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“The Best of Poetry . . .”: Literary Approaches to the Bible in the Spanish *Pesbat* Tradition

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

One such fundamental exegetical issue relates to the following question: Can one apply a literary analysis to the Bible? In other words, can one legitimately analyze God's word using methods normally applied to human literature? Although contemporary scholars reveal the Bible's artistic beauty through the prism of modern literary

criticism, their view of "the Bible as literature," which gives it the value of human literary accomplishments, seems incompatible with its divine origin. For this reason, the "literary approach" is sometimes considered alien to traditional assumptions about the Bible. Yet, a strong precedent for analyzing Scripture in literary terms occurs within Jewish tradition, in the medieval Spanish (Sephardic) *pesbat* school, albeit not without controversy. The belief that poetic analysis enriches our understanding of Scripture is most clearly articulated by Rabbi Moses Ibn Ezra, the great eleventh-century Spanish Hebrew poet, who aimed to define the Bible's literary artistry according to the poetics current in his day. Although his specifically literary orientation was unique in the medieval tradition, the literary principles he formulates illuminate the exegetical assumptions of medieval authorities such as Sa'adia Gaon, Abraham Ibn Ezra, Maimonides and Radak. We intend to outline this medieval literary approach and the controversies it sparked, which led to the development of an alternate "anti-literary" approach as well.

1. Maimonides' Literary Principles

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

Maimonides thus classifies as fiction biblical sections which are accepted as historical in rabbinic tradition. This divergence becomes evident when we compare his analysis of Job with that of the Tal-

mud. Among the opinions cited in *Bava Batra* 15a regarding the time period in which Job lived, we find an attempt to view him as a fictional character:

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

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

But Maimonides (*Guide* III:22) validates the rejected view, arguing that the obscurity of Job's time period, which the Talmud never conclusively determines, indicates that, in fact, he never really did exist. And, indeed, Maimonides' analysis of this book, to which two chapters of the *Guide* are devoted, reveals his belief that it is a *mashal*.² But questions still remain. What does Job teach according to Maimonides? How would he answer the Talmud's concluding criticism? To determine his response to these questions, we must examine his method for interpreting allegory.

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

In some prophetic allegories . . . the fictional tale, taken as a whole, teaches its entire inner meaning; and in the . . . tale there will be very many things, not every word of which adds to the inner meaning (*Guide*, Introduction).³

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

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

For Maimonides, Job's "inner meaning" could have been presented more concisely, in a chapter or two (as Maimonides himself does); but Scripture takes forty-two chapters to develop a drama enacted by Job, Satan, the friends and God. It was precisely this element, Job's elaborate, realistic detail, that the Talmud cited as proof for its historicity, arguing that Scripture would not expend words except to record actual facts. But Maimonides rejects this reasoning. He believes that an allegory might contain elaborate details, such as Job's name and the name of his town, even the names of his friends and their towns, specifically to enhance "the coherence of the allegorical tale," in other words, to make it more realistic. In fact, Maimonides here boldly asserts that *almost the entire book* of Job consists of such

"matters that have no interpretation."

But this approach raises a difficulty: Why would Scripture squander forty-two chapters only to weave a fictional tale, even a realistic one? Maimonides does not answer this question directly, but we can perhaps infer his reasoning from a similar dilemma addressed by Rabbi Joseph Ibn 'Aknin of Fez (twelfth century), an author of halakhic and ethical works, and a friend of Maimonides.¹⁰ An emigré from Muslim Spain like Maimonides, Ibn 'Aknin was a product of the same Jewish culture as was Maimonides and reflects similar literary conceptions in his commentary on the Song of Songs.

Taken literally, the Song is a love poem, but the Rabbis interpret it as an allegory for the love between God and Israel. Ibn 'Aknin explains what motivated this tradition: "It is inconceivable that [Solomon] . . . would compose a book in which he described a dialogue consisting of songs of love . . . between a lover and his beloved."¹¹ The Rabbis therefore concluded that the Song contains an "inner meaning." But Ibn 'Aknin asks why this inner meaning is not expressed directly; in other words, why *did* Solomon "compose a book . . . consisting of songs of love"? He answers that the "outer meaning," charming in its own right, is not wasted, nor is it incidental; it was designed intentionally to fascinate readers: "[Solomon's] purpose of couching his idea in these words was to make it attractive to the masses and fascinate them."¹² Attracted by the Song's literary beauty, the masses, "when they became a little more learned . . . would reflect that it cannot be . . . [interpreted according to] the exoteric sense of the husk of the words . . . without noble mysteries."¹³ Applying this reasoning to Job, one would argue for Maimonides that Scripture intentionally employs a drama that compels the reader to ask: Why *does* a righteous man lose his possessions, family and health? By bringing the problem of evil to life, Job's story, more than a concise, impersonal philosophical analysis, engages the reader's sympathy and motivates further reading and investigation.¹⁴

2. Identifying The Bible's Poetic Features

MOSES IBN EZRA'S AESTHETIC EXEGESIS

Maimonides saw value in literary design, at least enough to justify what to him were otherwise meaningless biblical verses. But he identified biblical literary techniques only to argue that they "have no interpretation." As a philosopher, rather than a literary critic or poet, Maimonides subordinated analysis of the Bible's literary style to a search for its meaning. Even Ibn 'Aknin, who praises the Song of

Songs' literary beauty, devotes his commentary to its "inner meaning." But Rabbi Moses Ibn Ezra (1055-1138),¹⁵ adopted a different perspective. Although he, too, was a philosopher, his love for poetry attracted him to the Bible's literary features *per se* and kindled within him a desire to reveal its poetic elegance.

Born and educated in Muslim Spain, Ibn Ezra was a student of Rabbi Isaac Ibn Ghiyāth (1038-1089), a talmudist, religious poet, biblical exegete and philosopher. Ibn Ezra mastered all of these fields, but excelled especially in poetry and was known as *ha-sallah*, the great composer of *seliḥoth* (penitential poetry).¹⁶ He was regarded as a mentor by Judah Halevi (1075-1141), a younger Spanish contemporary and great poet in his own right. Typical of his era, Ibn Ezra embraced Greek and Arabic learning, and, like other Spanish Hebrew poets, adhered to Arabic conventions in his poetry. In addition to poetry, Ibn Ezra wrote expository works relating to biblical exegesis, in which he extensively cites Talmud, Midrash, Targum, and medieval rabbinic scholars, especially Sa'adia Gaon, in addition to Greek and Arabic sources. Although Ibn Ezra apparently did not write biblical commentaries, these expository works of his define fundamental exegetical principles, which were applied by later exegetes.¹⁷ His writings seem to have influenced Maimonides, for example, and are cited explicitly by other exegetes, especially Radak (1160-1235).¹⁸

Ibn Ezra's most valuable and unique insights appear in his book on poetics, *Kitāb al-Muḥādara wal-Mudhākara* (*The Book of Discussion and Conversation*).¹⁹ The distinctive literary focus of this work is singular in the medieval Jewish tradition.²⁰ It traces the history of Hebrew literature from biblical to medieval times and justifies the adoption of Arabic literary principles by medieval Hebrew poets. The *Kitāb* was intended to be a practical guide for writing Arabic-style Hebrew poetry. It therefore includes a lengthy section that defines twenty Arabic poetic devices (Arabic: *badi'*; Hebrew: *kishbutim*; lit. "ornaments") appearing frequently in medieval Hebrew poetry. And since, despite their extensive use of Arabic techniques, medieval Hebrew poets regarded their work as an extension of the biblical literary tradition,²¹ Ibn Ezra attempts to find precedents for the Arabic ornaments in Scripture. As a result, the *Kitāb* provides a systematic analysis of biblical style through the prism of Arabic poetics.

Maimonides examines the Bible's meaning; Ibn Ezra describes its beauty.²² He judges the Song of Songs, for example, on the basis of its poetic imagery. Postulating that elegant poetry "enwrap[s] many ideas in few words" (K [= *Kitāb*] 76a),²³ he especially admires the simile, "Like a scarlet thread are your lips" (Song 4:3), which "combines three [aspects] of the lips: softness, color, and delicateness" (K 134b).

Revealing delight in a tone uncommon in the medieval tradition, he exclaims: "If the Song of Songs would boast to Ecclesiastes on the basis of this verse, it would be justified!" (K 134b).²⁴ Others might become this excited about a brilliant idea,²⁵ but it is specifically poetic beauty that elicits Ibn Ezra's enthusiasm.

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

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

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

Aristotle described poetic beauty in general terms, but the Arabs developed a range of specific devices, the *badi'* ("ornaments"), to adorn their poetry. These include universal techniques, like imagery and hyperbole, and more characteristically Arabic ones relating to word order and verse structures. Ibn Ezra considered the *badi'* a defining characteristic of Arabic and medieval Hebrew poetry. To

establish the Bible's literary beauty, he cites precedents for them in biblical Hebrew: "For each . . . [ornament] I will cite an Arabic verse, and a corresponding verse found in the Holy Scriptures, lest . . . it be assumed that . . . our language is devoid of them" (K 116b). Realizing, however, that Arabic poetics was unknown in biblical times, Ibn Ezra admits that such examples merely resemble, but cannot be regarded as genuine applications of, the *badi'* (*ibid.*). In other words, the prophets intuitively employed literary techniques later delineated systematically by Arabic poetics.

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

We have found nothing in [Scripture] departing from prose save these three books: Psalms, Job and Proverbs. And these, as you will see, employ neither meter nor rhyme in the manner of the Arabs, but are only like *rajaz*²⁹ compositions (K 24b).

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

Ibn Ezra's desire to identify the Bible's poetic features must be seen within his overall aesthetic philosophy. His outlook informed by Greek and Arabic thought, Ibn Ezra appreciated the powerful effects of art, in all of its manifestations, on the human mind and emotions. Ibn Ezra discusses the capacity of music to elevate man's soul, which he views as the reason for its central role in the Temple service and prophecy.³² Citing "ancient philosophers," he describes how it "stir[s]

up the noble forces of the soul" by awakening man's unique aesthetic sensibilities, which were implanted in his nature "when God . . . attached the individual souls to animals' bodies." Music, Ibn Ezra explains, "corresponds to [man's] four temperaments and harmonize[s] their differences;" he thus analyzes how each musical tone produces a distinct spiritual effect in the listener.³³ Ibn Ezra describes the effects of poetry on man's spirit in similar terms. Stimulating his aesthetic sense, poetry captivates man's soul and becomes indelibly absorbed into his heart like "engraving in a stone." Its melodic rhythm, uniform meter, clever sound-plays, noble diction, beautiful imagery, and other ornaments all cause poetry to be "most strongly fastened to the ears and most closely attached to [man's] nature" (K 14b-15a).³⁴ Ibn Ezra thus believed that the Bible's poetic language stirs man's aesthetic sense and fastens God's word to his soul, much like the Temple music inspired worshippers and enhanced their divine service.³⁵

CRITICISM OF IBN EZRA'S ANALYSIS

Although Ibn Ezra argues that the Bible manifests beauty measurable by the standards of Arabic poetics, his conclusions are troubling. The Bible's ornaments are not quite genuine *badi'* and its poetry resembles only *rajaz*, the least elegant Arabic poetic form. Ibn Ezra's Arabic yardstick indeed demonstrates that the Bible is not "devoid of" elegance, but also implies the superiority of Arabic poetics. In fact, he cites a biblical verse supposedly to prove that the Arabs are more gifted than any other nation in literary expression.³⁶ Accordingly, he prefers Arabic poetic conventions when they conflict with biblical ones and recommends their adoption by Hebrew poets. Regarding certain types of biblical alliteration avoided in Arabic poetry, for example, he writes: "What Scripture permits is permitted; however, inasmuch as we follow the Arabs especially closely in poetry, it is necessary for us to follow them to the degree that we can" (K 86b). Evidently, Ibn Ezra is content to claim that the Bible manifests a measure of poetic artistry, which in fact is surpassed by Arabic poetry.

