

Apples of Gold: The Inner Meaning of Sacred Texts in Medieval Judaism

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Allegory as a Characteristic Feature of Medieval Jewish Literature

IN HIS ANTI-CHRISTIAN POLEMIC, the *Book of the Covenant*, Joseph Kimhi, the twelfth-century Narbonne biblical exegete and grammarian, has his stereotypical Christian antagonist remark, "You understand most of the Torah literally while we understand it figuratively. Your entire reading of the Bible is erroneous for you resemble him who gnaws at the bone, while we suck at the marrow within. You are like the beast that eats the chaff, while we eat the wheat."¹ To have made such a statement, Joseph Kimhi's stereotypical Christian would have had to have read only stereotypical Jewish exegesis. He, like most Christian theologians, no doubt knew full well that Jews were anything but die-hard literalists.² What was meant by Jewish literalism was failure to accept the christological interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures, and the term was used at times to vilify the Jewish reading of the Bible as "carnal" and at times to support periodic Christian efforts at interpreting *literaliter*, according to the literal or historical sense. Indeed, modern students of the history of exegesis emphasize this aspect of Hebrew biblical commentary. Some, like Beryl Smalley, might wish to show its importance for the development of the school of St. Victor;³ others purport to emphasize its relevance for the contemporary exegete.⁴ They are all correct, of course, but they tell only part of the story. Medieval Jewish biblical exegesis operated on many levels, according to the time, the place, and the predilection of the individual writer. The categories

most frequently discussed are those of *peshat* and *derash*, the relationship of the so-called plain sense to the rabbinic hermeneutic. Our concern, though, is with a different set of polarities, that of *nigleh* (*zāhir*) and *nistar* (*bātin*), exoteric and esoteric, a dominant mode of exegesis in that part of the later medieval Jewish world more affected by Islamic culture than by Latin—Spain and Provence and, by extension, Italy. For lack of better terms—and indeed more precise terminology waits to be established—the categories of "allegory"⁵ and "symbol" are frequently used, and we may use these categories as long as we are aware that what is spoken of here is not, as in so much of Christian exegesis, figural allegory, in which the type represents the antitype and in which the old prefigures the new. To be sure, such typological exegesis was not unknown to Judaism and was used far more extensively than is generally supposed. Indeed, the proverb "the actions of the fathers are an indication of those of the sons,"⁶ in which the rabbis saw repetitiveness of the behavior of one generation of patriarchs after the other, was taken up by the thirteenth-century Geronese exegete Moses ben Nahman (Nahmanides), whereas his contemporary, Bahya ben Asher, points out that the exodus from Egypt is a *figura* (*dimyon*) of the future redemption.⁷ One of the most striking examples of Jewish typological exegesis is to be found in the commentary of Isaac ben Joseph Ha-Kohen (Spain, turn of the fifteenth century) on Ruth. There the book of Ruth is read as a prefiguration of the future history of Israel, and its characters are types (*mashal*) of those yet to come—Elimelech of the House of David, Naomi of the kingdom of Israel, Ruth of the faithful tribes of Judah and Benjamin, Orpah of the wayward ten tribes who followed Jeroboam, and so forth. In turn, Ha-Kohen's contemporary, Isaac Abravanel, from the evidence of the midrash, finds Adam to be a type of Israel, the true man, into whom God breathed His spirit, the Torah, and placed him in the Garden of Eden, the land of Israel.⁸

Yet by and large, without the need to demonstrate the concordance of two testaments, typology does not become the dominant mode. Rather the allegory that we shall be treating, more accurately termed reification allegory,⁹ is the heir of the Greek allegorizers of Homer, Hesiod, Ovid,¹⁰ and of Philo of Alexandria, an "imposed allegory"¹¹ in which the surface meaning¹² of a classical or canonical text, not truly intended by its author to be allegorical, is taken to envelop higher esoteric truth, the way the shell envelops the nut. This exoteric sense, the *nigleh*, may be useful as in Maimonides's *Guide for the Perplexed* (introduction; Pines, p. 12), or it may impede, as is suggested in the mystical classic the *Zohar*. But either way, the reader—the *discerning* reader—must probe beyond, must plummet beneath, must penetrate ever farther (*Guide* 1:26, 1:33, 2:48). Nor is it only

Scripture that is read allegorically, but even "parables of foxes," secular literature with an ostensibly diversionary intent, are, as in the Christian European tradition, to be read as a key to profounder, more arcane truths. In this way, even the fifteenth-century rhymed prose narrative of Don Vidal Benvenist, the *Romance of Epher and Dinah*,¹³ an unabashedly scatological piece, is declared by its author to be not just a cheap piece of entertainment, not to contain, as Dante would have said, simply *diletto* but also *ammaestramento* (*Convivio* 1.2, 21.1), moral and psychological truths, couched in their present garb only to draw and hold the interest of prurient youth. And, in case we do not believe him (and we should indeed not be too hasty in dismissing his claim),¹⁴ Benvenist, unlike the thirteenth-century Spanish savants, Judah al-Harizi and Isaac Ibn Sahula, who merely allude to the didactic nature of their rhymed prose narratives (*maqāmāt*), the *Tahkemoni* and the *Mashal ha-qadmoni*,¹⁵—actually undertakes to establish his claim in detail in his own allegorical interpretation of the tale. For so many in this Islamic-Jewish world of southern Europe, allegory was not merely a hermeneutic mode; it was a state of mind. It was not simply a way of looking at the world; it was a way of constructing the world. It was used in a variety of ways as abundant as the variety of its metaphors. For Maimonides, it was that of Prov 25:11:

The Sage has said, *A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings (maskiyyot) of silver.* Hear now an elucidation of the thought that he has set forth. The term *maskiyyot* denotes filigree traceries; I mean to say traceries in which there are apertures with very small eyelets, like the handiwork of silversmiths. They are so called because a glance penetrates through them; for in the (Aramaic) translation of the Bible the Hebrew *wa-yashqef*—meaning, he glanced—is translated *wa-istekhel*. 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. . . . When looked at from a distance or with imperfect attention, it is deemed to be an apple of silver; but when a keen sighted observer looks at it with full attention, its interior becomes clear to him and he knows that it is of gold.¹⁶ The parables of the prophets, peace be on them, are similar. Their external meaning contains wisdom that is useful for beliefs concerned with truth as it is. (*Guide*, introduction; Pines, pp. 11–12)

The quest for "truth as it is" is the quest then for the golden apple; as in *midrashim* cited by Maimonides (*Guide*, introduction; Pines, p. 11), it is the attempt to retrieve the coin at the bottom of the well by attaching cord to cord until one reaches bottom (*Song Rab.* 1:1) to make, as with the Muslim mystics' method of *istinbāt*,¹⁷ the inner meaning surface; it is the search for the lost pearl found with the aid of a penny candle (*Song Rab.* 1:1); it is, as in the *Zohar*, the shelling of the nut with its numerous shells and layers

(*Zohar Hadash, Midrash Ruth* 39c), or the soul encased in its body encased in its garments, or the tree with its roots, bark, cortex, branches, leaves, flowers, and fruit alluding to seven layers of meaning (*Zohar* 3:202a).¹⁸ But one of the most prevalent, and perhaps the most telling, images is that of the palace. This is the palace that entices but eludes, that beckons but only to those worthy of entrance.¹⁹ At the end of the *Guide* (3:51; Pines, pp. 618–20), Maimonides expresses the search for "truth as it is" in terms of this palace metaphor. It is a long and arduous journey from the entrance to the center, but how great the reward when one reaches the inner court. Maimonides's palace metaphor gives rise to the epithet of the Kabbalists, "sons of the palace,"²⁰ adopted by them from that famous passage in the *Zohar*, which, employing that common motif of Iberian and early Jewish literature, the guarded woman,²¹ places the Torah and the seductive and coquettish princess in the palace's inner court.

For the Torah resembles a beautiful and stately damsel, who is hidden in a secluded chamber of her palace and who has a secret lover, unknown to all others. For love of her he keeps passing the gate of her house, looking this way and that in search of her. She knows that her lover haunts the gate of her house. What does she do? She opens the door of her hidden chamber ever so little, and for a moment reveals her face to her lover, but hides it again forthwith. Were anyone with her lover, he would see nothing and perceive nothing. He alone sees it and he is drawn to her with his heart and soul and his whole being, and he knows that for love of him she disclosed herself to him for one moment, aflame with love for him. So is it with the word of the Torah, which reveals herself only to those who love her. The Torah knows that the mystic [*hakhim libba*, literally, "the wise of heart"] haunts the gate of her house. What does she do? From within her hidden palace she discloses her face and beckons to him and returns forthwith to her place and hides. Those who are there see nothing and know nothing, only he alone, and he is drawn to her with his heart and soul and his whole being. Thus the Torah reveals herself and hides, and goes out in love of her lover and arouses love in him. Come and see: this is the way of the Torah. At first, when she wishes to reveal herself to a man, she gives him a momentary sign. If he understands, well and good; if not, she sends to him and calls him a simpleton. To the messenger she sends to him the Torah says: tell the simpleton to come here that I may speak to him. As it is written (Prov 9:16): "Whoso is simple, let him turn in hither, she saith to him that wanteth understanding." When he 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 (*millin de-bidab*) and that is what is meant by *haggadah*. 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. Such a man is then termed perfect, a "master," that is to say, a "bridegroom of the Torah" in the

strictest sense, the master of the house, to whom she discloses all her secrets, concealing nothing. (*Zohar* 2:99a-b)

It is here that we must pause for a moment, for we in the Occident may not be fully able to appreciate what these particular structures really are. Generally, when we think of palaces, it is to those of Europe that we turn—Windsor, Hampton Court, Vienna, El Escorial, Leningrad, or, one should say, St. Petersburg—these awesome structures with their seemingly interminable corridors opening on to seemingly endless chambers and apartments and serving as cavernous display cases for royal treasures and objects of art intended to dazzle one so privileged as to be permitted to enter. Endless corridors, endless tunnels, endless doors—the palaces known to Kafka,²² the palaces that express the sentiment of their builders and occupants: “I am might, I am power, I stand forever.” Charles V of Spain attempted to build such a palace in Granada to which that odd little Moorish relic they call the Alhambra would serve as an annex to provide comic relief to the awesome dignity of his own. But that “arrogant intrusion,” as Washington Irving called it, was not to be completed. Rather it was the Alhambra itself, that gracious ode in stucco and stone, that was to be the centerpiece not only of Granada but of our story. In marked contrast to the palace of Charles V, which speaks of self-glorification, the Alhambra proclaims a different message. In recurrent arabesques, “open designs without beginning, end, or repose, in pursuit of unattainable being, alternating between ‘inner’ and ‘outer,’” as Américo Castro put it,²³ the Alhambra declares *wa-lā ghālib illa allāh* (“There is no Victorious One but God”),²⁴ and it is indeed toward heaven that the structure, with its star-shaped skylights and its stucco stalagmites, points. But it is the horizontal plane that concerns us here. Here one finds not tedious and monotonous corridors but dramatically arranged courts and chambers, so placed that one beckons to the other or, more properly, the others, for there is generally an option. A passage will lead now to the right, now to the left, now to a cul-de-sac, now to another passage where the whole march begins anew. It is a maze and a labyrinth—not one that discourages but one that entices, as the archways lead one to another, at first perhaps to disappointment, but finally, with persistence, to the princess or the golden apple.²⁵

Thus, the architecture and the literature of Moorish Spain and its satellites go hand in hand.²⁶ In one of his *maqāmāt*,²⁷ or rhymed prose tales, Jacob ben Eleazar, a younger contemporary of Joseph Kimhi, recounts the love of the youth Sahar for his beloved princess Kimah, who is sequestered in just such a labyrinthine palace as we have described. In his desperation, Sahar wanders through the palace, which is described in terms made to

order for a 1930s Hollywood musical stage set. Bebies of lovely maidens try to seduce him but to no avail. He struggles on through rooms walled in with glass flooded with water from behind so that he thinks he is in fact submerged and is drowning. Yet he perseveres. In each chamber, hangings with elegantly written love poems,²⁸ each more tantalizing than the previous, point the way until finally, when he finds himself at the point of desperation, he is led or leads himself to the object of his desire.

The palace, then, is the analogue in the Islamic-Jewish context of the labyrinthine forest or maze of the threshold episodes in Dante and Spenser, which provide the key to what approach one is to take to the text that follows.²⁹ Both the forest and the palace have their dangers, but it is the forward motion, the kinetic force against resistance, the overcoming of the conflict, the resolution of the quest, which are the searcher's salvation,³⁰ for, as the thirteenth-century Spaniard Bahya ben Asher would point out, it is the exoteric which represents darkness while the esoteric is the gem which illumines.³¹ Allegory, then, is not for the casual stroller in the gardens of the palace but for the one who dares to enter and is worthy of entering its portals. It is for the one who is willing to invest the hard labor and energy required, “the great effort at plowing and the need for being goaded. For the metaphor of plowing for the finding of the worthwhile esoteric sense and allegories (*hidot*) has long been widespread: If you had not plowed with my heifer, you had not found out my riddle (*hidab*) (Jud. 14:18). And this is because plowing is an activity which uncovers and lays bare the concealed thing sought after.”³²

Allegory presupposes readers assiduous in interpreting (rather than simply following or responding to) a narrative. The greatest allegories are intransigent and elusive . . . because they are concerned with a highly complex kind of truth, a matter of relationships and process rather than statement. The elusiveness of truth is a measure of its value. . . .³³

To read a text, then, was to seek the truth that eluded, in other words, to practice allegory. For the type of medieval mentality we are surveying, as for certain of today's literary critics, all reading was in some sense *allegoresis*, an allegorical reading.³⁴ Such a reader was literally inundated with allegory, expressed as it was in literature, in art, in architecture, and in homily at divine service, for which, as in Christianity,³⁵ greater or lesser preachers, such as Jacob Anatoli (Italy, thirteenth century), Isaac Arama (Spain, fifteenth century), and Abraham Saba (Portugal and Fez, turn of fifteenth century), prepared their sermons. It is to the types and uses of this all-pervasive *allegoresis* that we now direct our attention.

