

THE REBIRTH OF OMNISIGNIFICANT BIBLICAL EXEGESIS IN THE NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES*

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James Kugel has proposed the term “omnisignificance” to describe the essential standpoint of the rabbinic exegesis of Scripture. According to him, “omnisignificance” constitutes

the basic assumption underlying all of rabbinic exegesis that the slightest details of the biblical text have a meaning that is both comprehensible and significant. Nothing in the Bible...ought to be explained as the product of chance, or, for that matter, as an emphatic or rhetorical form, or anything similar, nor ought its reasons to be assigned to the realm of Divine unknowables. Every detail is put there to teach something new and important, and it is capable of being discovered by careful analysis.¹

If we equate Kugel’s “something new and important” with aggadic

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¹ This term has gained some currency through its use by Kugel in his *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (New Haven and London, 1981), pp. 103-4. Most recently, Richard Steiner has studied one consequence of the principle at “ground level,” and traced its use even among those exegetes most devoted to “pashtanic” readings. See his “Meaninglessness, Meaningfulness, and Super-Meaningfulness in Scripture: An Analysis of the Controversy Surrounding Dan 2:12 in the Middle Ages,” *JQR* 82 (1992), pp. 431-50, and see my “‘It Is No Empty Thing’: Nahmanides and the Search for Omnisignificance,” *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 4 (1993), pp. 1-83.

or halakhic truths, his definition is a restatement of the rabbinic interpretation of Deut 32:47: “For it is not an empty thing for you, it is your very life, and if [it appears] devoid [of moral or halakhic meaning]—it is you [who have not worked out its moral or legal significance].”² Thus, Kugel’s “meaning that is both comprehensible and significant” in rabbinic terms has a sharply limited and highly focused range of admissible interpretation, because it is restricted to interpretations which give the text a moral or legal dimension.

This may be illustrated by a comment attributed to R. Shimon b. Laqish, the second-generation Eretz Israel amora.³ “There are verses (*mikra’ot*) which are worthy of being burnt, but they are [after all] essential components of Torah (*hen hen gufei Torah*).” Resh Lakish (or the Bavli⁴) then attempts to tease moral significance from the geographical and historical data recorded in Deut 2:23 and Num 21:26. These verses are explained as demonstrating how God arranged matters so that Israel could conquer Philistine and Moabite land while still maintaining the oath which Abraham swore to Abimelech (Gen 21:23) and the prohibition of “vexing Moab” at Deut 2:9.

Thus, “omnificance” not only describes a fundamental assumption of the rabbinic view of Scripture, but also serves to guide rabbinic interpretation into certain fairly well-defined channels, and establishes a hierarchy of preference in regard to exegetical alternatives.

It also presents a challenge. Having claimed such profundity for *all* of Scripture, the rabbinic program may be expected to deliver on its promise. However, for reasons having to do with the problematics of the concept itself, and certain historical developments, that promise was never fulfilled. Omnificance remains an ideal *which was never actually realized*. Not every feature of Scripture was interpreted by the rabbis either halakhically or aggadically. Our collections of midrashim hardly constitute a comprehensive omnificant corpus;

² Yerushalmi Ketubot 8:11 (32c), based on Deut 32:47.

³ Hullin 60b.

⁴ This comment is not known from any Eretz Israel source, nor is R. Shimon b. Laqish recorded as having made any comments on the verses that are used to illustrate this dictum in the Bavli. The conversion of such stray comments into a systematic omnificant program in the Bavli may be due to the efforts of Rava in the fourth generation; see my forthcoming “Rava veva-Heqer ha-Artziyisraeli be-Midrash Halakhah,” in I. Gafni and L. H. Schiffman, eds., *Ba-Golah u-Vatefutzot*, Jerusalem, 2002.

not only do they fail to deal with many verses, and even whole biblical chapters, but features which are considered significant—legally or morally—in one context are ignored in others. And even when truly omnisignificant commentaries were attempted, chiefly in response to the challenges of the nineteenth century, many passages remained relatively untouched—even in the Pentateuch.

Moreover, by insisting on the primacy of halakhic and theological/ethical modes of interpretation over all others, including historical and aesthetic, the doctrine of omnisignificance sharpened the problem even while providing some methods to overcome it. On the one hand, the plain meaning of the text was not necessarily an impediment to its omnisignificant interpretation. On the other hand, since allegory on a large scale never became popular, the problem posed by biblical—especially Pentateuchal—passages of clearly historical, genealogical, or geographical import could not easily be solved.

Again, even when theological or moralistic readings were given to these passages, the question remained of why halakhic passages were often provided with a large number of interpretations per verse or even per word, while non-halakhic passages were interpreted so that as many as 90 verses at once were deemed to bring home only one basic point, as in the case of the list of donations to the Tabernacle listed in Numbers 7. It is one thing to explain the meaning of such repetitive lists (to honor each tribe equally, etc.); it is another to explain why the same principle could not have been laid down more efficiently.

In an earlier paper, I examined the methods adopted and adapted by the influential thirteenth-century exegete, halakhist, and mystic, Nahmanides, in his search for a solution to some of these problems.⁵ After the fourteenth century, concern with the biblical text receded, and those interested in biblical commentary concentrated their efforts on the Pentateuch, first and foremost, and to a great extent on producing supercommentaries on Rashi. However, towards the end of the eighteenth century—prompted by the rise of the Haskalah and the challenges it presented—attention once again began to turn to the biblical text itself. Was every word of Scripture, every turn of phrase, significant—and in what way? The purpose of the following remarks is to examine some of the approaches employed by various figures in answering that question.

⁵ “It Is No Empty Thing,” pp. 13-82.

I

The Haskalah—the Jewish “Enlightenment” of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—posed a threat and caused traditionalists to seek to defend the authority and authenticity of rabbinic teaching. As a result, the tension between the theoretical claims and the actual achievements of the omnisignificance doctrine were set in bolder relief. As just noted, omnisignificance had lain dormant since the fourteenth century. But now, the rise of what might be called a modern sensibility (identified by traditionalist opponents with Reform Judaism and, secondarily, with modern biblical studies as represented by some parts of Mendelssohn’s *Be’ur*) forced traditionalists to return to an arena that had been largely neglected—the biblical text itself and the meaning of each and every word.

It was precisely in those areas where the Bible’s wording fell short of the omnisignificant ideal that some nineteenth-century thinkers sought to stress the human element of revelation.

In some respects—particularly in its rejection of rabbinic exegesis and the authority of the Oral Torah—Reform Judaism and the sensibility it represented resembled the Karaite challenge. Potentially, then, it might have been dealt with using the methods developed long before. However, as Jay Harris has pointed out,⁶ these methods included a marginalization of midrashic exegesis, something no longer acceptable to most modern defenders of the faith. By asserting that all the halakhot which seem to have been derived by midrash were actually transmitted by (oral) tradition from Sinai, and that the rabbinic derivations were only provided as *asmakhtot*, nineteenth-century defenders of rabbinic tradition transferred the midrashim on which key parts of the halakhic system were based from human to divine origins, thus ensuring, at least in their opinion, its absolute authority—this despite clear talmudic evidence to the contrary in the form of long passages devoted to uncovering the midrashic basis of so many mishnaic rules. It may be worthwhile to pause a moment and examine, at least cursorily, the approach that these nineteenth-century exegetes implicitly rejected.

In the tenth century, R. Saadiah Gaon and others had attempted to blunt the force of the Karaite denigration of such methods by such a strategy. As R. Saadiah writes in the introduction to his *Tafsir*, “In all

⁶ See Jay M. Harris, *How Do We Know This?: Midrash and the Fragmentation of Modern Judaism*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1995, especially pp. 173-250, though the entire book is relevant to our theme.

we find seven essential elements which require us [to resort] to tradition in regard [to the proper understanding] of mitzvot whose reason is unknown (*shim'iyot*).” He then proceeds to enumerate the various parameters with regard to the performance of the mitzvot which can be known only through tradition—matters such as the proper manufacture of ritual objects, the manner of observance, pertinent measures of whatever sort, including time, mitzvot whose biblical source is obscure, or whose nature, as described in Scripture, is obscure, etc.⁷

Most revealing is his attack on Karaite methods of biblical exegesis, in particular their use of analogy.⁸ Since many midrashic *middot* may be categorized as forms of analogy (*hekesh*, *gezerah shavah*, *binyan av* or *mah matzinu*) or work by analogy (*kelal u-ferat* and its near relations, *ribbuy* and *mi'ut*, etc.), we may understand his strategic retreat from this battleground and his insistence on tradition alone. Depriving halakhic midrash of real authority prepared the ground for his counterattack on Karaite legal exegesis.⁹

This view continued to exercise influence so long as Karaism remained a threat, and its traces are to be found in the works of later Geonim, R. Shmuel ha-Nagid, R. Yehudah ha-Levi, and Ibn Ezra, as Harris points out.¹⁰

As the Karaite challenge receded, or in places in which it was not of concern, this view of the *pro forma* nature of rabbinic midrash did not take hold. As might be expected, this holds true for those most concerned with explicating the intricacies of the talmudic text as such, rather than studying it as a nascent law code. Rashi, the Tosafists and those who followed in their path, could scarcely ignore the sheer amount of space and effort devoted to the topic within the Talmuds and halakhic *midrashim*. However, all that this effort could achieve was to keep alive a certain interest in retrieving the methods used. Reviving them seemed out of the question, since, as noted above, the

⁷ See Moshe Zucker, *Perushei Rav Sa'adiah Gaon li-Bereishit* (New York, 1984), pp. 181-4; the sentence quoted is from 181, and see the general discussion in Jay M. Harris, *How Do We Know This?: Midrash and the Fragmentation of Modern Judaism*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1995, pp. 76-80.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 188-190.

⁹ It is ironic that R. Saadiah felt compelled to jettison vital elements of the very tradition he was defending—and that truncated version of tradition became yet another tradition. This process has recurred many times in Jewish history.

¹⁰ See *How Do We Know*, pp. 73-102.

process of limiting them had set in long before, already in the time of the early amoraim.¹¹

Thus, when faced with the anti-rabbinic challenges of nineteenth-century heterodox movements, one influential representative of Orthodox thinking on the matter, R. Y. I. Halevy Rabinowitz (1847-1914), author of *Dorot Rishonim*, took a similar stance.¹² Note the following, the first from a volume published in 1875/6.

All the *derashot* in the Talmud [intended] to provide prooftexts (*lehasmikh*) for the words of the Mishnah are only “hints” in the biblical texts, and in essence [these laws] are really traditions [that have been transmitted from Sinai]....As for the mishnah itself, which in this case (=Terumot 6:6) is [based on] the essential [i.e., original] Mishnah (*mi-yesod ha-Mishnah*), there is no prooftext or hint, but rather [the Mishnah as a whole is made up of] abstract (*peshutot*) *halakhot* [handed down by tradition without prooftext]. This is not so in regard to the words of R. Eliezer and R. Akiva [in this mishnah], which are not part of the essential [i.e., original] Mishnah, but [reflect] investigations [based] on the laws of the essential Mishnah.”¹³

Again:

And everywhere in which we find that [halakhic questions] are posed, or a doubt [is raised requiring] a new investigation [of a legal matter], it seems that they solved the question either from the words of the essential Mishnah which were accepted by all, or from traditions which they themselves received [and which were not generally known]. Or they did not provide a solution at all, and answered, “We have not heard.” For all the disputes of the tannaim involve only what each one learned according to his methodology [of interpreting] the essential Mishnah or from his own traditions (*hinneh rak mah she-lamad kol ehad al pi*

¹¹ See for now my discussion in “It Is No Empty Thing,” p. 5, and “Le-Toledot ha-Ribbuy ba-Talmud ha-Bavli,” *Proceedings of the Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Jerusalem, 1994, pp. 87-94.

¹² See Y. I. Halevy, *Dorot Rishonim*, Ic (Frankfurt, 5666 [=1875/6], repr. Israel, n.d.), pp. 292-307, IV (Frankfurt, 1918, repr. Jerusalem, 5727), pp. 470-543.

¹³ *Ibid.* Ic, p. 295.

shitato be-divrei yesod ha-Mishnah umi-tokh kabbalotav), and the *derashah* is nothing but a hint for the matter...for from biblical proof-texts (*derashah di-qera'ei*) we learn *nothing* [italics mine—Y.E.].¹⁴

Whatever value Halevy's thesis may have had from a tactical standpoint in repelling the challenge of Karaism or its modern-day analogues, it fails to account for the voluminous material available in rabbinic literature which takes the question of the biblical origins of *halakhot* quite seriously and deal with the problem quite earnestly.¹⁵

However, the modern challenge was far more serious. While the Karaites rejected rabbinic interpretation and authority, nineteenth-century thought challenged those and more; scriptural authority and divinity were eventually threatened as well. The new challenge thus required a response broader than R. Saadiah's polemics against Karaism.¹⁶

To employ R. Saadiah's tactic without a commitment to renewed Bible study would continue the marginalization of Scripture which had indeed begun in the wake of the Karaite challenge, or rather, after it had been beaten back.¹⁷ But even in the tenth century, R. Saadiah coupled his attack on Karaism with a comprehensive attempt at producing an up-to-date rabbanite commentary on the Bible. This need was felt by nineteenth-century defenders of the faith as well, though coming after nearly a thousand years of neglect of general biblical study by the elite of Rabbinic Judaism, even this was, with one

¹⁴ Ibid., IV, p. 487.

¹⁵ See Chanoch Albeck, *Mavo la-Mishnah* (Jerusalem, 5727), pp. 53-61, esp. pp. 55-6.

¹⁶ While the debate first concentrated on the illogical character of rabbinic midrash, it did not end there. However, any Jewish modernist program will at some time have to deal with the question of the authority of the Bible and the nature of biblical religion. See *How Do We Know*, pp. 137-172, where Harris concentrates on the challenge to midrash, but notes the difficulties of proposing a biblical base for nineteenth century "Mosaic religion."