But other options were available. Ibn Ezra cites an opinion that Solomon actually composed poems, now lost, in the higher Arabic *qaṣīda* form. The author of this view, who has been identified as Isaac Ibn Ghiyāth, Ibn Ezra's teacher,³⁷ cited I Kgs 5:12, ". . . his *šīr* was one thousand and five," for support, assuming that the biblical Hebrew term, *šīr*, is equivalent to Arabic *šī'r*. But Ibn Ezra, who rejects this comparison,³⁸ is skeptical that Solomon's lost works differed from other biblical "poetry," which at best resembles *rajaz* (K 25a). Theoretically, Ibn Ezra could have adopted the view of his contemporary, Judah Halevi, who maintains that biblical style is superior to

Arabic, and laments the Hebrew poets' adoption of Arabic conventions (*Kuzari* II:74,78).³⁹ Biblical poets, he argues, "aspired to a more excellent and useful quality" (*Kuzari* II:70), implying that they intentionally avoided the Arabic model.⁴⁰ Samuel Ibn Tibbon (1160-1230), the translator of Maimonides' works and a biblical commentator in his own right, makes this point explicitly: "We must assume that the poems of [David and Solomon] were superior to [Arabic style Hebrew] poems produced nowadays, for they were not limited [poetically] and could have easily and skillfully included in the[ir] poems whichever matters they wished to put in them."⁴¹ But since neither author matches this vague claim with a detailed study, Ibn Ezra, committed to scientific literary analysis, could not accept it. He adopted Arabic poetics as a fixed coordinate system upon which to plot the Bible's literary artistry.⁴²

THE ZOHAR'S CRITICISM

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

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

Although Ibn Ezra does not equate the Torah with "mere tales and secular matters," he does use the same tools to analyze both; and his advice that poets should embrace Arabic rather than biblical poetics implies that "we now could make a Torah with secular matters, more beautiful than all [the Scriptures]." The *Zohar* seizes this theological weak link to argue that secular standards inevitably detract from the lofty status of the Torah, which is *sui generis*, completely unlike human literature. Although the *Zohar's* author proves his point by citing the Torah's supposed literary inferiority, his objection is no doubt more fundamental. He seems to reject the application of secular aesthetic standards to the Bible in principle, even if they would prove

the Torah's aesthetic *superiority* (as Judah Halevi and Samuel Ibn Tibbon may have believed). The literary approach simply entails a category mistake; just as one would not analyze the color of a poem, literary categories, indeed the very issue of aesthetic beauty, are simply irrelevant in biblical study.⁴⁵

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

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

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

3. Exegetical Manifestations

We can now delineate two traditions on viewing the "Bible as literature." A definite anti-literary attitude appears in the *Zohar*, which upholds Dunash's position and vehemently rejects the secular yardstick. The *Zohar's* popularity in Christian Spain a few generations after Moses Ibn Ezra's death might help explain why his *Kitāb* was never translated into Hebrew in medieval times. The demand for such a translation in Christian Spain, where Jews no longer read Arabic, would have been sharply diminished by the *Zohar's* clear condemna-

tion of his literary project.⁵² But Jews in Muslim lands embraced Arabic literary achievements and proudly attributed to the Bible the aesthetic beauty of the greatest human literature.⁵³ Sa'adia, introducing the notion of *zahot* in biblical exegesis, encouraged this perspective, and his view, rather than that of Dunash, guided the Spanish *pesbat* tradition. Abraham Ibn Ezra records this debate and sides unequivocally with Sa'adia;⁵⁴ his older contemporary, Moses Ibn Ezra, delineates the principles of *zahot* in his *Kitāb*,⁵⁵ and Maimonides and Joseph Ibn 'Aknin employ this concept in their study of biblical allegory. As we shall see, the literary approach enabled the Spanish *pesbat* tradition to revolutionize biblical exegesis.

SEPARATING STYLE FROM CONTENT

Philosophers since Plato have accused poets of deceit because they celebrate imagination rather than reality, painting a fantastic, "untrue" world. This polemic passed into the medieval tradition in the maxim "the best of poetry is its most false" (K 62a).⁵⁶ The poets actually embraced this motto, admiring creative imagery and hyperbole. As Moses Ibn Ezra explains, the "most false," most beautiful poem is decorated elaborately with metaphors and other ornaments, without which it "would not be a poem" (K 62a). But this value-system rankled medieval philosophers, who regarded poetry as trivial and fraudulent. Moses Ibn Ezra, both poet and philosopher, was especially plagued by this conflict since he regarded the Bible, the word of God and true by definition, as poetry, which is false by definition. To resolve this conflict, he invokes the basic principle of Arabic theory that elegant literature consists of two separable components: (1) an idea (2) adorned by beautiful, poetic language. The ornaments decorate ideas that could be expressed more precisely and directly, albeit less poetically, in plain, unadorned language.⁵⁷ Ibn Ezra expresses this clearly in connection with metaphor, the most basic ornament: "Although literal language is fundamentally more reliable . . . a composition, when . . . clothed in metaphor . . . becomes beautiful" (K 118b). The "falsehood" of poetry thus relates only to its poetic "garb," an artistic exterior that contains a true, meaningful content, both in the Bible and in good poetry (K 62b). Regarding the Bible's content, its noble ideas, the opposite maxim pertains: "the best of a composition is its most true" (K 62a).

While the *Kitāb* teaches how to adorn plain truth in "false" ornaments, the literary theory it imparts suggests the opposite for interpreting poetry: its "false" adornments must be removed to uncover the essential, true idea. This exegetical byproduct is developed at length in another work by Moses Ibn Ezra, *Maqālat al-Ḥadīqa fi*

Ma'ni al-Majāz wa-l-Ḥaqīqa (*The Treatise of the Garden on Metaphor and Literal Language*).⁵⁸ In that work, he constructs a system of philosophical exegesis by separating two types of biblical language: *ḥaqīqa* (lit. "truth"; Heb. *emet*), i.e., literal language, and *majāz* (lit. "metaphor"; Heb. *ha'avarah*), i.e., figurative language, such as metaphor, simile and hyperbole.⁵⁹ Ibn Ezra "translates" the Bible's *majāz* into *ḥaqīqa* by removing its figures of speech which are "false" by definition and employed merely for decoration. The *majāz-ḥaqīqa* dichotomy, used in Qur'anic exegesis since the eighth century and applied to the Bible by Sa'adia Gaon in the tenth, is certainly not original to Ibn Ezra.⁶⁰ But it acquires special meaning within the matrix of his literary theory: corresponding to the range of *badi'* in the *Kitāb*, the concept of *majāz* in the *Maqālat* represents the Bible's "most false" exterior which must be removed to reveal its "most true" essence, its *ḥaqīqa*.

ANTHROPOMORPHISM

The *majāz-ḥaqīqa* dichotomy provided a powerful tool for solving the problem of biblical anthropomorphism, i.e., the description of God in human terms. The Spanish exegetes, believing axiomatically in God's incorporeality, were troubled by verses like "The eyes of the Lord turn to the righteous and His ears to their prayers" (Ps 34:16-17). Sa'adia argues that this is simply figurative language, i.e., *majāz*, and actually refers to God's providence.⁶¹ Applying this method to similar passages, he demonstrates that the Bible typically uses anthropomorphism to portray God's abstract qualities. This principle guided the Spanish *pesbat* tradition.⁶² Moses Ibn Ezra, in his *Maqālat*, creates an extensive "dictionary" of anthropomorphic *majāz* usages for which he provides literal *ḥaqīqa* equivalents; and this model was adopted by Maimonides, who created a similar dictionary in his *Guide*.⁶³ The "definitions" in these dictionaries were applied to the biblical text in the commentaries of Abraham Ibn Ezra and Radak.⁶⁴

Parts of *Maqālat al-Ḥadīqa* were translated into Hebrew as *'Arugat ha-Bosem* in twelfth century Provence for the benefit of Jews in Christian lands, who no longer read Arabic but retained interest in philosophical biblical exegesis.⁶⁵ In *'Arugat ha-Bosem*, the procedure of rendering anthropomorphic *majāz* into *ḥaqīqa* is portrayed as a mirror image of poetic metaphor as described in the *Kitāb*.⁶⁶ In connection with biblical descriptions of God, we read:

The true idea that is intended is too wondrous and exalted to be understood precisely. The wise man must [therefore] divest the true ideas of their 'garb of?' gross figurativeness⁶⁷ and [re]clothe them in

pleasant garb,⁶⁸ so that he will reach through them the intended idea, to the extent of human capacity to comprehend.⁶⁹

This passage implies that ideas are "dressed" by language, which may be ornate or simple. The *Kitāb* describes how poetry is created by adorning an idea with ornate, metaphorical "garb"; the corollary here describes how this "garb" must be "stripped away" to reveal the original idea and dress it in "simpler clothing," i.e., more accurate, though less poetic, literal language.⁷⁰

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

The Torah tends to speak [about God] in human language . . . [e.g.] "the eyes of God," "the ears of God". . . [But these are] metaphors to educate people, [by causing them] to picture Him in human form, although this is not accurate [lit. "though they are far from Him"]. This is so that the uneducated should understand and comprehend God; and this will not harm the wise since they comprehend the truth of the matter; they remove the husk and eat the fruit.⁷¹

Joseph Kimhi, like *'Arugat ha-Bosem*, explains that the wise "comprehend the truth" by "remov[ing] the husk and eat[ing] the fruit." But he also appreciates the tension between the false exterior and true inner meaning of such language. In other words, he explains why the "husk" is used to begin with. In a manner reminiscent of the maxim, "the best of poetry is its most false," he argues that Scripture speaks of God in human terms so that people will "picture Him in human form." This inaccuracy is necessary since the uneducated masses cannot believe in, much less fear, a completely abstract divine Being.⁷² The vivid picture, more than any abstract philosophical description, will capture their imagination, inspire their thoughts, and motivate them to worship God.⁷³

DRAMATIZATION

The literary aspect of Moses ibn Ezra's style-content dichotomy is echoed by Radak a century later in Provence in a revealing comment about the nature of prophecy. In the episode of a vision of the prophet Micaiah (I Kgs 22:19-22), King Ahab seeks advice from his four hundred prophets, led by Zedekiah ben Kenaanah, who predict success in the campaign against Aram, all saying: "Go up [to battle]

and the Lord will deliver [them] to his majesty!" (I Kgs 22:6). Micaiah, God's true prophet, denounces this message as false and foretells Ahab's defeat. To persuade Ahab, Micaiah depicts "the Lord seated upon His throne, with all the host of heaven . . . to his right and left . . . [asking] 'Who will entice Ahab. . . ?'" whereupon a spirit comes forward, saying: "I will entice him . . . and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets," to which God answers: "Go out and do it!" The other prophets were inspired by this spirit, identified in the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 89a) as Naboth, who was murdered by Ahab and now sought revenge. The Talmud classifies Ahab's prophets as "false prophets," defined in the Mishnah (*Sanhedrin* XI:5) as "one who prophesies what he did not hear and what was not told to him." But this creates a dilemma: if their message actually was sent from heaven, why are these "prophets" guilty of false prophecy? Speaking of Zedekiah ben Kenaanah, the Talmud asks: "What could he have done, the spirit of Naboth misled him!"

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

Radak on I Kgs 22:20 advocates a new approach to Micaiah's vision that neatly resolves the Talmud's dilemma while preserving the simple reading of the mishnaic definition. Postulating that prophecy sent by God is true by definition, he argues that the four hundred were false prophets because they received nothing from heaven; they "prophesied what they did not hear and what was not told to them." Radak, of course, recognizes that he must account for Micaiah's vision, which explicitly contradicts this claim. Alluding to the Talmud's dilemma, he prefaces his commentary by noting that "these things are a great quandary for those who understand them literally," and then offers a new approach, that the scene of God sending the "lying spirit" never occurred in reality but is merely a poetic device:

These are poetic words of rhetoric (*divrei melizab*); Micaiah said them as a way of presenting [God's] words; not that Micaiah saw these things, nor did he hear them.⁷⁵

To indicate that this scene is "false," i.e., Micaiah's fabrication, Radak calls it *melizab*, a technical medieval Hebrew term for poetry and rhetoric which evokes the medieval maxim, "the best of poetry is its most false."⁷⁶

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

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

mercy.⁸¹ But Radak classifies this scene as a *mashal*, indicating that Jeremiah conceived it to illuminate the horizon of despondent, disillusioned exiles, enabling them to envision God's continued protection.⁸²

Radak's comments suggest that the prophet does not simply relate the words he hears from God verbatim; he takes the idea communicated by God and reformulates it, using *mashal* and *melizab*. Moses Ibn Ezra says this explicitly: "A prophet must convey his message with words that make it penetrate the mind [of his audience], though these might be different than the words that he heard" (K 77b).⁸³ Both authors thus regard the prophet as a poet, since he must "clothe" the ideas he receives from God in rhetorical devices. If "the best of poetry is its most false," the best of prophecy illustrates and dramatizes to ensure that it penetrates the hearts of callous and uninterested listeners. Moses Ibn Ezra thus argues that dramatic hyperbole, though false by definition, is essential to the mission of the prophets,⁸⁴ "and if not for it, the[ir] objective would not be accomplished" (K 137b).⁸⁵

POETIC REPETITION

Invoking the style-content dichotomy, the Spanish *pesbat* tradition devised a revolutionary approach to the biblical tendency to repeat the same idea in similar words. Labeled "an idea repeated in different words" (*kefel 'inyan be-milim shonot*) in the medieval tradition, or "synonymous parallelism" by modern scholars, this is perhaps the most characteristic feature of biblical poetic style. Employed regularly in biblical sections Moses Ibn Ezra classifies as poetic, it creates an "echo," a steady rhythm, if not a strict meter. This style naturally caught Ibn Ezra's attention,⁸⁶ but it was already analyzed a century earlier by Jonah Ibn Janah (Spain, 985-1040), one of the greatest Hebrew linguists, who discussed its exegetical implications:

That which is added for emphasis and elegance [includes] "Who has *made* and *done*?" (Isa 41:4); there is no meaning element [implied] in "and he made" beyond that which is in "he has done"; but this is [simply] literary elegance and artistry. Similarly, "I have *created*, *fashioned* and *made* him" (Isa 43:7); there is no [new] meaning [implied] in "fashioned" and "made" that is not already [implied] in "created" . . . And you must treat all similar examples analogously.⁸⁷

To illustrate his principle, Ibn Janah partitions two verses from Isaiah, one into two, the other into three, synonymous phrases, "a," "b," (and "c"):

a.) Who has *made* b.) and *done*?

a.) I have *created* b.) *fashioned* c.) and *made* him.