Fourfold Schemes of Interpretation

The polysemous nature of Scripture was long accepted in Judaism. Tradition spoke of "seventy faces (panim) of the Torah,"³⁶ the concept of "faces" (*wujūh*) being found in Islamic exegesis as well.³⁷ On the Christian side, one of the loveliest images was that of John Scotus Erigena, who noted that "the sense of the divine utterances is manifold and infinite, just as in one single feather of the peacock one sees a marvelous and beautiful variety of innumerable colors" (*De Div. Nat.* 4:5, *PL* 122: 749). This acceptance of polysemy would make allegory possible for "the language of allegory makes relationships significant by extending the original identities of which they are composed with as many clusters of meanings as the traffic of the dominant idea will bear."³⁸ In Christianity, this polysemy had long been formalized into a system: the four senses of Scripture.³⁹ In Judaism, this crystallization took place in several texts that appeared in Spain in the latter half of the thirteenth century. We have already seen this description of a fourfold sense in the passage from the *Zohar* cited earlier in this paper, and Bahya ben Asher, the exegete and homilist, took a similar approach in his Torah commentary. There he lists "the way of *pesbat*" or, for want of a better term, the plain sense; the "way of *midrash*" or the rabbinic hermeneutic; "the way of reason" or philosophical interpretation; and "the Lord's way" or "the way of truth," which is the kabbalistic interpretation (Introduction to Torah commentary). The system soon formally received the name of *pardes*, an acronym for *pesbat*, *remez* (literally, "allusion" or philosophical allegory), *derashah*, and *sod* or the kabbalistic sense.⁴⁰ Whether there is a historical association between the Christian and Jewish quadruplex systems, an association already made by Pico della Mirandola,⁴¹ has been a subject of some debate.⁴² One point about it, however, should be made clear: the four senses of Christianity are not those of Judaism. The former received a variety of names, but most commonly they were termed literal, allegorical, moral or tropological, and anagogical. One of the best known and clearest formulations is that of Dante in his Epistle to Can Grande:

For the better illustration of this method of exposition we may apply it to the following verses: "When Israel went out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language; Judah was his sanctuary, and Israel his dominion" (Ps 114:1-2). For if we consider the letter alone, the thing signified to us is the going out of the children of Israel from Egypt in the time of Moses; if the allegory, our redemption through Christ is signified; if the moral sense, the conversion of the soul from the sorrow and misery of sin

to a state of grace is signified; if the anagogical, the passing of the sanctified soul from the bondage of the corruption of this world to the liberty of everlasting glory is signified.⁴³

If we examine these four senses, we find that the "letter" could indeed correspond to the Jewish *pesbat*. Yet the allegory meant here is typology, and although, as we have seen above, typology is not altogether alien to Jewish exegesis and although philosophical allegory is not entirely absent from medieval Christian exegesis,⁴⁴ Dante's allegory is not our *remez*. To be sure, moral exegesis of Scripture was part and parcel of Jewish interpretation, and, to take one example: Levi ben Gerson (Gersonides, Provence, fourteenth century) established a formal system of *to'aliyyot* (i.e., the Aristotelian *utilitas*) *middiyyot* (moral lessons)⁴⁵ in his biblical commentaries. Moral homilies go back, of course, to the midrash and rabbinic literature—one of the most remarkable being that cited in Maimonides's *Guide* (3:43), in which the verse "You shall have a paddle upon your weapon (*'aznekha*)" (Deut 23:14) is explained: "Do not read *'aznekha* but *'oznekha* your ear [the Hebrew consonantal spelling is the same in both words]. This teaches us that whenever a man hears a reprehensible thing, he should put his finger into his ear" (*b. Ket.* 15a). Yet although so much of rabbinic *derashah* is moral, it does deal with other categories, and moral interpretations can be found beyond the confines of rabbinic homily. The anagogical too is not unknown to Jewish exegesis. As an example, the *Zohar* interprets the "legalistic" passage "If a man sell his daughter to be a maid-servant, she shall not go out as the manservants do" (Exod 21:7) in terms of redemption of the soul, that is, leaving this world not as a slave, laden within sin, but pure (*Zohar* 2:94b). The redemption of the soul after death is dealt with at length in an elegant fashion in Abraham Saba's *'Eshkol ha-kofer* on Esther (Drohobycz, 1903, pp. 46-58), where Mordecai (*marei dakhya*, "pure myrrh") is taken to refer to the pure body and Esther represents the hidden (*nisteret*) soul after death. The twelve months during which the soul is purified are indicated by the twelve months during which each maiden had to wait to be allowed into the presence of the King (God) after their purification. Yet though the redemption of the soul is certainly a central concern of the Kabbalah, it is not all of it, and the equation of anagogy and *sod* will not work. In terms of content then, *pardes* is not the fourfold Christian system.⁴⁶ The question of the development of the fourfold system needs further investigation. For the present, one might be inclined to go along with the coy, jocularly serious or earnestly humorous Abraham Ibn Ezra (twelfth century, Spain) who likened the four senses of Scripture to the four functions of the nose—to ventilate the brain, to drain

it of mucus, to smell, and to improve one's appearance.⁴⁷

Whatever the historical development be,⁴⁸ our principal concern is with the two categories of *remez* (philosophical *allegoresis*) and *sod* (kabbalistic interpretation), which we have chosen to treat together under the category of esoteric interpretation. Although such joint treatment has not been at all conventional, we hope that it will be justified in the course of this essay.

Motivations for Allegorization

Not all biblical texts lent themselves equally to esoteric interpretation. Some were obvious candidates: Proverbs, with its Hebrew title of *mishlei* ("parables") and its reference to the "words of the sages and their enigmas (*hidot*)," the most obscure kind of allegory⁴⁹—according to such diverse philologists as the turn-of-the-seventh-century bishop Isidore of Seville (*Etym.* 1.37.26) and the thirteenth-century Narbonne exegete David Kimhi (*Commentary* on Ezek 17:2; cf. Maimonides, *Guide*, introduction; Pines, p. 13)—and with its references to wayward and virtuous women and to wisdom's building her seven-pillared house, crying aloud at the street-corners, was a favorite with the philosophical allegorists. Recurrent in such commentaries is the notion that Proverbs is to be understood on two levels—one exoteric, that is, as a book of practical wisdom, and one esoteric, as intended only for the elite, for it is the elite, and only they, who not only will benefit from the inner meaning but also will not be harmed by its exposure to it. For the unprepared or incapable, examination of the inner sense will not be salutary but, moreover, will be harmful. That the truth must be kept from dolts was a common theme among practitioners of allegory and *allegoresis* throughout the centuries. As George Chapman, a post-Elizabethan allegorist, would later put it, "Learning hath delighted . . . to hide her selfe from the base and profane Vulgare."⁵⁰ Maimonides made clear that the Torah speaks in the language of human beings (*b. Yeb.* 71a; *b. B. Mes.* 31b) in order to make it "possible for the young, the women, and all the people to begin with it and to learn it. Now it is not within their power to understand these matters as they truly are" (*Guide* 1:33; Pines, p. 71). Thus "it behooves to explain the matter to those whose souls grasp at human perfection and, by dint of expatiating a little on the point in question just as we have done, to put an end to the fantasies that come to them from the age of infancy" (*Guide* 1:36; p. 57).

Maimonides's spiritual disciple, Zerahiah ben Isaac ben Shealtiel Hen of thirteenth-century Barcelona, writing in Rome, expresses these sentiments more explicitly in the prologue to his commentary on Proverbs:

My intention in this work is to explain the Proverbs of Solomon after the fashion of science and inward speculation (*ha-'iyyun ha-penimi*) everywhere that understanding according to science or an esoteric explanation is called for. . . .

Now this book . . . has three functions. The first is to refer to matters which have an explicit benefit for the masses . . . and their behavior and interaction. The second . . . is to explain ethical matters of which their exoteric sense has an explicit benefit for the masses and their esoteric sense contains matters which are to be understood according to one's intellect and comprehension. The third, . . . which is the ultimate, is to allude to esoteric matters which are therapeutic for the sick soul and a benefit for the wise soul and its virtues in exalted divine matters. And because by their nature these matters are esoteric and concealed from the masses, and *because the natures of most people are not receptive to them and their intellects cannot cope with them*, King Solomon was forced to conceal them and assumed that whoever was disposed to understand that which he concealed would do so with a slight hint.⁵¹

According to Rabbi Zerahiah, then, Solomon's writing in allegory was protective, protective for the masses who simply could not cope with such subtle thoughts but protective as well for the esoteric teachings themselves lest they be misinterpreted by those unsuited for them. The *Zohar* goes so far as to explain the rebellion of the generation of the Tower of Babel by the suggestion that God revealed the secrets of esoteric wisdom to the world and they were immediately misinterpreted and misemployed. Not only Adam and Noah but also Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob failed to grasp them properly. It was only Moses who succeeded in understanding them (*Zohar* 1:75b–76a).

According to Samuel Ibn Tibbon's somewhat more sophisticated historicizing theory of protective camouflaging of the esoteric, there was a gradual reduction of the concealment of philosophical truths over the ages. Moses, writing the Torah for a people under the direct influence of a pagan and materialistic world, left certain philosophical truths well hidden lest they be perverted by the masses. In the course of time, David and Solomon (Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs) could be more relaxed, even though contemporary pagan influences prevented them from revealing the truth openly:

Moses . . . had to conceal many beliefs and to present them as something other than they were. . . . Now whereas he did conceal them from the multitude and showed them to be different from what they were, he undoubtedly transmitted them orally to Joshua and to the seventy elders together with the rest of the oral Torah. He also alluded to many to let the wise know about them in their proper place, . . . until David and Solomon came and added hints to those secrets, once they saw the need to conceal them had lessened.⁵²

Yet other motivations for allegorization are expressed in the context of commentaries on the Song of Songs. This book had been considered problematic since rabbinic times (*m. Yad.* 3:5) because of its blatantly erotic and sensuous surface meaning. The rabbis therefore warned: "He who recites a verse of the Song of Songs and treats it as a [secular] air . . . brings evil into the world, for the Torah puts on sackcloth, appears before God and complains: Your children have made of me a fiddle played by scoffers" (*b. Sanh.* 101a). Yet it was precisely because of its unlikely sacrality⁵³ that the Song of Songs was to play second fiddle to no other biblical book and was eagerly embraced by philosophers and Kabbalists alike in a rich variety of esoteric interpretations. Commentaries as diverse as that of Ezra of Gerona in the twelfth century and that pseudo-Joseph Kimhi bewail those who take the book as a love song.⁵⁴ Yet it was just that aspect which Ezra's contemporary, the rationalist North African Judah ben Joseph Ibn Aknin, saw as positive. Similar to the sentiments expressed in the context of Don Vidal Benvenist's *Epher and Dinah* is Ibn Aknin's idea that Solomon's writing in an appealing, belletristic style "was to make it attractive to the masses".⁵⁵

and when they became a little more learned they would reflect that it cannot be thought of the like of him that he intended the exoteric sense of the huk of the words . . . , and those that followed him . . . placed it in the biblical canon and esteemed it more than their own words . . . and urged people to study it for it contains exalted secrets and they would thus be prompted to investigate [them]. . . . *For this is the way of the Indians in the book they called Kalila wa-Dimna* [a cycle of fables that originated in India and was widely circulated in medieval Europe]. *They spoke in fables in the form of discussions between animals and birds and went as far as to decorate it with illustrations so that the masses would run and savor its wisdom and take pleasure in it until their intellect strengthens*⁵⁶ and would examine and find the insights and wisdom bound within.⁵⁷

With a book like Song of Songs then, *allegorēsis* has a redemptive quality,⁵⁸ for it redeems it from embarrassment in the face of possible misinterpreters and scoffers. Indeed, there is an additional dimension here. A number of early Christian theologians had rejected the sacred character of Song of Songs, but, as part of the canon, it was taken as an allegory of the love of Christ for the church and was made part and parcel of the christological heritage.⁵⁹ Islam, however, had no such vested interest, and a Muslim, whose religion so prided itself on the sublimity and incomparability of the Qur'an, could well wonder at the inclusion of the Song of Songs in a collection of sacred writings. Indeed, Ibn Aknin relates a charming story in which he

shows how *allegorēsis* saved the prestige of Judaism in the face of a rival religion.

The physician Abu-l-Hasan ben Kamniel related . . . : I visited the Almora-
vide King and found a Jewish physician with him . . . who was explaining the
Song of Songs according to its exoteric sense as a love song. I rebuked the
physician and condemned him before the king and said . . . : "This man is a
stupid ignoramus and knows nothing of our Torah . . . [I then explained that
the text was an allegory] and I convinced the king of this and explained its
meaning and purpose to him . . . and disembarassed him of the feeling of
contempt which that blithering ignoramus of a physician had prompted in
him. . . . In this incident, God's name was sanctified."⁶⁰

If Song of Songs was considered to be problematic because of its erotic character, the narratives (as opposed to the laws) of the Torah were considered to be no less so for other reasons. Some of these narratives, like the story of the fall replete with talking serpent, were considered to be perhaps a bit taxing on one's credulity. There were Jewish Celsuses, too, who considered such things old wives' tales.⁶¹ Some things might well have happened, as Scripture states,⁶² but they are recounted primarily to provide the foundation for a more sophisticated superstructure. Other things, such as the tales of the patriarchs—like, as we shall see, many rabbinic *aggadot*⁶³—were considered by some to be frankly rather trivial and less than worthy of a divine revelation. Rabbi Azriel of Gerona, on the evidence of *b. Hul.* 60b, reiterates that "there are passages in the Torah and Scriptures which would appear worthy of being burnt to those who do not know their real interpretation" (*Perush ha-'aggadot*, p. 37).⁶⁴ And so, as C. S. Lewis observed, esoteric interpretation, as "the most obvious way of turning primitive documents to meet the ethical or polemical demands of the moment,"⁶⁵ moved in. Surely one of the most daring expressions of this attitude is a passage found in the *Zohar* (3:152a), which merits citation here in full:

Rabbi Simeon said: Alas for the man who regards the Torah as a book of mere tales and profane matters. If this were so, we might even today write a Torah dealing in such matters and still more excellent. In regard to earthly things, the kings and princes of the world possess more valuable materials. We could use them as a model for composing a Torah of this kind. But in reality the words of the Torah are higher words and higher mysteries. When even the angels come down into the world [to fulfill a mission], they don the garment of this world, and if they did not, they could not survive in this world and the world could not endure them. And if this is true even of the angels, how much truer it is of the Torah, with which He created them and all the worlds and through which they all subsist. When she descends into the world, how could the world endure it if she did not don earthly garments?