¹⁷ See for example Mordechai Breuer's "Mine^cu Beneikhem min ha-Higayon," in Y. D. Gilat and E. Stern, eds., *Mikhtam le-David: Sefer Zikaron la-Rav David Ochs zal*, Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan, 1977, pp. 242-61, and especially the geonic interpretation (in the name of R. Zemah b. R. Paltoi Gaon) of the warning against *higayon* in *Berakhot* 28b as referring to Scripture, not, as Rashi maintains, because it was "attractive" to younger students and thus would deflect them from the more onerous task of Talmud-study, but because it tended to "heresy"! See *ibid.*, p. 242.

prominent exception, restricted to the Pentateuch, and, more particularly, to a defense of rabbinic halakhic exegesis. To do so without once again, at least to some extent, taking up the omniscient challenge, was impossible, and it thus fell to the lot of nineteenth-century scholars such as R. Yaakov Zevi Mecklenberg (1785-1865), R. Meir Leibush Weiser (1809-1879, known by the acronym “Malbim”), and Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) to attempt to come to grips with omniscience again.¹⁸

In the following pages I wish to focus on four crucial figures in the modern history of the omniscience doctrine: Malbim (1809-1879), R. Zadok Hakohen of Lublin (1823-1900), the Netziv (the acronym of R. Naftali Zevi Yehudah Berlin, 1817-1893), and R. Meir Simhah of Dvinsk. A fifth figure, not usually considered alongside these champions of Eastern European Orthodoxy, who was indeed a German Reform rabbi, nevertheless furthered the omniscient enterprise to an important extent—Benno Jacob (1862-1945), whose massive commentaries on Genesis and Exodus do far more than combat the Documentary Hypothesis. Each of these, in his own way and to a varying extent, responded to the challenge outlined above. In the following pages I hope to begin the analysis and assessment of their contributions.

II

Malbim was certainly one of the most interesting intellectual figures produced by nineteenth-century European Orthodoxy, an era hardly lacking in interesting and compelling intellectual figures.¹⁹ Born in 1809 in Volochisk, a small town in Volhynia, orphaned at six, married at fourteen and shortly after divorced, he spent his teenage years in Warsaw, where he could undoubtedly observe the Haskalah movement gathering adherents. He served as a rabbi in East Prussia during the forties and fifties, where he could observe the progress of the Reform

¹⁸ S. R. Hirsch made an extremely interesting attempt to fashion his own midrashic system, based on his understanding of the nature of the Hebrew language, a far more radical attempt than Malbim’s in some ways. It too requires separate treatment.

¹⁹ The intellectual biography of Malbim published a decade-and-a-half ago by N. H. Rosenbloom is well worth the perusal. See N. H. Rosenbloom, *Ha-Malbim: Rabbi Meir Leibush Malbim, Parshanut, Filosofia, Madda u-Mistorin be-Kitvei ha-Rav Meir Leibush Malbim*, Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1989.

movement; indeed, he refers to the Reform conference at Brunswick in 1848 as a prime motivating force in his work.

Malbim forthrightly announced the governing assumptions which guide his work in his introduction to Isaiah, the first of his commentaries to be published on Prophets. The program he set forth was thoroughly omnisignificant, and involved, for Isaiah, a rejection of biblical parallelism in its conventional sense. According to Malbim, Scripture brooks no repetitions.²⁰

The central beams upon which th[is] commentary is based are three:

1. In prophetic discourse there is no such thing as “repetition of the same idea in different words” (*kefel ‘inyan be-milim shonot*), no repetitions of speech, no rhetorical repetitions, no two passages with the same meaning, no two parables with the same interpretation, and not even any synonyms;
2. Prophetic discourse and sayings, simple or double, contain no words or actions which are set down by accident, without a particular intention, [so much so] that all words and nouns and verbs of which each passage is composed, are not only necessary for that passage, but it was not possible for the divine poet to substitute any other word for [for the word used], for all the words of the divine poetry are weighed in the scales of wisdom and knowledge, carefully arranged, counted and numbered according to the measure of supernal wisdom, which only it has the power to achieve.
3. Prophetic discourse has no husk without content, body without soul, no garment without a wearer (*levush be-lo’ mitlabbesh*), no utterance devoid of an elevated concept, [no] speech in which discernment does not dwell, for the prophetic words of the Living God all have the Living God within them....²¹

Kugel, in his history of the study of parallelism, notes that Malbim was “clearly aware of the binary structure and semantic pairing of parallelism..., [but] he frequently stated that repetition as such did not exist.” He “rejected utterly the approach to biblical style that had been adopted increasingly by Jews and Christians since the Renaissance.”²² In particular, as Noah Rosenbloom has noted, Malbim rejected Moses

²⁰ See Kugel, pp. 288-92.

²¹ See Kugel, pp. 288-9, for a slightly different version.

²² Kugel, p. 289.

Mendelssohn's use of Robert Lowth's ideas of biblical poetry and literary style.²³

His claims were supported by an equally bold theological claim, one that he makes explicit in his introduction to his commentary on Jeremiah, namely, that the prophets were verbally inspired, somewhat in the manner of Moses. He could hardly have been oblivious to the revolutionary nature of this claim: the Talmud reports a tradition that each prophet prophesied in his own *signon* ("no two prophets prophesy with the same signet"²⁴). From the subsequent discussion, the word *signon*, which has come to mean "style," was apparently taken to mean "form of words, formula" by the anonymous redactors of the Bavli, but which is close enough to the modern sense of the word "style" to constitute a theological problem for Malbim. It may well be that Malbim would not have recognized the difference between the ancient and the medieval uses of the word.²⁵ The clear implication is that each prophetic utterance was shaped by the personality of the prophet. Malbim asserts that this is because God in His graciousness presents each prophet with a prophecy which conforms to his own personality.

Thus, in order to shore up the authority of the Bible, including the Prophets, Malbim "promoted" the prophetic authors to the grade Maimonides assigns—uniquely—to Moses, that is, the twelfth degree of prophecy, in which he receives God's revelation with marvelous exactitude and without any human admixture.²⁶ "A prophet can hear only in a dream of prophecy that God has spoken to him. Moses our Master, on the other hand, heard Him from above the ark-cover, from between the two cherubim (Num 12:16), without action on the part of the imaginative faculty."²⁷ Thus, according to Maimonides—whose

²³ Noah H. Rosenbloom, *Ha-Malbim*, pp. 94-6; see also his section on "secularization," pp. 96-9.

²⁴ Sanhedrin 89a, and see below.

²⁵ See Ben Yehudah, *Thesaurus Totius Hebraeitis*, repr. New York: Thomas Yoseloff, V, 3957 s.v. *signon*. See, in particular, Genesis Rabba 97:21, ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 1248, where it is equated to a *siman* by which the Israelites' redeemer from Egypt would be known. This is quite in line with the Graeco-Roman use of the word.

²⁶ See his Commentary on the Mishnah, Sanhedrin 10, Introduction, seventh article of faith, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah 7:6, and Guide of the Perplexed II:35.

²⁷ Guide II:45, near end; see the translation by Shlomo Pines, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, University of Chicago Press, 1969, p. 403.

view had been considered authoritative—the Talmud’s statement that each prophet had his own “signet,” or formulation of the vision he had been shown, was to be taken at face value. Malbim, in his need to set the Prophets and Writings alongside the Pentateuch (at least for an Orthodox audience) ascribed to the prophets precisely those qualities that Maimonides ascribed to Moses alone.

Once this was done, it was fairly simple—in conception if not in execution—to interpret the rest of the Bible as conforming to the same canons of exactitude as the Pentateuch. This did not mean that Malbim applied the formal modes of midrash halakhah, or even midrash aggadah, to the Prophets and the Writings. After all, he did not apply those methods to the Pentateuch itself! For him, as for nearly every other post-talmudic exegete (we shall examine an exception below), those methods were no longer available. Rather, he adopted a stringent omnisignificant approach in which each word was uniquely appropriate to its placement, and each synonym had a particular usage and nuance of its own.

As I have noted, this was not a simple plan to execute, and Malbim was occasionally inconsistent in his own interpretations. Thus, for example, in distinguishing between the verbs *shama^c* and *he’ezin* in Is 1:2 and Deut 32:1, Malbim notes (as did the Rabbis²⁸) that in the Pentateuchal passage, *he’ezin* is linked with the heavens, while in Is 1:2, that same verb is linked with the earth, and *shama^c* is linked with the heavens. “Give ear (*shime^cu*), O heavens, and listen (*ha’azini*), O earth.” Implicitly rejecting the aggadic view adopted by Rashi, Malbim suggested that each verb was uniquely suited to be used in association with either the heavens or the earth.

In his comments on Is 1:10, where *‘am ‘amora^c*, “people of Gomorrah” is linked with *he’ezin*, while *qetzinei sedom*, “captains of Sodom” is linked with *shama^c*, Malbim suggests the following (in the *Be’ur ha-Millot* section of his commentary):

There is a difference between *shemi^cah* (“hearing, listening”) and *ha’azana^c* (“giving ear”), for *shemi^cah* refers to a greater understanding than the verb *he’ezin* (“give ear”), as I explained in my commentary on the Torah (Deut 32:1). When the two verbs appear synonymously in association with two similar subjects, the more exalted subject will receive the verb *shama^c*, and the less exalted one will receive the verb *he’ezin*.

²⁸ See Rashi on Deut 32:1.

Therefore, [the prophet] will address the “captains” with “hear,” and to the [common] people with “give ear.”

There is also a difference between “the word of God” and “the Torah of our Lord.” “The word of God” refers to prophecy, and “Torah” refers to the Torah of Moses.... I have already explained in the Commentary on the Torah [Deut 32:1] that when the two verbs, *shama*^c and *he'ezin* combine to refer to two similar subjects, the first will be used to refer to the more esoteric subject for which greater attention is required in order to understand it, [while the verb] *he'ezin* [will be employed in regard to] the more easily understood subject. Therefore, in regard to “the word of God,” which refers to prophecy, whose words are sealed and closed in, [so that] only the captains can understand them, he told the people to pay close attention in order to comprehend them, and thus he employed the verb *shama*^c. However, [in regard to] God’s Torah, which is understood by all according to its plain meaning, he employs the verb *he'ezin*.

However, despite his cross-references, his comment hardly conforms to the distinction he draws between the two verbs in the Isaiah passage.

Ha'azana refers to the action of listening with close attention, either because of the profundity of the matter [to be explained] or because of the greater distance [between speaker and listener(s)]. And thus, [when Moses said, “Give ear, (*ha'azinu*) o heavens, and I will speak, and let the earth hear (*ve-tishma*^c) the words of my mouth,”] by “heavens” he was referring to the heavenly spheres and to whatever is above the earth, and also to the great ones of Israel who influence the people in regard to Torah and morality, as the heavens [give rain] to the earth.

This contradiction was not lost on Malbim’s followers. R. Joseph Greenbaum, author of a biblical dictionary based on Malbim’s philological researches, first defines *he'ezin* as referring to “the hearing of the ear without any other discernment (*beli musag aher*), and relates to [the attainment of] less understanding than [the verb] *shama*^c,” and then notes the following:

According to this rule, the formulation of the verse “Give ear, o

heavens, etc.” is difficult (*yipalle*’), for at first glance are not the heavens the more exalted and honorable subject? Thus, in [Malbim’s] commentary on the Torah we find the opposite of this rule! Perhaps the solution may be found in the well-known fact that [Malbim’s commentary,] “Ha-Torah veva-Mitzvah” on the Torah was prepared (*mesuddar*) only until the middle of chapter 22 [of Deuteronomy], while the rest was completed by others who collected [interpretations] from here and there from what is found [in his commentary], and also “Ha-Torah Or” was produced by some anthologist or other, and not by our master himself. Therefore matters that are forced and without taste or reason (*dehuqim u-tefelim beli ta’am ve-reah*) appear there, but if the complete commentary of our master would have been found [on Deuteronomy], surely he would have explained the verse there [in Deuteronomy] according to the rule he laid down here [in Isaiah] in such a way as to obviate the contradiction.²⁹

Since Malbim himself refers to his commentary on Deuteronomy in his remarks on Isaiah, I am not sure why Rabbi Greenbaum assumes that he is not the author of the comments on Deut 32:1. Malbim does seem to have overlooked the contradiction when he penned his comments on Isaiah. Moreover, Rabbi Greenbaum’s defense misses the point. The contradiction was caused not so much by inattention as by the application of an approach that denied the existence of stylistic differences between parts of the Hebrew Bible, an extreme omnisignificant position upon which the Rabbis themselves did not insist.³⁰

Thus, for example, we have the talmudic principle that “we do not derive [teachings regarding] words of Torah (i.e., the Pentateuch) from

²⁹ Joseph Greenbaum, *Sefer Ya’ir Or: Ha-Karmel*, repr. Bnei Brak, 5746, vol. I, p. 28, s.v. ‘azan.

³⁰ The *locus classicus* for the rule that “two prophets do not prophesy with the same signet [i.e., form of words]” is Sanhedrin 89a. Identity of formulation on the part of prophets is accounted as evidence of their falsehood! This variety is acknowledged even in theological matters; see Makkot 24a (bottom), regarding inconsistencies between the Pentateuch and various prophetic books, or *Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana*, ed. Mandelbaum, New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1962, p. 355 [Shuvah 7], where the varying and contradictory approaches to sin and atonement of Wisdom, Prophecy, Torah and God are counterposed.

words of Tradition (i.e., verses from the Prophets),” clearly implying a distinct status for the Pentateuch.³¹ Again, many methods of midrash halakhah (*kelal u-ferat* and its related methods, as well as the *heqesh*, *binyan av*, and others), are not deployed outside the Pentateuch (though there are exceptions, *gezerah shavah* and *mi^cut*, for example). Research into the entire question remains a desideratum, but the Pentateuch’s special status is clear.

In any case, the precedent by Malbim’s day was definitely and definitively against the revival of midrashic methods, on the one hand, and for the authoritative use of more modern philological methods in halakhic contexts, on the other. This is amply confirmed by an examination of Malbim’s use of his 613 minute lexicographic and syntactic distinctions in *Ayelet ha-Shahar*, his introduction to Leviticus. He was not willing to employ his methods freely on halakhic passages; he was content to deploy them in defending existing midrash halakhah. Indeed, the very form of his commentary on Exodus through Deuteronomy proves this; he incorporated the classic *midreshei halakhah* into his commentary. Instead of producing a direct commentary on the Torah, for those passages dealt with by the *midreshei halakhah*, Malbim’s commentary deals primarily with the issues raised by them. In those passages his commentary is at best only secondarily concerned with the biblical text. His primary concern is to defend the classic rabbinic use of Scripture for halakhic purposes.

