to his soul, much like the Temple music inspired worshippers and enhanced their divine service.

**Criticism of Ibn Ezra's Analysis**

Although Ibn Ezra argues that the Bible manifests beauty measurable by the standards of Arabic poetics, his conclusions are troubling. The Bible's ornaments are not quite genuine badi* and its poetry resembles only rajaz, the least elegant Arabic poetic form. Ibn Ezra's Arabic yardstick indeed demonstrates that the Bible is not "devoid of" elegance, but also implies the superiority of Arabic poetics. In fact, he cites a biblical verse supposedly to prove that the Arabs are more gifted than any other nation in literary expression. Accordingly, he prefers Arabic poetic conventions when they conflict with biblical ones and recommends their adoption by Hebrew poets. Regarding certain types of biblical alliteration avoided in Arabic poetry, for example, he writes: "What Scripture permits is permitted; however, inasmuch as we follow the Arabs especially closely in poetry, it is necessary for us to follow them to the degree that we can" (K 86b). Evidently, Ibn Ezra is content to claim that the Bible manifests a measure of poetic artistry, which in fact is surpassed by Arabic poetry.

But other options were available. Ibn Ezra cites an opinion that Solomon actually composed poems, now lost, in the higher Arabic qaṣīda form. The author of this view, who has been identified as Isaac Ibn Ghiyāth, Ibn Ezra's teacher, cited I Kgs 5:12, "... his shīr was one thousand and five," for support, assuming that the biblical Hebrew term, shīr, is equivalent to Arabic si'r. But Ibn Ezra, who rejects this comparison, is skeptical that Solomon's lost works differed from other biblical "poetry," which at best resembles rajaz (K 25a). Theoretically, Ibn Ezra could have adopted the view of his contemporary, Judah Halevi, who maintains that biblical style is superior to
Arabic, and laments the Hebrew poets’ adoption of Arabic conventions (Kuzari II:74,78).39 Biblical poets, he argues, “aspired to a more excellent and useful quality” (Kuzari II:70), implying that they intentionally avoided the Arabic model.40 Samuel Ibn Tibbon (1160-1230), the translator of Maimonides’ works and a biblical commentator in his own right, makes this point explicitly: “We must assume that the poems of [David and Solomon] were superior to [Arabic style Hebrew] poems produced nowadays, for they were not limited [poetically] and could have easily and skillfully included in their poems whichever matters they wished to put in them.”41 But since neither author matches this vague claim with a detailed study, Ibn Ezra, committed to scientific literary analysis, could not accept it. He adopted Arabic poetics as a fixed coordinate system upon which to plot the Bible’s literary artistry.42

THE ZOHAR’S CRITICISM

While Ibn Ezra, Halevi and Ibn Tibbon debate the relative aesthetic merit of Arabic and biblical literature, they all accept the validity of the aesthetic standard.43 But the Zohar sees things differently. Ironically, the Zohar uses Ibn Ezra’s conclusions to undermine the literary approach altogether by arguing that the Bible’s supposed “inferiority” by secular aesthetic standards simply proves their unsuitability for its evaluation. The Zohar thus rejects any comparison between the Bible and human literature:

Woe onto the person who says that the Torah comes to impart mere tales and secular matters. For if so, we now could make a Torah with secular matters, more excellent than all [the Scriptures] . . . [for] even the princes of the world possess more sublime works; if so, let us follow them and compose a [new] Torah in that manner (Zohar III: 152).44

Although Ibn Ezra does not equate the Torah with “mere tales and secular matters,” he does use the same tools to analyze both; and his advice that poets should embrace Arabic rather than biblical poetics implies that “we now could make a Torah with secular matters, more beautiful than all [the Scriptures].” The Zohar seizes this theological weak link to argue that secular standards inevitably detract from the lofty status of the Torah, which is sui generis, completely unlike human literature. Although the Zohar’s author proves his point by citing the Torah’s supposed literary inferiority, his objection is no doubt more fundamental. He seems to reject the application of secular aesthetic standards to the Bible in principle, even if they would prove
the Torah's aesthetic *superiority* (as Judah Halevi and Samuel Ibn Tibbon may have believed). The literary approach simply entails a category mistake; just as one would not analyze the color of a poem, literary categories, indeed the very issue of aesthetic beauty, are simply irrelevant in biblical study.45

We will construct Ibn Ezra's response to this criticism later in this essay, after we establish that his approach was shared by other major authors in the exegetical tradition. In fact, a precedent for his debate with the opinion represented in the Zohar occurs earlier in the medieval tradition, between Sa'adia Gaon and his student, Dunash Ibn Labrat (920-990). In Baghdad, over a century before Moses Ibn Ezra, Sa'adia directed attention to the Bible's poetic qualities, which he referred to as *zahot*, an obscure biblical word (occurring only once, in Isa 32:4) he coined as an equivalent of the Arabic literary term *fasãha*, ("poetic elegance").46 These terms reveal the source of his literary standards, which, as related by Dunash, Sa'adia applied to assess the relative literary skills of various biblical authors. But Dunash criticized this application:

I am surprised at the one who says that Isaiah's language is elegant,47 and similarly Amos, because this is pleasing in his eyes. But this is a mistake, because all of Scripture is the word of God.48

Dunash rejects this differentiation because he argues that God Himself is the sole author of the entire Bible.49 Another, more fundamental criticism, however, is implicit in his phrase ("because this is pleasing in his eyes"). By what standards are Isaiah and Amos deemed superior to other biblical writers? Sa'adia applied the rules of *fasãha*, which are "pleasing in his eyes"; but such secular standards, Dunash implies, are subjective and limited, and inappropriate for the word of God.50 The Zohar, no doubt, would concur.51

3. Exegetical Manifestations

We can now delineate two traditions on viewing the “Bible as literature.” A definite anti-literary attitude appears in the Zohar, which upholds Dunash's position and vehemently rejects the secular yardstick. The Zohar's popularity in Christian Spain a few generations after Moses Ibn Ezra's death might help explain why his *Kitâb* was never translated into Hebrew in medieval times. The demand for such a translation in Christian Spain, where Jews no longer read Arabic, would have been sharply diminished by the Zohar's clear condemna-
tion of his literary project. But Jews in Muslim lands embraced Arabic literary achievements and proudly attributed to the Bible the aesthetic beauty of the greatest human literature. Sa'adia, introducing the notion of zahot in biblical exegesis, encouraged this perspective, and his view, rather than that of Dunash, guided the Spanish pesbat tradition. Abraham Ibn Ezra records this debate and sides unequivocally with Sa'adia; his older contemporary, Moses Ibn Ezra, delineates the principles of zahot in his Kitãb, and Maimonides and Joseph Ibn 'Aknin employ this concept in their study of biblical allegory. As we shall see, the literary approach enabled the Spanish pesbat tradition to revolutionize biblical exegesis.

**SEPARATING STYLE FROM CONTENT**

Philosophers since Plato have accused poets of deceit because they celebrate imagination rather than reality, painting a fantastic, "untrue" world. This polemic passed into the medieval tradition in the maxim "the best of poetry is its most false" (K 62a). The poets actually embraced this motto, admiring creative imagery and hyperbole. As Moses Ibn Ezra explains, the "most false," most beautiful poem is decorated elaborately with metaphors and other ornaments, without which it "would not be a poem" (K 62a). But this value-system rankled medieval philosophers, who regarded poetry as trivial and fraudulent. Moses Ibn Ezra, both poet and philosopher, was especially plagued by this conflict since he regarded the Bible, the word of God and true by definition, as poetry, which is false by definition. To resolve this conflict, he invokes the basic principle of Arabic theory that elegant literature consists of two separable components: (1) an idea (2) adorned by beautiful, poetic language. The ornaments decorate ideas that could be expressed more precisely and directly, albeit less poetically, in plain, unadorned language. Ibn Ezra expresses this clearly in connection with metaphor, the most basic ornament: "Although literal language is fundamentally more reliable . . . a composition, when . . . clothed in metaphor . . . becomes beautiful" (K 118b). The "falsehood" of poetry thus relates only to its poetic "garb," an artistic exterior that contains a true, meaningful content, both in the Bible and in good poetry (K 62b). Regarding the Bible's content, its noble ideas, the opposite maxim pertains: "the best of a composition is its most true" (K 62a).

While the Kitãb teaches how to adorn plain truth in "false" ornaments, the literary theory it imparts suggests the opposite for interpreting poetry: its "false" adornments must be removed to uncover the essential, true idea. This exegetical byproduct is developed at length in another work by Moses Ibn Ezra, *Maqãlat al-Hadîqa fi*
Ma'ni al-Majāz wa-’l-Ḥaqiqā (The Treatise of the Garden on Metaphor and Literal Language).

In that work, he constructs a system of philosophical exegesis by separating two types of biblical language: ḫaqīqa (lit. “truth”; Heb. emet), i.e., literal language, and majāz (lit. “metaphor”; Heb. ba‘awarah), i.e., figurative language, such as metaphor, simile and hyperbole. Ibn Ezra “translates” the Bible’s majāz into ḫaqīqa by removing its figures of speech which are “false” by definition and employed merely for decoration. The majāz-ḥaqīqa dichotomy, used in Qur’anic exegesis since the eighth century and applied to the Bible by Sa‘adia Gaon in the tenth, is certainly not original to Ibn Ezra. But it acquires special meaning within the matrix of his literary theory: corresponding to the range of badi‘ in the Kitāb, the concept of majāz in the Maqālat represents the Bible’s “most false” exterior which must be removed to reveal its “most true” essence, its ḫaqīqa.

**Anthropomorphism**

The majāz-ḥaqīqa dichotomy provided a powerful tool for solving the problem of biblical anthropomorphism, i.e., the description of God in human terms. The Spanish exegetes, believing axiomatically in God’s incorporeality, were troubled by verses like “The eyes of the Lord turn to the righteous and His ears to their prayers” (Ps 34:16-17). Sa‘adia argues that this is simply figurative language, i.e., majāz, and actually refers to God’s providence. Applying this method to similar passages, he demonstrates that the Bible typically uses anthropomorphism to portray God’s abstract qualities. This principle guided the Spanish pesbat tradition. Moses Ibn Ezra, in his Maqālat, creates an extensive “dictionary” of anthropomorphic majāz usages for which he provides literal ḫaqīqa equivalents; and this model was adopted by Maimonides, who created a similar dictionary in his Guide. The “definitions” in these dictionaries were applied to the biblical text in the commentaries of Abraham Ibn Ezra and Radak.

Parts of Maqālat al-Ḥadiqa were translated into Hebrew as ‘Arugat ha-Bosem in twelfth century Provence for the benefit of Jews in Christian lands, who no longer read Arabic but retained interest in philosophical biblical exegesis. In ‘Arugat ha-Bosem, the procedure of rendering anthropomorphic majāz into ḫaqīqa is portrayed as a mirror image of poetic metaphor as described in the Kitāb. In connection with biblical descriptions of God, we read:

The true idea that is intended is too wondrous and exalted to be understood precisely. The wise man must [therefore] divest the true ideas of their [garb of] gross figurativeness, and [re]clothe them in...
pleasant garb, so that he will reach through them the intended idea, to the extent of human capacity to comprehend.

This passage implies that ideas are "dressed" by language, which may be ornate or simple. The Kitãb describes how poetry is created by adorning an idea with ornate, metaphorical "garb"; the corollary here describes how this "garb" must be "stripped away" to reveal the original idea and dress it in "simpler clothing," i.e., more accurate, though less poetic, literal language.

Since anthropomorphic descriptions are inaccurate, even misleading, one might ask why Scripture didn't simply use literal language and describe God directly. Radak's father, Joseph Kimhi (1105-1170), a Spanish emigré in Provence, addresses this question:

The Torah tends to speak [about God] in human language . . . [e.g.] "the eyes of God," "the ears of God". . . . [But these are] metaphors to educate people, [by causing them] to picture Him in human form, although this is not accurate [lit. "though they are far from Him"]. This is so that the uneducated should understand and comprehend God; and this will not harm the wise since they comprehend the truth of the matter; they remove the husk and eat the fruit.

