

C
FORM ~~A~~
COLLEGE SCHOLARS ~~PROPOSAL~~ APPROVAL
PROJECT

Igor H. de Souza

Scholar

Sheldon Cohen

Mentor

Figurative Language of Medieval Jewish Exegesis
Project Title and Completion Date (Semester and Year)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS
(Minimum 3 Required)

Name

Signature

Sheldon Cohen

Sheldon Cohen

Thomas Burman

Thomas Burman

Ilya G. Schmidt

Ilya G. Schmidt

PLEASE ATTACH A COPY OF THE WRITTEN PROPOSAL TO THIS SHEET
AND RETURN TO THE PROGRAM DIRECTOR.

DATE APPROVED: April 23, 2004

The Figurative Language of Medieval Jewish Exegesis: Contexts and Critiques

Igor Holanda de Souza

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the
College Scholars program

University of Tennessee
Knoxville
2004

Foreword

The Talmud relates that two students were once learning with a certain rabbi. One of the students wanted to learn about law, while the other wanted to hear a legend. The rabbi replied: "I will tell you a parable. To what can it be compared? To a man with two wives, one young, one old. The young one pulls out his white hairs, while the old one pulls out his black hairs, and thus he becomes bald from both sides!" The rabbi's solution is to derive both a piece of law and a legend from a biblical verse, satisfying both students.

My initial decision to study medieval Jewish philosophy and hermeneutics was based on similar reasoning. I was an English major who also wanted to study philosophy, Judaic studies and Medieval studies. What is one to do? The College Scholars program was an invaluable way to find my own niche (and to keep my hair), and this thesis tied it all together (and made me pull my hair out). I would like to thank Dr. Philip Hamlin for encouraging me to enter the program and for his support of my research. Dr. David Tandy, director of the program, accepted my application and offered much support during the research process and in the technicalities thereof. I am greatly indebted to him. My sincerest thanks go to the three faculty members who graciously accepted my invitation to be part of the thesis committee: Dr. Tom Burman, even though I had not studied under him; Dr. Sheldon Cohen, who also accepted to serve as head of the committee; and חביבה אחרונה Dr. Gilya Schmidt, of whom I can say believed in me more than I believed in myself. Her support was inestimable.

I would like to thank the Interlibrary Services staff and the Reference staff at Hodges Library for their patience and understanding, and the late Mrs. Alvin C. Nielsen,

who provided substantial financial support through her scholarship for the College Scholars program. The research on Maimonides was shared with a student philosophy colloquium under the direction of Dr. Eileen John at the University of Louisville, who accepted my submission. Many thanks for the opportunity. Dr. Zion Zohar, at Florida International University, helped me direct my research at the earliest stages and answered my questions on medieval Jewish philosophy; Dr. Rosalind Gwynne kindly answered my questions on the Koran and its exegesis. My deepest appreciation to them both.

Finally, my parents provided much support, financial and otherwise; I would like to thank them, and also Randy Roark, Allison Castel, Moema Lacerda Furtado, James Mazzouccolo, Carl Tallent, and Ken Olsen. Their interest and concern was genuine.

Igor Holanda de Souza

University of Tennessee, Knoxville

March 2004 / Shushan Purim 5764

Transliteration table

Unambiguous phonemes follow the most obvious transliteration (for instance, ת /
נ = n). I have indicated only phonemes actually used in the text.

Hebrew	Arabic
ט - 't	ت - t
ה - h	ث - th
ח - kh	ج - ġ
כ - k	ح - ħ
ע - 'e	خ - kh
ק - k	ذ - ḏ
	س - s
	ص - ṣ
	ط - ṭ
	ظ - ḏ
	ع - 'e
	غ - gh
	ق - q
	ك - k
	و - w
	ي - y

For the spelling of Muslim philosophical terms and concepts (Kalam, Mu'tazila
etc.), I follow Harry Austryn Wolfson's usage in his *Philosophy of Kalam* (Cambridge,
Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976).

I

The Talmudic tractate ‘*Avot* (Sayings of the Fathers), primarily ethical in nature, offers this dictum: “Delve (*hafak*) in [the Torah] and delve in it [again], for everything is in it . . .”¹ The most common occurrence of *hafak* is “to turn,” as in Joshua 7:8, or “to overthrow,” in the sense of annihilate—the word is used for the overthrow of Sodom in Genesis 19:21,25. Yet *hafak* can also be used in the sense of “change,” to transform something into something else. The author of Psalms mentions God as the one who turned (*hahofki*) “the rock into a pool of water” (114:8). Interestingly enough, the gerund—*hefek*—came to mean “contrary” or “opposite,” as in Ezekiel 16:34. A related adjective, *hafakpak*, means “crooked,” as in Proverbs 21:8.²

These different uses of *hafak* and the application of that verb as a positive attitude towards the Torah are illustrative of what we identify as a specific mode of medieval Jewish exegesis, the philosophical exegesis. This brief exposition of the verb *hafak* betrays also the uncertainty surrounding the term “philosophical exegesis.” Its activity is traditionally identified with allegorization of Scripture, which in last instance allegedly aroused suspicion that it “displaced the historical content of the Bible in order to juggle with abstract concepts.”³ The literal meaning was claimed to have been shortchanged by such hermeneutical attitudes, even though no exegete discarded it entirely. The etymology of *hafak* illustrates this tension: as “turn,” it indicates a horizontal exegesis, occurring in a web of meanings and associations. In the sense of “change,” it signals a

¹ הפך בה והפך בה, כלא בה (V:26).

² *hefek* (הֶפֶק) may have neutral connotations, as in the example above, but may have negative ones as well; see Isaiah 29:16. *Hafakpak* (הִפְכֵּךְ) is used only once in the Hebrew Bible, with a decidedly negative connotation.

³ Julius Guttman, *Philosophies of Judaism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 187.

vertical exegesis, where allegorization presupposes deeper structures underlying the literal level.

In one of the few longer works dedicated specifically to philosophical exegesis in the Jewish Middle Ages, Maurice-Ruben Hayoun begins by identifying problems in, and traditional sources for, the study of “allegorical exegesis.” Nowhere in the introduction is the reader treated to an explanation of what differentiates, if anything, “allegorical exegesis” from “philosophical exegesis.” He explains later that the concept of allegorical interpretation is *peu clair*, and that he has chosen to call this certain mode of interpretation “allegorical” due to the lack of univocity in diverse activities that have been subsumed under the name “allegorical interpretation.” There is no *vocabulaire unique* when it comes to allegorical interpretation, but it is claimed that “philosophical commentary or exegesis” is better applied to such thinkers as Maimonides, Ibn Caspi or [Mosheh] Narboni, rather than Saadia Gaon (882-942 CE).⁴

Before proceeding too far, one must address these fundamental uncertainties on the scope of “philosophical” and “allegorical” exegesis. By doing so, I will be attempting also to demarcate the lines and orientation of the present inquiry. Following Hayoun, allegorical interpretation has been used to describe a variety of exegetical activities. He mentions a few groups: early Christian theologians, ancient Greek philosophical schools, in addition to, of course, medieval Jewish thinkers.⁵ Isaak Heinemann, an exponent of the methodology and orientation of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* school, mentions also

⁴ Maurice-Ruben Hayoun, *L'exégèse philosophique dans le judaïsme médiéval*, Text and Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Judaism, 0179-7891 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1992), 3-4, 10-11. I do not doubt that in Hayoun's work one can glean the distinction between allegorical and philosophical exegesis; see for instance idem, chapter 4, “Les rapports entre la philosophie et la religion d'après le *Cusari* de Judah Ha-Lévi,” (119-137) and idem, chapter 5, “Les différents sens de l'Écriture selon Abraham Ibn Ezra,” (139-167). But such distinction, and the degree to which allegorization can become philosophical exegesis (or vice-versa) is not discussed satisfactorily.

⁵ Hayoun, *L'exégèse philosophique*, 11.

Philo and Islam as forerunners in the allegorization of the Bible. He claims that “all these precursors share a belief in the divine origin and esoteric meaning of biblical documents. This belief . . . provided a much more favorable soil for allegorization than does modern rationalism.”⁶ More recent scholarship has emphasized not shared beliefs, but shared strategies in the context of allegorical interpretation. Thus, Jon Whitman sees allegorical interpretation as

a form of critical balance, a way in which individual interpreters and whole communities seek to “make sense” of old or strange texts in new or familiar circumstances. From this perspective, a host of civilization developing from the Middle East to western Europe and beyond it have made allegorical interpretation inseparable from their very sense of rationality itself. . . the turn to allegorical interpretation repeatedly marks civilization trying to keep—or in danger of losing—their intellectual and spiritual equilibrium.⁷

Whitman has identified a socio-historical role for allegorization, and he also stresses the elusiveness of a definition of allegory—a definition that cannot be decontextualized.⁸ Assessing the scope of “philosophical exegesis,” on the other hand, involves problems of a different nature. In a seminal essay, Sara Klein-Braslavy describes the Arabic environment in Spain during the 11th and 12th centuries. Through the “Arab cultural environment” Jewish philosophers “encountered Muslim theology, together with Muslim ascetic literature, Greek and Hellenistic philosophy translated into Arabic, and Arabic philosophy.” Their attempt to interpret Scripture “under the influence of ideas they absorbed” from these streams of thought thus constitutes what we call the philosophical exegesis. She also mentions translation from Hebrew into Arabic during the

⁶ Isaak Heinemann, “Scientific Allegorization During the Jewish Middle Ages,” trans. Elizabeth Petuchowski, in *Studies in Jewish Thought: An Anthology of German Jewish Scholarship*, ed. Alfred Jospe (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1981), 249.

⁷ Jon Whitman, “A Retrospective Forward: Interpretation, Allegory, and Historical Change,” in *Interpretation and Allegory: Antiquity to the Modern Period*, ed. Jon Whitman (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2000), 4.

⁸ Whitman, 20.

course of exegetical discussion as an “act of interpretation,” and her position is that biblical exegesis is secondary to theological and philosophical discussion.⁹

Klein-Braslavy’s essay limits itself to a very narrow period and location. It discusses four major thinkers: Solomon Ibn Gabirol (ca. 1021/22-1058), Baḳya ben Joseph Ibn Pakuda (eleventh century), Judah Halevi (1075-1141) and Maimonides (Rambam; 1135/38-1204). One wonders why there is no mention of any philosophical exegesis before the eleventh century, not only during the Gaonic period, but also in Isaac Israeli (850-932/55). Before Ibn Gabirol, Israeli had reconciled a notion of creation *ex nihilo*, ostensibly rooted in both Genesis 1:1 and in the Koran (where God is described as *badi’*, or absolute creator) with Plotinus’ emanationist theory of creation.¹⁰ It is impossible to ignore Saadia’s philosophical views in his biblical exegesis, which place him “well within the framework of contemporary Islamic philosophical thought.” His commentary on the Pentateuch (and also in the *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*) provided the earliest delimitation of a literal sense, and recommended Scripture to be “brought into accord with the senses and the intellect, with other verses and with tradition.”¹¹ For instance, Saadia assigns a metaphorical interpretation to the verse that describes God as a

⁹ Sara Klein-Braslavy, “The Philosophical Exegesis,” in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*, vol. 1, *From the Beginnings to the Middle Ages (Until 1300)*, part 2, *The Middle Ages*, ed. Magne Sæbø in co-operation with Chris Brekelmans and Menahem Haran (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 303-304

¹⁰ Creation is not understood by Ibn Gabirol to be a voluntaristic process, consisting of the union (impression) of Form onto Matter by the Will—but as has been pointed out, the *nihil* of creation may be identified with “God” himself, and creation *ex nihilo* is identical to the emanationist scheme. Raphael Loewe, *Ibn Gabirol* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1989), 51-52; Sarah Pessin, “Jewish Neoplatonism: Being Above Being and divine emanation in Solomon Ibn Gabirol and Isaac Israeli,” in *the Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 101-105.

¹¹ Robert Brody, “The Geonim of Babylonia as Biblical Exegetes,” in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament*, eds. Sæbø, Brekelmans, Haran, 82; M. Zucker, *Saadya’s Commentary on Genesis*, 17-18, in Brody, 80. For the biblical literal sense in the *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, see 7:2; trans. Samuel Rosenblatt, Yale Judaica Series, vol.1, ed. Julian Oberman, Louis Ginzberg and Harry Austryn Wolfson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), 265-267.

“consuming fire” (Deut. 4:24) because reason “establishes that fire is contingent and mutable, while God is not.”

The absence of post-Maimonidean philosophical exegesis in Klein-Braslavy’s essay is also surprising. The *Guide to the Perplexed* inaugurated a new era in medieval Jewish philosophy, and particularly in biblical exegesis. Although commentaries upon the *Guide* have inestimable philosophical value and represent an important source for medieval Jewish thought in general, the exegetical methods of the *Guide* also inspired a host of biblical commentaries.¹² Klein-Braslavy remarks that “Maimonides’ exegesis of the Bible had a profound influence upon all of the philosophical Bible exegesis which followed him. All subsequent medieval Jewish philosophical biblical exegesis carries his stamp.”¹³ But her sketch of philosophical exegesis is sorely lacking without a survey of philosophical exegesis after 1204, in two important respects: the association of philosophy and esotericism after Samuel Ibn Tibbon and “radical” allegorist exegesis in the controversies of 1304-1306 in Provence.¹⁴

My own conception of philosophical exegesis is not so restrictive as Klein-Braslavy’s. Other views on philosophical exegesis are not free from fundamental problems, either. For instance, like Hayoun, David Shatz associates philosophical

¹² For example the well-known influence of the *Guide* upon the biblical commentaries of its first translator, Samuel Ibn Tibbon; Aviezer Ravitzky, “Samuel Ibn Tibbon and the Esoteric Character of the *Guide of the Perplexed*,” in *History and Faith: Studies in Jewish Philosophy* (Amsterdam: J.C. Gieben, 1996), 231.

¹³ Klein-Braslavy, 320.

¹⁴ This controversy should not be confused with the so-called Maimonidean controversy, which took place in the 1230s, and centered on Maimonides’ apparent denial of several doctrines, particularly the doctrine of resurrection. The later controversy concerned allegorical exegesis (and subsequently, the appropriateness of philosophical study) that was itself influenced by Maimonides; according to Charles Touati, both sides claimed respect for Maimonides and did not attack his ideas directly. Iddit Dobbs-Weinstein, “the Maimonidean Controversy,” in *History of Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman, vol.2, *Routledge History of World Philosophies* (London: Routledge, 1997), 336; Charles Touati, “La Controverse de 1303-1306 Autour des Études Philosophiques et Scientifiques,” *Revue des Études Juives* 127 (1968): 23-24; and below. On the association of philosophy with esotericism by commentators of the *Guide*, see Aviezer Ravitzky, “The Secrets of Maimonides: Between the Thirteenth and the Twentieth Century,” in *History and Faith: Studies in Jewish Philosophy* (Amsterdam: J.C. Gieben, 1996), 250-253.

exegesis with allegorization, based upon a notion of the previous existence of a “two-layered text: one outer, exoteric, geared to the multitude; the other, inner, hidden, esoteric, aimed at the philosopher.” The philosopher-exegete is aware that the sacred text has more than one dimension, and his task is to pierce through the surface meaning.¹⁵

There is, of course, nothing wrong with this picture. Shatz himself points out that the notion of a two-layered text “is seductive and masks significant ambiguities.”¹⁶ Although he prefers to stress the ambiguity regarding the value of the exoteric layer—why does it exist at all?—a more fundamental ambiguity, or rather, impreciseness, is derived from viewing *all* of philosophical exegesis through the lenses of the exoteric-esoteric duality. It is not to be denied that this duality comprises a central issue in the philosophical exegesis, but it should also be noted that not all Jewish philosophers in the Middle Ages subscribed to this notion. I will expand on this objection as a way to stimulate a discussion on the extent of philosophical exegesis.