Thus, in the case of Lev 25:37, where the apparent synonyms *neshekh* and *marbit*, “interest,” could rather easily be distinguished—the one referring to the “bite,” the “discount” the interest takes from the borrower, and the other the “increase” the lender receives, or, perhaps, the one referring to monetary increase and the other to agricultural commodities—Malbim deploys the first of these distinctions, and only in passing, while emphasizing that the two terms are identical. The reason for this is clear: the Babylonian Talmud, in Bava Metzia 60b, explicitly declares that, legally speaking, there is no difference between the two terms. Indeed, as I have shown elsewhere, at least one of the Tosafists recognized the problem that this posed for omnisignificant exegesis, and proposed an aesthetic explanation—a phenomenon sufficiently rare to be notable.³²

Malbim does not deal with any of this, but only refers briefly to the *mi^cut* of *kaspekha*, that is, “‘your silver’—but not the silver of

³¹ Hagigah 10b, Bava Qamma 2b.

³² See Tosafot, Bava Metzi’a s.v. *lamah*, and see my discussion of this passage in “It Is No Empty Thing,” pp. 51-2 and esp. nn. 222-4.

others (i.e., non-Jews)” and similar matters raised in *Sifra ad loc.*³³ The one issue Malbim deals with at length in this connection is the question of why both terms had to be used, since, as noted, halakhically they are identical. Whether the long pilpulistic explanation he provides is full of “elevated concept[s]” I leave to others to determine. But the question I raised at the beginning of this essay, the question of omnisignificance and its uneven application, remains. Why are some verses heavy with omnisignificant distinctions, while others, if not devoid of them, are relatively untouched?

Malbim’s aims are primarily defensive and apologetic, and not exegetical. Despite his use of the principle of omnisignificance as the guiding principle of his commentary, he would not—could not—employ it to break new ground when halakhic issues were at stake, or in a thoroughgoing way otherwise. We need but compare the density of his interpretation in the non-legal parts of his Pentateuchal commentary to the weight of classic *midrash halakhah* in the legal passages to confirm that. omnisignificance in Malbim’s hands turns out to be a tactic, not a revival of its classic forms and methods.

On the other hand, it differs from Nahmanides’ revival of the omnisignificant program in the Middle Ages. Nahmanides dealt with issues of proportion, repetition and sequence, as I have shown elsewhere. But he did so within a context that allowed for *peshat* as an independent area of interpretation, a point that Malbim is at pains to disavow. For Malbim, the medieval distinction between *peshat* and *derash* is all but obliterated; in his oft-quoted phrase, to use Harris’ rendering, “the *peshat* that accords with the true and clear rules of

³³ See his brief comments in Lev 25, paragraph 76 (his numbering), but compare his long comment in paragraph 74, which relates to the talmudic passage just noted, and is devoted to producing a modern version of a talmudic *tzerikhuta*, i.e., justifying the Torah’s use of two terms for interest when they are legally identical. As Harris puts it (in *How Do We Know*, p. 222):

Malbim drove home the point [that the Torah were inextricably intertwined] in the commentary itself, which was unique in the history of Jewish Bible exegesis. It was not an effort to explain the biblical text per se; rather, Malbim juxtaposed the text of Leviticus to the *Sifra*, its tannaitic commentary.... To these discrete units of the *Sifra* was juxtaposed, in turn, Malbim’s commentary, which identified the linguistic link between the two antecedent texts, adding, where appropriate, discussion of the talmudic sources relevant to the issues at hand. Malbim was quite conscious of the semiotics of this form of presentation. The Torah and its rabbinic interpretation stand next to one another as two columns upholding a single, unified structure...which is recognized as such on the basis of the linguistic insights afforded by his commentary.

language is only to be found in [what we conventionally refer to as] the *derash*.”³⁴ It is not insignificant that this rule is seldom if ever referred to in his commentaries outside the Torah, since there is little that relates to classic *midrash halakhah* in these parts of the Bible.

Thus, where Nahmanides made room for a totally plain sense interpretation of Lev 14:38, so that the verse is seen to relate in its straightforward meaning to a case of house fungus³⁵ which lasts only a week, Malbim excludes this possibility in his comments on the passage. Instead, he suggests that in that case, the house has to be quarantined for another week.³⁶ He does so by insisting that 14:43 must imply that the house could not be ritually clean without scraping and replastering. Nahmanides suggests that the Torah simply does not deal at all with the case of a fungus which does not spread after the first week, but that the Rabbis dealt with such a case by means of a *gezerah shavah*.

Nevertheless, it is in this that Malbim champions his own omnisignificant reading of the verse. In essence, he defends the *gezerah shavah* by pointing to the parallel syntactic structures of 14:39 and 14:44. “The priest returns on the seventh day, and sees, behold, the fungus has spread in the walls of the house.... The priest comes and sees, behold, the fungus has spread in the house....” As a consequence, the verbs of 14:40 (“and he shall command that they remove the stones on which there is a fungus...and plaster the house”) are taken as *imperfects* rather than perfects.

Note that what had been problem-free for the tannaim—the reinterpretation of a biblical passage designed to describe a one-week process into one which involved a three-week process by means of a *gezerah shavah*—became one that required specific justification for Malbim. Having identified the “real *peshat*” with rabbinic *derash*, Malbim forced *midrash halakhah* into unfamiliar philological

³⁴ Malbim, *Ha-Torah v'ha-Mitzvah*, p. 2a; see *How Do We Know*, p. 221.

³⁵ As Jacob Milgrom renders it in his Anchor Bible commentary on Leviticus; see Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, New York: Doubleday, 1991, pp. 828-9.

³⁶ See his long comment on Lev 14, paragraph 105. He states flatly that “its rule is like that of clothing fungus: if it does not spread during the first [week] he quarantines it a second time.” Compare Nahmanides’ comment *ad v.* 43, “The Torah does not explain the case of a fungus which remains as it was during the first week and expands during the second.” See “It Is No Empty Thing,” pp. 40-46.

territory. To some extent, then, the canons of *peshat* became *normative* for omnisignificant interpretation in a way that his predecessors had never imagined. Thus, his solution raised new problems. There is no doubt, however, that to him the pressing challenge to rabbinic authority and authenticity warranted such a step.

Nevertheless, his failure to address the other major problem connected with omnisignificance is more difficult to understand, though it must be linked to his halakhic concerns. His method(s) failed to provide an omnisignificant purpose for those passages that had no apparent connection to Halakhah, or to rabbinic or rabbinic-style ethical and theological teachings by which the oddities of such passages might be explained. To fulfill his stated purpose, another element would have had to be added to his commentary. Thus, in his discussion of the list of stations in the Israelites' wilderness journeys in Numbers 33, Malbim suggests that the Israelites' forty-year stay in the desert was due to their low spiritual level after their Egyptian sojourn, and the need for spiritual healing. The list of stations in the wilderness marks a spiritual pilgrimage, and each word is necessary.

In this, Malbim is adapting Rashi's reading of the chapter, based, as Rashi himself notes, on Tanhuma: "Why were these journeys recorded? To teach [us] God's deeds of lovingkindness."³⁷ Malbim adds Maimonides' apologetic element: the list of journeys and wonders performed in these stations along the way lends verisimilitude to the Bible's claims regarding the miraculous nature of the Exodus.³⁸ However, a more or less bare list of camping places does not quite fit either bill, and Malbim apparently felt the need for something more, and presented a "*midrash peli'ah*" published by one R. Sh. Osterfaller, which stresses the mystical aspects of the number 42, which represents both the number of stations recorded and the number of letters in one of the mystical names of God. In the end, however, Malbim does not deal with any of the stations in detail, and the interpretation remains somewhat detached from the text, a situation for which he can hardly be faulted. Maimonides himself noted in regard to the list of Edomite kings in Gen 36 that it is noteworthy that none of their kings was a native Edomite, and as a consequence, they were tyrants:

In my opinion it is probable that their conduct and their histories were generally known—I mean that the conduct of

³⁷ Rashi on Num 33:1; see Tanhuma Mas^cei 3.

³⁸ Guide of the Perplexed III:50; see Pines ed., pp. 615-6.

those kings of Edom, and that they tyrannized over the children of Esau and humiliated them. Accordingly in mentioning them, it says as it were: Consider your brethren, the children of Esau, whose kings were this one and that one—whose actions were generally known. For no individual has ever been the chief of a religious community to whose race he did not belong, without doing it great or small injury.³⁹

Maimonides explains that the tyranny of these kings was well known at the time, and did not have to be stated; likewise, one might assume (though he does not say so explicitly), that the locations of the camping places were known as well. They could be used to prove, as Maimonides suggests, that the Israelites did not wander around in the wilderness without guidance from God, nor did they have recourse to settlements for water and food, but God provided both food (the manna) and water (the well) for them.

This is satisfactory in a general way; but the mode of systematic omnisignificance requires more: it requires that each and every detail be accounted for. This, of course, could be done neither by Maimonides nor by Malbim. Each did his best. But Maimonides did not insist that every detail of every biblical text be accounted for, while Malbim did, and thus the onus on the latter is all the greater. Maimonides' stance may be gauged by his approving attitude to Ibn Ezra's biblical commentaries, despite Ibn Ezra's avowed anti-omnisignificant statements.⁴⁰ Moreover, we may compare the attitude toward the use of parables by Maimonides and Maharal.

Know that the prophetic parables are of two kinds. In some of these parables each word has a meaning, while in others the parable as a whole indicates the whole of the intended meaning. In such a parable very many words are to be found, not every one of which adds something to the intended meaning. They serve rather to embellish the parable and to render it more coherent or to conceal further the intended meaning; hence the speech proceeds in such a way as to accord with everything required by the parable's external meaning. Understand this well.⁴¹

³⁹ Ibid., Pines, p. 615.

⁴⁰ See Ibn Ezra's comments in his Long Commentary to Exod 20:1, s.v. *amar Avraham ha-Mehabber*.

⁴¹ *Guide of the Perplexed*, ed. Pines, Introduction to the First Part, p. 12.

Maimonides' view, that details may merely serve as embellishment, did not prevail, either in regard to parables or to any other hallowed text. Quite apart from the controversies surrounding the *Guide*, it would seem that this view ran counter to the deeper currents of Jewish textual interpretation, which demanded holistic textual exegesis which gives meaning to every element and simply abhors the idea that "not every [word] adds something to the intended meaning."

This is a far cry from what became the mainstream interpretation of Aggadah. Compare Jacob Elbaum's characterization of the Maharal's exegesis:

In fine, the strange episodes, the far-fetched statements, *the details and stylistic usage which appear as no more than ornamentation are all intended to convey deeper meanings. Nothing, not even the seemingly most trivial detail, is mentioned in vain.*⁴²

We may thus term Malbim's methods "neo-omnisignificant."

III

As noted above, Malbim's concern was primarily with the halakhic parts of the Torah, at least in his commentary on the Pentateuch. In this his contribution was not inconsiderable; in essence he applied [his own version] of the medieval grammarians' understanding of the Hebrew language to the task of explanation and justification of classic *midrash halakhah*. In the non-halakhic portions of the Pentateuch, his commentary is nonetheless a *novum* in that it employs some of the categories of medieval and even modern conceptions of society and politics to elucidate the background against which the stories of patriarchal and other figures are narrated.

In his commentaries on the later prophets and Writings, he consistently applied his omnisignificant principles to a text which was often neither halakhic nor narrative, with varying results. Thus, for example, though in his introduction to his commentary on Jeremiah he

⁴² See Jacob Elbaum, "Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague and his Attitude to the Aggadah," in Joseph Heinemann and Dov Noy, eds., *Studies in Aggadah and Folk-Literature*, Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1971, pp. 28-47; the quotation is from p. 39. The italics are mine.

attacks Abarbanel for apparently denying the divine origin of *qeri u-ketiv*, he himself does not attempt to explain them except when a classical explanation already exists.

Malbim insists that there are no exact synonyms in Biblical Hebrew, and thus no real “synonymous parallelism.” While the first proposition can be defended, since very few words have exactly the same usage and semantic range, his insistence that every verse in “synonymous parallelism” contains in reality a double message requires him to make extremely fine distinctions between synonyms. In the context of biblical parallelism, these synonyms serve the same purpose in both cola, and the result is that his interpretation of one pair of synonyms works at cross-purposes with its parallel, and is sometimes contradictory. We have already seen such a case above. But beyond that, it blinds him to other aspects of the biblical text such as chiasmic structures, assonance, dissonance, and the like. The literary and theological questions which Rashi and Nahmanides had raised scarcely figured in this attempt. For example, like Abarbanel, Malbim interprets every resumptive repetition in the standard casuistic way, as comprising two supplementary passages, rather than allowing for a literary explanation.⁴³

Thus, neither Malbim, nor, we may add, his contemporaries and successors succeeded in producing a thoroughly omnisignificant commentary to the entire Pentateuch, let alone the Bible as a whole. Still, Malbim and others did not work in a vacuum, and we may discern in them traces of three pursuits that had special importance in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Eastern Europe. One is inevitably the halakhic, one the historical, and one the mystical.

The halakhic approach in late nineteenth-century Eastern Europe attempted to extend halakhic interpretation to narrative passages. First and foremost were the patriarchal narratives, in which the Patriarchs’ actions were seen as motivated almost exclusively by halakhic concerns. Unlike R. Saadiah Gaon, who appended halakhic expositions to these narratives when he felt they were appropriate, as when he enters into a discussion of the rules governing mourning in Gen 23:2, when Abraham buries Sarah,⁴⁴ these works see halakhic

⁴³ See Malbim’s comments on Gen 37:6 and 39:1, Exod 1:1f., and 6:29-30. Neither R. Yaakov Zevi Mecklenberg nor R. Naftali Zevi Yehudah Berlin (Netziv) accept this possibility, and prefer more omnisignificant readings. See nn. 120-22 below.

⁴⁴ See Moshe Zucker, ed., *Perushei Rav Sa’adiah Gaon li-Bereshit*, p. 404; see Zucker’s discussion of this approach in R. Saadiah Gaon’s exegesis in

motivations as an integral part of these narratives.

