Timebound Exegesis

Reading In and Allegorizing

The realization that the rabbis of the Talmud in their interpretation of the Bible occasionally deviated from the “simple” literal meaning of the text provoked condemnation from those outside the rabbinic tradition and puzzled insiders. Spinoza\(^1\) criticized Maimonides for sanctioning deviation from the literal meaning and called such a practice “rash and excessive.” Two hundred years later, A. Geiger\(^2\) chastised the rabbis of the Talmud for having abandoned “the natural meaning” of the text; he attributed this lapse to their “deficient sense of exegesis.” Insiders since the time of Saadya\(^3\) (882–942), one of the most important Jewish scholars of the early Middle Ages, have agonized over the conflict between what the text seems to say and the way it was understood by the rabbis of the Talmud. The discrepancy was particularly pronounced when it affected a matter of law, when a mode of behavior was demanded on the basis of an interpretation that was not congruous with the literal meaning of the text. An aggadic, nonlegal passage could easily be converted into a metaphor or an allegory,\(^4\) blunting the troublesome edges of the literal meaning. In legal matters, however, conversion into metaphor or allegory is inappropriate, indeed forbidden. One faces the dilemma of choosing, in the words of a recent traditional scholar,\(^5\) between “assuming that the Torah expressed itself—God forbid—in an unsuitable manner and accepting the binding result of the rabbinic interpretation, or accepting the literal
meaning of the text and rejecting the rabbinc tradition”—neither a very comforting alternative to the traditionalist.6

Several examples will suffice to indicate the frequent disparity between the meaning of a scriptural verse and its rabbinc interpretation. The simple, literal reading of Exod. 21:24 is “an eye for an eye,” implying physical compensation; the rabbis changed it to mean monetary compensation.7 In another case, biblical law enjoins a woman whose husband died without children to marry one of the deceased husband’s brothers (levirate marriage): “And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his brother who is dead, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel” (Deut. 25:6). The simple, literal meaning of the verse implies that the living brother is a surrogate father for the deceased. He lends his seed to the deceased brother who is considered the “real” father of the firstborn of the levirate marriage. The rabbis changed the meaning of the verse to refer not to the firstborn child, as the literal meaning suggests, but to the firstborn brother, that is the oldest brother of the deceased, who shall perform the levirate marriage.8 A third example is Exod. 22:6–12, which deals with the obligations of custodianship. Literally understood, the Bible distinguishes between giving “silver or chattels for safekeeping” and giving “an ass, an ox, a sheep or any beast into his neighbor’s keeping” with respect to culpability if the object is stolen. If the object that was stolen was inanimate (such as silver or chattels) the keeper is absolved from payment; if it was animate, he is responsible. The rabbis totally ignored the distinction of the simple, literal meaning, and instead distinguished between one who is a “gratuitous bailee” and one who is a “bailee for hire.” If he does not get paid for safekeeping and the object was stolen he is absolved from payment; if he was paid to watch the object and then it was stolen, he is responsible.9 In these instances the rabbis negated both the meaning and the content of the verses: you never extract an eye for an eye; there is no father other than the biological father; and there is absolutely no difference whether the object given for safekeeping was animate or inanimate. There are instances where the rabbis’ changes did not affect the practical outcome implied by the simple literal meaning. However, that was because another verse fulfilled that function, allowing the verse in question to convey other, nonliteral information. For example, in Deut. 24:16, we read: “Fathers shall not be put to death for the children, nor shall the children be put to death for the fathers; every man shall be put to death for his own sin.” The rabbis interpret the phrase “fathers shall not be put to death for the children” to mean that fathers cannot testify (pro or con) in a case involving their children nor can children testify (pro or con) in a case involving their father.10 To the rabbis, not to kill parents because of crimes committed by their children, or children for their parents, is implied in the second half of the verse: “every man shall be put to death for his own sin.” The superfluous exhortation “fathers shall not be put to death for their children” conveys additional information that relatives cannot be witnesses. The simple meaning here is already included in the second part of the verse.

To be sure, the rabbis of the Talmud were not the only ones11 who on occasion abandoned the plain meaning of a text (the meaning that scrupulously follows the tenor of the words and the thrust of the context).12 A similar criticism may be leveled against Christian theologians whenever they have extracted christological predictions from the Old Testament, or when during the medieval period they regarded the writings of pagan authors like Homer and Vergil as Christian allegories. The wavering attitude of the church throughout the ages regarding the divine nature of the Old Testament (so ably documented by J. S. Preus),13 was due to its vacillation in deciding the proper exegetical posture to be adopted vis-à-vis the Old Testament. What ultimately defeated Marcionism and saved the Old Testament for the church was the willingness of the church fathers to interpret the contents of the Old Testament in a manner spiritually edifying to a Christian. They could do so—though not without quarrels and differences of opinion—only because they did not adhere to simple meaning, although they protested all the while that they were following the sensus litteralis.14 When the fifteenth-century chancellor of the University of Paris, Jean Gerson (d. 1429) asserted15 (with ostensible support from Thomas Aquinas) that sensus litteralis is only what the church, as the official, authoritative interpreter of Holy Writ, declares it to be, he was not living up to the standards of textual exegesis later systematized by Spinoza.