The theory of “double truth” is most often associated with Siger de Brabant (ca. 1240 - ca. 1284).¹⁷ But since Ibn Rushd (Averroes) also came to be associated with this theory, there are divergent views on its specifics. The theory of double truth, in its most basic form, maintains that there are two legitimate sources of truth: one is reason; the other is religious revelation. But the agreement among proponents of the double truth theory stops there. The divisive question is whether the findings of reason and the dictates of religious revelation can contradict one another. Some adherents of the double

¹⁵ David Shatz, “The biblical and rabbinic background to medieval Jewish philosophy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 20.

¹⁶ Ibid. 21.

¹⁷ Arthur Hyman and James J. Walsh, *Philosophy in the Middle Ages: The Christian, Islamic and Jewish Traditions* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1973), 450-451.

truth theory were accused of maintaining that there exist contradictions between reason and revelation: this is the non-theological Scholastic view (it is not clear whether any philosophers held this view). Ibn Rushd is sometimes erroneously identified with this position.¹⁸ On the other hand, it was also asserted that there is no contradiction between philosophy and revelation. One of the earliest proponents of this position was Philo, who explained his thesis by means of a myth. Philosophy had its inception not in Greece, but among Jews. But as a result of the exile, the original Jewish philosophical writings were lost, although the ideas therein survived in translation. These are the ideas that are found in Persian, Greek and Roman philosophy. Hence there can be no contradiction between the Bible and philosophical writings, since they belong to the same source.¹⁹

The latter position eliminates the need to choose between philosophy and faith by affirming that their truths are in fact one Truth. It is not, however, free from difficulties; how can one ignore cases where the content of revelation does not accord with reason? This is the most serious question for all those who held to this version of the double-truth theory, and created an impetus for philosophical exegesis. As regards this question, philosophical exegesis is not a matter of reading philosophy into Scripture, but rather a quest to uncover the true *purpose* of Scripture. Biblical anthropomorphism is a useful example. Jehudah Halevi (b. ca. 1080) describes the God of the philosophers as

“above desire or intention. . . . He is. . . . above the knowledge of individuals, because the latter change with the times, whilst there is no change in God’s knowledge. He, therefore, does not know thee, much less thy thoughts or thy actions He never created man. For the world is without beginning. . . . seek purity of heart in which way thou art able, provided thou hast acquired the sum total of knowledge in its real essence;

¹⁸ Hyman, 287, 451.

¹⁹ Colette Sirat, *A History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Paris: Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, 1985), 6-7.

then thou wilt reach thy goal, viz. the union of man with this Spiritual, or rather Active Intellect.²⁰

This portrayal differs considerably from the biblical God. The language used to describe Him in the Torah “refers to the use of terms that strongly imply a direct and unmediated relationship between God and man, or which depict divine action as a calculated, personal response to specific human concerns.”²¹ Thus the biblical God can be described by reference to what is proper to man, including the human anatomy and human psyche. Anthropomorphic representations of the Deity can be significant of a “fresh and vital form of religious awareness” of “immediate reality and relevance,” but from the medieval philosophical point of view, every physical being is a created being.²² Anthropomorphisms, psychological descriptions of God, are even more problematic, as they imply change in God.

Given these two radically distinct descriptions of God, early Jewish philosophers in particular were confronted with a nearly insurmountable dilemma between reason and revelation. It is noteworthy that the problem would not have arisen had it not been for the acceptance of philosophy as a source of knowledge, which is corroborated by revelation and “authentic tradition,” according to Saadia.²³ His solution is to find “non-anthropomorphic meanings that would be in keeping with the requirements of reason.” Before mentioning what such meanings might be, Saadia is nevertheless concerned with why there are anthropomorphisms in the Bible at all. He explains that their use is “due to

²⁰ *The Kuzari: An Argument for the Faith of Israel*, trans. Hartwig Hirschfeld (New York: Schocken, 1964), 36-39 (I:1).

²¹ Robert J. Eisen, “The Exodus of the Jews from Egypt in Gersonides’ *Commentary on the Torah*: a Study in Medieval Philosophical Exegesis” (Ph. D. diss., Brandeis University, 1990), 238-239.

²² R.J. Zwi Werblowsky, “Anthropomorphism,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, CD-ROM Edition; Saadia Gaon, *Beliefs and Opinions*, II:5 (104).

²³ *Beliefs and Opinions*, Introductory Treatise: 5 (16-18).

our endeavor to give a proximate and figurative description of the deity.”²⁴ Saadia must explain why anthropomorphisms must be present in the text, just as he must explain why neither revelation nor reason can be dispensed with.²⁵

His solution is to suggest that anthropomorphisms are “meant to designate lofty, exalted ideas,” and that they enable us to speak about God.²⁶ Revelation is necessary because “the capacity to reason belongs to the few, whereas religion is available to all.”²⁷ Anthropomorphisms constitute a vital pedagogical medium. Saadia asks rhetorically, “Was not the body the first step in our process of cognition, and was it not by means of its earmarks that we conducted our investigation and our research until we attained the knowledge of its Maker?”²⁸ While the body figurative is necessary as a first step of comprehension, it is only a means to an end; the majority of people cannot immediately attain the rational idea of God as dissimilar to everything else in Creation. Reading anthropomorphisms literally is thus to return to an almost pre-rational mode of thinking: “how, then, can they, to put it figuratively, return to the ABC and endeavor to treat the Creator as a physical being?”²⁹ Thus his insistence that reason, or rather “the requirement of sound reason” be the yardstick by which one determines that anthropomorphic language must be figuratively interpreted.³⁰

In this discussion, there is no mention of an exoteric-esoteric dimension to the biblical text. Can it be said that the exegesis of anthropomorphism qualifies as philosophical exegesis? As I mentioned above, anthropomorphism did not constitute a

²⁴ Ibid. II:8 (112).

²⁵ Ze’ev Levy, *Between Yafeth and Shem: On the Relationship between Jewish and General Philosophy*, American University Studies series V (philosophy), vol. 21 (New York: Peter Lang, 1987), 163.

²⁶ *Beliefs and Opinions* II:9 (115), II:10 (117-118).

²⁷ Levy, 163.

²⁸ *Beliefs and Opinions* II, exordium (92)

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *ibid.* II:3 (100).

stumbling block in biblical interpretation for Rabbanites; descriptions of God in the Talmud and associated writings can be as anthropomorphic as in the Bible.³¹ Mystical hymns from the third and fourth century CE, known collectively as the *Heḳalot* hymns, constantly make reference to parts of God's body as well.³² But with the acceptance of philosophy as a legitimate source of knowledge, anthropomorphisms must also be rationally interpreted, that is, interpreted so as to accord with reason. Recourse to the figurative sense is valid, but the exegetical results must be rationally acceptable as well. Saadia thus interprets Deuteronomy 4:24, *For the Lord thy God is a devouring fire, a jealous God*:

Now fire is something created and defective [sic], for it is subject to extinction. Hence it is logically inadmissible that God resemble it. We must, therefore, impute to this statement the meaning that God's punishment is like a consuming fire, in accordance with the remark made elsewhere in Scripture: *For all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of My jealousy* (Zeph. 3:8).³³

Reason serves two important purposes here. First, the criteria of logic allow one to reject the biblical comparison. Second, an attribute of essence has been reinterpreted as an attribute of action. Attributes of essence, of the type "God is x" were considered problematic in Saadia's day, for Jews as well as Muslims and Christians. Among the sects of Kalam, the Mu'tazila stressed that "God's attributes cannot be separated from the

³¹ An extreme example of rabbinical anthropomorphization is the *Shi'ur Qomah*, or *Measure of the Divine Body*, which attempts to concretely describe the measurements of the Creator's body. Karaites denounced Rabbanite anthropomorphism, and hence lack of scientific sophistication, based upon this work. Alexander Altmann, "Moses Narboni's 'Epistle on Shi'ur Qomā,'" in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. Alexander Altmann (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 225-228. See also A. Marmorstein, *The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God*, vol. 2, *Essays in Anthropomorphism* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1937).

³² For example, "The Face of God," in *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse*, ed. and trans. T. Carmi (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 196-197.

³³ *Beliefs and Opinions*, VII:2 (266).

divine essence;” they must be one with God’s essence.³⁴ Saadia explains that only the terms “living,” “omnipotent” and “omniscient” can be applied to God’s essence because they are mere explanations of the appellation “Creator.”³⁵ “Creator” is an attribute of action, that is, it describes God’s actions, rather than God’s essence, hence a legitimate description of the deity. It is not admissible to equate God with fire, but the exegetical result, the reinterpretation must not simply substitute fire for some other created thing. Interpretation of anthropomorphisms is not some haphazard process where any superimposed meaning can take the place of the anthropomorphic term. Saadia considers the ten Aristotelian categories (by which we can describe all that exists) and concludes, like other medieval philosophers, that God cannot be said to belong to any category.³⁶ Therefore the reinterpretation of such terms is a philosophical process; it must conform to certain accepted notions that are themselves based upon philosophical inquiry.

Saadia’s exegesis of anthropomorphic terms can thus be said to be a mode of philosophical exegesis. Its nature admittedly differs from later esoteric philosophical exegesis, since for him there is no “hidden sense” or “superposition of another sense.”³⁷ Nevertheless, the question of the nature of anthropomorphic expressions ought not to be dismissed offhandedly as purely religious. For Maurice-Ruben Hayoun, it is a matter of internal exegesis, of ensuring that the Bible does not contradict itself: the incorporeal God

³⁴ Sirat, 16.

³⁵ *Beliefs and Opinions* II:4 (102). Saadia’s choice of these three terms reflects traditional Mu’tazilite description of God as “knowing, powerful, and seeing,” bearing in mind that these cannot be separate from God’s essence; otherwise, pure monotheism is compromised, since there would exist something other than God that is also eternal. Mir Valiuddin, “Mu’tazilism,” in *A History of Muslim Philosophy: with short accounts of other disciplines and the modern renaissance in Muslim lands*, vol.1, ed. M. M. Sharif (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1963), 200.

³⁶ *Beliefs and Opinions*, II:9 (112-115).

³⁷ Hayoun, *L’exégèse philosophique*, 46.

cannot be corporeally described, i.e, a “*contradiction in adjecto*.”³⁸ But this contradiction is only obvious because of a certain pre-existent philosophical idea of God, and because of the perception that this idea of God must be the same as the concept of God as portrayed in the Bible. Hayoun thus argues that *il n’y a pas ici de recherche du sens profond mais recherche du sens vrai*, which is correct, but even the search for the true sense of Scripture can be conducted in a philosophical method.³⁹

There are therefore a host of thinkers whose exegesis must be discarded if we are to define philosophical exegesis exclusively as the search for an external, esoteric sense within Scripture. Most Jewish thinkers in the Middle Ages expressed their position on the larger question of the relationship between reason and revelation, with different conclusions. It would be inaccurate to limit the sphere of philosophical exegesis only to those who came to certain conclusions on the nature of the biblical text, and most characteristically, allegorized the text to some extent. Moses Ibn Ezra, for instance, displays an orientation similar to Saadia’s—he is also concerned with the true meaning of Scripture, not with an added meaning—while reaching dramatically different conclusions on the nature of anthropomorphic expressions.⁴⁰ Any sharp dichotomy between rational esotericists (mostly identified with Maimonides) and literalists (such as Judah Halevi, or to an extent, Abraham Ibn Ezra) denies much philosophical value to the literalist exegesis.⁴¹

³⁸ Ibid. 53 (original italics).

³⁹ Ibid. 54.

⁴⁰ Mordechai Cohen, “The Aesthetic Exegesis of Moses Ibn Ezra,” in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament*, eds. Sæbø, Breckelmans, Haran, 288.

⁴¹ Klein-Braslavy thus discusses authors not traditionally associated with philosophical exegesis, such as Baḳya Ibn Pakuda and Judah Halevi. Klein-Braslavy, 306-311.

I have so far discussed the philosophical background of the “double-truth” exegesis; its philosophical implications will be discussed in the second part of this essay. I will now set the background for the esoteric approach to medieval Jewish exegesis. Its rationale can be illustrated by an allegory. The well-known Platonic “allegory of the cave” (in book VII of the *Republic*) argued that some are able to attain a “beatific vision.” The philosopher cognitively escapes the constraints of the human condition and is able to recognize the “immediate source of truth and reason in the intellectual [world].” Quite literally, the philosopher alone can see the light, while most people are relegated to darkness.⁴²

An esoteric approach to philosophical studies became a veritable tradition. Esoterically speaking, knowledge of the Truth, or Truths, is the property of a few privileged and enlightened individuals. Most people, out of natural disinclination or inability, belong to a kind of inferior epistemological realm where all that can be seen are “images or shadows of images.”⁴³ Esoteric epistemology is, therefore, extremely elitist. Moreover, as in the Platonic allegory, the philosopher does not obtain access to the realm of “truth as it is”⁴⁴ unaided.⁴⁵ Knowledge is transmitted from teacher to pupil, and thus, instead of observation of natural phenomena and drawing conclusions from empirical data, the student is encouraged to rely upon authority and tradition.

⁴² B. Jowett, trans., *The Republic and Other Works* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 208. On the place of the *Republic* in Arabic commentaries, see Joel L. Kraemer, “The Islamic context of medieval Jewish philosophy,” in *Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, eds. Frank and Leaman, 43-44.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Moses Maimonides, “Introduction to the First Part,” Shlomo Pines, trans., *The Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 12.

⁴⁵ Plato mentions “an instructor;” the student also does not voluntarily approach the sun (source of truth) but is “reluctantly dragged up a steep and rugged ascent, and held fast until he is forced into the presence of the sun himself.” *Republic*, 206.

Rabbinical Judaism is not altogether free from esotericism. The Talmud characteristically records divergent views, but the view that predominates is one that discourages natural inquiry. “Whoever reflects on four things, it were a mercy if he had never come into the world, viz. what is above, what is beneath, what is before and what is after.”⁴⁶ In fact, a somewhat cryptic story is related to illustrate the fate of those who attempt to investigate the nature of things. “Four men ascended into “the orchard” (*pardes*), Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Akher, and Rabbi Akiva. R. Akiva said to them, “When you arrive at the stones of pure marble do not exclaim, “water, water.” Ben Azzai gazed and died; Ben Zoma gazed and became demented; Akher cut the plants; R. Akiva departed in peace.”⁴⁷

One Talmudic sage expressed the opinion that water was the original element from which the universe was created, which, in Abraham Cohen’s opinion, parallels Greek pre-Socratic cosmological accounts.⁴⁸ Thus it has been argued that Akiva’s words for the four rabbis meant that “when, in their investigation, they approached the “stones of pure marble,” i.e. the Throne of God representing ultimate reality, they must avoid the theory that water supplies the explanation of the origin of the universe.”⁴⁹ The story

⁴⁶ M. *Khagigah* 2:1, b. *Khagigah* 13a. However, Hillel claimed (b. *Avot* II:6) that an unlearned person (עם הארץ) cannot be pious (חסיד).