The quasi-historical approach was already initiated by Malbim, but it was further developed by Netziv, who, quite naturally, interpreted the Pentateuchal narratives from the viewpoint of his own Eastern-European experience. Thus, for example, Pharaoh's dislike of the Israelites is connected with their having moved out of "the Pale of settlement" in Goshen, and chosen to live among the Egyptians!⁴⁵ What is more striking, however, is the historicist approach employed by R. Meir Simhah of Dvinsk in his *Meshekh Hokhmah*, an approach which we will examine in greater detail below in section VI.

Finally, there is the mystical approach, which sees each work and letter of the Pentateuch as embodying the "secrets of the Torah" which are also the "secrets of Creation," since the Torah itself served as the Creator's blueprint. We will explore this approach in section IV.

Each in its own way attempted to tackle the omnisigificant challenge, to give meaning to texts which had no obvious halakhic, theological or moral message to impart.

R. Yehudah Copperman, who has published a number of articles dealing with nineteenth- and twentieth-century Eastern-European Pentateuchal commentaries, has suggested that these attempts were not direct responses to contemporary challenges, but issued in some measure from within the fold of Jewish learning, especially that of the school of the Vilna Gaon.⁴⁶ He has contrasted the approaches of Western and Central Europe, where the impetus to the production of such commentaries as *Ha-Ketav veka-Kabbalah* and those of the Malbim arose from the need to respond to the challenge of heterodox movements, with that of Eastern Europe, where the comparative intellectual and spiritual vibrancy of the Lithuanian fortress of Torah allowed for the development of an indigenous "Torah" approach to the Pentateuch.⁴⁷

his introduction, pp. 13-7. This was undoubtedly connected with his anti-Karaite polemics.

⁴⁵ See his comments on Exod 1:7 s.v. *va-timalle'* in his *Ha'ameq Davar*.

⁴⁶ *Li-Peshuto shel Mikra*, Jerusalem: Haskel, 1974, pp. 76-80.

⁴⁷ It should be noted that while the issue of *peshat* and *derash* seems to dominate nineteenth-century discussions of these issues, it is only because the fight had to be carried to the attackers' home ground, in the case of openly apologetic works such as the Malbim's, and because the word "*peshat*" had long since lost the meaning given to it by the Rishonim. Thus, when D. W. Halivni states that "their execution of what constitutes *peshat* might be faulty, but their devotion to *peshat* was complete and consuming" (*Peshat and*

However, if Lithuania was a fortress in the second half of the nineteenth century, it was a fortress besieged, and its inhabitants knew it. The number of “*maskilim*” was increasing, as were defections. Pressure for secular education was increasing. And not all *rashei yeshiva* were totally opposed to some secular learning, or were unaware of trends in the outside world.⁴⁸ If we find a new, more historically minded sensibility in the writings of such staunch pillars of Eastern-European Orthodoxy as Netziv and R. Meir Simhah, there is good reason. And if there is a new interest in responding to the omnisignificant challenge, it is hardly to be supposed that this was not to some extent the effect of external pressures. Indeed, Rabbi Copperman’s apparent assumption that the Vilna Gaon’s approach was totally indigenous is also somewhat disingenuous. The Vilna Gaon was hardly oblivious to events in Western Europe.

Indeed, there are more similarities than differences between these Eastern and Western European approaches. Both generally ignore the literary and rhetorical approaches which characterize certain types of modern biblical scholarship, and both favor a halakhocentric approach, even for non-legal passages. We have already noted that the resumptive repetitions proposed by Rashi and Nahmanides (Gen 39:1, Exod 1:1, 6:29-30) are either ignored by Malbim or addressed as problems of *yittur* which may be solved in the classic casuistical manner.⁴⁹ This is as true of Netziv and *Meshekh Hokhmah* as it is of

Derash, New York: Oxford UP, 1991, p. 32), one need not wonder how such a consuming devotion to *peshat* could lead to such midrashic results. The lip service paid to *peshat* should not lead one to assume devotion to it; it is not merely “faulty execution” that is the issue, but an acceptance of midrash *as peshat*, and not only by the Malbim; see Netziv on Exod 1:21 and 2:5, for example.

⁴⁸ See, for example, the recent articles by J. J. Schacter, “Facing the Truths of History,” *Torah U-Madda Journal* 8 (1998-1999), pp. 200-276, and B. Raphael Shuchat, “The Debate Over Secular Studies Among the Disciples of the Vilna Gaon,” *ibid.*, pp. 283-294, and see the bibliography listed in n. 1 of the latter. Among many other studies, see Hillel Goldberg, *Between Berlin and Slobodka; Jewish Transition Figures From Eastern Europe*, Hoboken: Ktav, 1989, pp. 1-14, and Shaul Stampfer, *Ha-Yeshivah ha-Lita’it be-Hithavvutah*, Jerusalem: Merkaz Shazar, 1995, esp. pp. 158-166 (Volozhin) and pp. 282-87 (Telz), and see Yitzhak Barzilay, *Manasseh of Ilya: Precursor of Modernity Among the Jews of Eastern Europe*, Jerusalem: Magnes, 1999, pp. 137-149.

⁴⁹ See Malbim on Gen 37:6 and 39:1, Netziv on 39:1; Malbim on Exod 1:1, 6:12. *Meshekh Hokhmah* does not deal with any of these. Moreover, but for the Malbim’s perfunctory discussion of *ein muqdam u-me’uhar ba-Torah* at

the Malbim.⁵⁰

Even those commentators who evince a certain historical sensibility, as do all those whose work will be discussed below, show little interest at all in matters of chronology or proportion or expositional sequence, sensitivities that are characteristic of Nahmanides' approach to the Pentateuch.⁵¹ To the extent to which these matters are considered at all, the parameters are set by Rashi, and very seldom by Nahmanides.⁵² As to sequentiality, when Netziv comments on the order of events in a narrative or elements in an exposition, it is usually because a contrary order elsewhere requires harmonization, rather than, as in the case of Nahmanides, to determine or defend the sequence of the narrative as it stands.⁵³

The alternate approaches mentioned above—the mystical, the halakhic, and the historical—were used as responses to the long-neglected task of justifying and defending the doctrine of omnisignificance and more contemporary challenges. In Western and Central Europe, under the pressure of the moment, exegetes turned to a more intense cultivation of omnisignificance, attempting to produce systemically omnisignificant commentaries. Inevitably, however, given their apologetic intent, the aim of these writers was to hold the line, and not to innovate in any substantive way. Written in Hebrew, these responses were not aimed at the Reformers themselves in any case, but rather at those within Orthodoxy who might be attracted to the new currents.⁵⁴ It was therefore not necessary to do more than provide a smidgin of the new learning; Malbim's commentaries, in particular, contain enough evidence of awareness of matters historical, sociological, political, philosophical, and to some extent scientific to

Num 9:1, and Netziv's implicit rejection of Rashi's position at Lev 8:2, the issue hardly comes up.

⁵⁰ See his comments on Exod 1:1.

⁵¹ See "It Is No Empty Thing," *passim*. The occasional exception involves those cases that have been raised in classic texts.

⁵² This is true but for rare occasions; see for instance the comment of Netziv on Lev 8:2, where he seems to follow Nahmanides' dating of that passage in preference to Rashi's.

⁵³ See for example his comments on Exod 29:21 and Lev 8:30 for the first type, and Lev 8:12 for the second.

⁵⁴ Jay Harris (*How Do We Know*, p. 198), makes this point in regard to R. Mecklenberg and the turn of Zechariah Frankel to Hebrew for his later works; it holds good for the Malbim as well. Only with the advance of Haskalah in Eastern Europe, and its use of Hebrew, would the need for Hebrew apologetics become urgent.

pass muster for such an audience. In particular, it is noteworthy that Malbim's scientific knowledge, at least as demonstrated by his commentaries, was by then a century out of date.⁵⁵

Whether these Eastern European commentators—Netziv, R. Meir Simhah, and the like—were influenced more by the Vilna Gaon's approach rather than by the challenges of the time may be doubted, given what we know of the issues that Eastern-European leaders faced in their lifetimes.⁵⁶ However, even if the initial impetus came from the outside, the response was in consonance with the old canons of omnisignificant interpretation, albeit with an admixture of new elements (e.g., a renewed awareness of Hebrew philology), with a subdued apologetic aspect. It is in this sense that Copperman's analysis is valid.

As noted above, these three approaches—the mystical, halakhic and historic—may be exemplified by the works of R. Zadok ha-Kohen Rabinowitz of Lublin (1823-1900), Netziv, and R. Meir Simhah Hakohen of Dvinsk (1843-1926). In particular, the latter two, less concerned with the immediate defense of the rabbinic system, began to work through the logical consequences of the unfinished omnisignificant program.⁵⁷

IV

In approaching the work of R. Zadok, one must bear in mind that with the loss or demotion of "pashtanic" exegetical devices, the tension between the omnisignificant imperative and the reality was lessened by allowing for yet another facet of meaning, namely, a theosophical

⁵⁵ Noah Rosenbloom's book, *Ha-Malbim*, provides a survey of these matters.

⁵⁶ See *Li-Peshuto shel Mikra*, pp. 76-80. In the light of Harris' analysis (*How Do We Know*, p. 22) of the beginnings of the challenge to rabbinic methods of exegesis in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we may wonder whether the Vilna Gaon's interest in these matters, and the new sensibility which he himself embodied, did not owe something, no matter how distant the echo, to this growing challenge.

⁵⁷ In this respect, as in many others, R. David Zevi Hoffmann (1843-1921) stands somewhat apart, and though his work merits the closest attention, it will not be dealt with here. In any case, those parts of his biblical work dealing with the last part of Genesis and all of Exodus and Numbers have not been published. His commentary on Leviticus, by concentrating on the need to counter the Documentary Hypothesis on its own ground, could hardly concern itself with *extending* halakhic midrash.

or mystical reading of Scripture. Even mundane texts (viz., historical, genealogical and geographical) take on a new life when viewed as an account of Creation (*ma'aseh bereshit*) or theosophically (a mystical *ma'aseh merkavah*). Such an interpretation carries its own meaning no matter how remote from everyday life, abstract or “technical” (in the scientific/halakhic sense) it may seem. This mode of exegesis moderates the tension raised by the omnisignificant demand since it provides a blanket meaning without requiring that the individual interpretation be morally edifying or halakhically meaningful. In a sense, here too Nahmanides pioneered this approach by emphasizing, in his introduction to Genesis, that on the mystical level the Pentateuch is made up of the names of God. It is sufficient that Scripture encodes the secrets of the universe’s functioning. Do we demand moral teaching from modern physics’ elementary particles? Do we derive *halakhot* from an “up” quark or edification from a *mu* meson?

As the *Zohar* put it in a celebrated passage:

R. Shimon says: Woe to the man who says that the Torah comes to tell us ordinary stories (*sippurin be-alma*) and mundane matters (*milin de-hedyot*) for if so, we today might produce a Torah of mundane matters—and even better than all of them (i.e., better stories than those in the Torah).⁵⁸

Mystical meaning imputed to Torah dissolves all incongruity, all vestiges of genre, into the all-embracing *unio mystica* of theosophical knowledge, whose profundity is beyond dispute and beyond cavil. Its comprehensive power is such that it generates an antithesis equally comprehensive and distressing. Why express such profundities in such pedestrian form? And, on the other hand, what meaning does form have at all? Could we not derive arcane theosophical doctrines by recourse to the Jerusalem telephone directory—or at least assert that this could be done, if we were so minded?

However, the precedent of this mystical strategy may point to the possibility of adding other meanings to the classic halakhic-cum-edificatory ones. For example, it is clear that any “pashtanic” approach requires the revaluation of history. Since the Torah quite clearly manifests a large and even antiquarian interest in history, that should itself give those facts meaning, no less than a theosophical interpretation. The attitude of *mai de-hava hava* (i.e.,

⁵⁸ *Zohar* III, 152a.

what difference do the details of historic events make to us?) may serve as a heuristic device, to elicit morally edificatory interpretations, but not as a statement of value. In the absence of a morally relevant interpretation, or even in its presence, the text in its simple sense remains of value. But, as noted, this approach was not given much attention until the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Indeed, the movement from the Torah as a book of narrative to a book of wisdom is relatively easy, given the omnisignificant imperative. As R. Zadok put it in the course of his discussion of the talmudic statement that had Israel not sinned, only the Hexateuch would have been necessary as Holy Writ (*Nedarim* 22b):

Know that the word “book” is employed⁵⁹ of the recording⁶⁰ of words of wisdom, and there is no difference if the record is on paper, parchment, or anything else. [After all, this is] similar to the form which the Torah itself took before Creation, as described by *Midrash Kohen* (section 1) [as black fire on white fire]. However, since wisdom is recorded in the brain, one’s brain [too may be termed] a book of wisdom. As a person composes a book, viz., the revelation of his words of wisdom to all [who read it], and in it is stored (*ganuz*) his wisdom, so too we find the wisdom of God, may He be blessed, revealed in the world which He created with wisdom.⁶¹

Note that R. Zadok himself relates these metaphors—a book as a collection of wisdom and the world as God’s book—to still another, much older in Jewish tradition, which views the Torah as the “blueprint” which served and serves as the model for Creation. I hope on another occasion to explore R. Zadok’s use of the second of these metaphors, that of the world as a book, which he took from his teacher, R. Mordecai Yosef of Izbica (d. 1854),⁶² and which itself may yield conceptual treasures as yet only partially glimpsed. For the present, let us examine some of the implications of classifying the Torah as a repository of wisdom.

“Wisdom” here serves to indicate the content of revelation, and thus expresses in other words the generic theory of revelation R.

⁵⁹ Literally, “is called.”

⁶⁰ Literally, “inscribing” (*hakikah*).

⁶¹ R. Zadok ha-Kohen of Lublin, *Likkutei Ma’amarim* (repr. Benei Berak, 5733), 79b-80a.

⁶² See *Mei Shiloah* on *Nedarim*.