However, rabbinic exegesis is distinct from the church’s method of interpretation. The church, for instance, when confronting texts that it wanted to utilize or even adopt and integrate into its system but whose surface meanings were not truly consistent with its
ON MATTERS OF EXEGESIS

Timebound Exegesis

theology, allegorized their meaning (or turned them into metaphors, figures of speech, etc.). The rabbis of the Talmud, in contrast, when confronting a legal text whose surface meaning needed to be revised, changed it, read in a different meaning.  

The difference between reading in and allegorizing is crucial. Allegorization or metaphorization preserves the surface meaning; reading in displaces the surface meaning. In allegory and the like the simple meaning is retained, albeit transformed; in reading in, the simple meaning is rejected. Allegorization burdens the text, strains it; reading in changes the text. Allegorization adds to the text (superadditio). In the celebrated example of the four senses of meaning given by the medieval Christian exegetes, Jerusalem stands for both the physical city of Jerusalem (the simple, literal meaning) and the church (the allegorical meaning). Its tropological meaning is the soul, and its anagogical meaning is the heavenly city. These meanings are not mutually exclusive. Reading in, however, excludes the simple, literal meaning. The rabbis also allegorized the nonlegal sections of the Bible (or metaphorized or treated them as figures of speech). An entire book, the Song of Songs, was interpreted by some rabbis as an allegory of man's love for God. They also added to texts, indeed quite frequently. They are the distinguished authors of that fascinating, rich and multifaceted genre called aggada, whose legitimacy—though not its reliability as a mode of interpretation—was never questioned. Aggada contains all the means and modes of interpretation employed by the church fathers, and scholars have duly noted that it is similar to the way the church fathers interpret the Bible. However, in law in general and in rabbinic law in particular, allegorization and the like are inadmissible. When modification is called for, there is often no choice but to “read in,” changing the simple meaning. Since law is so dominant in rabbinic thought and dependence on the Bible so fundamental, the process of reading in is more pronounced and prominent in rabbinic literature. But it is not entirely unique to it. Those who claim that capital punishment is unconstitutional because it violates the Eighth Amendment’s guarantee against “cruel and unusual punishment” are reading into the constitutional text which says: “no person shall be deprived of life or liberty without due process of law,” clearly implying that with due process of law a life may be deprived. One may still argue, however, given the present climate of opinion and the ethnicity of most of those who are awaiting the death penalty, that no due process of law is possible. This argument does not read into the text. It does, however, add to it, giving new meaning to “due process” that most likely was not intended by its framers. Adherence to any system of written law may on occasion stimulate reading in. When that system is justified as an expression of the will and desire of a higher being, like the Bible, reading in is almost endemic. That is why rabbinic exegesis, centered as it is on law, is more exposed than any other kind of exegesis to the charge that it does not strictly adhere to the “natural” meaning of a text.

Interpretive States of Mind

What were the reactions to the charges against the rabbis? They were generally of two kinds: one, put forward most forcefully by what can best be termed apologists, denied that the rabbis violated the simple, literal meaning of the biblical text; the other response was the denial by certain exegetes of the Middle Ages that the Rabbis intended to do away with simple, literal meaning. The former claimed that the rabbis, more than any other exegetes, were committed to the simple literal meaning, called peshat in later Hebrew, which they perfected and studied systematically and comprehensively. What appears to us as applied (in the sense of “forced, worked”) meaning is actually “peshat-in-depth,” based on rules of grammar known to the rabbis of the Talmud and subsequently forgotten. Not all apologists subscribe to this extreme position, nor do they all reduce the problem of peshat and derash to matters of knowledge of syntax and grammar. Yet all of them maintain that fundamentally the rabbis of the Talmud did not violate the simple, literal meaning (i.e., the peshat) except in a few instances where they say so themselves. It is because of an inability of the critics of the rabbis to comprehend properly the divine text of the Bible that many an exposition of the rabbis, called in later Hebrew derasha, appears inconsistent with the simple, literal meaning, while in fact it is not. Most apologists lived in or close to the modern era, a period whose “interpretive state of mind” encourages adherence to the simple literal meaning. Their own commitment to peshat is there-
fore understandable. What is problematic, however, is the transfer-
ence of this conviction retroactively to talmudic times, making the
rabbis experts in peshat.

