



BRILL

# The Rise and Fall of Jewish Philological Exegesis on the Bible in the Middle Ages: Causes and Effects

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## Abstract

In the course of the ninth century CE Jewish intellectuals in the Babylonian cultural sphere began to interpret the Bible literally, on the basis of language, syntax, and context. This hermeneutic method, called *peshat* exegesis spread from the East to the West and reached its apex in the twelfth century in northern France. However, the *peshat* method of interpretation flourished for a short time only and then declined, first in lands under the rule of Islam and afterwards also in Christian Europe. The question of the causes that led to the development of this hermeneutical method, its waxing and its waning, is one of the most basic questions in the study of medieval biblical exegesis. Nonetheless, no study devoted to a comprehensive explanation of the factors leading to the rise and fall of the *peshat* method has been undertaken, and most academic attention to the subject has focused on particular aspects, specifically the question of the factors that led to the flourishing of the *peshat* method in northern France. In this study, I fill this gap. As will be made clear, my results differ in various points from the views presented in previous research.

## Keywords

Biblical Exegesis – Medieval Exegesis – Peshat – Derash

In the Middle Ages, in Jewish communities from Iraq to France, a method of biblical exegesis characterized by a relatively fixed literary structure and common hermeneutical methodology developed into a unique literary-exegetical

genre.<sup>1</sup> These commentaries are composed of consecutive exegetical comments arranged according to the order of the verses. These comments are built from a quotation of a word, or a number of words, from a verse, called the “opening quotation” (lemma), which serves as a point of reference and sometimes functions also as the subject of the commentary.<sup>2</sup> The quotation is followed by the exegetical comment itself, which can vary in length from a single word to hundreds of words and can relate to specific issues, such as the meaning of a word, or the grammatical function of a particle, and so forth, or broader topics such as the structure of the narrative and its meaning. Some commentators integrated into their commentaries additional subjects connected somehow to the verses under discussion, such as polemics, educational questions, and so forth.<sup>3</sup>

This exegetical genre is referred to by the general name “*peshat* exegesis,” because several of the commentators used the terms “*peshat*” or “*peshuto*” to describe their method. The terms “*peshat*” or “*peshuto*” have received extensive scholarly attention. The accepted current opinion is that “*peshat*” refers to a type of exegesis based upon distinct principles. An exegete for whom the method of *peshat* is clearly formulated within his mind will interpret the text according to its language, syntax, context, the structure of the unit, parallel biblical texts, logic, and the way of the human world (*derech erez*).<sup>4</sup>

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- 1 For useful surveys, see Moshe Greenberg, ed., *Jewish Bible Exegesis: An Introduction* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1983); Magne Sæbø, ed., *Hebrew Bible, Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1996–2013) 1:2, especially chapters 25, 32–33.
  - 2 Sara Japhet and Robert Salters, *The Commentary of R. Samuel Ben Meir (Rashbam) on Qoheleth* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1985), pp. 44–48.
  - 3 It is interesting that the aforementioned structure is known from Christian exegesis beginning from the first centuries CE. For useful surveys, see Henry de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis* (trans.: E.M. Macierowski; Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998–2000); Sæbø, “Hebrew Bible,” 1:1, chapters 19–22. However, these Christian commentaries are not characterized by the exegetical methodology I describe below. Regarding the biblical exegesis of Antioch, see below, n. 38.
  - 4 Regarding this definition, see Sara Kamin, *Rashi’s Exegetical Categorization in Respect to the Distinction between Peshat and Derash* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1986), p. 268, and, among others, Moshe M. Ahrend, *Rabbi Joseph Kara’s Commentary on Job* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook, 1988), p. 69; Sara Japhet, *The Commentary of Rabbi Samuel Ben Meir (Rashbam) on the Book of Job* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Magnes, 2000), p. 55, n. 32; eadem, “The Pendulum of Exegetical Methodology: From the *Peshat* to the *Derash* and Back,” in Michael Fishbane and Joanna Weinberg, eds., *Midrash Unbound: Transformations and Innovations* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2013), pp. 249–250, and there also regarding

This definition, which is an academic theorization, fits the exegetical method of the greatest of the Jewish *peshat* commentators of the Middle Ages, Shmuel (Samuel) ben Meir (Rashbam),<sup>5</sup> among others. Other commentators who used the terms “*peshat*” and “*peshuto*” were only aware of some of these principles and with varying degrees of nuance.<sup>6</sup>

Of all of the principles mentioned, adherence to the context is the most crucial to the *peshat* commentators. Attention to the context is one of the characteristics of Jewish biblical exegesis in every place and at all times, as can be seen from famous statements of the sages of the Talmudic period.<sup>7</sup> The substantive difference between *peshat* commentators and the biblical exegesis of the sages is rooted in their level of adherence to the context and in particular to the rejection of the opposite methodology, atomistic interpretation, which is well rooted in the Jewish exegetical tradition.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, it is important

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the difficulty in translating the term “*peshat*” into English; and see the detailed discussion of Mordechai Cohen, “Reflections on the Concept of *Peshuto shel Miqra* at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century” [Hebrew], in Sara Japhet and Eran Viezel, eds., “*To Settle the Plain Meaning of the Verse: Studies in Biblical Exegesis*” (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2011), pp. 5–58.

- 5 On Rashbam, see in particular David Rosin, *R. Samuel B. Mëir als Schriffterklärer* (Breslau: F.W. Jungfer, 1880); Elazar Touitou, *Exegesis in Perpetual Motion: Studies in the Pentateuchal Commentary of Rabbi Samuel Ben Meir* (Hebrew; Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan, 2003); Japhet, “Rashbam on Job;” eadem, *The Commentary of Rabbi Samuel Ben Meir (RASHBAM) on the Song of Songs* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: World Union Jewish Studies, 2008); Meir Isaac (Martin) Lockshin, *Rashbam’s Commentary on the Torah* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Horeb, 2009), and see below.
- 6 As far as I know, no exegete suggested a principle of the *peshat* method other than the ones mentioned above. However, there is an exceptional case in which an exegete made a formal (or perhaps aesthetic) distinction between the *peshat* method and other exegetical methods. See Raphael Kirchheim, *Ein Commentar zur Chronik aus dem 10<sup>ten</sup> Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt am Main: Brönnner’s Druckerei, 1874), p. 55, and cf. Eran Viezel, “‘*Ksharim Dakim*’ (Subtle Links): The Methodology of the Anonymous Commentary on Chronicles Attributed to a Student of Sa’adiah Gaon,” in *Hebrew Union College Annual* 81 (2010), p. 82\*.
- 7 E.g., “The words of Torah are poor in one place and rich in another” (Y. R.H. 3:5 [58d]); “All the words of Torah need one another, for what one locks another opens” (Tanchuma *Chukat*, 52 [Buber ed., 129]); “[the midrash is expounded] from a matter that is not clarified in its place and is clarified elsewhere [in the Bible],” (Hyman Gershon Enelow, ed., *The Midrash of Thirty-Two Hermeneutic Rules* [New York: Bloch, 1933], p. 30, *Midah* 17).
- 8 An “atomistic commentary” gives independent meaning to the details in the text (whether to marginal aspects of the text such as the shape of the letters or units of content such as a word, verse, or a series of verses) without consideration for other verses that contradict this independent meaning; cf., e.g., Isaak Heinemann, *The Ways of the Aggadah* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1954), pp. 103, 108, 131; Barry Dov Walfish, “Medieval Jewish Interpretation,” in Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University

to point out that just as *peshat* commentators differed significantly in their levels of adherence to the *peshat* method, so too did they differ widely in defining “context.” Rashbam, for example, tended to limit the definition of context to the specific narrative unit (in similarity to modern commentators). In contrast, other commentators assumed that the context includes all of the Bible, and some of them even believed that in certain circumstances it is correct to take into consideration information included in rabbinic literature, under the assumption that context can include non-biblical literature.<sup>9</sup>

The fixed structure of *peshat* commentaries and their points of similarity in exegetical methodology are the defining characteristics of this exegetical-literary genre, which distinguish them from the biblical exegesis found in classical rabbinic literature. It is true that in the huge corpus of this literature it is possible to find examples of *peshat* exegesis, and several scholars have meticulously collected them.<sup>10</sup> However, these are specific, incidental, exegetical comments scattered throughout various collections, without a clearly defined or fixed structure and, for the most part, without any methodological awareness. The exegetical methodology found in classical rabbinic literature is different in its aims and methods from the *peshat* method and is given to description by means of negation. In contrast to the *peshat* method, the sages did not necessarily base their commentaries on the language, syntax, or context of the text, or on considerations of the literary unit, the literary genre, logic, or rationalist speculation. Although the sages did pay attention to some, or all, of these

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Press, 1999), p. 1876, and see also James L. Kugel, “Two Introductions to Midrash,” in Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick, eds., *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven: Yale University, 1986), pp. 93–99.

9 My reference here is not to the myth of “oral law” that complements the laws in the written Torah (see below) but rather to the exegetical assumption that the Bible and the classical rabbinic literature are a continuum whose parts illuminate each other. For further discussion about the limitations of “context” in medieval exegesis, see Eran Viezel, “Context, Harmonization, and the Uniqueness of the Commentaries to the Book of Chronicles,” in *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 22 (2015), pp. 1–35. On the limitations of context in rabbinic biblical exegesis, see in particular Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of the Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

10 Cf., Moses Eisenstadt, *Über Bibelkritik in der talmudischen Literatur* (Berlin: Druck v. H. Itzkowski, 1894); Isaac Jacob Weisberg, *Peshuto shel Mikra according to the Sages* (Hebrew; St. Petersburg: L. Rabinovitch, 1898); Ezra Zion Melamed, *Bible Commentators* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1978), pp. 115–125. For a balanced description of the place of *peshat* commentaries in rabbinic literature, see Japhet, “Pendulum,” pp. 251–252.

principles, they did so according to the desire of the individual homilist.<sup>11</sup> The practical expression of this flexible hermeneutic method is a liberal approach to the text and widespread use of atomistic exegesis, which *peshat* commentators usually avoided.

Biblical exegesis according to the *peshat* method began around the ninth century in Babel (Iraq) and from there spread to the heart of Christian Europe, apparently in two parallel paths: by way of areas under the rule of Islam (the land of Israel, North Africa, and Muslim Spain) and by way of Italy and Byzantium. It reached the height of its development in the middle of the twelfth century in northern France. In the eleventh century this exegetical method died out in Babel and afterward waned also in Muslim Spain. From the thirteenth century it weakened also in France. Nonetheless, in Christian Spain and France, as well as in Portugal and Italy, and even in Islamic lands, *peshat* exegesis did not die out altogether, and exegetes continued to interpret the Bible by way of *peshat* throughout the Middle Ages and in modernity. Even in our time, in rabbinic circles, biblical commentaries are being written that both methodologically and structurally appear to be a natural continuation of the *peshat* exegesis of the Middle Ages.<sup>12</sup>

The question of the causes that led to the development of this exegetical genre, its waxing and waning, is one of the most fundamental questions in the study of medieval biblical exegesis. Nonetheless, most academic treatment of this subject has focused on particular aspects of it without presuming to cover

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11 Many scholars have attempted to define the exegetical methodology of the sages and to describe systematically their approach to the Bible; the suggestion of Isaak Heinemann, who defined the methodology of the sages as “creative philology” and “creative historiography” is particularly well-known. Idem, “Ways,” pp. 4–7; A great deal of material has been collected by Yonah Fraenkel, *Midrash and Aggadah* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Open University Press, 1996); see below. The exegetical methodology of the sages is a sophistication and development of a much more ancient exegetical method, known from the ancient Near East, the Bible, and Hellenistic exegesis; see Saul Liberman, *Greek and Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1984); Stephen J. Lieberman, “A Mesopotamian Background for the So-Called Aggadic Measures of Biblical Hermeneutics,” in *Hebrew Union College Annual* 58 (1987), pp. 157–225; Yair Zakovitch, *Inner-Biblical and Extra-Biblical Midrash and the Relationship between Them* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: ‘Am ‘Oved, 2009).

12 See especially Yehuda Kiel (series editor), *Da’at Mikra* (Hebrew; 30 vols.; Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook, 1970–2003); cf. Michael Avioz, “The *Da’at Mikra* Commentary Series: Between Tradition and Criticism,” in *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 34 (2006), pp. 226–236.

the topic completely and thoroughly.<sup>13</sup> In explaining the course of the rise and fall of the *peshat* method, I will make use of some of the conclusions proposed by my predecessors, although my opinion differs on certain points. In addition to this, I will refer to a number of points that appear to me to be central that have not been mentioned or given sufficient attention in the research literature.

## 1 The Causes of the Rise of *Peshat* Exegesis

It appears correct to me to connect the development of *peshat* exegesis to the rise of Karaism and its growth within the communities of Babylonian Jewry and its cultural offshoots, in the ninth and tenth centuries.<sup>14</sup> People tend to resist hegemony for political and economic reasons and from authentic feelings of discrimination and exclusion. In many cases, the process of separation will include also intellectual aspects that distinguish the seceding sector from the dominant group.<sup>15</sup> It is only natural that the resistance to political-religious

13 It would appear that most research has been devoted to the question of the development of *peshat* exegesis in northern France; see especially Yitzhak F. Baer, *Studies in the History of the Jewish People* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: The Historical Society of Israel, 1985), vol. 2, pp. 162–174; Avraham Grossman, *The Early Sages of France: Their Lives, Leadership, and Works* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2001), pp. 21–29, 457–506; Israel Moshe Ta-Shma, *Studies in Medieval Rabbinic Literature* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar, 2004–2005), vol. 1, pp. 302–313, vol. 3, pp. 241–250; Ora Limor, *Jews and Christians in Western Europe: Encounter between Cultures in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Open University Press, 1997), vol. 4, pp. 27–65; Touitou, *Exegesis*, pp. 11–47; On the extra-academic reasons for the extensive scholarship on the development of *peshat* in northern France, cf., Meira Polliack, “On the ‘Literal Sense’ in Medieval Jewish Exegesis and Daniel Al-Qūmisi’s Contribution to the Semantic Study of the Hebrew Bible,” in Michael Avioz, et al., eds., *Zer Rimoni: Studies in Biblical Literature and Jewish Exegesis Presented to Professor Rimon Kasher* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), pp. 391–392.