Joseph Kimhi, like 'Arugat ha-Bosem, explains that the wise "comprehend the truth" by "removing the husk and eating the fruit." But he also appreciates the tension between the false exterior and true inner meaning of such language. In other words, he explains why the "husk" is used to begin with. In a manner reminiscent of the maxim, "the best of poetry is its most false," he argues that Scripture speaks of God in human terms so that people will "picture Him in human form." This inaccuracy is necessary since the uneducated masses cannot believe in, much less fear, a completely abstract divine Being.

The vivid picture, more than any abstract philosophical description, will capture their imagination, inspire their thoughts, and motivate them to worship God.

Dramatization

The literary aspect of Moses Ibn Ezra's style-content dichotomy is echoed by Radak a century later in Provence in a revealing comment about the nature of prophecy. In the episode of a vision of the prophet Micaiah (1 Kgs 22:19-22), King Ahab seeks advice from his four hundred prophets, led by Zedekiah ben Kenaanah, who predict success in the campaign against Aram, all saying: "Go up [to battle]
and the Lord will deliver [them] to his majesty!” (1 Kgs 22:6). Micaiah, God’s true prophet, denounces this message as false and foretells Ahab’s defeat. To persuade Ahab, Micaiah depicts “the Lord seated upon His throne, with all the host of heaven . . . to his right and left . . . [asking] ‘Who will entice Ahab. . . ?’” whereupon a spirit comes forward, saying: “I will entice him . . . and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets,” to which God answers: “Go out and do it!” The other prophets were inspired by this spirit, identified in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 89a) as Naboth, who was murdered by Ahab and now sought revenge. The Talmud classifies Ahab’s prophets as “false prophets,” defined in the Mishnah (Sanhedrin XI:5) as “one who prophesies what he did not hear and what was not told to him.” But this creates a dilemma: if their message actually was sent from heaven, why are these “prophets” guilty of false prophecy? Speaking of Zedekiah ben Kenaanah, the Talmud asks: “What could he have done, the spirit of Naboth misled him!”

The Talmud resolves this problem in a somewhat forced manner based on Rabbi Isaac’s rule that “no two prophets prophecy in the exact same style” (ein shenei nevi’im mitnabbe’im besignon ehad). Since the four hundred prophets all used the identical language (“Go up . . . the Lord will deliver . . .”), the Rabbis reason that Zedakaiah should have recognized that their prophecy came from a “lying spirit” and was fallacious. In giving this answer, the Rabbis uphold their initial assumption that the false “prophecy” actually derived from a heavenly source. The four hundred, led by Zedakaiah, were guilty of “false prophecy” not because they fabricated their prophecy, but because they should have discerned it as a false message. The Talmud thus widens the narrow mishnaic definition of a “false prophet” to include anyone who knowingly transmits a false message in God’s name, even one received from a heavenly source, sent by God Himself.74

Radak on II Kgs 22:20 advocates a new approach to Micaiah’s vision that neatly resolves the Talmud’s dilemma while preserving the simple reading of the mishnaic definition. Postulating that prophecy sent by God is true by definition, he argues that the four hundred were false prophets because they received nothing from heaven; they “prophesied what they did not hear and what was not told to them.” Radak, of course, recognizes that he must account for Micaiah’s vision, which explicitly contradicts this claim. Alluding to the Talmud’s dilemma, he prefaces his commentary by noting that “these things are a great quandary for those who understand them literally,” and then offers a new approach, that the scene of God sending the “lying spirit” never occurred in reality but is merely a poetic device:
These are poetic words of rhetoric (di'vrei melizah); Micaiah said them as a way of presenting [God's] words; not that Micaiah saw these things, nor did he hear them.\textsuperscript{75}

To indicate that this scene is “false,” i.e., Micaiah's fabrication, Radak calls it melizah, a technical medieval Hebrew term for poetry and rhetoric which evokes the medieval maxim, “the best of poetry is its most false.”\textsuperscript{76}

But we must now ask why Micaiah himself is not a “false prophet.” After all, Radak (but not the Rabbis!) claims that “Micaiah [did not see] these things, nor did he hear them,” echoing the Mishnaic definition of a false prophet.\textsuperscript{77} Evidently Radak assumes that the “truth” of a prophecy is judged by its content, which must be received from God, not its poetic style, which may be fabricated. And, in fact, earlier in this passage, Radak refers to Micaiah's message itself—that the four hundred prophets are lying—as ha-emet, “the truth,” i.e., the authentic content, in contrast to the “false,” poetic vision.\textsuperscript{78} This defense of Micaiah as a true prophet, constructed from Radak's terminology of melizah vs. emet, echoes Moses Ibn Ezra's terminology, majãz vs. haqiqa (≡emet), and his defense of poetry from the charge “the best of poetry is its most false,” i.e., the poetic garb alone is false, but the idea it contains is true. Radak thus takes advantage of the style-content dichotomy articulated by Moses Ibn Ezra to advance an approach avoided by the Rabbis, who would not consider the possibility that a true prophet might fabricate any aspect of his prophecy.\textsuperscript{79}

Radak's language here suggests an answer to an obvious question: Why did Micaiah use the false poetic medium (melizah) rather than stating his message (ha-emet) directly? Micaiah uses this technique, Radak writes, “as a way of presenting [God's] words,” i.e. to convince his audience. The vivid dramatization—God convening the heavenly court, sending the “lying spirit” to mislead Ahab—powerfully and clearly illustrates God's message. Radak regarded Micaiah's strategy as typical. In his commentary on Jer 6:29, for example, he describes prophecy as “a constant attempt to use allegory and rhetoric (mashal u-melizah) to reform [the people].”\textsuperscript{80} Radak calls Micaiah's vision melizah; elsewhere he refers to dramatization as mashal. For example, Jeremiah comforts the Judean exiles by relating God's consolation to their weeping matriarch Rachel, “Restrain your voice from weeping . . . For there is a reward for your labor . . . hope for your future . . . your children shall return to their country” (Jer 31:15-16). The Rabbis (\textit{Lam. Rab.}, Peti'hta 24) took this realistic conversation literally, explaining how Rachel herself, in heaven, approached God for
mercy. But Radak classifies this scene as a mashal, indicating that Jeremiah conceived it to illuminate the horizon of despondent, disillusioned exiles, enabling them to envision God’s continued protection.

Radak’s comments suggest that the prophet does not simply relate the words he hears from God verbatim; he takes the idea communicated by God and reformulates it, using mashal and melitzah. Moses Ibn Ezra says this explicitly: “A prophet must convey his message with words that make it penetrate the mind [of his audience], though these might be different than the words that he heard” (K 77b). Both authors thus regard the prophet as a poet, since he must “clothe” the ideas he receives from God in rhetorical devices. If “the best of poetry is its most false,” the best of prophecy illustrates and dramatizes to ensure that it penetrates the hearts of callous and uninterested listeners. Moses Ibn Ezra thus argues that dramatic hyperbole, though false by definition, is essential to the mission of the prophets, “and if not for it, the[ir] objective would not be accomplished” (K 137b).

**Poetic Repetition**

Invoking the style-content dichotomy, the Spanish peshat tradition devised a revolutionary approach to the biblical tendency to repeat the same idea in similar words. Labeled “an idea repeated in different words” (kefel ‘inyan be-milim shonot) in the medieval tradition, or “synonymous parallelism” by modern scholars, this is perhaps the most characteristic feature of biblical poetic style. Employed regularly in biblical sections Moses Ibn Ezra classifies as poetic, it creates an “echo,” a steady rhythm, if not a strict meter. This style naturally caught Ibn Ezra’s attention, but it was already analyzed a century earlier by Jonah Ibn Janaḥ (Spain, 985-1040), one of the greatest Hebrew linguists, who discussed its exegetical implications:

That which is added for emphasis and elegance [includes] “Who has made and done?” (Isa 41:4); there is no meaning element [implied] in “and he made” beyond that which is in “he has done”; but this is [simply] literary elegance and artistry. Similarly, “I have created, fashioned and made him” (Isa 43:7); there is no [new] meaning [implied] in “fashioned” and “made” that is not already [implied] in “created” . . . And you must treat all similar examples analogously.

To illustrate his principle, Ibn Janaḥ partitions two verses from Isaiah, one into two, the other into three, synonymous phrases, “a,” “b,” (and “c”):
a.) Who has made b.) and done?
a.) I have created b.) fashioned c.) and made him.

Ibn Janah does not attempt to explain what is added by phrase “b” (and “c”). Instead, he identifies the shared sense of “a,” “b,” (and “c”) which, in his view, completely represents their meaning. This method diverges significantly from rabbinic exegesis, which is illustrated by an alternative midrashic reading of Isa 43:7 cited by Moses Ibn Ezra. According to that reading, “created” refers specifically to conception, “fashioned” to formation of limbs and veins, and “made” to growth of the skin. Siding with Ibn Janah, Ibn Ezra calls this “overly minute analysis” (K 87a). In favor of the midrashic approach, however, one might ask: if nothing is added by phrases “b” and “c,” why are they used at all? Anticipating this objection, Ibn Janah continues: “And if someone asks . . . Would not brevity be more appropriate? We would tell him that in the art of rhetoric, elaboration is more fitting, artistic and elegant.” Ibn Janah here and in the passage cited above reveals the literary foundation of his rule by invoking the Arabic terms for literary elegance and artistry, ḥasāba and ḥalāgba. Repetition is employed in the Bible purely for poetic reasons; the added phrases, “b” and “c” are merely “ornamentation” for an idea adequately expressed by “a.” In light of the sharp style-content dichotomy, this implies that all specific connotations of “a,” “b,” and “c” beyond their shared meaning element must be “stripped away,” since they are “matters that have no interpretation, and were not [written] to be interpreted,” to borrow Maimonides’ expression (cited above, p. 18).

Ibn Janah’s principle became a hallmark of the Spanish peshat tradition. Abraham Ibn Ezra, labeling synonymous repetition zahot, used it to avoid (sometimes forced) rabbinic distinctions between synonymous phrases. Radak applied Ibn Janah’s rule, for which he coined the formula “an idea repeated in different words,” even more systematically, often citing the alternative midrashic analysis it obviates. Ibn Ezra and Radak similarly identify verbatim repetition as a biblical poetic technique. For example, on Gen 23:1, Radak observes the redundant words שמה . . . שמה in the sum of Sarah’s age, מאתו שלמה והשממה דברי השמות חד פעמיות והשממה (“one hundred years and twenty years and seven years”). Following Rashi, he mentions the midrashic explanation that “at age one hundred she was like a woman of twenty with regard to sin, and at age twenty like a woman of seven with regard to beauty.” But Radak cites similar biblical verses to support an alternative advanced by Abraham Ibn Ezra: “they say this is [simply] literary elegance (zahot) in Hebrew.”

The literary approach to biblical repetition appears later in the
Spanish *pesbat* tradition in the writings of Nahmanides (1194-1274). Living in Christian Spain, he was no longer exposed to Arabic poetics; yet the literary principles of his Spanish predecessors were an integral part of his exegetical heritage, and sometimes caused him to reject midrashic readings. On Ex 4:9, \(\text{"And the waters you take from the Nile shall become blood on the dry land"}\), for example, he observes that Rashi, citing the Midrash, derives meaning from the extra word \(\text{"and"}\). But Nahmanides argues that this is unnecessary:

We do not require the midrashic reading, because the linguists (ba'alei ha-lashon) have already determined that the normal style of many biblical verses is to repeat words for emphasis, or because of a lengthy interruption that comes between them.

The "linguists" referred to here are Ibn Janah and Radak, who demonstrate that Scripture typically repeats words for rhetorical or stylistic purposes, rather than to teach new information. Applying their principles, Nahmanides argues that the second \(\text{"and"}\) is used exclusively for stylistic purposes and could have been omitted without changing the meaning of the verse.