⁴⁷ b. *Khagigah* 14b. It is not known exactly what *pardes* (פרדס) refers to; it has been interpreted both literally (as Paradise) and figuratively (as the “realm of theosophy”). *Khagigah*, trans. I. Abrahams, ed. I. Epstein (London: Soncino Press, 1938), 90-91 n.10.

⁴⁸ Abraham Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud: the Major Teachings of the Rabbinic Sages* (New York: Schocken, 1949), 28. The rabbinic statement is in p. *Khagigah* 77a. However, the interpretation of water as the material cause of the cosmos is Aristotelian (and repeated by Theophrastes); Thales had claimed only that water is the “essence” of the cosmos inasmuch as all of the cosmos partakes of a single essence. Alexandre Kojève, *Essai d’une histoire raisonnée de la philosophie païenne*, vol. I, *les présocratiques* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1968), 198-199. Thales’ hypothesis has Babylonian and possibly Ugaritic parallels as well.

⁴⁹ Ibid. The whole parable has also been interpreted, notably by Scholem, as referring not to *Ma’aseh Bereshit* but to *Ma’aseh Merḳavah*; thus entrance into the orchard means a mystical ascent. Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), 52-53. The same interpretation is taken by Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 193, 417. For a criticism of Scholem’s methodology, see Barukh M.

suggests, likewise, that natural inquiry is actually dangerous: one rabbi died and the other became demented. Aḳer (literally, “the other”) is known throughout the Talmud as the quintessential apostate: his real name was Elisha ben Abuyah, but he was referred by that pejorative term as a sign of his defection from Judaism. The reference to “cut the plants” may have symbolized his apostasy.⁵⁰ The menace stands to both physical and spiritual health.

Metaphysical studies are therefore discouraged, but two areas were singled out. These two particular disciplines were not necessarily the product of free inquiry, but constituted the clearest example of an esoteric element in rabbinical Judaism. First, the *Ma’aseh Bereshit* (Work of Creation⁵¹), ostensibly a set of secret doctrines surrounding the inner mechanics of the creation of the universe, per Genesis 1. The second was the *Ma’aseh Merḳavah*, or Work of the Chariot. The latter was based upon the first chapter of Ezekiel, which describes the prophet’s vision of mythical creatures and of the Presence of the Lord.⁵²

The strongest restrictions were placed upon teaching about these doctrines, most particularly on teaching about *ma’aseh merḳavah*. One may only teach these subjects to one student at a time, and this provided that the student is “wise and can understand by

Bokser, review of *Mysticism in Rabbinic Judaism*, by Ira Chernu, *Jewish Quarterly Review* LXXIV:4 (April, 1984), 428.

⁵⁰ Cohen, 28, n.1.

⁵¹ *Ma’aseh Bereshit* is sometimes translated as “Account of Creation.” *Ma’aseh* means anything that is created: it can also mean deed (as in Numbers 16:28) or secular work in general (cf. Ezekiel 46:1). In one instance it was translated into the Greek *ποίημα*, anything that is made or done (Psalms 45:2).

⁵² The JPS translation is somewhat misleading, since it is *Shekhinah* that is most often translated as “Presence of the Lord.” Ezekiel’s expression is *Ḳevod Adonay*, literally, “Glory of the Lord.” There is absolutely no indication in the text as to what exactly it refers to. The creatures are the *khayot*, and they have wheels (*ophanim*), and they are entirely fantastic. The influence of the first chapters of Ezekiel is felt also in religious liturgy: they inspired (with Isaiah 6:3) one of the key sequence of prayers in the traditional morning liturgy (the *yotser* cycle), where these mythical creatures are mentioned by name.

his own perspicacity.”⁵³ Even then, the teacher may only transmit the “chapter headings,” which the student must expand by himself. It is not permitted to set down anything in writing; the same student who learns orally from his teacher will, in the future, transmit the knowledge absolutely orally.⁵⁴

It is not known exactly what kinds of theories were taught under those headings.⁵⁵

The *merḳavah* chapters of Ezekiel, together with Isaiah 6:2-3 inspired the Rabbinic conception of heaven (in the sense of “sky,” not the spiritual heaven). But by the third century CE Ezekiel’s vision had taken on strongly mystical overtones, inspiring the *heḳalot* hymns. As for the *ma’aseh bereshit*, those constraints did not prevent rabbinical speculation on the process of creation. What emerges is an emphasis on *creation ex nihilo*, despite the biblical implication that something pre-existed the cosmos.⁵⁶

Regardless of the specific doctrines contained under the concepts of *ma’aseh merḳavah* and *ma’aseh bereshit*, I would like to stress that rabbinical Judaism recognized the existence of a chain of esoteric tradition, and that the pedagogical techniques described above would strike a chord among esoterically-leaning philosophers in the Middle Ages.

I have mentioned only half of the Platonic allegory of the cave. Although Glaucon calls it at first “unjust,” Socrates argues that those who can see the truth of their epistemological condition must not be allowed to remain in the light of the sun, but “must

⁵³ חזקם ומבן מדעתו. M. *Khagigah* 2:1, b. *Khagigah* 13a.

⁵⁴ These constraints are best understood in contrast to the pervasively public, oral and argumentative nature that permeated both classical Greek philosophy and Talmudic dialectics. Jacob Neusner, *Jerusalem and Athens: the Congruity of Talmudic and Classical Philosophy*, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 52 (New York: E. J. Brill, 1997), 20-35.

⁵⁵ A. Cohen, 28.

⁵⁶ The question of *תהו ובהו* (*tohu va-bohu*) is too broad to be discussed here; for an overview of how the question evolved during the Talmudic and medieval periods, cf. Andrew Mayer Hahn, “Tohu va-Vohu: Matter, Nothingness and Being in Jewish Creation Theology,” (Ph.D. diss., The Graduate School of the Jewish Theological Seminary, 2001). For statements on creation *ex nihilo*, see Gen. R. 1:1, 1:9, b. *Khagigah* 12a.

be made to descend again among the prisoners in the den, and partake of their labors and honors,” since they must be compelled to “have a care and providence of others.”

Socrates echoes here the idea of the philosopher-king, he who has reluctantly come to power and who knows that power is not the greater good; such rulers would not “fight with one another about shadows only.” The philosopher is indeed forbidden to remain in an ivory tower, unconcerned with the blind majority.

This second half of the allegory was to have a more interesting destiny than the first. The extent to which the philosopher should be involved in the community was a matter of much debate, and the issue was not settled with Maimonides. The heart of the matter was not so much political and social involvement as it was dissemination of esoteric doctrines. Unlike Christian political thought, which was heavily influenced by Aristotle’s *Politics* (and separated spiritual power from secular power), Judaism and Islam both relied on the *Republic*. The political principles of the *Republic* were amenable to the nature of the ideal Jewish and Muslim states, which were an “integral part of a holistic metaphysical *Weltanschauung*.”⁵⁷ No sharp dichotomy between the body politic and religion exists; conformity to “religious law” is a political act. Therefore, if certain doctrines are dangerous to religious observance (as it was believed they were), then teaching these doctrines runs counter to the upkeep of social order.

Esoteric thinkers were aware of these implications. The sociopolitical ramifications of esoteric teaching are present in some of the earliest Islamic esoteric schools. One of them was the “Ikhwān Al-Ṣafa,” (إخوة الصفة) or Brothers of Purity, and another, of which little is known, was dubbed simply the Bāṭinīa (باطنية). The Ikhwān Al-

⁵⁷ Abraham Melamed, “Medieval and Renaissance Jewish political thought,” in *History of Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Frank and Leaman, 420.

Şafa displayed little interest in the management of the state or in political theorizing. Rather, they aimed to create an ethical community that transcended collective institutions, such as states, religions or sects. Their Neoplatonic-leaning utopia was said to belong exclusively to the metaphysical realm. The radical aspect of the group is evident in their program to create a universal religion, based upon Islam and Greek thought.⁵⁸

The Bāṭinīa was also heavily influenced by Greek philosophy, and adopted some Neoplatonic doctrines. Unlike the Ikhwān Al-Şafa, the Bāṭinīa did not constitute a secret or even clearly definite group; it flourished during the caliphate of al-Māmūn (198-218; 813-833 CE) and Bāṭinīa ideas spread as far as North Africa and Oman. While we have little external evidence about the Ikhwān Al-Şafa (perhaps because they were a secret group), the Bāṭinīa were denounced by the Sunni as “heretics and outside the pale of faith.”⁵⁹ Both shared a basic stance towards revelation: biblical narratives or doctrines, such as the account of creation, the Tree of Knowledge, the day of judgment, etc., had a literal sense as well as a “secret” sense (whence the name Bāṭinīa, or seekers of *bāṭin* [باطن]—an inner, secret meaning). The literal sense, or *ẓāhir* (ظاهر), was useful for the masses, but the initiated knew that revelation needed not—must not—be understood only in the literal sense.

Hence these groups and their theories represented a menace to state order, or at very least, a devaluation of state institutions. In a Christian context, such a move is not unusual: “the earthly city,” although not valueless, is temporary, while the “city of God”

⁵⁸ Omar A. Farrukh, “Ikhwān Al-Şafa,” in *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, ed. M. M. Sharif, 289-291, 305, 308-309.

⁵⁹ Omar A. Farrukh, “Ẓāhirism,” in *History of Muslim Philosophy*, ed. M. M. Sharif, 275. See also Al-Ghazali’s criticism in his *Kitāb fada’ih al-bāṭinīa*. Maurice-Ruben Hayoun, *Maimonide et la Pensée Juive* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1994), 40.

is eternal.⁶⁰ But, as Abraham Melamed argues, for both Judaism and Islam the “*civitas temporalis*, too, could and must be a perfect community.”⁶¹ The observance of a revealed legislation depended upon the acceptance of its literal sense. The literal sense accepted here must be not only that of expressed commandments, but also of the state mythos: narratives, legends, and cosmogonies. Revelation becomes the *magna charta* of the national universe.⁶² Therefore, if there is indeed a deeper meaning to the revealed text, as these groups maintained, one is then faced with an urgent need to reappraise the basis of collective identity. It is then not surprising that the Ikhwān Al-Ṣafa would attempt to create an ethic-religious system that would transcend all religious systems, and create an international, spiritual community. The menace to the nationalistic ethos comes not from a denial of a particular state (the Ikhwān Al-Ṣafa did hold that everyone should have a religion) but from the claim that something else transcends the state.

The discussion on early Islamic esotericism is important in two respects: first, it lays a foundation for medieval philosophical esotericism: for Jewish thinkers, esotericism of rabbinical origin (for instance, the constraints upon teaching, or the role of religious language) interacts with Islamic esotericism.⁶³ Second, the discussion on the religious

⁶⁰ *The Essential Augustine*, ed. Vernon J. Bourke (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1974), 203-205.

⁶¹ Melamed, 421.

⁶² Thus all the facets of collective identity identified by Leszek Kolakowski—substance, memory, anticipation, body, and an identifiable beginning—can be said to have roots in the revealed text; nevertheless, the identification of “body” with “religious identity” for Judaism is somewhat inaccurate, since the religious identity embraces *all* the facets of collective identity, and it shapes the ethnic identity—the latter is not simply “virtually indistinguishable” from the former. “On Collective Identity,” *Partisan Review* LXX:1 (Winter 2003), 9, 11.

⁶³ The doctrines and methods of the Ikhwān Al-Ṣafa and the Bāṭinīa reverberated strongest among Neoplatonic thinkers such as Ibn Gabirol and Abraham Ibn Ezra, as well as among Neoplatonic-leaning Yemenite philosophers (through the Ismā‘īlī sect). Maimonides is dismissive of interpreting miracles figuratively “as was done by the Islamic internalists” (أهل الباطن – *ahl al-bāṭin*); *Guide* II.25 (328), although most Jewish philosophers were influenced by the Bāṭinīa dichotomy to a certain degree. Heinemann, 250; Irene Lancaster, *Deconstructing the Bible: Abraham Ibn Ezra’s Introduction to the Torah* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 84-88; *The Philosophic Questions and Answers of Ḥōṭer ben Shelōmō*, David R.

implications of esotericism is helpful in the analysis of the controversies of 1304-1306. Those controversies involved, among other things, the extent to which the text may be philosophically allegorized.⁶⁴

The scope of medieval Jewish exegesis is therefore not restricted to either double-truth or esoteric orientations. The first is developed in the gaonic period. Saadia Gaon is one of the first to address the relationship between science and the biblical text, under the assumption that they cannot contradict each other. This assumption informs his exegesis and leads him to tackle the problem of biblical anthropomorphism, which had not posed any conundrums to the rabbis of the Talmud. He therefore establishes a single meaning for the text, a meaning that cannot contradict reason. However, he can only do so if he accepts the premise that the text can be read figuratively where it contradicts reason. The esoteric orientation, developed first in Muslim Spain, also reads the text figuratively. But it does so to discover within it inherent philosophical truths; Moses is cast as the ideal philosopher-prophet (as in the Platonic philosopher-king). By interpreting the text figuratively, esoteric exegesis can define the boundaries of various prophetic messages addressed to different classes of worshippers.

II

The Reformation period brought with it a distinct exegetical approach. Emphasis was laid on the literal sense of the Bible, although this sense came to accommodate, over time, a distinct “spiritual” reading.⁶⁵ Spinoza, too, had interpreted Scripture along the

Blumenthal, ed., trans. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981), 9-24; Ronald C. Kiener, “Jewish Ismā’īlism in Twelfth Century Yemen: R. Nethanel ben Al-Fayyūmī,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* LXXIV:3 (January 1984), 249-266.

⁶⁴ Leo Bäck, “Zur Charakteristik des Levi ben Abraham ben Chajjim,” *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 44:28 (1900), 24-26.

⁶⁵ Whitman, 12.

lines of a literal sense: it has no dimension other than the historical; its values are purely pragmatic and antithetical to philosophical inquiry.⁶⁶

Albeit with different agendas, both Luther and Spinoza were conscious of and reacting against the medieval exegetical heritage.⁶⁷ Many medieval thinkers did hold that the literal sense of Scripture should be upheld—the so-called “science of *peshat*,” itself a reaction against the rabbinic *midrash*, came into full bloom precisely in the rationalist circles of Andalusian Jewry.⁶⁸ But medieval biblical exegesis involved many interpretive approaches. I have so far contextualized philosophical exegesis, especially the esoteric approach, with respect to streams of thought that influenced it. In this section, I will set the background within which figurative philosophical exegesis ought to be understood. After briefly setting the rabbinical and Islamic background for non-literalist readings, I will return to Saadia and analyze his exegesis of metaphor; as for the esoteric school, I will stress its use of allegory. The exegesis of figurative expressions and the attribution of figurative meaning to the text are particularly revealing of a commentator’s philosophical assumptions. In the first, what is imaginative must be rationally explained, and philosophical assumptions often come to light in this process. In the second, the exegete is forced to explain why a passage should (or must) be read figuratively, and what its content should then be.