Zadok himself mentions above. But if that were all, we would not have gained much. In this passage, however, R. Zadok refers to the Torah not so much as wisdom but as “the record of God’s wisdom,” similar to the way in which a person records his wisdom in a book. However, this record is not quite the same thing as a book itself. By placing the inscription of wisdom at one remove from its contents, and suggesting that ink-on-parchment is only one way of recording such knowledge, R. Zadok manages to remove the Torah from the strictures and structures of book-making. We come close to an “eclipse of Biblical narrative,” where even allegorical and typological interpretations can be theosophized, though in actual practice R. Zadok, working within a distinctly hasidic context, related everything to the human ethical/spiritual plane. In theory, however, this mystical vision of Torah could serve the omnisignificant program very well. This reassertion of the primacy of omnisignificance did not bring in its wake a renewal of the effort to find new meanings in texts which had perhaps not been given their due in the past. In the case of R. Zadok, whose interests did not lie within the orbit of biblical exegesis except sporadically,⁶³ and whose hasidic context imposed constraints of its own, as noted, this is perhaps understandable.

However, given the overarching importance of tradition, it is perhaps too much to expect that such a program be attempted. More to the point, however, R. Zadok, as a thorough traditionalist at least in this sense, is less concerned with extending the omnisignificant corpus than with elaborating what already exists.⁶⁴

V

⁶³ Though his knowledge of and interest in certain biblical passages is clear enough; among his lost writings is a commentary on Jeremiah. However, from his comments on Joshua preserved at the beginning of *Mahshevt Harutz*, and those on the beginning of Exodus in *Or Zaru'a la-Zaddik* (which, as an early work, may not be altogether typical), it is not likely that the lost works would yield the sort of commentary which comprehensively and systematically follows the program may be derived from his comments regarding the Torah as God’s wisdom.

⁶⁴ While much of his work seems to have been lost during the Holocaust, enough remains, reprinted in some ten closely printed volumes, to gain a good measure of his approach. See my “The History of Gentile Wisdom According to R. Zadok Hakohen of Lublin,” *Journal of Philosophy and Jewish Thought* 3 (1993), pp. 153-87, nn. 2-4.

Netziv is ever-sensitive to the problem of passages that had not been mined for their omnisignificant content, and usually attempts to solve this by recourse to the halakhic option. Thus, for example, he attempts to derive halakhic distinctions for terms hitherto regarded as “pashtanically” identical—a true return to omnisignificance in that he breaks new ground in this attempt, albeit on the basis of already existing Halakhah.

As R. Copperman has already noted, this aspect of his work is hardly unprecedented, and in this he follows the approach taken by the Vilna Gaon.⁶⁵ Indeed, its roots can be traced further back—to the *Or ha-Hayyim*⁶⁶ and (continuing backward) to the supercommentaries on Rashi.⁶⁷ Netziv himself points to Nahmanides as a predecessor.

The opinion of Nahmanides in several places is that [the words] *kesev* and *keves* are exact synonyms. However, after careful consideration of the biblical text (*diyyuk ha-mikra*), and in particular [that] below in the passage [regarding] an individual sin-offering: “And if he bring a lamb, etc....all its fat shall he remove as the fat of the lamb of the peace-offering was removed” (Lev 4:32-35)—note that the Bible was careful [to employ the word] *kesev* [in regard] to peace-offerings and *keves* [in regard] to a sin-offering. [Furthermore], I saw in the *Ba'er Hetev*⁶⁸ in the name of the *Pa'ane'ah Razei*⁶⁹ [that] wherever [the word] *kesev* is employed it refers to a large [lamb] and wherever [the word] *keves* is stated it refers to a small one⁷⁰.... It would seem that the meaning of *kesev* relates [to a lamb] of large stature (*gedol ba-komah*), [and thus] usually more than a year old. And *keves* [refers to a] two-year-old [lamb], usually of short stature....⁷¹

⁶⁵ See *Li-Peshuto shel Mikra*, pp. 80-81, and see p. 64.

⁶⁶ See Eleazar Touitou, *Rabbi Hayyim ben Attar u-Ferusho Or Ha-Hayyim 'Al Ha-Torah* (Jerusalem, 1981), pp. 114-32, and see *Or ha-Hayyim* to Num 21:17.

⁶⁷ I refer to their varied explanations of one or another of the halakhic *derashot* which Rashi cites, when such explanations seem called for.

⁶⁸ I have been unable to locate this source.

⁶⁹ See R. Yitzhak b. R. Yehudah, *Pa'ane'ah Raza*, ed. R. Y. D. Asya, *Makhon Torat Harishonim*, n.p., 5758, p. 330 *ad* Lev 3:7.

⁷⁰ Here he continues with an explanation which is difficult halakhically, and which he subsequently abandons.

⁷¹ *Ha'amek Davar* to Lev 1:10.

We need not enter into the halakhic details of his suggestion to realize that Netziv's analysis resumes the work of meeting the omnisignificant challenge. Not that he was the first to make this suggestion; he quotes predecessors. Moreover, his *derash* is well within the bounds set by the Rishonim, or R. Hayyim ben Attar, for that matter; he does not seek to innovate *halakhot*.⁷² As R. Aaron ha-Levi's (1235-1300) dictum has it: "[As to] anything⁷³ which we know is true, but whose origin in a verse is not clear, everyone has permission to derive it [from Scripture]...."⁷⁴

Nevertheless, at times Netziv ventures new explanations for old cruces. In the case of Lev 12:8,⁷⁵ where the usual sin-offering/burnt-offering sequence is reversed, and Rashi cites the amora Rava's enigmatic explanation that this is meant for "reading" purposes, Netziv suggests that the reversal is triggered not by the opposition of sin/burnt-offering, but by the particular birds employed in this case. Because turtledoves are *always* listed before pigeons,⁷⁶ Netziv concludes that they are considered the more prestigious; indeed, according to him, pigeons are preferred for a *sin-offering* for just that reason—because such an offering does not merit the use of turtledoves, the more prestigious bird.⁷⁷ Here too, then, that hierarchy is maintained, even though this necessitates mentioning the woman's burnt-offering before her sin-offering, counter to the usual order.

Thus the reversal of the usual order of turtledove/pigeon in 12:6 is explained by the preference for pigeons for sin-offerings, while the reversal of the usual sin-offering/burnt-offering sequence in 12:8 is a consequence of the *usual* preference of turtledoves over pigeons.⁷⁸

⁷² As he himself notes in his brief introduction to Leviticus.

⁷³ That is, any halakhic point.

⁷⁴ See *Nimmukei Yosef to Bava Kamma*, beg. chapter 8, s.v. *yerushalmi tani*, cited in Y. D. Gilat, "Midrash Ha-Ketuvim," p. 213, n. 15.

⁷⁵ "It Is No Empty Thing," pp. 39-40, and n. 183 on p. 77.

⁷⁶ See Lev 1:14, 5:7, 11, 14:22, 30, 15:14, 29, Num 6:10, 14:30.

⁷⁷ See his comments on Lev 12:6.

⁷⁸ It is worth noting that this problem was already raised in Sifra, with the suggestion that this sin-offering was not offered because of sin, and therefore it is mentioned after the burnt-offering. Malbim of course takes his cue from Sifra in his comments on the Sifra (Tazri^ca 35), but suggests two other reasons as well. I have no idea why Netziv, who produced commentaries on the Mekhilta and the Sifres, did not follow Sifra here, and instead followed a recently published commentary.

Ha-Ketav ve ha-Qabbalah does not raise the question at all.

The reversal of species in 12:6 is due to the mention of burnt-offerings apart from sin-offerings; in 12:8, though the order of sacrifices is reversed, this merely reflects the usual preference of species.

Netziv thus substitutes a sequence which does not have an inexplicable exception for one which does have an exception. However, for our purposes, it is important to note that it is the *exceptional* nature of this sequence which motivates Netziv's exegetical *legerdemain*; he does not ordinarily concern himself with matters of sequence.

Rather, Netziv's innovation was to attempt to work his way through the biblical text systematically, at least within the bounds of the limitation set forth above. That is, his commentary is relatively continuous and based on the text rather than on the *midreshei halakhah*. Indeed, the case just discussed shows his independence of the *midreshei halakhah*, despite his manifest interest in them (he produced commentaries on several of them).⁷⁹ It may be argued that the case given here does not proceed beyond that of the Maharal mentioned above in section III, since after all he has not broken new ground in areas of the Pentateuch hitherto neglected.⁸⁰

To gain the full flavor of Netziv's innovation, we must look at his comments on Exod 35-39, which is essentially a reprise of Exod 25-30. As noted above, Nahmanides accounted for this repetitive account of the construction of the Tabernacle by suggesting that the repetitions reflect the importance of the topic considered.⁸¹ Netziv rehabilitates the old principle of "every *parashah* which is said and repeated, is repeated for the *hiddush* it contains"⁸² in its original tannaitic sense, and attempts to account in turn for each variation between these sections.⁸³ Needless to say, the same applies to those

⁷⁹ See note above.

⁸⁰ In this he was followed by R. Meir Simhah; see *Meshekh Hokhmah* on Exod 36:13, 37:1, 38:8, 38:18. As we shall see below, R. Meir Simhah even surpassed the Netziv in his attention to the omnisignificant enterprise.

⁸¹ See "It Is No Empty Thing," pp. 34-38.

⁸² Sotah 3a-b, and see "It Is No Empty Thing," p. 62, n. 17.

⁸³ See, for example, his comments on the loss of the definite article in the phrase *be-qaneh ehad* in place of the usual *ba-qaneh ha-ehad* in 37:19. The use of the word *tahor* in connection with the incense in 38:29 in place of the more usual *qodesh* also attracts his attention. So too the use of the active *hif'il* of *bo* in 38:7 in place of the passive *hof'al* in the parallel at 27:7. Or see his remarks about the "superfluous" *vav* in 27:14 which parallels the phrase *mi-zeh umi-zeh* in 38:15—truly a revival of the omnisignificant ideal!

To gain an appreciation of the distance we have come from Abarbanel,

cases which Rashi and Nahmanides labelled resumptive repetitions.

In this respect one of his successors was somewhat more innovative.⁸⁴ R. Meir Simhah, in his *Meshekh Hokhmah*, was at times willing to apply *middot* such as *gezerah shavah* to verses which had not been so used in the past, and to produce new *halakhot* in the process. As R. Copperman puts it, “In contrast [to the more conservative approach of *Revid Ha-Zahav*], [R. Meir Simhah] actually employs (*mishtammesh mammash*) the *middot* by which the Torah is interpreted not only to strengthen a halakhah which he holds (*mekubbelet etzlo*), but to innovate⁸⁵ a new halakhah of which we have not heard before [his time]. [Thus,] it is not the means which is the innovation, but the actual halakhah (*ezem ha-halakhah ‘azmah*).”⁸⁶

The example Copperman cites, R. Meir Simhah’s note on Exod 20:22, is noteworthy both for what he emphasizes and for what he does not. R. Meir Simhah bases himself here on a midrash in Mekhilta. In regard to the prohibition of building an altar of stones which have been quarried by the use of iron implements, R. Nathan states that an altar which contains two stones which have been hewed in such a manner does not become invalid thereby.⁸⁷ He derives this from the word “*ethen*,” which is used in place of the more usual

compare this to the latter’s claim to explain the variations between accounts of the Tabernacle construction in the answer to his fifth query in Parashat Vayakhel (ed. Jerusalem, p. 355). In essence, Abarbanel took his query from Nahmanides but answered it in his own way. The differences are procedural: that is, the repetition comes to teach us the differences between the planning and the construction. This should remind us of the chasm between Abarbanel’s explanation of the differences between Abraham’s servant’s account of his meeting at the well with Rivka and the original narrative, and that of Nahmanides, who again employs the *hibbah* doctrine (see “It Is No Empty Thing,” pp. 23-50), while Abarbanel sees in the retelling—and its variations from the original story—a lesson in negotiating technique. Tellingly, R. Mecklenberg and the Malbim devote very little attention to these Tabernacle accounts.

We should also note that Nahmanides too on occasion employs this principle, at least implicitly, in accounting for duplications. For a particularly good example of this, see his comments on Lev 24:2-7.

⁸⁴ As we shall see in the next section, he was radical in other ways as well.

⁸⁵ Emphasis his.

⁸⁶ Y. Copperman, *Pirkei Mavo le-Ferush “Meshekh Hokhmah” la-Torah* (Jerusalem, 5736), p. 80.

⁸⁷ Mekhilta, 11:4, ed. Horovitz-Rabin, 244.

“*otan*” and thus must have a particular signification. R. Meir Simhah suggests that this distinction may be derived—“by means (*al derekh*)⁸⁸ of a *gezerah shavah*”—from the use of that word in Lev 14:40, as explicated in *Sifra ad loc.*,⁸⁹ where a similar distinction is made between removing the stones of a house affected by scale disease or fungus and dismantling the house entirely.

The word *ethen*, as interpreted by *Sifra*, implies a limitation; only the stones immediately concerned are to be removed from the wall of the house affected by the fungus, but not the entire house (at least at that point). Similarly, R. Meir Simhah proposed that its use in Exod 20:22, so understood, implies that only the stones which have been quarried with the use of an iron implement are invalidated, but not the other stones in the altar. This, in turn, would solve a problem posed by one of the Tosafists to Rabbenu Tam.⁹⁰

The issue is as follows. In Mishnah Sanhedrin 9:3 there is a dispute between R. Shimon and the Sages as to what penalty must be meted out to one who has been convicted of a crime for which the penalty is stoning, but who becomes intermixed with a group of people sentenced to “burning.” Both sides agree that the lesser penalty should be levied; that is, *all* the people in that group should receive the lesser penalty, lest even the one sentenced to the lesser penalty should be put to death (along with the others) in the more severe manner. The two sides disagree only on which penalty—stoning or burning—is the less severe one. According to R. Shimon, stoning is the lesser penalty. R. Yitzhak b. R. Mordekhai asks Rabbenu Tam why R. Shimon does not simply state that all are stoned in accordance with the well-known rabbinic rule of “following the majority,” since the majority (that is, all but the one) are liable to the other penalty. This is especially so since we should decide matters involving capital crimes with greater severity.

Rabbenu Tam is reported to have replied that the one sentenced to stoning is not at all guilty of a crime punishable by burning; putting him to death in that manner would subject him to a penalty imposed for a crime of which he or she is totally innocent! Rabbenu Tam suggests that the use of the same word, *ethen*, in Lev 20:14 (regarding the penalty of burning) is the source of this decision.