**Structural Repetition**

Beyond applying principles of his predecessors, Nahmanides contributed his own literary insights to the Spanish *pesbat* tradition. Earlier exegetes treat the Pentateuch as one continuous work; but Nahmanides, manifesting keen sensitivity to literary structure, argues that each of its five books can stand alone as a distinct unit, unique in theme and independent in design. This furnishes him with an original, though natural, resolution for a redundancy that troubled Rashi on Ex 1:1-4, namely why Scripture repeats the names of Jacob's sons who came to Egypt, information already recorded in Genesis 46. Citing the Midrash, Rashi explains that the repetition shows God's love for Israel, which prompts Him to repeat their names at every possible opportunity. Nahmanides, however, while affirming the validity of this concept, argues that it need not be invoked to explain the redundancy. Defining Exodus as the "Book of Exile and Redemption," he maintains, instead, that the brief review of the roots of the exile is necessary simply for the sake of literary coherence. Although this information already appeared in Genesis as part of the story of the patriarchs, here it provides the setting for the exile and unfolding redemption, the theme of Exodus.
4. The Anti-Literary Response

**RABBINIC “OMNISIGNIFICANCE”**

Having seen the exegetical implications of the literary approach, we can now summarize the ways in which the Spanish tradition sets its course apart from rabbinc exegesis. The well-defined Arabic concepts of literary dramatization and embellishment adopted by the Spanish exegetes were unknown to the Rabbis, who did not apply the style-content dichotomy. As we have seen, the Rabbis do not regard Micaiah's vision of the "lying spirit," or Jeremiah's portrait of Rachel, as a literary fabrication. Nor do they treat biblical anthropomorphism as a "false" exterior to be "stripped away." By now it should be apparent that Maimonides' tendency to disregard ("strip away") allegorical details employed for poetic enhancement is simply another manifestation of the style-content dichotomy. But the Rabbis reject Maimonides' assumption that such details "have no interpretation." Regularly expounding every word, even every letter of Scripture, they believe instead that all biblical details are meaningful, a doctrine referred to by James Kugel as "omnisignificance." This belief also prevents the Rabbis from accepting Ibn Janah's principle that synonymous and repeated language could have been omitted without any loss of meaning. Instead, the Rabbis normally attempt to differentiate between synonymous phrases, and even words repeated verbatim, assigning a specific meaning to each and every word in Scripture.

The Rabbis, applying the doctrine of "omnisignificance," implicitly reject the "literary" approach by avoiding the methods of the Spanish peshat school. But since they obviously were unaware of this medieval development, they could not directly address, much less refute, its principles. This task fell to the Malbim, a nineteenth century rabbinic Bible scholar who witnessed the damaging religious effects of literary Bible interpretation in his day. Constructing his exegesis on a rejection of the principle "an idea repeated in different words," he argues that in Holy Scripture an additional word always implies a new idea. In articulating his exegetical theory, Malbim carefully chooses his language to reject the axioms of the Spanish tradition:

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.

Malbim argues that style cannot be divorced from content; no prophetic word can be attributed purely to stylistic embellishment and
"stripped away." His justification seems like a tautology: "for the spirit of the living God is in the midst of all the words of the living God." The key word here is all: the "spirit of the living God," i.e., a divine message, is contained in every single one of the "the living God's words," whereas the Spanish exegetes, according to the Malbim, reduce the Bible's divine character, believing that only some words convey meaning, while others "have no interpretation." This reveals Malbim's motivation, which echoes the objections by Dunash and the Zohar. Those authors reject, in principle, the application of aesthetic standards to the Bible; Malbim applies similar reasoning to attack the exegetical implications of the literary approach. Even if the best of human poetry "is its most false," it is sacrilegious in his view to assume that the word of God contains "false" or even meaningless language, which can be "stripped away."103

**"The Torah Speaks As Human Beings Do"**

How would the Spanish tradition respond to Malbim's sharp, compelling attack? We begin by addressing his specific critique of its approach to synonymous repetition. Although most of rabbinic exegesis adopts Malbim's principle, we find a talmudic precedent for Ibn Janah's view in the rule, "the Torah speaks as human beings do" (diberah Torah ki-leshon benei adam). Admittedly marginal in rabbinic literature, this rule is cited in connection with repeated or otherwise redundant biblical language.104 The Talmud (Kiddushin 17b), for example, records a debate regarding a master's biblically mandated duty to reward his freed slave:

The Rabbis taught: "[You will surely furnish him (תל שמש תפש) out of the flock, threshing floor and vat] with which the Lord your God has blessed you" (Deut 15:14): One might [think] that if the household was blessed because of him you furnish him, but if not, you do not furnish him. Scripture thus teaches [otherwise]: תפש תפש (a doubled verb); in any event [he must be furnished].

Had Scripture said simply תפש, the master's obligation would, in fact, be contingent; but the added word, תפש, teaches that it is absolute. A dissenting view is recorded:

R. El'azar ben 'Azariah says: The verse must be taken exactly as it is written; if the household was blessed because of him you should furnish him, but if the household was not blessed because of him you do not furnish him.

The Talmud then returns to the doubled verb: "If so, what does Scripture teach [with] תפש תפש? The Torah speaks as human beings do."
R. El'azar is criticized for his failure to interpret the word פִּינּוּ. The Talmud normally solves this type of problem without questioning the axiom of omnisignificance by assigning some other meaning to the added word. But R. El'azar apparently rejects this axiom, asserting that "The Torah speaks as human beings do," and adds words merely for rhetorical effect, emphasis, or other purposes, just as human beings do; hence one need not derive additional laws from or attribute specific meaning to every single word of the Torah. Malbim advocates the view of the talmudic questioner, who assumes that no word of the Torah is "devoid of a lofty idea." But the Spanish peshat tradition follows R. El'azar's view that the meaning of הַדָּעָה היה והַדָּעָה would have been adequately expressed by the word הַדָּעָה alone.

Beyond providing a precedent for Ibn Janah, this talmudic debate exposes the pivotal point that divides the Spanish peshat tradition from midrashic exegesis. If the Torah indeed "speaks as human beings do," it must be analyzed according to linguistic methods applied to ordinary human speech. The opposing position, that "the Torah does not speak as human beings do" (לו דיבר הַדָּעָה קִי-לְשׁוֹנָא מֵהָנְאוֹת), considers these methods improper for God's word, which is unlike human language. On this view, the Torah is a divine "code" accessible only through its midrashic keys. The Rabbis thus replaced ordinary linguistic analysis with unique hermeneutic rules (ميدות שֶֽהַ-הוֹרָה נְדְרֵשַת בּהָהֵרִי) which direct talmudic and midrashic biblical exegesis.

But the Spanish tradition develops the belief that human linguistic analysis accurately yields the Torah's message. Exposed to extensive Arabic studies of language and literature, this school discerned various types of "human language," and instead of analyzing Scripture simply as ordinary speech, regarded it as artistic, literary language. Perhaps this is why these exegetes replaced the talmudic maxim with literary terms like צָהַֽוַת and מֶלִֽיזָֽה. In any case, this novel conception of "human language" opened up new exegetical avenues; instead of attributing redundancy to the wastefulness of ordinary speech, this tradition could view it as a poetic technique employed deliberately to produce an aesthetic effect. If secular allegories are enhanced by extra details, Scripture is as well; and like secular poetry, Scripture employs dramatization and "false" imagery for vividness and impact.

Comparison with the Northern French peshat school of Rashi (1040-1105) and his grandson, Rashbam (1080-1160), highlights the unique Spanish perspective. Rashi manifests an incipient, though hesitant, literary approach. He occasionally explains extra words in terms of literary design, but frequently adopts midrashic readings, indicat-
ing acceptance of "omnisignificance." Rashbam's attitude is more decisive: systematically avoiding midrashic readings, he regularly and insightfully identifies biblical stylistic tendencies to explain otherwise redundant phrases. But lacking the literary theory and terminology of the Spanish tradition, even Rashbam could not view, much less describe, the Bible's style in poetic terms. Whereas Moses Ibn Ezra and Jonah Ibn Janah identified biblical stylistic patterns by searching for the badi' and fasâha in Scripture, Rashi and Rashbam discerned them empirically and intuitively. The French pesbat method interprets Scripture as if it were ordinary, though well structured, human speech; but the Spanish pesbat tradition interprets it as "the best of poetry."

To reconcile the conflicting literary and "omnisignificant" approaches, a compromise can be considered, which sometimes arises in modern traditional circles. In the Prophets and Writings (Nevi'im u-Ketuvim), some words can be viewed merely as literary ornamentation, whereas the Pentateuch (Torah) must be treated as an omnisignificant code that requires interpretation of every minute detail. This distinction is attractive because it affirms the primacy of the rabbinic hermeneutic rules applied throughout the Talmud, which evidently assume the Torah's omnisignificance. In addition, the uniquely divine authorship of the Torah, which consists of the exact words of God Himself, invites the presumption of omnisignificance.

Yet, this compromise position does not actually appear among the exegetes we have seen in the debate between the literary and anti-literary approaches. Malbim argues that all of Scripture is omnisignificant, whether formulated by God Himself or by people through divine inspiration. Analogously, Ibn Janah, Moses Ibn Ezra, Abraham Ibn Ezra, Maimonides, Radak and Nahmanides all consistently employ their literary principles in the Pentateuch, just as in the Prophets and Writings. Nor is this perspective limited to the Spanish pesbat tradition. To begin with, the rule of diberah Torah kilesbon benei adam, where it appears in the Talmud, is applied specifically to the Pentateuch. And linguistic convention, rather than omnisignificance, is invoked by Rashbam (and occasionally by Rashi) to treat redundancies in the Pentateuch. While they unequivocally accepted all halakhot derived in rabbinic literature through the hermeneutic rules, the medieval exegetes maintained that the pesbat of the Pentateuch must be determined using another exegetical method.
THE ZOHAR'S CRITICISM REVISITED

Identifying in Scripture known genres and qualities of human literature, the Spanish literary approach suggests that the Torah speaks in a human voice because it is written for human beings. Like the best human literature, Scripture addresses man's aesthetic sensibilities and, aiming for poetic beauty, "dresses" its ideas in poetic "garb." For what type of aesthetic excellence did biblical authors aim? The principle diberah Torah ki-leshon benei adam implies that Scripture, intended to inspire human beings, adheres to measurable human artistic standards, rather than some mysterious "divine" artistic standard. Moses Ibn Ezra assumed that biblical poetics adheres to a universal human sense of literary artistry and could be defined through the prism of Arabic poetics. Analogously, it is reasonable to assume that the Temple music was aesthetically pleasing to human listeners; and on this basis Sa'adia and Moses Ibn Ezra identify its instruments and melodies with those regarded beautiful according to the musical theory of their days.

We can now return to the Zohar's criticism: How can we apply secular literary standards to the Bible if they imply its artistic inferiority? The solution rests in the medieval style-content dichotomy. Moses Ibn Ezra, who admits that the Bible's artistic style is surpassed in Arabic literature, would argue that its divine content is unique and unsurpassed. In other words, even he must consider the Bible's artistic garb secondary, though indispensable. This relationship can be illustrated by a common modern analogy. A person who is not judged primarily on appearance, a Rabbi, for example, will still wear a respectable suit to conform with accepted norms of proper attire. Yet we would not expect him to win a "best dressed" contest since his attire, while not trivial, is secondary. Moses Ibn Ezra sees the Torah's literary attire in similar terms. God's word, given to mankind, must be elegant and compare respectably in artistic terms with other literary works, although its ultimate worth must be judged in a completely different arena.