If anyone should suppose that the Torah herself is this garment and nothing else, let him give up the ghost. Such a man will have no share in the world to come. That is why David (Ps 119:18) said: "Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy Torah," namely, that which is beneath the garment of the Torah. Come and behold: there are garments that everyone sees, and when fools see a man in a garment that seems beautiful to them, they do not look more closely. But more important than the garment is the body, and more important than the body is the soul. So likewise the Torah has a body, which consists of the commandments and ordinances of the Torah, which are called *gufei torah*, "bodies of the Torah." This body is cloaked in garments, which consist of wordly stories.⁶⁶ Fools see only the garment, which is the narrative part of the Torah; they know no more and fail to see what is under the garment. Those who know more see not only the garment but also the body that is under the garment. But the truly wise, the servants of the Supreme King, those who stood at the foot of Mount Sinai, look only upon the soul, which is the true foundation of the entire Torah, and one day indeed it will be given them to behold the innermost soul of the Torah.

Thus, the truly wise, that is, the mystic, will perceive not only the inner meaning but will one day, in this life or the next, attain an innermost ultimate understanding. It is then that he will realize that if he finds anything in the Torah that appears vacuous, it is only because of a deficiency within him,⁶⁷ that nothing is superfluous,⁶⁸ that the driest genealogical and geographical lists are redolent of supernal wisdom for "there is no difference between the [list of] captains of Esau and the Ten Commandments for it is all one entity and one structure" and that "Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai would expound three hundred *halakhot* through the mystery of supernal wisdom on the verse 'And the name of his wife was Mehetabel the daughter of Matred the daughter of Me-zahav (Gen 36:39)'" (*Zohar Hadash* 12d).⁶⁹ Nor was it only the mystics who spoke so. Even the alleged archrationalist Levi ben Abraham ben Hayyim, the scapegoat of the Maimonidean controversy of 1304–1305, expressed essentially the same notion using precisely the same verses.⁷⁰

Concerning other texts, of course, little apology was necessary. The first chapters of Genesis and of Ezekiel were believed to contain esoteric teachings from rabbinic times. The rabbis (*b. Hag.* 11b) and the medieval Kabbalists treated these texts, the *ma'aseh bereshit* ("work of creation") and the *ma'aseh merkavah* ("work of the chariot") as repositories of mystical lore, while the medieval rationalists, Maimonides foremost among them (e.g., *Guide*, introduction; Pines, p. 6), took them as referring to natural science and metaphysics respectively. Thus, Joseph Kimhi's son, David, a staunch Maimonidean but one who practiced restraint in the composition of allegorical commentaries, allowed himself free rein in his "secret" commentaries

on these texts. In the Hexaemeron commentary, the Garden of Eden represents the active intellect and the tree of life the human intellect, while the tree of knowledge of good and evil symbolizes the material intellect. The virtuous human intellect strives toward the active intellect by pursuing the divine sciences, while the material intellect languishes because of its material lusts. In the same fashion, the roles of the cast of human characters are spelled out: Cain, the materialist agriculturalist, was devoid of intellectual attainments; Abel, who hungered after luxuries, was potentially more intelligent but allowed his intellect to go to waste; Seth, who was born of another woman (for Eve had returned to her source), ate from the tree of life, and was "good seed," shared the human intellect with Adam and was the true founder of humanity. The esoteric Ezekiel commentary, inspired by Maimonides, goes into elaborate detail concerning the creatures, the wheels, the four faces, the rider, and so forth in order to explain "this obscure vision . . . and incomprehensible utterance" (*Commentary on Ezekiel*, introduction).⁷¹

The Appropriateness of *Allegorēsis* in a Biblical Commentary

Exegetical gymnastics such as these raised the question of the place of *allegorēsis* in a biblical commentary. Joseph Kimhi, for example, interprets Prov 9:1, "Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn out her seven pillars," as referring to "the seven cognitive capacities by which man knows the Creator of the world and all that is in it. They are the five senses in man and two which are not physical—the reports of informants and the science of deductive reasoning. . . ." ⁷² In other words, he reads a medieval epistemological theory into the scriptural text. Yet when his son, David—who, as we recall, did not shrink from writing allegorical commentaries on the first chapters of Genesis and Ezekiel and found the "exoteric sense of [the Garden of Eden story] very garbled (*Commentary on Gen 3:1*)—comments on that verse in his own commentary on Proverbs, he avoids any such "modernizing" tendency and instead of citing a philosophical interpretation "reverts" to a midrashic type of comment. If this strikes us as odd, it is odder still that it is not David's last word on the subject. In his relatively lengthy introduction to Psalm 119, he explains Prov 9:1 very much in the same fashion as had his father. In the same way, Rabbi David gives several rationalistic interpretations of Proverbs—which are not found at all in his commentary on Proverbs—in the introduction to his Genesis commen-

"My son, let them not depart from your eyes, keep sound wisdom (*tushiyah*) and thought (*mezimmah*) (Prov 3:22)." . . . "Keep sound wisdom (*tushiyah*)" refers to the exoteric [element] in the secrets of the Torah. The word *tushiyah* is derived from the word *yesh* ["being"], which generally refers to the sensible, and that is the exoteric. And he said *mezimmah* which means "thought" with reference to the esoteric which is understood through ratiocination. He said that one should always guard the exoteric and the esoteric in the Torah in his heart.⁷³

This anomaly may perhaps be clarified by looking at a similar anomaly. In explaining Jer 17:12, Rabbi David remarks:

"The throne of glory, on high from the beginning, the place of our sanctuary." The rabbis referred this to the Temple and said "Seven things were created before the world was created. One of them was the place of the Temple . . ." (Mid. Tehillim 90). They said too that the Temple faces the throne of glory (Gen. R. 49:7). The commentators have followed this approach. In the *Sefer Yezirah* [*Book of Creation*, an early cosmogonic work], it says: "the holy sanctuary is set in the middle" (*Sefer Yezirah* 4:3). I have dealt with this at length in my commentary on Psalms.

Indeed we find such an esoteric explanation in Kimhi's comment on Ps 132:2. The reason for this exegetical displacement is alluded to in the continuation of the preceding passage from the Jeremiah commentary: "[*The esoteric explanation*] is good but it is not connected to the preceding or following verses." And again at Jer 9:23, he cites Maimonides's rationalistic explanation (*Guide* 3:54) with approval, finding it "fitting" but "not related to the context." His function on the other hand is clear: "I have clearly explained these two verses for you according to the subject of the chapter in relation to the context." Kimhi's purpose thus becomes evident. In the introduction to his commentary on Proverbs he notes:

When I considered the various biblical commentaries and I examined all that my wise predecessors expounded, . . . I found that everyone had his own opinion concerning the Book of Proverbs and this confused the mass of people. Some of the exegetes say that Solomon likened the Torah to a beautiful wise woman and idolatry to a wicked alien woman. Some explained that he likened matter to the harlot and the intellectual form to the good and wise woman. They all cite proofs to confirm their opinions.⁷⁴

Kimhi believed—like Maimonides, like Jacob Anatoli,⁷⁵ like a host of others—that Solomon wrote this book with two intents, one esoteric and one exoteric, one philosophical and the other practical. In explicating "the lovely hind and graceful doe" of Prov 5:19, he hedges: "Rabbi Jonah [Ibn Janah] explained it allegorically as referring to wisdom. It is possible that

the author of the book wrote it with two intents in mind but it is probable that he spoke about the woman." Yet at Prov 5:3 he openly admits: "There is another meaning to this parable but we shall explain it only according to its plain sense."⁷⁶

To explain "according to its plain sense" was considered, then, to be at the root of the scientific exegetical enterprise. Scripture can and should be understood according to its esoteric sense: one should go beyond the silver tracteries to perceive the golden apple. But that is the task of the philosopher and rationalist investigator. The primary responsibility of exegete as exegete is not to reveal what God or the inspired authors did not choose to reveal openly but only to clarify the immediate message of their words. When one takes a text out of its context, one may interpret it as one wishes; in context, however, one must remain faithful to its apparent intent.

The Techniques of *Allegorēsis*

Esoteric interpretation was not arbitrary and whimsical. The techniques of *allegorēsis*, whether the philosophical brand or the kabbalistic, were based on textual manipulations made possible by certain attitudes toward language—and in particular, the sacred language, that of Scripture.

Allegorical narrative and allegoresis both respond to the linguistic context; in those periods when language is felt to be a numinous object in its own right, allegorical criticism and allegorical narrative will both appear, the one focusing on the manipulations the reader can make with a text and the other creating a text designed to manipulate the reader.⁷⁷

And in the low Middle Ages, that great and golden age of allegory, such a conception of the numinous quality of language was not lacking. The often quoted kabbalistic tradition cited by Nahmanides states:

The entire Torah consists of the names of God and . . . the words we read can be divided in a very different way, so as to form [esoteric] names. . . . The statement in the *aggadah* to the effect that the Torah was originally written with black fire on white fire (*y. Sheq.* 6:1) obviously confirms our opinion that the writing was continuous, without division into words, which made it possible to read it either as a sequence of [esoteric] names or in the traditional way as history and commandments. Thus the Torah as given to Moses was divided into words in such a way as to be read as divine commandments. But at the same time he received the oral tradition, according to which it was to be read as a sequence of names.

The question of the magical uses of this theory aside,⁷⁹ it laid the foundation for such manipulation of the text as follows. Mentioning Rashi's interpretation of the first three words of Genesis, *be-reshit bara Elohim*, as "at the

beginning of God's creation" (NJV: "When God began to create . . ."), Nahmanides adds an interpretation according to the "way of truth," that is, the Kabbalah, according to which the second *sefirah* (*hokhmah*) emanated (*bara*) the third *sefirah* (*elohim*). Each *sefirah* in the kabbalistic systems of exegesis is assigned one or more divine names as well as a plethora of epithets and cognomens which make the biblical text a network of allusions to what transpires in the world of the *sefirot*, to be deciphered by those who know the code. But these allusions and this system of code words were supplemented by a very fundamental technique in interpretation of this sort—paronomasia, or plays on words.⁸⁰ This was, of course, hardly an innovation in Jewish literature, for it was one of the pillars of rabbinic hermeneutics and midrash. Yet it was turned to good use in the new medieval kabbalistic midrash. For example, continuing the creation account, the *Zohar* relates:

"And Melchizedek the King of Salem (*shalem*) brought out bread and wine" (Gen 14:18). Rabbi Simeon began his discourse: "In Salem (*shalem*) also is set his tabernacle," etc. (Ps 76:3). Come and see: when the Holy One, blessed be He, desired to create the world, he drew a flame (the *sefirah gevurah*) from the scintilla of darkness (here apparently the *sefirah binah*) and blew one spark against the other: it dimmed and then glowed, and He drew from the depths (the *sefirah hokhmah*) one drop (the *sefirah hesed*) and joined them together and through them created the world. The flame (*gevurah*) rose and ensconced itself on the left and the drop (*hesed*) rose and ensconced itself on the right, they being intermeshed and entangled, ascending and descending [in disharmony]. A current of wholeness (*shalim*, i.e., the *sefirah tif'eret*) went forth and immediately both sides became one. [*Tif'eret*] resided between them [*hesed* and *gevurah*] and they were bound with each other. Then was there peace (*shelam*) above and peace below and the ladder [the *sefirot*] was firm. . . . Then "Melchizedek was the King of Salem," the King of Salem, to be sure, the king who governs in wholeness (*bi-shelemu*). (*Zohar* 1:86b-87a)

Thus, a temporary disarray in the creation of the "sefirotic" world is resolved with the creation of *tif'eret*, so that the Holy One, blessed be He, is the King of Salem (*shalem*) who brings peace (*shelam*) and wholeness (*shelemu*) to the world.

But it was not only the Kabbalah that employed paronomasia; philosophical allegory made extensive use of it as well. Thus, in explaining the meaning of the book of Job, Maimonides plays on the name of Job's homeland, Uz, pointing out that among other things it is the imperative of the verb 'uz: "It is as if [Scripture] said to you: 'Meditate and reflect on this parable, grasp its meaning, and see what the true opinion is'" (*Guide* 3:22). Thus, the exhortation to scrutinize the book of Job for its true message is alluded to in an apparently incidental reference to a place name.

The use of paronomasia was limited only by the philological (or pseudo-philological) ingenuity of the writer. To one post-Maimonidean, the sons of Leah symbolized the senses, since one of the sons of Dan is called Hushim (Hebrew: *hushim*, "senses"). In this way, Reuben is sight (*re'ut*), Simeon (*Shim'on*) hearing (*shema'*), and so forth,⁸¹ an approach not all that different from that of the early Christians who saw Simon of Cyrene as representing the five senses because he came from the Lybian Pentapolis!⁸² Joseph Ibn Kaspi (Provence, turn of the fourteenth century), who was generally, although not absolutely, disinclined from allegory,⁸³ interpreted the cherubim (*keruvim*) as the separate intellects who are "mounted (*rekhuvim*) on stones of fire."⁸⁴ Isaac Arama, the fifteenth-century Spanish homilist, takes Abraham's saddling his ass (*wa-yahavosh 'et hamoro*, Gen 22:3) to refer to the subduing of his material component (*kevishat be-heleq ha-homri*),⁸⁵ and Isaac ben Yedaiah, in his commentary on the *aggadot*, even interprets Zion (*ziyyon*) as "the intellectual signification (*ha-ziyyun*) . . . that is in man."⁸⁶

A second important technique was the use of stock metaphors. As we have seen, harking back to ancient allegorical traditions, male and female were standard representations of matter and form;⁸⁷ water, which according to rabbinic tradition represented Torah, now could refer to philosophical wisdom;⁸⁸ "evil waters" (Ps 124:5), by association with Christian baptism, alluded to apostasy⁸⁹ or, as in the flood story, the waters of sin, against which one is protected by an ark of good deeds with three levels representing mathematics, physics, metaphysics,⁹⁰ and so forth. Although this was seldom developed into a full-fledged formalized system, as it was in the *aggadic allegorèsis* of Isaac ben Yedaiah, its traces were clearly marked.

Yet it was not only the words and letters of the sacred text which were vehicles of esoteric interpretation; it was the numbers as well. As M.-D. Chenu has observed: "Numbers were like the thoughts of God, and in decoding their meaning one discovered the secret of a world whose harmony derived from 'measure and number and weight' (Wisdom 11:20)."⁹¹ Numerical manipulations in the form of *gematria* and other techniques were integral elements of early rabbinic exegesis as well, but the Middle Ages developed numerical interpretation in elaborate schemes designed to reveal the mysteries of the universe. The interpretation of the four rivers of Eden, which had its origin in the allegorization of the Eden story by Solomon Ibn Gabirol quoted by Abraham Ibn Ezra, was oft repeated.⁹² But this is trivial compared with David Kimhi's almost encyclopedic listing of the meaning of the number four in Ezekiel 1 in his esoteric commentary on that chapter.