⁶⁶Guttman, 284-285; Seymour Feldman, “Spinoza,” in *History of Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Frank and Leaman, 623-624. For a more detailed account of Spinoza’s attitude towards medieval exegesis, see Simon Rawidowicz, “On Interpretation,” in *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 26 (1957), 83-126. It should be noted that Rawidowicz has a very distinct ideological agenda there.

⁶⁷ Spinoza vehemently rejects Maimonidean exegesis in the *Theologico-Political Tractatus* ch. 7. See Warren Zev Harvey, “On Maimonides’ Allegorical Readings of Scripture,” in Whitman, *Interpretation & Allegory*, 181-182.

⁶⁸ The attitude of the Spanish *peshat* school towards rabbinic *midrash* is very clear from the writings of exiles to Provence. Mordechai Cohen, “The Qimhi Family,” in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament*, eds. Sæbø, Brekelmans, Haran, 389-391; Frank Talmage, *David Kimhi: The Man and the Commentaries* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), 54-135: “the way of *peshat*” does not exclude allegorization, and for Radak, it can even incorporate *midrash*.

As I mentioned in the first part of this essay, the Talmudic tractate *‘Avot* exhorts its readers to turn the Bible this way and that, “for everything is in it...” The question is, of course, “everything about what?” Different exegetical approaches to the Bible yielded different meanings in the text, so the medieval exegetical answer to that question is quite fluid. A rabbinical distinction exists between *peshat*, which represents the literal sense, and *derash*, from which the word “midrash” is derived. *Derash* has been defined variously as “ethical,” “moral,” “homiletical,” etc., since its aim is avowedly pedagogical, that is, it seeks to draw a lesson for the benefit of the hearers.⁶⁹ *Derash* exegesis, however, is much more than ethical: recent scholarship has emphasized, among other things, its semiotic and literary value.⁷⁰

Derash remained the dominant mode of Jewish biblical interpretation in Christian Europe. In Muslim Spain, the development of a mystical strain within Judaism, the kabbalah, as well as the dissemination of Arabic philosophical writings gave rise to mystical and philosophical exegesis. The thirteenth-century exegete and preacher Baḳya ben Asher systematized these four exegetical methods under the acronym *PaRDeS*: *peshat*, *derash*, *remez* and *sod*.⁷¹ *Sod*, “secret,” alludes to the mystical *sitrei Torah*, mystical “secrets” of Torah that “should not be publicized.”⁷² *Remez* is literally “hint” or “allusion,” but also “allegory” or “metaphor.” It came to represent philosophical

⁶⁹ Maurice-Ruben Hayoun, *L'exégèse Juive: Exégèse et Philosophie dans le Judaïsme*, Série Que Sais-Je? (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2000), 19-20.

⁷⁰ David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991); Susan A. Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982).

⁷¹ Frank Talmage, “Apples of Gold: The Inner Meaning of Sacred Texts in Medieval Judaism,” in *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible Through the Middle Ages*, Arthur Green, ed., 1986 (New York: Crossroads, 1988), I:319. For ben Asher, however, the “way of *sekel* (reason) “does not always mean philosophic-rationalistic interpretation.” He is also quoted by name in the well-known Yiddish commentary *Tse’ناه U-Re’ناه* (16th century), primarily a women’s commentary. Efraim Gottlieb, “Bahya ben Asher ben Khlava,” Chava Turniansky, “Ze’ناه u-Re’ناه,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*.

⁷² Shatz, 20.

exegesis, although it can refer to non-philosophical uses as well. Baḳya's distinction among the "four senses of Scripture" was, however, seldom used—medieval thinkers did not specifically follow any methodology, because none was prescribed.⁷³ Not that exegetical rules were foreign to rabbinical Judaism: the Talmud lists different sets of rules, ranging from 13 to 32 items.⁷⁴ These rules guided biblical exegesis with the purpose of deriving principles of *Halaḳah*, not with the intent of uncovering the metaphysical truth of the text. They correspond to exegesis according to *peshat*. But even *peshat* is not above controversy; for what is encompassed within the "literal sense" did not always remain the same.⁷⁵ In Muslim Spain, *peshat* came to be increasingly associated with scientific methods (grammatical, philological), and with literary critiques.⁷⁶

Most Jewish communities in Christian Europe recognized *peshat* as what which was not *derash*.⁷⁷ *Derash* remained extremely popular, sometimes going as far as accepting anthropomorphisms literally, a move that was frowned upon (when not branded

⁷³ We disagree here with Heinemann, who claimed the lack of technical terms handicapped exegesis: "it was not possible to seek rigorously (*mit voller Schärfe*) for the justification of allegorism because a technical term for this form of reinterpretation was not available. It is not true that there are no such terms; Heinemann himself cites two. Hayoun notes also that "ce ne sont pas des imprécisions d'ordre terminologique qui auraient pu apaiser l'ardeur combative des adeptes ou des critiques de Maïmonide. *L'exégèse philosophique*, 8; Heinemann, 251.

⁷⁴ Hayoun, *L'exégèse Juive*, 14-16; introduction to *Sifra* (midrashic commentary on Leviticus).

⁷⁵ For a discussion of the scope of *peshat* in rabbinical exegesis, see David Halivni, *Peshat and Derash: Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). The *Practical Talmud Dictionary* notes that פשוט (*peshut*) may refer "not to the *nature* of the interpretation but to its *authority* or its *acceptance*, since פשוט sometimes means *widespread*. . . . thus פשטיה דקרא [Aramaic for the Hebrew "scriptural *peshut*"] would be translated *the standard meaning* or *the accepted meaning of the pasuk* [verse]." Yitzḥak Frank, *The Practical Talmud Dictionary* (Jerusalem: The Ariel Institute, 1991), s.v. "פשוט; פשטיה"

⁷⁶ Lancaster, 176-180; for the Andalusian challenge to rabbinical assumptions, see Mordechai Cohen, "The Qimhi Family," in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament*, 407.

⁷⁷ Cf. the comment of Rashbam (Rabbi Samuel ben Meir, grandson of Rashi), about "older commentators" who were "inclined to preach sermons (*derashot*)," to the neglect of "the depths of the literal meaning of the Biblical text." Commentary on Gen. 37:2, in Ezra Shereshevsky, *Rashi: the Man and His World* (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1982), 63.

as heretical) in Muslim Spain.⁷⁸ Already in Saadia's environment we can find a multiplicity of approaches towards the text: the theological development of Islam, with both mystical and rational strands (Isma'ili, Kalam, and within the latter, first the Mu'tazilites and then the Ash'arites⁷⁹), Christians who argued (against Islam and Judaism) for the truth of the Trinity, Karaites, who rejected the Oral Torah and criticized rabbinical exegesis—all these came to different conclusions as to the sense of Scripture.⁸⁰

Saadia had an urgent need to defend Judaism against non-rabbinical Judaism and against other religions (the rational character of his program is evident from his desire to turn *beliefs*, which are accepted only as “sound doctrine,” into *opinions*, which are based upon rational proof⁸¹). His view of the relationship between reason and revelation led him into non-esoteric paths, as we have seen, and these do not completely disappear in the Spanish school. But the development of Arabic literature, and in a sense, the development of the Arabic language itself, created a new linguistic condition for both Arabs and Jews.

Paul Fenton explains:

L'œuvre exégétique des *gā'ônîm*⁸² [sic] connut néanmoins des prolongements en Occident auprès des adeptes de l'école andalouse . . .

⁷⁸ *Guide* I.35; Mordechai Cohen, “The Qimhi Family,” in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament*, 391.

⁷⁹ The Mu'tazila movement, characterized by denial of attributes in God and free will (divine justice) had been founded in the early 700s. Although Saadia was influenced by them, by the mid 900s, the Ash'aryia were the most influential sect of Kalam (which Al-Ghazali “philosophized”). Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Kalam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), 18-43.

⁸⁰ Disputes extended, of course, into what Scripture comprises: Rabbanites accepted the Written and Oral Torah, Karaites only the Written, Muslims recognized the Koran alongside both Jewish and Christian Scriptures, etc. For a treatment of Saadia's background and polemics, see Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Repercussions of the Kalam in Jewish Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 8-18; A. S. Halkin, “Saadia's Exegesis and Polemics,” in *Rab Saadia Gaon: Studies in His Honor*, ed. Louis Finkelstein (New York: Arno Press, 1980), 117-142; and a little-known interaction, A. S. Halkin, “The Relation of the Samaritans to Saadia Gaon,” *Saadia Anniversary Volume*, American Academy for Jewish Research [ed. Boaz Cohen] (New York: Arno Press, 1943), 271-326.

⁸¹ Lou H. Silberman, “Prophets and Philosophers: The Scandal of Prophecy,” in *Arguments and Doctrines: A Reader of Jewish Thinking in the Aftermath of the Holocaust*, Arthur A. Cohen, ed. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1970), 163.

⁸² *geonim*, plural of *gaon*, the title borne by Saadia and given to the heads of the academies of Sura and Pumbedita.

Mais alors que pour les premiers le *mağāz* fut principalement un outil exégétique permettant de parvenir à une compréhension correcte du Livre sacré, il est davantage perçu par les seconds, profondément imprégnés de la poétique et de la rhétorique arabes, comme une expression du modèle de l'éloquence (*balāgha*) scripturaire.⁸³

Gaonic exegesis had manifested a sensitivity to figurative language,⁸⁴ although with a distinct agenda. The purpose is not to emphasize the variety of biblical language, but that “a reasonable person must always understand the Torah according to the simple meaning of its words . . . since the purpose of every book is to convey its meaning perfectly to the reader’s heart.”⁸⁵ Thus the *mağāz* is interpreted as such only when the “simple meaning of [Scripture’s] words,” defined as “that which is well-known and widespread among the speakers of the language,” contradicts reason or tradition.⁸⁶ Words that are in accordance with reason or tradition are *muḥkam* (محكم), that is, unambiguous. The value of exegesis lies not in finding a meaning within the *mağāz*, which is said to be *mutašābih* (متشابه), or ambiguous, but to render the ambiguous as *muḥkam*.⁸⁷

As an example, let us take Numbers 22, which narrates how Balaam’s donkey spoke. According to Saadia, the donkey did not speak (since that is empirically impossible) but “a voice which was created in proximity to the ass, and which Balaam

⁸³ Paul Fenton, *Philosophie et Exégèse dans Le Jardin de la Métaphore de Moïse Ibn Ezra, Philosophe et Poète Andalou du XII^e Siècle*, Études sur le Judaïsme Médiéval XIX (New York: E. J. Brill, 1997), 293. *mağāz* (مجاز) is commonly translated as metaphor, although Saadia used it broadly; it has also been rendered as “figurative expression” or “image.” See David R. Blumenthal, “Maimonides on Mind and Metaphoric Language,” in *Approaches to Judaism in Medieval Times*, vol.2 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984), 127; See Fenton, 258-263, for a discussion on how the meaning of *mağāz* changed from the 825 to 1024, and *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. “madjāz.”

⁸⁴ The concept of “eloquence” was indeed adopted by Saadia, but it is not *balāgha* but *faṣāḥa*, which referred to the “requirements of grammatical correctness, fluency and clarity of expression.” Robert Brody, *The Geonim of Babylonia and the Shaping of Medieval Jewish Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 320.

⁸⁵ M. Zucker, ed., *Saadya’s Commentary on Genesis* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1984), 17.

⁸⁶ Zucker, 18. In Arabic rhetoric and philosophy the opposite of *mağāz* is *ḥaqīqa* (حقيقة).

⁸⁷ Ibid.

heard as if it had passed her tongue.”⁸⁸ The “imaginative” (the donkey speaks) is explained in terms of the “real,” but reality here is not arbitrary. The Mu’tazila, the Islamic sect that influenced Saadia’s views, had a distinctive view of speech (*kalām*): the Koran, as the Speech of God, cannot be co-eternal with God, since the Mu’tazila cannot admit of anything that is extraneous to his essence and yet also eternal. To do so would be to put monotheism in jeopardy.⁸⁹ Applying this view towards prophecy in Jewish Scripture, Saadia posits the existence of a “second air,” from which prophecy emanates; according to him, it is described in Scripture as “the voice of the living God.”⁹⁰ Thus it is not against reason for a “created voice” to exist; but it is against reason that an animal, deprived of reason, should speak.

The preeminent oral character of the *mikra*’ (reading) gives place to the textual through the identification of the *mağāz* as such, and consequently, its exegesis.⁹¹ As Roland Barthes has written on the metaphor of “the marxist church”, *la métaphore engage une méthode*: in this instance, reducing Scripture and Reason *aux signes qu’elles peuvent avoir en commun*.⁹² The metaphor, *mağāz*, uniting the oral to the textual, the acoustical-sensorial to the abstract, becomes the literary equivalent to Saussure’s *signe linguistique*.⁹³ The imaginative and pictorial is united to the intellectual through the identification of the metaphor as such, and only through that means can Scripture retain its validity in cases where it is perceived not to conform to the theological-rational

⁸⁸ Zucker, 50

⁸⁹ Sirat 15-16.

⁹⁰ *Tafsīr Kitāb Al-mabādī* (Commentary on the Book of Creation), in Sirat, 29; *Beliefs and Opinions* II.10 (121).

⁹¹ Robert Martin-Achard, “Un exégète devant Genèse 32.23-33,” in *Analyse Structurale et Exégèse Biblique: Essais d’interprétation*, ed. François Bovon (Paris: Delachaux et Niestlé Éditeurs, 1971), 45-46.

⁹² Roland Barthes, “A propos d’une métaphore (Le marxisme est-il une « Eglise » ?),” *Esprit* (Nov. 1951), in *Roland Barthes: Œuvres complètes*, vol I :1942-1965, ed. Éric Marty (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1993), 111.

⁹³ Saussure, 98.

mentalité. Nevertheless, an important distinction is in order. In the Eastern (gaonic) exegesis, the metaphor can be employed as a means of adjusting the biblical to the logical (not necessarily philosophical), but the *maḡāz* can also be interpreted along the lines of the philosophical.⁹⁴ The incident of Balaam's donkey is an example of the first, while the exegesis of the verse that describes God as a "consuming fire" is founded upon the knowledge of properties such as contingency and necessity. In both cases, there is a semantic optimism. While the ambiguousness of certain terms (*mutašābiḥ*) is accepted, there is full confidence that this ambiguousness can be translated into non-ambiguousness. This process corresponds to one of the goals of the *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, which is that of "dispelling doubt and removing uncertainty,"⁹⁵ and the identification of the *maḡāz* as such is an essential step.

Fortunately, Saadia is only too conscious of an exasperated reader. He mentions a critical hypothetical question. "But what advantage is there in this extension of meaning that is practiced by language and that is calculated to throw us into doubt? Would it not have done better if it had restricted itself to expressions of unequivocal meaning and thus have enabled us to dispense with this burden of discovering the correct interpretation?"⁹⁶

The question is not illegitimate. The metaphor creates doubt, which Saadia wants to eliminate. The metaphor is neither rationally nor empirically tenable,⁹⁷ which requires its restatement in rational terms. This restatement is not arbitrary, since it is assumed that there is one correct interpretation; not just any rational interpretation will do.

Furthermore, it is not the reader who assigns meaning, but the meaning is already in the

⁹⁴ See Klein-Braslavy's distinction in regards to Solomon Ibn Gabirol, 305.

⁹⁵ *Beliefs and Opinions*, Introductory treatise II (9)..

⁹⁶ *Beliefs and Opinions* II.10 (117-118).