Ibn Janah does not attempt to explain what is added by phrase "b" (and "c"). Instead, he identifies the shared sense of "a," "b," (and "c") which, in his view, completely represents their meaning. This method diverges significantly from rabbinic exegesis, which is illustrated by an alternative midrashic reading of Isa 43:7 cited by Moses Ibn Ezra. According to that reading, "created" refers specifically to conception, "fashioned" to formation of limbs and veins, and "made" to growth of the skin. Siding with Ibn Janah, Ibn Ezra calls this "overly minute analysis" (K 87a). In favor of the midrashic approach, however, one might ask: if nothing is added by phrases "b" and "c," why are they used at all? Anticipating this objection, Ibn Janah continues: "And if someone asks . . . Would not brevity be more appropriate? We would tell him that in the art of rhetoric, elaboration is more fitting, artistic and elegant." Ibn Janah here and in the passage cited above reveals the literary foundation of his rule by invoking the Arabic terms for literary elegance and artistry, *faṣāḥa* and *balāgha*.⁸⁸ Repetition is employed in the Bible purely for poetic reasons; the added phrases, "b" and "c" are merely "ornamentation" for an idea adequately expressed by "a." In light of the sharp style-content dichotomy, this implies that all specific connotations of "a," "b," and "c" beyond their shared meaning element must be "stripped away," since they are "matters that have no interpretation, and were not [written] to be interpreted," to borrow Maimonides' expression (cited above, p. 18).

Ibn Janah's principle became a hallmark of the Spanish *pesbat* tradition. Abraham Ibn Ezra, labeling synonymous repetition *zāḥot*, used it to avoid (sometimes forced) rabbinic distinctions between synonymous phrases.⁸⁹ Radak applied Ibn Janah's rule, for which he coined the formula "an idea repeated in different words," even more systematically, often citing the alternative midrashic analysis it obviates.⁹⁰ Ibn Ezra and Radak similarly identify verbatim repetition as a biblical poetic technique. For example, on Gen 23:1, Radak observes the redundant words *שנים . . . שנה* in the sum of Sarah's age, *מאה שנה* ("one hundred years and twenty years and seven years"). Following Rashi, he mentions the midrashic explanation that "at age one hundred she was like a woman of twenty with regard to sin, and at age twenty like a woman of seven with regard to beauty."⁹¹ But Radak cites similar biblical verses to support an alternative advanced by Abraham Ibn Ezra: "they say this is [simply] literary elegance (*zāḥot*) in Hebrew."⁹²

The literary approach to biblical repetition appears later in the

Spanish *pesbat* tradition in the writings of Nahmanides (1194-1274). Living in Christian Spain, he was no longer exposed to Arabic poetics; yet the literary principles of his Spanish predecessors were an integral part of his exegetical heritage, and sometimes caused him to reject midrashic readings. On Ex 4:9, *והיו הנחש אשר תקח מן הניר והיו לדם ביבשת* ("And the waters you take from the Nile shall become blood on the dry land"), for example, he observes that Rashi, citing the Midrash, derives meaning from the extra word *והיו*.⁹³ But Nahmanides argues that this is unnecessary:

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

The "linguists" referred to here are Ibn Janah and Radak, who demonstrate that Scripture typically repeats words for rhetorical or stylistic purposes, rather than to teach new information.⁹⁴ Applying their principles, Nahmanides argues that the second *והיו* is used exclusively for stylistic purposes and could have been omitted without changing the meaning of the verse.⁹⁵

STRUCTURAL REPETITION

Beyond applying principles of his predecessors, Nahmanides contributed his own literary insights to the Spanish *pesbat* tradition. Earlier exegetes treat the Pentateuch as one continuous work; but Nahmanides, manifesting keen sensitivity to literary structure, argues that each of its five books can stand alone as a distinct unit, unique in theme and independent in design.⁹⁶ This furnishes him with an original, though natural, resolution for a redundancy that troubled Rashi on Ex 1:1-4, namely why Scripture repeats the names of Jacob's sons who came to Egypt, information already recorded in Genesis 46. Citing the Midrash, Rashi explains that the repetition shows God's love for Israel, which prompts Him to repeat their names at every possible opportunity. Nahmanides, however, while affirming the validity of this concept, argues that it need not be invoked to explain the redundancy. Defining Exodus as the "Book of Exile and Redemption," he maintains, instead, that the brief review of the roots of the exile is necessary simply for the sake of literary coherence. Although this information already appeared in Genesis as part of the story of the patriarchs, here it provides the setting for the exile and unfolding redemption, the theme of Exodus.⁹⁷

4. The Anti-Literary Response

RABBINIC "OMNISIGNIFICANCE"

Having seen the exegetical implications of the literary approach, we can now summarize the ways in which the Spanish tradition sets its course apart from rabbinic exegesis. The well-defined Arabic concepts of literary dramatization and embellishment adopted by the Spanish exegetes were unknown to the Rabbis, who did not apply the style-content dichotomy. As we have seen, the Rabbis do not regard Micaiah's vision of the "lying spirit," or Jeremiah's portrait of Rachel, as a literary fabrication. Nor do they treat biblical anthropomorphism as a "false" exterior to be "stripped away."⁹⁸ By now it should be apparent that Maimonides' tendency to disregard ("strip away") allegorical details employed for poetic enhancement is simply another manifestation of the style-content dichotomy. But the Rabbis reject Maimonides' assumption that such details "have no interpretation." Regularly expounding every word, even every letter of Scripture, they believe instead that all biblical details are meaningful, a doctrine referred to by James Kugel as "omnisignificance."⁹⁹ This belief also prevents the Rabbis from accepting Ibn Janah's principle that synonymous and repeated language could have been omitted without any loss of meaning. Instead, the Rabbis normally attempt to differentiate between synonymous phrases, and even words repeated verbatim, assigning a specific meaning to each and every word in Scripture.¹⁰⁰

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

In the poetry of the prophets, there is no husk devoid of interior, body without soul, clothing without a wearer,¹⁰¹ language devoid of a lofty idea, a saying within which does not dwell wisdom, for the spirit of the living God is in all the words of the living God.¹⁰²

Malbim argues that style cannot be divorced from content; no prophetic word can be attributed purely to stylistic embellishment and

"stripped away." His justification seems like a tautology: "for the spirit of the living God is in the midst of all the words of the living God." The key word here is *all*: the "spirit of the living God," i.e., a divine message, is contained in *every single one* of the "the living God's words," whereas the Spanish exegetes, according to the Malbim, reduce the Bible's divine character, believing that only *some* words convey meaning, while others "have no interpretation." This reveals Malbim's motivation, which echoes the objections by Dunash and the *Zohar*. Those authors reject, in principle, the application of aesthetic standards to the Bible; Malbim applies similar reasoning to attack the exegetical implications of the literary approach. Even if the best of human poetry "is its most false," it is sacrilegious in his view to assume that the word of God contains "false" or even meaningless language, which can be "stripped away."¹⁰³

"THE TORAH SPEAKS AS HUMAN BEINGS DO"

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

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

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

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

The Talmud then returns to the doubled verb: "If so, what does Scripture teach [with] העניק תעניק? The Torah speaks as human beings do."

R. El'azar is criticized for his failure to interpret the word העניק. The Talmud normally solves this type of problem without questioning the axiom of omnisignificance by assigning some other meaning to the added word. But R. El'azar apparently rejects this axiom, asserting that "The Torah speaks as human beings do," and adds words merely for rhetorical effect, emphasis, or other purposes, just as human beings do;¹⁰⁵ hence one need not derive additional laws from or attribute specific meaning to every single word of the Torah. Malbim advocates the view of the talmudic questioner, who assumes that no word of the Torah is "devoid of a lofty idea." But the Spanish *pesbat* tradition follows R. El'azar's view that the meaning of העניק תעניק would have been adequately expressed by the word תעניק alone.¹⁰⁶

Beyond providing a precedent for Ibn Janah, this talmudic debate exposes the pivotal point that divides the Spanish *pesbat* tradition from midrashic exegesis. If the Torah indeed "speaks as human beings do," it must be analyzed according to linguistic methods applied to ordinary human speech. The opposing position, that "the Torah does not speak as human beings do" (*lo diberah Torah ki-leshon benei adam*), considers these methods improper for God's word, which is unlike human language. On this view, the Torah is a divine "code" accessible only through its midrashic keys.¹⁰⁷ The Rabbis thus replaced ordinary linguistic analysis with unique hermeneutic rules (*midot she-ba-Torah nidreshet bahen*) which direct talmudic and midrashic biblical exegesis.¹⁰⁸

But the Spanish tradition develops the belief that human linguistic analysis accurately yields the Torah's message.¹⁰⁹ Exposed to extensive Arabic studies of language and literature, this school discerned various types of "human language," and instead of analyzing Scripture simply as ordinary speech, regarded it as artistic, literary language. Perhaps this is why these exegetes replaced the talmudic maxim with literary terms like *zohot* and *melizab*. In any case, this novel conception of "human language" opened up new exegetical avenues; instead of attributing redundancy to the wastefulness of ordinary speech, this tradition could view it as a poetic technique employed deliberately to produce an aesthetic effect. If secular allegories are enhanced by extra details, Scripture is as well; and like secular poetry, Scripture employs dramatization and "false" imagery for vividness and impact.

Comparison with the Northern French *pesbat* school of Rashi (1040-1105) and his grandson, Rashbam (1080-1150), highlights the unique Spanish perspective. Rashi manifests an incipient, though hesitant, literary approach. He occasionally explains extra words in terms of literary design,¹¹⁰ but frequently adopts midrashic readings, indicat-

ing acceptance of "omnisignificance."¹¹¹ Rashbam's attitude is more decisive: systematically avoiding midrashic readings, he regularly and insightfully identifies biblical stylistic tendencies to explain otherwise redundant phrases.¹¹² But lacking the literary theory and terminology of the Spanish tradition, even Rashbam could not view, much less describe, the Bible's style in poetic terms. Whereas Moses Ibn Ezra and Jonah Ibn Janah identified biblical stylistic patterns by searching for the *badi'* and *fasāha* in Scripture, Rashi and Rashbam discerned them empirically and intuitively. The French *pesbat* method interprets Scripture as if it were ordinary, though well structured, human speech; but the Spanish *pesbat* tradition interprets it as "the best of poetry."

To reconcile the conflicting literary and "omnisignificant" approaches, a compromise can be considered, which sometimes arises in modern traditional circles. In the Prophets and Writings (*Nevi'im u-Ketuvim*), some words can be viewed merely as literary ornamentation, whereas the Pentateuch (*Torah*) must be treated as an omnisignificant code that requires interpretation of every minute detail.¹¹³ This distinction is attractive because it affirms the primacy of the rabbinic hermeneutic rules applied throughout the Talmud, which evidently assume the Torah's omnisignificance.¹¹⁴ In addition, the uniquely divine authorship of the Torah, which consists of the exact words of God Himself, invites the presumption of omnisignificance. The Prophets and Writings, on the other hand, formulated by humans based on prophecy (*nevu'ab*) or divine inspiration (*ruah ha-kodesh*),¹¹⁵ are more readily perceived as manifesting literary features.