Medieval exegetes, on the other hand, claimed that the scriptural
verses which the rabbis cite in cases of applied meaning (derash) are
merely an asmakhta, a support, a kind of Biblical ornament for
laws (or beliefs) whose authority was not actually the verses quoted,
but either a tradition or a rabbinic ordinance. Unlike the apologists,
they admit that many talmudic derashot (expositions) are not in
line with the simple, literal meaning. They claim, however, that the
rabbis never intended with these derashot to replace the “natural”
meaning of peshat. The derashot come only to add richness and
texture to the text, and reciprocally to endow the laws (or beliefs)
with greater authority by associating them with the Bible. Associa-
tion, however, should not be confused with derivation. If a verse is
to function as a true biblical source, it must flow from the simple,
literal meaning. Laws and beliefs that do not emerge from the
peshat are not entitled to be designated as scriptural, and must be
classified as either traditional or rabbinic. The medieval exegetes’
position assumes that derashot do not contradict the peshat. How-
ever, their view cannot explain those instances where, as in the case
of an eye for an eye, the simple meaning and the applied meaning,
the peshat and the derash, are mutually exclusive. You cannot
logically have both a physical eye for an eye and an eye in pecuniary
compensation. There the derasha replaces the simple meaning. In
those instances, the medieval exegetes, like the apologists, were
derapeutically trying to elevate the applied meaning to the rank of
simple meaning.

I would like to suggest a different approach: to recognize that
rabbinic deviation from simple meaning is a historical fact, and to
see it as a stage in the development of the interpretation of texts in
general, without assigning either praise or blame. This shifts the
focus of the debate from concentrating on rabbinic violation of
peshat to the development of rabbinic attitudes towards peshat.
The view presented here denies the two assumptions made by the
aforementioned schools, that is, that our sense of peshat is uni-
versal, and that the rabbis shared this valuation. It is my contention
that the rabbis did not share our devotion to the simple literal
meaning. Exegesis is “time bound.” Each interpretive state of mind
has its own system of exegesis, and the rabbis’ interpretive state of
mind did not dictate to them that the simple, literal meaning was
inherently superior to the applied meaning. Although they gener-
ally began their interpretations of the Bible with the simple, literal
meaning of the text, they did not feel committed to it. The slightest
provocation, most often an apparently superfluous word or letter,
moved them to abandon it.

This position is difficult for a modern exegete to grasp. The
modern state of mind demands a greater faithfulness to the simple,
literal meaning (to the peshat), and a greater obligation to preserve
it. Only in the face of virtually insurmountable problems is this
approach abandoned. The presence of an extra word, letter, or even
an entire phrase can be easily seen as a stylistic peculiarity. Peshat,
from this point of view, is synonymous with exegetical truth, and
one does not abandon truth lightly. But to the rabbis of the Tal-
mud, deviation from peshat was not repugnant. Their interpretive
state of mind saw no fault with an occasional reading in. It was not
against their exegetical conscience, even though it may be against
ours.

We are thus necessarily more historically conscious, inasmuch as
we hold that the commitment to the literal meaning of a text is a
product of historical development. This development will be more
fully appreciated after one has read chapter 2, which traces the
history of rabbinic exegesis and which, together with chapter 3,
constitutes the major proof for this position. The remainder of this
chapter will be devoted to removing possible objections that may
occur to a learned reader upon hearing the notion of time bound
exegesis for the first time (in the course of which material from
these two chapters will be utilized, hence, the slight duplication)
and to making this notion intellectually more palatable. Only after
the reader has overcome his natural resistance to this notion will he
be susceptible to evidence.

Miscellaneous Objections

First we have to establish when a preference for simple, literal
meaning over applied meaning, peshat over derash, first emerged in
rabbinic literature. If it can be shown that this preference existed
already in the early talmudic period, any deviation from it must be
attributed to negligence or knowing violation of that principle. On the other hand, if it can be shown that the rabbis of the Talmud were aware of the distinction between peshat and derash, yet at the slightest provocation switched from simple meaning to applied meaning, one must conclude that they simply did not have the absolute aversion to reading in that is so characteristic of the modern exegete. A widespread and pervasive resort to reading in cannot be attributed to ignorance, but to a collective interpretive state of mind that had not conceded absolute superiority to simple, literal meaning.27