The author of the Zohar evidently dismissed this response, probably because he would reject Moses Ibn Ezra's analysis even if it had shown the Bible's literary superiority. In other words, the Zohar disavows the whole idea of diberah Torah ki-leshon benei adam. Scripture, being the word of God, would not employ human literary conventions, no matter how beautiful. We can now define the essential debate between the Zohar and Moses Ibn Ezra most clearly: the Zohar, representing the anti-literary approach, views the Bible in light of its divine source, while the Spanish literary tradition views it in terms of its human audience. To be sure, the anti-literary approach
has a certain appeal: it regards the Bible's very language and style as intrinsically divine; like an angel, even like God Himself, it is a completely holy, other-worldly entity. But the Spanish tradition viewed Scripture as a human-like document, holy by virtue of its divine content, despite its use of secular genres. Abraham Ibn Ezra writes that "words are like a body, and their content like the soul" (longer commentary on Ex 20:1). The Torah, a divine essence encased in earthly form, thus mirrors the human situation; it challenges man to discover the holy within the mundane.

5. Modern Literary Analysis

The modern relevance of the Spanish tradition emerges when we compare it with current literary approaches to the Bible based on modern theories. This comparison is interesting because literary theories that have emerged since the advent of "New Criticism" in this century reject the principles of Arabic poetics. In the words of Cleanth Brooks, a seminal literary critic, the modern theories share "a profound distrust of the old dualism of form and content, and a real sense of the failure of an ornamentalist rhetoric." In this view, imagery, alliteration and other "poetic devices" cannot be "stripped away" to get at a poem's meaning; they all contribute to its "organic whole" and together create the poem. The New Critics devised methods of "close reading" specifically to capture the subtle connotations of a literary creation in its own individual language and form. The Spanish exegetes saw language as "clothing" that could be made more or less ornate without altering its content; but Meir Weiss, a modern proponent of "close reading" of Scripture, writes:

The garment can be changed and the body . . . will still be the same. Wine can be emptied from one container to another without losing its taste or bouquet. However, if you change the wording of a poem by paraphrasing it, you have taken away its soul and put something else in its place.125

This echoes Malbim's critique of the Spanish pesbat tradition; but Weiss is actually relying on the principles of New Criticism, which regards paraphrase as literary "heresy."126 Advocates of the modern literary approach, ever sensitive to nuances of language, tone and even sound, often suggest readings that resemble those found in the anti-literary tradition. The Spanish pesbat exegetes, regarding diction as arbitrary, viewed word-plays merely as
literary artistry; but both Midrash and modern literary studies carefully analyze biblical word choices for subtle connotations. M. Weiss, based on New Critical theory, justifies his approach in the following way:

Any thought that has been expressed in a certain manner can be realized only through these very words in their given order, rhythm, sound pattern and associative context—this order and no other.

A striking precedent for these words appears a century ago in Malbim’s formulation of rabbinic exegetical theory:

In prophetic poetry there are no . . . words or verbs placed by chance. . . . [This is true] to the point that all the words . . . that comprise every phrase, not only are they necessary for that phrase, but indeed it would not have been possible for the divine poet to use another word in its place; for all of the words of divine poetry are weighed in the scales of wisdom and understanding.

This principle provides the basis for Malbim’s midrashic approach to synonymous repetition. Not surprisingly, modern literary scholars eschew Ibn Janah’s view of this feature as a meaningless stylistic device and instead analyze the connotations of the “echo” effect it creates.

Yet, the shared exegetical path of the Malbim and Weiss, of the Midrash and biblical New Critics, belie divergent conceptual points of origin. The Rabbis, followed by the Malbim, respond specifically to Scripture’s divine origin in applying their meticulous hermeneutic methods, which they would not apply to a human document. But modern literary critics apply their meticulous analysis to the Bible because this is exactly the way they approach human literature; they believe that modern literary criticism, which reveals the meaning of the greatest human literature, will also reveal the greatness of Scripture. As Robert Alter writes:

By literary analysis [of Bible] 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.
The modern literary approach, like its medieval counterpart, adopts the principle *diberah Torah ki-leshon benet adam.*

6. Conclusion

As we have seen, the questions that opened this essay were answered affirmatively by the Spanish *pesbat* tradition, which applied medieval literary theories to biblical literature. While this approach was formulated most explicitly by Moses Ibn Ezra, it underlies the thought of other figures in that tradition, such as Sa'adia Gaon, Abraham Ibn Ezra, Maimonides and Radak. The style-content dichotomy, derived from Arabic theory, forms the common denominator of this school, on the basis of which the Bible's content was viewed as being clothed in poetic ornamentation. Sa'adia and Moses Ibn Ezra evaluated the Bible's poetic style *per se.* Others in this tradition focused on Scripture's message and “stripped away” its ornamental “garb,” which includes literary devices such as dramatization, repetition and allegorical details, all of which, in the words of Maimonides, are “matters that have no interpretation.” This revolutionary approach was not universally accepted; in fact, it inspired a distinct anti-literary tradition. The very idea that the Bible’s poetic style could be measured by human aesthetic taste was questioned by Dunash and renounced by the Zohar. And the exegetical principles of the Spanish *pesbat* tradition, unknown in rabbinic exegesis, were rejected outright by the Malbim, who argued that “in the poetry of the prophets there is no . . . language devoid of a lofty idea.”

In modern times, the debate takes a new turn: somewhat paradoxically, the modern literary approach to Scripture, applying the ideological axiom of the Spanish *pesbat* tradition, yields “close reading,” which amounts to the opposite exegetical result. The Spanish tradition advocates a “literary” approach to the Bible; but like other human disciplines, literary criticism evolved over the centuries to the point that its methods were completely transformed. This finds parallels in other secular fields applied to Torah. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, for example, following Maimonides, uses secular philosophy to analyze the conceptual underpinnings of the halakhic system; the two can thus be said to share a central ideological position. Yet their conclusions dramatically diverge because modern philosophy runs a different course than the Aristotelian system of Maimonides. If we imagine the evolution of literary criticism as a multi-story building, we can say that the modern and medieval literary approaches view Scripture from different floors of the same building. Coincidentally,
the panorama visible from the "modern" floor resembles that of rabbinic exegesis from an adjacent building, since both reject the style-content dichotomy, insisting instead on "close reading." This raises an interesting historical question: how would Maimonides, Moses Ibn Ezra or Radak approach biblical literature if they lived today? Would they still advocate the style-content dichotomy, or would they adopt modern theories and become more sympathetic to midrashic exegesis? We cannot answer this question for the medieval exegetes, but it highlights our unique perspective as modern readers, enabling us to bridge the gap between the literary and midrashic traditions.

NOTES

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1. English translations of biblical and medieval passages cited throughout this essay are my own, unless otherwise noted.

2. He argues, for example, that the author repeats similar ideas in the speeches of Job and his friends to hide the true, unique positions of each (Guide III:23), an explanation which assumes that the book is a fabricated dialogue, not an accurate record of one which historically took place. It is interesting to note that a compromise rabbinic position, between the extremes of absolute fiction and strict history, appears in Gen. Rab. 57:3, which records a view that Job himself is a historical character, whereas the biblical story about him is fiction. This preserves the Talmud's postulate that Job's "name and the name of his town" would be recorded only if historically accurate, an assumption Maimonides rejects.

3. English translations of the Guide are my own, based on Maimonides' original
Arabic. Where cited in this essay, the Arabic appears in Hebrew characters to reflect Maimonides’ own usage, which was standard among medieval Jewish Arabic writers (sometimes referred to as Judeo-Arabic.) Hebrew citations of the Guide are from Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s translation, which was approved by Maimonides himself.

4. To be sure, even Maimonides agrees that some biblical allegories contain only meaningful details, in which case, “every word in the allegory has meaning” (ibid.). But he argues that this approach, standard in rabbinic exegesis, is legitimate only with respect to a minority of biblical allegories, saying: “Normally, you must seek only the general idea, for that is what is intended” (ibid.). See, however, Mishnah Im Perush Rabbenu Moshe Ben Maimon: Seder Nezikin, J. Kahana ed. (Jerusalem, 1956), 143-44, for what would appear to be a different exegetical approach. It is true that the Mishnah Commentary was written much earlier than the Guide, which might suggest that Maimonides’ views simply changed over the course of his lifetime. But a careful reading reveals that these two sources can be otherwise reconciled to reflect a consistent viewpoint. I intend to address this issue in a forthcoming article devoted to Maimonides’ exegetical methodology.

5. This resembles Maimonides’ methodology for ascertaining ta’amot ha-mizvot (the rationale for the laws of the Torah) in Guide III:26. Positing that the details of many mitzvot are necessarily arbitrary, he argues that a rationale often can be determined only in a general sense, by viewing a given mitzvah in its entirety, without considering all of its details. See I. Twersky, Introduction to the Code of Maimonides (New Haven, 1980), 398-400.

6. Maimonides himself does not discuss this case; but his method is applied, e.g., by Mezudat David, ad loc.

7. Although the Hebrew can be construed differently (“to embellish the allegory and the arrangement of its elements,” taking שדרת והדר as another object of the verb שדרת), Maimonides’ Arabic, לָעַל מִדְלֵי הָעֵדָּה לֹא נְעֶבֶּר (see above, n. 3; lit. “for embellishment of the allegory and [for] arrangement of the words in it”) supports our translation, which presents “arrangement . . .” as a distinct function. Compare S. Pines’ English translation, “. . . to embellish the parable and to render it more coherent” (The Guide of the Perplexed: Moses Maimonides [Chicago, 1963], I:12).

8. Although it is common in modern traditional circles (see below, p. 37) to admit this approach only in the Prophets and Writings (Nevi’im u-Ketuvim) but not in the Pentateuch (Torah), Maimonides evidently considered it applicable throughout Scripture, and did not exclude the Pentateuch. See Yom-Tov ibn al-Ashbilli (Ritba), Sefer ba-Zikkaron, K. Kahana ed. (Jerusalem, 1956), 41, who demonstrates that Maimonides identified “matters that have no interpretation,” which are employed purely for the purpose of allegorical coherence, in Genesis 18.

9. See Y. Shilat, ed., Iggerot ha-Rambam (Jerusalem, 1987), 25, who notes that this is not the student of Maimonides, Joseph Ibn ‘Aknin, to whom the Guide is addressed.


11. Ibid.

12. Ibid. Evidently Ibn ‘Aknin was not disturbed in principle by love poetry, but merely considered it trivial and unworthy of Solomon’s literary attention, parallel to the problem we raised regarding the Job story for Maimonides. Ibn ‘Aknin's
answer—that the Song contains a hidden inner meaning—resolves the second
problem, not the first. Moses Ibn Ezra responds more directly to the inherent reli-
gious problem of the Song’s (sometimes erotic) love poetry; see D. Pagis, "À pro-
191-96.

It is important to observe the source of Ibn ‘Aknin’s analysis, which he cites
for support:

The Indians in the book they called Kalila wa-Dimna . . . spoke in fables in
the form of discussions between animals and birds and . . . decorated it
with illustrations so that the masses would run and savor its wisdom and
take pleasure in it until their intellect strengthens and would examine and
find the insights and wisdom bound within.

Although the Song is Holy Scripture, Ibn ‘Aknin cites an example from secular lit-
terature to account for its literary format. Evidently, he believed that Scripture
employs human literary methods, a view shared by Maimonides, who regards
substantial biblical passages as literary embellishment, not unlike that in secular
literature.

14. The notion that the Torah employs otherwise superfluous passages to captivate
and motivate readers appears in contemporary rabbinic thought, in the writings
of the late Rav Nissan Alpert z”l. Although the Talmud, as a rule, recommends
brevity (in the dictum, “One must always teach his student in a concise way”;
Pesahim 3b), Rav Alpert observes that many biblical passages, especially in
Genesis, are repetitive or could otherwise be written more concisely. The value
of brevity, he explains, applies primarily in Halakhah; but, in narrative, the Torah
employs a lengthy style in order to more effectively convey moral and religious
 teachings. Using the very reasoning we attribute to Maimonides, Rav Alpert ex-
plains that these narratives are carefully designed so that “a person’s heart will be
captivated by their beauty” (emphasis in original), and thus be sparked with
greater religious devotion and fervor. See N. Alpert, Sefer Limmudai Nissan ’al
ba-Torah (New York, 1991), 8-9. I am indebted to Rabbi Y. Neuberger for this
reference.