Yet, this compromise position does not actually appear among the exegetes we have seen in the debate between the literary and anti-literary approaches. Malbim argues that all of Scripture is omnisignificant, whether formulated by God Himself or by people through divine inspiration.¹¹⁶ Analogously, Ibn Janah, Moses Ibn Ezra, Abraham Ibn Ezra, Maimonides, Radak and Nahmanides all consistently employ their literary principles in the Pentateuch, just as in the Prophets and Writings.¹¹⁷ Nor is this perspective limited to the Spanish *pesbat* tradition. To begin with, the rule of *diberah Torah ki-leshon benei adam*, where it appears in the Talmud, is applied *specifically* to the Pentateuch. And linguistic convention, rather than omnisignificance, is invoked by Rashbam (and occasionally by Rashi) to treat redundancies in the Pentateuch. While they unequivocally accepted all *halakhot* derived in rabbinic literature through the hermeneutic rules, the medieval exegetes maintained that the *pesbat* of the Pentateuch must be determined using another exegetical method.¹¹⁸

THE ZOHAR'S CRITICISM REVISITED

Identifying in Scripture known genres and qualities of human literature, the Spanish literary approach suggests that the Torah speaks in a human voice because it is written for human beings. Like the best human literature, Scripture addresses man's aesthetic sensibilities and, aiming for poetic beauty, "dresses" its ideas in poetic "garb." For what type of aesthetic excellence did biblical authors aim?¹¹⁹ The principle *diberah Torah ki-leshon benei adam* implies that Scripture, intended to inspire human beings, adheres to measurable human artistic standards, rather than some mysterious "divine" artistic standard. Moses Ibn Ezra assumed that biblical poetics adheres to a universal human sense of literary artistry and could be defined through the prism of Arabic poetics. Analogously, it is reasonable to assume that the Temple music was aesthetically pleasing to human listeners; and on this basis Sa'adia and Moses Ibn Ezra identify its instruments and melodies with those regarded beautiful according to the musical theory of their days.¹²⁰

We can now return to the *Zohar's* criticism: How can we apply secular literary standards to the Bible if they imply its artistic inferiority? The solution rests in the medieval style-content dichotomy. Moses Ibn Ezra, who admits that the Bible's artistic style is surpassed in Arabic literature, would argue that its divine content is unique and unsurpassed.¹²¹ In other words, even he must consider the Bible's artistic garb secondary, though indispensable. This relationship can be illustrated by a common modern analogy. A person who is not judged primarily on appearance, a Rabbi, for example, will still wear a respectable suit to conform with accepted norms of proper attire. Yet we would not expect him to win a "best dressed" contest since his attire, while not trivial, is secondary. Moses Ibn Ezra sees the Torah's literary attire in similar terms. God's word, given to mankind, must be elegant and compare respectably in artistic terms with other literary works, although its ultimate worth must be judged in a completely different arena.¹²²

The author of the *Zohar* evidently dismissed this response, probably because he would reject Moses Ibn Ezra's analysis even if it had shown the Bible's literary superiority. In other words, the *Zohar* disavows the whole idea of *diberah Torah ki-leshon benei adam*. Scripture, being the word of God, would not employ human literary conventions, no matter how beautiful. We can now define the essential debate between the *Zohar* and Moses Ibn Ezra most clearly: the *Zohar*, representing the anti-literary approach, views the Bible in light of its divine source, while the Spanish literary tradition views it in terms of its human audience. To be sure, the anti-literary approach

has a certain appeal: it regards the Bible's very language and style as intrinsically divine; like an angel, even like God Himself, it is a completely holy, other-worldly entity. But the Spanish tradition viewed Scripture as a human-like document, holy by virtue of its divine *content*, despite its use of secular genres.¹²³ Abraham Ibn Ezra writes that "words are like a body, and the[ir] content like the soul" (longer commentary on Ex 20:1). The Torah, a divine essence encased in earthly form, thus mirrors the human situation; it challenges man to discover the holy within the mundane.

5. Modern Literary Analysis

The modern relevance of the Spanish tradition emerges when we compare it with current literary approaches to the Bible based on modern theories. This comparison is interesting because literary theories that have emerged since the advent of "New Criticism" in this century reject the principles of Arabic poetics. In the words of Cleanth Brooks, a seminal literary critic, the modern theories share "a profound distrust of the old dualism of form and content, and a real sense of the failure of an ornamentalist rhetoric."¹²⁴ In this view, imagery, alliteration and other "poetic devices" cannot be "stripped away" to get at a poem's meaning; they all contribute to its "organic whole" and together create the poem. The New Critics devised methods of "close reading" specifically to capture the subtle connotations of a literary creation in its own individual language and form. The Spanish exegetes saw language as "clothing" that could be made more or less ornate without altering its content; but Meir Weiss, a modern proponent of "close reading" of Scripture, writes:

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

This echoes Malbim's critique of the Spanish *pesbat* tradition; but Weiss is actually relying on the principles of New Criticism, which regards paraphrase as literary "heresy."¹²⁶

Advocates of the modern literary approach, ever sensitive to nuances of language, tone and even sound, often suggest readings that resemble those found in the anti-literary tradition. The Spanish *pesbat* exegetes, regarding diction as arbitrary, viewed word-plays merely as

literary artistry; but both Midrash and modern literary studies carefully analyze biblical word choices for subtle connotations.¹²⁷ M. Weiss, based on New Critical theory, justifies his approach in the following way:

Any thought that has been expressed in a certain manner can be realized only through these very words in their given order, rhythm, sound pattern and associative context—this order and no other.¹²⁸

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

In prophetic poetry there are no . . . words or verbs placed by chance. . . . [This is true] to the point that all the words . . . that comprise every phrase, not only are they necessary for that phrase, but indeed it would not have been possible for the divine poet to use another word in its place; for all of the words of divine poetry are weighed in the scales of wisdom and understanding.¹²⁹

This principle provides the basis for Malbim's midrashic approach to synonymous repetition. Not surprisingly, modern literary scholars eschew Ibn Janah's view of this feature as a meaningless stylistic device and instead analyze the connotations of the "echo" effect it creates.¹³⁰

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

By literary analysis [of Bible] I mean the manifold varieties of minutely discriminating attention to the artful use of language, to the shifting play of ideas, conventions, tone, sound, imagery, syntax . . . and much else; the kind of disciplined attention . . . which through a whole spectrum of critical approaches has illuminated, for example, the poetry of Dante, the plays of Shakespeare, the novels of Tolstoy.¹³¹

The modern literary approach, like its medieval counterpart, adopts the principle *diberah Torah ki-leshon benei adam*.¹³²

6. Conclusion

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

In modern times, the debate takes a new turn: somewhat paradoxically, the modern literary approach to Scripture, applying the ideological axiom of the Spanish *peshat* tradition, yields "close reading," which amounts to the opposite exegetical result. The Spanish tradition advocates a "literary" approach to the Bible; but like other human disciplines, literary criticism evolved over the centuries to the point that its methods were completely transformed. This finds parallels in other secular fields applied to Torah. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, for example, following Maimonides, uses secular philosophy to analyze the conceptual underpinnings of the halakhic system; the two can thus be said to share a central ideological position. Yet their conclusions dramatically diverge because modern philosophy runs a different course than the Aristotelian system of Maimonides. If we imagine the evolution of literary criticism as a multi-story building, we can say that the modern and medieval literary approaches view Scripture from different floors of the same building. Coincidentally,

the panorama visible from the "modern" floor resembles that of rabbinic exegesis from an adjacent building, since both reject the style-content dichotomy, insisting instead on "close reading."¹³³ This raises an interesting historical question: how would Maimonides, Moses Ibn Ezra or Radak approach biblical literature if they lived today? Would they still advocate the style-content dichotomy, or would they adopt modern theories and become more sympathetic to midrashic exegesis? We cannot answer this question for the medieval exegetes, but it highlights our unique perspective as modern readers, enabling us to bridge the gap between the literary and midrashic traditions.¹³⁴

NOTES

Research for this essay was done under a Study Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, which I received in the Summer of 1995. I gratefully acknowledge this support. From its inception as an array of ideas drawn from various Jewish and secular disciplines, this essay inspired many conversations with teachers, colleagues and students of mine. Each approached the topic from a different perspective, providing insights and questions that prompted me to clarify and develop the implications of my analysis as it relates to his or her specific area of interest. This diversity, which attests to the richness of the *Torah u-Madda* tradition, increased the breadth and depth of what crystallized as the final product. In particular, I would like to thank those who read the manuscript critically: Rabbi Yaakov Neuburger, whose profound understanding of rabbinic literature and Jewish thought helped place the Spanish *pesbat* method within the framework of the halakhic tradition; Dr. Will Lee, who first introduced me to literary theory and has since been available to me for further consultation; my colleague, Dr. Moshe Sokolow, who shared with me his expertise in biblical exegesis and Arabic; my good friends, Rabbis Ari Berman and Aaron Cohen, whose grasp of the complexities of *Torah u-Madda* helped sharpen the focus of my arguments; my father-in-law, Mr. Joseph Rapaport, one of my most ardent critics, whose comments increased the relevance of this essay for the contemporary Orthodox reader; my editor, Rabbi Dr. Jacob J. Schacter, who provided valuable stylistic and substantive suggestions; and, last but not least, my students, Mrs. Rebecca Allen, Mrs. Shifra Schapiro, Ms. Toby Rotenstein, Ms. Judith Rapaport (also my sister-in-law) and Mr. Daniel Cukor, who helped make this essay more readable, and whose love for learning will always be an inspiration to me.

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

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

4. *יטרוך לפרש ענינים אין פירוש להם, ולא הוציא בו לפרשם.* To be sure, ever. Maimonides agrees that some biblical allegories contain only meaningful details, in which case, "every word in the allegory has meaning" (*ibid.*). But he argues that this approach, standard in rabbinic exegesis, is legitimate only with respect to a minority of biblical allegories, saying: "Normally, you must seek only the general idea, for that is what is intended" (*ibid.*). See, however, *Mishnah 'Im Perush Rabbenu Moshe Ben Maimon: Seder Nezikin*, J. Kafih, trans. (Jerusalem, 1965), 143-44, for what would appear to be a different exegetical approach. It is true that the Mishnah Commentary was written much earlier than the *Guide*, which might suggest that Maimonides' views simply changed over the course of his lifetime. But a careful reading reveals that these two sources can be otherwise reconciled to reflect a consistent viewpoint. I intend to address this issue in a forthcoming article devoted to Maimonides' exegetical methodology.
5. This resembles Maimonides' methodology for ascertaining *ta'amei ha-mizvot* (the rationale for the laws of the Torah) in *Guide* III:26. Positing that the details of many *mizvot* are necessarily arbitrary, he argues that a rationale often can be determined only in a general sense, by viewing a given *mizvot* in its entirety, without considering all of its details. See I. Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides* (New Haven, 1980), 398-400.
6. Maimonides himself does not discuss this case; but his method is applied, e.g., by *Mezudat David*, *ad. loc.*
7. *ליטת המשל וסדר הדברים בו*. Although the Hebrew can be construed differently ("to embellish the allegory and the arrangement of its elements," taking *סדר הדברים בו* as another object of the verb *ליטת*), Maimonides' Arabic, *لتوضيح الالتمال وتوحيده*, *اللقول فيه* (see above, n. 3; lit. "for embellishment of the allegory and [for] arrangement of the words in it") supports our translation, which presents "arrangement . . ." as a distinct function. Compare S. Pines' English translation, "... to embellish the parable and to render it more coherent" (*The Guide of the Perplexed: Moses Maimonides* [Chicago, 1963], I:12).
8. Although it is common in modern traditional circles (see below, p. 37) to admit this approach only in the Prophets and Writings (*Nei'im u-Ketuvim*) but not in the Pentateuch (*Torah*), Maimonides evidently considered it applicable throughout Scripture and did not exclude the Pentateuch. See Yom-Tov ibn al-Ashbilli (Ritba), *Sefer ha-Zikaron*, K. Kahana ed. (Jerusalem, 1956), 41, who demonstrates that Maimonides identified "matters that have no interpretation," which are employed purely for the purpose of allegorical coherence, in Genesis 18.
9. *לא יוכלת ממש דבר אלא מה שבא בסדר הדברים והמשל המשל*.
10. See Y. Shilat, ed., *Iggerot ha-Rambam* (Jerusalem, 1987), 25, who notes that this is not the student of Maimonides, Joseph Ibn 'Aknin, to whom the *Guide* is addressed.
11. Joseph ben Judah Ibn 'Aknin, *Hitgallut ha-Sodot ve-Hofa'at ha-Me'orot: Perush Shir ha-Shirim*, ed. A.S. Halkin (Jerusalem, 1964), 2-5; English trans. in A. Halkin, "Ibn 'Aknin's Commentary on the Song of Songs," *Alexander Marx Jubilee Volume*, ed. S. Lieberman (New York, 1950), 407. See also F. Talmage, "Apples of Gold: The Inner Meaning of Sacred Texts in Medieval Judaism," in A. Green, ed., *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible Through the Middle Ages* (New York, 1986), 323.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.* Evidently Ibn 'Aknin was not disturbed in principle by love poetry, but merely considered it trivial and unworthy of Solomon's literary attention, parallel to the problem we raised regarding the Job story for Maimonides. Ibn 'Aknin's

answer—that the Song contains a hidden inner meaning—resolves the second problem, not the first. Moses Ibn Ezra responds more directly to the inherent religious problem of the Song's (sometimes erotic) love poetry; see D. Pagis, "À propos de l'amour intellectuel dans les œuvres de Moïse Ibn Ezra," *REF* 126 (1976): 191-96.