Of critical importance in proving that rabbinic exegesis did not subscribe to the modern sense of literal meaning is the analysis of the famous dictum in the Babylonian Talmud,28 ein mikra yotze middei peshuto (No text may be deprived of its peshat). The crux of the matter is the meaning of the word peshat, both in this dictum and in other places (in different inflectional forms) where the context indicates that the term is being used as a mode of interpretation. Is it—as it has been understood at least since the time of R. Samuel ben Chofni (d. 1013)29—similar or equivalent to the simple, literal meaning, in contrast with derash, which generally designates applied meaning? In that case, the rabbis of the Talmud themselves, by asserting the permanency and inviolability of the simple meaning, made it superior to the applied meaning; and their occasional abandonment of the simple meaning could not be explained as reflecting a state of mind. If, however, peshat means “context”—as I hope to prove in chapter 3—then all this dictum asserts is that any meaning ascribed to the verse must cover the full text, including what is said before and what is said after it. Etymologically, the root p-sh-t means extension, continuation, context. If this is the word’s meaning, there is no evidence that the rabbis of the Talmud gave precedence to literal meaning. Indeed, from some places30 in the Talmud where the root p-sh-t is not employed, it can be proven that the rabbis of the Talmud did not always prefer simple over applied meaning. They possessed no built-in sense of the superiority of peshat. Peshat did not take hold of them at their time.

A striking example of the rabbis’ not honoring our modern sense of peshat is the observation made by two rabbis, one from the sixteenth century and one from the nineteenth century,31 pertaining to Lev. 19:14: “Thou shall not put a stumbling block before the blind.” Nowhere in the Talmud, observed these scholars, does it say that to put a physical stumbling block before a physically blind person is a violation of this injunction. The Talmud says in several places32 that if anyone knowingly gives false advice to another person, the giver violates the above injunction. It goes even further and says33 that if a person abets the wrongdoing of another person, the abettor violates the above injunction. It is putting a spiritual stumbling block before a spiritually blind man. But it does not say that the same is true if a person has put an actual stumbling block before a physically blind man. This silence is due to the rabbis’ ignorance of the literal meaning of the injunction, as if it did not occur to them that when the law says “Thou shall not put a stumbling block before the blind” it means a physical stumbling block before a physically blind man. Maimonides himself, in his book on the commandments, surprisingly seems to say just that, that the simple meaning of this injunction is not to give false advice (commandment no. 299). However, the rabbis of the Talmud knew very well what the literal meaning of this injunction was. They explicitly say (b. Nid. 57a) that the Samaritans (and the Sadducees), who do not believe in the oral law as the authoritative interpretation of Scripture, and who explain every verse in the Bible literally, understand the above injunction to refer only to a physical stumbling block put before a physically blind man. Giving false advice or abetting wrongdoing is not included in the literal meaning. The rabbis of the Talmud, for reasons unknown, rejected the simple, literal meaning of the phrase and preferred the applied meaning. Not that putting a physical stumbling block before a physically blinded man was permitted, according to the rabbis of the Talmud. There is another verse that forbids it: “Cursed be he that makes the blind go astray in the way” (Deut. 27:18). (By relegating it to the other verse in Deuteronomy, they made it less of a crime, only a curse. Removing redundancy, therefore, is not the motive. When the rabbis perceived a redundancy, it was usually the less severe that is expositcd.)

What makes this example unique is not the abandonment of the simple meaning as such—there are many instances where the rabbis of the Talmud abandoned the literal meaning—but that they did so in a case where the abandonment was least expected. And what is
more, they did not even find it necessary to explain why, unlike the Samaritans (and the Sadducees), they did not subsume the placing of a physical stumbling block before an actual blind man under the biblical injunction. We would have expected them to include all three categories under this injunction: placing a physical stumbling block, giving false advice, and abetting wrongdoing. They were completely silent about this. In the other instances an explanation, usually based on a redundancy of a word or a letter, is given for the abandonment of the simple, literal meaning. Here, it is simply ignored. The attachment to the simple, literal meaning, which is so unflinching in the modern exegete, held no special allure for the rabbis of the Talmud. They easily dispensed with it, sometimes, as in this instance, not even explaining its absence.