[It refers to] . . . the four elements from which the lower world was formed and the world of the four species: mineral, vegetable, animal, and rational. The great luminaries which direct the lower worlds move in fours, for the sun moves in its course through the four seasons of the year and the moon in four phases in a month. The day is divided into four periods against the four elements. Similarly the animal and vegetable kingdoms are in fours. . . . In a like fashion, the government of the microcosm is related to the number four for the governors of the human body are four: the nutritive, the sensitive, the imaginative, and the appetitive. The nutritive is divided into four faculties: the ingestive, the retentive, the digestive, and the eliminative, with the four qualities: heat, cold, dryness and humidity. Item, the four humors through which the body is maintained: blood, white gall, red gall, and black gall. Item, the four prime problems: existence, what, how, and why . . . and four is the first perfect square. Again $1+2+3+4$ is equal to ten. . . .⁹³

But if this listing presumed to be exhaustive—as it is unquestionably exhausting—other numerical symbolical references taxed one's energy by taxing one's wit, for some ingenuity had to be used in deciphering them. Thus, the *Zohar* tells us that on the Sabbath, "the Torah is crowned in perfect crowns, on this day the [sound of] joy and delectation is heard in 250 worlds" (*Zohar* 2:88b). It is hardly obvious that the number 250 refers to the 248 limbs⁹⁴ of the *shekhinah*, the *sefirah malkhut*, who is embracing in dance the two *sefirot*, *hesed* and *gevurah*—thus 250.

The examples adduced here are perhaps extreme and indeed are deliberately chosen in order to put into relief the kind of approach taken. This does not mean, though, that esoteric interpretation, especially philosophical *allegorēsis*, did not have its rules. One of the earliest pronouncements on the limits of "nonliteral" interpretation was that of the tenth-century Iraqi scholar, Saadya Gaon, whose statement has become a classic:

We, the congregation of Israelites, accept in its literal sense and its universally recognized meaning whatever is recorded in the books of God that have been transmitted to us. The only exceptions to this rule are those instances in which the generally recognized and usual rendering would lead to one of the four [following] results: either (a) the contradiction of the observation of the senses . . . ; or (b) the contravention of reason . . . ; or (c) a conflict with some other Scriptural utterance; or finally, (d) a conflict with what has been transmitted by rabbinic tradition. . . . Now the method of interpretation to be adopted in these exceptional cases is to look for a rendering of the expressions [that are in doubt], which would be permissible in the usages of the Hebrew language and would make it possible for the contradictions to be reconciled.⁹⁵

This statement is of course intended to a great extent to deal with the problem of anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms, that is, individual metaphors, rather than the extended metaphor which is allegory as well as

certain very specific problems, although allegory is by no means excluded. Yet it was the spirit of this statement that kept a check on what was to be allegorized not only by him but by Abraham Ibn Ezra.⁹⁶ It was really not until the generations of Maimonides and the post-Maimonideans that esoteric interpretation among the philosophers was used not only for limited, apologetic purposes but also, as we have seen, as a natural mode of exegesis. Yet even then *allegorēsis* had, officially at least, its limitations. And if, in Goethe's felicitous phrase, "it is in his restraint that the master reveals himself," Maimonides once again proved himself the master. Although Maimonides clearly approved of *allegorēsis*, he used it only to a very limited extent in the *Guide*—and where he did do so he indicated that there was a certain artistry in esoteric exegesis. When a passage is selected for *allegorēsis*, not every word has to be exploited. As Spenser warned in the preface to the *Faerie Queene*: "Many adventures are intermeddled rather as Accidents than intendments."⁹⁷ Thus, in the introduction to the *Guide*, Maimonides advises that there are two kinds of prophetic parables.

In some of these parables each word has a meaning, while in others the parable as a whole indicates the whole of the intended meaning. In such a parable very many words are to be found, not every one of which adds something to the intended meaning. They serve rather to embellish the parable and to render it more coherent or to conceal further the intended meaning, hence the speech proceeds in such a way as to accord with everything required by the parable's external meaning. Understand this well. (Pines, p. 12)

As an example of the first kind, Maimonides cites Gen 28:12–13, the account of Jacob's ladder; as an example of the second, Prov 7:6–21, the story of the harlot. Explaining that the passage is an allegory in which the harlot represents matter, the cause of all bodily pleasures, against the pursuit of which one is warned, Maimonides insists that certain phrases are completely tangential to the narrative.

What can be submitted for the words, "*Sacrifices of peace-offerings were due from me, this day have I paid my vows*" (7:14). What subject is indicated by the words, "*I have decked my couch with coverlets?*" (7:16) And what subject is added to the general propositions by the words, "*For my husband is not at home?*" (7:19)

He warns then:

[When the reader] find[s] in some chapter of this Treatise I have explained the meaning of a parable and have drawn your attention to the general proposition signified by it, you should not inquire into all the details occurring in the parable, nor should you wish to find significations corresponding to

them. For doing so would lead you into one of two ways: either into turning aside from the parable's intended subject, or into assuming an obligation to interpret things not susceptible of interpretation and that have not been ingested with a view to interpretation. (*Guide*, introduction; Pines, p. 14)

These, of course, are the words of a master, of one who knew how to practice restraint, of one who knew how not to outdo himself. And indeed, on these verses, where the master gave guidance, the disciples followed, although elsewhere they might be less discreet and judicious. In this way, Zerachiah Hen in his rather lengthy commentary on Proverbs was faithful to the master and refrained from explicating three verses in Proverbs 7 which Maimonides considered decorative, although he was prolix on the others; whereas Immanuel of Rome singled these verses out as coming only to flesh out the chapter.⁹⁸

Samuel Ibn Tibbon saw another reason for this sort of literary "padding." Connecting it with the Maimonidean style of esoteric writing, in which the truth is hidden in a web of repetition and contradiction in order to conceal it from the masses, he states:

This is the way of concealment used by Ecclesiastes in his book in order to make his rhetoric more difficult, by the use of equivocity, by both dropping and adding necessary connections [between themes] and this makes it possible for someone to interpret in a way counter to the intended interpretation . . . but the man of understanding will understand. . . . It should not occur to you that [Ecclesiastes] is needlessly repetitious. . . . Any time he repeats himself or appears to contradict himself he does it intentionally, and the intelligent reader will understand what he wanted to innovate by this repetition, and which of the two contradictory teachings is the truth which the author wishes to communicate.⁹⁹

Again then, deliberate obfuscation helps draw the ways of the labyrinthine maze from which the adept must seek to extricate himself.

Allegorical Interpretation of Rabbinic Literature

The problems encountered by medieval Judaism in reading the Bible were to be no less severe when it came to interpreting rabbinic midrash, especially the *aggadah* or nonlegal material. It was once again not just a question of individual anthropomorphic or anthropopathic phrases but of entire passages—passages that were the products of an essentially oriental literature, couched in the language and painted in the colors of the oriental imagination, which were now to be read by those who professed—with the rise of Islam, the absorption of Greek culture, and the translation of Judaism to Western Europe—an occidental religion. In his *Kuzari*, the

twelfth-century Andalusian thinker, Judah Halevi, raises this problem in the imaginary dialogue between a Jewish sage and the king of the Khazar nation, who had just converted to Judaism and was receiving instruction in his new religion. The sage admits that there may indeed be many a thing in rabbinic literature "which is considered less attractive today," but "was held proper in those days." Taking the opening, the king indeed notes that "the application of such verses once for legal deductions, another time for homiletic purposes, does not tally with their real meaning. Their *aggadot* and tales are often against reason." The sage advises that rather than consider the rabbis deficient in the art of dialectic, one must take the apparently difficult *aggadot* either "as basis and introduction for explanations and injunctions" in the case of the anthropomorphic and anthropopathic *aggadot* or the "tales of visions and spirits, a matter which is not strange in such pious men." Others are clearly esoteric "parables employed to express mysterious teachings which were not to be made public. For they are of no use to the masses and were handed over to a few select persons for research and investigation, if a proper person suitable—one in an age, or in several—could be found. Other sayings appear senseless on the face of them, but that they have their meaning, becomes apparent after but a little reflection" (emphasis added).

The *aggadot*, then, are not to be taken lightly, for, like certain biblical passages, they are reserved for a limited elite. As an example, Halevi cites a passage from *b. Pes.* 54b and *b. Ned.* 39b:

"Seven things were created prior to the world: Paradise, the Torah, the just, Israel, the throne of glory, Jerusalem, and the Messiah, the son of David." This is similar to the saying of some philosophers: "The primary thought includes the final deed." It was the object of divine wisdom in the creation of the world to create the Torah, which was the essence of wisdom, and whose bearers are the just, among whom stands the throne of glory and the truly righteous, who are the most select, viz. Israel, and the proper place for them was Jerusalem, and only the best of men, viz. the Messiah, son of David, could be associated with them, and they all entered Paradise. Figuratively speaking, one must assume that they were created prior to the world. (*Kuzari* 3:67–73).¹⁰⁰

Thus, the difficult passages are to be taken as allegories and metaphors. Maimonides formalizes this principle by categorizing in several places three approaches to *aggadah*, two erroneous and one correct. Two classes take the words of the *aggadah* literally: one accepts them at face value and imagines that the sages "have said these things in order to explain the meaning of the text in question," and the other "holds the [*midrashim*] in slight esteem and holds them up to ridicule, since it is clear and manifest that this is not the

meaning of the biblical text in question." The fundamentalist "first class strives and fights with a view to proving, as they deem, the correctness of the *midrashim* and to defending them and think that this is the true meaning of the [biblical] text and that the *midrashim* have the same status as the traditional legal decisions." But both classes are gravely in error, for literalism can lead only to blind fundamentalism, on the one hand, or mocking rejection on the other. What both groups must realize is that the *aggadot* "have the character of poetical conceits whose meaning is not obscure for someone endowed with understanding. At that time this method was generally known and used by everybody, just as the poets use poetical expressions." To illustrate this, Maimonides cites the *aggadah* from *b. Ket.* 15a (quoted above) which plays on Deut 23:14, according to which the command to have a paddle (*yated*) on one's weapon (*'aznekha*) is interpreted as a moral homily according to which one should plug one's ear (*'oznekha*) on hearing something reprehensible. Maimonides rails:

Would that I knew whether, in the opinion of these ignoramuses, this tannaite believed this to be the interpretation of the text, that such was the purpose of this commandment. . . . I do not think that anyone of sound intellect will be of this opinion. But this is a most witty poetical conceit by means of which he instills a noble moral quality . . . and he props it up through a reference to a [biblical] text, as is done in poetical compositions.¹⁰¹

Although the example brought by Maimonides is not allegorical, the principle is established. As Judah Halevi put it, the biblical text is a fulcrum on which the true meaning of the parable turns. Although he himself would not, as a rule, allegorize the *aggadah*, he most certainly opened the door for others to do so.¹⁰² His rather limited expositions would be developed by a wide variety of writers into interpretations such as the following explication of an apparently fanciful passage from *b. Baba Batra* 75a by Shem Tov ben Isaac Shaprut:

Rabbah stated in the name of . . . R. Johanan: The Holy One, blessed be He, will in time to come make a tabernacle for the righteous from the skin of Leviathan; for it is said "Can you fill tabernacles with his skin" (Job 40:31). If a man is worthy, a tabernacle is made for him. If a man is [sufficiently] worthy, a covering is made for him; if he is not worthy [even of this], a necklace is made for him; if he is not worthy [even of this] an amulet is made for him. . . .

Know that the skin (*'or*) alludes to light (*'or*) and emanation which the soul acquires as they said in the *haggadah*: "And the Lord God made . . . garments of skin (*'or*) (Gen 3:21), i.e., garments of light (*'or*)" (*Gen. Rab.* 20:12). The sage clarified for us the purpose of the resurrection of the dead. He said that it is [to enable] man to acquire the perfection which he had not acquired previously because of all extraneous matters which prevent apprehension,

and at the time of the resurrection there will be no tempter (*satan*) or evil affliction and one will be able to apprehend that which he is lacking. He also advised that one should not think that at that time all will be equal for there will be differentiation according to [the degree of] apprehension for there are those who apprehend a great deal and those who apprehend a bit. . . . *Now reader, see how all these haggadot explain great secrets and awesome matters hidden from the eyes of the sages. Praised be God who revealed their intention to us so we could understand their inner meaning.*¹⁰³

Although there would be not a few who, like Ibn Shaprut, would attempt to penetrate the true meaning of the rabbinic dicta, Maimonides, like Judah Halevi, was less than optimistic about the possibility. Whereas the latter saw only "one in an age or in several," Maimonides says that the third class of people, those who truly understand, are so few that they can be considered a class only in the sense that the sun is considered a species.¹⁰⁴ And in principle they were correct, for opposition to *allegorēsis* of the *aggadot* was rife especially during the time of the thirteenth-century Maimonidean controversy. Those who favored esoteric interpretation of the *aggadah* constantly harked back to earlier authorities to establish the legitimacy of their approach—David Kimhi to the Geonim¹⁰⁵ and Yedaiah Ha-Penini of Beziers who argued:

It is not today that we started to allegorize the *haggadot* . . . and understand them in a manner other than their exoteric sense. I will say that we are not only permitted to do so but that we are commanded by the master of blessed memory [Maimonides] to be concerned for the honor of our sainted sages and to clarify and explain them in a fashion which will be compatible with the truth without the roots of the faith being affected.¹⁰⁶