Having thus determined the significance of the somewhat unusual

⁸⁸ It is possible that *al derekh* should be rendered “*in the manner* of a *gezerah shavah*.” This would mitigate somewhat the force of his innovation.

⁸⁹ *Metzora*^c 4:4, ed. Weiss, 73c.

⁹⁰ See Tosafot Sanhedrin 80b-81a s.v. *ha-niskalin be-nisrafin*.

word, R. Meir Simhah then proceeds to the issue at hand: the exact application of this limitation in regard to the extent to which the use of iron implements is forbidden in the construction of altars. In particular, R. Meir Simhah suggests that even a “private altar” (*bamah*) would be subject to the same requirement. This is because of the use of the word *im*—“if” one builds an altar—thus implying that one is at liberty *not* to do so. Indeed, as R. Meir Simhah points out, Nahmanides already suggested in his comments to Exod 24:1 that Moses built an altar after the revelation at Sinai; this rule would have applied to that altar and to any subsequent halakhically constituted *bamot*.

Note that this is not a philological investigation based on the rules of *peshat*, but a halakhic one based on the rules of halakhic midrash. Quite in R. Meir Simhah’s style, it uncovers a rule which, according to him, applied at one time but applies no longer, since once the Temple in Jerusalem was built, no private altars would ever be permitted again. His midrashic initiative, while bold, was sharply limited. Most important for our purposes, however, is the fact that his explanation serves to account for the use of the word “if” which is somewhat out of place. Generally speaking, the generation of the Wilderness were not permitted the option of constructing private altars, for they had immediate access to the Tabernacle. But beyond the halakhic-historic issue is certainly the philological one, which, as is often the case, becomes an omnisignificant issue: the puzzling use of a word that seems, strictly speaking, unnecessary.

In truth, R. Meir Simhah’s innovation is not unprecedented, for in the nature of things those who concern themselves with the application of the hermeneutic rules are inclined to amplify or extend their use as well. For example, in their explanation of the use of the noun *‘avveret*, “blindness” in Lev 22:22, in a clause in which it is followed by two adjectives (*shavur*, *haruz*), several exegetes propose a distinction between *‘ivver*, “blind,” and *‘avveret*, which has halakhic consequences. R. David Pardo (1718-1790), in his super-commentary on Rashi, *Maskil le-David*, suggests that the noun includes ocular afflictions aside from blindness, namely, those which are detailed in the somewhat parallel list in Lev 21:20. In contrast, R. Aaron ibn Hayyim (1545-1632) proposes that the noun includes the blemish of blindness in only one eye, as opposed to the *‘ivver*, who is totally without sight.⁹¹

⁹¹ See his commentary on *Sifra*, *Qorban Aharon* on *Sifra ad loc*.

VI

With the eclipse of both the narrative and theosophical approaches as significant factors in twentieth-century Eastern Europe we begin to witness the rise of historical consciousness in biblical exegesis. As we shall see, there were precedents for this as well, though once again, as we have seen repeatedly, it is not so much the existence of precedents that provides a marker of intellectual progress as their employment (or deployment in polemical contexts, as was usually the case).

While *pilpul* remained a component of the new commentaries such as *Ha'amek Davar* and *Meshekh Hokhmah*—how could it be otherwise?—a more historically oriented approach made its presence felt. In truth, this is sometimes true of the Malbim as well,⁹² but in his work this historical sensibility was subordinated to his attempt to show that rabbinic *derash* represents the essential *peshat*.⁹³

According to both Rashi and Nahmanides, the Torah sometimes takes the trouble to inform us of its own structure, perhaps as this relates to proper exegesis, or perhaps to inform us of the nature of particular historical periods. As a contemporary biblical scholar, Thomas Dozeman, put it in a 1989 article:⁹⁴

Instead of establishing a clear temporal sequence to the Sinai narrative, the repetitive movement of Moses creates...the narrative context for the promulgation of distinct legal codes, which are now all anchored in the one revelation on Mount Sinai.... [It] forces the reader “to project not so much forward (‘what happens next’) as backward or sideways.”⁹⁵ ...The reader repeatedly loses a sense of the past, present, and future of narrated time. But this loss of narrated time serves a

⁹² His comments on Isaiah’s use of mythology in Is 43:10 are striking, but his awareness of the broader currents of nineteenth-century culture shows up quite often.

⁹³ See Y. Copperman’s trenchant observations in *Li-Peshuto shel Mikra*, 80-83.

⁹⁴ In his “Spatial Form in Exodus 19:1-8a and in the Larger Sinai Narrative,” *Semeia* 46 (1989), pp. 87-101; the quotation is from p. 97.

⁹⁵ Here Dozeman refers to a study he cited earlier in his own paper, that of David Mickelsen, “Types of Spatial Structure in Narrative,” in *Spatial Form in Narrative*, ed. Jeffrey Smitten and Ann Daghistany, Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981, pp. 63-76. The references are from pp. 64-5, 67 of that article.

canonical purpose, for the result is that the reader's time becomes the significant moment for interpreting the promulgation of Torah "on this day."⁹⁶

At least one recent traditional approach, that of R. Meir Simhah in his *Meshekh Hokhmah*, the antecedents of which go back to medieval and even talmudic times, mitigates this antinomy between narrated time and literary structure. Indeed, Dozeman himself notes that Moses's comings and goings provide a context for the various legal sections which interrupt the narrative flow.

The emphasis on history is not entirely new in traditional exegesis, but it has always been secondary to more omnisignificantly oriented methodologies. In part because of this, this approach has not been classified as historical, and, at times, even masquerades as "halakhic." I refer to the evolutionary hypothesis developed by R. Meir Simhah, and championed most recently by Rabbi Yehudah Copperman.⁹⁷ While the latter traces it back to the school of the Gaon of Vilna, this approach has precedents in talmudic sources, sources which Nahmanides developed in his commentary.

R. Ishmael says: The general rules [of the Torah] were given⁹⁸ at Sinai, and the details were given [in revelations at] the Tent of Meeting, but R. Akiva says: The general rules and the details [both] were given at Sinai, repeated at the Tent of Meeting, and given a third time on the plains of Moab.⁹⁹

In particular, Nahmanides' discussion of the first two of these periods, according to R. Akiva's scheme, is pertinent.

In my view, the passage [regarding the Jubilee year in Lev 25:1-55] is written in proper order here, for the meaning of "at Mount Sinai" is [at the time that Moses] went up to receive the second tablets. The explanation of the matter is that, at the beginning of the first fortyday [period when Moses went up to receive] the first tablets, [he] wrote all the words of God and all

⁹⁶ Dozeman, 97, quoted above.

⁹⁷ See his *Li-Peshuto shel Mikra*, pp. 63-66, and his *Pirquei Mavo le-Perush "Meshekh Hokhmah" la-Torah*, subsequently incorporated as an introduction to his edition of the commentary.

⁹⁸ Literally, "said," and so throughout.

⁹⁹ That is, in the book of Deuteronomy; Hagigah 6b, Zevachim 115b.

the statutes in the Book of the Covenant as recorded there [Exod 21-23], and [then] he sprinkled the covenantal blood on the people [Exod 24:8]. When [the Israelites] sinned with the golden calf and the tablets were broken, it was as though that covenant had been rescinded by the Holy One, blessed be He, and when [He] was reconciled with Moses [when the latter inscribed] the second tablets, He instructed him regarding a second covenant, as [Scripture] states, “Behold, I am making a covenant” [Exod 34:10]. He reinstated (*hehezir*) there the weighty commandments which were stated in the Sidra of *Ve-eleh Ha-Mishpatim* in the first covenant, and said: “Inscribe these Words for yourself, for by these Words will I make a covenant with you and with Israel” [Exod 34:27]....

Now, in the first Book of the Covenant the [mitzvah of the] sabbatical year is mentioned in its generality, as I mentioned, as is stated, “As for the sabbatical year, you shall forgive debts and leave [the land] uncultivated” [Exod 23:11], while now all its rules and specifications and punishments were recorded in this second covenant. [Likewise,] Moses was instructed regarding the Tabernacle at the time of the first covenant during the first forty days, and when the Holy One, blessed be He, was reconciled with him, and commanded [Moses] to make a second covenant with [Israel], Moses descended [from the mountain] and instructed them regarding all that God had commanded him at Mount Sinai, [including] the construction of the Tabernacle.

And when he completed [the construction and dedication of the Tabernacle], he said to them that “God commanded me at Mount Sinai to explain the sabbatical and jubilee years to you and to make a new covenant with you on every mitzvah with a treaty and an oath.” [Therefore,] he did not need to bring sacrifices and sprinkle half the blood on the altar and half on the people as he did at first,¹⁰⁰ but they accepted the first covenant with these treaties and oaths....

And, likewise, the covenant of the plains of Moab was [made] in this way when they accepted the Torah with those treaties and curses. That is the covenant [spoken of in the following verse], “These are the words of the covenant which God commanded Moses to make with the Israelites in the land

¹⁰⁰ As described in 24:8.

of Moab, aside from the covenant which He made with them at Horeb” [Deut 28:69].¹⁰¹

Nahmanides’ comments thus provide a basis for a quasi-evolutionary view of Halakhah, with a pre-Sinaitic era followed by the period which began with the Sinai covenant and ended tragically with the incident of the Golden Calf. This in turn was followed by a new covenant associated with the Tabernacle, and, finally, a new era associated with the plains of Moab and the new generation about to enter the land of Canaan. Each was marked by legislative activity, every phase of which has its place within the legal materials scattered through the narrative of Israel’s sojourn in the wilderness. Among the virtues of this approach is that it can allow for apparent repetitions and contradictions, elements that are particularly problematic for the omnisignificant directive.

In R. Meir Simhah’s view, some of the repetitive halakhic material in the Torah may reflect the particular conditions prevalent at the time of the promulgation of these passages, as does the explicitly time-bound (*le-sha’ah*) material of halakhic nature which the Torah contains. Seen in this way, the Pentateuch presents, at least in part, a history of Israelite religion during the Wilderness Period. The stage of pre-*Mattan Torah* gave way to a short “honeymoon” period, which, in turn, was ended by the watershed event of the Golden Calf.

In R. Meir Simhah’s view, the exalted spiritual level attained at Sinai was lost with the latter episode, and this loss of stature is reflected in the minutiae of halakhic draftsmanship. One example is the difference in formulation between Exod 23:4 and Deut 22:4; in the former, the Israelites are warned that “when you encounter an enemy’s ox or ass wandering, you must take it back to him,” while the latter speaks of “your fellow’s ass or ox fallen on the road.” R. Meir Simhah relates the change of “enemy” to “fellow” to the fall of Israel at the incident of the Golden Calf. Before the worship of the Golden Calf one’s fellow-Israelite might have been considered an enemy if he or she transgressed one of the *mitzvot* given at Sinai; in Deuteronomy such a person could no longer be considered an enemy, since fallen Israel may no longer stand in such moral judgement on others.¹⁰² Thus, variations in the formulation of laws in Scripture reflect different eras even within the relatively short period of forty years; *the*

¹⁰¹ From Nahmanides’ commentary to Lev 25:1, ed. Chavel, 165.

¹⁰² See *Meshekh Hokhmah* to Deut 22:4, ed. Y. Copperman, vol. 5, p. 156, and see Y. Copperman, *Li-Peshuto shel Mikra*, p. 66.

*law collection of the Book of the Covenant in Exodus and that of Deuteronomy may be assigned to different spiritual/historical periods.*¹⁰³

Nahmanides' emphasis on sequence and proportion led him to a quasi-evolutionary understanding of Jewish history. From our point of view, however, its importance lies in this: by providing for a context which permits the categorization of further halakhic elements as primarily (or almost solely) directed to the generation of the wilderness (that is, *le-sha'ah*), an historical approach gives meaning to features of the biblical text which were hitherto unexplainable, *and therefore ignored*. While certain laws were always deemed of temporary applicability, as for example the requirement that any heiress of the generation entering the land of Canaan must marry within her tribe,¹⁰⁴ this principle had not been extended beyond the minimum which the Talmud had already specified.¹⁰⁵ Thus, the story of Israel's covenant with God had perforce to include one of the basic components of that relationship, the halakhic.

In essence, R. Meir Simhah extends the casuistical option to another arena, the historical; rather than applying only to different cases, duplicate passages now apply to different *times*, which naturally involve different circumstances and different people.

This in turn gives fuller meaning to a doctrine shared by both Rashi and Nahmanides, though, as we have demonstrated, they apply it in different ways: the matter of *hibbah*, God's love for Israel. Biblical history, whether in narrative, genealogical or other form, may be viewed as an expression of God's love and concern (*hibbah*) for every aspect of Israel's spiritual and material wellbeing. As Nahmanides himself noted, this love and concern has as its center the

¹⁰³ This history of Pentateuchal law echoes R. Zadok's historiography, in particular the change from halakhah as constituted in the wilderness and that which was in force with the entrance into the Promised Land,; see my "History of Halakha According to R. Zadok Hakohen of Lublin," *Tradition* 21 (1985), pp. 1-26. However, R. Zadok does not, in his surviving writings, provide a continuous commentary on the Pentateuch from the perspective of his radical historiographic point of view.

¹⁰⁴ See Num 36, and vv. 8-9 in particular, and the rabbinic discussion at bB.B. 120a.

¹⁰⁵ It should be noted, however, that Maimonides had already noted (in the third section of the introduction to *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*) the existence of this type of halakhic material in the Torah by excluding it from his count of 613 eternally applicable *mitzvot*.

generation(s) which received the Torah, and it is for this reason that the Torah includes *halakhot* whose details refer primarily to those generations—and excludes material which does not.

Thus, on one important occasion Nahmanides inquires into the reason for the Torah's failure to include one particular aspect of the laws of inheritance: the right of a father to inherit the estate of a son who predeceases him. After proposing several solutions to this problem, and apparently rejecting them, he suggests, with all due hesitation, that “perhaps this did not occur (*lo hayah*) [in the generation] which entered the Land, with which [this section] deals (*she-bahem yedabber*)—that a father should inherit a son.”¹⁰⁶

R. Copperman long ago noted the fundamental importance of this insight.¹⁰⁷ From our perspective, it furthers the omnisignificant program by providing a rationale for the inclusion of such time-bound components within an eternally valid Torah, and incidentally provides the basis for R. Meir Simhah's historico-halakhic interpretations.¹⁰⁸ Nahmanides' perception of the time-bound nature of a significant portion of the Pentateuchal legislation—in his introduction to Numbers he states that “this entire book [is made up] of *mitzvot* [applicable] only for a time (*mitzvot sha'ah*) regarding which they were commanded in the wilderness....There are not in this book

¹⁰⁶ See his comments on Num 27:9.