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

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

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

14. The notion that the Torah employs otherwise superfluous passages to captivate and motivate readers appears in contemporary rabbinic thought, in the writings of the late Rav Nissan Alpert z"l. Although the Talmud, as a rule, recommends brevity (in the dictum, "One must always teach his student in a concise way"; *Pesahim* 3b), Rav Alpert observes that many biblical passages, especially in Genesis, are repetitive or could otherwise be written more concisely. The value of brevity, he explains, applies primarily in Halakhah; but, in narrative, the Torah employs a lengthy style in order to more effectively convey moral and religious teachings. Using the very reasoning we attribute to Maimonides, Rav Alpert explains that these narratives are carefully designed so that "a person's heart will be captivated by their *beauty*" (emphasis in original), and thus be sparked with greater religious devotion and fervor. See N. Alpert, *Sefer Limmudei Nissan 'al ha-Torah* (New York, 1991), 8-9. I am indebted to Rabbi Y. Neuberger for this reference.
15. Other than the shared patronymic, "Ibn Ezra," we have no evidence that he was related to his younger contemporary, the well-known Spanish exegete, Abraham Ibn Ezra.
16. Abraham Ibn Daud, the twelfth century Spanish historian, writes: "R. Moses son of R. Jacob Ben Ezra [was] of a princely family, and a great scholar in Torah and Greek wisdom, and a composer of poems and hymns (שירות ומשכורות) . . . and he that heard them, his heart would soften and he would be filled with awe of his creator" (*Sefer ha-Qabbalah*, ed. G. Cohen [Philadelphia, 1967], 73). Ibn Ezra's *selihot* are recited to this day in some Sephardic traditions.
17. For his contributions to the exegetical tradition, see my forthcoming article, "The Aesthetic Exegesis of Moses Ibn Ezra," Sec. 31.2 of *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: The History of its Interpretation* (Vol. I / pt. 2), ed. Magne Sæbø (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht).
18. For his influence on Maimonides, see S. Pines, "Sefer 'Arugat ha-Bosem: ha-Keta'im mi-Tokh Sefer Mekor Hayyim," *Tarbiz* 27 (1958): 218, n. Radak cites Moses Ibn Ezra in *Shorashim*, s.v. *bad* and s.v. *'zb* and in his commentaries on Gen 1:5 and Isa 51:1. For evidence of his influence on other medieval exegetes, see P. Fentor, *Philosophie et exégèse dans le Jardin de la métaphore de Moïse Ibn 'Ezra* (Leiden, forthcoming), 264-67.
19. Originally written in Arabic, the *Kitāb* was not translated into Hebrew until modern times. The best modern translation, published together with the Arabic, is A.S. Halkin, *Sefer ha-Iyyunim ve-ha-Diyyunim* (Jerusalem, 1975). References to the *Kitāb* are from Halkin's edition; English translations are my own. Where the original Arabic is cited in this essay, it appears in Hebrew characters, as it does in the manuscripts and published edition of Ibn Ezra's writings (see above, n. 3).
20. Perhaps other such works existed but were lost. N. Allony claims that Sa'adia's work on Hebrew language, *Ha-Egron*, contained a section on poetics no longer extant (*Ha-Egron*, ed. N. Allony [Jerusalem, 1969], 79). He bases this on (1) the Arabic title of that work, *Kitāb Usūl al-'Ibraniyya* (*The Book of Principles of Hebrew Poetry*); (2) its introduction, which mentions chapters on poetics; and (3) a fragment he believes belongs to those chapters (see below, n. 31). Based on parallels between this fragment and the *Kitāb*, N. Allony (pp. 112-13) claims that the lost section actually influenced Moses Ibn Ezra.
21. See D. Pagis, *Hiddush u-Masoret be-Shirat ha-Hol ha-Ivrit* (Jerusalem, 1976), 51-64. Samuel ha-Nagid (933-1056) manifested this belief by entitling his poetic works *Ben Tehillim* and *Ben Mishlei*.
22. On a parallel dichotomy in Muslim thought and Qur'anic exegesis, see W. Heinrichs, "On the Genesis of the *Haqīqa-Majāz* Dichotomy," *Studia Islamica* 59 (1984): 120; see also J. Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies* (Oxford, 1977), 228-29.
23. He attributes this notion to Aristotle; see below, p. 22.
24. There are several textual problems in this passage and I follow the reading favored by J. Dana, *Ha-Poetika Shel ha-Shirah ha-Ivrit bi-Sefarad bi-Yemet ha-Betnayim* (Jerusalem, 1982), 151. Cf. Halkin's note, *ad. loc.*
25. See, e.g., Maimonides' enthusiasm for Resh Laqish's equation of Satan and the "evil inclination" (*Guide* III:22) and for rabbinic attempts to explain miracles in natural terms (*Guide* II:29).
26. Literally, *nathr* means "scattering," as opposed to the Arabic *naẓm*, lit. "string of pearls," a metaphorical term for rhymed, metrical verse, i.e., poetry.
27. A similar concern appears in the nineteenth century commentary of the Neziv (Rabbi Naftali Zevi Yehudah Berlin), who cites Deut 31:19, "Write for yourselves this *shirah*" (taken by the Rabbis as a command that every Jew write his own *sefer Torah*), as evidence that the Pentateuch is poetry (*shirah*), which he contrasts with prose (*sippur perezot*). Drawing upon literary notions of his day, he explains that, whereas prose can be understood in a straightforward manner, poetry must be interpreted as an intricate complex of multifaceted allusions. He thus argues that the exegetical methods applied by the Rabbis reveal Scripture's plain sense (*peshat*), and are not merely homiletic (*derush*; see below, n. 118, for the implications of this claim). See N.Z.Y. Berlin, *Sefer Bereshit 'Im Perush Ha'amek Davar* (Jerusalem, 1975), ii. Although he works with different literary definitions and reaches antithetical exegetical conclusions (see sections 3 and 4 of this essay), the Neziv's use of the prose-poetry distinction, taken from general literary theory, does follow the precedent established by Moses Ibn Ezra.
28. Citing Moses' Song of the Sea and *Ha'azinu*, which he regards as "poetic" in the Arabic sense, he writes: "Some biblical *shirot* depart from prose," but then adds: "Now I [intentionally] said 'some of the *shirot*' because [texts] in prose also are called *shirah* like the Song of Songs . . . and others" (K 25a).
29. *Rajaz* is the least rigid Arabic poetic form; it is rhymed, but its meter is not strictly confined.
30. It is likely that this categorization was also influenced by the unique *te'amim* (musical notes) of these three books.
31. He cites three rhymed verses in Job that come closer to the *rajaz* form, but recognizes them as exceptions rather than a poetic convention: "Sometimes by chance in some of the [se books] there is something by way of [genuine, i.e., rhymed] *rajaz*, for example [Job 28:16, 33:17 and 21:4]" (K 25a). N. Allony, 386-89, conjectures that a fragment he attributes to Sa'adia (see above, n. 20), which cites Job 28:16, 21:4, and Isa 49:1 as examples of *rajaz*, was Ibn Ezra's source. Ibn Ezra, however, substitutes Job 33:17 for Isa 49:1, perhaps because he does not regard Isaiah as a poetic book. See A. Berlin, *Biblical Poetry Through Medieval Jewish Eyes* (Bloomington, 1991), 81.
32. Ibn Ezra's discussion of music appears in another work of his, *Maqalat al-Hadiqa fi Ma'ni al-Majāz wa-l-Haqīqa* (*The Treatise of the Garden on Metaphor*

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

33. A. Shiloah, 218-19 (Arabic), 221-22 (English). Judah Halevi also speaks of music as a "revered art" that "transfer[s] the soul from one mood to its opposite" (*Kuzari* II:64-65). Maimonides (*Shemonah Perakim*, chap. V) applies this in a medical context, prescribing "listening to melodies and musical instruments" to cure melancholy. A biblical precedent for this therapy (not mentioned explicitly by Maimonides) appears in the episode of David playing the harp to cure Saul's depression (I Sam 16:23).
34. The connection between music and poetry is further developed by later medieval authors, e.g., Moses Ibn Tibbon (thirteenth century; son of the translator, Samuel) and Shem-Tov Ibn Falaquera (thirteenth century). See A. Berlin, *Biblical Poetry*, 89-99.
35. This notion, of course, underlies Ibn 'Aknin's explanation for the literary beauty of the Song of Songs (above, p. 19).
36. Identifying biblical Kedar as Arabia, he cites as a proof-text Isa 42:11, "The inhabitants of Kedar . . . shall sing and cry out from the peaks of mountains." This forms one part of his three-part, universal distribution of knowledge: (1) Israel as expert in prophecy and divine law; (2) Arabic supremacy in language and literature; and (3) Greek preeminence in philosophy and science (K 19a-22b). See U. Simon, *Arba Gishot le-Sefer Tehillim* (Ramat-Gan, 1982), 153-55. The verse Ibn Ezra relates to Greek philosophy, Gen 9:27, "May God beautify Yepheth," is already adduced in *Megillat* 9b apparently to praise the poetic beauty of the Greek language (see below, n. 53); but since Ibn Ezra assigns this to Arabic, he takes the verse as a reference to Greek philosophy.
37. U. Simon, *Arba Gishot*, 152.
38. See above, p. 22.
39. This criticism is surprising since Halevi's poetry follows Arabic conventions. See R. Brann, *The Compunctious Poet: Cultural Ambiguity and Hebrew Poetry in Muslim Spain* (Baltimore, 1991), 88-89.
40. This appears to be a Jewish version of the Arabic belief in *i'jāz al-qur'ān* (the inimitable wondrousness of the *Qur'an*). Writing in a Muslim milieu, Halevi felt a religious need to combat the claim that Arabic is divine and superior to all other languages. See N. Allony, "Ha-Kuzari—Sefer ha-Milhamah ba-Arabiyyah le-Shihirur ha-Yehudi," *Eshel Be'er Sheva* 2 (1980): 119-36; cf. R. Brann, 26, 88-89; see also below, n. 42.
41. This passage, from Ibn Tibbon's commentary on Ecclesiastes which is no longer extant, is preserved in a citation by Rabbi Judah Moscato (sixteenth century), *Kol Yehudah* [commentary on *Kuzari*] (Vilna, 1905), 161. The Hebrew (mistakenly in A. Berlin, *Biblical Poetry*, 89) reads:
וְשֵׁי לִזְמֹר שִׁירָה לְשִׁירֵי הָהֶם יִתְחַן עַל הַשִּׁירִים שִׁירָתָאֵם הֵימֶן, כִּי לֹא הִיא דְּכֶם צִדְּוּ יִכְלִים לְהִנָּח
בְּשִׁירֵי הָהֶם אֶדְרֵךְ לְשׁוֹנָם בְּהֵם כְּרִמָּה עַל שְׁלִמָּה.
42. Some therefore regard Ibn Ezra as a "defeatist" in the battle between Arabic and Hebrew culture (see R. Brann, *Compunctious Poet*, 69). Nonetheless, he was acutely aware of the theological problems created by this preference. See N. Allony, "The Reaction of Moses Ibn Ezra to 'Arabiyya (Arabism)," *Bulletin of the Institute for Jewish Studies* 1 (1973): 19-40.
43. The absolute objectivity of "the aesthetic standard" assumed by Moses Ibn Ezra

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

44. The Aramaic reads:

וְיִי לְהוֹאֵר בְּרֹשׁ דְּאִמְרֵי דְהָא אֲדוּיִיתָא אַתָּא לְאַחֲזָא סְפֻרִין בְּעֵלְמָא וּמְלִין דְּהִדְיִטִּי. דְּאִי הִכִּי אִפִּילוּ בְּזִמְנָא דָּא אֲנִי יִכְלִין לְמַעֲבֹד אֲדוּיִיתָא בְּמִלִּי דְּהִדְיִטִּי וּבְשִׁבְחָא יִתִּיר מְכֻלָּהוּ . . . אִפִּילוּ אִינוּן קִפְסִירִי דְּעֵלְמָא אִיתִּי בְּיִנְיָהוּ מְלִין עֲלָאִין יִתִּיר. אִי הִכִּי נִיזֵל אֲבַת־יִיְהוּ וְנַעֲבִיד מְנִיְהוּ אֲדוּיִיתָא כְּהָא נִוּנָא.