15. Other than the shared patronymic, “Ibn Ezra,” we have no evidence that he was
related to his younger contemporary, the well-known Spanish exegete, Abraham
Ibn Ezra.

16. Abraham Ibn Daud, the twelfth century Spanish historian, writes: “R. Moses son
of R. Jacob Ben Ezra [was] of a princely family, and a great scholar in Torah and
Greek wisdom, and a composer of poems and hymns (תְּפִיעַת הַהָּדָּו) . . . and he
that heard them, his heart would soften and he would be filled with awe of his
creator” (Sefer ha-Qabbalah, ed. G. Cohen [Philadelphia, 1967], 73). Ibn Ezra’s
selihot are recited to this day in some Sephardic traditions.

17. For his contributions to the exegetical tradition, see my forthcoming article, “The
Aesthetic Exegesis of Moses Ibn Ezra,” Sec. 31.2 of Hebrew Bible / Old Testament:
The History of its Interpretation (Vol. 1 / pt. 2), ed. Magne Sæbo (Gottingen:
Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht).

18. For his influence on Maimonides, see S. Pines, “Sefer ‘Arugat ha-Bosem: ha-
Keta’im mi-Tokh Sefer Mekor Hayyim,” Tarbiz 27 (1958): 218, n. Radak cites
Moses Ibn Ezra in Sborashim, s.v. bad and s.v. ‘zb and in his commentaries on
Gen 1:5 and Isa 51:1. For evidence of his influence on other medieval exegetes,
see P. Fenton, Philosophie et exégèse dans le Jardin de la métaphore de Moise Ibn

19. Originally written in Arabic, the Kitāb was not translated into Hebrew until mod-
ern times. The best modern translation, published together with the Arabic, is
A.S. Halkin, Sefer ha-‘lyyunim ve-ha-Diyyunim (Jerusalem, 1975). References to
the Kitāb are from Halkin’s edition; English translations are my own. Where the
original Arabic is cited in this essay, it appears in Hebrew characters, as it does in
the manuscripts and published edition of Ibn Ezra’s writings (see above, n. 3).
20. Perhaps other such works existed but were lost. N. Allony claims that Sa'adia's work on Hebrew language, Ha-Egron, contained a section on poetics no longer extant (Ha-Egron, ed. N. Allony [Jerusalem, 1969], 79). He bases this on (1) the Arabic title of that work, Kitâb Usui af-Si'r al-Ibraniyya (The Book of Principles of Hebrew Poetry); (2) its introduction, which mentions chapters on poetics; and (3) a fragment he believes belongs to those chapters (see below, n. 31). Based on parallels between this fragment and the Kitâb, N. Allony (pp. 112-13) claims that the lost section actually influenced Moses Ibn Ezra.

21. See D. Pagis, Ḥiddush u-Masoret be-Shirat ha-Hol ha-'Ivrit (Jerusalem, 1976), 51-64. Samuel ha-Nagid (933-1056) manifested this belief by entitling his poetic works Ben Tehillim and Ben Misbiṭ.


23. He attributes this notion to Aristotle; see below, p. 22.

24. There are several textual problems in this passage and I follow the reading favored by J. Dana, Ha-Poetika Shel ba-Shirah ha-Teruki-Sefarad bi-Yemei ha-Betinayim (Jerusalem, 1982), 151. Cf. Halkin's note, ad. loc.

25. See, e.g., Maimonides' enthusiasm for Rish Lajish's equation of Satan and the "evil inclination" (Guide III:22) and for rabbinitic attempts to explain miracles in natural terms (Guide II:29).

26. Literally, nāṭhr means "scattering," as opposed to the Arabic naẓm, lit. "string of pearls," a metaphorical term for rhymed, metrical verse, i.e., poetry.

27. A similar concern appears in the nineteenth century commentary of the Neziv (Rabbi Naftali Zevi Yehudah Berlin), who cites Deut 31:19, "Write for yourselves this shirah" (taken by the Rabbis as a command that every Jew write his own sefer Torah), as evidence that the Pentateuch is poetry (shirah), which he contrasts with prose (ṣippur perozi). Drawing upon literary notions of his day, he explains that, whereas prose can be understood in a straightforward manner, poetry must be interpreted as an intricate complex of multifaceted allusions. He thus argues that the exegetical methods applied by the Rabbis reveal Scripture's plain sense (pesīḥat), and are not merely homiletic (derush, see below, n. 118, for the implications of this claim). See N.Z.Y. Berlin, Sefer Bereshit 'Im Perusb Ha'amek Davar (Jerusalem, 1975), ii. Although he works with different literary definitions and reaches antithetical exegetical conclusions (see sections 3 and 4 of this essay), the Neziv's use of the prose-poetry distinction, taken from general literary theory, does follow the precedent established by Moses Ibn Ezra.

28. Citing Moses' Song of the Sea and Ha'azinu, which he regards as "poetic" in the Arabic sense, he writes: "Some biblical shirah depart from prose," but then adds: "Now I [intentionally] said 'some of the shirah' because [texts] in prose also are called shirah, like the Song of Songs . . . and others" (K 25a).

29. Ṣurj is the least rigid Arabic poetic form; it is rhymed, but its meter is not strictly confined.

30. It is likely that this categorization was also influenced by the unique te'amim (musical notes) of these three books.

31. He cites three rhymed verses in Job that come closer to the ṣurj form, but recognizes them as exceptions rather than a poetic convention: "Sometimes by chance in some of these books there is something by way of [genuine, i.e., rhymed] ṣurj, for example [Job 28:16, 33:17 and 21:4]" (K 25a). N. Allony, 386-89, conjectures that a fragment he attributes to Sa'adia (see above, n. 20), which cites Job 28:16, 21:4, and Isa 49:1 as examples of ṣurj, was Ibn Ezra's source. Ibn Ezra, however, substitutes Job 33:17 for Isa 49:1, perhaps because he does not regard Isaiah as a poetic book. See A. Berlin, Biblical Poetry Through Medieval Jewish Eyes (Bloomington, 1991), 81.

32. Ibn Ezra's discussion of music appears in another work of his, Maqālāt al-Ḥadiqa fi Ma'ni al-Majāz wa-l-Ḥadiqa (The Treatise of the Garden on Metaphor
The Torah U-Madda Journal

and Literal Language), MS 203-18. Although the majority of this work (discussed below, p. 27) remains in manuscript, the section on music was published and translated into English in A. Shiloah, “The Musical Passage in Ibn Ezra’s Book of the Garden,” Yovel: Studies of the Jewish Music Research Centre 4 (1982): 211-24. Ibn Ezra clearly relies on Greek and Arabic theory to define the workings of music; but he correctly identifies musical charm as a genuine biblical concern. He cites biblical passages (e.g., 1 Chron 25:1-5) indicating that the psalms recited in the Temple service were set to music, and infers the essential role of music in prophecy from Elisha’s request for a minstrel (II Kgs 3:15). See A. Shiloah, 219-20 (Arabic), 223-24 (English).

33. A. Shiloah, 218-19 (Arabic), 221-22 (English). Judah Halevi also speaks of music as a “revered art” that “transfer[s] the soul from one mood to its opposite” (Kuzari II:64-65). Maimonides (Shemonah Perakim, chap. V) applies this in a medical context, prescribing “listening to melodies and musical instruments” to cure melancholy. A biblical precedent for this therapy (not mentioned explicitly by Maimonides) appears in the episode of David playing the harp to cure Saul’s depression (I Sam 16:23).

34. The connection between music and poetry is further developed by later medieval authors, e.g., Moses Ibn Tibbon (thirteenth century; son of the translator, Samuel) and Shem-Tov Ibn Falaquera (thirteenth century). See A. Berlin, Biblical Poetry, 89-99.

35. This notion, of course, underlies Ibn ‘Akin’s explanation for the literary beauty of the Song of Songs (above, p. 19).

36. Identifying biblical Kedar as Arabia, he cites as a prooftext Isa 42:11, “The inhabitants of Kedar . . . shall sing and cry out from the peaks of mountains.” This forms one part of his three-part, universal distribution of knowledge: (1) Israel as expert in prophecy and divine law; (2) Arabic supremacy in language and literature; and (3) Greek preeminence in philosophy and science (K 19a-22b). See U. Simon, Arba Gishot le-Sefer Tehillim (Ramat-Gan, 1982), 153-55. The verse Ibn Ezra relates to Greek philosophy, Gen 9:27, “May God beautify Yopheh,” is already adduced in Megillah 9b apparently to praise the poetic beauty of the Greek language (see below, n. 53); but since Ibn Ezra assigns this to Arabic, he takes the verse as a reference to Greek philosophy.

37. U. Simon, Arba Gishot, 152.

38. This criticism is surprising since Halevi’s poetry follows Arabic conventions. See R. Brann, The Compunctious Poet: Cultural Ambiguity and Hebrew Poetry in Muslim Spain (Baltimore, 1991), 88-89.

39. This appears to be a Jewish version of the Arabic belief in *i‘jaz al-qur’ân* (the inimitable wondrousness of the Qur’an). Writing in a Muslim milieu, Halevi felt a religious need to combat the claim that Arabic is divine and superior to all other languages. See N. Allony, “Ha-Kuzari—Sefer ha-Milhamah ha-Arabiyah le-Shihur ha-Yehudi,” Edel Be’er Sheva 2 (1980): 119-36; cf. R. Brann, 26, 88-89; see also below, n. 42.

40. This passage, from Ibn Tibbon’s commentary on Ecclesiastes which is no longer extant, is preserved in a citation by Rabbi Judah Moscato (sixteenth century), Kol Yebudab [commentary on KuzarA (Vilna, 1905), 161. The Hebrew (mistranslated in A. Berlin, Biblical Poetry, 89) reads:


42. The absolute objectivity of “the aesthetic standard” assumed by Moses Ibn Ezra
and his contemporaries is, of course, questioned in modern thought, which tends to view aesthetics (as well as ethics) in subjective terms. It is interesting to note that the modern perspective resolves much of the perceived dilemma created by Ibn Ezra's comparison of biblical and Arabic poetic conventions. Instead of demonstrating the Bible's aesthetic "inferiority," this comparison, using the modern view, merely reveals the different aesthetic standards of biblical and Arabic poets.

44. The Aramaic reads:

וי הלחנה בר חם אדמר חדא אורייתא אפורת ספורת בעלמים הכלל דהויא, זא בר
אפיל באתא זא עני לכלך אוריתא הכלל דהויא יבשבא זייר שלחל
אפיל יאנק פסורי ידעלס ויאביויה כליל ילא יתי, זא בר יאול אבתרויי יניבד

See J. Dan, Ha-Sippur ha-'Ivri bi-Yetnei ha-Beinayim (Jerusalem, 1974), 10-12, for an analysis of this passage and the anti-literary orientation it represents. Even according to the traditional view that the Zohar was composed early in the talmudic era (as opposed to modern scholars who argue that it was written in thirteenth century Spain), this passage would have played a pivotal role in any medieval debate over the literary approach to the Bible. Regardless of its original historical context, medieval readers in thirteenth century Spain (where the Zohar had become popular) would have understandably regarded it as a criticism of Ibn Ezra's Kitâb. Furthermore, Rabbi Ya'akov Emden, Sefer Mitpahat Sefarim (Jerusalem, 1995), who accepts the antiquity of the original Zohar, argues that many passages were added in medieval times. Given the strong literary awareness in medieval Spain, it is reasonable to regard this as one of the passages added there. For a survey of the various views on the Zohar's authorship, from medieval to modern times, see Y. Tishbi, Mishnat ha-Zohar (Jerusalem, 1949), 1:28-105. See also M. Kasher, "Ha-Zohar," Sinai Sefer Yovel, ed. Y.L. Maimon (Jerusalem, 1958), 40-56.