⁹⁷ *Beliefs and Opinions* II.10 (120).

text, however elliptically it is presented. It is there to be discovered. Should we then see the metaphor as, above all, an obstacle in the biblical text, confusing rather than enlightening?

Saadia's answer offers an insight into his philosophy of language, while also affirming that the reader need not deal with the metaphor unaided. Words must necessarily have more than one meaning, he argues, in order to be able to convey more than "a small portion of what we aim to convey."⁹⁸ Without the metaphor, it would seem that language is, at the very least, a less than adequate carrier for expressing all facets of the human experience. As John Wansbrough explains, "the truism that for the mimetic function of speech metaphor was indispensable symbolized formal and collective recognition . . . that language could not be construed as having merely or exclusively an immediate (verifiable and quantifiable) relation to the data of experience it purportedly described."⁹⁹

Saadia's optimistic attitude towards the harmony of reason and Scripture has its bearing here as well. "It is therefore preferred to rather extend [language's] use of words so as to transmit *every meaning*,"¹⁰⁰ that is, while metaphor is an unavoidable linguistic condition, which certainly produces doubt for the exegete, it is also the conduit through which all meanings can be expressed. Language is rehabilitated through the metaphor to include every possible meaning. Thus, what seemed irrational (for example, that "the Lord smelled") becomes rational (it can be interpreted as "the Lord received")¹⁰¹, and there is no contradiction between Scripture and reason. A proper understanding of what

⁹⁸ *Beliefs and Opinions* II.10 (118).

⁹⁹ John Wansbrough, "Principles of Exegesis," in *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, London Oriental Series 31 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977)

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ *Beliefs and Opinions* II.10 (120)

constitutes a metaphor is thus essential for a correct reading of the text, a reading that cannot abrogate the words but need not adopt their most immediate meaning. What meaning should then be adopted? Here Saadia offers a reliance on “reason and acquaintance with the texts of Scripture and with history” to determine the correct sense of the biblical words.¹⁰² He also adopts Muslim hermeneutical techniques in linguistic and stylistic textual analysis.¹⁰³ Science, of whatever provenance, could be subsumed to the larger goal of determining the correct sense of the text, a task made all the more urgent for polemical reasons.

For both Islam and Judaism, the first centuries of the Muslim era were theologically consolidating periods. Along with the development and acceptance of the Koran, Saadia champions rabbinical Judaism against Karaism as the true form of Judaism. His exegesis must perforce stress the unity of meaning in the text, not its multiple interpretative possibilities. If the text admits of various interpretations, alternate readings can be employed to challenge rabbinical Judaism. Moreover, rabbinical doctrines can be rejected if science, i.e. philosophy, contradicts them. In our own times, for example, scientific findings regarding the age of the planet make it difficult to accept the rabbinical dating of the Creation event. Therefore, Saadia’s exegesis must establish a unique textual meaning that does not contradict the philosophical notions of the day. Only in portions where the literal meaning is quite at odds with philosophical theories (as in the case of anthropomorphisms) does Saadia allow for the acceptance of *mağāz* as an exegetical device.

¹⁰² *Beliefs and Opinions* II.10 (118)

¹⁰³ Brody, *The Geonim*, 307.

In Muslim Spain, and later in Christian Spain, a linguistic-literary emphasis was placed on the exegetical discourse. Unlike the gaonic period, *le spectre des doctrines schismatiques était déjà moins menaçant en Espagne*. Karaism did not offer as great a threat to rabbinical Judaism there. The Muslim political reality was quite different. The Caliphate of Cordova, the first to be established in Spanish soil, was itself was a *doctrine schismatique*, a scion of the dethroned Umaïad dynasty independent of Baghdad.¹⁰⁴ Not that this fact made the Umaïad regime (711 to 1002) theologically liberal—it was not—but Umaïad rulers were ever conscious of their precarious position, detested by the native Christian population and internally divided into inimical factions.¹⁰⁵ In this context Arabic culture and Arabic language were employed as a means of social amalgamation. Hishām I, the second Umayyad ruler (788-796), forbade *en todos sus dominios que se hablara y escribiera la lengua latina* and compelled mozarab (Christian) children to attend Muslim public schools, with the intent to make Arabic the sole language of his empire.¹⁰⁶

Along with the absorption of Arabic language and Arab attitudes towards language (especially the language of revealed texts) Jews inherited an attitude of “exceptional receptivity, and sympathetic attitude to philosophy and the sciences.”¹⁰⁷ Of special importance is the scientific approach to language, in the form of philology and etymology. Most philosophical exegesis pays attention to grammatical or etymological forms, although the preoccupation with language goes further than its mechanics. One of

¹⁰⁴ For a somewhat romanticized account of the rise of the Umaïad dynasty in Spain, see Eliyahu Ashtor, *The Jews of Moslem Spain* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America), I:43-84.

¹⁰⁵ Jose Amador de los Rios, *Historia Social Politica y Religiosa de los Judios de Espana y Portugal* (Madrid: Aguilar, 1960), 73-78.

¹⁰⁶ Rios, 75.

¹⁰⁷ Yom Tov Assis, “The Judeo-Arabic Tradition in Christian Spain,” in *The Jews of Medieval Islam: Community, Society and Identity*, Études sur le Judaïsme Médiéval XVI, Daniel Frank ed. (New York: Leiden, 1995), 116-117.

the axioms of medieval Jewish philosophy, it has been argued, is that “one should pay a lot of attention to the different ways of speaking and of expressing truth.”¹⁰⁸ That is, the political, the economic, the philosophical etc. all employ distinct languages; thus “the idea of truth is far more complex than might appear superficially.”¹⁰⁹

The stress on linguistic attitudes is necessary in order to understand the shift that occurs in biblical exegesis from Eastern Islamic lands to Muslim Spain. The establishment of the theological purpose of Scripture, in the form of semantic cohesiveness, characterizes the former, though not without the influence of philosophical inquiry. The latter is marked by variegated approaches towards language. On the one hand, there developed a notable “school of *peshat*,” whose concerns in textual analysis were primarily scientific (grammatical, historical, philological, and sometimes philosophical). On the other hand, the philosophical-esoteric school, while borrowing freely from scientific analysis, engendered its own unique approach to the text, an approach marked by the multiplicity and esoteric concealment of meaning. It has been argued that the idea that Scripture has more than one meaning, some of which may not be readily apparent, is based on the Koran.¹¹⁰

He it is Who has sent down to thee the Book; in it are verses basic or fundamental (of established meaning) [*muḥkam*]; they are the foundation of the Book: others are not of well-established meaning [*mutašābih*]. But those in whose hearts is perversity follow the part thereof that is not of well-established meaning. Seeking discord, and searching for its hidden meanings, but no one knows its true meanings except Allah. And those who are firmly grounded in knowledge say: “We believe in the

¹⁰⁸ Oliver Leaman, “Introduction to the study of medieval Jewish philosophy,” in *Cambridge Companion*, Frank and Leaman, eds., 6-7.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Wansbrough, 149.

Book; the whole of it is from our Lord:” and none will grasp the Message except men of understanding (3:7).¹¹¹

In the first part of the verse, we see the *mutašābiḥ/muḥkam* duality again, as in Saadia. But those terms, along with the rest of the verse, underwent several interpretations, “distinguished if uneven” semantic histories, even during Saadia’s own lifetime.¹¹² The *muḥkam* came to be associated, as in Zağāğ (d. 923) with the *zāhir baīn*, usually translated as “straightforward/obvious expression.”¹¹³ Whereas other types of exegesis used *zāhir* to describe a more “compelling argument” in a dispute,¹¹⁴ allegorical exegesis in the philosophical school held to the identification of *muḥkam* with *zāhir*. Thus the *muḥkam/ mutašābiḥ* duality gives rise to the duality most employed in medieval exegesis, the *zāhir/bāṭin* (ظاهر/باطن). Exegetical activity that involved *bāṭin* was described as *ta’wīl* (تأويل), elucidating biblical passages that could be interpreted in more than one way. Saadia’s exegesis of *mağāz* is thus called *ta’wīl*, although with an important reservation: in Saadia the literal sense is “translated away,” reflecting a semantic approach to metaphor.¹¹⁵ Not all *ta’wīl* treated the literal sense with such violence, as Abraham Ibn Ezra would later show through his use of *mashal* (his Hebrew version of the Arabic *mağāz*) as an interpretive technique.¹¹⁶ Among esoteric-leaning exegetes the *ta’wīl* came to represent “allegorical or symbolic interpretation of the Koran, especially with a view to elucidating its most profound, inward doctrine,” an attitude

¹¹¹ Trans. ‘Abdullah Yūsuf ‘Alī, *The Meaning of The Holy Qur’ān* (Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications, 2001).

¹¹² Wansbrough 149.

¹¹³ Wansbrough 150. *zāhir* (ظاهر) is literally “visible.”

¹¹⁴ Wansbrough 153.

¹¹⁵ Mordechai Z. Cohen, *Three Approaches to Biblical Metaphor: From Abraham Ibn Ezra and Maimonides to David Kimhi* (Boston: Brill, 2003), 70, 69, 95.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

espoused principally by the Isma‘ili.¹¹⁷ The methodology of *tafsīr* (تفسير) covered those passages that only had one meaning: *فالتفسير ذا وجه والتأويل ذا وجوه* (the *tafsīr* has [one] face but the *ta’wīl* has [many] faces).¹¹⁸

The Koranic verse quoted above affirms the existence of two classes of textual units in Scripture, but it apparently casts *mutašābih* in a negative light, paralleling the *pardes* story about seeking impermissible knowledge.¹¹⁹ An alternative reading of the verse, however, offers a different attitude: “no one knows its true meanings (*ta’wīlahu*) except Allah and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge. They say: We believe in the Book; the whole of it is from our Lord.”¹²⁰ Alternatively, not unlike the rabbinic constraints upon the transmission of the *ma’aseh bereshit* and *ma’aseh merḳavah*, only the knowledgeable and the initiates have access to the deeper level of Scripture (metaphysics).¹²¹ As in the interpretation of extra-canonical philosophical doctrines, the *tafsīr/ta’wīl* “symbolized a dispute rather more fundamental than one merely of method or terminology, namely, the exegetical relationship between canonical and non-canonical material.”¹²² This exegetical relationship is what characterizes philosophical exegesis as

¹¹⁷ Cyril Glassé, *The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam*, s.v. “Ta’wīl.”

¹¹⁸ Māturīdī, Suyūfī, in Wansbrough 155.

¹¹⁹ There is no consensus what verses are *muḥkamāt* and what verses are *mutašābihāt*; one interpretation, which would approach the *pardes* rationale, states that *mutašābihāt* “speak of a realm of existence that is beyond our ken (e.g. the hereafter, paradise and hell), using such modes of speech as similes, metaphors and similitudes.” The *muḥkamāt*, on the other hand, “are said to be those verses which present self-evident truths, incontestable ethical norms, and established principles of truth, justice, and good conduct.”

Mustansir Mir, *Dictionary of Qur’ānic Terms and Concepts*, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities 693 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987), s.v. “Qur’ān.”

¹²⁰ Accepted by Mujāhid (d.722 or 723). Yūsuf ‘Alī, 3:7, n.348.

¹²¹ Maimonides identifies physics and metaphysics with the *ma’aseh bereshit* and *ma’aseh merḳavah*, respectively. This identification reflects the Aristotelian suggestion that knowledge of physics precedes that of metaphysics, as well as the rabbinic discrimination between the two: while there are both cosmological and cosmogonical discussions in the Talmud, the content of *ma’aseh merḳavah* is not discussed there. Guide, “Introduction to the First Part,” 6. On Aristotle, see his *Metaphysics*, and Marc S. Cohen, “Aristotle’s Metaphysics”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2003 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2003/entries/aristotle-metaphysics/>>.

¹²² Wansbrough 156.

such, since the extra-canonical material (philosophical doctrines) was held to be a source of truth along with Scripture. Whereas *maḡāz* did not denote a clear separation between metaphor and allegory in Saadia's work, the entrance of rhetoric and grammar into Hebrew philology demanded more precise categories.

The refinement of rhetoric terms and their hermeneutical application occurs first in the early grammatical works. The previously broad *maḡāz* becomes associated with metaphor, or *isti'āra* (إستعارة), which one of the first linguists, Samuel [HaNagid] Ibn Nagrilla (d. 1056) reportedly defined as “interprétation figurée ou métaphorique.” This recourse is justified “lorsqu'il n'y a pas d'adéquation entre le contexte et l'interprétation littérale (غير مستصحب للحقيقة),” and a prooftext offered is b. *Shabbat* 63a: “a verse cannot depart from its plain meaning (עין מקרא יוצא מד פשוטו).”¹²³ The identification of *maḡāz* with *isti'āra* is furthered in the classic grammar and lexicography of Ibn Ġanāh (ca. 990-1050). His *Kitāb al-uṣūl* often classifies figurative expressions into the category “from *isti'āra* and *maḡāz* (ومن الإستعارة والمجاز).”¹²⁴ Moses Ibn Ezra (ca. 1055-1135?1138?) notes the literal translation of *maḡāz* as “le passage et l'origine de l'expression,” derived from the Arabic verb “faire un passage (جزت مجاز).” The linguistic dimension of *maḡāz* is also downplayed by Moses Ibn Ezra: “le sens figuré est celui qui n'est pas employé à l'encontre de l'usage linguistique. . . . le sens propre designe le signifié sans recourir à la moindre adjonction ou retranchement ou périphrase.”¹²⁵ Hannah Arendt notes that *metapherein* achieves a “carrying over” from “one existential state, that of thinking, to another, that of being an appearance among appearances;” for her, metaphor is a way to

¹²³ Cited by Abū Ibrāhīm Ibn Barūn (ca. 1100), *Kitāb al-muwāzana*, in Fenton, 294.

¹²⁴ Fenton 295.

¹²⁵ *Treatise of the Garden of the Metaphorical Sense and of Literal Sense* (المقالت الحديقة في معنا لمجاز والحقيقة) 27, 29, in Fenton, 302.

immanence, a bridge between abstract thought and reality (the world of appearances). Consequently, “all philosophic and most poetic language is metaphorical.”¹²⁶ The *mağāz*, in particular the *isti’āra*, is a literary carrier, itself non-semantic, leading to (or originating from) *recondite* (invisible or non-appearing) meaning.

How is the non-semantic metaphor constituted? According to Mordechai Cohen, a non-semantic view of metaphor “distinguishes between “sentence meaning,” which is limited to the literal sense of the metaphorical statement, and “speaker’s meaning” or “intent,” i.e., the different idea that the speaker intends to convey.”¹²⁷ Thus, the metaphor need not be treated in semantic dependence to the literal sense, with dramatic implications for biblical exegesis: “it implies that while the content of prophecy is divine, its literary form is the work of the prophets.”¹²⁸ According to Abraham Ibn Ezra

The words are like bodies and the meaning like souls. . . . hence it is the rule of scholars in every language to preserve the meaning; they do not worry about interchanging words if they have the same meaning. . . . essentially words are but hints; knowledge of the language has no independent value, but is a vehicle of communication.¹²⁹

The non-semantic view of metaphor is thus apt to provide support for the idea of the inner and outer (*ẓāhir/bāṭin*) senses of scripture. As Moses Ibn Ezra explains, “the task of the exegete is to “strip away” the “husks” of Scripture’s imprecise *mağāz* and “(re)clothe” the “true idea” (المعنا الحقيقي; *al-ma‘na al-ḥaqīqī*) in more accurate language.”¹³⁰ Compared to the gaonic period, we see a destabilization of the literal sense; unlike Saadia, Moses Ibn Ezra does not hold the view that metaphor is a linguistic

¹²⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 102-103.