Such justificatory statements have, to a great extent, led some to see in the philosophical *allegorēsis* of the midrash an apologetic tendency, a sense of embarrassment in confronting the fanciful and at times "irrational" *aggadah*. Such *aggadot* had been, it is true, under attack by forces outside of rabbinic Judaism to show the alleged absurdity of rabbinic traditions and teachings.¹⁰⁷ Karaism, Islam, and Christianity all contributed their share to attacking the midrashic heritage.¹⁰⁸ It is true too that such *aggadot* were problematic for those biblical exegetes who were interested in following the plain sense of Scripture.¹⁰⁹ But this did not necessarily mean that the "rationalists," more than any other Jews, were embarrassed by the *aggadah*. Rather, the huge exegetical enterprise undertaken by them shows a conviction (note the enthusiastic conclusion of Ibn Shaprut's remarks cited above!) that rabbinic tradition contains the teachings of Greek philosophy. It was the task of the exegete of *aggadah* to decipher these teachings, which the rabbis masked in fanciful guise very much for the same reasons that the

biblical writers ostensibly masked their esoteric teachings in disguise—to hide the truth from dolts,¹¹⁰ to make their teachings more appealing to the masses, and so forth. In this way, the motivation of the philosophizers would be similar to that of the Kabbalists in their quest to extract kabbalistic teachings from rabbinic midrash and thereby demonstrate the antiquity of the Kabbalah. Thus, Rabbi Azriel of Gerona in the thirteenth century would write a commentary on the *aggadot* in which many passages would be explained according to the sefirotic system. The anthropomorphic passage about God's wearing phylacteries is explained in terms of the ten *sefirot*: the four compartments of the head phylactery represent the first four *sefirot*, the fifth *sefirah*, "strength," is represented by the "left hand of God," on which the hand phylactery is placed on the basis of the proof text Isa 26:8. That the word *yadekhab* ("your hand") in "It will be as a sign on your hand" (Exod 13:16) is spelled with a superfluous *heb*, the fifth letter of the Hebrew alphabet shows, too, that the phylactery placed on the left hand is the fifth *sefirah*. The lower five *sefirot* are represented by the knot of the phylacteries, which, according to tradition, was revealed to Moses when he was shown God's back (Exod 33:24).¹¹¹

Esoteric Interpretation of the Commandments: Allegory versus Symbol

The search for the esoteric sense of *aggadah* had, as do all matters *aggadic*—its halakhic parallel, the quest for the inner meaning of the *mizwot*, of the commandments of the Torah according to their traditional rabbinic interpretations. The imperative of seeking out this meaning is given a striking rationale by Jacob Anatoli. He harks back to the Christian argument, familiar to us from the statement from Joseph Kimhi's *Book of the Covenant* with which we began this paper, that "we eat the husks while they eat the fruit" and argues that this is indeed the case. The problem is that "their fruit is the fruit of falsehood, while the fruit of truth, as bequeathed by Moses, is not cultivated because of Jewish negligence and superficiality in reading the Scriptures."¹¹²

The entire question of this esoteric interpretation of the commandments has far-reaching consequences not only in terms of the history of exegesis but in terms of Jewish religious history as well. It is here also that some have seen a strong line of demarcation between the approach of the philosophers and that of the Kabbalists. According to this dichotomy, the *allegoresis* of the philosophers had the potential for leading to the abandonment of the actual observance of the commandment itself. In other words, there was a potential (and at times allegedly actual) antinomianism, since, according to

this conception, if one understood the philosophical rationale of a commandment there was no longer any need to perform it in deed. In contrast, kabbalistic exegesis of the commandments is held to be symbolic, the symbol—in this case, the commandment—retaining its own integrity.

The thing which becomes a symbol retains its original form and its original context. It does not become, so to speak, an empty shell, into which another content is poured; in itself, through its own existence, it makes another reality transparent which cannot appear in any other form. If allegory can be defined as the representation of an expressible something by another expressible something, the mystical symbol is an expressible representation of something which lies beyond the sphere of expression and communication.¹¹³

Before examining the validity of this point of view, let us review the treatment of a particular *mizwah*, namely, that of dwelling in a booth or *sukkah* during the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev 23:42–43), in the philosophical tradition and the *Zohar*.

In dealing with the former, our primary concern is not with the issue of *ta'amei ha-mizwot*, the enterprise of explaining the reasons for which the commandments were actually given, but with actual allegorization of the commandment. The *ta'am* or reason is fairly straightforward. Whether Maimonides, Gersonides, or others, all agree that the reason for the commandment is that one dwell in the *sukkah* in order to be reminded of the days of poverty in the desert, so that he may be grateful to God for his present prosperity, or to be reminded of the miracles performed in the desert.¹¹⁴ Allegorization, on the other hand, follows the pattern we have been observing. Bahya ben Asher, who combined philosophy with Kabbalah, explains the minimal seven handspans required for the width of the *sukkah*¹¹⁵ as representing the seven liberal arts, the ten for the height the ten commandments, and the seventy square handspans of each side the seventy "faces" of the Torah.¹¹⁶ According to Gersonides, the covering (*sikkah*) of the *sukkah*, made of some material that is naturally grown from the earth, has the function of teaching that, as one becomes aged and the veil (*masakh*) of matter is removed from the intellect and becomes fragile like the covering of the *sukkah*, one must not think one can abandon the study of the natural sciences and engage only in metaphysics but must still engage in the former since they lead to the latter, and ultimately to the awe of God.¹¹⁷ Ḥasdai Crescas again interprets the covering of the *sukkah* allegorically:

As the body is the vehicle for the soul which is the form of man and shelters him, the covering is the essence of the *sukkah* and shelters him. Thus the Torah commanded that it be made of material which grows from the ground

to indicate submission and that it not be subject to defilement in order to alert us concerning the purity of our souls.¹¹⁸

Moving now from these rationalistic allegorizations of elements of the *sukkah*, let us review one kabbalistic, specifically Zoharic, interpretation.¹¹⁹

Among the interpretations of the *Zohar* of the Feast of Tabernacles is that of the invitation into the *sukkah* of "guests," *'ushpizin*, a word related to one found in rabbinic literature meaning "inn"¹²⁰ but given the connotation of "guest" by the author, probably under the influence of the Castilian *huésped*. This apparently extraneous bit of philology is useful in that it dates to the Middle Ages the custom of *'ushpizin*, a custom widely practiced until today even by Jews totally unaware of its Zoharic origins. According to this custom, seven heavenly guests, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joseph, and David, are invited into the *sukkah* on each of the seven days of the holiday. These heavenly guests are the seven heavenly days, that is, the seven lower *sefirot*, and by the fulfillment of the precept, the unity of the seven *sefirot* is brought about.

R. Abba said: It is written: "In booths shall you dwell, seven days" (Lev 23:42). The *Zohar* reads the verse as if the seven supernal days, the seven *sefirot*, are being addressed. And afterwards: "they shall dwell in booths" (Lev 23:42). . . . The first is for the guests (*'ushpizin*), the second for those of this world. The first for the guests as when R. Himmuna the Elder entered the *sukkah*, he rejoiced and stood at the entrance of the *sukkah* from within and said: "Let us invite the guests, let us set the table." He stood and blessed and said: "You shall dwell in booths seven days" (Lev 23:42). Be seated, O supernal guests, be seated! Be seated, O guests of faith, be seated!" He raised his hands and rejoiced and said: "Happy is our portion, happy the portion of Israel as it is written 'for the portion of the Lord is His people'" (Num 32:9), and he would sit down. The second [verse, Lev 23:42], refers to those of this world, for he who has a portion in his people and in the holy land sits in the shadow of faith to receive the guests and rejoice in this world and the next. (*Zohar* 3:103b-104a).

It is at this point that the *Zohar* adds its own dimension to its understanding of the performance of the commandments. Their purpose, the unification of the upper world, the world of the *sefirot*, is not accomplished unless there is a corresponding fulfillment below in this world. Therefore, the invitation of the heavenly guests will be to no avail for they will not grace the *sukkah*, unless *earthly* guests, the poor (and, for Bahya ben Asher, the scholars,¹²¹ for who can be poorer than they?), are invited as well.

Nonetheless, one must give pleasure to the poor. For what reason? Because the portion of the guests (*'ushpizin*) which he invited belongs to the poor. And he who sits in the shadow of the faith, and does not give them their

portion has them all get up and leave saying: "Do not eat the bread of him that has an evil eye" (Prov 23:6), for it develops that the table he set was intended for him and not for the Holy One, blessed be He. Concerning him, it is said: "I will spread dung upon your faces" (Mal 2:3), "the dung of your sacrifices" (Mal 2:3), and not *My* sacrifices. Woe to him when the guests of faith get up and leave his table. (*Zohar* 3:104a).

In this way, the esoteric level of the commandment has no validity unless the exoteric level—the literal observance of the commandment—is fulfilled. Further, the purpose of the commandment according to the philosophers, the recollection of the Israelites' poverty in the desert, is translated here into action, recollection through concern for the poor. And he who shows no such concern for the poor, the representatives of the patriarchs who symbolize the *sefirot*, is cursed in the roundest and most colorful terms.

Rabbi Abba said: Abraham would always stand at the crossroads to invite guests and set the table for them. Now, when they invite him and all the righteous ones and King David and do not give them their portion, Abraham gets up from the table and says: "Depart, I pray you, from the tents of these wicked men" (Num 16:26) and they all leave with him. Isaac says: "The belly of the wicked shall want" (Prov 13:25). Jacob says: "The morsel you have eaten you shall vomit up" (Prov 23:8). The rest of the righteous say: "For all tables are full of filthy vomit and no place is clean" (Isa 28:8). King David [representative of the *sefirah malkhut*, which serves as the agent for punishing the wicked] says [this verse] and exerts retribution. . . . (*Zohar* 3:104a)

But he who fulfills the commandment in sincerity, even if his means only allow him to do so in the humblest capacity, is greatly blessed.

Rabbi Eleazar said: The Torah has not laid a burden on man greater than he can bear, as it is written: "every man shall give as he is able" (Deut 16:17). Let not one say: first, I shall eat to satiety and quench my thirst and shall give to the poor what remains; but the first portion is for the guests. And if he gives pleasure to the guests and satisfies them, the Holy One, blessed be He, rejoices with him and Abraham invokes the verse: "Then shall you delight in the Lord" (Isa 58:14) while Isaac invokes the verse: "No weapon that is formed against you shall prosper" (Isa 54:17). (*Zohar* 3:104a)

What does an example such as this teach us of the effect of esoteric exegesis on halakhic practice? Despite the presence of ostensibly antinomian passages in Zoharic literature, the *Tiqquney Zohar* and *Ra'ya Meheimna* and in kabbalistic literature in general,¹²² the prevalent trend is a confirmation of the actual observance of the *mizwah* since only that which has a correspondence in the lower world can have reality in the upper world. The question that needs examination, then, is the widespread view that philosophical

allegorēsis led to abandonment of the observance of *halakhab*. There are two bases for this view, one historical and one literary critical. The former stems largely from the criticism heard during the Maimonidean controversy of the thirteenth century in which, among other things, the allegorists, in their attempt to imitate Maimonides, "made dark light and light dark" and "went out against Eden, the Garden of God, for which all Israel longs; it was a beautiful sight to behold . . . after them it was a desolation."¹²³ According to these critics the very foundations of the faith were shaken by the allegorization of the creation story, since the observance of the Sabbath rests on the principle of creation.¹²⁴ They tell too of actual ritual indifference, laxity in prayer, and so forth.¹²⁵

The latter, literary-critical view, which sees in philosophical *allegorēsis* a catalyst for the abandonment of halakhic observance, is the distinction between allegory, in which the literal sense is nulled or annulled, and symbol, in which that which is symbolized participates in the symbol—in this case, the *mizwah*—and therefore the precept itself cannot be annulled.

The difficulty with the first critique of philosophical *allegorēsis*, stemming primarily from the acrimonious feuding of the Maimonidean controversy, is that we have virtually no evidence that these charges had any validity. As is true with so many heresy hunts throughout history, our literary records present the point of view of the accusers rather than that of the accused. The latter, the so-called philosophizers or rationalists, continually protest their orthodoxy, and indeed the sources give us scant reason to doubt them. The one example continuously branded as an archheretic, Levi ben Hayyim, was in reality hardly immoderate in his views and was lauded by his familiars for his piety. If negligence in religious observance did exist, it seems to have been due more to general indifference rather than to sophisticated intellectual considerations.¹²⁶

The second critique, the literary-critical, with its distinction between allegory and symbol, has its origins in Goethe and since his time has undergone numerous modifications and metamorphoses.¹²⁷ To a certain extent, this literary-critical crux seems to mirror or at least parallel the distinction made in modern times between allegory and typology in Christian biblical exegesis. The former, with its roots in Philo and Origen is seen as discarding the literal or historical sense; the latter, with its purpose of establishing the link between one historical reality and another, is seen as preserving it.¹²⁸ Typology is, then, "a legitimate extension of the literal sense, while word allegory is something entirely alien: the former is in truth exegesis, the latter is not."¹²⁹ This approach has led to a general embarrassment on the part of modern Christian exegetes with allegory, that is, moral

allegory, which is a "rationalistic phenomenon" over against typology, which is "concerned with tying into facts, not spiritual truths."¹³⁰

To transfer the problematics of modern Christian biblical exegesis and certain outmoded theories of literary criticism to concerns of medieval Jewish theology is, to say the least, fraught with difficulties.¹³¹ For one thing, patristic and medieval Christian exegesis repeated, by and large, its insistence that the spiritual senses, tropology and so forth, that which the moderns call allegory, in no way annuls but indeed validates the literal or historical: "Spiritual understanding is founded on the literal and presupposes it."¹³² It is true, of course, that Christian recognition of the literal sense did not necessarily imply literal fulfillment. Whereas even the prophecies concerning Jerusalem, which had been traditionally spiritualized in Christian tradition, were taken literally when historical circumstances made it desirable, that is, with the establishment of the Crusader kingdom,¹³³ the fulfillment of the ritual commandments was not, for they were considered a category unto themselves.¹³⁴ In no way, however, should we commit the fallacy of drawing an analogy between Jewish spiritualization and allegorization of the commandments and that of Christianity against its background of conceptions of a new dispensation and freedom from the "law."¹³⁵

And so we find Jacob Anatoli, the object of so much criticism in the Maimonidean controversy, stressing in the very context of his sermon for Tabernacles that "true opinions need deeds in order to reinforce them."¹³⁶ Yet the fifteenth-century Spanish Jewish philosopher, Joseph Albo, addressing himself to Christian spiritualization of the commandments, notes in his *Book of Roots* that the Torah is called "testimony" (Exod 25:21, Ps 132:12) to signify that the words of the Torah are to be taken at their face value, like the testimony of witnesses in a court case, and that we must not give them figurative interpretations (*we-lo na'aseh lahem zurot*) or read into them conditions or time limitations that are not explicitly stated. He insists that "no man has the power to abolish the literal meaning of the commandments by interpretation." At the same time, however, many passages in the Torah "bear allusion to more noble and celestial things. Thus, the account of the tabernacle refers to real things, and at the same time bears allusion to sublime and celestial things. . . ." In sum, "there are in the Torah expressions which allude to other nobler and more sublime things, and yet are also true in their literal meaning. *This is especially true of the commandments.* They do allude to noble and sublime things, but at the same time there is an important purpose in themselves and in their performance."¹³⁷

Thus are the words of a "philosopher," writing, it is true, ostensibly against the background of an anti-Christian polemic but essentially reiterating the

typology
allegory

traditional Jewish view that multiple interpretation of Scripture leaves each level of interpretation intact. And this is indeed in complete harmony with what reading or practicing allegory is all about. As C. S. Lewis has warned, one must be wary of the danger of "attend[ing] to the signification in the abstract and . . . throw[ing] aside the allegorical imagery as something which has done its work."¹³⁸ For the one cannot dispense with the other, in that "allegory calls attention to the 'other'—in a word to God, or to some sort of possible 'sacredness'; by interfolded correspondences between word and word, one woven web of sense (one text) calls attention to the plexed (or 'folded') artistry of another text."¹³⁹ Allegory is not then a throwing away but, as W. Y. Tindall notes—if we transfer his use of the term "symbol" to ours of "allegory"—a "throwing . . . together."¹⁴⁰

Thus, the dichotomy between rationalistic *allegorēsis* and kabbalistic interpretation would have to be tempered, first of all, on literary-critical grounds.¹⁴¹ Moreover, certain Kabbalists themselves were prepared to make use of philosophical allegory itself as a legitimate mode of interpretation even though it was not the kabbalistic truth. Bahya ben Asher in his *Kad ha-Qemah* discusses the very *mizwah*, *sukkah*, with which we began.