45. Although a number of talmudic sources attach value to aesthetics (see below, n. 53), a negative attitude towards aesthetic beauty can perhaps be discerned in Ta'anit 7a-b. Upon meeting R. Yehoshua ben Hananyah, who apparently was rather unattractive, a Roman princess exclaimed, "How could such beautiful wisdom [be contained] in [such an ugly vessel]"? R. Yehoshua answers that just as wine preserves in plain earthenware but spoils in beautiful gold and silver vessels, an ugly person is a more appropriate receptacle for Torah than a handsome one. Taking this analogy at face value, the Talmud then asks, "But are there not handsome people who are learned?" The response is: "Had they been ugly, they would have been even more learned!" Perhaps this talmudic passage can be taken, in the spirit of the Zohar, as an indication that beauty, as perceived by human beings, does not enhance, and even detracts from, God's word. But one can reasonably argue that this source is not relevant to our discussion, since the Talmud explains that R. Yehoshua's opinion is based on the fact that a handsome person is less likely to manifest humility, a necessary component of true Torah scholarship. This suggests that arrogance, a moral flaw, rather than aesthetic beauty itself, is the trait actually identified by the Talmud as being incompatible with Torah.

46. See above, n. 20, on Sa'adia's work on poetics. On the term zahot, see N. Allony, Ha-Egron, 26-30; D. Pagis, Hiddush u-Masoret, 52.

47. Dunash's Hebrew, דָּעַ֣שְׁנָ֑ש, corresponds with Sa'adia's term, zahot.

48. Tesbuvot Dunash 'al Rasag, ed. R. Schröter (Breslau, 1866), 28-29. Although Dunash does not cite Sa'adia by name, his identity is revealed by Abraham Ibn Ezra, who cites this debate (see below, nn. 49, 54). However, we have no record of this statement in Sa'adia's extant writings.

49. Dunash's position seems to conflict with the rabbinic rule, "No two prophets prophecy in the exact same style" (Sanhedrin 89a; see below, n. 49, 54). Indeed, his extreme view is unique; the more prevalent position is that of Maimonides,
who maintains that only the Pentateuch is God's exact language, but the
Prophets and Writings (Nevi'im u-Ketuvim) were written by people, through various levels of divine instruction and inspiration. See Guide, II:45; see also discussion below, n. 83.

50. This should be contrasted with the claim of biblical superiority over Arabic poetry advanced by Judah Halevi and Samuel Ibn Tibbon. Like Dunash, they refuse to accept the Arabic standard as an absolute measure of aesthetic beauty. But they intimate that human aesthetic taste is an objective standard by which the Bible's literary beauty could theoretically be measured, given the proper insight and skill. In contrast, Dunash implies that human aesthetic taste is inherently subjective and limited, and thus cannot be used to measure the Bible's beauty.

51. Note that Dunash, who explicitly deals with prophetic writings, is more inclusive than the Zohar, which mentions only the Pentateuch (Orayta). See below, n. 116.

52. In contrast, Ibn Ezra's Maqālat al-Ḥadiqa, a more conventional work on philosophical biblical exegesis (discussed below, p. 27), was translated into Hebrew (as 'Arugat ha-Beẓem) in medieval times. See M. Idel, "Zehuto Shel Metargem Sefer 'Arugat ha-Beẓem le-R. Moshe Ibn Ezra," Keriyyet Sefer 51 (1976): 484-87.

53. Although the well-defined aesthetic notions of the Spanish school were certainly novel in Jewish tradition, aesthetic concerns do arise in rabbinic literature. The benediction formulated by the Rabbis for "one who beholds beautiful creatures and beautiful trees" (Berakhot 58b; see also 'Avodah Zarah 20a) demonstrates their appreciation for aesthetic beauty. Furthermore, the value they attached to such beauty is apparent in the talmudic principle of biddur mizvah ("embellishing the mizvah"), which requires that mizvot be performed using aesthetically superior objects. The Talmud specifically applies this principle to require that a Torah scroll be written in a most beautiful fashion (safer Torah na'eh). See Shabbat 133b; see also Inzeklopedia Talmudit, VIII:271-76, s.v. biddur mizvah. Of particular interest for our purposes is the talmudic maxim regarding literary beauty in connection with Scripture, appearing in a discussion of R. Shimon ben Gamliel's view that Scripture may be translated into Greek, but not any other language. Citing the verse, "May God beautify Yefet" (Gen 9:27), the Rabbis regarded Greek as aesthetically superior to all other languages. Apparently applying the biddur mizvah principle, the Talmud thus reasons that Greek, apart from Hebrew itself, is the only worthy receptacle for Holy Scripture, according to R. Shimon ben Gamliel. See Megillah 9b and Rashi ad. loc., s.v. yafyuto shel yefet (cf. Moses Ibn Ezra's view, above, n. 36). Cf. what would appear to be a different talmudic attitude towards aesthetic beauty, cited above, n. 45.

54. Sefer Sefat Yeter, ed. D. Torsch (Warsaw, 1895), 32; see translation and discussion in J. Kugel, The Idea of Biblical Poetry (New Haven, 1981), 184. Ibn Ezra justifies Sa'adia's evaluation of the prophets' relative literary skills by arguing that they, in fact, formulated their own prophecies based on ideas received from God. This is a natural explanation for the rabbinic rule that "No two prophets prophecy in the exact same style" (Sanhedrin 89a, discussed below, p. 29), which thus supports Ibn Ezra. We should note, however, that this defense does not apply to the Pentateuch, traditionally viewed as the word of God Himself. Perhaps Ibn Ezra felt that Sa'adia judges the relative poetic merit only of the prophetic writings. In any case, the medieval literary approach normally does not distinguish between biblical books based on authorship, divine or human (see below, p. 38). As discussed below (n. 119), the talmudic maxim, "The Torah speaks as human beings do" (diberah Torah ki-leshon benei adam) can be understood to imply that God Himself adopted human literary conventions, an assumption that would validate the literary approach even for the Pentateuch itself.

55. N. Allony (above, n. 20) conjectures that the Kitab is actually based on Sa'adia's lost writings on Hebrew poetry. This theory lacks evidence except for a parallel (noted above, n. 31) between Ibn Ezra's identification of biblical rajaz and a
fragment Allony regards as part of Sa'adia's Ha-Egron.

56. This Arabic aphorism, translated into Hebrew as מָכַז, echoes Plato's censure of the poets as deceitful. For its history in Greek and Arabic literature, see R. Brann, 72, 191; R. Scheindlin, “Rabbi Moshe Ibn Ezra on the Legitimacy of Poetry”, Medievalia et Humanistica 7 (1976): 107-08.

57. This is rejected in modern theory, which regards style and content as integrally related; see below, p. 39 ff.

58. Never published, this work remains in MS (Jerusalem National Library MS 5701, formerly Sassoon MS 412).

59. Although majāz literally means "metaphor", Ibn Ezra uses it to refer to a wide range of non-literal (but not necessarily metaphorical) linguistic usages; in this he follows Sa'adia and Arabic writers. See H. Ben-Shamrai, "Hakdamat R. Sa'ad ha'Gan li-Yesh'a' yahu," Tarbiz 60 (1991): 380-82; W. Heinrichs, 122-27.

60. For its Arabic background, see W. Heinrichs, 111-40. On Sa'adia's majāz exegesis and its Arabic sources, see M. Zucker, "Al Targum Rasag la-Torah" (New York, 1959), 225-36; H. Ben-Shamrai, 380-82.

61. Eemanot ve-De'ot 2:10, followed by Moses Ibn Ezra (Maqālat, 163) and Maimonides (Guide 1:44-45).


64. Naturally, certain terminological changes (which reflect different conceptions of metaphor) arise in this tradition, which spans three centuries. Sa'adia and Moses Ibn Ezra use majaz; as does Maimonides in his commentary on the Mishnah (Sanhedrin X, “The Third Principle”), written in his youth. But throughout the Guide he applies a new term, isit'āra (Heb. hash 'alah), Arabic for metaphor (see, e.g., Guide 1:4, 6, 7, 9, 10). In Mishneh Torah (Hil. Yesodei ha-Torah 1:12) Maimonides employs the Hebrew term mashal, which is also used by Abraham Ibn Ezra (e.g., on Gen 1:3, longer commentary on Ex 19:20) and Radak (e.g., on Gen 6:6 and Jer 14:8). See my forthcoming book, Three Approaches to Biblical Metaphors in Radak and His Predecessors.

65. Selections from this work were published in Zion 2 (1849): 117-23, 134-37, 157-60, 175 and in Litteraturblatt des Orients 10 (1849): 747-48. According to M. Idel, Judah Ibn Tibbon was the translator but S. Abramson argues that it was Judah al-Ḥarizi. See M. Idel, Zehuto (cited above, n. 52); S. Abramson, "Metargem Sefer Arugat ha-Bosem le-R. Moshe Ibn Ezra Hu Rav Yehudah al-Ḥarizi," Kiryat Sefer 51 (1976): 712.

66. Cited above, p. 27. As we shall see (below, nn. 67, 68), this "mirror image" is not as strongly implied in the original Arabic. Although our inferences are from the translator's formulation, the parallel in the Kitāb demonstrates that his way of thinking was not foreign to Moses Ibn Ezra.

67. The Hebrew here reads, המְכַז נְמוּרָה׀ נְמוּרָה מְמוּצָה נְמוּרָה נְמוּרָה, which evidently should be emended to read המְכַז נְמוּרָה מְמוּצָה נְמוּרָה, based on the subsequent phrase המְכַז נְמוּרָה נְמוּרָה המְכַז נְמוּרָה נְמוּרָה, "he will remove those husks from them") does not evoke the image of divesting a garment. It seems that the translator chose his language to parallel the Arabic original of the first phrase (נְמַדַּר נְמַדַּר "and he will clothe them”), more precisely, although the translator added the phrase המְכַז נְמוּרָה נְמוּרָה המְכַז נְמוּרָה נְמוּרָה, for clarity.

68. Here the Hebrew (זִכְרָה נְמוּרָה נְמוּרָה "and he will clothe them”), more precisely, although the translator added the phrase המְכַז נְמוּרָה נְמוּרָה המְכַז נְמוּרָה נְמוּרָה, for clarity.

69. Zion 2 (1849): 137.

70. This passage actually indicates the limitations of language, which stem from the limitations of human intellect. Prefacing that the "true idea [about God] . . . is too wondrous and exalted to be understood precisely," it implies that the best we
can do is replace the gross biblical anthropomorphisms (תפנש ודיבר) with less poetic, but not completely accurate literal language, which still carry the limitations of speaking about God in human terms.

71. Joseph Kimhi, Sefer ha-Berit, ed. F. Talmage (Jerusalem, 1974), 34. The “husk-fruit” metaphor is borrowed from Hagigah 15a, “R. Meir found a pomegranate, ate its interior, and discarded its husk,” a description of his relationship with Aher (Elisha ben Avuyah), his teacher.

72. Bahya Ibn Pakuda, Hovot ha-Levavot, Sha'ar ba-Yihud, chapter X, also maintains that the uneducated are permitted to imagine God in human form. But Maimonides strongly argues that no one is permitted to do so. See Guide 1:35; Hil. Teshuvah III:7 (cf. Rabad’s gloss, ad. loc.). Judah Halevi, Kuzari IV:3-5, goes to the opposite extreme and argues that even educated people require tangible imagery to fully grasp God’s existence.

73. Compare the formulation of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik: “anthropomorphic metaphors . . . lend warmth and color to the personal God-man relation . . . the worshipper . . . begs the Almighty for a guiding hand, a friendly eye and a forgiving smile.” See The Halakhic Mind (New York, 1986), 39-40. “Guided by the practical needs of the worshipper,” this account, he notes, deviates from Maimonides’ strict prohibition of imagining God in human form (see previous note), which was not accepted by Jewish tradition (p. 115). From among the medieval authorities cited in the previous note, Rabbi Soloveitchik most closely follows Judah Halevi, since he implies that anthropomorphism is a legitimate need for all worshippers, not only “the uneducated.”