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

45. Although a number of talmudic sources attach value to aesthetics (see below, n. 53), a negative attitude towards aesthetic beauty can perhaps be discerned in *Ta'anit* 7a-b. Upon meeting R. Yehoshua ben Hananyah, who apparently was rather unattractive, a Roman princess exclaimed, "How could such beautiful wisdom [be contained] in [such] an ugly vessel?" R. Yehoshua answers that just as wine preserves in plain earthenware but spoils in beautiful gold and silver vessels, an ugly person is a more appropriate receptacle for Torah than a handsome one. Taking this analogy at face value, the Talmud then asks, "But are there not handsome people who are learned?" The response is: "Had they been ugly, they would have been even more learned!" Perhaps this talmudic passage can be taken, in the spirit of the *Zohar*, as an indication that beauty, as perceived by human beings, does not enhance, and even detracts from, God's word. But one can reasonably argue that this source is not relevant to our discussion, since the Talmud explains that R. Yehoshua's opinion is based on the fact that a handsome person is less likely to manifest humility, a necessary component of true Torah scholarship. This suggests that arrogance, a moral flaw, rather than aesthetic beauty itself, is the trait actually identified by the Talmud as being incompatible with Torah.
46. See above, n. 20, on Sa'adia's work on poetics. On the term *zahot*, see N. Allony, *Ha-Egdon*, 26-30; D. Pagis, *Hiddush u-Masoret*, 52.
47. Dunash's Hebrew, *לשון עז*, corresponds with Sa'adia's term, *zahot*.
48. *Teshuvot Dunash 'al Rasag*, ed. R. Schröter (Breslau, 1866), 28-29. Although Dunash does not cite Sa'adia by name, his identity is revealed by Abraham Ibn Ezra, who cites this debate (see below, nn. 49, 54). However, we have no record of this statement in Sa'adia's extant writings.
49. Dunash's position seems to conflict with the rabbinic rule, "No two prophets prophecy in the exact same style" (*Sanhedrin* 89a; see below, n. 49, 54). Indeed, his extreme view is unique; the more prevalent position is that of Maimonides,

- who maintains that only the Pentateuch is God's exact language, but the Prophets and Writings (*Nevi'im u-Ketuvim*) were written by people, through various levels of divine instruction and inspiration. See *Guide* II:45; see also discussion below, n. 83.
50. This should be contrasted with the claim of biblical superiority over Arabic poetry advanced by Judah Halevi and Samuel Ibn Tibbon. Like Dunash, they refuse to accept the Arabic standard as an absolute measure of aesthetic beauty. But they intimate that human aesthetic taste is an objective standard by which the Bible's literary beauty could theoretically be measured, given the proper insight and skill. In contrast, Dunash implies that human aesthetic taste is inherently subjective and limited, and thus cannot be used to measure the Bible's beauty.
51. Note that Dunash, who explicitly deals with prophetic writings, is more inclusive than the *Zohar*, which mentions only the Pentateuch (*Orayta*). See below, n. 116.
52. In contrast, Ibn Ezra's *Maqalat al-Hadiqa*, a more conventional work on philosophical biblical exegesis (discussed below, p. 27), was translated into Hebrew (as *'Arugat ha-Bosem*) in medieval times. See M. Idel, "Zehuto Shel Metargem Sefer 'Arugat ha-Bosem le-R. Moshe Ibn Ezra," *Kiryat Sefer* 51 (1976): 484-87.
53. Although the well-defined aesthetic notions of the Spanish school were certainly novel in Jewish tradition, aesthetic concerns do arise in rabbinic literature. The benediction formulated by the Rabbis for "one who beholds beautiful creatures and beautiful trees" (*Berakhot* 58b; see also *'Avodah Zarah* 20a) demonstrates their appreciation for aesthetic beauty. Furthermore, the value they attached to such beauty is apparent in the talmudic principle of *biddur mizvab* ("embellishing the *mizvab*"), which requires that *mizvot* be performed using aesthetically superior objects. The Talmud specifically applies this principle to require that a Torah scroll be written in a most beautiful fashion (*sefer Torah na'eh*). See *Shabbat* 133b; see also *Encyclopedia Talmudit*, VIII:271-76, s.v. *biddur mizvab*. Of particular interest for our purposes is a talmudic observation regarding literary beauty in connection with Scripture, appearing in a discussion of R. Shimon ben Gamliel's view that Scripture may be translated into Greek, but not any other language. Citing the verse, "May God beautify Yefet" (Gen 9:27), the Rabbis regarded Greek as aesthetically superior to all other languages. Apparently applying the *biddur mizvab* principle, the Talmud thus reasons that Greek, apart from Hebrew itself, is the only worthy receptacle for Holy Scripture, according to R. Shimon ben Gamliel. See *Megillah* 9b and Rashi *ad. loc.* s.v. *yafyuto shel yefet* (cf. Moses Ibn Ezra's view, above, n. 36). Cf. what would appear to be a different talmudic attitude towards aesthetic beauty, cited above, n. 45.
54. *Sefer Sefat Yeter*, ed. D. Torsch (Warsaw, 1895): 32; see translation and discussion in J. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (New Haven, 1981), 184. Ibn Ezra justifies Sa'adia's evaluation of the prophets' relative literary skills by arguing that they, in fact, formulated their own prophecies based on ideas received from God. This is a natural explanation for the rabbinic rule that "No two prophets prophecy in the exact same style" (*Sanhedrin* 89a, discussed below, p. 29), which thus supports Ibn Ezra. We should note, however, that this defense does not apply to the Pentateuch, traditionally viewed as the word of God Himself. Perhaps Ibn Ezra felt that Sa'adia judges the relative poetic merit only of the prophetic writings. In any case, the medieval literary approach normally does not distinguish between biblical books based on authorship, divine or human (see below, p. 38). As discussed below (n. 119), the talmudic maxim, "The Torah speaks as human beings do" (*diberah Torah ki-leshon benet adam*) can be understood to imply that God Himself adopted human literary conventions, an assumption that would validate the literary approach even for the Pentateuch itself.
55. N. Allony (above, n. 20) conjectures that the *Kitab* is actually based on Sa'adia's lost writings on Hebrew poetry. This theory lacks evidence except for a parallel (noted above, n. 31) between Ibn Ezra's identification of biblical *rajaz* and a

- fragment Allony regards as part of Sa'adia's *Ha-Egron*.
56. This Arabic aphorism, translated into Hebrew as מיטב השיר כזבו, echoes Plato's censure of the poets as deceitful. For its history in Greek and Arabic literature, see R. Brann, 72, 191; R. Scheindlin, "Rabbi Moshe Ibn Ezra on the Legitimacy of Poetry", *Medievalia et Humanistica* 7 (1976): 107-08.
57. This is rejected in modern theory, which regards style and content as integrally related; see below, p. 39 ff.
58. Never published, this work remains in MS (Jerusalem National Library MS 5701, formerly Sassoon MS 412).
59. Although *majaz* literally means "metaphor", Ibn Ezra uses it to refer to a wide range of non-literal (but not necessarily metaphorical) linguistic usages; in this he follows Sa'adia and Arabic writers. See H. Ben-Shammai, "Hakdamat R. Sa'adia Ga'on li-Yesha'yahu," *Tarbiz* 60 (1991): 380-82; W. Heinrichs, 122-27.
60. For its Arabic background, see W. Heinrichs, 111-40. On Sa'adia's *majaz* exegesis and its Arabic sources, see M. Zucker, *'Al Targum Rasag la-Torah* (New York, 1959), 229-36; H. Ben-Shammai, 380-82.
61. *Emunot ve-De'ot* 2:10, followed by Moses Ibn Ezra (*Maqalat*, 163) and Maimonides (*Guide* I:44-45).
62. See S. Rawidowicz, "Ba'ayat ha-Hagshamah le-Rasag ve-la-Rambam," *Iyyunim be-Mahshevet Yisra'el* (Jerusalem, 1969), 171-223.
63. In the first forty-eight chapters of the *Guide*, Maimonides defines the literal and figurative uses of various biblical words. See L. Strauss, "How to Begin to Study the *Guide of the Perplexed*," in *Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. S. Pines, xxiv-xxv.
64. Naturally, certain terminological changes (which reflect different conceptions of metaphor) arise in this tradition, which spans three centuries. Sa'adia and Moses Ibn Ezra use *majaz*; as does Maimonides in his commentary on the Mishnah (*Sanhedrin* X, "The Third Principle"), written in his youth. But throughout the *Guide* he applies a new term, *'isi'ara* (Heb. *hash'alab*), Arabic for metaphor (see, e.g., *Guide* I:4,6,7,9,10). In *Mishneh Torah* (*Hil. Yesodei ha-Torah* I:12) Maimonides employs the Hebrew term *mashal*, which is also used by Abraham Ibn Ezra (e.g., on Gen 1:3, longer commentary on Ex 19:20) and Radak (e.g., on Gen 6:6 and Jer 14:8). See my forthcoming book, *Three Approaches to Biblical Metaphors in Radak and His Predecessors*.
65. Selections from this work were published in *Zion* 2 (1849): 117-23, 134-37, 157-60, 175 and in *Litteraturblatt des Orients* 10 (1849): 747-48. According to M. Idel, Judah Ibn Tibbon was the translator but S. Abramson argues that it was Judah al-Harizi. See M. Idel, *Zehuto* (cited above, n. 52); S. Abramson, "Metargem Sefer 'Arugat ha-Bosem le-R. Moshe Ibn Ezra Hu Rav Yehudah al-Harizi," *Kiryat Sefer* 51 (1976): 712.
66. Cited above, p. 27. As we shall see (below, nn. 67, 68), this "mirror image" is not as strongly implied in the original Arabic. Although our inferences are from the translator's formulation, the parallel in the *Kitab* demonstrates that his way of thinking was not foreign to Moses Ibn Ezra.
67. The Hebrew here reads, והמשכיל יפשיט הענינים ממעטה ההעברות, which evidently should be emended to read ממעטה ההעברות, based on the subsequent phrase וילבש מעטה נעימות. The Arabic original of the first phrase (يُزِيلُ عَنْهُمْ مِنْ دَرَجَاتِهِمْ) "he will remove those husks from them") does not evoke the image of divesting a garment. It seems that the translator chose his language to parallel וילבש (= וילבשם) in the next phrase (see following note).
68. Here the Hebrew (וילבשם מעטה נעימות) follows the Arabic, וילبشם (= וילبشם, "and he will clothe them"), more precisely, although the translator added the phrase מעטה נעימות for clarity.
69. *Zion* 2 (1849): 137.
70. This passage actually indicates the limitations of language, which stem from the limitations of human intellect. Prefacing that the "true idea [about God] . . . is too wondrous and exalted to be understood precisely," it implies that the best we

can do is replace the *gross* biblical anthropomorphisms (העצמות הגסות) with less poetic, but not completely accurate literal language, which still carry the limitations of speaking about God in human terms.