14 Regarding this suggestion see briefly Abraham Sh. Halkin, “Jewish Exegesis in Arabic Outside of Spain and the Ancient Karaite Exegesis,” in Greenberg, “Jewish Bible Exegesis,” p. 15; Walfish, “Medieval Jewish,” pp. 1877–1878; Polliack, “On the ‘Literal Sense,’” pp. 395–397; eadem, “The Emergence of Karaite Bible Exegesis” [Hebrew], in *Sefunot* 22 (1999), pp. 299–311; eadem and Erder, “The Karaite Canon from the Ninth to the Eleventh Centuries” [Hebrew], in *Te’uda* 23 (2009), p. 202, and cf., Rina Drori, *The Emergence of Jewish-Arabic Literary Contacts at the Beginning of the Tenth Century* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Ha-Me’uchad, 1988), pp. 156–178.

15 As has been accepted since Antonio Gramsci, see Frank Rosengarten, ed., *Letters from Prison* (trans. Raymond Rosenthal; New York: Columbia University Press, 1994),

hegemony will be expressed by a challenge to the writings of the dominant group, perceived, metonymically, as an inseparable part of it. At the beginning, the challenge to the dominant writings stands in the margins of the conflict, but in time these intellectual points of controversy turn into clear expressions of the difference between the factions. The conflict between the Sunnites and the Shiites that began in the middle of the seventh century in Iraq and Persia and their differing approach to the canonical *Hadith* collections serves as an example of these processes of bifurcation and increasing intellectual alienation. Another example is the conflict between the Rabbinite and Karaite sects and their conflicting approaches to rabbinic literature.<sup>16</sup>

Throughout its history, Judaism has known fierce internal conflicts that included intellectual components related, among other things, to the correct interpretation of the Bible, the status of post-biblical literature, and questions of Jewish law. The conflict between the Pharisees and the Sadducees in the Second Temple period is apparent in contemporary intellectual-halakhic controversies.<sup>17</sup> The sectarian writings of the members of the Qumran sect also reflect the intellectual-religious conflicts between the dominant religious group and the members of the sect.<sup>18</sup> This fundamental similarity can clarify the points of similarity of the Sadducees and the members of the Qumran sect in the ancient period to the various sects and movements that flourished in the Middle Ages in Islamic lands, of whom we usually know very little, among them the Sabeans, Tustarians, Isfahans, Yudghanites, Sarinites, Shadganites and Mushkanites.<sup>19</sup> The Karaite movement should be seen as one of these alternatives that arose throughout the generations of which the common

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Hegemony draws its strength also from cultural and intellectual sources and this point has major significance for the matter under discussion here. For other expressions of counter-hegemony and a categorical break-down of active opposition to hegemony, see for example Alan Hunt, "Rights and Social Movements: Counter-Hegemonic Strategies," in *Journal of Law and Society* 17 (1990), pp. 309–328; Gabriel Bukobza, "Relation between Rebelliousness, Risk-Taking Behavior, and Identity Status during Emerging Adulthood," in *Identity: Journal of Theory and Research* 9 (2009), pp. 159–177.

- 16 See the bibliography in Barry Dov Walfish and Mikhail Kizilov, *Bibliographia Karaitica: An Annotated Bibliography of Karaites and Karaism* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), chapters 16 and 21.
- 17 Eyal Regev, *The Sadducees and Their Halakhah: Religion and Society in the Second Temple Period* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi, 2005).
- 18 Menahem Kister, ed., *The Qumran Scrolls and Their World* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi, 2009).
- 19 Nathan Schur, *History of the Karaites* (Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 1992), pp. 17–19; scholars even assumed that Karaism is the direct descendent of these ancient sects and serious objections have been raised against this argument. For a detailed bibliography, see Walfish and Kizilov, *Bibliographia Karaitica*, chapters 5 and 22.



denominator was the rejection of the dominant group in Judaism and, by extension, the rejection of their authoritative writings.

It was not coincidental that Karaism arose a few decades after the breach between the Sunnis and the Shiites and in the same geographical area. We can assume the direct influence of the internal Muslim turmoil on the turmoil within Judaism. In this case there is also a similarity in the attitude of the seceding faction to the authoritative writings of the dominant group. The Sunnis regarded the traditions included in the canonical collections of the *Hadith* as an authoritative source for the interpretation of the *Koran*, while the Shiites rejected these traditions that could not always be reconciled with that which is written in the *Koran* and with the words of the prophet Mohammed. They challenged the authenticity of its transmission and cast doubt on its transmitters. The rejection of the *Hadith* collections required the Shiites to devote more attention to the *Koran* itself, its language and context, while at the same time, within the Shiite tradition, alternative *Hadith* collections were compiled. It was only natural that in the course of the controversy that erupted Sunni scholars were compelled to adhere closely to the language of the *Koran* and aspired to prove, by means of this analysis, the necessity of relying upon the exegetical traditions external to the *Koran*. The advanced Arabic philology, philosophy, and sciences, based upon Greek wisdom and adapted to the principles of Islam and the systematic thinking of the *kalām* and the Mu'tazila school, were the foundation of the development of this systematic exegesis of the *Koran*.<sup>20</sup>

Just as the Shi'ite sect challenged the authority of the *Hadith* collections, the Karaites challenged the post-biblical traditions, in other words, rabbinic literature.<sup>21</sup> Their claim that it is possible to base the Jewish religion exclusively on the Bible compelled them to concentrate on the language of the

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20 This description is accurate to a large extent regarding the mainstream Shiite denomination—Imāmī or Asna Ashri. In other sects (for example the Isma'alia) the situation was different. See the classic survey of Ignaz Goldziher, *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung* (Leiden: Brill, 1920); see recently: idem, *Schools of Quranic Commentators* (trans.: Wolfgang W. Behn; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006); and see also Helmut Gätje, *The Qur'an and Its Exegesis: Selected Texts with Classical and Modern Muslim Interpretations* (trans.: Alford T. Welch; Oxford: Oneworld Pub., 1996); Meir M. Bar-Asher, *Scripture and Exegesis in Early Imāmī Shiism* (Leiden: Brill, 1999); Walid A. Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsir Tradition: The Qur'an Commentary of al-Tha'labi (d. 427/1035)* (Leiden: Brill, 2004); Hussein Abdul Raof, *Schools of Qur'anic Exegesis: Genesis and Development* (London: Routledge, 2010).

21 The Karaites do not reject the sages' solutions automatically, but they opposed being forced to accept the sages' solutions under all conditions. See especially Polliack and Erder, "The Karaite Canon," pp. 166, 176–178.



biblical text, just as the Shiites paid particular attention to the language of the *Koran*. Moreover. The challenge to the rabbinic literature forced the Karaites to expand the corpus. The result is increasing the authority of the books of the Prophets and Hagiographa. The rejection of rabbinic literature also meant that the Karaites had to find an alternative to the authoritative rabbinic prayers, and the book of Psalms became their authoritative prayer book.<sup>22</sup> It joined the Karaites apprehension that one can find in the Bible hints to the fate of the Karaites themselves.<sup>23</sup> All these encouraged the systematic study of the books of the Bible as a whole—Torah, Prophets, and Hagiographa. Just as Sunni scholars, in response the Shi'ite challenge to the authority of the *Hadith* collections, were compelled to pay closer attention to the language of the *Koran*, rabbinic scholars were compelled to devote more attention to the Bible and sought to prove the necessity of relying on rabbinic literature in order to understand it. This literary-exegetical genre, just as the systematic exegesis of the *Koran*, was formed under the influence of sophisticated Arabic philology and the methodological thinking of the *kalām*.<sup>24</sup>

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- 22 Uriel Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms: From Saadya Gaon to Abraham Ibn-Ezra* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Bar-Ilan University, 1982), pp. 55–95; Polliack and Erder, “The Karaite Canon,” pp. 207–210.
- 23 Polliack and Erder, “The Karaite Canon,” pp. 202–203; Yoram Erder, *The Karaite Mourners of Zion and the Qumran Scrolls: On the History of an Alternative to Rabbinic Judaism* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Me’uchad, 2004), pp. 378–418.
- 24 For the affinity and connections between the Muslim attitude to the *Koran* and the approach of the Jews to the Bible and the influence of Arabic philology on Jewish scholars, see for example Abraham Sh. Halkin, “The Judeo-Islamic Age,” in Leo Walder Schwarz, ed., *Great Ages and Ideas of the Jewish People* (New York: Modern Library, 1956), pp. 215–263; Salo Wittmayer Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), vol. VI, pp. 274–276; Ahmad Khalifah, and Muhammad Khalifah Hasan, *Medieval Jewish-Muslim Contribution to the Academic Study of Religion: A Study in the Methodology of Saadia Al Fayyumi and Muhamad Al Shahrastani* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1976); Uriel Simon, “Spain’s Exegetes,” in Greenberg, “Jewish Bible Exegesis,” pp. 29–32; Drori, *The Emergence*, especially pp. 81–123; Edward L. Greenstein, “Medieval Bible Commentaries,” in Barry W. Holtz, ed., *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts* (New York: Summit Books, 1994), pp. 220–222; Wolfish, “Medieval Jewish,” p. 1876; Haggai Ben-Shammai, “Return to Scriptures in Ancient and Medieval Jewish Sectarianism and in Early Islam,” in Évelyne Patlagean and Alain Le Bouluec, *Les retours aux écritures . . .* (Louvain: Peeters, 2003), pp. 319–339; Miriam Goldstein, “‘Arabic Composition 101’ and the Early Development of Judaeo-Arabic Bible Exegesis,” in *Journal of Semitic Studies* 55 (2010), pp. 451–478. Goldstein (ibid., pp. 475–478) suggests cautiously that the Muslim polemic against the Bible led Jewish exegetes to devote more attention to context and in fact contributed to the establishment of the *peshat* method;

Apparently, Karaism was originally made up of different groups that objected to rabbinic Judaism, each in its own way. It is possible that these groups differed from each other, among other things, in their level of reliance on classical rabbinic literature. For example, it is possible that Anan Ben David, who was active in the eighth and ninth centuries in Iraq and is commonly considered the founder of Karaism, in fact was the leader of a small group (the Ananites?) that only in time merged with the Karaites.<sup>25</sup> What remains of the writings of Anan reflects great affinity for the dominant rabbinic denomination both in the sources he used and his methodology.<sup>26</sup> There is in this an indirect proof of my statement that intellectual separation is often secondary to political division. Only in the course of time did the rejection of rabbinic sources become more systematic and effective, although not absolute.<sup>27</sup> Inevitably, turning their back on rabbinic literature contributed to the distancing and the separation of the Karaites from the Rabbinites in the practical sphere as well, because a significant part of Jewish religious practice is based on classical rabbinic literature, and its connections to the Bible are tortuous and require exegetical explanation.<sup>28</sup>

We may thus conclude that both Karaite and Rabbinitic exegetes began to devote attention to the language of the biblical text for ideological reasons: the Karaites, because they were required to create an exegetical alternative to rabbinic literature from which they wanted to disassociate themselves, and the Rabbinites, because they sought to prove that it is impossible to rely exclusively on the biblical text without reference to rabbinic literature. Accordingly, we

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on the Muslim polemic against the Bible, see in particular Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Camilla Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazem* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

25 Leon Nemoj, "Early Karaism (The Need for a New Approach)," in *Jewish Quarterly Review* 40 (1950), pp. 307–315; Haggai Ben-Shammai, "Between Ananites and Karaites: Observations on Early Medieval Jewish Sectarianism," in *Studies in Muslim-Jewish Relations* 1 (1993), pp. 19–29; Moshe Gil, "The Origins of the Karaites," in Meira R. Polliak, ed., *Karaite Judaism: A Guide to Its History of the Literary Sources* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 73–118; Schur, *History*, pp. 13–28, and see Walfish and Kizilov, *Bibliographia Karaitica*, pp. 60–62.

26 Cf., Erder, *The Karaite Mourners*, pp. 44–45.

27 Regarding the extent of the influence of rabbinic literature on the Karaites, see Ofra Tirosh-Becker, *Rabbinic Excerpts in Medieval Karaite Literature* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 2011).

28 For the Karaite's *halakhah* and practice see Walfish and Kizilov, *Bibliographia Karaitica*, chapter 17; Yoram Erder, *Methods in Early Karaite Halakhah* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Me'uchad, 2012).

can assume that at the early stage of the composition of the Karaite biblical commentaries, the polemic against the sages (or against rabbis in general) played a crucial role, just as the anti-Karaite polemic played a significant role in the development of the biblical exegesis of the Rabbinite scholars. However, in the course of time, this innovative exegesis became more sophisticated both in structure (a systematic running commentary following the order of the verses) and in methodology, while the polemic became only one element of a cohesive exegetical work. Rabbi Sa'adya Gaon (Rasag), active in Babel in the tenth century, is usually regarded as the first Rabbinite exegete.<sup>29</sup> The commentaries of Rasag reveal sophistication and maturity and, in several points, anti-Karaite polemic.<sup>30</sup> Still, it is correct to assume that exegetical works reflecting a much more cautious and hesitant hermeneutic preceded that of Rasag.<sup>31</sup> The commentaries of these anonymous biblical exegetes were based on a less refined methodology, frequently relied upon rabbinic literature, and devoted a great deal of attention to the anti-Karaite polemic, a great deal more attention than this polemic received in the commentaries of Rasag.