¹²⁷ Cohen, *Three Approaches*, 22.

¹²⁸ Cohen, “The Aesthetic Exegesis,” 292.

¹²⁹ *Commentary on the Pentateuch: Exodus* (20:1, 23:20), in Uriel Simon, “Abraham Ibn Ezra,” *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament*, 386.

¹³⁰ *Treatise of the Garden*, 45, in Cohen, “The Aesthetic Exegesis,” 288 and Fenton 118.

necessity. The “new style” of rhetorics (*badiʿ*), a collective of literary embellishments, is only a “decoration for ideas that could be expressed more directly and precisely in plain language (*muḥkam*),” without which they are said to be “naked.”¹³¹ With the break between the literary style of prophetic writings (which includes, of course, Mosaic prophecy) and their content, other frames of reference must be found in which to argue for content. Precisely because what is seen—the literary style—does not necessarily conform to the unseen—the content—dogmatist positions, such as Saadia’s, become difficult to justify (which is not to say they disappear completely).¹³² Polysemic¹³³ approaches to the text are more likely to flourish, in a cultural context that could be described as granting “to language a significance beyond that belonging to a merely arbitrary system of signs.”¹³⁴

As an example of the non-arbitrariness of signs in the Biblical text, I will turn to Solomon Ibn Gabirol (1021?1022?—ca.1070), some of whose contemporaries were known by Moses Ibn Ezra.¹³⁵ Ibn Ezra’s *Kitāb al-muḥādara wal-muḍākara* (كتاب المحذرة والمذكورة) describes Ibn Gabirol as “the first to introduce the “art of poetry”¹³⁶ into Hebrew, therein setting a pattern for his successors, as anyone can see who makes a deep study of his poetry and learns to appreciate the power of its allusiveness to the institutions of the Torah and the corpus of rabbinical tradition.”¹³⁷ We have no way of reliably judging the extent of such “power of allusiveness” in Ibn Gabirol, given that there are no extant

¹³¹ Cohen, “The Aesthetic Exegesis,” 291.

¹³² Cf. Menachem Kellner, *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought: From Maimonides to Abravanel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

¹³³ See below, n.154.

¹³⁴ Quilligan, 156.

¹³⁵ Raphael Loewe, *Ibn Gabirol* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1989), 20.

¹³⁶ Loewe notes that the Arabic *qarīd* (قرذ) is “of obscure reference: *taqrīd* (تقرذ) means the art or criticism of poetry; perhaps “flowery metrical schemes” is here meant.” Loewe, 19.

¹³⁷ Cited in Loewe, 19.

biblical commentaries of his.¹³⁸ Nevertheless, Abraham Ibn Ezra offers the following exegesis by Ibn Gabirol on the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:8ff):

I will now reveal you, by way of allusion, the mystery of the garden, the rivers and the garments of skin,¹³⁹ which I have not found in any of the notables, except Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol, as he is well versed in the knowledge of the soul. Eden is the upper world; the garden is full of plants; the river is like the mother of all bodies. The four branches (ראשים) of the river¹⁴⁰ are the foundations (יסודות).¹⁴¹ Man is the intelligence (rational soul)¹⁴² that gives the names.¹⁴³ Eve, as her name indicates,¹⁴⁴ designates the *espace vital* (animal soul)¹⁴⁵ and the snake is the concupiscent (appetitive) soul, as the name snake indicates, which is derived from the biblical verse.¹⁴⁶ The tree of knowledge is the generation and its power is from the garden. Therefore the vegetative is tied to dust. The issue of the woman will crush the head that rises up.¹⁴⁷ The end of the living is the head (the beginning) of the vegetative. The garment of skin is the body. It has been expelled from the garden in order to toil the earth, for this is the destiny of all. The tree of life is knowledge of the upper world as it is written: "It is a tree of life to all who cling to it."¹⁴⁸ The cherubim are the angels. The flaming sword is the parabola (curve) of the sun. . . .

Abraham Ibn Ezra adds:

¹³⁸ It is debatable whether this absence is due to Ibn Gabirol's not having written any systematic commentaries, or if his commentaries have simply not survived. Loewe argues that "it seems improbable that he would have set himself out to comment on any biblical book throughout," because his comments tend to be "speculative observations or philosophical identifications." Sara Klein-Braslavy, following Wilhelm Bacher (*Die Biblexegese der jüdischen Religionsphilosophen vor Maimuni* [Strasburg 1892]) states that he did write commentaries, "fragments of which are cited" by A. Ibn Ezra. Hayoun notes that *nul ne peut l'affirmer avec certitude* whether he composed commentaries or not, but apropos the passages cited by A. Ibn Ezra, *il est très peu probable que ces deux interprétations allégoriques aient figurés ailleurs que dans un ensemble plus vaste, un recueil ou un sermon*. Loewe, 25; Klein-Braslavy, 304; Hayoun, *L'exégèse philosophique*, 115, 118. See also Jacques Schlanger, *La Philosophie de Solomon Ibn Gabirol: Étude d'un Néoplatonisme*, Études sur le Judaïsme Médiéval III (Leiden : E.J. Brill, 1968), 13.

¹³⁹ Gen. 3:21.

¹⁴⁰ Gen. 2:10.

¹⁴¹ יסודות designates the four elements, which (in Greek philosophy) are the basic components of all that exists; for instance, in the exegesis of Gen. 3:17 A. Ibn Ezra mentions that man is formed from the four elements, with earth being the predominant one.

¹⁴² According to Neoplatonic philosophy, the human soul is divided into appetitive, animal and rational.

¹⁴³ To the animals.

¹⁴⁴ חַיָּה (Eve) is etymologically related to חַיָּה (life)

¹⁴⁵ I fail to see the correspondence of *espace vital* to animal soul; the interpretation is Hayoun's.

¹⁴⁶ נִחֵשׁ is interpreted here on the basis of Gen. 44:15, "practice divination" (נִחֵשׁ יִנְחֵשׁ).

¹⁴⁷ According to Schlanger, an allusion to the relationship among the three souls: "the issue" is the rational soul and "the woman" is the animal soul, which must rein in the excesses of the appetitive soul (the snake). Schlanger, 14 n.7.

¹⁴⁸ Proverbs 3:18.

In this mystery we see that the soul of the one who has acquired the knowledge of the upper world stands near the throne of Glory and finds delight in the venerable and terrible Name.¹⁴⁹

This passage bears the distinctively Neoplatonist stamp: there is a clear division between the sensible and the intelligible, the river is the universal matter, within which is universal form (since for Ibn Gabirol their individual existence is an illusion). The doctrine of the four elements and the tri-partite division of the soul are also integral to the Neoplatonic tradition. The origin of body from matter (the river), as well as the apprehension of intelligibles by the soul (at the tree of life), thereby ensuring its immortality, are also doctrines of Neoplatonic origin.¹⁵⁰

The philosophical harmonization of the biblical passage in question shows that biblical language was perceived as carefully constructed so as to cloak a mystery. Its non-arbitrariness, however, becomes evident only in exegesis. The process involves both construction and deconstruction. The construction assumes the non-arbitrariness of biblical language in order to build another textual layer upon it; the end result is the supremacy of neither one text nor sense but a truly hybrid text. The deconstruction depletes the text of its literal meaning, at least partially, and precedes the construction. Such would be unnecessary if language were arbitrary: meaning could simply be restated in other terms, like in Saadia. But since language is not arbitrary but rather a system of “signposts,” it must remain as it is: allegory presupposes “at least a sacralizing power in language, and it is possible to write and to read allegory intelligently only in those

¹⁴⁹ M. Friedländer, *Essays on the Writings of Abraham Ibn Ezra* (1877), in Hayoun, *L'exégèse philosophique*, 116 [author's translation from French].

¹⁵⁰ Hayoun, *L'exégèse philosophique*, 116-117. For an overview of Neoplatonism in the Middle Ages, see Fernand Brunner, “Le Néoplatonisme au Moyen Âge,” in *Métaphysique d'Ibn Gabirol et de la Tradition Platonicienne*, Variorum Collected Studies Series CS589, Daniel Schulthess, ed. (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1997).

cultural contexts which grant to language a significance beyond that belonging to a merely arbitrary system of signs.”¹⁵¹ Meaning, however, can be deconstructed and then reconstructed following accepted (in this case, neoplatonic) parameters.

The non-arbitrariness of the constructive hermeneutical process is emphasized through the use of the proof text (It is a tree of life to all who cling to it), as well as through comparative linguistic analysis (Eve:living:animal soul). The deconstructive hermeneutics is harder to justify; as a “mystery,” it is apparently outside the pale of orthodox hermeneutics altogether, being neither forbidden nor allowed.¹⁵² It is also restricted to those who have acquired knowledge (as Ibn Ezra claims about Ibn Gabirol).

Muslim attitudes towards language provide much of the methodology and terminology employed by Jewish philosophers. Additionally, there were Talmudic statements used to justify the activity of *ta’wīl*. Often employed is the well-known dictum, “the Torah has seventy faces.”¹⁵³ This statement is sometimes cited to refer to the four senses of the *pardes* acronym,¹⁵⁴ although within strictly philosophical exegesis it can be taken to symbolize the exoteric-esoteric (*ẓāhir/bāṭin*) level. The idea is that there is polysemy, or “multiple meaning,”¹⁵⁵ which is a religious notion as much as it is a linguistic or philosophical one. As Heinemann claims, “the fact that polysemy could be ascribed to the sacred texts endowed them, in prevailing medieval opinion, with

¹⁵¹ Quilligan 156.

¹⁵² Within traditional exegesis (i.e. Talmudic, Saadia’s) one can recall the restraints upon the *ma’aseh bereshit* and *ma’aseh merḳavah*. But these constraints, as well what those doctrines refer to, will undergo different interpretations as applied to philosophical exegesis.

¹⁵³ יש לתורה שבעים פנים, b. *Sanhedrin* 34a. Note the use of “face” to designate meaning also in Islam; *vide supra* n. 115.

¹⁵⁴ Talmage, “Apples of Gold,” 319.

¹⁵⁵ “Polysemy” was Dante’s term for “manifold” meaning; it has since entered the standard literary lexicon. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971) 72.

superiority over human documents.”¹⁵⁶ Thus the idea of polysemy produces a sacral view of the text and its language, which in its turn makes it possible for allegory to appear.

I have already stressed the role of *mağāz* in Saadia and Abraham Ibn Ezra, who is in many respects his successor. The remarks above serve as an introduction to the discussion on the school of philosopher-exegetes who adopt esoteric hermeneutical devices. The division between *peshat* and *remez* exegetical schools is only for purposes of clarity. As A. Ibn Ezra’s mention of Ibn Gabirol shows, exegetes could be eclectic in their methodology. The eclecticism can be traced to the Talmud: the commandments could not be allegorized, as they were in Christianity, but the Song of Songs must necessarily be seen as an allegory of God’s relationship with the people Israel.¹⁵⁷ The same exegete could use both a *peshat* approach, interpreting the text in the light of its grammatical structure and etymology, and also the *dereḥ mashal*, the allegorical (or figurative) interpretation of obscure expressions, such as the description of the Garden of Eden. Thus Abraham Ibn Ezra, reflecting his primary *peshat* orientation as well as his eclecticism, asks,

Why should we turn exoteric [meanings] into esoteric [ones]? If there are indeed places where they are truthfully conjoined, and both equally credible, some in bodies and some in thoughts, as in the circumcision of the flesh¹⁵⁸ and the foreskin of hearts, or as in the [story of the] Tree of Knowledge [where] a hidden meaning dwells pleasantly,

¹⁵⁶ Heinemann, 262.

¹⁵⁷ It was forbidden to read the Song of Songs literally (b. *Sanhedrin* 111a). For the difficulties inherent in such an approach for medieval philosophers, such as the text’s anthropomorphisms and its sexual connotations, see Menachem Kellner, “Communication or Lack Thereof Among Thirteenth-Fourteenth Century Provençal Jewish Philosophers: Moses Ibn Tibbon and Gersonides on Song of Songs.” In *Communication in the Jewish Diaspora: the Pre-Modern World*, Sophia Menache, ed. (New York: Brill Academic Publishers, 1996), 227-255.

¹⁵⁸ כמילת בשר, which does not appear in Scripture. Lancaster (160-161) argues there are at least three possible interpretations: “physical circumcision,” “the word as flesh (a reference to Christ, the Christian God, who transcends Jewish exegesis and tradition),” and to the Talmud (Oral Torah). She argues these are based on the ambiguousness of *milah*, which refers to “orality as well as to circumcision.” She claims Ibn Ezra wished to address Christian misunderstanding of Judaism as “non-spiritual.”

nevertheless the words are also true according to their obvious meaning. [And] if a man [really] cannot sustain this among his ideas, he would be wise to open his eyes and also find in nature many forms,¹⁵⁹ like the nostrils, the tongue and the feet, which serve two purposes.¹⁶⁰

According to Baḳya ben Joseph Ibn Pakuda (c. 1050-c.1156), however, the [Talmudic] sages “hinted only a little about the spiritual meanings intelligible only to the clever and wise . . . the same is true for every subtle matter in the Scriptures . . . for the Scriptures rely on the intelligence of the wise to be inspired to search and inquire about the matter as much as possible...”¹⁶¹ While Scripture speaks to everyone, “the spiritual meanings” are only clear to a certain class of readers. The *peshat* exegesis is accessible to everyone who understands the rudiments of language. Esoteric interpretation, however, can only be written and understood by a distinct kind of person. This orientation reflects the valorization of the inner sense as advocated by the Bāṭinīa, coupled with the elitism of the Ikhwān Al-Ṣafa, whose *Epistles* had been brought to Spain in the eleventh century,¹⁶² as well as the rabbinic specification on the type of student who is allowed to study secret doctrines.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ “forms” here is נוצרים, which also means “Christians.” According to Lancaster he “contrasts the “blind” Christians with the “insightful” Jews,” emphasizing the “harmonious co-existence of the bodily and the spiritual in Judaism” through multiple interpretations of the same verse. It should be noted, however, that adherence to the literal meaning was a common Christian accusation against Jews; see Talmage, “Apples of Gold,” 313.

¹⁶⁰ “Path Three,” in A. Ibn Ezra’s introduction to the *Commentary on the Torah*; Lancaster 159.

¹⁶¹ *Book of Direction to the Duties of the Heart* (كتاب الهداية الى فرائض القلوب) I.10, Menahem Mansoor, trans., annot., with Sara Arenson and Shoshana Dannhauser (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1973), 137-138.

¹⁶² The *Epistles* (رسائل) of the Ikhwān Al-Ṣafa was described by the group as “a garden of untold splendor” with “a hidden . . . wisdom that should be disclosed . . . only in part” to a select few. Lancaster, 84. The *Epistles* were not unknown to Ibn Gabirol; see Loewe 28, 113, and Loewe, “Ibn Gabirol’s Treatment of Sources in the *Kether Malkhut*,” in *Studies in Jewish Religious and Intellectual History Presented to Alexander Altmann*, S. Stein and R. Loewe, eds. (University, AL.: University of Alabama Press, and London: Institute of Jewish Studies, 1977), 183-194. See also Lawrence V. Berman, “Brethren of Sincerity, Epistles of,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, CD-ROM Edition.