Therefore one must fulfill the precept of *sukkah* concretely (*be-murgash*) and consider its ideational (*be-muskal*) character, [for . . . it is the latter which is] its ultimate purpose . . . for the physical (*gashmit*) level is not like the ideational (*sikhlit*) level. Now it is known that our forefathers experienced both at the Red Sea: . . . the physical crossing . . . when they physically perceived that remarkable miracle and the metaphysical perception as our rabbis said: "A maidservant at the Red Sea saw what Ezekiel ben Buzi did not" (*Mekhilta, Shirah* 3). Thus it is the essence of the fulfillment of a *mizwah* that one contemplates its essence which is its metaphysical and esoteric element. But one is fulfilled only through both, for even though one knows the esoteric level (*nistar*) of a precept, one is not exempted from fulfilling it on the exoteric level (*nigleh*). Of this it is written: "The hidden things (*ha-nistarot*) are the Lord our God's and the revealed things (*ha-niglot*) are for us and our sons" (Deut 29:28), . . . i.e., we are under the obligation to fulfill them exoterically for with a knowledge of the esoteric we cannot possibly be exempted from the exoteric.¹⁴²

What does exist here is a hierarchy in the levels of meaning, whether in the Kabbalists' four senses, in the simpler formulation of the eleventh-century Spanish philosopher Bahya Ibn Paquda that "the rational and practical commandments . . . are only a means by which to ascend to the intellectual perception which is the ultimate purpose intended in the creation of the human species in this world,"¹⁴³ or in that of his later namesake, Bahya ben Asher, falling back on Maimonides's parable: "For the superiority of the esoteric over the exoteric is as the superiority of gold over

silver."¹⁴⁴ But hierarchy does not mean abrogation. The more precious the apple of gold, the more must it be guarded by its silver encasement.

Afterword

As a postscript, one may inquire about what remains of this treasure of gold and silver which medieval Judaism bequeathed to posterity. Is it, like so many Hebrew manuscripts of the period, to be placed on the block at Sotheby's and be ultimately viewed as a museum piece or hidden in a dark climate-controlled vault to be taken out occasionally at the request of some odd antiquarian or doctoral student researching a dissertation? Or indeed has it had and does it have a more vital function to fulfill? We have noted previously the embarrassment of modern Christian biblical scholars and theologians at certain types of allegorical exegesis, not only among Protestants, who might be expected to be freer in dispensing with the patristic or medieval legacy,¹⁴⁵ but among Catholics as well. As for Judaism, one would be hard pressed to find very many modern Jews who would accept medieval philosophical *allegorēsis* at face value although kabbalistic interpretation in various modifications and among diverse sectors of the contemporary Jewish world still retains meaning. Yet this is not the real point at issue.

One of the most difficult concepts to convey to the student embarking on a study of a religious tradition or a particular form of that tradition is that it is not the intention or desire of the instructor to indoctrinate or catechize the student but rather to have the latter appreciate it on its own terms and, if possible, to empathize with its adherents, to penetrate *their* minds—even as an outsider looking in; to see with *their* eyes—even through the glass darkly. If one were to study medieval Jewish esoteric exegesis in this light, one would appreciate that perhaps its most significant legacy for modern Judaism has not been any particular doctrinal interpretation or form of interpretation but the very principle of freedom of interpretation itself, that the Scriptures, biblical or postbiblical, bear more than one meaning, that a modernist approach to a text need not rule out a commitment to belief in tradition. Thus, one retains one's foundation without fundamentalism, one's faith in the Creator without creationism.

This was put on a sardonic level by Walter Kaufmann in his "Dialogue Between Satan and an Atheist." Complaining that arguing with Jews about Scripture never got him anywhere, Satan laments: "They knew the texts as well as I did, made connections from verse to verse across a hundred pages much more nimbly than I did, and were never, absolutely never, fazed by anything I said. . . . Usually they produced some rabbi who, more than a

thousand years ago, had made my point and been given some classical answer.¹⁴⁶

When asked why he could not show that their interpretations were untenable, Satan replies that that was not the point at issue:

For they considered the whole thing a game, and they played it according to special rules; by their rules, their arguments were tenable. *They never claimed that Moses had meant all the things they put into his mouth.* Of course not. But according to the rules of the game it could be argued that an interpretation of the words of Moses was correct in spite of that—even several conflicting ones.¹⁴⁷

Through the art of interpretation—the game, if you will—Moses' hard, chiseled tablets become pliable, malleable, flexible—no more to be shattered but to retain their wholeness and integrity.

Thus, when the late Chief Rabbi of Palestine, Abraham Isaac ha-Kohen Kook, was asked concerning the legitimacy of the findings of modern biblical scholarship for the pious Jew, he replied, relying on some of the texts we have cited above, that although one need not blindly accept them, neither must one blindly reject them: "For the purpose of the Torah is not to tell us simple facts and stories. Its essence is that which lies within (*tokh*), the inner elucidation of the material."¹⁴⁸ If anything, he continues, should modern biblical scholarship challenge traditional understanding of the Torah, all the better! For it will spur on the pious Jew to probe more deeply and search out the Torah's profounder intents.¹⁴⁹ Yes, a game it may all be, but it is one that has allowed Judaism to be continued to be played out in earnest.

Notes

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1. Joseph Kimhi, *Book of the Covenant*, trans. Frank Talmage (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1972) 46–47.

2. H. A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, 2 vols., 3rd rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970) 1:74–75. Cf. G. R. Evans, *The Language and Logic of the Bible: The Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge: University Press, 1984) 155, but contrast pp. 14–15.

3. Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, passim.

4. See the *Enziqlopedyah Miqra'it*, s.v. "TeNaKh, parshanut"; reprinted as *Parshanut ha-Miqra ha-Yehudit*, ed. Moshe Greenberg (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1983).

5. Our use of the term allegory in this essay in general does not include the metaphorical interpretation of individual anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms. See Isaak Heinemann, "Scientific Allegorization During the Jewish Middle Ages," in *Studies in Jewish Thought*, 247–48.

6. Based on *Tanbuma, Lekh Lekha* 9.

7. See Amos Funkenstein, "Nahmanides' Symbolical Reading of History," in *Studies in Jewish Mysticism*, ed. Joseph Dan and Frank Talmage (Cambridge, MA: Association for Jewish Studies, 1982) 129–50; expanded Hebrew version: "Parshanuto ha-Tipologit shel ha-RaMBa"n," *Zion* 45 (1979–80) 35–49; Bahya ben Asher, *Kad ha-Qemah*; *Ner hanukkah, Sukkah*, in *Kitvey Rabbenu Bahya* (Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-Rav Kook, 1969) 269, 276; Abraham Saba, *Šeror ha-Mor*, 5 vols. in 1 (Warsaw, 1878/80), 4:23b, 5:5b, 32a–b.

8. Isaac ben Joseph Ha-Kohen, *Perush Megillat Rut Megalleh Sod ha-Ge'ulah* (Sabionetta, 1551); Isaac Abravanel, *Commentary on Gen 3:22* (Warsaw, 1861/62) p. 22a based on *Gen. Rab.* 19:9.

9. That is, making a thing (*res*) of an abstract notion. See *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, s.v. "Allegory."

10. See *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, s.v. "Allegory, Allegorical Interpretation"; Ernst Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. W. R. Trask, Bollingen Series 36 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953) 203–7; Jean Pepin, *Mythe et allégorie: Les origines grecques et les contestations judéo-chrétiennes* (Paris: Editions Mouton, 1958); Edwin Honig, *Dark Conceit: The Making of Allegory* (London: Faber & Faber, 1959) 28–31; R. P. C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event* (London: SCM, 1959) 56–62.

11. See Rosemond Tuve, *Allegorical Imagery: Some Medieval Books and Their Posterity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966) 219–333; John MacQueen, *Allegory* (London: Methuen, 1970) 15, 46–49.

12. Hillel of Verona in the thirteenth century actually refers to the "superficial" sense of texts following the Christian terminology "iuxta superficiem littere"; see *Tagnmuley ha-Nefesh*, ed. Joseph Sermoneta (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1981) 146 (*mi she'tah peshatei ha-miqra . . .*), 179 (*divrey aggadot . . . nir'im be-shitham ha-hison maskimim 'im peshatei qesat miqra'ot*, 193 (*be-shitham ha-hison*).

13. Vidal Benvenist, *Efer we-Dinah* (Constantinople, 1516).

14. On the didactic function of medieval belles lettres, see Edward A. Bloom, "The Allegorical Principle," *ELH* 18 (1951) 164–74; Maria Rosa Lida de Malkiel, *Two Spanish Masterpieces: The Book of Good Love and the Celestina* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1961) 24–33; cf. D. W. Foster, *Christian Allegory in Early Hispanic Poetry* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1970) 93, 100–1 n. 32; Gay Clifford, *The Transformations of Allegory* (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974) 37–39. Robert Hollander, *Allegory in Dante's Commedia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969) 54. For a more skeptical view, see Stephen Gilman, *The Spain of Fernando de Rojas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972) 361–62.

15. Judah al-Ḥarizi, *Tahkemoni*, ed. Y. Toporowski (Tel-Aviv: Mahbarot le-Sifrut, 1952) 13–14; Isaac Ibn Sahula, *Mashal ha-Qadmoni* (Brescia, 1491; photoreprint, Jerusalem: Kedem, 1976–77) introduction (p. 1): "See the parable and allegory . . . and inner allusion and wisdom within it."

16. On the similar conception of the "pierced technique" in Carolingian art and

exegesis, see Smalley, *Study of the Bible*, 2: "... we are invited to look not at the text but through it."

17. Paul Nwiya, *Exégèse coranique et langage mystique* (Beirut: Dar-el-Machreq éditeurs, 1970) 34.

18. Cf. Saba, *Sevor ha-Mor*, 1:28a. These images are, of course, universal and common to the Latin, romance, and English traditions. See D. W. Robertson, Jr., "Some Medieval Literary Terminology with Special Reference to Chrétien de Troyes," *Studies in Philology* 48 (1951) 669-92, and esp. the glossary on p. 692. One of the loveliest expressions is the utterance of Dame Nature in Alain de Lille's *De planctu naturae*: "Do you not know that in the shallow surface of literature the poetic lyre sounds a false note, but within speaks to those hearers of a loftier understanding, in that the chaff of outer falsity cast aside, the reader finds within the sweeter kernel of truth" (PL 210:451; English: Alain de Lille, *The Complaint of Nature*, trans. Douglas Moffat, Yale Studies in English 36 [New York: Henry Holt, 1908] 40). This motif is ultimately charmingly satirized by Jonathan Swift in *A Tale of a Tub*, where Wisdom, among other things, is declared to be "... a Nut, which unless you chuse with judgment may cost you a Tooth, and pay you with nothing but a worm" (ed. A. G. Guithkeich and D. Nicholl Smith [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1920] 66).

19. Cf. Origen *Selecta in Psalmos*, Ps. 1, PG (*Patrologiae cursus completus. Series graeca*, ed. J. P. Migne [Paris: J. P. Migne, 1857-66]) 12, col. 1080, cited in Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, 180.

20. The theme of the mystical descent into the palace is carried through in Nahmanides's poem "Me-rosh mi-qadmey 'olamim," printed in Jefim Schirmann, *Ha-Shirah ha-'Ivrit bi-Sefarad u-vi-Provans*, 2 vols. in 4, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1960) 2:322-25. On the development of the theme from the *Zohar* to Moses Hayyim Luzzatto's *Migdal 'oz*, see Fischel Lachover, *'Al Gevul ha-Yashan we-be-Hadash* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1951) 40-51.

21. *Tanbuma*, *Piqqudey*, 96: "Testimony means Torah. This is likened to a king who had a daughter and built her a palace. He set her within seven chambers and declared: 'If any one reaches my daughter, it is as if he reaches me';" Américo Castro, *The Structure of Spanish History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954) 445-46.

22. Kafka's castle was actually a complex of small buildings, but the effect of sameness and interminability is that described here for they were "innumerable" and the village itself that led to the castle "seemed to have no end; again and again the same little houses..." (*The Castle*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir [London: Penguin, 1970] 16, 17).

23. Castro, *Structure*, 432.

24. On the significance of this iconographic inscription, see Oleg Grabar, *The Alhambra* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978) 135.