71. Joseph Kimhi, *Sefer ha-Berit*, ed. F. Talmage (Jerusalem, 1974), 34. The "husk-fruit" metaphor is borrowed from *Hagigah* 15a, "R. Meir found a pomegranate, ate its interior, and discarded its husk," a description of his relationship with Aher (Elisha ben Avuyah), his teacher.
72. Bahya Ibn Pakuda, *Hovot ha-Levavot*, *Sha'ar ha-Yihud*, chapter X, also maintains that the uneducated are permitted to imagine God in human form. But Maimonides strongly argues that *no one* is permitted to do so. See *Guide* I:35; *Hil. Teshuvah* III:7 (cf. Rabad's gloss, *ad. loc.*). Judah Halevi, *Kuzari* IV:3-5, goes to the opposite extreme and argues that even educated people require tangible imagery to fully grasp God's existence.
73. Compare the formulation of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik: "anthropomorphic metaphors . . . lend warmth and color to the personal God-man relation . . . the worshipper . . . begs the Almighty for a guiding hand, a friendly eye and a forgiving smile." See *The Halakhic Mind* (New York, 1986), 39-40. "Guided by the practical needs of the worshipper," this account, he notes, deviates from Maimonides' strict prohibition of imagining God in human form (see previous note), which was not accepted by Jewish tradition (p. 115). From among the medieval authorities cited in the previous note, Rabbi Soloveitchik most closely follows Judah Halevi, since he implies that anthropomorphism is a legitimate need for *all* worshippers, not only "the uneducated."
74. See Me'iri, *Sanbedrin* 89a, who reinterprets the mishnaic definition in a more comprehensive sense to include the widened application of the *Gemara*.
75. Radak's (unnamed) source here is *Kuzari* III:73. We cite Radak because he responds to the talmudic source more directly, and applies this principle to other prophecies (see below, p. 31).
76. To be sure, Radak accepted talmudic authority implicitly and unequivocally. Yet, this passage indicates that in exegetical matters, he believed that talmudic analysis was not necessarily intended to be definitive and could therefore be reconsidered in later generations, a view well represented in medieval halakhic sources, e.g., Sa'adia Gaon, Sherira Gaon, Hai Gaon and Maimonides. See M. Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis* (Cambridge, MA, 1980), 6-14; *Inteklopedia Talmudit*, s.v. *Aggadab*, I:20; see also below, n. 100. Based on these sources, M. Rosensweig concludes that within the tradition of Orthodox Judaism, "rabbinic texts do not exert the same measure of binding authority in areas of *parshanut* and *hashkafah* as they do in halakhic discussions." See M. Rosensweig, "Eilu ve-Eilu Divrei Elohim Hayyim," *Rabbinic Authority and Personal Autonomy*, ed. Moshe Sokol (Northvale, NJ, 1989), 96. (It may seem that by rejecting the Talmud's definition of a false prophet, Radak opens a halakhic debate with the Rabbis; but his claim that God never sends "false spirits" actually renders this debate inconsequential from a practical [halakhic] point of view. The Talmud classifies one who knowingly transmits a message from a false spirit as a false prophet; Radak simply argues that this situation can never really occur.) Similar exegetical freedom is also manifested in Maimonides' tendency in *Mishneh Torah* to derive a given law from a biblical verse other than the one adduced in the Talmud. He evidently believed that talmudic authority does not preclude a search for greater clarity in the use of biblical sources as a foundation for Halakhah. See I. Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides*, 57; see also B. Epstein *Torah Temimah* on Lev 10:6.
77. Compare Radak's language *לא שדאח מיכיה דברים אלה ולא שמעם* with that of the Mishnah: *המתנבא מה שלא שמע*.
78. Radak writes: "The truth is that God aroused the spirit (העיר דוח) of the false prophets to beguile Ahab, not that the spirit of prophecy (רוח נבואה) came to any one of them." He does not clarify the difference between God "arousing" the spirit of the false prophets" and actually sending them "a spirit of prophecy."

- Evidently, the former indicates "encouragement" to sin by fabricating a prophecy, in contrast to God actually sending a "false" prophecy.
79. The Talmud (*Sanbedrin* 89a) allows one exception: a prophet may deduce God's will, although not explicitly expressed, through principles of inference (e.g., *kal va-homer*). See Me'iri, *ad. loc.*
80. Neither *masbal* nor *melizab* are indicated by the context in Jer 6:29, which makes this comment particularly instructive.
81. This, together with the previous example, should demonstrate that midrashic exegesis, which is often thought to be primarily allegorical, is often hyper-literal. See also Radak, *Zach* 3:2.
82. Rashi here, in addition to recording the midrashic tradition, cites the Targum, which does interpret this passage allegorically. But, unlike Radak, Rashi does not employ the literary term *masbal* to separate the two readings (see below, p. 37, for Rashi's attitude towards the literary approach). On Rashi's terminology, see S. Kamin, "Digma be-Perush Rashi le-Shir ha-Shirim," in *Bein Yehudim le-Nozrim be-Parshanut ha-Mikra* (Jerusalem, 1991), 13-30.
83. Abraham Ibn Ezra makes a similar claim in *Sefer Sefat Yeter* § 84, cited above, nn. 49, 54. Maimonides agrees that the Prophets and Writings reflect human composition, divinely inspired, but assigns a less creative role to the prophets by arguing that the scenes they depict reflect actual visions God implanted in their mind. He thus maintains, for example, that Micaiah, in his "mind's eye," actually "saw" God sending the false spirit. See *Hil. Yesodei ha-Torah*, chap. 7; *Guide* II:43-45.
84. Although he speaks of how "the prophets" employ hyperbole to accomplish their objective, the examples Ibn Ezra cites, which include verses from the Pentateuch, clarify that he does not exclude any section of Scripture from his analysis. In other words, following the convention of medieval Spanish usage, he includes Moses in his phrase, "the prophets." This usage is also attested, e.g., in Abraham Ibn Ezra's longer commentary on Ex 11:5.
85. Compare Moses Ibn Ezra's description of allegory, cited above, p. 21. The examples he cites are from supernatural passages that describe great calamities or great prosperity. (Similar examples are cited by Maimonides in *Guide* II:29.)
86. K 87a. Interestingly, Ibn Ezra could not classify this stylistic device as a poetic ornament since it was discouraged in Arabic poetry and, true to his principles, he discourages it in Hebrew poetry as well.
87. *Kitab al-Luma'*, ed. J. Derenbourg (Paris, 1886), 288-89; Hebrew translation of Judah Ibn Tibbon in *Sefer ha-Rikmah*, ed. M. Wilensky (Jerusalem, 1964), 303.
88. These are translated into Hebrew as *zahot* and *baga'ah* (הגעה). The equivalent *zahot-fasaba* was set by Sa'adia (see above, p. 25). Ibn Tibbon's meticulously literal translation *balagha-baga'ah* is misleading. While the Ar. root *b-l-gh* means "to reach" (הגיעה), the noun *balagha* is a technical term for literary elegance.
89. See, e.g., Ibn Ezra on *Psa* 2:3, 73:2, 78:15.
90. See, e.g., Racak on *Gen* 21:1, *Josh* 6:26. The Northern French *pesbat* tradition also recognized this style and even devised a similar exegetical rule for its interpretation. See, e.g., Rashi on *Ex* 15:6; Rashbam there and on *Gen* 49:22. See below, p. 37, on the analogy between the Spanish and French *pesbat* traditions.
91. Rashi's citation of this midrashic reading (without the alternative *pesbat* reading advanced by Radak), which is typical in his commentary, would seem to indicate his rejection of the literary approach in favor of the rabbinic assumption that every word of Scripture conveys meaning (see below, p. 37).
92. His source is Ibn Ezra on *Psa* 1:2, who rejects a similarly motivated rabbinic reading by invoking the notion of *zahot*.
93. The English translation does not reflect the redundant *והוא*, and would be the same for *והוא אשר נקרא ליום כיבושת*.
94. See Ibn Janah, *Sefer ha-Rikmah*, 293-94; Radak, *Sefer Mikhlol*, ed. I. Rittenberg (Lyck, 1862), 61a.
95. See also Nahmanides on *Gen* 12:1 (regarding the superfluous *ול*) and *Gen* 12:11

- (regarding the word נא), where he rejects Rashi's midrashic reading on the basis of "the style of the language."
96. This is most clearly manifested in his separate introductions to each of the five books. See E.Z. Melamed, *Mefareshei ba-Mikra: Darkheiham ve-Shtoteihem* (Jerusalem, 1978), 937-39. On Nahmanides' sensitivity to literary structure, see Y. Elman, "It Is No Empty Thing: Nahmanides and the Search for Omnisignificance," *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 4 (1993): 1-83.
 97. Nahmanides, introduction to Exodus and on Ex 1:1. See Y. Elman, 25-29, who refers to this technique as "resumptive repetition" and finds a precedent for it in the *peshat* commentaries of Rashi, e.g., on Gen 39:1 and Ex 6:29-30 (see below, n. 110).
 98. A summary of the Rabbis' approach to anthropomorphism is beyond the scope of this essay. But even a cursory reading of their literature reveals that they do not systematically reinterpret it as do the Spanish exegetes. In fact, sometimes they actually depict God in human terms even more blatantly than Scripture does. See E. Urbach, *Hazal: Emunot ve-De'ot* (Jerusalem, 1986), 29-52. See also M. Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis*, 7-8.
 99. *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 104-05. For further discussion, see Y. Elman, 1-8. See also R. Steiner, "Meaninglessness, Meaningfulness, and Super-Meaningfulness in Scripture: An Analysis of the Controversy Surrounding Dan 2:12 in the Middle Ages," *JQR* 82 (1992): 431-50.
 100. The conclusions in this paragraph raise a critical question: How does the Spanish *pesbat* tradition reconcile its exegetical methods with rabbinic precedent? As we have already noted (above, n. 76), some freedom from talmudic exegesis is accepted within the halakhic tradition. But the fundamental methodological shift delineated here amounts to a complete rejection of rabbinic exegesis and requires a more substantial explanation. Abraham Ibn Ezra and Maimonides both address this issue in similar terms. Ibn Ezra maintains that the Rabbis knew the plain sense (*pesbat*) of Scripture, but, regarding it as obvious, did not devote commentaries to it, apart from *Targum Onkelos* (Introduction to the Pentateuch, "The Fifth Approach"; shorter commentary on Ex 21:8 [cited below, n. 109]). He thus reasons that midrashim which violate the rules of *pesbat* were never intended to represent the actual meaning of the biblical text and are purely homiletic (Introduction to Lamentations). Known for his sarcastic "anti-midrashic" remarks, Ibn Ezra actually directs his criticism at those who misconstrue Midrash by regarding it as actual biblical exegesis (*Safar Berurah*, ed. G. Lipman [Jerusalem, 1967], 5a). Maimonides also maintains that many rabbinic *derashot* were intended only as homilies, "similar to poetic inventions" (כדמות מליצת השיר), "but not [to express] . . . the meaning of the biblical verse" (לא; ענין הפסוק ההוא; *Guide* III:43). This stems from Maimonides' overall view that midrashim which seem irrational must not to be taken at face value, but rather must be reinterpreted "in order to make [them] agree with reason, and conform with the truth and Scripture" (כדי שיהיה תואם את המושכל ומתאים לאמת ולטובת ההקשר); and, like Ibn Ezra, he strongly criticizes those who insist on taking such midrashim at face value (*Mishnah 'Im Perush ha-Rambam: Seder Nezikin*, J. Kafih, trans., 136-37). In light of Maimonides' well-defined—and strongly asserted—exegetical principles in the *Guide*, it stands to reason that he applied this approach to midrashim diverging from his conception of accurate biblical exegesis. Ibn Ezra and Maimonides would thus deny that the Rabbis ever adopted the doctrine of "omnisignificance" as a legitimate exegetical principle. See also below, n. 109.
 101. לא נמצא במלצות הנביאים קליפה בלא תוך. גיה בלא נשמה, לבוש בלא מתלבש. These three images derive from the medieval tradition, which uses them to manifest its literary orientation. The "husk . . . interior" image appears in Joseph Kimhi (above, p. 28); the "body . . . soul" image is from Abraham Ibn Ezra's longer commentary on Ex 20:1 (cited below, p. 39); and the "clothing" image is from *Arugat ha-Bosem* (above, p. 28).