Rasag is without doubt one of the most influential figures in Jewish intellectual history. Because he wrote in Arabic, his direct influence was limited to Jewish scholars of the Middle East and Muslim Spain, in other words, scholars who lived in areas under Muslim rule and were able to read his writings.<sup>32</sup> Along

29 E.g., Henry Malter, *Saadia Gaon: His Life and Works* (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1978); Sarah Stroumsa, *Saadia Gaon: A Jewish Thinker in a Mediterranean Society* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 2001); Robert Brody, *Sa'adya Gaon* (trans. B. Rosenberg; Oxford: Littman Library, 2013).

30 For a description of the exegetical method of Rasag, which frequently relies upon classical *midrashim* and even creates original *midrashic* commentaries while at the same time making use of advanced philology, see Haggai Ben-Shammai, "The Rabbinic Literature in Sa'adya's Exegesis: Between Tradition and Innovation" [Hebrew], in Joshua Blau and David Doron, eds., *Heritage and Innovation in Medieval Judeo-Arabic Culture* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University, 2000), pp. 33–69; idem, "The Tension between Literal Interpretation and Exegetical Freedom: Comparative Observations on Saadia's Method," in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, et al., eds., *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 33–50; for reflections of the polemic with the Karaites in the commentaries of Rasag, see, e.g., Samuel Poznański, *The Karaite Literary Opponents of Saadia Gaon* (London: Luzac, 1908); Brody, *Sa'adya Gaon*, pp. 147–159.

31 For echoes of the exegesis before Rasag, see Brody, *Sa'adya Gaon*, pp. 40–42.

32 Rasag had a certain influence also on Jews who lived in Christian Europe, both among those Jews who knew some Arabic and those who were exposed to his writings through an intermediary. See Abraham Geiger, *Parschandatha* (Leipzig: L. Schnauss, 1855), pp. 6–7; Efraim E. Urbach, *Sefer 'Arugat Ha-Boshem Auctore R. Abraham b. R. 'Azriel* (Jerusalem:

with the commentaries of Rasag, additional commentaries, both Rabbinite and Karaite, written in the cultural sphere of Babylonian Jewry, spread throughout this area. In this context special mention must be made of the Karaite exegesis from Jerusalem, in particular, the commentary of Japheth ben 'Eli.<sup>33</sup> The enormous influence of the *peshat* commentaries from the Babylonian sphere are the major reason for the spread of *peshat* exegesis among Jews in Islamic lands.<sup>34</sup> The most outstanding examples in this area are from Spain, where a rich *peshat* exegesis flourished from the end of the tenth century.<sup>35</sup>

Still, it is possible that this is not the only explanation for the spread of this exegetical method. It is entirely possible that the intellectual trend that led the Babylonian exegetes to devote special effort to the interpretation of the Bible according to its language happened also in other places in which Rabbinite Jews polemicized with Karaite Jews. In other words, it is possible that in the land of Israel, North Africa, and Spain, lands that were centers of Karaism, *peshat* exegesis developed spontaneously, as a result of the Karaite-Rabbinite polemic, rather than exclusively as a result of the influence of Rasag and other exegetes from the Babylonian cultural sphere. It is possible to bring indirect

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Mekize Nirdamim, 1963), vol. 4, p. 79; Eran Viezel, "The Anonymous Commentary on the Books of Chronicles Attributed to a Student of Sa'adiah Gaon: Its Status in the History of Jewish *Peshat* Exegesis" [Hebrew], in *Tarbiz* 76 (2008), pp. 415–416; Ronald C. Kiener, "The Hebrew Paraphrase of Saadiah Gaon's *Kitab al-Amanat wa'l-Ptiqādāt*," in *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 11 (1986), pp. 1–25, and see also Moshe Gil, "Between Two Worlds: The Relations between Babylonia and the Communities of Europe in the Gaonic Period" [Hebrew], in Daniel Carpi, et al., eds., *Shlomo Simonshon Jubilee Volume: Studies on the History of the Jews in the Middle Ages and Renaissance Period* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1993), pp. 45–63. Regarding general ties between the Jews of southern Germany and northern France and the Jews of Babel and the land of Israel, specifically in the areas of *Halakhah* and religious poetry, see primarily Avraham Grossman, "Ties between Ashkenzy Jewry and the Jewry in Eretz Israel in the Eleventh Century" [Hebrew], in *Shalem* 3 (1981), pp. 57–92; Haym Soloveitchik, *Principles and Pressures: Jewish Trade in Gentile Wine in the Middle Ages* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: 'Am 'Oved, 2003), pp. 321–343. On ties between eastern lands and Christian Europe, in the Christian world, see for example Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (trans.: Willard R. Trask; New York: Pantheon Books, 1953), pp. 17–30.

33 See most recently Miriam Goldstein, *Karaite Exegesis in Medieval Jerusalem: The Judeo-Arabic Pentateuch Commentary of Yūsuf ibn Nūh and Abū al-Faraj Hārūn* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

34 Cf., Daniel Frank, *Search Scripture Well: Karaite Exegesis and the Origins of the Jewish Bible Commentary in the Islamic East* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 248–257.

35 Simon, "Spain's Exegetes," pp. 32–34. Regarding evidence of biblical exegesis from this period in North Africa, see Viezel, "The Anonymous Commentary," pp. 416–417.

support for this conjecture. We have fragments of biblical commentaries written in Byzantine Italy around the tenth century, some of which reflect Karaite biblical exegesis and others, Rabbinite biblical exegesis.<sup>36</sup> The dating of these commentaries to the time of Rasag, if not before,<sup>37</sup> supports the hypothesis that *peshat* exegesis arose in areas in which there existed a Karaite-Rabbanite polemic.<sup>38</sup>

In the last generation it has become increasingly clear that the Jews of Provence had connections of various kinds with the Jews of Muslim Spain, despite the fact that they lived in separate and even hostile political and religious entities.<sup>39</sup> There is even evidence that the Jews of northern France had some connections with the Jews of Spain.<sup>40</sup> The fact that, on the one hand, some of the Jewish scholars of Provence knew Arabic and that, on the other hand,

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36 Nicholas Robert Michael de Lange, *Greek Jewish Texts from the Cairo Genizah* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996); for the commentators' religious identity (rabbinic or Karaite), see Richard Cecil Steiner, "The Byzantine Biblical Commentaries from the Genizah: Rabbanite vs. Karaite," in Moshe Bar-Asher, et al., eds., *Shai le-Sara Japhet: Studies in the Bible, Its Exegesis and Its Language* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2007), pp. 243–262, and see also Gershon Brin, *Re'u'el and His Colleges: Jewish Exegetes from Byzantium around Tenth Century* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 2012).

37 Cyrille Aslanoff, "Les gloses Judéo-Helleniques du commentaire de Re'u'el sur Ezéchiél découvert la Geniza du Caire," in *Revue des Etudes Juives* 157 (1998), pp. 7–45.

38 Biblical exegesis of Antioch of the fifth and sixth centuries, best known for the commentaries of Theodor the bishop of Mopsuestia (ca. 350–428) and Theodoret of Cyrus (393–457), had methodological characteristics common to medieval Jewish *peshat* exegesis. Although these exegetes tended to discuss the symbolic meanings of the text, they concentrated on the literal aspect. See Christoph Schäublin, *Untersuchungen zu Methode und Herkunft der antiochenischen Exegese* (Bonn: P. Hanstein, 1974); Robert Charles Hill, *Reading the Bible in Antioch* (Leiden: Brill, 2005); Sten Hidal, "Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Antiochene school with Its Prevalent Literal and Historical Method," in Sæbø, "Hebrew Bible," 1:1, pp. 543–568, and see also Frances M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1997). The possible influence of this group on Jewish biblical exegesis in Byzantium has yet to be clarified. However, even if we assume a certain influence, it is difficult to ignore the fact that the earliest examples of Jewish biblical exegesis in this area are, as we have seen, from the period of Rasag, hundreds of years after the flourishing of Christian biblical exegesis in the area.

39 Regarding the uniqueness of the Jewish culture in Provence, which reflected the influence of the Muslim and Christian worlds, see Isadore Twersky, "Aspects of the Social and Cultural History of Provençal Jewry," in *Cahiers d'histoire mondiale* XI (1968), pp. 185–207.

40 See especially Grossman, *Early Sages*, pp. 471–473, 539–586, and see also Mordechai Z. Cohen, "A Possible Spanish Source for Rashi's Concept of *Peshuto Shel Miqra*" [Hebrew], in Sara Japhet and Avraham Grossman, eds., *Rashi: The Man and His Works* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar, 2008), pp. 358–366; Touitou, *Exegesis*, pp. 46–47, and most recently

some Jewish scholars of Spain chose to write in Hebrew, eased the transfer of the genre of *peshat* exegesis to Christian Europe. The transfer of this new literary-exegetical genre from Provence to the Jewish centers of northern France and southern Germany was without doubt natural and swift.<sup>41</sup> It is possible that the *peshat* biblical commentaries written in Byzantine Italy mentioned above reflect an additional path by which *peshat* commentaries reached France. These commentaries were written in Hebrew and could easily have influenced the Jews of northern Italy and from there have reached the Jews of France and southern Germany, whose connections to both northern Italy and Byzantine Italy have been clarified in depth in recent years.<sup>42</sup>

The significant influence of Rasag and other exegetes from the Babylonian cultural sphere and the polemic with the Karaites explain the rapidity with which *peshat* exegesis was adopted in Muslim Spain. The rapidity with which this exegetical method was adopted also by the Jews of France, an area to which Karaism had not spread and in which the influence of the Babylonian scholars was limited, is the result of a number of mutually complementary factors.<sup>43</sup>

From the second half of the eleventh century and until the end of the twelfth century, Christian Europe in general, and France in particular, experienced an intellectual enlightenment so significant that it is customary to refer to this period as “The Renaissance of the Middle Ages” (or “The Renaissance

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Avraham Grossman, “The Impact of Rabbi Samuel of Spain and Reuel of Byzantium on Rashi’s School” [Hebrew], in *Tarbiz* 82 (2014), pp. 447–458.

- 41 So, for example, Rabbi Menachem the son of Rabbi Chelbo passed on exegetical traditions from Provence to northern France; see Samuel Poznański, *Kommentar zu Ezechiel und den XII kleinen Propheten* (Warschau: Druck von H. Eppelberg, 1913), p. xii; Grossman, *Early Sages*, p. 341; Similarly the author of the commentary to the book of Chronicles attributed to Rashi who transmitted exegetical traditions from Provence to southern Germany; see Eran Viezel, *The Commentary on Chronicles Attributed to Rashi* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2010), pp. 47, 63, 175.
- 42 Israel Moshe Ta-Shma, “Studies,” vol. 3, pp. 177–187, 241–250. Ta-Shma suggested that the Byzantine commentaries were the basis for the *peshat* commentaries of northern France. This is highly exaggerated. See most recently Grossman, “The Impact,” pp. 458–464. On the great importance of Italy in the transmission of traditions from the eastern lands to Western Europe, see, for example, Jean Hubert, et al., *Europe in the Dark Ages* (trans.: Stuart Gilbert and James Emmons; London: Thames and Hudson, 1967).
- 43 As we saw above, many scholars have discussed the causes of the development of *peshat* exegesis in France (specifically in northern France, see n. 13); however, most did not distinguish how this exegetical genre reached the hands of the French scholars (as we have seen, by means of the Spain-Provence track and by way of Italy) from the question of the causes that led the French scholars to adopt this exegetical method so extensively and enthusiastically.



of the Twelfth Century”).<sup>44</sup> These years were characterized by, among other things, advancements in the study of grammar and philology and intensive study of the proper relationship between the authority of tradition and the authority of human reason. In this intellectual environment, it was natural that Jewish intellectuals enthusiastically adopted the genre of *peshat* exegesis of the Bible.<sup>45</sup>

The rapidity with which the French biblical exegetes made significant achievements in the realm of *peshat* exegesis is not surprising. Around the tenth century the Babylonian Talmud reached the Jews of France and southern Germany and in subsequent generations scholars were occupied with its study and interpretation. Talmudic exegesis of the eleventh century in these areas is characterized by a very systematic approach both in structure and in methodology.<sup>46</sup> This background provided later scholars with expertise in philological exegesis and to a large extent all that was necessary was to apply

44 This renaissance is connected to the name of Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1933); see Robert L. Benson and Giles Constable, eds., *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982). For an extensive bibliography, see Elizabeth A.R. Brown, “Review Essay,” in *History and Theory* 19 (1980), pp. 319–338.

45 This point has been strongly emphasized by Touitou, *Exegesis*, pp. 11–33, and see Limor, *Jews and Christians*, pp. 58–65; Grossman, *Early Sages*, pp. 21–24; 473–475, and see also Gilbert Dahan, *Les intellectuels chrétiens et les juifs au moyen âge* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1990). These scholars have stressed the renaissance of the middle ages as the reason for a certain interest in the literal meaning of the Bible also in Christian exegesis, and in this context the primary example is the exegetes of St. Victor; on this school, see the classic work of Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), and more recently Dale M. Coulter, “*Historia* and *Sensus litteralis*: An Investigation into the Approach to Literal Interpretation at the Twelfth-Century School of St. Victor,” in Franklin T. Harkins, ed., *Transforming Relations: Essays on Jews and Christians throughout History in Honor of Michael A. Signer* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2010), pp. 101–124; for a comparison between the literal Christian exegesis of the St. Victor exegetes and Jewish *peshat* exegesis, see for example Michael A. Signer, “*Peshat*, *Sensus Litteralis*, and Sequential Narrative: Jewish Exegesis and the School of St. Victor in the Twelfth Century,” in Barry Walfish, ed., *The Frank Talmage Memorial Volume* (Haifa: Haifa University, 1993), vol. 1, pp. 203–216; Rivka Basch, “*Sensus Litteralis*—*Peshuto shel Miqra*: A Comparative Examination of Jewish and Christian Interpretations from the Twelve Century” (Thesis, Baltimore Hebrew University, 2003); Montse Leyra, “The Victorine Exegesis on the Pentateuch and the Former Prophets: The Sources of the *In Hebreo* Interpretations in the Light of Its Parallels with the *Peshat* School of Northern France and Other Jewish Sources” (Ph.D., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2011).