25. On the complexities and drama of the structure of the Alhambra, see Grabar, *Alhambra*, 56-58, 64, 114, 199-200.

26. On allegory in the visual arts and the visual element in allegory, see Clifford, *Transformations*, 71-93; and on the relation between thought and architecture in the Latin Middle Ages, see Erwin Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* (Cleveland, OH: World, 1957); O. G. Von Simson, "The Gothic Cathedral: Design and Meaning," in *Change in Medieval Society: Europe North of the Alps, 1050-1500*, ed. Sylvia L. Thrupp (New York: Meredith, 1964) 168-87; Emile Mâle, *The Gothic Image: Religious Art in France of the Thirteenth Century*, trans. Dora Hussey (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958; reprint of *Religious Art in France: A Study in Medieval Iconography and Its Sources of Inspiration* [London: Dent & Sons, 1913]); Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale: Les quatre sens de l'écriture*, 2 parts in 4 vols. (Paris: Aubier, 1959-63)

2:2:4-60. For a striking example of modern architectural imagery in literary definition, see W. Y. Tindall, *The Literary Symbol* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955) 229.

27. Jacob ben Eleazar, "'Ahavat Sahar we-Khimarh," in Jefim Schirmann, ed., "Sippurey ha-Ahavah shel Ya'aqov ben 'El'azar," *Yedi'ot ha-Makhon le-Heqer ha-Shirah ha-'Ivrit* 5 (1939) 247-66.

28. Cf. Grabar, *Alhambra*, 100-101.

29. See A. C. Hamilton, *The Structure of Allegory in the Faerie Queene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961) 34-35.

30. See Clifford, *Transformations*, 14-35.

31. Bahya ben Asher, *Kad ha-Qemah*, Sukkah, in *Kitvey Rabbenu Bahya*, ed. Chavel, p. 274.

32. Jacob Anatoli, *Malmad ha-Talmidim* (Lyck: Mekize Nirdamim, 1866) introduction, p. [6].

33. Clifford, *Transformations*, 53.

34. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957) 89; Maureen Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1979) 15-16.

35. See Harry Caplan, "The Four Senses of Scriptural Interpretation and the Mediaeval Theory of Preaching," *Speculum* 4 (1925) 282-91; Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1964) 5.

36. Wilhelm Bacher, "L'Exégèse biblique dans le Zohar," *Revue des études juives* 22 (1891) 35; Gershom G. Scholem, "The Meaning of the Torah in Jewish Mysticism," in *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, 62-63.

37. Ignaz Goldziher, *Die Richtungen der Islamischen Koranauslegung* (Leiden: Brill, 1920) 84-85, 115-16; cf. Nwiya, *Exégèse coranique*, 109-56 and passim. The concept, as presented by Nwiya, is somewhat more complex than in Judaism. On the seeming inexhaustibility of meanings of a biblical text, see the analysis of Guiseppe (Joseph) Sermoneta, "Prophecy in the Writings of R. Yehuda Romano," in Isadore Twersky, ed., *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature-II* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1984) 337-51.

38. Edwin Honig, *Dark Conceit*, 114.

39. See de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale*.

40. Scholem, "Meaning of the Torah," 56-59.

41. *Ibid.*, 62 n. 1.

42. Wilhelm Bacher ("Das Merkwort PRDS in der jüdischen Bibelexegese," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 13 [1893] 294-305) and Gershom Scholem ("Meaning of the Torah," 61-62) were inclined to see such a connection, but Peretz Sandler ("Li-Ve'ayat PaRDeS we-ha-Shitah ha-Merubba'at," in *Sefer Auerbach* [Jerusalem: Ha-Hevrah le-Heqer ha-Miqra, 1954/55] 222-35) tended to reject it.

43. *Letters of Dante*, trans. Paget Toynbee, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966) 198; cf. *Convivio* 2.1.3-6. See also MacQueen, *Allegory*, 54-58.

44. Robert Hollander, *Allegory in Dante's Commedia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969) 252; de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale*, 2:2:37-39, 168.

45. Compare the schema of Abraham Maimonides, *Ma'amar 'al odot Derashot HaZal*, printed in Jacob Ibn Habib, *'Eyn Ya'aqov*, photoreprint ed., 5 vols. (Jerusalem: 'Am 'Olam, 1960-61) 1:16 (*ha-derekh ha-rishon*, *ha-derekh ha-sheni*).

46. Joseph Sermoneta has seen a correspondence between the fourfold system and Hillel of Verona's classification of rabbinic *aggadah* into six categories (*Tagmuley ha-Nefesh* 2:2, p. 181n.). Although there may be some formal correspondence, this is not

the issue. Hillel is not dealing with multiple approaches to the interpretation of a single text but to the classification of different texts.

47. David Rosin, "Reime und Gedichte des Abraham Ibn Ezra," pt. 2, *Jahresbericht des jüdisch-theologischen Seminars* (Breslau, 1887), p. 60. It is of interest to note here that Angus Fletcher has pointed out that the fourfold scheme of exegesis is a semantic translation of the Aristotelian four causes. The tropological or moral sense would correspond to the efficient cause. (*Allegory*, 313 n. 12).

48. On this point, an examination of Islamic exegesis may be fruitful: see Nwiya, *Exégèse coranique*, 210-11. In general, much could be learned from one competent in both Islamic and Jewish biblical exegesis.

49. The twelfth-century northern French exegete Joseph Bekhor Shor, living in a different intellectual climate, railed against "the nations of the world who say that what Moses said is *allegoria*, that is, riddle and parable (*hidah u-mashal*)" (*Commentary* on Num 12:8).

50. Cited in Quilligan, *Language of Allegory*, 27; cf. the passage from Sir John Harrington's preface to his translation of Orlando Furioso cited in Edward A. Bloom, "The Allegorical Principle," *ELH* 18 (1951) 177; P. J. Korshin, *Typologies in England 1650-1750* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982) 159-60. Such statements are reminiscent of the classic statement of Cassiodorus following Augustine, *In Ps.*, Preface, 15 (*Corpus Christianorum scriptorum Latinorum* 97; Louvain: *Corpus Christianorum scriptorum Latinorum*) 19.50-54.

51. Zerachiah ben Isaac ben Shealtiel *Hen*, *'Imrey Da'at*, ed. Josef Schwarz (Vienna, 1871).

52. Samuel Ibn Tibbon, *Ma'amar Yiqqawu ha-Mayim* (Pressburg, 1837) 174; cited in Aviezer Ravitzky, "Samuel Ibn Tibbon and the Esoteric Character of the *Guide of the Perplexed*," *AJS Review* 6 (1981) 113 and see pp. 111-13. See also Ibn Tibbon's introduction to his commentary on Ecclesiastes cited in Sermoneta, "Prophecy in . . . Yehuda Romano," 340-41, n. 5.

53. See Quilligan, *Language of Allegory*, 30-31.

54. Commentary of Ezra, printed in *Kitvey Rabbenu Mosheh ben Nahman*, ed. C. B. Chavel, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-Rav Kook, 1963/64) 480; French translation: *Le commentaire d'Ezra de Gérard sur le cantique des cantiques*, trans. Georges Vajda, 44; Pseudo-Joseph Kimhi is cited in Siegmund Salfeld, *Das Hohelied Salomo's bei den jüdischen Erklärern des Mittelalters* (Berlin, 1879) 53n.

55. See Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, 238. See also Augustine *On the Trinity* 11.2: "The Holy Scriptures, as is fitting for little ones, did not shun any kind of verbal expression through which our understanding might be nourished and rise step by step to divine and sublime things"; and the formulation of the eighth-century Muslim mystique Muqātil Ibn Sulaymān: "God described that which is in His realm (*'indahu*) [i.e., Paradise] by means of that which is in [man's] realm (*'indahum*) in order to direct their hearts to Him"; see Nwiya, *Exégèse coranique*, 101.

56. This is the rationale expressed by the seventh-century Arab compiler of *Kalila wa-Dimnah*, Abdullah Ibn al-Muqaffa'; see Castro, *Structure*, 427-28.

57. Joseph ben Judah Ibn Akinin, *Hitgallut ha-Sodot ve-Hofa'at ha-Me'orot*, ed. A. S. Halkin (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1964) 2-5; idem, "Ibn 'Akinin's Commentary on the Song of Songs," *Alexander Marx Jubilee Volume* 407.

58. See Quilligan, *Language of Allegory*, 79-85. Compare the attitude of Isaiah b. Yedaiah toward the *aggadah* as "pandering" to the masses (Marc Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis: A Thirteenth-Century Commentary on the Aggadah*, 27) and the similar views

of Joseph Ibn Kaspi (Basil Herring, *Joseph Ibn Kaspi's Gevia' Kesef: A Study in Medieval Jewish Philosophic Bible Commentary* [New York: Ktav, 1982] 58-59).

59. See Halkin, "Ibn 'Akinin's Commentary," 390-91; Johan Chydenius, "The Typological Problem in Dante," in *Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum*, Societas Scientiarum Fennica 25 (Helsinki: Finska vetenskaps-societen, 1961) 121-26.

60. Ibn Akinin, *Hitgallut*, 490-91; Halkin, "Ibn Akinin's Commentary," 391-92.

61. Origen *Against Celsus* 4.38-39; see also Anatoli's condemnation of those who read the prophets superficially as if they were old wives' tales (*ke-derekh sippur haveli ha-zeqenot*) (*Malmad*, introduction, p. [10]).

62. See Heinemann, "Scientific Allegorization," 258-59.

63. Maimonides, *Ma'amar*, 15; Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis*, 22, 45-46.

64. On this passage, see Moshe Idel, "Tefisat ha-Torah be-Sifrut ha-Hekhalot we-Gilguleha ba-Qabbalah," *Mehqerei Yerushalayim be-Mahshevet Yisra'el* 1 (1981) 51.

65. C. S. Lewis, *Allegory of Love* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936) 62; see also Smalley, *Study of the Bible*, 2; de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale*, 1:44.

66. On the vestment image in John Scotus Erigena, see de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale*, 1:121-25.

67. Pseudo-Nahmanides, *Ma'amar 'al penimiyut ha-Torah*, ed. C. B. Chavel, *Kitvey Rabbenu Mosheh ben Nahman*, 2:468. On the possible authorship of this text see Ephraim Gottlieb, "Berurim be-Khitvey R. Yosef Giqatila," in *Mehqarim be-Sifrut ha-Qabbalah*, ed. Joseph Hacker (Tel Aviv: University of Tel Aviv Press, 1976) 128-31; see also Abba Mari ben Joseph, *Minhat Qena'ot* (Pressburg, 1838) 5.

68. Pseudo-Nahmanides, *Ma'amar*, 2:468; Isaiah Tishbi, ed., *Perush ha-Aggadot le-Rabbi 'Azri'el* (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1945) 38.

69. Azriel, *Perush ha-Aggadot*, 37-38; see also Saba, *Sefer ha-Mor*, 1:49b.

70. A. S. Halkin, "Why Was Levi ben Hayyim Hounded," *Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Research* 34 (1966) 71.

71. Frank Talmage, *David Kimhi: The Man and the Commentaries* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1975) 121-22.

72. Joseph Kimhi, *Sefer ha-Galui*, ed. H. J. Mathews (Berlin: Mekize Nirdamim, 1887) 1; idem, Commentary to Prov 9:1, *Sefer Huqqah*, ed. Ber Dubrowo (Breslau, 1865-66) 12a; see also Jonah Ibn Janah, *Sefer ha-Riqmah*, ed. Michael Wilensky, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Ha-'Aqademyah la-Lashon ha-Ivrit, 1963-64) 380.

73. Introduction to Genesis, ed. Avraham Golan, *Petiḥah le-Ferush ha-Torah* (Jerusalem: privately published, 1982) 3.

74. ms Vat. Ebr. 89, fol. 2r.

75. Anatoli, *Malmad*, introduction, p. [6].

76. ms Vat. Ebr. 89, fols. 19v, 17v.

77. Quilligan, *Language of Allegory*, 281.

78. Moses ben Nahman, *Perush ha-Torah le-Rabbenu Moshe ben Nahman*, ed. C. B. Chavel, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-Rav Kook, 1958/59) 1:6; English from Scholem, "Meaning of the Torah," 38. On this theory in general, see Scholem, "The Meaning of the Torah," 37-38.

79. Scholem, "The Meaning of the Torah."

80. On punning and wordplay in allegorical narrative, see Quilligan, *Language of Allegory*, 33-51. A scholar of English has insightfully noted the suitability of Hebrew for this sort of interpretation. "The study of Hebrew . . . and the existence of English Bibles with alternatives in the margin, may have had influence on the capacity of English for ambiguity; Donne, Herbert, Jonson, and Crashaw were Hebrew scholars, and the flowering of poetry at the end of the sixteenth century corresponded with the

first thorough permeation of the English language by the translated texts. This is of interest because Hebrew, having very unreliable tenses, extraordinary idioms, and a strong taste for puns, possesses all the poetical advantages of a thorough primitive disorder" (William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* [New York: Meridian Books, 1955] 219).

81. David Kaufmann, "Hoshen mishpat" (Letter of Simeon b. Joseph to Menahem b. Simeon) in *Jubelschrift zum neunzigsten Geburtstag des Dr. L. Zunz* (Breslau, 1886), Hebrew section, pp. 158-59.

82. Herring, *Gevia' Kesef*, 37-40.

83. Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, 133.

84. Joseph Ibn Kaspi, *Menorat Kesef* in *'Asarah Keley Kesef*, ed. Isaac last (Pressburg, 1902) 109; and in general see Herring, *Gevia' Kesef*, 52-54.

85. Isaac Arama, *Aqedat Yizhaq* (Pressburg, 1849) 1:143a; see Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis*, 113; Kaufmann, "Hoshen mishpat," Hebrew section, p. 160.

86. Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis*, 75.

87. *Ibid.*, 27, 60, 233-34 n. 50.

88. *B. Ta'anit* 6a; Rashi on Isa 55:1; Maimonides, *Guide* 1:30; Pines, p. 64; Kimhi on Isa 55:1 synthesizes the traditions, saying "Torah and science," as does Jacob Anatoli, *Mamad, ha-Talmidim* 57a-58a. See also Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis*, 73-75.

89. *Kitvey Pulmos shel Profiat Duran*, ed. Frank Talmage (Jerusalem: Dinur Center, 1981) introduction, p. 12; Anatoli, *Mamad*, 12a.

90. See Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis*, 47-78.

91. M.-D. Chenu, "The Symbolist Mentality," in *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1968) 106; see also de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale*, 2:2:7-40; Evans, *Language and Logic*, 59-66.

92. See Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis*, 57.

93. From Talmage, *David Kimhi*, 122.

94. According to rabbinic reckoning (*m. 'Oholot* 1:8), the body has 248 limbs.

95. Saadya ben Joseph Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, trans. Samuel Rosenblatt (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1948) 2:17, p. 415.