102. Malbim on Isaiah (Jerusalem, 1978), Introduction, p. 1.
103. There is one important exception to this generalization: Malbim (who manifests strong philosophical leanings) does not reject the Spanish approach to anthropomorphism, since he, too, unequivocally believes in God's incorporeality. This demonstrates that one might theoretically adopt principles of the Spanish *pesbat* tradition selectively (see, e.g., below, p. 37); however, in their original context, these principles emerged as an integrated system of thought that included a definite literary orientation.
104. The controversy regarding this rule underlies a fundamental debate between the schools of R. Akiva and R. Yishmael over the proper methods for midrashic derivation of Halakhah. R. Yishmael's school adopts this rule; but R. Akiva's rejects it altogether, and zealously derives halakhot from the most minute details of Scripture. See Y.N. Epstein, *Mevo'ot le-Sifrut ba-Tana'im ve-ha-Amora'im* (Jerusalem, 1957), 521-22; M. Elon, *Ha-Mishpat ha-Ivri* (Jerusalem, 1973), II:310-17; Y. Frankel, *Darkhei ha-Aggadah ve-ha-Midrash* (Giv'atayim, 1991), 119-20, 595n. While in theory the opposing sides of this debate appear to represent equally viable rabbinic viewpoints, the majority of rabbinic exegesis, in fact, does not follow the rule *diberah Torah ki-leshon benei adam*, which appears only about a dozen times throughout rabbinic literature. See below, n. 108.
105. Pseudo-Rashi, *Nedarim* 3a, s.v. *lindor neder*, explains that "*ki-leshon benei adam*" means "this is the way people [normally] speak." Cf. *Yerushalmi Nedarim* 1:1, which cites biblical examples of ordinary conversations that include doubled verbs, e.g., Gen 31:30, הָלַךְ הָלַכְתָּ כִּי נִכְסְךָ נִכְסְתָּ ("You had to leave, for you were longing for your father's house"), said by Laban to Jacob. See also M. Elon, II:311.
106. Ibn Janah might say, "There is no meaning element [implied] in the word תעקב beyond that which is in העקב."
107. Even according to this view, however, the Torah adopts some human linguistic conventions: after all, it contains sentences made up of nouns, verbs and adjectives. An attempt to deny even this similarity to human language may have motivated a kabbalistic tradition cited by Nahmanides in his introduction to the Pentateuch. According to that tradition, the entire text of the Torah spells out the names of God (כל הדיבור כלה שמותיו של הקב"ה), and as such is not to be divided into ordinary words and sentences.
108. *Tosafot*, *Bava Me'zia* 21b, s.v. *diberah Torah*, thus argues that even talmudic sages who adopt the rule *diberah Torah ki-leshon benei adam* apply it only in a limited number of cases, but usually accept the prevalent rabbinic exegetical method. See *Tosafot*, *Sotah* 24b, s.v. *ve-Rabbi Yohanan*, for an even more restrictive application. Although the rule *diberah Torah ki-leshon benei adam* provides a conceptual precedent for the Spanish *pesbat* exegetes, they would not have adopted this minority talmudic position as their source of authority, because this would have put them at odds with the more prevalent talmudic view. Instead, they maintained that all talmudic sages agree that the *pesbat* of Scripture is derived assuming *diberah Torah ki-leshon benei adam*, and that talmudic debates over this rule relate to a separate realm of analysis, namely the mnemonic associations between the halakhot and the text of the Torah (see following note; see also below, n. 118). Compare M. Elon, II:313-17, who claims that even R. Akiva's school did not consider omnisignificance to be a genuine exegetical principle and therefore normally implemented it only to formulate mnemonics, but not to derive halakhot.
109. This, of course, conflicts with the widespread talmudic derivation of halakhot through the *midot she-ha-Torah ni'ereshet bahen*. The response of the Spanish tradition to this conflict is complex and requires lengthy analysis, and we can only briefly note its salient features. Abraham Ibn Ezra (short commentary on Ex 21:8) argues that the Rabbis knew and accepted the *pesbat* (plain sense) of the biblical text, which they determined by normal linguistic analysis. He thus con-

cludes that where such "derivations" contradict the *pesbat*, they could not have been intended as biblical "interpretation," but are merely mnemonic devices to remember and organize laws given orally at Sinai. See above, n. 100; see also U. Simon, "Le-Darko ha-Parshanut shel ha-Rav Avraham Ibn Ezra 'al pi Sheloshet Bi'urav le-Pasuk Ehad," *Bar-Ilan Annual* 3 (1965): 130-38. Ibn Ezra's resolution is also adopted by Judah Halevi (*Kuzari* III:73). Neither author questions the biblical (*de-orayta*) weight of such laws; they simply argue that their derivation does not represent the meaning of the biblical text. A more extreme view is formulated by Maimonides (*Sefer ha-Mizvot*, C. Heller ed. [Jerusalem, 1946], 7-8), who argues that some laws "derived" in the Talmud from biblical verses are actually of *rabbinitic* origin. (Compare his notion of *asmakhta* in his introduction to his *Mishnah* commentary, *Mishnah 'Im Perush ha-Rambam*, J. Kafih trans. [Jerusalem, 1963], 10.) Although Maimonides does not apply this rule universally, and regards many laws derived through the hermeneutical rules as biblical, his suggestion that some of them are merely rabbinic evoked strong criticism from Nahmanides. See *Sefer ha-Mizvot le-ha-Rambam 'Im Hassagot ha-Ramban*, C. Chavel ed. (Jerusalem, 1981), 44-45, and discussion below, n. 112.

110. E.g., on Ex 15:6, Rashi observes what modern scholars refer to as "staircase parallelism"; and on Gen. 39:1 and Ex 6:29-30, he observes what Y. Elman, 25, calls "resumptive repetition."
111. See examples cited above (pp. 33-34), which prompted reactions by later exegetes who applied a literary approach instead of Rashi's midrashic reading. For the relationship between *pesbat* and *derash* in Rashi, see A. Grossman, *Hakbemet Zarefat ha-Rishonim* (Jerusalem, 1995), 193-201.
112. See, e.g., commentary on Gen 49:22 and Ex 15:5; see also E. Toubou, "Al Shitot ha-Parshanut shel Rashbam be-Perusho la-Torah," *Tarbiz* 43 (1979): 248-73. Rashbam's approach, applied even in legal sections of the Pentateuch, often conflicts with halakhot derived in rabbinic literature through the *midot she-ha-Torah nidreshet baben*. To resolve this conflict, he argues that the Torah encompasses two distinct levels of meaning. One level, the *pesbat*, is accessible through normal methods of analyzing (human) language; the other, embodied in the rabbinic *derashot*, is derived by analyzing the Torah as an omnisignificant code, decipherable through the *midot she-ha-Torah nidreshet baben*. Although he devotes his exegetical project exclusively to *pesbat*, Rashbam regards it as little more than a surface reading of the divine text, having only marginal importance. Ultimately, he insists, the *derashot* reflect the primary meaning of the Pentateuch, and therefore determine Torah law. See commentary on Gen 1:1, 37:2, Ex 21:1, and E. Toubou, 251-53. Without citing Rashbam as his source, Nahmanides embraces the doctrine that the language of the Pentateuch simultaneously communicates both *pesbat* and *derash* as two distinct levels of meaning. On this basis, he rejects the older Spanish view of Abraham Ibn Ezra and Maimonides (cited above, n. 109), who tended to regard *derash* as unrelated to the text. See E. Wolfson, "By Way of Truth: Aspects of Nahmanides' Kabbalistic Hermeneutic," *AJS Review* 14 (1989): 125-29.
113. As we note below (n. 118), this evidently stems from the exegetical approach of modern traditional commentators (*Ahronim*) on the Pentateuch. Particularly important in this context is the Neziv's view (cited above, n. 27) that the Pentateuch, by its very literary nature as *shirah* (which he takes to mean "poetry," as defined in his day), requires midrashic exegesis. Since only the Pentateuch is referred to in Deut 31:19 (the Neziv's prooftext) as "*shirah*," one might consider excluding the Prophets and Writings from this conclusion. While theoretically viable, this distinction is not, in fact, adopted by the Neziv, who maintains that the special poetic features he delineates as the basis for midrashic exegesis inhere "not only in the Holy Torah, but also in all of the Holy Scriptures." See N.Z.Y. Berlin, *Sefer Bereshit 'Im Perush Ha'amek Davar*, ii; see also *Ha'amek Davar* on Deut 18:18.

114. Our somewhat tentative language here ("which *evidently* assume . . .") accounts for the view of Abraham Ibn Ezra, Judah Halevi and Maimonides (cited above, n. 109), who would disagree with this inference.
115. See above, n. 49 and n. 83).
116. The Neziv (see above, n. 113) also makes this equation and thus rejects the modern compromise position. Dunash, of course would not accept this compromise because he argues that "all of Scripture is the word of God Himself" (see above, p. 25). Perhaps the *Zohar*, which, in rejecting the literary approach, refers explicitly only to the Pentateuch (see above, n. 51), is open to this compromise. But it is conceivable that this specific reference is meant simply to highlight the problem of comparing God's word with "secular matters," but not to limit the criticism to the Pentateuch alone. Accordingly, the *Zohar* would then also refuse to analyze the rest of Scripture in literary terms.
117. Nahmanides (cited above, n. 107) makes another type of distinction when he records the Kabbalistic tradition that the text of the Torah spells out the names of God, which indeed endows it with unique significance not shared by other parts of Scripture. This doctrine makes every word, even every letter, of the Pentateuch necessary, as a part of God's name. Yet since it does not attribute meaning to every word, as the Rabbis and Malbim do, it does not imply omnisignificance in the classic sense of the term.
118. See above, n. 109 and n. 112. This highlights an essential difference between the talmudic rule *diberah Torah ki-leshon benei adam*, which is always invoked to reject a particular halakhic derivation (*limmud*), and the medieval exegetes, who never question the authority of the *derashot*. The medieval exegetes thus validate their method even according to the talmudic view that rejects the principle of *diberah Torah ki-leshon benei adam*. Rashbam and Abraham Ibn Ezra, for example, would argue that the talmudic debate in each case refers only to the *derash* level, but that for determining the *pesbat*, all talmudic authorities would accept normal conventions of human language.
E. Toubou, 253, observes that, unlike the medieval exegetes, modern traditional commentators, such as Rabbis Y. Mecklenberg, N.Z.Y. Berlin (see above, n. 27), Malbim, S. Hirsch and D. Hoffmann, attempt to identify the halakhic *derashot* as the *pesbat* of the Pentateuchal text. Rejecting the axiom of Rashbam and Nahmanides that the Pentateuch conveys *pesbat* and *derash* as two distinct, legitimate levels of meaning, they argue instead that it can be interpreted only according to the *derashot she-ha-Torah nidreshet baben*. This approach, no doubt, fostered the modern compromise position that the Pentateuch must be interpreted as an omnisignificant divine code, even if the Prophets and Writings can be analyzed according to literary principles.
119. We use the phrase "biblical authors" to refer to the prophets and sages who composed the Prophets and Writings and to God Himself, the author of the Pentateuch. The maxim *diberah Torah ki-leshon benei adam* suggests that even the Pentateuch itself adopts a human voice; and, if so, its divine author can be said to have aimed for aesthetic beauty measurable in human terms.
120. For an analysis of this endeavor, see U. Simon, *Arba Gishot*, 29-35, 148-57.
121. This idea is articulated in the "first recension" of Abraham Ibn Ezra's introduction to Psalms (U. Simon, *Arba Gishot*, 238).
122. The relationship between the content and artistic style of Scripture can be illustrated in terms of Dr. N. Lamm's discussion of personal *shelemut* ("wholeness") as a balance between Torah study and developing other talents, such as music or art. Granting the merit of artistic endeavors, while regarding Torah study as a supreme value, he asserts that one might best "develop . . . his full religious personality" by allocating effort in both areas, a dynamic balance Lamm depicts in the following manner:
A metaphor . . . for such an approach is a Platonic one, adopted by R. Yehuda Halevi . . . of the person of *shelemut* presiding over his character

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

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

123. While this relationship may seem ironic, at first glance, it is not unusual within traditional Jewish thought. Rav Kook, for example, expresses this notion exactly in formulating his concept of *kiddush ba-hol* ("sanctifying the mundane"): "The sacred must be established on the foundation of the profane." They are related to each other as matter is to form—the secular is matter, the sacred is form—and "the stronger the secular, the more significant the sacred." See N. Lamm, *Torah Umadda*, 128.
124. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton, 1974), s.v. "New Criticism," 568. For a useful survey of modern critical theories, including bibliography, see also *ibid.*, s.v. "Modern Poetics," 514-23.
125. *The Bible From Within* (Jerusalem, 1984), 22. Weiss, a Rabbi in Hungary before World War I who subsequently taught Bible at the Hebrew University, uses his literary approach to combat source criticism, which assigns multiple authors to biblical books based on stylistic discrepancies. Citing New Critical theory, Weiss argues instead that these reflect literary ingenuity and complexity.
126. As C. Brooks writes in his now famous essay, "The Heresy of Paraphrase": "To refer the structure of the poem to what is finally a paraphrase of the poem is to refer it to something outside the poem. . . . Most of our difficulties in criticism are rooted in the heresy of paraphrase." See his *The Well Wrought Urn* (New York, 1947), 201.
127. For example, S. Rozik, "Mi-darkei ha-Midrash u-mi-Darkei ha-Sifrut be-Parshanut ha-Mikra," *Eet Mikra* 21 (1976): 71-78, compares Buber's close readings with midrash. See also R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, 1981), 11, who notes a midrashic precedent for his close readings. Naturally, there are significant differences between the midrashic and modern approaches, as both Alter and Rozik observe.
128. *The Bible From Within*, 23.
129. Malbim on Isaiah, Introduction, p. 1.
130. See, e.g., studies of parallelism in R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York, 1985) and A. Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Bloomington, 1985). Both of these follow J. Kugel's seminal work, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (cited above, n. 54). Kugel already notes the rabbinic precedent for the modern view of parallelism, and devotes an entire chapter to Malbim, although he observes differences between the rabbinic approach (including that of Malbim) and the modern one, based on modern literary methods.
131. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 12-13.
132. Naturally, non-traditional scholars, denying the Bible's divine authorship, regard it as nothing more than *leshon benei adam*. But traditional scholars like M. Weiss and N. Leibowitz (see below, n. 133), rely on this maxim in their application of New Critical principles to Bible.
133. This confluence is perhaps best illustrated by Neḥamah Leibowitz who applies

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

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