One ought not, however, deduce from the above example that the rabbis of the Talmud were aware of the simple, literal meaning as we understand it, and always attributed such a view to the Samaritans (and the Sadducees). Our sense and the rabbis' sense of what constitutes simple, literal meaning do not always agree. Their sense of the simple, literal meaning was more inclusive. They felt less committed to our limited sense of peshat, seeing it instead as larger and wider in scope. To the rabbis, there was less of a distinction between simple and applied meaning with respect to both scope and primacy of peshat than there is to us. Scope, too, is subject to the respective differences in the interpretive state of mind between the rabbis and the modern exegete, and it is reflected accordingly. We have a narrower definition of, and a greater commitment to, the simple, literal meaning. For the rabbis, the Samaritans (and Sadducees) were the representatives par excellence of the simple literal meaning. Yet, on the same page where the Talmud transmits the Samaritans' (and the Sadducees') interpretations of the verse in Lev. 19:14 (with respect to the stumbling block), it also attributes to them in a slightly different context an exposition of Deut. 19:14 that even by rabbinic standards is farfetched. Thus the rabbis did not equate peshat with simple, literal meaning as we know it, but with a wider scope of expositions. Indeed, most, if not all of the rebuttals offered (in the b. Menach. 65a–66a and parallels) against the Sadducees' interpretation of “the morrow of the Sabbath” (Lev. 23:15) do not coincide with our sense of what constitutes the simple, literal meaning. That could be said also about other biblical expositions attributed to the Samaritans (and the Sadducees) in other places in the Talmud (particularly in b. Hor. 4a). The rabbis clearly do not conform to our sense of the simple, literal meaning. If one assumes that the rabbis subscribed to our sense of peshat, then these examples may cause us to view the rabbis as inconsistent in their perception of Samaritan (and Sadducean) laws. In fact, however, they were quite consistent. Those laws that the rabbis, not necessarily we today, considered explicitly stated they thought ought to be binding even on the Samaritans (and Sadducees); whereas those laws that they considered derived from reading in (or adding to), though equally binding on themselves, were nevertheless treated as nonexplicit and therefore not binding on the Samaritans (and Sadducees).

Asmakhta: Biblical Support for Rabbinic Law

Aside from understanding the meaning of peshat, one also has to reconcile the thesis that rabbinic exegesis is time bound, that the rabbis of the Talmud viewed peshat differently than we do today, with the history and employment of the concept of asmakhta (support), found frequently in the Talmud. Some medieval scholars applied this term to the relationship between peshat and derash, asserting that the rabbis of the Talmud knew, if not in all cases, at least in most of them, that reading in does not represent the genuine meaning of the text, that the content occasioned by reading in is either rooted in tradition or is rabbinically instituted. The biblical verses quoted are not the sources of content, only their “support.” They were cited either to add authority to the tradition by showing that it was already vaguely hinted at in the written law or to facilitate memorization. (Later laws are more easily remembered when they are studied and remembered together with the Bible.) If this is true there is no need to posit timebound barriers between the rabbis of the Talmud and the modern exegete. The mindset remains more or less the same, but now that the oral law is also written and visibly separated from the written law, the need to “ornament” rabbinic (or traditional) ordinances with biblical verses (the condition of authority) or to facilitate memorization through some connection to the Bible is not as urgent or pressing. The modern
exegete may avail himself less of the *asmakhta* than the rabbis did in halakha. In principle, however, he understands it. In a similar situation he might even duplicate it. In fact, modern preachers do much the same in aggada, using Scriptural verses for ornamental purposes in their sermons. The rabbis may have overdone it; they did not misdo it.

I do not believe that the rabbis considered reading in extraneous to the "true" meaning, nor were the verses of the Bible they used intended to be a merely decorative support. The word *asmakhta* (first used relatively late, in the fifth century) is never employed in talmudic sources as a means of explaining the repugnance of reading in, since the rabbis of the Talmud, unlike the rabbis of medieval times, did not consider reading in offensive. The word is exclusively used in a situation where a law contains a biblical prooftext, yet is treated as though it were rabbinically instituted. There are differences with respect to severity of observance between a law which is biblically commanded and a law which is rabbinically ordained.\(^3\) When practical behavior (based on respected authority) treats a law as being of the second category, while the official formulation of the law attaches it to a biblical verse, the rabbis may declare that the verse is *asmakhta*, implying that the verse is not really the source of the law and that the law rightly behaves as a rabbinically instituted one. *Asmakhta* arose in the early fifth century because of the increasing number of rabbinic ordinances having biblical prooftexts. Prior to that time rabbinic ordinances or their equivalent were considered biblically charged since, according to the interpretation prevalent throughout Jewish history, the Bible (Deut. 17:8-12) gave the sages the right to institute new laws. In effect, the sages were acting on behalf of the Bible. Sectarians knew no difference between what was later called *de-oraita* (biblical) and *de-rabbanan* (rabbinic). The list of prohibitions in Jubilees 49-50, for instance, contains both laws that are written in the Bible and laws that were added later (presumably by the scholars) without a discernible difference. The Babylonian Talmud (*Tevam*. 90b, *Sanh*. 46a) reports that during the Hellenistic rule (pre-Hasmonean) a man was put to death by stoning for having ridden a horse on the Sabbath—a rabbinic prohibition. There was no difference between biblical and rabbinic. The blessing recited to this day before the performance of a biblical commandment, namely: "Blessed be Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with your commandments and bid us . . . ." Biblical and rabbinic ordinances are both divine commandments. The origin of the blessing is pretannaitic, and it was equally applied to both, biblical and rabbinic. The difference in severity between a biblical injunction and a rabbinic ordinance most likely emerged during the tannaitic period. The first clear distinction we hear made between biblical and rabbinic is by sages contemporaries of R. Joshua (*m. Yad*. 3:2), a late first century Palestinian scholar. Subsequently, the number of rabbinic ordinances increased not only because the rabbis added new ordinances,\(^4\) but also because gradually a great many laws previously considered biblical (with prooftexts) now became rabbinic. For a while it looked as if some rabbinic ordinances were both biblical and rabbinic, rabbinic in nature and biblical in their scriptural justification.