¹⁶³ vide supra n.52.

Esoteric interpretation develops at first not among philosophers (with the possible exception of Ibn Gabirol) but in theological writing. According to Sara Klein-Braslavy, Ibn Pakuda is the first to adopt the *zāhir/bāṭin* distinction in his exegesis.¹⁶⁴ His *chef d'œuvre*, the *Book of Direction to the Duties of the Heart*, is by nature esoteric, the “duties of the heart” being only alluded to in the biblical text.¹⁶⁵ Unlike the *peshat* school, Ibn Pakuda does not comment on the “external duties of the body and its members,” but only on the “internal knowledge of the of the secret duties of the heart;” his aim is to “uncover the roots of our religion and the principles of our Law hidden in pure minds and buried in our souls.”¹⁶⁶

The religious life is thus composed of two parts. Nevertheless, as the “wise and sagacious man, gifted with sound judgment” reads Scripture, he realizes it is tripartite. First there are the “subtle spiritual meanings which constitute the inner knowledge to whose practise [sic] he should devote himself constantly—the duties of the heart and the obligations of the soul.” He then derives from the first the “knowledge of the duties of the members, all in their appropriate time and place.”¹⁶⁷ The third part of Scripture should be studied historically, “so that he may know the classes of people and their succession in past generations, as well as the stories and anecdotes passed down from ancient times.”

¹⁶⁴ Klein-Braslavy, 307.

¹⁶⁵ Klein-Braslavy, *ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ *Duties*, Introduction, 87, 105.

¹⁶⁷ Perhaps what Ibn Pakuda means here is that some *mitsvot*, such as sacrifice, were promulgated “in the light of the psychohistorical of those initially bound by it,” an argument adopted by Maimonides (*Guide* 3.32). The spirit of the *mitsvot*, that is, the duty of the heart, remains even if the duty of the limb, as in this case, can no longer be exercised. Daniel H. Frank, “Maimonides and medieval Jewish Aristotelianism,” in *Cambridge Companion*, Frank, Leaman, eds., 152.

All these three parts are, however, only “introductions to the supreme science of metaphysics.”¹⁶⁸

For those readers who are wise, then, the inner meaning of Scripture—the duties of the heart—leads to the inner meaning of the universe, so to speak. A contradiction between Scripture and metaphysics is thus a contradiction in terms, although Ibn Pakuda does not directly address the relationship between philosophy and revelation. The influence of the *Epistles* is evident in this inherent accord of reason and revelation, as they combine “Aristotelian physics and Neoplatonic metaphysics,” coordinating the “truths of Greek philosophy and science with the truth of the Islamic faith.”¹⁶⁹ This type of harmonization should not be confused with Saadia’s: for Saadia the text remains true so long as it conforms to reason; it does not point to an extra-textual realm. The *maḡāz* is only identifiable as such to the extent that the text is not logically or empirically tenable.

For Ibn Pakuda, though, the same verse can be interpreted in different yet valid ways; an example is his treatment of anthropomorphisms. The Talmudic statement employed was “the Torah speaks in the language of human beings” (דברה תורה כלשון בני אדם)¹⁷⁰, that is, the Torah speaks in a certain way in order to reach all human beings. It must appeal to the philosopher, as well as to the farmer; hence its language must be such that all humans would understand. The Geonim had also applied this maxim to anthropomorphism. But Ibn Pakuda’s emphasis is not so much on the language used but

¹⁶⁸ *Duties*, introduction, 106-107. The Sufi influence is evident: Ibn Pakuda was the first to employ Sufi material in prose, Ibn Gabirol and Jehudah Halevi having preceded him in poetry. But it is also controversial. Mansoor claims that “Bahya does not think in terms of freeing the soul for a mystical union with God, or for the attainment of speculative knowledge of the spiritual world. Instead he seeks to free the soul for the proper worship of God with one’s heart.” Paul B. Fenton states, however, that “Bahya devised an individualistic, inward itinerary, guiding the soul through contemplation and union with the “supernal light.” Menahem Mansoor, “Translator’s Introduction,” in *Duties*, 31; Paul B. Fenton, “Judaism and Sufism,” in *Cambridge Companion*, Frank, Leaman, eds., 204.

¹⁶⁹ Mansoor, 24.

¹⁷⁰ b. *Bava Metsiah* 31b.

the truths conveyed; “the emphasis is upon the adjustment of Scripture to the understanding of the average person, rather than to his manner of speech.”¹⁷¹

The didactic goal of anthropomorphic language—to teach the common people the existence of God—justifies the use of seemingly irrational speech (the process is comparable to teaching children about God; one would not either begin with or expect to proceed to abstract theological statements). On the other hand, those who are wise recognize the spiritual truth that lies behind such language: “a discourse implying a material meaning cannot harm the clever man, who is able to understand it with discrimination, while it can greatly benefit the simple man by establishing in his soul the fact that he has a Creator whom he is obliged to obey.” Recalling Moses Ibn Ezra’s “husk” analogy,¹⁷² Ibn Pakuda likewise affirms that “the clever and intelligent man would try to peel the anthropomorphic husk from the term and abstract its meaning.”¹⁷³ Sara Klein-Braslavy states that Ibn Pakuda was the first medieval Jewish philosopher to interpret “the Torah speaks in the language of human beings” in this manner.¹⁷⁴

Esoteric exegesis quickly found a following among students of philosophy. Although Ibn Pakuda did make use of Aristotle, Galen, Euclid, Neoplatonic and Arabic sources, he tries to show that these are rooted in Judaism by citing Talmudic sources as proof. He does not mention any Muslim source, such as al-Ghazali or Ikhwān Al-Ṣafa, as such.¹⁷⁵ By doing so, he presents himself as within mainstream Judaism. But because he does not directly treat the question *du jour*, namely, the relationship between reason and revelation, his influence in Jewish philosophical exegesis was not significant. The most

¹⁷¹ Klein-Braslavy 307.

¹⁷² *vide supra* n. 126

¹⁷³ *Duties* 1.10 (136-137).

¹⁷⁴ Klein-Braslavy 307.

¹⁷⁵ Mansoor, 11.

definitive exercise of esoteric philosophical interpretation appears with Maimonides.

Before him, however, an eclectic philosopher, Abraham bar Khaiya, also attempted to identify the philosophical doctrines of Scripture through exegesis.

Bar Khaiya was a contemporary of Ibn Pakuda and Jehudah Halevi. In his hermeneutical orientation he revives Philo's idea that the Greek philosophy had its source in the Bible, and therefore biblical terms are synonymous with philosophical terms.¹⁷⁶ In this respect, Bar Khaiya is close to Ibn Gabirol (per A. Ibn Ezra) in the straightforward identification of philosophical and biblical terms and concepts. Unlike Ibn Gabirol, Bar Khaiya seeks to integrate the disparate aspects of the Creation text into an overall cosmogony that has both Neoplatonic and Aristotelian elements. Thus *bohu*, *mayim* (water) and "light" ("let there be light, and there was light," Gen. 1.3) are all identified with "Form," although each term represents a different aspect of Form,¹⁷⁷ while Light is further defined as an emanationist principle, a Neoplatonic concept.¹⁷⁸

In the first part of his *Meditation of the Sad Soul* (הגיון הנפש העצובה), he begins with an explanation of the "views of the early philosophers and their theories of creation." He praises their method of investigating "the fundamentals from which all things have been created" and what follows is a mostly Aristotelian biopsychology (rational, animal, vegetal natures) along with the definition of body and its basic composition as matter and form. He continues, "all their words that we have explained so far [Matter and Form] can be derived on reflection from the Torah, the Source of Wisdom. Thus the hyle and the Form, which—according to the ancient philosophers—existed in potentiality until creation, are the *Tohu* and *Bohu*, mentioned in the Torah

¹⁷⁶ *vide supra* n. 18

¹⁷⁷ *Meditation*, 42-44.

¹⁷⁸ *Meditation* 45.

(Genesis 1.2).”¹⁷⁹ This exegesis of *tohu* and *bohu* is interesting in two respects. First, it is not apparent from the biblical text how they were created; rather, they seem to pre-exist creation, perhaps uncreated and co-existent with God, or created before the events of Genesis 1:1. Thus Bar Khaiya must explain either that they were in fact created (and ally himself with Saadia on creation *ex nihilo*) or explain why they were not created, revealing to his readers a position closer to Aristotle (or closer to Neoplatonism, if he explains it by means of an emanationist account). Second, *tohu* and *bohu* are not defined and play no obvious role in biblical cosmogony; Bar Khaiya must also explain not only why they seem to be coexistent with God, but also what is their particular role in the Creation process.

Bar Khaiya takes a moderate approach, arguing that while *tohu* and *bohu* did precede creation, they existed in potentiality and not in actuality, introducing an Aristotelian explanation that commits him neither to creation *ex nihilo* nor to creation from pre-existent matter. They emerge to actuality “at the word of God,”¹⁸⁰ and thus the voluntarist aspect of creation is preserved.¹⁸¹ Nevertheless, Bar Khaiya takes his exegesis a step further. He argues that *bohu* is actually a composite of two words, *bo* (in it) and *hu* (it is), and thus *bohu* also means “it is in it.” The obscurity of the word is explainable in

¹⁷⁹ trans. Geoffrey Wigoder (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 40.

¹⁸⁰ *Meditation* 40.

¹⁸¹ One can read Aristotle as saying that potentialities are necessarily grounded in actualities. But it is not clear in this case that this actuality must be God (in which case creation would be *ex nihilo*). Rabbinical Judaism taught that Torah existed before Creation (b. *Pesakhim* 54a) and the view arose that the Koran preceded Creation as well (earliest ascribed to Ibn Abbas, who died in 687). Like the Torah (Gen. 15:1) the Koran also refers to acts of revelation as “word” (Surah 2:70, 9:6, 48:15). Unlike the Torah, the Koran describes itself as God’s “knowledge” and “wisdom” (Surah 2:114, 13:37, 55:1-3). Since God’s attributes (such as wisdom and knowledge) were held to be uncreated and eternal, the Koran, too, came to be seen as such. If Bar Khayia had the concept of uncreated revelation in mind (in the expression “at the word of God”) then *tohu* and *bohu* could be grounded in an actuality other than God, in which case creation would not necessarily occur *ex nihilo*. Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), 238-241. I thank Dr. Sheldon Cohen for calling my attention to this ambiguity.

its philosophical context: *bohu* is two words “because the clear, closed, pure Form is self-sustaining and requires no assistance, so the meaning of *Bo-hu* [sic] is that which is self-sustaining and self-powered even though unconnected to any other thing.”¹⁸² While *bohu* is not caused by God, it can itself become a cause only to the extent that it is joined with *tohu*, since “from this union the heavenly bodies were created,” and thus it is in a kind of dependence from God, as the union is effected only through the Word of God.¹⁸³ *Bohu*, *tohu*, and their cognates become useful as instruments for creation, but the assertion that it is the Word of God that effects their union, and not God personally, suggests the Aristotelian idea of God as remote cause, although with Bar Khaiya’s distinctly voluntarist stamp.

Bar Khaiya does not treat the question of allegory or allegorization of the text in theoretical language. That is, he offers no definitions or justifications for his allegorical exegesis. On the whole, his concern is more scientific than biblical.¹⁸⁴ In the face of my foregoing remarks on Arabic rhetoric, it is very unlikely that he was simply unfamiliar with a hermeneutical terminology, and therefore could not abstract theory from practice.¹⁸⁵ His exegesis, however, clearly shows a preference for allegory rather than metaphor as the primary literary device used in philosophical interpretation.

The question of what constitutes an allegory is too broad to be considered here. Although literary theories are useful, one must bear in mind that “there are irreducible differences not only in the historical settings in which interpretation takes place, but in the very status of diverse texts (sacred, legendary, recreational, prescriptive) for different

¹⁸² *Meditation* 41.

¹⁸³ *Meditation* 40.

¹⁸⁴ *vide supra* n.8.

¹⁸⁵ Heinemann claims “during the Middle Ages it was not possible to seek rigorously for the justification of allegorism because a technical term for this form of reinterpretation was not available.” Heinemann, 251.

individuals and communities.”¹⁸⁶ One basic distinction is that between allegory proper (“allegorical narrative”) and what has been called *allegoresis* or allegorical interpretation.¹⁸⁷ The former, which implies personification, “manifests the meaning as clearly as possible by naming the actor with the concept,” but *allegoresis* “assumes that meaning is not manifest and must be dug for.”¹⁸⁸ It has become common to speak of *allegoresis*, therefore, as an “imposed” allegory, an allegory that is not in the text itself but in the interpretation of that text. The terminology of *allegoresis* is thus one of “verticalness, levels, hidden meaning, the hieratic difficulty of interpretation.”¹⁸⁹ One must be careful not to separate the two too radically, however. As Jon Whitman explains, “both of these procedures imply each other,” and “the two forms of allegory (allegory proper and *allegoresis*) increasingly stimulate one another as they develop into full-scale literary and interpretive movements in their own right.”¹⁹⁰ For instance, *ta’wīl*, which is used in the Koran as “meaning” (which may or may not be obvious),¹⁹¹ comes to represent, in post-Koranic times, “the product of research and reason,” and is identified with “allegorical interpretation.”¹⁹²

In the Koran the *mathal* (مثال), a term denoting a broad range of figurative expressions, including allegory, is said to have a divine origin.¹⁹³ Since the allegory was perceived as already present in the sacred text, *allegoresis*, far from being a fanciful

¹⁸⁶ Whitman, “Retrospective,” 21.

¹⁸⁷ Quilligan 26.

¹⁸⁸ Quilligan 31.

¹⁸⁹ Quilligan 32.

¹⁹⁰ Jon Whitman, “Allegory,” in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan, eds. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

¹⁹¹ *vide supra* n. 117.

¹⁹² Alfred Ivry, “The Utilization of Allegory in Islamic Philosophy,” in Whitman, *Interpretation and Allegory*, 157; *vide supra* n. 115.

¹⁹³ Q. 14:24-25. *Mathal* is also the term used to designate the Platonic Forms in Arabic philosophy: المثال . M. Saeed Sheikh, *A Dictionary of Muslim Philosophy* (Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, 1970), 117.

exercise or alternative reading, becomes a matter of religious duty. *Allegoresis* need not make use of philosophical explanations insofar as it is a religious duty. Thus Jehudah Halevi sees the Song of Songs as an allegory, as in the rabbinic reading, but neither as a philosophical allegory nor as a “parable for the human soul,” a common interpretation in Jewish philosophy.¹⁹⁴ Likewise, the *Zohar* attributes allegorical speech to Scripture, as in the comparison of the Torah to a “guarded woman:”

When [her secret lover] comes to her, she begins from behind a curtain to speak words in keeping with his understanding, until very slowly insight comes to him, and this is called *derashah*. Then through a light veil she speaks allegorical words (*milin de-khidah*) and that is what is meant by *hagadah*. Only then, when he has become familiar with her, does she reveal herself to him face to face and speak to him of all her hidden secrets and all her hidden ways, which have been in her heart from the beginning.”¹⁹⁵

Medieval exegetes did not see themselves as imposing an allegorical interpretation alien to the text.¹⁹⁶ It was based upon certain assumptions, some of which I have already outlined (*ẓāhir/bāṭin*, polysemy etc.). In Ibn Sinā (Avicenna, 980-1037) we see a systematic treatment of esotericism, which I hope will serve to put the foregoing remarks in context. His argument consists of four main points:

First, it is a postulate of Aristotelian philosophy that the “rational soul” (the rational faculty) is what constitutes man qua man; it is what distinguishes man from other creatures. Nevertheless, it is not always dominant: in fact, most people are led predominantly by the “lower faculties” (such as physical appetites).