¹⁰⁷ In *Li-Peshuto shel Mikra*, p. 65.

¹⁰⁸ This applies as well to those of the Vilna Gaon, which in some cases, can be traced even further back. See Copperman, *Li-Peshuto shel Mikra*, p. 64, Netziv on Lev 16:23.

Netziv also provides such interpretations (see for example, his comments to Lev 16:23, and see Yoma 32a), and his *Qidmat ha-Emek*, his introduction to his commentary on the *She'eltot, Ha'ameq She'alah* (Vilna, 5621, repr. Jerusalem, 5727), and recently reprinted with notes in *Derashot ha-Netziv* [Jerusalem, 5753], 1-72), which provides a quasi-historical scheme as well, but, it seems to me, this does not bulk as large in his *Ha'ameq Davar* as in R. Meir Simhah's *Meshekh Hokhmah*. However, this may be because Netziv's commentary is less halakhocentric than R. Meir Simhah's, and thus contains more non-halakhic elements. The matter requires more examination, but the appearance of historical considerations in the work of such eminent halakhists as Netziv and R. Meir Simhah, as well as in those of R. Zadok ha-Kohen (see my “R. Zadok HaKohen of Lublin on the History of Halakhah”) and R. Moshe Samuel Glasner (see my “From the Pages of Tradition: Rabbi Moses Samuel Glasner: The Oral Torah,” *Tradition* 25 [1990], 63-69), not to mention R. D. Z. Hoffman—all in the latter part of the nineteenth and first quarter of the twentieth—can hardly be coincidental.

mitzvot that are in force in future times (*nohagot le-dorot*) except for a few regarding sacrifices that He began in the Book of Priests (=Leviticus) and whose explanation was not completed there, and He completed them in this book.”¹⁰⁹ In actuality, there are nineteen *mitzvot* of this sort, according to the standard enumeration. Thus Nahmanides could contemplate a nearly entire Pentateuchal book devoted to matters that applied primarily to the wilderness generation. He could do so because he considered this an expression of *hibbah*, God’s love for the people who first accepted His Torah, and with whose ancestors He had made a covenant. In essence, though, this mitigated to a considerable degree the omnisignificant pressure to discover profound *le-dorot* explanations for every jot and tittle.

VII

Ironically, then, when the omnisignificant program slowly began to be renewed with the work of Netziv and *Meshekh Hokhmah*, the historical perspective pioneered by Nahmanides provided a framework for viewing differing segments of the Pentateuch’s law collections, but without the sensibility that gave rise to it. It was Nahmanides’ sense of sequence and proportion which allowed for his quasi-evolutionary scheme. Its divergence from the midrashic view of Torah as uniform was not a problem for him, since he sharply distinguished between *peshat* and *derash* in his commentary. He could proceed with research into both areas without conflict, which was not the case for Malbim, who denied the dichotomy, and for Netziv, who affirmed it in theory and ignored it in practice.

As to the reawakening of interest in such matters in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the resulting works, as stimulating as they are, cannot be said to have advanced the omnisignificant program in any striking way. The reason is simple. Having been forced to develop a halakhic system without benefit of creative *derashot* of biblical texts for almost a millennium and a half, halakhic Judaism has learned to do without, and the power of precedent and tradition is such that that avenue remains blocked but for exceptional instances.

Nevertheless, one nearly omnisignificant commentary has been produced in the twentieth century, and from a somewhat unexpected source. Benno Jacob was a scholarly Reform rabbi (with a University

¹⁰⁹ Nahmanides’ *Perush al ha-Torah*, ed. Chavel, p. 195. See also his comments on Exod 12:2 for the expression *mitzvot sha’ah*.

degree in Semitics) in Germany until World War II. Before leaving Germany, he produced a monumental commentary on Genesis. Recently, a German edition of his commentary on Exodus has been published.¹¹⁰ Generally, Jacob is linked with U.M.D. Cassutto as one of the great twentieth-century opponents of the Documentary Hypothesis, and he certainly was that. However, Jacob is being misread when he is viewed primarily as that. His exegetical work must be seen in a wholly different context to be properly understood and for his contribution to be properly appreciated. That context is omnisignificant Jewish exegesis of a particular type. Melding a traditionalist (if not traditional) view of the Torah with a knowledge of Semitics and applying a Germanic thoroughness to his conviction that no word in the Torah is out of place, he produced two commentaries which attempt to explain nearly every nuance of every word. Among the manifold ways in which his commentary differs from that of Malbim, there are two which are particularly relevant to our concerns: the tremendous documentation he supplies for his definitions, and his less-than-tenacious adherence to leads provided by the *Mekhilta* in his commentary on Exodus.

The programmatic statement in his 1916 book, *Quellenscheiden und Exegese im Pentateuch*, illustrates his concerns.

Sie [=biblisches Darstellungsweise] kann die halbpoetische oder dichotomische genannt werden. Denn sie schreitet gleich der Dichtung, aber ohne deren strengere Masse, gern in gepaartem Gedanken, Satz- und Wortgefuege, in Zwiefaeligkeiten, Parallelismen und Kontrasten dahin und wurzelt letzten Endes in der semitischen, die Dinge dichotomisch erfassenden Denkweise. Diese Art anzuschauen, aufzufassen und darstellen beherrscht die ganze hebraesche Sprache und Literatur bis in die feinsten Verzweigungen.¹¹¹

[The Bible's means of representation (*Darstellungsweise*)] may be termed the semi-poetic or dichotomistic. It proceeds like poetry, but without its strict measure [i.e., meter], employing instead paired thoughts, patterns of words and clauses and syntax, in doublets, parallels and contrasts; it is rooted, when all

¹¹⁰ Benno Jacob, *Das Buch Exodus*, Stuttgart: Leo Baeck Institute, 1997. The first volume was *Das Erste Buch der Tora*, Berlin: Schocken, 1934, repr. New York: Ktav, 1974.

¹¹¹ *Quellenscheidung und Exegese im Pentateuch*, Berlin: Schocken, 1916, p. 46.

is said and done, in the Semitic [way of thought], which grasps matters dichotomously. This manner of seeing, conceiving and representing dominates the Hebrew language and literature in its entirety, to its subtlest manifestations.

I have deliberately included the next-to-last sentence, though it sounds somewhat archaic to modern ears, not only for the sake of truthfulness to my sources, but also because it underscores the extent to which Jacob was willing to see parallels and doublets as inevitable even within a document, and lays the groundwork for his understanding of the literary uses to which such a way of thinking (*Denkweise*) may be put.

Jacob then proceeds to list the dichotomies which function to orient the Joseph narrative: the geographic poles of Canaan and Egypt; the fact that the main characters are the father and son, Jacob and Joseph, the two elder brothers, Reuben and Judah, the younger Joseph and Benjamin, Pharaoh and his servants, the Butler and the Baker. Dreams come in pairs: Joseph's, those of the Butler and Baker, Pharaoh's, and yet more.¹¹² This *Denkweise* extends much further—to the use of synonyms and variation in dialogue and narrative, and in the use of names (e.g., Jacob and Israel). It should be noted in this context that the two-fold nature of biblical thought, in Jacob's view, proceeds independently of the Documentary Hypothesis. It exists within individual documents, but also transcends documents. In individual cases it is not bound to the documents at all, since four sources must perforce make do with only two variants in most cases!

Among these dichotomies is one which is interesting precisely because no great critical argument hangs on it; I refer to the pair *saq-amtahat*, the first characterizing E and the second J according to nearly all critics. Jacob and the critics both have no great stake in its interpretation; it is merely one of many apparently synonymous pairs that biblical scholars attribute to different sources. Indeed, the appearance of *saq* in Gen 42:27 *contradicts* the source-critical division into documents. The solution usually adopted is either to emend *saq* to *amtahat* or to attribute its appearance to the Redactor.

Jacob's approach to the whole issue is of particular interest for that very reason of its lack of great importance. He does not manifest any particular interest in using this anomalous distribution as an argument against the Documentary Hypothesis. Rather than

¹¹² See *ibid.*, pp. 46-48.

concentrate on this critical crux for polemic ends, Jacob devotes his attention primarily to demonstrating that the distribution *furtheres the ends of the narrative* with marvelous exactitude. In classic omnisignificant form, he carefully distinguishes between the two words.

Jacob, in his 1934 commentary on Genesis,¹¹³ follows the Targum tradition in part and distinguishes between these two apparent synonyms; more important for our purposes, he attempts to show the literary purpose behind such variation.¹¹⁴

First, Jacob notes that the word *saq* elsewhere in the Bible, with one exception (Jos 9:4), refers to the material from which sacks are made and not to the sack itself. Thus, to begin with, there is no need to equate *saq* with *amtahat*, though Jacob does not make this point explicitly. However, since, he notes, *saq* in our narrative is used only in connection with feeding the brothers' donkeys (at the inn in vv. 25 and 27, and at their homecoming in v. 35), it must refer to the feedbags rather than the sacks which contained the grain for the patriarchal family. When the brothers open their "sacks" in 42:35, "sacks" must refer not to the sacks of grain to be used by the family back home, but to provisions for the journey, and, in particular, to the feedbags for the donkeys. This interpretation is further supported by the fact that there was no need to refer to the feedbags on the brothers' abortive second trip home, since they never had the opportunity or need to feed the animals before being overtaken by Joseph's steward, as 44:4 indicates. Thus Jacob explains the absence of the word *saq* in this context. Beyond explaining that lack, his interpretation gives us an insight into Joseph's careful and detailed planning (*mit gutem Vorbedacht*), since, accordingly, Joseph ordered that the brothers' gold be returned to them in their animals' *feedbags* on their first journey home, and in their own *sacks* during the second trip, to ensure against premature discovery on the second trip. The placement of the gold in the feedbag(s) during their first visit with Joseph was perhaps yet another little test on Joseph's part — would they return the gold, either immediately, or on their inevitable return in the next year?

In contrast, as noted above, the critics emend *saq* to *amtahat* in 42:27 or attribute the word to redactional hands, since an E-word in a J-context is inconvenient, if not impossible, and according to the basic

¹¹³ B. Jacob, *Der Erste Buch der Torah: Genesis*, Berlin: Schocken Verlag, repr. New York: Ktav, 1974, p. 773.

¹¹⁴ The following example is taken from an article of mine to be published later this year in a volume on his work.

tenets of the theory can serve no literary purpose.¹¹⁵

What are the advantages of Jacob's interpretation? It obviates the need for an emendation in 42:27, and explains the distribution of the word *saq* both within its wider biblical context and within the context of the Joseph narrative. As a by-product, it also provides an insight into the thoroughness and subtlety of Joseph's machinations, a suggestion already made by Kimhi, though without the semantic distinction.¹¹⁶ Once the distinctions Jacob suggests are accepted, the rest follows as a result of the particular distribution of these words. It also, as we shall argue, furthers the omnisignificant program.

To what, then, does *amtahat* refer? Jacob cites Nahmanides' suggestion that this word refers to a large sack, but ultimately rejects that in favor of one which fits the context more squarely, following Onkelos and the Peshitta. *Amtahat* refers to a donkey's entire load, of which the feedbag is part. To be more precise, it is the *baggage* (*Gepaeck*), and not the *burden*, that is of moment here, since the *amtahat* must be something which can be *opened*, and not merely the sum total of everything loaded onto the donkey's back.

It is important to note that in this interpretation Jacob goes beyond the Targums, his original sources, since Onkelos at Exod 23:5 glosses *massa* with *to^caneih* as it glosses *amtahat* in Genesis. Targum thus does not differentiate between the two, though it is consistent in discriminating between *saq*, glossed with *saq*¹¹⁷, and *amtahat*, given as *to^cana*. Jacob thus distinguishes three roughly synonymous terms in Biblical Hebrew: *saq*, "feedbag," *amtahat*, "baggage," and *massa*, "load, burden."¹¹⁸ He does so by paying strict attention to context, and

¹¹⁵ See for example, ICC Genesis (Skinner), crit. app. on 42:27 (p. 477) emends *saqo* to *amtahto* on the basis of the Septuagint; so too BHS. Ephraim Speiser, in *Anchor Bible: Genesis*, Garden City: Doubleday, 1964, p. 322 suggests that it was "carried over from vs. 25." More recently, Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 2, Genesis 16-50, Dallas: Word, 1994, p. 409, notes that "Traditional source critics used the two terms to distinguish two sources, but as Westermann (3:112) points out, the presence of both terms in a single verse makes this a dubious criterion for source analysis."

¹¹⁶ See Radak *ad loc.*

¹¹⁷ With the exception of Peshitta to Gen 42:27, which glosses the second occurrence of *saq* with *to^cana* while it renders the first with *saga*. What this may betoken is unclear. My thanks to Dr. Richard White for his help with the Peshitta.

¹¹⁸ Unfortunately, in his comments on Exod 23:5, which contains the noun *massa*, Jacob concentrates his attention on the difficult verb *azav*. It is clear from his remarks, however, that he does define *massa* as "burden" rather

he does so in order to justify his unitary reading of the Pentateuch.