Ultimately, the question arose how can a rabbinic law be accompanied by a biblical prooftext and remain rabbinically ordained. It took approximately three hundred years from the time of R. Joshua until R. Ashi (d. in 427)\(^41\) to suggest the term *asmakhta*. He in turn most likely was influenced by Rava (died c. 353) who is quoted in three places in the Babylonian Talmud (*Sukk*. 28b, *Kid*. 9a, *Nid*. 32a-b) to the effect that certain laws, though contained within biblical expositions, are traditions (presumably given to Moses on Mount Sinai, not yet rabbinic) which the rabbis later attached to verses of the Bible. It is mentioned in the Talmud only once (*Yev*. 52b) that R. Ashi used the term *asmakhta*. The term spread, however, quite rapidly; for the *stammaim*—the anonymous authors of sections of the Talmud, who flourished soon after R. Ashi—utilized it close to twenty-five times. By the eleventh century the notion of *asmakhta* had come to mean any biblical exposition that did not live up to current standards of exegesis. This meaning is medieval, not talmudic. Nowhere does the Talmud use the word *asmakhta* in connection with an exposition that has overstepped the boundaries of interpretation and violated what seems to be the genuine meaning of the text. Nowhere in the Talmud\(^42\) do we find the word *asmakhta* (or any other word or phrase for that matter) used as an apology for reading in.\(^43\) The rabbis of the Talmud, unlike their colleagues of the Middle Ages,
did not consider reading in a violation of the integrity of the text as long as the whole verse was involved and no part of it was taken out of context. That may not suit our exegetical sensibilities, but it cannot be denied.

A good illustration is the passage in b. Chul. 17b. It reads as follows:

R. Hisda said: Whence do we learn from Scripture that it is necessary to examine the slaughtering knife? from the verse (in 1 Sam. 14:34): “And slaughter with this and eat” (“with this” means the knife examined and checked). But is it not obviously necessary to do so since if the gullet is perforated the animal is terefa, unkosher? [will not a knife with a notch most certainly perforate and tear the gullet, asks the stam, the anonymous author, and answers:] We mean, whence do we learn from Scripture that it is essential that the knife be examined by a sage? [And that is from the verse: “And slaughter with this (the knife examined by the sage) and eat.”] But surely does not R. Yochanan say that the ruling that one must present the knife to a sage for examination was laid down only out of respect to the sages? The rule is actually rabbinic, and the verse adduced is an asmakhta, merely a support.

The simple, literal meaning of “and slaughter with this” has nothing to do with examining the knife by the sage or by anybody else. It means slaughter the animal here on the stone (referred to in 1 Sam. 14:33). Nevertheless, the stammaim were willing to accept R. Hisda’s exposition of that verse in 1 Samuel, even though it is against the simple, literal meaning. They categorized it as asmakhta only because R. Yochanan declared the examination of the slaughter knife by a sage to be rabbinically ordained. The discrepancy between the text and the exposition did not bother them.

Talmudic Attitudes Toward Reading In

But, the perceptive reader may wonder, is not the very need for an asmakhta to resolve the contradictory nature of rabbinic ordinances having biblical prooftexts an indication that the process of reading in was gradually weakening during the talmudic period? Were it in full force, rabbinic ordinances with biblical prooftexts—
of Num. 27:11 expresses [b. B. Ba. 111b] a modern sentiment against rabbinic midrash in general, namely that they “take a sharp knife and dissect biblical verses”) is offering an alternative interpretation of the verse in a way that is jarring to a modern ear.\(^{46}\) The old and new intermingled. Among the rebuttals offered (in b. Menach. 65b–66a and parallels) against the Sadducees’ interpretation of “the morrow of the sabbath,” Rava does not choose the one that is to our taste, the closest to the simple, literal meaning.\(^{44}\) Rava sensed what was coming in the future but remained anchored in the past. And it continued that way until medieval times. 