46 For a detailed survey, see Israel Moshe Ta-Shma, *Talmudic Commentary in Europe and North Africa: Literary History* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2000), vol. 1, pp. 32–117.



exegetical principles with which they were already familiar to a different textual corpus—the Bible.<sup>47</sup>

It may be possible to connect this rapid process of adoption of *peshat* biblical exegesis to both the tendency of the scholars of France and southern Germany to study a wide range of texts (much wider than the accepted range among Jews of other lands) and their openness to absorb external traditions, another of their unique characteristics.<sup>48</sup> Scholars already long accustomed to interpret the Babylonian Talmud, to occupy themselves with the study and interpretation of both homiletical and legalistic *midrashim*, to interpret liturgical poems (*piyyutim*), to write new poems, and to devote a great deal of effort to writing halachic monographs were very easily able to take upon themselves another challenging textual study—the interpretation of the Bible.

It would appear that the polemic with the Christians as to the correct interpretation of biblical verses contributed also to the rapid transplanting of *peshat* biblical exegesis. This can be seen from both explicit and implicit polemical comments included in the writings of the *peshat* exegetes. These comments are an “answer to the Christians” (*teshuvah la-minim*) and not infrequently even called such by the commentators themselves. They are intended to equip the Jewish reader with a ready answer to Christian interpretations.<sup>49</sup> It is clear

47 In the past scholars accepted that the intellectual expansion from exegesis of the Talmud to biblical exegesis was a natural internal Jewish development in northern France, and they did not connect it to other factors mentioned here; see, for example, Moshe Zvi Segal, *Biblical Exegesis* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Qiryat Sefer, 1952), p. 62; Eliezer Meir Lifshitz, *Rashi: R. Shlomo Isaaci* (Jerusalem: Ha-Rav Kook, 1966), pp. 158–159; and see Touitou, *Exegesis*, pp. 15–16.

48 On this unique aspect of Ashkenazi scholars see Grossman, *Early Sages*, pp. 572–586.

49 Much research has been devoted to the reflection of the Jewish-Christian debate in medieval Jewish biblical exegesis; for an extensive bibliography, see Ephraim Kanarfogel, *Jewish Education and Society in the High Middle Ages* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1992), p. 183, n. 115; for a summary of the subject, see Grossman, *Early Sages*, pp. 475–504, and detailed bibliography in n. 62; Touitou, *Exegesis*, pp. 34–45; Touitou summarizes the main points of the Christian arguments and the answers provided by the Jewish commentators. A collection of Christian anti-Jewish polemical literature was compiled by Heinz Schreckenberg, *Die christlichen Adversus-Judaeos Texte und ihr literarisches und historisches Umfeld (1.–11. Jh.)*; *Die christlichen Adversus-Judaeos Texte (11.–13. Jh.)* (Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 1982–1988), and, inter alia, see Arthur Lukyn Williams, *Adversus Judaeos: A Bird's-Eye View of Christian Apologiae until the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935); Baer, *Studies*, vol. 2, pp. 37–59; Michael A. Signer, “The Land of Israel in Medieval Jewish Exegetical and Polemical Literature,” in Lawrence A. Hoffman, ed., *The Land of Israel: Jewish Perspectives* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1986), pp. 220–233; idem, “God’s Love for Israel: Apologetic and Hermeneutical Strategies in

that literal interpretation based on language and context was meant to provide a winning argument against the Christian allegorical and typological exegesis.<sup>50</sup>

In the twelfth century, Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra, at the age of about fifty, left his home in Spain and in the following years wandered between Italy, Provence, northern France, and England.<sup>51</sup> All of his extant works, among them his commentaries to the books of the Bible, were written in these lands.<sup>52</sup> Ibn Ezra laments that the Jews of Christian Europe are not knowledgeable in grammar and do not clearly distinguish between the *peshat* method and other exegetical methods. Ibn Ezra is known for his critical comments, and it sometimes appears that he is exaggerating and that his comments do not accurately reflect the textual data in front of us.<sup>53</sup> Nonetheless, it appears that in general his words reflect an accurate picture: the exegetes differ from each other in their level of awareness of the principles of *peshat* and their level of commitment to those principles. They further reveal that *peshat* exegesis did not completely push aside other exegetical methods, and Jewish scholars continued

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Twelfth-Century Biblical Exegesis," in idem and John van Engen, eds., *Jews and Christians in Twelfth-Century Europe* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2001), pp. 123–149.

- 50 Although the influence of the Jewish-Christian polemic on biblical commentators was extensive, it is nevertheless important to present a balanced picture—the polemic was one factor among several that caused the French exegetes to favor the genre of *peshat* exegesis rather than the principal cause (and certainly not the only one) of this development, as suggested by several scholars; after all, the extent of the discussion of polemics in exegetical writings is not large and sometimes even quite scant; see, among others, Shaye J.D. Cohen, "Does Rashi's Torah Commentary Respond to Christianity? A Comparison of Rashi with Rashbam and Bekhor Shor," in Hindy Najman and Judith H. Newman, eds., *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 449–472; Martin I. Lockshin, *Rashbam's Commentary on Deuteronomy: An Annotated Translation* (Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 2004), pp. 19–22.
- 51 On Ibn Ezra, see, for example, Michael Friedlaender, *Essays on the Writings of Abraham Ibn Ezra* (Jerusalem: Mazchef, 1967); Mordechai Z. Cohen, *Three Approaches to Biblical Metaphor: From Abraham Ibn Ezra and Maimonides to David Kimhi* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 33–97, 228–271; Uriel Simon, "The Ear Discerns Words:" *Studies in Ibn Ezra's Exegetical Methodology* (Hebrew; Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University, 2013). On his reason for leaving Spain and his wanderings, see Uriel Simon, "Why Did Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra Leave Spain and Go to Italy?" [Hebrew], in Michael Avioz, *Zer Rimonim*, pp. 489–502.
- 52 Shlomo Sela and Gad Freudenthal, "Abraham Ibn Ezra's Scholarly Writings: A Chronological Listing," in *Aleph* 6 (2006), pp. 13–55.
- 53 Cf., Uriel Simon, "Ibn Ezra's Harsh Language and Biting Humor: Real Denunciation or Hispanic Mannerism?" in Fernando Díaz Esteban, ed., *Abraham Ibn Ezra y Su Tiempo* (Madrid: Asociación Española de Orientalistas, 1990), pp. 325–334; idem, "Transplanting the Wisdom of Spain to Christian Lands: The Failed Efforts of R. Abraham Ibn Ezra," in *Jahrbuch des Simon-Dubnow-Instituts* VIII (2009), pp. 139–189.

to interpret the Bible according to *derash* (homily), mysticism, and esoteric lore.<sup>54</sup> However, unrelated to the quality of the biblical commentaries to which Ibn Ezra was exposed during his wanderings, it is clear that at this stage in all the lands he visited, the genre of *peshat* exegesis was already known and well established.

Intellectual advancement flourishes under the influence of certain social and political conditions and sometimes as a conscious reaction to these conditions. However, in the next stage this development is likely to advance, cohere, attain significant achievements and spread to other geographic areas both near and far without retaining any connection to the historical conditions that led to its creation. The spread of *peshat* biblical exegesis is an example of this very interesting phenomenon. As we have seen, it started for political and ideological reasons, initially among the Karaites and afterwards also within Rabbinite circles. This literary-exegetical genre coalesced and advanced, and in the course of time the *peshat* exegetes, even those who viewed Karaism as an existential threat to Judaism, were not at all aware of the fundamental influence of the Karaite-Rabbinite polemic on the literary-exegetical genre in which they worked. The place of the polemic with the Karaites within the biblical commentaries of Ibn Ezra are an excellent example of this. His open hatred of Karaites is very apparent in his commentaries, which include an overt and caustic anti-Karaite polemic.<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, this is only one characteristic of his biblical commentaries and not necessarily the most prominent. The readers of these commentaries—Jews of northern Italy, Provence, northern France, and England—apparently did not reveal a particular interest in his polemical comments, and in any case it is not possible to find exegetes from Christian Europe who themselves polemicized with the Karaites under the influence of Ibn Ezra. As we have seen, the attraction of these Jewish scholars to *peshat* biblical commentary is connected to completely different factors.

## 2 Fundamental Difficulties in the *Peshat* Method of Biblical Exegesis

No exegete is free of preconceptions that can influence his conclusions even more than meticulously formulated and deliberate methodological considerations. *Peshat* exegetes are also known to have had various preconceptions, each one according to his particular hermeneutic circle and the interpretive

54 This point is very significant to the question of the causes of the weakening of the *peshat* method, and I will return to it below.

55 For a collection of examples, see, e.g., Friedlaender, *Essays*, pp. 126–127; Melamed, *Bible Commentators*, pp. 592–593.

community to which he belonged.<sup>56</sup> However, one fundamental and basic pre-conception is common to all exegetes, those active in Babel in the tenth century as well as those in Christian Europe in the fifteenth century: all believed that the Torah is divine and thus as holy and perfect as God himself.<sup>57</sup> As I will propose in the following pages, this opinion cannot be easily reconciled with the principles of *peshat* exegesis. This point reinforces the conclusion of the previous section that the rise of *peshat* exegesis is connected to specific historical-intellectual conditions, while the theory of “natural” development as suggested by several scholars is unworthy of serious consideration.<sup>58</sup> At the same time, it suggests that the waning of *peshat* exegesis was perhaps inevitable.

A relentless philological analysis of the books of the Bible leads to the unequivocal conclusion that they include a huge number of flaws and basic defects. The *Torah* (Pentateuch) includes clear cases of repetitions, inconsistencies, and serious contradictions both in the narrative and legal sections. There are two completely different creation stories (Gen. 1–2); three stories about the interactions between the father of the nation, his wife, and a foreign king that are overwhelmingly similar in plot (Gen. 12:10–20; 20; 26:6–11); various and differing background stories for the origin of the name “Beersheba” (Gen. 21:22–32; 26:26–33) and “Beit El” (Gen 28:19; 35:15), and the change of the name of Jacob to Israel (Gen. 32:25–32; 35:10–11); several descriptions of how Joseph came to Potiphar (37:25–28, 36, 39:1); three passages differing in their details on the appointment of judges and national leaders to alleviate the burden on Moses (Exod. 18:13–26; Num. 11:10–17, 24–30; Deut. 1:9–18); a threefold

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56 Regarding the term “interpretive community,” see David Bleich, *Subjective Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), especially pp. 162–167, 264–298; and see, e.g., Jane P. Tompkins, ed., *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); Elizabeth Freund, *Return to the Reader: Reader-Response Criticism* (London and New York: Methuen, 1987), and see also Robert Detweiler, ed., *Semeia 31: Reader Response Approaches to Biblical and Secular Texts* (Decatur: Society of Biblical Literature, 1985).

57 Through the years controversies between the sages have arisen on the question of how the Torah was written—word by word from the mouth of God, or by divine inspiration—though no one disputes the basic premise that the Torah is the book of God; see recently Eran Viezel, “Moses’ Role in Writing the Torah: The History of Jewish Fundamental Tenet,” in *The Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 13 (2014), pp. 3–44; with regard to the rest of the books of the Bible, many very interesting differences between the sages can be discerned, although the position common to all is that these books were also written under divine inspiration (the book of Chronicles is a little different in this respect; for a detailed discussion, see Viezel, “Context”).

58 See above, n. 47.

revelation of the ineffable name of God (Gen. 4:26; Exod. 3:13–15; 6:2–3); different approaches to the Hebrew slave and the possibility of his becoming a permanent slave (Exod. 21:1–6; Lev. 25:39–43; Deut. 15:12–18), the permissibility of eating the first fruits (Num. 18:15–18; Deut. 15:19–23), the allocation of the tithes to the Levites (Num. 18:21–32; Deut. 14:22–23, 29); lists of holidays that present different and contradictory details (Exod. 23:14–17; 34:18–23; Lev. 23; Num. 28–29; Deut. 16:1–17); and other tens of familiar and well known examples that the scholars of biblical criticism have been studying intensively for three hundred years.<sup>59</sup> These literary data lead to the conclusion that the Torah contains independent traditions and texts and reflects complex and drawn-out processes of composition and editing. Even though there were many points of controversy between critical scholars of the Bible, they do not challenge the understanding that only with the aid of a diachronic analysis of the text and the separation between its different layers and traditions is it possible to explain these cases of repetition, inconsistency, and contradiction. Clearly it is possible to argue that this “conclusion” expresses the assumptions of the “interpretive community” to which I belong.<sup>60</sup> Nonetheless, it appears to me that the insistence upon the position of faith that the *Torah* accurately reflects the word of God is a perfect example (perhaps the classic example of all times!) of the imposition of the intention of the reader (*intentio lectoris*) on the intention of the text (*intentio operis*), and this leads necessarily to exaggerated and unusual interpretations.<sup>61</sup>

59 Further examples of similar inconsistencies and contradictions, in both narrative and legal segments, are concentrated in introductory studies of the Bible; see for example Alexander Rofé, *Introduction to the Literature of the Hebrew Bible* (Jerusalem: Simor, 2009), pp. 166–176. For the history of scholarly research on the Bible, and the central place of these inconsistencies and contradictions in the history of this research, see for example Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Geschichte der historisch-kritischen Erforschung des Alten Testaments: von der Reformation bis zur Gegenwart* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Verl. Erziehungsvereins, 1956); Baruch J. Schwartz, “The Torah: Its Five Books and Four Documents” [Hebrew], in Zipora Talshir, ed., *The Literature of the Hebrew Bible: Introductions and Studies* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 2011), pp. 161–226.

60 Cf. Matitiahu Tsevat, “Common Sense and Hypothesis in Old Testament Study,” in *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum* 28 (1974), pp. 217–230.