In contrast, R. Yaakov Zevi Mecklenberg proposed that *amtahat* was a feedbag which was placed around the animal's neck, but was kept in the larger sacks used for grain. One consequence of this interpretation is that when the brothers found the money in the *amtahat* rather than the sacks, they surmised that the placement was not a mistake or accident, but had been done deliberately in order to frame them. This explains why v. 27 states: "One opened his sack to give feed to his ass at the camping place; he saw the silver, and behold, it was in the mouth of his *amtahat*," implying that its placement was also a matter of surprise.¹¹⁹ Similarly, Malbim is content to cite the distinction made by "the commentators," that *amtahat* is a small container which holds valuables (*hafatzim meyuhadim*), while *saq* is a larger sack into which feed and grain is placed.¹²⁰ Netziv proposed a similar distinction: *amtahat* was the more important container, and was used by the brothers for feed and grain, whereas the *saq* was generally used for transporting large amounts of grain. In this case, Joseph expected the brothers to place the grain in their *saqim*, and so instructed his majordomo to place the money in the sacks (v. 25); but the brothers had the grain placed in their *amtahot* which were then placed in the *saqim*. Thus, the sacks were not available to those who measured out the grain; when the brothers opened the sacks, they found the money in the *amtahot* (v. 27).¹²¹ When they returned home (v. 35), they opened the sacks, at which point both the *amtahot* that were filled with grain fell out, along with the money in the sacks.¹²²

However, to return to Jacob's interpretation, it is clear that his reading of this passage fits the broad trends of omnisignificant exegesis rather than being intended as part of a systematic refutation of the claims of the "critics." For were the latter the case, he might have merely asserted, as Ibn Ezra did long before him¹²³ and Abba

than "baggage." He notes, for example, that "the fact that the ass could not stand up need not have been due to the weight of the burden; it might have been loaded incorrectly or unevenly.

¹¹⁹ *Ha-Ketav voha-Qabbalah ad Gen 42:27.*

¹²⁰ Malbim *ad Gen 45:25-27.*

¹²¹ See his comments *ad Gen 42:27.*

¹²² R. Meir Simhah ignored the whole matter, presumably because he had nothing to add to what had already been suggested.

¹²³ See Ibn Ezra's introduction to the Ten Commandments in his Long Commentary on Exodus, s.v. *amar Avraham ha-Mehabber.*

Bendavid would a generation later, that Biblical Hebrew style is fond of variation for its own sake.¹²⁴ Thus, *saq* and *amtahat* might actually be exactly synonymous, and yet employed by one author for stylistic reasons. Such a view might easily be reconciled with his belief in the dual nature of Semitic thought, as noted above, and would serve his anti-critical polemic admirably. As for the question of apologetic intent *per se*, that is, a defense of the Pentateuch itself rather than a unitary reading of it, the light shed on Joseph's character by Jacob's exegetical move provides some support to Gunkel's general anti-Semitic inclinations in his judgements of various members of the patriarchal family. Thus Jacob, in playing his philological card, was in danger of losing the ethical hand. By resisting the critical consensus in the way he did, he served, as he himself would have termed it, the wider ends of German critical scholarship. But why would an experienced and sensitive polemicist and apologist, the author of *Auge um Auge, Krieg, Revolution und Judentum*, and other such works, which defended Jewish conceptions of morality from their Christian denigrators, give his opponents more grist for their mill?

At stake here is much more than what he believed to be a plain-sense reading of the text, or Germanic thoroughness, or even the mind-set of a polemicist who gets carried away with his polemic. What is at stake is an omnisignificant reading of Hebrew Scripture.

To what may we attribute this concern? Jacob did not subscribe to Orthodox dogmas in regard to the divinity of the Torah; in this connection we should note his comment in his 1905 book, *Der Pentateuch*, in which he asserts that (at least in regard to the extended Tabernacle narrative in Exodus and Leviticus) "der Verfasser hatte Zeit und hat seinen Gegenstand gruendlich und bis in alle Einzelheiten durchdacht, ehe er schrieb."¹²⁵ ["The author had the time and had thoroughly and fundamentally considered his subject in all its detail."] And further, axiom 5, "Jede Besonderheit und Abweichung des Ausdrucks hat ihren besonderen Grund und Sinn." ["Every peculiarity and variation of expression has its own particular basis and sense."]

Again, he does not accept Nahmanides' assumption of a syntactical resumptive repetition at 4:9.¹²⁶ In His instructions to Moses

¹²⁴ Abba Bendavid, *Leshon Miqra u-Leshon Hakhamim*², Tel Aviv: Devir, 1967, pp. 16-59.

¹²⁵ *Der Pentateuch*, p. 150.

¹²⁶ Note that *Ha-Ketav veka-Qabbalah* explicitly rejects Rashi's suggested resumptive repetition in his comments on Exod 6:29. It is clear that Malbim and Netziv do so as well in their respective handling of the issue; see

regarding his first appearance before the Israelites, God provides him with three signs, if needed. The third, it will be remembered, involves the turning of water into blood. An overly literal translation of the relevant part of Exod 4:9 would yield: “you shall take of the waters of the Nile and pour them onto the dry ground, and the waters which you have taken from the Nile shall be (*ve-hayu*), and they shall become (*ve-hayu*) blood on the dry ground.”

A number of commentators noted the repeated use of *ve-hayu*. Rashi prefers a midrashic explanation, which we shall examine in a moment. Rashbam in this instance disagrees with his grandfather, and substitutes a superficially plain-sense reading, taking the repetition as rhetorical, citing Ps 93:3 (“the rivers raised, O Lord, the rivers raised their voices”) and Ps 94:3 (“how long will the wicked, O Lord, how long will the wicked rejoice?”). This desperate expedient, which fails on several grounds, seems not to have taken root. (For one thing, the repetition in Exod 4:9 is not poetic, nor does it involve the repetition of a phrase.) Nahmanides explains the repetition as a “syntactic resumptive repetition” necessitated either by the need for emphasis or because of the length of the clause which intervenes between the subject and the predicate.¹²⁷ It is Rashi’s suggestion that Jacob adopts: that *ve-hayu* appears twice “because the blood did not change back; when it sank into the parched soil (not earth), it could not be removed.” Moreover, he also deals with the repetition of the phrase “which you have taken from the Nile” as intended to indicate “that this sign would only be used before the Israelites in Egypt.”¹²⁸ As Jacob notes in connection with his comments on Exod 16:15, and in rejecting the interpretation of Rashbam and a number of other *pashtanim* there, if their interpretation were accepted, “these phrases would have been meaningless or redundant.”¹²⁹ The omnisignificant principle could hardly have been more pithily expressed. After all, the syntactic function of the repeated *ve-hayu* does serve the function of furthering the narrative intent. Once again, we must view Jacob against the background of the strong omnisignificant trend of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Malbim and Netziv both elaborate on Rashi’s interpretation, explaining the necessity for this “miracle within

Malbim *ad* Exod 6:28-29, and Netziv on 6:30, Needless to say, they also do not accept Nahmanides’ syntactic resumptive repetition in Exod 4:9.

¹²⁷ For more on this technique, and Nahmanides’ use of it, see my “It Is No Empty Thing,” pp. 23-29.

¹²⁸ *Exodus* [American edition], p. 87.

¹²⁹ *Exodus*, p. 453.

a miracle.” From our perspective, the important fact is that they all reflect a strong omniscient drive, whereby even a syntactic explanation must give way to a more religiously meaningful one, when it is available. In Jacob’s own words in axiom 8: “Jede Deutung muss mit der Gesamtheit der religioesen und kultischen Ideen des Verfassers in Einklang und organischem Zusammenhang stehen.” [“Every meaning must stand in harmony and organic relation with the totality of religious and cultic ideas of the author.”]¹³⁰

Jacob was nothing if not thorough. For example, his notes on the variations in the description of the Tabernacle’s construction in Exod 36 includes the following comment: “B [the account of the construction] took the vivid and poetic language of A [=the instructions] and used it in *the prosaic language of the workshop*. When A used *ishah el ahotah* in 26:3, 5, 7, 17, B used *ahat el ahat* in 36:10, 11, 12, 13, 22....”¹³¹ Jacob proceeds to give a number of other such examples.

Even Netziv, who on 36:10 rejects Nahmanides’ *hibbah* explanation of the repetitions and duplications in the account of the Tabernacle in this verse, and insists that the repetitions are designed for the new insights implied by the minute changes in phraseology, does not note this one.

Now, the prolixity and lengthiness (*arikhut*) of the *parshiyot* of the construction is all excessive (*meyuttar*). The Ramban, *z”l*, already noted this, but did not say things that the ear may absorb. But the truth is that few new insights (*me’at hiddushim*) are to be found [in the account of] the construction in regard to matters that are meant for that generation (*le-sha’ah*) and for future generations (*le-dorot*), as will be explained below.... This is an important principle, as cited in Bava Qamma 64 and in other places, that “every *parashah* that is said and repeated is only repeated for the new insight it contains (*davar she-nithaddesh bah*)—aside from the hints in the Torah which come by means of minute variations (*shinnuyim qalim*) like *ba-hoveret/ba-mahberet*, *negbah/temanah*, *esrim ha-qaresh/esrim ha-gerashim*, and many more— “God’s secret [is given over] to those who fear Him” (Ps 25:14), and “there is no empty thing” in the Torah (Deut 32:47).¹³²

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 151.

¹³¹ Benno Jacob, *The Second Book of the Bible: Exodus*, p. 1022.

¹³² Netziv to Exod 36:8; there are not comments on vss. 9 and 10.

It is noteworthy that, despite this insistence, and his rejection of Nahmanides' approach, and Netziv's policy of interpreting each minute difference in phrasing between the two accounts of the Tabernacle's construction, he writes almost nothing on the twelve-fold repetition of the tribal princes' donations to the Tabernacle in Numbers 7, where the repetitions hold almost no variations.

Returning for a moment to the Tabernacle account, let us note that *Meshekh Hokmah* has no comments at all on Exod 36:9-12, Malbim has no comments at all on vss. 8-20 of this chapter, and *Ha-Ketav veba-Qabbalah* has none on vss. 7-22.

Benno Jacob could include matters for which Malbim, Netziv and others could not give an explanation, since he had added a category to the traditional omnisignificant approach: the aesthetic. It is important to note that Jacob does not suggest that this change represents a neutral free variant; for him, it must have some significance, even if "only"¹³³ aesthetic. He notes that "other distinctions are less significant, but as our text was composed with great care, they are not without reason or meaning."¹³⁴ Some of these distinctions were noted by Netziv or *Meshekh Hokmah*, but not all. On the other hand, it is undeniable that Jacob's comments become sketchier as he reaches the end of the book; thus, in regard to the construction of the courtyard, Jacob notes; "The variations are even greater here, and we shall restrict ourselves to those of a major nature."¹³⁵ To what extent this was due to his advanced age, or to a feeling, at long last, that he had outlasted the patience of his readers, is not clear. What is clear is that he did not surrender one jot or tittle of the omnisignificant imperative.

In one of those ironies with which intellectual history is replete, omnisignificant interpretation, traditionally applied only to texts considered divinely and verbally inspired, reaches its apex in the work of a scholar whose view of Scripture, though suffused with awe, did not consider it in the same light as his traditionalist precursors.

His own accomplishment points up the partial nature of that of his predecessors. The long-standing lack of an adequate response to the problem of really integrating large parts of Scripture into Rabbinic Judaism as it was actually practiced, one which did not involve actual abandonment of the omnisignificant principle, hampered efforts to

¹³³ The quotation marks/parentheses are not meant to reflect his own view, but that of the East-European commentators just mentioned.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1023.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1030.

respond to the contemporary challenge.

Moreover, in part because of the two-pronged nature of the challenge—both religious and exegetical—and in part because of long-standing tradition, those responses tended to concentrate on defending ground already gained rather than extending the range of omnisignificant meaningfulness. This was especially true as regards the Pentateuch. Only Malbim tackled the problem of providing an omnisignificantly oriented commentary on the rest of the Bible. The others restricted their efforts to the Pentateuch, both because the challengers concentrated their fire there, and because it was the primary source of revelation and Halakhah. But even in their work on the Pentateuch, all three restricted their efforts to defending rabbinic halakhic interpretation rather than extending their defense of the worth and meaningfulness of Scripture to relatively uncharted parts of the Pentateuch. Whatever ground was gained in those areas was gained only as a by-product of efforts in understanding rabbinic exegesis.

Nevertheless, it is clear that facing the challenge of modern religious and exegetical movements, both Orthodox and traditionally minded non-Orthodox returned to the classical rabbinic doctrine of omnisignificance. By drawing on the disparate approaches which had arisen in the interim, they developed a number of approaches that addressed with the problems raised by nineteenth-century source critics while preserving the doctrine of the Pentateuch's divine, unitary nature.

Half a century has now passed since Benno Jacob laid down his pen, and somewhat less since the death of Umberto Cassuto, and Orthodox Jewish biblical exegesis, especially in Israel, has more and more drawn on academic biblical studies, even while denying the academic orthodoxy represented by the Documentary Hypothesis and its offspring, and, we should note, without pursuing the omnisignificant ideal. Thus the work of R. David Zvi Hoffmann (1843-1921), the *Da'at Miqra* series, which has in recent years bitten the exegetical bullet and published several volumes on the Pentateuch, and most of all, the work of R. Mordecai Breuer, whose *Pirquei Mo'adim* and *Pirquei Bereshit* apply his transmogrification of the critical approach to Genesis, which provides a narrative framework for his analysis, and to the various Pentateuchal passages that deal with the festivals, which provide a legal/ritual one, do not provide consistent omnisignificant interpretations of whole chapters, *parashiyot*, and certainly not whole books. And this applies all the more to such compilations of classic rabbinic midrash as *Torah*

Temimah, or the more exhaustive *Torah Shelemah*.

This does not mean that omnisignificant ideal or doctrine has been abandoned, at least in theory; indeed, it remains the basis of most rabbinic and rabbinic-style comments on biblical passages. What does not exist is the will to produce a *systematic and comprehensive* omnisignificant *biblical* commentary. But “omnisignificant style” commentaries and supercommentaries continue to be produced, as in the case of Isaiah Halevi Weiss’ wonderful *Leqet Bahir* supercommentary on Rashi on the Pentateuch,¹³⁶ or Nehamah Leibowitz’ (1905-1997) work on Rashi and other commentators. The latter is particularly noteworthy, from our point of view, for including within the compass of her corpus of commentaries that of Benno Jacob. Whether the mantle of Malbim, of R. Meir Simhah, of Netziv, and of Benno Jacob will eventually be taken up I cannot say. But as Gershom Scholem wrote in another context, quoting S. J. Agnon telling of R. Israel of Ruzhin, if we cannot find the place in the forest, or light the fire, or perform the secret meditations, we can at least tell the tale.¹³⁷

¹³⁶ *Humash Or ha-Hayyim im perush Leqet Bahir-Or Bahir* (5 vols.), Brooklyn: Or Bahir, 5740.

¹³⁷ See Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York: Schocken Books, 1967, pp. 349-350, and n. 36.