74. See Me’iri, Sanhedrin 89a, who reinterprets the mishnian definition in a more comprehensive sense to include the widened application of the Gemara.

75. Radak’s (unnamed) source here is Kuzari III:73. We cite Radak because he responds to the talmudic source more directly, and applies this principle to other prophecies (see below, p. 31).

76. To be sure, Radak accepted talmudic authority implicitly and unequivocally. Yet, this passage indicates that in exegetical matters, he believed that talmudic analysis was not necessarily intended to be definitive and could therefore be reconsidered in later generations, a view well represented in medieval halakhic sources, e.g., Sa’adia Gaon, Sherira Gaon, Hai Gaon and Maimonides. See M. Saperstein, Decoding the Rabbis (Cambridge, MA, 1980), 6-14; Inzehlopedia Talmudit, s.v. Aggadah, 1:20; see also below, n. 100. Based on these sources, M. Rosensweig concludes that within the tradition of Orthodox Judaism, “rabbinic texts do not exert the same measure of binding authority in areas of parshanut and hashkafah as they do in halakhic discussions.” See M. Rosensweig, “Eilu ve-Eilu Divrei Elohim Hayyim,” Rabbinic Authority and Personal Autonomy, ed. Moshe Sokol (Northvale, NJ, 1989), 96. (It may seem that by rejecting the Talmud’s definition of a false prophet, Radak opens a halakhic debate with the Rabbis; but his claim that God never sends “false spirits” actually renders this debate inconsequential from a practical [halakhic] point of view. The Talmud classifies one who knowingly transmits a message from a false spirit as a false prophet; Radak simply argues that this situation can never really occur.) Similar exegetical freedom is also manifested in Maimonides’ tendency in Mishneh Torah to derive a given law from a biblical verse other than the one adduced in the Talmud. He evidently believed that talmudic authority does not preclude a search for greater clarity in the use of biblical sources as a foundation for Halakhah. See I. Twersky, Introduction to the Code of Maimonides, 57; see also B. Epstein, Torah Temimah on Lev 10:6.

77. Compare Radak’s language אל שאר ברית ברית אלחנן with that of the Mishnah: עשתו תכתי בו אלחנן.

78. Radak writes: “The truth is that God aroused the spirit (מג應用) of the false prophets to beguile Ahab, not that the spirit of prophecy (מג應用) came to any one of them.” He does not clarify the difference between God “arousing” the spirit of the false prophets and actually sending them “a spirit of prophecy.”
Evidently, the former indicates “encouragement” to sin by fabricating a prophecy, in contrast to God actually sending a “false” prophecy.

79. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 89a) allows one exception: a prophet may deduce God’s will, although not explicitly expressed, through principles of inference (e.g., kal va-homer). See Me’iri, ad. loc.

80. Neither mashal nor melizah are indicated by the context in Jer 6:29, which makes this comment particularly instructive.

81. This, together with the previous example, should demonstrate that midrashic exegesis, which is often thought to be primarily allegorical, is often hyper-literal. See also Radak, Zach 3:2.

82. Rashi here, in addition to recording the midrashic tradition, cites the Targum, which does interpret this passage allegorically. But, unlike Radak, Rashi does not employ the literary term mashal to separate the two readings (see below, p. 37, for Rashi’s attitude towards the literary approach). On Rashi’s terminology, see S. Kamin, “Dugma be-Perush Rashi le-Shir ha-Shirim,” in Bein Yehudim le-Nozrim be-Parseshat ha-Mikra (Jerusalem, 1991), 13-30.

83. Abraham Ibn Ezra makes a similar claim in Sefer Sefat Yeter § 84, cited above, nn. 49, 54. Maimonides agrees that the Prophets and Writings reflect human composition, divinely inspired, but assigns a less creative role to the prophets by arguing that the scenes they depict reflect actual visions God implanted in their mind. He thus maintains, for example, that Micaiah, in his “mind’s eye,” actually “saw” God sending the false spirit. See Hil. Yesodei ha-Torah, chap. 7; Guide II:43-45.

84. Although he speaks of how “the prophets” employ hyperbole to accomplish their objective, the examples Ibn Ezra cites, which include verses from the Pentateuch, clarify that he does not exclude any section of Scripture from his analysis. In other words, following the convention of medieval Spanish usage, he includes Moses in his phrase, “the prophets.” This usage is also attested, e.g., in Abraham Ibn Ezra’s longer commentary on Ex 11:5.

85. Compare Moses Ibn Ezra’s description of allegory, cited above, p. 21. The examples he cites are from supernatural passages that describe great calamities or great prosperity. (Similar examples are cited by Maimonides in Guide II:29.)

86. K 87a. Interestingly, Ibn Ezra could not classify this stylistic device as a poetic ornament since it was discouraged in Arabic poetry and, true to his principles, he discourages it in Hebrew poetry as well.


88. These are translated into Hebrew as zahot and baga’at (נוא). The equivalent zahot-fasada was set by Sa’adia (see above, p. 25). Ibn Tibbon’s meticulously literal translation balaga-baga’at is misleading. While the Ar. root b-gh means “to reach” (נוא), the noun balaga is a technical term for literary elegance.

89. See, e.g., Ibn Ezra on Ps 2:3, 73:2, 78:15.

90. See, e.g., Radak on Gen 21:1, Josh 6:26. The Northern French peshat tradition also recognized this style and even devised a similar exegetical rule for its interpretation. See, e.g., Rashi on Ex 15:6; Rashbam there and on Gen 49:22. See below, p. 37, on the analogy between the Spanish and French peshat traditions.

91. Rashi’s citation of this midrashic reading (without the alternative peshat reading advanced by Radak), which is typical in his commentary, would seem to indicate his rejection of the literary approach in favor of the rabbinic assumption that every word of Scripture conveys meaning (see below, p. 37).

92. His source is Ibn Ezra on Ps 1:2, who rejects a similarly motivated rabbinic reading by invoking the notion of zahot.

93. The English translation does not reflect the redundant ויהי, and would be the same for ויהי ב משחק נמנים מברכים ויהי ב שמחת נמנים מברכים ויהי ב-Semitism נמנים מברכים ויהי ב שמחת נמנים מברכים ויהי ב Seminar on Ps 1:2. The Northern French peshat tradition also recognized this style and even devised a similar exegetical rule for its interpretation. See, e.g., Rashi on Ex 15:6; Rashbam there and on Gen 49:22. See below, p. 37, on the analogy between the Spanish and French peshat traditions.

94. See Ibn Janah, Sefer ba-Rikmah, 293-94; Radak, Sefer Mikhlol, ed. I. Rittenberg (Lyck, 1862), 61a.

95. See also Nahmanides on Gen 12:1 (regarding the superfluous ויהי) and Gen 12:11

97. Nahmanides, introduction to Exodus and on Ex 1:1. See Y. Elman, 25-29, who refers to this technique as "resumptive repetition" and finds a precedent for it in the *pesbat* commentaries of Rashi, e.g., on Gen 39:1 and Ex 6:29-30 (see below, n. 110).

98. A summary of the Rabbis' approach to anthropomorphism is beyond the scope of this essay. But even a cursory reading of their literature reveals that they do not systematically reinterpret it as do the Spanish exegesites. In fact, sometimes they actually depict God in human terms even more blatantly than Scripture does. See E. Urbach, *Hasid: Emunot ve-De'ot* (Jerusalem, 1986), 29-52. See also M. Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis*, 7-8.


100. The conclusions in this paragraph raise a critical question: How does the Spanish *pesbat* tradition reconcile its exegetical methods with rabbinic precedent? As we have already noted (above, n. 76), some freedom from talmudic exegesis is accepted within the halakhic tradition. But the fundamental methodological shift delineated here amounts to a complete rejection of rabbinic exegesis and requires a more substantial explanation. Abraham Ibn Ezra and Maimonides both address this issue in similar terms. Ibn Ezra maintains that the Rabbis knew the plain sense (*pesbati*) of Scripture, but, regarding it as obvious, did not devote commentaries to it, apart from *Targum Onkelos* (Introduction to the Pentateuch, "The Fifth Approach"); shorter commentary on Ex 21:8 (cited below, n. 109). He thus reasons that midrashim which violate the rules of *pesbati* were never intended to represent the actual meaning of the biblical text and are purely homiletic (Introduction to Lamentations). Known for his sarcastic "anti-midrashic" remarks, Ibn Ezra actually directs his criticism at those who misconstrue Midrash by regarding it as actual biblical exegesis (*Safat Berurah*, ed. G. Lipman [Jerusalem, 1967], 5a). Maimonides also maintains that many rabbinic *derashot* were intended only as homilies, "similar to poetic inventions" (דמואים ודברים מדרשים), "but not to express . . . the meaning of the biblical verse" (אומלץ ולשון חכמה . . .بَ מדרש, Guide III:43). This stems from Maimonides' overall view that midrashim which seem irrational must not to be taken at face value, but rather must be reinterpreted "in order to make [them] agree with reason, and conform with the truth and Scripture" (ב쾌ון ודיון ..., ויחד הבראה ובאה ב딩, קצון מדרש: הרפ'. ויחד הבראה ובאה בדין, מדרש). And, like Ibn Ezra, he strongly criticizes those who insist on taking such midrashim at face value (*Mishnah 'Im Perush ba-Rambam*: *Seder Nezikin*, J. Kafif, trans., 136-37). In light of Maimonides' well-defined—and strongly asserted—exegetical principles in the *Guide*, it stands to reason that he applied this approach to midrashim diverging from his conception of accurate biblical exegesis. Ibn Ezra and Maimonides would thus deny that the Rabbis ever adopted the doctrine of "omnisignificance" as a legitimate exegetical principle. See also below, n. 109.

101. These three images derive from the medieval tradition, which uses them to manifest its literary orientation. The "husk . . . interior" image appears in Joseph Kimhi (above, p. 28); the "body . . . soul" image is from Abraham Ibn Ezra's longer commentary on Ex 20:1 (cited below, p. 39); and the "clothing" image is from *'Arugat ha-Bosem* (above, p. 28).

103. There is one important exception to this generalization: Malbim (who manifests strong philosophical leanings) does not reject the Spanish approach to anthropomorphism, since he, too, unequivocally believes in God's incorporeality. This demonstrates that one might theoretically adopt principles of the Spanish pesher tradition selectively (see, e.g., below, p. 37); however, in their original context, these principles emerged as an integrated system of thought that included a definite literary orientation.

104. The controversy regarding this rule underlies a fundamental debate between the schools of R. Akiva and R. Yishmael over the proper methods for midrashic derivation of Halakhah. R. Yishmael's school adopts this rule; but R. Akiva's rejects it altogether, and zealously derives halakhot from the most minute details of Scripture. See Y.N. Epstein, Mevot le-Sifrut ba-Tana'im ve-ba-Amora'im (Jerusalem, 1957), 521-22; M. Elon, Ha-Mishpat ba-Ivri (Jerusalem, 1973), II:110-117; Y. Frankel, Darkei ba-Aggadah ve-ba-Midrash (Giv'atayim, 1991), 119-20, 595n. While in theory the opposing sides of this debate appear to represent equally viable rabbinic viewpoints, the majority of rabbinic exegesis, in fact, does not follow the rule diberah Torah ki-leshon benei adam, which appears only about a dozen times throughout rabbinic literature. See below, n. 108.

105. Pseudo-Rashi, Nedarim 3a, s.v. lindor neder, explains that "ki-leshon benei adam" means "this is the way people [normally] speak." Cf. Yerushalmi Nedarim 1:1, which cites biblical examples of ordinary conversations that include doubled verbs, e.g., Gen 31:30, JTûDD) *p3í "O rcbn Tfrn ("You had to leave, for you were longing for your father's house"), said by Laban to Jacob. See also M. Elon, 11:311.