61 On excessive (“unlimited semiosis” and “overinterpretation”) versus moderate exegesis and the need to limit the exegetical range, see Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); on the pioneering attempt of Ibn Ezra to limit the legitimacy of over-exegesis without challenging the basic principle that the Torah is divine, see Cohen, *Three Approaches*, pp. 233–238, 245–255; however, Ibn Ezra assumed that we have to supplement necessary information from

From the faith based preconception that the *Torah* is divine and thus perfect are derived faith based positions no less important.<sup>62</sup> Such is the belief that the *Torah* reflects lofty and timeless ethical standards and correct and eternal theological principles. So too is the belief that this divine text deals with substantive matters and does not include unimportant esoteric details. So too is the belief that the *Torah* reflects Jewish religious practice, itself understood as an expression of divine perfection. However, it is clear that a text composed in the course of hundreds of years by different writers, which underwent complex processes of editing, cannot meet this set of expectations. The *Torah* does not reflect a single ethical system and does not express fixed and cohesive theological principles. The *Torah* is missing essential, fundamental subjects, and despite this there can be found in it many particulars that were perhaps important to previous generations while their relevance is no longer clear. While Jewish religious practice, which coalesced in the course of hundreds of years, is not reflected in full in the *Torah*, guidelines that do not conform to accepted practice often do appear in it. This last point is perhaps the most crucial, because in contrast to eternal ethical principles, whose repercussions on daily life are limited, Jewish religious practice determines daily halachic behavior.

Medieval *peshat* exegetes had satisfying answers to these questions. At the apogee of the Talmudic era there were Jews who were closer perhaps than at any other time to completely bridging the gap between what is written in the *Torah* and what its readers expect there to be written in it. This was done on the basis of two complementary principles. The first principle is that the *Torah* is characterized by multiple understandings and expresses infinite meanings.<sup>63</sup> This does not mean that the sages present a completely nihilistic exegetical approach. A thorough examination of their literature reveals clearly marked boundaries that are not to be crossed. Thus, for example, no rabbi would think of identifying Jesus with the Messiah or assume that God does not act in accordance with the attribute of justice or suggest that the fate of the Jews is annihilation. However, as long as there is no crossing of basic theological borders, exegetical freedom is absolute and allows a variety of answers,

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rabbinic literature in order to correctly interpret the legal sections of the Torah. On this assumption, see below.

62 E.g., James L. Kugel, "The Rise of Modern Biblical Scholarship," in Talshir, *The Literature*, pp. 8–9.

63 This idea has ancient roots (see above, n. 11). However, it reached its apogee with the sages; see, e.g., Gerald J. Blidstein, *Studies in Halakhic and Aggadic Thought* (Hebrew; Beer Sheva: Ben Gurion University, 2004), pp. 29–34.



including contradictory ones. This unique situation corresponds to the well-known concept that on Sinai Moses was given both the Torah and its interpretations and details: “Scripture, Mishnah, Talmud and Aggadah—even what a veteran student would expound before his teacher—were all transmitted to Moses on Sinai.”<sup>64</sup>

Another basic tenet that helped the sages bridge the gap between that which is written in the Torah and that which its readers expect to be written there is that divine revelation is expressed also in the Oral Law, so that this “second” Torah is a natural and necessary complement to the written one.<sup>65</sup>

Neither of the aforementioned assumptions would have come into being were it not for the tension created between the fundamental faith that the Torah is divine and therefore perfect, and the fact that it does not meet this expectation.<sup>66</sup> These premises solved all known textual problems and, no less important, any possible potential problems. As it is written: “For this is not a trifling thing for you’ (Deut. 32:47), and if it is empty—it is empty because of you.”<sup>67</sup> The divine Torah is as whole and as perfect as God himself, and if the reader has difficulty with a specific passage—whether it seems to him that the passages of the Torah contradict each other or it seems to him that the laws of the Torah do not correspond to normative law—the fault is with the reader and him alone. He has to properly examine the passage before him and to analyze it thoroughly until he is able to find a solution, one solution from among an infinite number of possible solutions explaining the text and

64 Y. Pe’ah 2:6 (16b), cf. Y. Hag. 1:8 (76d); Lev. Rabbah 22 (Mordechai Margulies ed. [New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1993] 497), and cf., B. Meg. 19b.

65 “The Torah-Myth” and “the open canon of Judaism;” see Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven: Yale University, 1988), pp. xxxv–xl. This premise also has ancient roots and reached its apogee with the sages.

66 My words here do not contradict the suggestion that the sages created (or improved upon) a flexible exegetical methodology as a reaction to the strengthening of the unequivocal dogmas of Christianity. Cf., Daniel Boyarin, “Midrash as Anti-Philosophy” [Hebrew], in idem, *Intertextuality and the Reading of the Midrash* (Jerusalem: Shalom Hartman, 2011), especially pp. 209–210; under discussion are complementary hermeneutical lines of development.

67 Y. Pe’ah 1:1 (15b) and parallels, and see, e.g., the expanded formulation of R. Joshua Ibn Shuaib, “if it is empty, it is because of you, for the matter itself is not empty;” Zeev Metzger, ed., *Derashot Ibn Shuaib* (Jerusalem: Machon Lev Sameach, 1992), *Shemini*, 240. Cf. “It is unfitting to attribute any flaw or blemish to the teachings [*torotav*] of the blessed One, the judge of the entire world, and to think that they could be less ordered than the books of even the smallest of scholars;” Isaac Abarbanel to Exod. 21, Avishai Shotland, ed. (Jerusalem: Horev, 1999), p. 339.



clarifying that the difficulty is, in fact, only theoretical. This in-depth, uncompromising analysis of the text is reflected in particular in the enormous effort invested by the sages to connect the normative Halakhah to the verses of the Torah.<sup>68</sup> It requires an unusual reading of the text and, in particular, an exceptionally flexible exegetical methodology in order to find within the Torah a commandment to put on *tefillin* (phylacteries), a prohibition against cooking meat with milk, the premise that the Sabbath begins on Friday evening, and so forth, including many tens of similar examples in which the most basic Jewish religious practice is not mentioned in the Torah.

The faith-based preconception that the Torah is divine, that it is as holy and perfect as God himself, does not allow the admission of the possibility of flaws and errors in the text. While the rabbis could choose whether to deal with a certain difficulty in the text or to ignore it and which exegetical methodology to apply to this purpose, *peshat* exegetes examined the text systematically and were required to find philological solutions to difficulties revealed in the Torah. This does not mean that they applied systematic analyses to cases of inconsistency and contradiction between passages. However when the verse under discussion invited it, and especially at key points in the narrative, they lost the freedom to ignore the difficulty and were required to clarify, on the basis of the language of the text, the syntax and the context, such questions as a) when was Adam created? At the beginning of creation (according to Gen. 2:7) or at the end (according to Gen. 1:27)? b) When did people begin using the ineffable name of God? In the days of Enosh (Gen. 4:26) or at the revelation of God to Moses? And if the latter, at the revelation at the burning bush (Exod. 3:13–15) or in Egypt (Exod. 6:2–3)? c) How did Joseph get to the house of Potiphar? Did his brothers sell him to the Ishmaelites who then sold him to Potiphar (Gen. 37:25–27; 39:1)? Or was it the Midianites who sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites (Gen. 37:28)? Or perhaps the Midianites sold him directly to Potiphar (Gen. 37:36)? d) What are the conditions in which a Hebrew slave becomes a perpetual slave, and what is the meaning of the term “*olam*” in this context—a slave forever (Exod. 21:6) or only until the Jubilee year (Lev. 25:10)?

Similarly, they had to examine by means of philological tools the relationship between the legal verses and the normative Halakhah, in other words to cope with the considerable distance between the statutes of the Torah and the Jewish religious practice as it appears in classical rabbinic literature and in everyday Jewish life. This is an unfathomable intellectual challenge that can

68 In this context the well-known expression is “Mountains hanging by a strand;” see most recently Michal Bar-Asher Siegal, “Mountains Hanging by a Strand’: Re-Reading Mishnah Hagiga 1:8” [Hebrew], in *Lěšonénu* 76 (2014), pp. 137–148.

only be described as a paradox. As an exegete becomes more aware of the methodological principles unique to the *peshat* approach and commits himself to them, it becomes difficult for him to ignore the fact that his interpretations differ from the “intuitive” conclusion to which *peshat* principles were supposed to lead him, because this conclusion is unacceptable from a theological point of view.

It is possible to find a certain regularity in the ways that the *peshat* exegetes coped with the numerous difficulties raised by the belief that the Torah is whole and pure. With regard to coping with what appear to be flaws in the Torah, cases of inconsistency and contradictions, the principle of harmonization usually applied. If one verse says “x” and another says “y,” the exegetes will endeavor to prove by means of the principles of *peshat* that “x” is really no different from “y,” and, in fact, both verses relate to the same event, and we have to consider both descriptions in order to understand it. For example, the story of the creation of the world described in the first chapter of Genesis (x) is not different from the story of creation described in the second chapter of Genesis (y), and the relationship between the descriptions is resolved as the relationship between the general and the particular. Alternatively, the exegetes will try to prove that “x” and “y” deal with incidents that are independent of each other, for example, the three places in the Torah in which the ineffable name of God is revealed.<sup>69</sup>

It is possible to find a certain regularity also in the ways in which *peshat* exegetes dealt with the disparity between the verses of the Torah and the normative Halakhah. Sometimes these were convoluted and tortuous attempts to connect the verse and the Halakhah according to the principles of *peshat* exegesis.<sup>70</sup> Sometimes the exegetes made use of the myth of the divine origin of the Oral Law and admitted the necessity of filling in the details relating

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69 There isn't always agreement and in certain cases the exegetes disagree with each other on whether there was one incident (in other words  $X = Y$ ) or whether there were separate incidents (these cases can be represented by  $X + Y$ ); thus, for example, the exegetes deliberate whether the contradiction in the question of how Joseph came to be in the hands of Potiphar should be resolved by the assumption that Joseph was sold several times ( $X + Y$ ) or only once and thus Ishmaelites and Midianites (or Medanites [cf. Gen. 37:36]) are different names for the same merchants ( $X = Y$ ). On the principles of these methods and examples, see Viezel, “Context.”

70 See for example the obvious attempts by Ibn Ezra in his commentary to Deut. 15:5–7 to prove by *peshat* interpretation that Jews are not commanded to leave the Sabbath limit on a holiday by means of a comparison with a similar difficulty in 1 Kgs. 8:66, solved in 2 Chron. 7:10 by the method of “rewritten Bible.”

to the Halakhah by relying upon classical rabbinic literature.<sup>71</sup> In certain cases, the exegetes admitted that according to the principles of *peshat* some of the laws in the Torah differ from the normative Halakhah.<sup>72</sup> It may be possible to assume that each of these exegetical tactics, and in particular the last mentioned, confronted the *peshat* exegetes with dilemmas and difficulties. Naturally it is difficult to gauge precisely the intensity of these inner deliberations, and they left only scant traces. One example of such traces is the repeated emphasis by Rashbam that Jewish religious practice (as formulated in classical rabbinic literature) is obligatory even though it is not always reflected in his commentary.<sup>73</sup> These emphases indicate that Rashbam feared that his readers would get the impression that some of his commentaries negated the commandments and in fact correspond to the Christian position, and he therefore found it necessary to repeatedly declare that this was not his intention. This fear was justified. The commentaries of Rashbam were controversial, and the accusation was raised that his interpretations could strengthen the Christian claim that the commandments in the Torah have lost their validity.<sup>74</sup>

It would appear that it is possible to point out tactics used repeatedly by the *peshat* exegetes to resolve difficulties arising from the belief in the integ-

71 See for example the frank admission of Ibn Ezra in his commentary to Deut. 25:2 that the verse leads to a conclusion at variance with the accepted Halakhah: “*With the number of lashes proportionate to the offense* [...] It would seem to us that there are sins for which ten, and also twenty, lashes are given, or less or more. The proof is, ‘proportionate to the offense,’ but ‘he shall not exceed’ forty. This would be true if not for what has been received by tradition.”

72 This phenomenon is identified in particular with Rashbam, for example, his commentary to Exod. 13:9: “*And it shall serve for you as an Ot*—according to the straightforward sense at its most profound level, it should be a reminder as permanent as if it were written on your hand, as ‘Let me be a seal upon your heart’ [Song 8:6];” and from here it can be concluded that on the *peshat* level the verse does not relate to the commandment to put on *tefillin* as accepted in tradition. For key examples and a detailed discussion on the different ways that exegetes coped with this issue, see Sara Japhet, *Collected Studies in Biblical Exegesis* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2008), pp. 35–54, and, inter alia, Moshe Ahrend, “The Plain Meaning of Scripture and *Midrash Halakhah*” [Hebrew], in *Studies in Bible and Exegesis* VIII (2008), pp. 19–32; Meir (Martin) Lockshin, “Some Approaches to the Tension between *Peshat* and *Midrash Halakhah*,” in *ibid.*, pp. 33–45; Eliav Shochetman, “To the Question of the Attitude between *Halakhah* and the Plain Meaning of Scripture” [Hebrew], in *Sinai* 139 (2007), pp. 30–65.

73 See especially Rashbam to Exod. 21:1; Introduction to Leviticus; Lev. 13:2.

74 Read Rashbam on Gen. 1:4–5, 8, 14, 31, with Ibn Ezra, “Letter of the Shabbath,” in Michael Friedländer, “Ibn Ezra in England,” in *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* 2 (1894–1895), p. 63. Or the harsh words of Joseph Bekhor Shor on Gen. 12:6–9, concerning the commentary of Rashbam to Exod. 13:9.

rity and perfection of the Torah, but this does not reduce the intensity of the intellectual challenge with which they were dealing. Ultimately the *peshat* exegetical method “complicates” the understanding of the Torah and necessitates almost paradoxical coping strategies. There is in this indirect support for my argument that this exegetical method developed out of certain historical-intellectual conditions rather than through a “natural” hermeneutic process. As I will emphasize below, there would seem to be a connection between the theoretical difficulties the *peshat* exegetes were forced to confront and the eventual waning of this exegetical method.