This is not to say that the rabbis’ interpretive state of mind remained static, until medieval times. The entirety of chapter two is devoted to proving the contrary, that there was a linear development stretching from the late biblical books to our own times in the direction of greater respect for the integrity of the text. This respect can be partially equated with the simple, literal meaning. I say partially only because staying closer to the integrity of the text does not necessarily imply also staying closer to authorial intention, which is commonly identified with the simple, literal meaning. “Integrity of the text” means no violence to the substantive meaning of the text, no twisting of the text. A certain type of adding to the text, for example, may not be congruous with authorial intention, yet not violate the tenor of the text. Making earlier texts refer to later events may run counter to authorial intention but not necessarily to the words and context of the text. In the following chapter, we also state that reading in, in the more technical sense of displacing the simple, literal meaning as a mode of interpretation, was discontinued in the third century if not earlier. From the third century on, rabbinic exegesis displays a noticeable trend away from reading in (used here as an inclusive term for any interpretation that requires straining the words or the context of the text). Rabbinic exegesis was far from being static.

What I have been saying up to this point is that neither the need for asmakhla nor the increase of rabbinic ordinances (certainly not the use of the word vadai, which took place in the first century) indicates that the rabbis of the Talmud emphasized peshat to the extent of retroactively interpreting earlier expositions (derashot) to make them compatible with their sense of the value of peshat. This was done only during the Middle Ages. In talmudic times, even as late as the fifth century, the simple, literal meaning had not yet acquired such an authority. Instead, the rabbis of the Talmud sanctioned earlier derashot that were not in line with their own sense of interpretive priority.\(^{47}\) They recognized the validity of such derashot only if they were composed in the past. The authority of the past overcame their internal opposition and they accepted these derashot without trying to explain them away. The exegetical policy of explaining away the Derashot of the past became a hallmark of medieval interpretation.

**Metaphor as Plain Meaning**

I ought to remark that throughout I am using the word literal as a synonym for peshat (plain meaning). It is not intended to exclude metaphors or allegories, etc. from being peshat. Sometimes, in fact, a metaphorical or allegorical interpretation is the plain meaning, the peshat, borne out by the text. Rather, the terms literal and peshat exclude an interpretation which is not implied by the extant literature, an interpretation which is extraneous to the text, which is being read into it from the outside. An interesting example is the putting on of the phylacteries. The rabbis and apparently also the sectarians were convinced that the verses in Exod. 13:9 (“This shall serve you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead”) and in Deut. 6:8 (“Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a frontlet on your forehead”) command the placing of actual boxes, containing certain biblical passages, on the forehead and on the hand.\(^{44}\) They interpreted the verses “literally,” not metaphorically. However, the plain meaning, the peshat, supports the contention that the verses, particularly the verse in Exodus, ought to be understood metaphorically.\(^{40}\) Here the rabbis deviated from the peshat by being literal. They, on the other hand, did not even find it necessary, either in the tannaitic Mekhilta on Exodus or in the tannaitic Sifrei on Deuteronomy, to raise and reject the possibility of a metaphorical interpretation. It is characteristic of midrash to posit untenable expositions and reject them. In connection with the putting on of the phylacteries, the possibility of a metaphorical interpretation was not even offered as an exposition, so convinced were the rabbis of the literal meaning of these verses. Only in medieval times, when the exegetical temper had
changed, was the possibility of a metaphorical interpretation seriously considered. The Karaites advocated it; and even some Rabbanites, like the Rashbam, thought that the peshat favored a metaphorical interpretation. With the new state of mind closer to what we today call peshat, the tendency was more toward a metaphorical interpretation, the literal being ruled out as not according with the peshat.

**Changing Mindsets: A Homeric Analogy**

Conventionally, historians allow for a broad intellectual understanding of earlier periods. Even when they posit irreversible trends, permanent changes, newly emergent qualities, etc., they do not assume radical breaks. Some level of continuity remains, allowing the intelligent person from any period to comprehend the intellectual activity of another period. Applied to the realm of exegesis, that would mean that an interpretation of a text offered in an earlier period should be comprehensible to a person of a later period, though he may not necessarily agree with that interpretation. He at least should be able to conceive of the earlier exposition as an exegetical possibility. However, if we accept the notion that the rabbis of the Talmud occasionally considered reading in as reflective of the true meaning of the text, we are positing a distinct discontinuity in exegetical tradition. A modern exegete cannot comprehend reading in as conveying the intention of the author. In order to understand the rabbis' mentality, the modern exegete must accept that what is exegetically impossible for him and his contemporaries was actually quite possible two thousand years ago. Moreover, he must both posit and overcome distance. Recognizing that he is far removed from the rabbis' mode of exegesis, that he is, so to speak, operating on different interpretive wavelengths, he must yet try to grasp their state of mind, appreciate their exegetical flavor. To do this is not easy. Paradoxical relationships are not accepted easily. Direct explanation will not help, since the terms that go into the explanation, the components that are supposed to make the explanation intelligible, are not transferable from period to period.