96. Heinemann, "Scientific Allegorization," 252-55.

97. See also Alain de Lille: "All other elements, which some say are to be taken differently should be referred not to prophecy, but to visual picturing" (*De sex alis cherubim*, PL 210; 171).

98. Zerariah ben Shealtiel Hen, *'Imrey Da'at*, 42; Immanuel of Rome, *Perush Sefer Mishlei* (Naples, 1487; reprint, Jerusalem: National and University Library, 1981) 39.

99. Samuel Ibn Tibbon, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, quoted in Ravitzky, "Samuel Ibn Tibbon," 111.

100. Trans. Hartwig Hirschfeld (1905; reprint, New York: Schocken Books, 1964) 192-96.

101. *Guide* 3:45; Pines, p. 573; cf. *Guide*, introduction; Pines, 9-10; Commentary on the Mishnah, introduction, ed. Joseph Kafih, 6 vols. (Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-Rav Kook, 1963/64-1968/69) 1:20-21; Simon Rawidowicz, "On Interpretation," *Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Research* 26 (1957) 102-5.

102. More elaborate schematizations of the *aggadah* are provided by Maimonides's son Abraham in his *Ma'amar* and in Hillel of Verona's *Tagmuley ha-Nefesh*, 179-91; see above, n. 45.

103. Shem Tov ben Isaac Shaprut, *Pardes Rimmonim* (Zhitomir, 1866) 22-23; cf. Isadore Twersky, "R. Yeda'yah ha-Penini u-Ferusho la-'Aggadah," in *Studies in Jewish Religious and Intellectual History Presented to A. Altmann*, ed. Siegfried Stein and

Raphael Loewe (University, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1979), Hebrew section, p. 71.

104. Moses Maimonides, introduction to *Pereq Heleq*, ed. Kafih, 2:202; English translation: *A Maimonides Reader*, ed. Isadore Twersky (New York: Behrman House, 1972) 408-9.

105. Talmage, *David Kimhi*, 122-23.

106. Yedaiah Ha-Penini Bedersi, *Ketav Hitnasselut*, printed in *She'elot u-Teshuvot ha-RaSHBA* (Benei Berak, 1957/58) 158 n. 418; see also D. J. Silver, *Maimonidean Criticism and the Maimonidean Controversy, 1180-1240* (Leiden: Brill, 1965) 119, 125, 192; and Twersky, "R. Yeda'yah ha-Penini," 63-82.

107. See Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1946) 30-32.

108. See Chen Merhavia, *Ha-Talmud bi-Re'i ha-Nazrut* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1970); Talmage, *David Kimhi*, 77-83; Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis*, 1-20; Twersky, "R. Yeda'yah ha-Penini," 65, 71-72.

109. See, e.g., Talmage, *David Kimhi*, 72-83, 125-34.

110. See Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis*, 25.

111. Azriel, *Perush ha-Aggadot*, 4-5; the passage is paraphrased more fully in Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis*, 16-17.

112. Anatoli, *Mamad*, introduction, p. [9].

113. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 27; Isaiah Tishbi, *Mishnat ha-Zohar*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1957) 2:364-65; Isaiah Tishbi, *Netivei 'emunah u-minut* (Tel Aviv: Massada, 1964) 11-22, esp. 20; see also Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, 63; and the full treatment by Daniel Matt in his essay in this volume, chapter 14.

114. Maimonides, *Guide* 3:43; Pines, p. 572; Gersonides, *Commentary on the Torah*, ad loc. Cf. Joseph Ibn Kaspi, *Guide to Knowledge*, in *Hebrew Ethical Wills*, ed. Israel Abrahams; 1 vol. in 2 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1926) 135.

115. Cf. Maimonides, M.T., Hil. Sukkah 4:1.

116. Bahya ben Asher, *Kad ha-Qemah*, Sukkah, ed. Chavel, p. 279.

117. Gersonides, *Commentary, 'emor*, third to 'elet.

118. Crescas, "Or 'adonai 2.6.2 (Vienna, 1859) p. 59a.

119. For an example, though, of *kabbalistic* allegory of this *mizwah*, using philosophical style but *kabbalistic* content, see Jacob ben Sheshet, *Meshiv Devarim Nekbohim*, ed. Georges Vajda (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1968) 177-78.

120. For example, *b. Meg.* 26a, *b. Git.* 44b.

121. Bahya ben Asher, *Kad ha-Qemah*, 276-77.

122. Scholem, "Meaning of the Torah," 83-86.

123. Joseph ben Todros Abulafia in *Ginzei nistarot*, ed. Jacob Kobak; 3 (1872) 150-51; cited from Silver, *Maimonidean Criticism*, 181.

124. Judah Alfakhar, in *Qovez teshuvot ha-RaMBaM we-'iggerotaw*, ed. A. L. Lichtenberg (Leipzig: L. Schnauss, 1859) 16; cited from Silver, *Maimonidean Criticism*, 176.

125. *Ginzei nistarot*, 3:165; see also Silver, *Maimonidean Criticism*, 145, 157, 188, 189, 192; Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis*, 138-39 and notes. Compare the attitude of the twelfth-century Muslim philosopher Averroes (Ibn Rushd), as discussed by Herring (*Gevi'a Kesef*, 40, with appropriate bibliography).

126. See Heinemann, "Scientific Allegorization," 260-61; Y. F. Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, trans. Louis Schoffman, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1971) 1:289-305; Halkin, "Why Was Levi b. Hayyim Hounded," 65-76; idem, "Yedaiah Bedersi's Apology," in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. Alexander Altmann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967) 165-84;

Charles Touati, "La Controverse de 1303-1306 autour des études philosophiques et scientifiques," *Revue des études juives* 127 (1968) 21-37.

127. See the succinct formulation of Saperstein (*Decoding the Rabbis*, 219-20 n. 62). For echoes of the Goethian view of symbol, see Johan Huizinga, *Waning of the Middle Ages* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959) 205; Auerbach, "Figura," 56-57; C. R. Post, *Mediaeval Spanish Allegory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1915) 4-5; Fletcher, *Allegory*, 13-14. Hollander goes so far as to call the spirit of allegory gnostic (*Allegory in Dante's Commedia*, 5, 11).

128. Wolfson, *Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, 31, 34.

129. Jean Daniélou, *From Shadows to Reality: Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers* (London: Burns & Oates, 1960); *Sacramentum Futuri: Etudes sur les origines de la typologie biblique* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1950) 64-65.

130. Gerhard von Rad, "Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament," trans. John Bright, in *Essays in Old Testament Hermeneutics*, ed. Claus Westermann (Richmond, VA: M. E. Bratcher, 1963) 21. On embarrassment over allegory in general, see G. W. H. Lampe and K. J. Woolcombe, *Essays on Typology* (London: SCM, 1951); Chydenius, "Typological Problem in Dante," 23; de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale*, 2:2:128-30; Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, 89. Erich Auerbach's celebrated essay takes fairly much the same strand, substituting the concept of "figura" for typology ("Figura," in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, 11-76; esp. 30, 54-55).

131. For the dichotomy allegory-symbol, one could substitute the bipolar system of Roman Jakobson, F. de Saussure, and C. Lévi-Strauss of metaphor (corresponding to philosophical allegory) and metonymy (corresponding to kabbalistic interpretation). The former is based on similarity and analogy, and the latter connotes contiguity and participation. See Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1952) 26-82; Hayden White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973) 31-38; Gerhart B. Ladner, "Medieval and Modern Understanding of Symbolism: A Comparison," *Speculum* 54 (1979) 229. However, although this system is superficially attractive, it would seem to do little to relieve the problems created by the allegory-symbol polarity. For reservations on the Scholem-Tishbi dichotomy from a contemporary literary critical point of view, see Uri Shoham, *Ha-mashma'ut ha-'Aberet* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1982) 61-64.

132. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1.1.9; see also Augustine, *Literal Commentary on Genesis* 8.1 (CSEL 28:1, 229; *PL* 34:273); de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale*, 1:44; Chenu, "The Symbolist Mentality," 110-11, 132-33; Auerbach, "Figura," 36, 39.

133. See Johan Chydenius, "The Typological Problem in Dante," 51-91; Joshua Praver, "Jerusalem in the Christian and Jewish Perspectives of the Early Middle Ages," *Gli Ebrei nell'alto medioevo, Settimane di studio del Centro Italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo*, 1978 26 (1980) 2 parts, 2:743.

134. Idem, "The Theory of Medieval Symbolism," *EHL* 27.2 (1970) 24, 34-35. Nonetheless, in Christianity as well theory does not become totally divorced from deed. See Evans, *Language and Logic*, 56: "When the Bible uses allegory, it tells us of something which has been done, not simply so that we may know of it, but in a way that refers beyond itself, so that we may understand that something else has been done or is to be done. The emphasis here is consistently upon what those 'things done' or 'things to be done' signify, that is, upon the meaningfulness of the things themselves, not the words."

135. On multiple interpretation as opposed to reinterpretation, see pp. 254-55, 59.

136. Anatoli, *Malmad*, 187a.

137. Joseph Albo, *Sefer ha-'Iqqarim*, ed. Isaac Husik, 5 vols. (Philadelphia: Jewish

Publication Society, 1930) 3:21, 192-95. Compare the especially strong statement of Hillel of Verona on taking the rabbinic interpretation of the commandments figuratively: "One must not understand them figuratively (*be-derekh mashal*) in order to free oneself from the straightforward sense of the explicit commandment, nor say that such-and such a commandment means such-and-such and it is enough for me to understand that meaning alone. There is no need for me to fulfill it literally. Any one who says this is not part of the Jewish people nor of the followers of Moses our Master and it is forbidden to speak to him. May God remove him from us!" (*Hegyon ha-Nefesh*, 182-83); see also the emphatic disquisition of Immanuel of Rome, *Perush Sefer Mishlei*, 159-61.

138. Lewis, *Allegory of Love*, 125.

139. Quilligan, *Allegory*, 152.

140. Tindall, *The Literary Symbol*, 116; see also Nwiya, *Exégèse coranique*, 67-68: "The allegorical is not the abstraction of the letter nor its negation nor its truth; it is only the way by which the imagination breaks the narrow circle of the letter—that of the law—to gain access to a world which is no longer ruled by the intangible categories of permitted and forbidden."

141. Maintaining the polarity of allegory-symbol, R. Goetschel has attempted to demonstrate that, for all their differences, the interpretations of Jacob's encounter with the angel in Judah Ibn Akinin (via Bahya ben Asher) and the *Zohar* stem from a single "epistémè"; see R. Goetschel, "Interpretation rationaliste et interpretation mystique du combat de Jacob avec l'ange dans l'exégèse juive du moyen âge," *Lectures bibliques* (Brussels, 1980) 41-54, esp. 48-49.

142. Bahya ven Asher, *Kad ha-Qemah*, Sukkah, ed. Chavel, p. 280.

143. Bahya Ibn Paquda, *Hovot ha-Levavot*, ed. Moses Hyamson, 5 vols. (New York, 1925-27) 3:2, p. 192.

144. Bahya ben Asher, *Kad ha-Qemah*, ed. Chavel, p. 274, based on Maimonides, *Guide*, introduction, trans. Pines, p. 12; cf. Anatoli, *Malmad*, introduction, p. 4.

145. *Ibid.*, 163-64. See Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, 126-27.

146. Walter Kaufmann, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1961) 256.

147. *Ibid.* (emphasis added).

148. Abraham Isaac ha-Kohen Kook, *Iggerot*, 3 vols. (Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-Rav Kook, 1961-65) Letter 134, 1:163. Compare the attitude of Philo and Origen toward the positive value of biblical inconsistencies and difficulties along with Hanson's charming comparison to one of G. K. Chesterton's "Father Brown" stories, in which the latter deliberately sets a number of small objects out of place on his route through London as a trail for another (Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, 264).

149. Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, 126-27.

Bibliography

Medieval Jewish biblical exegesis has received surprisingly little attention from scholars since the early days of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* in nineteenth-century Germany. Those surveys that do exist have been done primarily by biblicists, whose concerns do not necessarily coincide with those of medievalists or historians of religion, and the type of interpretation discussed here is generally not treated.

An older, schematic treatment of the subject is Ginzburg (the term "allegory" is used here to refer to any non-"plain sense" type of interpretation). Far more probing and

highly recommended is Heinemann, a somewhat stilted if still readable translation of the German original. Rawidowicz is an essay on exegesis as an accommodation to changing historical circumstances written as a vehicle for the author's own ideology of Jewish history. The most eloquent and accessible essay on kabbalistic exegesis in English is Scholem.

Indispensable for an understanding of the nature of so much medieval exegesis, Christian or Jewish, is Smalley. Auerbach is an illuminating and rich study of the development of the concept of figural interpretation in Christian exegesis. Chenu is a rich essay on allegorical interpretation against the background of medieval intellectual history.

Virtually no original texts relevant to this study have been translated into English, apart from, of course, a classic model of an approach to allegorical exegesis, Moses Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed*. Halkin will give the student a good sense of Ibn Aknin's approach. Vajda is a complete annotated French translation of Ezra of Gerona's kabbalistic commentary on the Song of Songs. A good introduction to philosophical allegoresis of rabbinic midrash is Saperstein.

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Keep Your Sons from Scripture: The Bible in Medieval Jewish Scholarship and Spirituality

Frank Talmage

1. THE ROLE OF SCRIPTURE

The epithet "people of the book" by which the Jews have proudly styled themselves was not self-conferred. It was bestowed upon them, as it was upon Christians and Zoroastrians, by Islam to indicate their status as a people possessing an authentic pre-Quranic revelation and therefore assured of the option of retaining their ancestral religion rather than having to convert. In the case of the Jews, the "book" was the Book, the Hebrew Bible, which Israel saw itself as faithfully preserving and observing. Yet there was by no means universal consensus as to rabbinic Judaism's fidelity to the sacred text. From within, Karaism denounced Rabbanism, which was to be the prevalent form of Judaism, and its "Oral Torah" as a perversion and distortion of the entrusted revelation.¹ From without, early Christianity, in the Augustinian formulation, recognized the Jewish people as the heirs of biblical Israel and consequently entitled to continued existence as the living witness to the pre-Christian tradition. Yet, if we are to accept Jeremy Cohen's thesis, it was the thirteenth-century mendicant friars who realized that rabbinic Judaism was not at all identical with Israelite religion, and that consequently the justification for the continued existence of this heretical cult—loyal to the precepts of neither the Old nor the New Testaments—no longer held.²

The question we raise here, however, is not how "biblical" rabbinic Ju-