### 3 The Status of Classical Rabbinic and *Peshat* Exegesis: “Transmitted to Moses on Sinai” versus “Zero Sum Game”

The *peshat* methodology widened the gap between the exegetes and the generations that preceded them (and perhaps even created the gap!) and thus contributed to raising the status of classical rabbinic literature, while at the same time weakening the status of the exegetes themselves. This point is very significant, both because it lends additional indirect support to the argument that *peshat* exegesis did not develop naturally, but rather was the product of distinct historical conditions, and also because it suggests that the weakening of this method was inevitable.

As we have seen, the rabbis postulated that the Torah has infinite meanings, a premise that corresponds to the belief that Moses received on Sinai all of the commentaries and the nuances that future generations would suggest. This methodological premise does not allow for the establishment of a hierarchy between various interpretations, because their status and importance are fixed and definite. It is possible to distinguish between the interpretations of the sages in accordance with certain criteria, for example, aesthetics (a pleasing commentary) or style (a long commentary), and even compatibility to principles of *peshat* (a commentary compatible with Biblical language or the context of the verse). However, these are external criteria that do not indicate anything about the absolute worth of the commentaries. One interpretation does not negate other interpretations, and we should not judge them according to evaluative criteria: right/wrong, true/false, successful/unsuccessful and so forth.<sup>75</sup> As opposed to the unassailable status of classical rabbinic

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75 The well-known statement of Rashi in his comments on Gen. 3:8, in which he declares that he will include in his commentary only *midrashim* that are *aggadah meyashev* (“I have come only for *peshuto shel miqra* and for *aggadah* that settle the words of the verses, each word in its proper place,” see Kamin, *Rashi’s Exegetical Categorization*,

exegesis, *peshat* exegesis is characterized by relativity and inherent hierarchy.<sup>76</sup> Exegetical solutions according to the *peshat* method are weighed against each other, and ultimately only one—the most convincing and correct—will be accepted. Even this chosen interpretation does not reflect the absolute truth but rather relative truth—the interpretation is “correct” until there is a new *peshat* interpretation that is more “correct” and more convincing. The model of classical rabbinic biblical exegesis in which interpretations pile up without any consideration of relative merit or value is replaced by an intellectual atmosphere of exegetical controversy. The intellectual determinism according to which even the words of a pupil “were already transmitted to Moses on Sinai” is replaced by a “zero sum game.” The difference between these approaches is too deep and fundamental to be suppressed.<sup>77</sup>

Several *peshat* exegetes discussed the connection between their commentaries and those of the sages.<sup>78</sup> Some exegetes accepted as self-evident that the *Torah* has multiple meanings and is therefore given to various interpretations. For these exegetes, the *peshat* method reflects one specific level of meaning of the text, the level in which the “zero sum game” takes place. This level of meaning is different from the other levels existing in the text, which are reflected in classical rabbinic commentaries and among which there is no opportunity to

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pp. 62–77, 209–262), can serve as an example of an external criterion for the assessment of the exegesis of the sages, because Rashi is definitely not arguing that *midrashim* that fit the category of *aggadah meyashevet* are more accurate or better than other commentaries of the sages that do not fulfill this criterion. On this point see Eran Viezel, “Targum Onkelos in Rashi’s Exegetical Consciousness,” in *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 15 (2012), pp. 2–4.

76 E.g., Uriel Simon, “The Religious Significance of the *Peshat*” [Hebrew], in idem, ed., *The Bible and Us* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1979), pp. 139, 148; Japhet, *Rashbam on Job*, pp. 95–98; eadem, *Rashbam on Song*, pp. 86–87; see also Joseph Dan, *On Sanctity: Religion, Ethics and Mysticism in Judaism and other Religions* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1998), pp. 87–130.

77 The well-known admission of Rashi to his grandson Rashbam “that, if only he had had the time, he would have written new [revised] commentaries, based on the insights into the plain meaning of Scripture that are newly thought of day by day” (commentary of Rashbam to Gen. 37:2) reflects his awareness of the inherent relativity of the *peshat* method; see Eran Viezel, “‘The Torah Was Given by Moses at Sinai along with All of the Particulars of Its Interpretation’: Can the Interpretations Be Retrieved? Rashi’s Position on a Fundamental Issue” [Hebrew], in *Jewish Studies* 46 (2009), pp. 81–82; Japhet, “Pendulum,” p. 250.

78 On the different approaches of the exegetes to rabbinic literature and the religious and cultural background at their foundation, see Sara Kamin, *Jews and Christians Interpret the Bible* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2008), pp. xxi–xxxv; Cohen, “Possible Spanish Source,” pp. 358–366.

judge which is more or less “correct.” Other exegetes assumed that the Torah, like any other text, has one single interpretation. For them, the commentary of the sages is not real exegesis: since the sages intended to educate their readers, to form their Jewish worldview, to bring the written Torah closer to the oral Torah, not to interpret the written word,<sup>79</sup> it is not possible to judge their homilies according to absolute standards of accuracy.

Either way, so far as I know, every *peshat* exegete, without exception, set a clear methodological boundary between the classical rabbinic *midrashim*, which are absolute and above judgment, and the *peshat* interpretations that they themselves suggested, which are unique, relative and can be evaluated on the basis of merit. This boundary does not neatly correspond to the periodization of time—the commentaries of Sa’adya Gaon in the tenth century are in the same time period as several of the major collections of rabbinic *midrashim*, and there are collections known to have been redacted even later.<sup>80</sup> Even if the exegetes assumed that collections of *midrashim* were compiled at an earlier point, it is clear that their status was not determined by their age but rather by the belief that the commentaries of the sages are above any critical evaluation and different from the interpretations suggested by the exegetes themselves. In other words, the line of chronological demarcation and with it the self-awareness of the exegetes was influenced first and foremost by the deep methodological difference between them and the sages.<sup>81</sup> In this context it should be mentioned that it would appear that the medieval exegetes were not very impressed by the expressions of explicit self-negation of the sages in

79 This was the approach of Ibn Ezra; see Uriel Simon, and Josef Cohen, *R. Abraham Ibn Ezra: The Foundation of Reverence and the Secret of the Torah* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Bar Ilan University, 2007), pp. 40–41; Eran Viezel, “The Divine Content (*te’amim*) and the Words (*milot*) of Moses: R. Abraham Ibn Ezra on Moses’ Role in Writing the Torah” [Hebrew], in *Tarbiz* 80 (2012), p. 407.

80 For the conclusions of the research regarding the periodization of the redaction of the major collections of midrash, see the relevant entries in Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery-Peck, eds., *Encyclopedia of Midrash: Biblical Interpretation in Formative Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), and see recently Anat Reizel, *Introduction to the Midrashic Literature* (Hebrew; Alon Shvut: Tvunot, 2011).

81 To this difference can be added the question: “Were the earlier generations better, or the later ones?” (B. Yoma 9b)—the long term impact of which on rulings in Jewish law in the Middle Ages is well-known; Israel Moshe Ta-Shma, *Ritual, Custom and Reality in Franco-Germany, 1000–1350* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Magnes, 2000), pp. 58–78; and cf. Abraham Melamed, *On the Shoulders of Giants: The Debate between Moderns and Ancients in Medieval and Renaissance Jewish Thought* (Hebrew; Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2003).

deference to the generations that came before them.<sup>82</sup> For them the Talmudic and *midrashic* sources were products of a different generation possessing exceptional qualities, for in this body of literature is embedded the Torah, its interpretations and nuances, all of which are included in the corpus transmitted to Moses on Sinai.<sup>83</sup>

The *peshat* exegetes were imbued with the consciousness that they did not attain the level of the early generations and that the area of activity that they took upon themselves was of lesser importance than the main area of activity of the sages. This is the appropriate context for understanding the words of Rashbam in his commentary to Gen. 37:2 (and several other places) from which we learn that the *peshat* commentaries are less important than the *derash* (homiletical interpretation) of the sages and that he who occupies himself with *derash* commentary is on the level of “piety.” From this we learn that he who occupies himself with *peshat* cannot be considered to be on this level: “Due to their piety, the earliest scholars<sup>84</sup> tended to devote their time to *midrashic* explanations, which are the essence of Torah.”<sup>85</sup>

The interpretation of the Torah according to the *peshat* does not only make it more “difficult” to understand the written word, but this exegetical method, to a certain extent, damages the status of the exegete himself. It would seem that these unique difficulties that the *peshat* methodology raises for biblical commentators are the major reason that, along with its success, and despite the fact that major Jewish scholars found it appropriate to devote great

82 Cf., “If the earlier [scholars] were sons of angels, we are sons of men; and if the earlier [scholars] were sons of men, we are like [sons of] asses” (B. Shab. 112b); “The fingernail of the earlier generations is better than the belly of the later generations” (B. Yoma 9b).

83 As expressed later in the school of Rashi: “Moses received the Torah on Sinai, all of the Torah, both written and oral [...] and we have further found *aggadot* [...] all were given by the same shepherd, the same shepherd said them and they are both words of the living God [...] and we have also found [...] that *targum* [the translation of] Onkelos to the Torah was given at Sinai.” Shimon Hurwitz, ed., *Machsor Vitry nach der Handschrift im British Museum* (Nürnberg: J. Bulka, 1923), pp. 461–462.

84 The term “*ha-rishonim*” (earliest scholars) in the language of Rashbam (here and other places) can refer both to the sages and to the medieval exegetes that preceded him; cf. Touitou, *Exegesis*, pp. 69–70, 102–103. From this we may conclude that the act of biblical exegesis by way of homily raised the status of the exegete, regardless of the era in which he lived.

85 In light of the decisive commitment of Rashbam to the *peshat* method, it is possible to argue that these words are empty rhetoric; if so, this reflects his realization that his readers assumed it was self-evident that the stature of *peshat* exegetes is lower than that of *derash* [homiletical] exegetes.



effort to the composition of original *peshat* commentaries, a different exegetical style, less committed, if at all, to the principles of *peshat*, continued to exist. In addition, it would appear that at the height of the flourishing of *peshat* exegesis it elicited a certain opposition, although only scant evidence of this controversy has reached our hands.<sup>86</sup>

It would appear that special historical intellectual conditions are necessary to bring generations of scholars to devote their time to the composition of works regarded as less important than other works and that expose their writers to constant criticism. Presumably, different historical conditions would have led to a fundamentally different methodological development. Nonetheless, from the inception of the intellectual development—however unnecessary and unnatural—it was already impossible to stop it and return to the starting point. This development had its own dynamic. A Jewish scholar in northern France in the twelfth century made an extended exegetical effort to interpret the Bible according to the *peshat* because this is what his teacher, a prominent and influential scholar, did and, as far as he knew, also his teacher's teacher and the teachers of previous generations. Eventually, this northern French scholar would influence other scholars, his pupils, to also try their hand at writing *peshat* commentaries. Generations of scholars adapted the principles of this exegetical genre and did so naturally, without engaging in historical reflection. They were concerned neither by the question of the particular circumstances that led to the creation of the genre of *peshat* exegesis, nor even with clarification of the benefit to be accrued from this exegetical endeavor. Moreover, their short historical memory led the exegetes to assume that *peshat* exegesis had always been known and that even the sages were aware of its principles. The exegetes assumed that on this point the difference between them and the sages was merely formal—the sages devoted little attention to biblical exegesis according to the *peshat* method of biblical exegesis, while they devoted to it a great deal of attention.<sup>87</sup>

86 See especially R. Joseph Qara on 1 Sam. 1:17 (and maybe also on 2 Sam. 12:30); cf. Grossman, *Early Sages*, pp. 468–471.

87 Both Rashbam and Ibn Ezra made explicit statements from which we can learn that the sages knew the *peshat* meaning of the Bible but chose not to use this exegetical method; e.g. Simon and Cohen, *The Foundation of Reverence*, pp. 40–41; Lockshin, *Rashbam's Commentary on the Torah*, p. 6. This methodological anachronism was created both from rhetorical causes (scholars aspiring to present their exegetical method as the natural continuation of that which was accepted in tradition) and from a flawed analysis of hermeneutical terms (the exegetes assumed that the term *peshat* appearing in the literature of the sages had the same well-known methodological meaning as in their time). Compare the material collected in Moshe M. Ahrend, "The Concept 'Peshuto Shellamiqra' in the

#### 4 The Causes of the Waning of *Peshat* Exegesis

As explained above, the genre of *peshat* exegesis began in Babel and from there spread among Jewish communities in lands under Islamic rule and afterwards also to the Jews of Christian Europe. From the moment that this exegetical genre arrived in the hands of the scholars of the various communities, it began to develop within them independent of the community of origin. The strength of Babylonian Jewry weakened progressively and in the eleventh century its intellectual centers were damaged and declined—we have no *peshat* commentaries from Babel that were written in this period, and it would appear that the decline of the intellectual centers brought an end to the Babylonian *peshat* exegesis.<sup>88</sup> Centers of learning in Muslim Spain were also mortally wounded in the eleventh century with the victory of the conquests of the Almoravid dynasty and afterwards the conquests of the Almohad dynasty. In this case as well, the decline of the centers of learning caused a significant weakening of *peshat* exegesis.<sup>89</sup> Biblical exegesis in Spain revived with the expansion of the Reconquista, but this was an exegesis with different methodological characteristics; the exegetes revealed only partial commitment to the *peshat* method and in general combined that method with other approaches.<sup>90</sup> While *peshat*

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Making" [Hebrew], in Sara Japhet, ed., *The Bible in the Light of Its Interpreters: Sara Kamin Memorial Volume* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1994), pp. 237–244; Kamin, *Rashi*, pp. 23–56, and see David Weiss Halivni, *Peshat and Derash: Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 52–88.