Second, legislators of any stripe must formulate their arguments in a way that is considerate of their audience. It is desirable that one’s argumentation be conceived so as

¹⁹⁴ Klein-Braslavy 311. He reads instead that Solomon “designates the exile by *sleep*, and the continuance of prophecy among them by the wakefulness of the heart.” *Kuzari* 2:24 (100).

¹⁹⁵ *Zohar* 2:99b, in Talmage, “Apples of Gold,” 316.

¹⁹⁶ Ivory, 158.

to include different kinds of arguments, such as rhetorical or demonstrative, “so that diverse types of mind instinctively assent to it.” The value of allegorical statements is emphasized, because the epistemology of the animal soul (which is above all perceptual) is representational rather than abstract: imagination is a “motion produced by the activity of sense” (*De Anima* 429a). Allegories can thus be understood by the masses as imaginative figurae.

Third, the “intellectual import of revelation” must not be disclosed to the masses, because, first, they are not fit to receive it, second, it may be harmful to them, and third, it could lead to social unrest. Therefore society needs laws that are formulated not abstractedly but tangibly; “prophecy is a social necessity” because it addresses the whole “diversity of human temperaments.”

Fourth, the intellectual content of revelation must be disseminated to those who are apt to receive it and advance it; by comprehending the “underlying truths” they become adequate interpreters of the law. The value of allegory, in this case, is one of intellectual stimuli, much like the *Zohar* allegory cited above.¹⁹⁷ It draws the student but does not reveal outright; Scripture becomes a maze for which, indeed, a *Guide for the Perplexed* is most useful.¹⁹⁸

Leo Strauss was been one of the most forceful exponents of philosophical esotericism in the *Guide*. In *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, he introduces a compelling argument that has special bearing on allegorical exegesis, namely, the place

¹⁹⁷ *vide supra* n. 189.

¹⁹⁸ The French title *Guide des Égarés* reflects this aspect of loss more forcefully than “perplexed.” Ibn Sinā’s premises are culled from the *The Book of the Prophet Muhammad’s Ascent to Heaven*, *Fī Ithbāt an-nubuwwāt* [Proof of Prophecies] and the *Metaphysics*. Peter Heath, *Allegory and Philosophy in Avicenna (Ibn Sinā): with a translation of the Book of the Prophet Muhammad’s Ascent to Heaven* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 150-152. See also the *Guide*, “Introduction to the First Part,” 5-14.

of oral speech in philosophical writing.¹⁹⁹ Socrates never wrote; the *Phaedrus*'s admonition on the dangers of writing was repeated by Al-Fārābī, one of Maimonides' major influences.²⁰⁰ The Talmud, likewise, is essentially a record of oral dialectics (as it is properly called the Oral Torah, *Torah be'al peh*). It is Strauss' contention that the Guide to the Perplexed is constructed around the rabbinic restrictions on the *ma'aseh bereshit* and *ma'aseh merḳavah*: a teaching that may not be set down in writing.²⁰¹ Paradoxically, we have a book that may not be written; Strauss points out that Maimonides, however, never calls the Guide a "book" but only a *maqāla* (مقالة / מאמר), which may mean "treatise," but whose original connotation is "speech."²⁰²

The meaning of Scripture, as presented in the *Guide*, is thus encased in two allegorical layers. The first is the allegory of the text itself, the interpretation of which constitutes Maimonides' objective (as far as he tells us) in writing the *Guide*: "to explain the meanings of certain terms occurring in the books of prophecy," terms that may be either equivocal, derivative or amphibolous; the treatise also aims at the

explanation of very obscure parables occurring in the books of the prophets, but not explicitly identified there as such. Hence an ignorant or heedless individual might think that they possess only an external sense, but not internal one. However, even when one who truly possesses knowledge considers these parables and interprets them according to their external meaning, he too is overtaken by great perplexity. But if we

¹⁹⁹ The wider controversy in twentieth-century philosophy regarding the "written" and the "oral" is most often associated with Derrida. See Jack Goody, *The Power of the Written Tradition* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000).

²⁰⁰ *Phaedrus* 247c-end; Leo Strauss, "The Literary Character of the *Guide for the Perplexed*," in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1952), 47.

²⁰¹ *vide supra* n.53. Maimonides accordingly identifies *ma'aseh bereshit* with "natural science" and *ma'aseh merḳavah* with "divine science" (physics and metaphysics, respectively) and declares: "hence you should not ask of me here [in the *Guide*] anything beyond the chapter headings (original italics).

"Introduction to the First Part," 6.

²⁰² Samuel Ibn Tibbon, first translator of the *Guide* into Hebrew and esoteric interpreter, likewise entitles his own volume of esoteric exegesis a *ma'amar* (מאמר יקבו המים). Ravitzky, "Samuel Ibn Tibbon," 206. Israel Efros' classic *Philosophical Terms in the Moreh Nebukim* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1921), s.v. "מאמר," "מאמרות," which follows Ibn Tibbon's translation, has *ma'amar* as "definition," the original being, most often, not *maqāla* but 'alkol (אלקול in Judeo-Arabic).

explain these parables to him or if we draw his attention to their [*sic*] being parables, he will take the right road and be delivered from this perplexity. That is why I have called this Treatise “The Guide of the Perplexed.”²⁰³

The second meaning that emerges is the one presented in the *Guide*, that is, Maimonides’ own explanation. Strauss’ argument is that Maimonides employs hints, allusions and the like in order to convey the primarily oral nature of his teaching. In the *Guide*, “hints are more important than explicit statements,” just as face-to-face communication transmits meaning through familiar verbal clues, allusions to shared experiences and even body language (if Strauss is right, however, one is presumably at a loss as to what statements in the *Guide* should be read esoterically and what statements should be read literally. Virtually any statement could be read esoterically).²⁰⁴ One must, therefore, interpret Maimonides’ own interpretation.

Maimonides’ task is therefore twofold. First, he must point out where parables occur and what their explanation is, a process we exemplified by Bar Khaiya. Maimonides divides biblical parables in two major categories, those where each word has an esoteric meaning (such as the parable of Jacob’s ladder) and those where the overall sense of the parable is esoteric (individual words do not necessarily have an individual esoteric meaning outside the context of the passage).²⁰⁵ James Arthur Diamond calls

²⁰³ “Introduction to the First Part,” 6.

²⁰⁴ Strauss, 47. Strauss own method emulates Maimonides, much like the medieval commentaries on the *Guide*; it is an esoteric explanation of an esoteric book (which in its turn offers the esoteric interpretation of the Bible). See criticism of this method in Marvin Fox, *Interpreting Maimonides: Studies in Methodology, Metaphysics and Moral Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 47-66. Among the most important medieval esoteric commentaries on the *Guide*, inaugurated by Samuel Ibn Tibbon, are Ibn Caspi’s commentary *Masḥiyot Ḳesef* and Moses Narboni’s *Commentary on the Guide of the Perplexed*. See Ravitzky, “Samuel Ibn Tibbon;” Hayoun, *L’exégèse philosophique*, 237, 239-240; Isaiah Dimant, “Exegesis, Philosophy and Language in the Writing of Joseph Ibn Caspi,” (Ph. D. Diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1979), 11-14; Hayoun, *La Philosophie et la Théologie de Moïse de Narbonne (1300-1362)* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1990); Hayoun, *L’exégèse Juive*, 79-82.

²⁰⁵ *Guide*, “introduction,” 12. In this context, David Blumenthal has argued for a refinement of usage between *mathal* and *lughz* (لغز). The former is used to define the two categories delimited above, which

these parables “parabolic types.” Jacob’s ladder is an example of “parabolic precision,” while the parable of the “married harlot” (Proverbs 7:6-21), whose meaning is a “warning against the pursuit of bodily pleasures” (harlot=Aristotelian matter), is an example of “parabolic flourish.”²⁰⁶

Maimonides’ second task is to construct the explanation of parables in a way that will preserve not only the oral nature of his teaching but the *zāhir/bāṭin* premise as well. As Ibn Sinā argued, there are several reasons why one should not reveal secret doctrines to the masses. Maimonides therefore imitates the literary and stylistic style of Scripture, the style that appeals to all irrespective of background. In order to achieve that, he uses a process of construction/deconstruction parallel to what I argued about Ibn Gabirol.²⁰⁷ In Gabirol’s case there was no intention to conceal: A. Ibn Ezra cites the esoteric meaning outright. But since Maimonides wishes (or must, if one is to accept Strauss) to conceal his views to some degree, the process of deconstruction/construction becomes two independent processes.

In the interpretation of a particular parable (مثال) in Scripture, construction is associated with *bāṭin*, the inner meaning, while deconstruction stresses the *zāhir*. Maimonides shows this association by citing two *midrashim* from *Shir Hashirim Rabah* 1:1. The first compares the “words of Torah” to “a well the waters of which are at a great depth and cool, yet no man could drink of them.” Solomon, however, “joined cord with cord and rope with rope and drew them up and drank. . . . thus did Solomon say one

he claims have “only one level of decipherment and without that, [they] are only an image.” *Lughz*, on the other hand, contains both exoteric and esoteric levels, and corresponds to the simile of the “apple of gold” (*vide infra* p. 53); *lughz* is then a specific kind of *mathal*. David R. Blumenthal, “Maimonides on Mind and Metaphoric Language,” 127-128.

²⁰⁶ James Arthur Diamond, *Maimonides and the Hermeneutics of Concealment: Deciphering Scripture and Midrash in the Guide of the Perplexed* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002), 31-32.

²⁰⁷ *vide supra* p.38.

parable after another and speak one word after another until he understood the meaning of the words of the Torah.”²⁰⁸ Diamond interprets this passage to mean that meaning is discovered and attainable through parable or allegory (משל / מִטַּל), that is, a method is constructed to “decipher biblical text.”²⁰⁹ Unlike a deconstruction of literal meaning, as in Ibn Gabirol, a method is constructed to lead to the true meaning. The literal meaning is itself part of that method, in as much as it is necessary to “distract” the unprepared. The second *midrash* quoted by Maimonides stresses the deconstruction of the *mashal* / allegory.²¹⁰

This *midrash* stresses the worthlessness of *mashal*: “Our rabbis say: a man who loses a *sela*’²¹¹ or a pearl in his house can find the pearl by lighting a taper worth an *issar*.²¹² In the same way this parable in itself is worth nothing, but by means of it you can understand the words of the Torah.” The emphasis here is not on discovery, but on recovery, the “lighting of material” equating the “dissipation of *mashal* to arrive at meaning” that was lost.²¹³ Diamond claims that the clarity achieved by this latter deconstruction “would seem to indicate an apprehension inferior to the one symbolized by the actual ingesting of fluid.”²¹⁴

Thus we see that in Maimonides’ exegesis the processes of construction and deconstruction become referentials for methodology as well as meaning. He sums up this

²⁰⁸ *Guide*, “Introduction,” 11.

²⁰⁹ Diamond, 14. Note also the water motif reappearing in Ibn Tibbon in his title *Ma’amar Yikavu Hamayim*; vide *supra* n. 197.

²¹⁰ *Mashal*, like its Arabic cognate *mathal* (מַתַּל in Maimonides’ Judeo-Arabic), is a vague term. It can be taken to mean “simile or allegory,” or parable, as Diamond has it, although parable is too restrictive a term for the multi-purpose *mashal*. Significantly, *mashal* can also mean “meaning,” with מִשַּׁל רֵאשׁוֹן being the “literal meaning” (Jud.-Ar. מַתַּל אֶלְאִיל); *mashal r’ishon* has been contrasted to עֵינֵן רֵאשׁוֹן as *Grundbedeutung* as opposed to *Grundbegriff*. Efros, s.v. “משל.”

²¹¹ A silver coin (Pines).

²¹² ninety six issar = one sela’ (Pines)

²¹³ Unlike water in the construction process, the deconstruction process utilizes fire.

²¹⁴ Diamond 15.

tension in his exegesis of Proverbs 25:11 (“Like golden apples in silver showpieces is a phrase well turned”²¹⁵):

Hear now an elucidation of the thought that [Solomon] has set forth. The term *maskiyyoth* [sic] denotes filigree trceries; I mean to say trceries in which there are apertures with very small eyelets, like the work of silversmiths The Sage accordingly said that a saying uttered with a view to two meanings is like an apple of gold overlaid with silver filigree-work having very small holes the parables of the prophets, peace be on them, are similar. Their external meaning contains wisdom that is useful in many respects, among which is the welfare of human societies, as is shown by the external meaning of *Proverbs* and of similar sayings. Their internal meaning, on the other hand, contains wisdom that is useful for beliefs concerned with truth as it is.²¹⁶

The *zāhir* is therefore not useless, but plays a specific role in social order, as in Ibn Sinā’s third argument on the necessity of prophecy.²¹⁷ “Silver” is not necessarily the “bare literal,” as Diamond has called it, but denotes the meaning that emerges after the deconstruction of the *mashal*. This ethico-moral level “can and must be achieved by most.” The “silver” is nevertheless illusory: closer inspection will reveal the underlying reality, which can never be grasped in its entirety,²¹⁸ concerning, literally, “truth in its true reality” (الحق على حقيقته). *Ḥaqīqa*, which in earlier hermeneutical settings stood for the opposite of *maḡāz* as its clear and unambiguous counterpart, is now said to be, in ultimate instance, unknown.

²¹⁵ תפוחי זהב במשפיות כסף דבר דבר על-אפניו. Jewish Publication Society translation (second edition, 2000). It duly notes that the meaning of *maskiyot* is “uncertain.”

²¹⁶ *Guide*, “introduction,” 12.

²¹⁷ *vide supra* n.193.

²¹⁸ Diamond, 16-18. The perennial elusiveness of ultimate reality is knowledge of God’s essence, which is utterly impossible for man (even through *mashal* or anthropomorphism). This issue bears significant ramifications in Maimonides’ theory of religious language and worship. Ehud Z. Benor, “Meaning and Reference in Maimonides’ Negative Theology,” *Harvard Theological Review* 88:3 (1995), 339-360; David R. Blumenthal, “Maimonides: Prayer, Worship, and Mysticism,” in *Approaches to Judaism in Medieval Times*, vol. 3. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1984), 1-16; Arthur Hyman, “Maimonides on Religious Language,” in *Perspectives on Maimonides*, Joel Kraemer, ed. (London; Portland, OR.: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1996), 175-191.

The “turning” of Scriptural sense, that is, *hafak*, has come full term. If with Saadia the metaphor can be turned into non-metaphor, for Maimonides, the ultimate meaning of this non-metaphor is unknowable. With Maimonides, the metaphor, or more properly, the allegory, acquires a value of its own; it, too, can be turned around by those who know how. In either way, “everything” is truly in it, even as it points elsewhere.