Unlike the conventional view, the periods remain distinct, each one with its own mode of cognition, not necessarily accessible to people from another period.

An analogy may help explain this difference between periods. By showing that there are more instances like the one I posited in connection with reading into a text, drawn from totally different subjects, but sharing similar intellectual patterns, the modern exegete may become more credulous. Admittedly, analogies do not elucidate the inner reason of the object under question; they do, however, make it more believable, undermining the logical objections. For retaining paradoxes as paradoxes, that is without dissolving their contradictory content, nothing is as efficacious as analogy. It keeps the paradox intact, protects it from objections. Analogy is anchored in fact, whereas the logical objections are based on reason. Therefore, the former always has the right of way. To support the notion that reading in was once considered to be the true, more palpable meaning, I will quote an analogy from Homeric studies. The subject is distant enough yet demands a similar exertion on the part of the exegete to abandon his present mode of thinking in order to grasp the state of mind of an earlier period. I am referring to Bruno Snell's thesis that the Greeks of Homer's day had no conscious idea of a unified human self or a unified human body.

For a modern man, it is difficult to conceive of someone who describes in great detail the different human limbs and their multiple functions without being aware of the body as a whole; or of someone who depicts with depth and insight various intellectual activities without being aware of the intellect as such; or of someone who know life's intricacies but not the soul. Yet that is what Homeric man was, according to Snell. The Iliad and the Odyssey never refer to, nor even have words for, the soul, the intellect, or the body. This trio's disparate actions fill the pages of these epic poems, but they themselves are never mentioned as such. To us parts must add up to a whole; limbs, functions and activities imply something larger, more inclusive, an abstract unifier, an organic whole. Not so to those ancient Greeks. Their state of mind did not necessitate the concept of unified wholes. They saw everything as aggregates, as constituents, not unity—a phenomenon incomprehensible to a modern man. Therein lies the analogy to the reading in into a text...
of the rabbis. In both instances, modern man's incomprehension is due not to a lack of information, nor to not knowing all the pertinent facts, but to a chronological, time-bound barrier. Were the ancient Greeks asked (given all the relevant evidence) to explain how they can ignore the unified body, unified intellect, and the unified soul; or were the rabbis asked (given all the relevant evidence) to account for their acceptance of reading in as reflecting the genuine intention of the author, they would respectively answer that they do not feel these tensions, that they do not see them. What separates modern man from the Homeric lack of a concept of the whole and from the exegesis of the rabbis is not the higher degree of knowledge accumulated in the course of generations, or a more complete set of reliable data, but the inexorable clock of universal time. Little can be done to change it other than to try to empathize, to lift oneself out of one's contemporary mindset, if only for a while, in order not to cavalierly dismiss the thoughts of an earlier period, or, what is worse, to distort them apologetically, denying a priori that people could have had such conceptions.

It should be noted that according to our approach, the choice is not between acceptance or rejection of rabbinic exegesis. It is both acceptance and rejection. It is rejection because for a person today to read into a text is tantamount to falsifying that text. It is acceptance because on our account, we do not attribute falsification to the rabbis. Their reading into the text was as authentic then as is our aversion to it today. There is no single exegetical criterion, no single interpretive state of mind uniting all periods. This, however, does not necessarily imply that the criterion of a particular generation is entirely arbitrary. Exegesis from one generation to the next has inexorably evolved in one direction—that of diminishing textual yield. As time marched on, the text per se seems to have yielded less and less. That process is far from being concluded.

The history of rabbinic exegesis consists of biblical exegesis (as practiced by the rabbis of the Talmud) and talmudic exegesis (the way the rabbis of the Talmud interpreted the Mishnah and other authoritative rabbinic texts). Rabbinic biblical exegesis and talmudic exegesis overlap in time but are distinct in nature, each with its own momentum of change, each with its own course of development. Their constitutive parts display different modes of assumptions, different inner creative forces. Yet both, over time, tended toward a greater preference for less interference with the actual wording of the text, a greater preference for peshat.

**Biblical Exegesis: Historical Survey**

*Reading In: From the Bible to the Third Century C.E.*

The process of reading in, in the sense of displacing the content of the simple meaning (the case of “an eye for an eye” serves as a paradigm), has its origin in antiquity. Perhaps even in late biblical times, this way was employed to solve contradictions found, for instance, in 2 Chr. 35:13: “and they cooked the Passover (lamb) with fire.” This unusual combination of cooking with fire (cooking is usually done with water) is the result of a harmonization of Exod. 12:9 (“Do not eat it [the Passover] raw or cooked in water”) and