- 88 As we learn from the Genizah's findings, the study of the Bible in countries under Islam was not neglected during the middle ages; see especially R. Samuel Ben R. Nissim Masnuth (Aleppo?; thirteenth century): *Midrash Daniel and Midrash Ezra*, Isaac S. Lange, and Shmuel Schwartz, eds. (Jerusalem: Makitze Nirdamim, 1968); Tanhum Ha-Yerushalmi (Egypt?; thirteenth century): Hadassa Shay, ed., *Commentary on the Minor Prophets* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1991); and cf., Shlomo Dov Goitein, *Jewish Education in Muslims Countries Based on Records from the Cairo Genizah* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi, 1962); Meira Polliack, "The Importance of Studying the Bible in Countries under the Islamic Religion according to the Testimony of the Cairo Geniza" [Hebrew], in *Al ha-pereq 17* (2000), pp. 131–141. However, we do not have findings of *peshat* interpretations with similar (or even close) achievements as the interpretations of the tenth century.
- 89 For useful surveys of the history of the Jewish communities of Babel and Spain, see, e.g., Eliyahu Ashtor, *The Jews of Moslem Spain I–III* (trans.: Aaron Klein and Jenny M. Klein; Philadelphia: JPS, 1973–1984); Moshe Gil, *Jews in Islamic Countries in the Middle Ages* (trans.: David Strassler; Leiden: Brill, 2004).
- 90 Nachmanides' commentary on the *Torah*, which reflects different levels of meaning, is a perfect example of this; see, e.g., Jacob Shalom Licht, "Nachmanides," in Greenberg, *Jewish Bible Exegesis*, pp. 60–68; Haviva Pedaya, *Nahmanides: Cyclical Time and Holy Text*

exegesis faded in Babel and Muslim Spain, in France it had not yet reached the height of its success.

Rashbam wrote his commentaries to the Bible in northern France in the middle of the twelfth century. He clearly and unequivocally distinguished between *peshat* and other exegetical methods. He was aware of the exegetical principles included in the *peshat* method and felt committed to adhere to them systematically.<sup>91</sup> In northern France, concurrent to the activity of Rashbam, biblical commentaries were written that were characterized by a varied and complex methodology. Their authors felt no absolute commitment to *peshat* principles. It appears therefore that Rashbam cannot be seen as typical of all of biblical exegetes in northern France in the twelfth century. Rather, various exegetes worked concurrently in several different tracks while stimulating and influencing each other.<sup>92</sup> Nonetheless, it is correct to conclude that this stage reflects the height of the success of this exegetical genre in the Middle Ages—the commentaries of Rashbam are the most impressive *peshat* exegesis to be written in the Middle Ages (and perhaps ever!). Commentaries written by his pupils and their pupils also reflect a commitment to the *peshat* method and complete mastery of its principles.<sup>93</sup>

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(Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2003); Yaakov Elman, “Moses ben Nahman/Nahmanides (Ramban),” in Sæbø, *Hebrew Bible*, 1:2, pp. 416–432. Also, the commentaries of Jonah Gerondi, the central intellectual figure in Spain in the thirteenth century, are an example of a complex exegetical methodology, only a part of which reflects the *peshat* method; on the man and his work, see Ta-Shma, *Studies*, vol. 2, pp. 109–148.

91 E.g., Japhet, *Rashbam on Job*, pp. 54–56; eadem, *Rashbam on Song*, pp. 79–82.

92 Viezel, *Commentary on Chronicles*, pp. 332–335; and see Ephraim Kanarfogel, “Midrashic Texts and Methods in Tosaphist Torah Commentaries,” in Fishbane and Weinberg, *Midrash Unbound*, pp. 267–319.

93 The traces of this circle of scholars have been gradually revealed, especially in the last generation; see Poznański, *Kommentar zu Ezechiel*, pp. lxxxii, cxxx; Robert A. Harris, “The Literary Hermeneutic of Rabbi Eliezer of Beaugency” (Ph.D. Dissertation, The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York 1997), especially pp. 82–111; idem, *Discerning Parallelism: A Study in Northern French Medieval Jewish Biblical Exegesis* (Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 2004); s.v. “Eliezer of Beaugency influenced by [Rashbam],” p. 137; Eran Viezel, “The Commentary on Ezra-Nehemiah Attributed to Rashi” [Hebrew], in *Jewish Studies Internet Journal* 9 (2010), pp. 123–180; Sara Japhet, *Collected*, pp. 328–340; eadem, “The Anonymous Commentary on the Song of Songs in Ms. Prauge: A Critical Edition and Introduction,” in eadem and Viezel, “*Settle the Plain Meaning*,” pp. 206–230; eadem, “The Composition of Ezra-Nehemiah from the Perspective of a Medieval Jewish Commentator,” in David J.A. Clines, et al., eds., *Making a Difference: Essays on the Bible and Judaism in Honor of Tamara Cohn Eskenazi* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012), pp. 148–162.

*Peshat* exegesis made impressive achievements also in Provence. Rabbi Joseph Kimchi and his son Moshe revealed complete mastery of the principles of *peshat*, in particular a sophisticated knowledge of grammar. Rabbi Menachem the son of Shimon, active in the second half of the twelfth century, also reveals commitment to the *peshat* method. Rabbi David Kimchi, the son of Joseph, active at the turn of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, is also considered an outstanding *peshat* exegete.<sup>94</sup> However, his commentary on the Torah, which he apparently wrote at a later stage of his life, in the middle of the thirteenth century, already reflects an interesting change in direction—the strengthening of *midrashic* methodology and dogmatism.<sup>95</sup>

From here on *peshat* exegesis waned also in France.<sup>96</sup> Scholars continued to write commentaries to the Bible, but it appears that fewer and fewer of them felt a need to adhere systematically to the *peshat* method. Even exegetes who leaned towards a certain affinity for the *peshat* method did so in commentaries to the books of the Prophets and Writings, while commentaries to the *Torah* were characterized by a significant retreat from philological principles.<sup>97</sup> Many of them combined exegetical solutions according to the *peshat* method with interpretations based on other exegetical methods. Mystical and kabbalistic exegesis proliferated,<sup>98</sup> exegesis with philosophical-Maimonic characteristics

94 For a summary of the works of the Kimchi family, see Mordechai Z. Cohen, “The Qimhi Family,” in Sæbø, *Hebrew Bible*, 1:2, pp. 388–415.

95 See especially Mordechai Z. Cohen, “Influences of Midrash on the Exegesis of Radak” [Hebrew], in *Proceeding of the Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies* (1994), pp. 143–150; Yitzhak Berger, “Radak on Genesis and the Meaningfulness of the Pentateuchal Text,” in Japhet and Viezel, “*Settle the Plain Meaning*,” pp. 180–192.

96 For a detailed description of this waning, with an emphasis on one biblical book (*The Song of Songs*), see Japhet, “Pendulum,” pp. 262–265.

97 In addition to Rabbi David Kimchi (n. 95 above), see also the commentary to the *Torah* of Rabbi Joseph Caspi; Isaac Halevi Last ed., *Mishneh Keseph* (Jerusalem: Mekorot, 1970).

98 For a concise description of the various exegetical methods, see Moshe Idel, “Preliminary Observations on the Variety of Kabbalistic Exegesis” [Hebrew], in Moshe Bar-Asher, ed., *Rabbi Mordechai Breuer Festschrift: Collected Papers in Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem: Academ Press, 1992), pp. 773–784. Exegesis based on mysticism and esoteric lore existed in the ancient world and the first centuries of the Common Era, parallel to “the rationalist Talmudic-rabbinic movement” (Yaakov Sussman, “The Scholarly Oeuvre of Professor Ephraim Elimelech Urbach,” in *Jewish Studies Supplement* 1 [1993], p. 102); nonetheless, it is clear that beginning in the thirteenth century biblical exegesis based on mysticism and esoteric lore flourished in an unprecedented manner. For a systematic description of the history of esotericism, see the recent, monumental work of Joseph Dan, *History of Jewish Mysticism and Esotericism* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar, 2008 onwards).

flourished,<sup>99</sup> and homiletical exegesis, expressed both in original *midrashic* commentaries and by the collection and compilation of *midrashic* commentaries from classical rabbinic literature, expanded.<sup>100</sup>

In this period, compilations of passages from existing biblical commentaries were common. Some of these compilations also included original material of the redactor himself, while others did not.<sup>101</sup> Above all, the commentaries of Rashi, the grandfather of Rashbam, and especially his commentary to the Torah, gained unprecedented popularity.<sup>102</sup> This commentary was copied again and again, apparently thousands of times,<sup>103</sup> and scholars applied themselves assiduously to its study and interpretation.<sup>104</sup> In contrast, the commentaries of other exegetes, among them Rashbam and his pupils, were copied only rarely, and sometimes not at all, and as a result most of this material has been lost forever.<sup>105</sup> In contrast to Rashbam's commentary, Rash's work on the

99 Yechiel Tzeitkin, "The Characteristics of Biblical Exegesis in the Works of *Peshat* Commentators of the Maimonidean School of Provence in the thirteenth and fourteenth Centuries" (Hebrew; Ph.D Dissertation, Bar Ilan University, 2011); this is an up to date study of Rabbi David Kimchi, Rabbi Samuel Ibn Tibbon and his son Moses Ibn Tibbon, Rabbi Menachem Ha-Meir, Rabbi Joseph Caspi, and Rabbi Levi Ben Gershom (Gersonides).

100 See above, n. 80.

101 Japhet, in *Collected Studies*, pp. 341–363.

102 Jordan Sterling Penkower, "The Canonization of Rashi's Commentary on the Pentateuch" [Hebrew], in Howard Kreisel, ed., *Study and Knowledge in Jewish Thought* (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2006), pp. 123–146; Eran Viesel, "The Secret of the Popularity of Rashi's Commentary on Torah," in *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 17 (2014), pp. 207–217.

103 David Simon Blondheim, "Liste des manuscrits des commentaires bibliques de Raschi," in *Revue des études juives* 91 (1931), pp. 71–101, 155–174; Jordan Sterling Penkower, "Rashi's Corrections to His Commentary on the Pentateuch" [Hebrew], in *Jewish Studies Internet Journal* 6 (2007), pp. 187–180; for a summary of matters relating to the question of the version of Rashi's commentary to the Torah, see Yeshayahu Maori, "The Text of Rashi's Commentary on the Pentateuch: The Present State of Scholarship," in Japhet and Grossman, *Rashi*, pp. 63–97.

104 Israel Shapira, *Rashi's Supercommentaries* (New York, 1960); Pinchus Krieger, *Parshandata* (Monsey: P. Krieger, 2005). These lists are not complete and in fact it is not possible to count with precision the super-commentaries to the commentary of Rashi on the Torah. There are many intermediary cases of works that are composed of an original commentary to the Torah along with a super-commentary to the commentary of Rashi, or works that are a collection of rabbinic sources in addition to a super-commentary on Rashi's commentary to the Torah, and it is therefore difficult to categorize them.

105 As agreed upon in the research literature, a book that was not studied was not copied, and a book that was not copied was usually lost. Cf. Simcha Emanuel, *Fragments of the Tablets: Lost Books of the Tosaphists* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Magnes, 2006), p. 308; this was the fate of

Torah is not a *peshat* commentary in the full sense of the word. Rashi's goal was first and foremost to interpret the Torah with help from rabbinic *midrashim*. Original interpretations according to the *peshat* method account for only about a quarter of his commentary and perhaps even less.<sup>106</sup> The increasing popularity of Rashi's commentary reflects therefore a lack of interest in *peshat* exegesis.

If it is true, as stated earlier, that the commentaries of Rashbam are the best *peshat* commentaries to have been written in the Middle Ages, this also reflects the ebb of the *peshat* method. Rashbam's grammatical knowledge was limited in comparison to that of Jewish scholars in subsequent generations.<sup>107</sup> Logic dictates that it would be reasonable to expect from these scholars *peshat* commentaries even more sophisticated than that of Rashbam, because they could reach conclusions that Rashbam's limited knowledge precluded. The fact that none of them attained the level of Rashbam reflects his personal brilliance, but also indicates that the scholars of subsequent generations based their commentaries on additional methodological principles and in contrast to Rashbam did not attempt to adhere at all cost to the *peshat* method.

The few extant biblical commentaries from southern Germany, England, and Italy provide additional indirect evidence of the waning of *peshat* exegesis from the thirteenth century. As far as we know, in these areas *peshat* biblical commentaries were written in the twelfth century. Nevertheless, only individual fragments of these works survived, and sometimes only indirect references (sections of the work quoted in other sources). Two anonymous *peshat* commentaries to the book of Chronicles written in southern Germany in the mid-twelfth century provide clear evidence of extensive exegetical activity in this area.<sup>108</sup> The biblical commentary of Isaiah Mitrani, although it reflects the world of *peshat* commentary in southern Germany, because he studied in Speyer, indicates exegetical activity in northern Italy.<sup>109</sup> The third commentary of Ibn Ezra on the Torah, written in England (by a pupil), indicates interest

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most of the commentaries written by Rabbi Joseph Kara, Rashbam, Eliezer of Beaugency, and Rabbi Joseph Bechor Shor, among many others.

106 E.g., Nechama Leibowitz and Moshe Ahrend, *Rashi's Commentary on the Torah: Studies in His Methodology* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: The Open University Press, 1990); Yosefa Rachman, *The Aggadah of Rashi: Reevaluation* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: M. Mizrahi, 1991); for a summary of the issue as well as detailed research, see Grossman, *Early Sages*, pp. 193–201.

107 Ronela Merdler, "Rabbi Samuel Ben Meir (Rashbam) and Hebrew Grammar" (Hebrew; Ph.D. Dissertation, Hebrew University, 2004).