106. Ibn Janah might say, "There is no meaning element [implied] in the word |7nyn beyond that which is in pwn."

107. Even according to this view, however, the Torah adopts some human linguistic conventions; after all, it contains sentences made up of nouns, verbs and adjectives. An attempt to deny even this similarity to human language may have motivated a kabbalistic tradition cited by Nahmanides in his introduction to the Pentateuch. According to that tradition, the entire text of the Torah spells out the names of God (nun = נון), and as such is not to be divided into ordinary words and sentences.

108. Tosafot, Bava Mezia 21b, s.v. diberah Torah, thus argues that even talmudic sages who adopt the rule diberah Torah ki-leshon benei adam apply it only in a limited number of cases, but usually accept the prevalent rabbinic exegetical method. See Tosafot, Sotah 24b, s.v. ve-Rabbi Yohanan, for an even more restrictive application. Although the rule diberah Torah ki-leshon benei adam provides a conceptual precedent for the Spanish pesher exegetes, they would not have adopted this minority talmudic position as their source of authority, because this would have put them at odds with the more prevalent talmudic view. Instead, they maintained that all talmudic sages agree that the pesher of Scripture is derived assuming diberah Torah ki-leshon benei adam, and that talmudic debates over this rule relate to a separate realm of analysis, namely the mnemonic associations between the halakhot and the text of the Torah (see following note; see also below, n. 118). Compare M. Elon, II:313-17, who claims that even R. Akiva's school did not consider omnisignificance to be a genuine exegetical principle and therefore normally implemented it only to formulate mnemonics, but not to derive halakhot.

109. This, of course, conflicts with the widespread talmudic derivation of halakhot through the midot she-ba-Torah nidresbet baben. The response of the Spanish tradition to this conflict is complex and requires lengthy analysis, and we can only briefly note its salient features. Abraham Ibn Ezra (short commentary on Ex 21:8) argues that the Rabbis knew and accepted the pesher (plain sense) of the biblical text, which they determined by normal linguistic analysis. He thus con-
cludes that where such "derivations" contradict the *peshat*, they could not have been intended as biblical "interpretation," but are merely mnemonic devices to remember and organize laws given orally at Sinai. See above, n. 100; see also U. Simon, "Le-Darko ha-Parshanit shel ha-Rav Avraham Ibn Ezra 'al pi Sheloshet B'l'urav le-Pasuk Ehad," *Bar-Ilan Annual* 3 (1965): 130-38. Ibn Ezra's resolution is also adopted by Judah Halevi (Kuzari III:73). Neither author questions the biblical (de-orayta) weight of such laws; they simply argue that their derivation does not represent the meaning of the biblical text. A more extreme view is formulated by Maimonides (Sefer ha-Mitzvot, C. Heller ed. [Jerusalem, 1946], 7-8), who argues that some laws "derived" in the Talmud from biblical verses are actually of rabbinic origin. (Compare his notion of *asmakhta* in his introduction to his Mishnah commentary, *Mischnah 'Im Perush ba-Rambam*, J. Kafih trans. [Jerusalem, 1963], 10.) Although Maimonides does not apply this rule universally, and regards many laws derived through the hermenéutical rules as biblical, his suggestion that some of them are merely rabbinic evoked strong criticism from Nahmanides. See Sefer ha-Mitzvot le-ha-Rambam 'Im Hasagot ba-Rambam, C. Chavel ed. (Jerusalem, 1981), 44-45, and discussion below, n. 112.

110. E.g., on Ex 15:6, Rashi observes what modern scholars refer to as "staircase parallelism"; and on Gen. 39:1 and Ex 6:29-30, he observes what Y. Elman, 25, calls "resumptive repetition."

111. See examples cited above (pp. 33-34), which prompted reactions by later exegetes who applied a literary approach instead of Rashi's midrashic reading. For the relationship between *peshat* and *derash* in Rashi, see A. Grossman, *Hakbemel Zarafot ba-Rishonim* (Jerusalem, 1995), 193-201.

112. See, e.g., commentary on Gen 49:22 and Ex 15:6; see also E. Touitou, "Al Shitato ha-Parshanit shel Rashbam be-Perusha la-Torah," *Tarbiz* 48 (1979): 248-73. Rashbam's approach, applied even in legal sections of the Pentateuch, often conflicts with halakhah derived in rabbinic literature through the *midot she-ba-Torah nidreshet baben*. To resolve this conflict, he argues that the Torah encompasses two distinct levels of meaning. One level, the *peshat*, is accessible through normal methods of analyzing (human) language; the other, embodied in the rabbinic *derasbot*, is derived by analyzing the Torah as an omnisignificant code, decipherable through the *midot she-ba-Torah nidreshet baben*. Although he devotes his exegetical project exclusively to *peshat*, Rashbam regards it as little more than a surface reading of the divine text, having only marginal importance. Ultimately, he insists, the *derasbot* reflect the primary meaning of the Pentateuch, and therefore determine Torah law. See commentary on Gen 1:1, 37:2, Ex 21:1, and E. Touitou, 251-53. Without citing Rashbam as his source, Nahmanides embraces the doctrine that the language of the Pentateuch simultaneously communicates both *peshat* and *derash* as two distinct levels of meaning. On this basis, he rejects the older Spanish view of Abraham Ibn Ezra and Maimonides (cited above, n. 109), who tended to regard *derash* as unrelated to the text. See E. Wolfson, "By Way of Truth: Aspects of Nahmanides' Kabbalistic Hermeneutic," *AJS Review* 14 (1989): 125-29.

113. As we note below (n. 118), this evidently stems from the exegetical approach of modern traditional commentators (Abronim) on the Pentateuch. Particularly important in this context is the Neziv's view (cited above, n. 27) that the Pentateuch, by its very literary nature as *shirah* (which he takes to mean "poetry," as defined in his day), requires midrashic exegesis. Since only the Pentateuch is referred to in Deut 31:19 (the Neziv's prooftext) as *shirah*, one might consider excluding the Prophets and Writings from this conclusion. While theoretically viable, this distinction is not, in fact, adopted by the Neziv, who maintains that the special poetic features he delineates as the basis for midrashic exegesis inhere "not only in the Holy Torah, but also in all of the Holy Scriptures." See N.Z.Y. Berlin, *Sefer Beresbit 'Im Perush Ha'amek Davar*, ii; see also *Ha'amek Davar* on Deut 18:18.
Our somewhat tentative language here ("which *evidently* assume . . .") accounts for the view of Abraham Ibn Ezra, Judah Halevi and Maimonides (cited above, n. 109), who would disagree with this inference.

See above, n. 49 and n. 83).

The Neziv (see above, n. 113) also makes this equation and thus rejects the modern compromise position. Dunash, of course, would not accept this compromise because he argues that "all of Scripture is the word of God Himself" (see above, p. 25). Perhaps the Zohar, which, in rejecting the literary approach, refers explicitly only to the Pentateuch (see above, n. 51), is open to this compromise. But it is conceivable that this specific reference is meant simply to highlight the problem of comparing God's word with "secular matters," but not to limit the criticism to the Pentateuch alone. Accordingly, the Zohar would then also refuse to analyze the rest of Scripture in literary terms.

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E. Touitou, 253, observes that, unlike the medieval exegetes, modern traditional commentators, such as Rabbis Y. Mecklenberg, N.Z.Y. Berlin (see above, n. 27), Malbim, S. Hirsch and D. Hoffmann, attempt to identify the halachic derashot as the pesbat of the Pentateuchal text. Rejecting the axiom of Rashash and Nahmanides that the Pentateuch conveys pesbat and derash as two distinct, legitimate levels of meaning, they argue instead that the talmudic debate in each case refers only to the derash, level, but that for determining the pesbat, all talmudic authorities would accept normal conventions of human language.

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like a prince ruling a city. He must allot to each attribute its due, assign to each its duty, see to it that none of them overdoes or overreaches, while making sure that the totality functions smoothly with all interrelated parts working cooperatively . . . An even more appealing metaphor might be that of the conductor of an orchestra who must make optimum use of every musician and every instrument, allowing no sound or combination of sounds to be more or less than is necessary for the total effect of the emerging symphony.

See N. Lamm, Torah Umadda (Northvale, NJ, 1990), 219-20. My thanks to Rabbi Yaakov Neuberger for bringing this source (and its relevance here) to my attention. Rabbi Neuberger suggested that one can view the aesthetic dimension of Scripture as a reflection of “shelemut ba-Torah,” much as Dr. Lamm describes personal shelemut. Although it is not the primary concern, poetic beauty, according to the Spanish tradition, certainly contributes to “the total effect of the emerging symphony” of the divine word.

123. While this relationship may seem ironic, at first glance, it is not unusual within traditional Jewish thought. Rav Kook, for example, expresses this notion exactly in formulating his concept of kiddush ba-hol (“sanctifying the mundane”): “The sacred must be established on the foundation of the profane.” They are related to each other as matter is to form—the secular is matter, the sacred is form—and “the stronger the secular, the more significant the sacred.” See N. Lamm, Torah Umadda, 128.


125. The Bible From Within (Jerusalem, 1984), 22. Weiss, a Rabbi in Hungary before World War II who subsequently taught Bible at the Hebrew University, uses his literary approach to combat source criticism, which assigns multiple authors to biblical books based on stylistic discrepancies. Citing New Critical theory, Weiss argues instead that these reflect literary ingenuity and complexity.

126. As C. Brooks writes in his now famous essay, “The Heresy of Paraphrase”: “To refer the structure of the poem to what is finally a paraphrase of the poem is to refer it to something outside the poem . . . Most of our difficulties in criticism are rooted in the heresy of paraphrase.” See his The Well Wrought Urn (New York, 1947), 201.

127. For example, S. Rozik, “Mi-darkei ha-Midrash u-mi-Darkei ha-Sifrut be-Parshanut ha-Mikra,” Bet Mikra 21 (1976): 71-78, compares Buber’s close readings with midrash. See also R. Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative (New York, 1981), 11, who notes a midrashic precedent for his close readings. Naturally, there are significant differences between the midrashic and modern approaches, as both Alter and Rozik observe.

128. The Bible From Within, 23.


130. See, e.g., studies of parallelism in R. Alter, The Art of Biblical Poetry (New York, 1985) and A. Berlin, The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism (Bloomington, 1985). Both of these follow J. Kugel’s seminal work, The Idea of Biblical Poetry (cited above, n. 54). Kugel already notes the rabbinic precedent for the modern view of parallelism, and devotes an entire chapter to Malbim, although he observes differences between the rabbinic approach (including that of Malbim) and the modern one, based on modern literary methods.


132. Naturally, non-traditional scholars, denying the Bible’s divine authorship, regard it as nothing more than leshon beni adam. But traditional scholars like M. Weiss and N. Leibowitz (see below, n. 133), rely on this maxim in their application of New Critical principles to Bible.

133. This confluence is perhaps best illustrated by Nehemiah Leibowitz who applies
the principles of New Criticism in the spirit of Malbim and rabbinic exegesis. Indeed, much of her work is devoted to revealing the "close readings" implicit in Rashi and other traditional commentators. Unlike Malbim, however, she advocates "close reading" on literary grounds, and maintains that it is required for all literary texts. In discussing this matter with me, she remarked that while studying literature at Berlin University before New Criticism had arrived in Europe, she was disturbed by the lack of sensitivity to nuance in literary scholarship, which she found in abundance in Rashi and Midrash. When later exposed to New Criticism, she welcomed its formulation of a belief she held intuitively based on her Jewish background, namely that the language of a literary composition is not simply an arbitrary medium.

134. Despite this confluence, the modern literary approach, unlike its medieval antecedent, which included eminent rabbinic figures like Sa'adia and Maimonides, admittedly has few prominent rabbinic proponents. Contemporary Orthodox Bible scholars that apply literary methods thus do so based on the religious authority of the medieval precedent. One might even argue that the modern literary approach, which insists on "close reading" of the biblical text, hardly requires any such justification since it avoids the controversial exegetical conclusions of the medieval literary tradition.