108 Viezel, *Commentary on Chronicles*, pp. 330–335.

109 On Isaiah Mitrani and his literary oeuvre, see, for example, Ta-Shma, *Studies*, vol. 3, pp. 9–62, and the bibliography there. If the theory well-known in research literature is



in the *peshat* method within the Jewish community there.<sup>110</sup> To this evidence we can add the commentaries of the Tosafists (*ba'alei ha-Tosafot*), who were active in northern France, and also southern Germany and England, and who, among other things, engaged in biblical commentary according to the *peshat* method.<sup>111</sup> It is correct to assume that this evidence is all that survived of a much richer exegetical corpus lost due to subsequent generations' lack of interest in the *peshat* method. In contrast, commentaries based upon *derash* (homily), mysticism, and kabbalah, some of them written in the same areas and in the same period, had readers and enthusiasts who copied them assiduously again and again so that, as a result, these works survived.<sup>112</sup>

The decline of *peshat* exegesis in the Babylonian cultural sphere and in Muslim Spain is connected to the deterioration in the centers of learning in these areas. In contrast, the reason for the waning of the *peshat* exegesis in other areas is not self-evident. Above all, the waning of *peshat* exegesis in France is surprising because, as we have seen, in the twelfth century this method experienced an unprecedented growth. In addition, we must ask ourselves why biblical exegesis that developed in Spain concurrent with the progress of the Reconquista does not reflect the same strong commitment to the *peshat* method that characterized Sephardic exegesis until the end of the eleventh century. As far as I know, these questions have not yet been either clearly formulated or researched in their own right. Avraham Grossman has connected the waning of the *peshat* method in northern France to both the significant deterioration in the lives of the Jews and the general intellectual decline in Christian Europe.<sup>113</sup> It seems to me that these two complementary factors provide part of the answer.

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correct, that some of the commentaries of Isaiah Mitrani were written by his grandson, there is evidence of exegetical activity according to the *peshat* method in Italy.

110 Sela and Freudenthal, *Abraham Ibn Ezra's*, p. 46.

111 Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Tosaphists: Their History, Writings and Methods* (Hebrew; fifth enlarged edition; Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1986), and see Ya'akov Gellis, *Sefer Tosafot Hashalm: Commentary on the Bible* (14 vols.; Jerusalem: Ariel, 1982–2004); Ephraim Kanarfogel, *The Intellectual History and Rabbinic Culture of Medieval Ashkenaz: Expanding Horizons and Innovating Tradition* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 2012), pp. 111–288.

112 E.g., Isaac Samson Lange, ed., *Ta'amei masoret ha-Mikrah le-R. Judah he-Hasid* (Jerusalem, 1980); *Sefer Gematriot of R. Judah the Pious: Facsimile Edition* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 1998); Stell, *Sefer Gematriot le-[...] R. Judah he-Hasid*, Ya'akov Israel Stell, ed. (Jerusalem, 2005); Joel Klugmann, ed., *Sefer ha-Remazim le-Rabeinu Yoel* (Bnei Berak: Klugmann and Sons, 2001); Ya'akov Israel Stell, ed., *Sodei Humash ve-Š-A'-R* (Jerusalem: Stell, 2009); Amnon Gross, ed., *Sefer Ziyoni le-Rabi Menahem Ziyoni* (Tel Aviv: Barazani, 2005).

113 Grossman, *Early Sages*, pp. 505–506.

The basis of tolerance towards the Jews as formulated in the Augustinian framework was disputed at the turn of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, concurrent with the end of the Medieval Renaissance. The Christian Jewish polemic expanded and was transferred from the Bible to the Talmud and acquired particularly harsh anti-Jewish characteristics.<sup>114</sup> This development is connected to the rise in the power of the Church (“the victory of the church!”<sup>115</sup>), especially under the rule of Pope Innocent III (1198–1216), called by the Jews “the head of the vipers,” because of the decrees imposed upon them in his reign.<sup>116</sup> The hostility of King Philippe Auguste (1180–1223) towards the Jews also heralded a profound change—the Roman tradition of tolerance had ended<sup>117</sup> and from now the status of the Jews in France declined precipitously until their final expulsion at the end of the fourteenth century.<sup>118</sup>

There is much validity in the assumption that the general deterioration in the condition of the Jews led to an intellectual decline. It is also logical to assume that if the renaissance of the Middle Ages contributed to the advancement of philology, an intellectual decline would have led to the strengthening of other, less rational, methodologies, such as *midrash*, mysticism, and kabbalah.

114 Amos Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Oxford: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 172–201, and, e.g., Gershon D. Cohen, “Esau as Symbol in Early Medieval Thought,” in Alexander Altman, ed., *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1967), pp. 19–48.

115 Robert Chazan, *Medieval Jewry in Northern France: A Political and Social History* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1973), p. 100.

116 In 1199, Innocent III issued the *Constitutio pro Judaeis*, which decreed that the status quo of the Jews should be maintained as is, without change for better or worse. See Simon Shwarzfuchs, *A History of the Jews in Medieval France* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: ha-Kibbutz ha-Me’uchad, 2001), pp. 163–175. Nonetheless, most of his activity was clearly anti-Jewish, culminating in edicts and restrictions on the Jews promulgated by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. Following this, national and regional councils placed restrictions on the Jews in different ways; for the text of the decisions of the Lateran Council, see Solomon Grayzel, *The Church and the Jews in the XIIIth Century* (New York: Hermon Press, 1966), vol. 1, pp. 306–311; see most recently John Tolan, “Milk and Blood: Innocent III and the Jews, Revisited,” in Elisheva Baumgarten and Judah D. Galinsky, eds., *Jews and Christians in Thirteenth-Century France* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 139–149.

117 For a survey of the period of the reign of Philippe Auguste, see for example John W. Baldwin, *The Government of Philip Augustus: Foundation of French Royal Power in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California, 1986); and for his hostility to Jews, see William Chester Jordan, *The French Monarchy and the Jews from Philip Augustus to the Last Capetians* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1989); Chazan, *Medieval Jewry*, pp. 63–99.

118 Shwarzfuchs, *A History*, chapters 5–8.

Nonetheless, the intellectual effort involved in mystical, kabbalistic or philosophical-Maimonistic exegesis is not necessarily less than the effort required of a *peshat* exegete. To this we must add what I mentioned above: even though the *peshat* method waned considerably, it did not completely die out. I will bring only two representative examples: the philosophical-Maimonistic commentaries of Rabbi Joseph Caspi to the books of the Prophets and Writings (even though they sometimes appear to be a fragmented collection of exegetical aphorisms rather than a comprehensive commentary) and individual exegetical comments included within compilations of commentaries. Both of these reveal complete mastery of the principles of *peshat* and sometimes also impressive achievements. It would seem therefore that in addition to the deterioration in the condition of the Jews and the change in the intellectual climate, we have to assume the existence of some factor directly related to the *peshat* method that deterred scholars from maintaining the level of commitment of Rashbam and his followers to *peshat* principles.

As stated above, the genre of *peshat* exegesis did not develop in “naturally” but rather as the result of distinct historical-intellectual processes. I would further suggest that the unique difficulties that the *peshat* method creates for biblical exegetes are the primary reason that even during the apogee of this method, exegetes with limited commitment to the principles of *peshat* were also active. These difficulties also explain why the *peshat* method received a certain amount of criticism.<sup>119</sup> A change in the intellectual climate was enough therefore to encourage these exegetical alternatives, which are to a large extent much easier for the biblical exegete. The preacher (*darshan*), the mystic, and the kabbalist are free from the paradox with which the *peshat* exegete is forced to contend when he comes to explain, with the help of philological tools, that the flaws and oddities in the biblical text, the repetitions, inconsistencies and contradictions, are not really irregularities at all. They are also free from having to deal with the tension created by a comparison of the legal verses to the normative Halakhah.

In contrast to the *peshat* exegete whose commentaries are given to hierarchical evaluation, the biblical commentaries according to *midrash*, mysticism, and kabbalah return to the model known from classical rabbinic literature, in which the interpretations pile up without any consideration of relationship or value. The intellectual atmosphere of exegetical controversy was replaced by scholastic determinism, according to which even the words of a pupil were “already transmitted to Moses on Sinai.” This could have influenced the status of these commentaries. The inbuilt relativity of the *peshat* commentaries

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119 Above, text to n. 86.

(“zero sum game”) led all *peshat* exegetes, apparently without exception, to work hard to refute the exegetical solutions that preceded them, because they had to explain to their readers why there was a need for a new interpretation.<sup>120</sup> The waning of the *peshat* method led to a retreat from these exegetical controversies because all of the other interpretations were absolute, non-justiciable, and expressed a profound truth.

Naturally, this influenced the stature of the exegetes themselves. These changes are revealed, perhaps paradoxically, in the analytical methods of the super-commentators on Rashi’s commentary to the Torah. As we have seen, Rashi’s commentary achieved unprecedented popularity and became a subject of study and interpretation itself. Rashi regarded his *peshat* commentaries as subject to the model of the “zero sum game” and accordingly exerted himself to refute the *peshat* interpretations of his predecessors.<sup>121</sup> As we saw above, Rashi even admitted to his grandson Rashbam that he should write a new commentary to the Bible “based on the insights into the plain meaning of Scripture that are newly thought of day by day” (commentary of Rashbam on Gen. 37:2), a statement that expresses more than anything his consciousness of the relativity of his exegesis. In contrast, many of the super-commentators on Rashi’s commentary assumed that it was decisive and incontrovertible, and it was even suggested that he wrote it with divine inspiration.<sup>122</sup>

Nonetheless, several generations of the use of philological tools made an indelible impression on scholars. Basic grammatical knowledge, from the moment when it is acquired, becomes to a certain extent instinctive. So too, the acquisition of sensitivity to context arouses instinctively the question of the demarcations of the literary unit. The developing methodological awareness that characterized the *peshat* exegetes is also a way of thinking that once acquired can only be suppressed by conscious effort. From the time that

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120 Ibn Ezra’s introductions to his commentaries on the Torah are perhaps the best example of this phenomenon—their purpose is to clarify the need for his commentaries in light of the limitations of the commentaries of his predecessors. For a detailed discussion and English translation, see Irene Lancaster, *Deconstructing the Bible: Abraham Ibn Ezra’s Introduction to the Torah* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003).

121 For examples, see Viezel, “Targum Onkelos,” p. 4.

122 For relevant citations, see Penkower, “Canonization of Rashi’s,” p. 125. The super-commentators on Rashi, who assumed that his commentary was divinely inspired, were forced, in many cases, to subjugate the intention of the text (*intentio operis*) to the intention of the reader (*intentio lectoris*), and they are characterized by excessive and unusual exegetical solutions. In this they reflect the same hermeneutical phenomenon that I mentioned above, which derives from the belief that the Torah is as perfect and whole as God himself.

scholars crossed the threshold into *peshat* methodology, the door slammed behind them and locked, and they were no longer able to completely return to the intellectual world they had previously inhabited.<sup>123</sup>

Thus, in addition to the revival of the model that predated the *peshat* exegetical genre, the model in which interpretations pile up without end and without any evaluative basis, some exegetes continued to adhere also to the model of the “zero sum game” and wrote biblical commentaries with a complex exegetical methodology. This methodological complexity can provide an explanation, in addition to the explanations already suggested, for the enormous popularity of the commentary of Rashi to the Torah.<sup>124</sup> His commentary fully answered the needs of his readers, who on the one hand were committed to a methodological awareness and the realization that a certain attention must be given to language and context, while on the other hand were not interested in pure *peshat* exegesis. Thus, if in the twelfth century, at the height of *peshat* exegesis, exegetes regarded the commentary of Rashi to the Torah as an example of incohesive *peshat* exegesis that must be improved,<sup>125</sup> in the following centuries his commentary became the model of correct exegesis, combining *peshat* with other exegetical methods, and, as mentioned above, even attaining a kind of canonization.

123 Various similar transitions are known in human culture from the dawn of its existence. For a similar metaphor to the one I used here, see, regarding the agricultural revolution, “From the moment that humanity crossed that threshold, the door slammed shut behind it and locked;” Yuval Noah Harari, *A Brief History of Mankind* (Hebrew; Or Yehuda: Dvir, 2011), p. 104.

124 See above, n. 102.

125 See especially “Rav Shlomo z”l [Rashi . . .] though he was under the impression that this is the way of *peshat*, in his writings one will find only one *peshat* out of a thousand;” Ibn Ezra, *Safa Berura*, Meir Vilenski, ed. (Jerusalem: Ha-Po’alim, 1926), p. 288; Enrique Ruiz Gonzalez and Ángel Sáenz-Badillos, eds. (Córdoba: Ediciones el Almendro, 2004), p. 4\*; see Aharon Mondschein, “Only One in a Thousand of His Comments May Be Called *Peshat*: Toward Ibn Ezra’s View of Rashi’s Commentary to the Torah” [Hebrew], in *Studies in Bible and Exegesis* v (2000), pp. 221–248; and see also Abraham Gross, “Spanish Jewry and Rashi’s Commentary on the Pentateuch” [Hebrew], in Zvi Arie Steinfeld, ed., *Rashi Studies* (Jerusalem: Bar Ilan University, 1993), pp. 27–55; Erik Lawee, “From Sepharad to Ashkenaz: A Case Study in the Rashi Supercommentary Tradition,” in *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 30 (2006), pp. 393–425.

## Conclusion

Biblical exegesis according to the *peshat* methodology is the product of distinct historical factors and does not reflect a “natural” intellectual development. It may be assumed that if the historical conditions of the ninth century in the Babylonian cultural sphere had been different, this exegetical genre would not have developed, because in certain respects *peshat* exegesis hampers Jewish biblical exegetes. The complex, even paradoxical, adjustment that the attention to language and context imposed on the *peshat* exegetes and the problematic stature of the *peshat* commentaries in comparison with the commentaries according to *derash*, mysticism, and esoteric lore, are the reason that simultaneous to the flourishing of the *peshat* method, and despite the exertion of influential scholars in writing *peshat* commentaries, biblical commentaries not adhering to the principles of *peshat* continued to be written. A change in the intellectual climate was enough therefore to encourage these alternate methods of exegesis. Nonetheless, *peshat* exegesis, although it developed almost by accident, entailed fundamental exegetical difficulties, and predominated for only a short period of time (about a hundred and fifty years in the lands under Muslim rule and another hundred and fifty years in Christian Europe), left its indelible mark on the history of Jewish biblical exegesis and can be considered one of the crowning achievements of Jewish cultural creativity of all times.