Applied *Peshat*: Historical-Critical Method and Religious Meaning

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Yochanan Muffs is scholar of rare intellectual breadth. Since the range of topics in which he is interested and expert is so vast, one might appropriately write in his honor in any number if areas. Yet, the strand underlying, if not unifying, his writings and studies is that of meaning. It is Professor Muffs' appreciation of "significance," therefore, which motivates this article in tribute to an esteemed colleague. I am all the more grateful for this privilege since it was Yochanan Muffs' teaching (nearly twenty years ago in a course on Jeremiah and Second Isaiah) that first induced me to pursue advanced biblical studies.[1]

It is not clear whether ideas can exist independent of their formulation in language (even granting that the formulation may remain unverbalized),[2] but preparing this paper has compelled me to articulate and refine some of the notions which I have accepted in an imprecise way over the past years. In a sense, this article is a response to a series of broadly-phrased questions, indirectly-voiced concerns, and perplexed looks that have been a refrain or undercurrent for many discussions in classes I have taught to undergraduate, graduate, and rabbinical students during the past decade. The unasked, but motivating, question is this: aside from antiquarian interest, why study the *peshat*?

Just below the surface of that question lies the following one: even for those to whom a *peshat* approach[3] to biblical texts is not inimical, what is to be gained by using it? Will "historical-critical" analysis[4] of the biblical text provide the sort of information that parallels religious inquiry but never intersects it? If so, *peshat*

1. I am grateful to the Abbell Research and Publication Fund of the Jewish Theological Seminary for a summer research stipend enabling me to further this project and to Sarah Diamant for her research assistance.

2. The question is considered by Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism & Semiotics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1977) and emerges from earlier work on linguistics. See, e.g., Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye in collaboration with Albert Riedlinger, trans. with introduction and notes by Wade Baskin (New York, 1959; reprint: 1966).

3. The term *peshatic* is not (yet) in use, though it would parallel the term *midrashic*. Although some scholars employ the terms *pashtan* and *pasthanic*, for the practitioner and for the method, respectively (see, e.g., Jon D. Levenson, "The Hebrew Bible, The Old Testament, and Historical Criticism," in Richard E. Friedman and H. G. M. Williamson, eds., *The Future of Biblical Studies: The Hebrew Scriptures* [Atlanta, 1987], 19–59), it is preferable to avoid those terms because they also denote "simpleton" and "simplistic" in modern Hebrew.

4. Historical-critical and comparative methods are mentioned here as virtually synonymous with *peshat*, even though they are not identical terms. The synonymity reflects an understanding of *peshat* endorsed below.

study would be praiseworthy for expanding our "knowledge base" about ancient Israel and its sacred literature. Even a religious believer could study biblical texts using accepted academic tools, by compartmentalizing scholastic and religious realms. However, can we hope for even more without compromising academic integrity: that *peshat* analysis might promote religious insight or appreciation of the *Tanakh* as a religious guide?[5] In an attempt to avoid intellectual schizophrenia, Susan Schneiders raises similar concerns about New Testament study:

> What is involved in an integral, that is transformative, interpretation of the biblical text? . . . Traditional historical critical exegesis, because it deals with the text only as an historical document, is necessary but not sufficient for integral interpretation. . . . I believed, with Vatican II's document on divine revelation, that scripture was a "pure and lasting fount of spiritual life". . . . But there seemed no legitimate way to introduce this interest or conviction into my study of the New Testament. Indeed, the type of objectivity that was the ideal of historical critical exegesis and that controlled its agenda and methodology seemed to forbid, if not any interest in such matters, at least any explicit intrusion of such concerns into the scholarly study of the text.[6]

Thus, for students of the New Testament, historical study has been largely irrelevant to the religious venture. To understand why this has been so for the Hebrew Scriptures, too, let us review several relevant points from the history of its exegesis.

As is now widely understood, the process of interpretation—of exegesis—had started by the time the biblical canon was complete and almost certainly even before that, when the Bible was still "the Bible-in-the-making."[7] Kugel's catalogue of the factors that compelled an urgency of interpretation—matters of language, law, and lesson[8]—as well as countless methods of exegesis, should not, however, confuse us. Notwithstanding the proliferation of hermeneutic approaches, what is most significant is whether a method fits into the category of *peshat* or of *derash*. For the present we proceed with the assumption that every exegetical exercise falls into one of the two divisions, though it is not always easy to "assign" a category.[9]

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5. Below we will briefly raise the ancillary issue of whether use of the *peshat* might affect religious observance, but that outcome is extremely unlikely.

6. *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco, 1991), 3, 2.

7. James Kugel, "Early Interpretation: The Common Background of Late[r] Forms of Biblical Exegesis," in Kugel and Rowan A. Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia, 1986), 57. The compulsion to elaborate is so great that a text may comment on itself! See Meir Weiss, *The Bible from Within: The Method of Total Interpretation* (Jerusalem, 1984); Avigdor Shinan and Yair Zakovitch, "Midrash on Scripture and Midrash Within Scripture," in Sara Japhet, ed., *Studies in the Bible 1986* (Jerusalem, 1986), 257–77; and Michael Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1989), 3–18. This phenomenon was already known by Rabbi Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam, 12th century France); see his comment that *wĕnil'û* (Exod. 7:18) is glossed by *wĕlo'-yākĕlû* (in v. 21).

8. Ibid., 28–39.

9. Whether the two approaches represent an actual dichotomy or may be seen on a continuum is not entirely resolved. For example, in the Buber-Rosenzweig translation method, the element of consistently translating a Hebrew word by the same German root regardless of context reflects certain aspects of *midrash* no less than of *peshat*.

Rabbinic traditions recognize two additional strata (*remez*, "hint," and *sôd*, "secret") and refer to the four together by the acronym *pardes*. For reasons outlined below, however, we differentiate between *peshat* and "non-*peshat*," comprised of the other three.

Many earlier discussions of the topic that articulated the distinctiveness of the two approaches often misrepresented the *peshat* by translating it as the "simple meaning" or the "plain meaning."[10] Aside from the pejorative connotations of those terms, they are often an incorrect description of the approach and do not capture its essence. No better, and more deceptive for its apparent objectivity, is the nomenclature of the "literal meaning" for the *peshat.* Such definitions are not only demeaning; they are inaccurate. The *peshat* may, and often must, comprise a metaphorical understanding of the text. Literary and poetic devices are seldom "literal," even though they may clearly be the *peshat.* It is a poor language which does not reach beyond literality, a harsh, prosaic language without idiom, and biblical Hebrew is clearly not so impoverished. Literalism, therefore, is not a more "accurate" understanding of the biblical text and may be a distortion of it as often as not. Ironically it is often the *midrashic* reading that latches onto the literal sense, as in the comical rendering of Exod. 8:2. There we read of the second plague in Egypt that *watta^{c}al haṣṣĕpardēa^{c} wattĕkas $^{\supset}$et-$^{\supset}$ereṣ miṣrāyim*, "frogs came up and covered the land of Egypt." The singular noun and verb forms might lead the reader to imagine a plague of one lone (albeit very large) frog, as does the *midrash*,[11] but the *peshat* admits the collective use of *ṣĕpardēa^{c}* in the verse.[12] Less comical, however, is the insidious literalism that often shapes a fundamentalist reading of the biblical text.[13]

Other attempts to differentiate the focus of *peshat* from that of *derash* accentuated a "historical" difference. *Peshat* was correctly understood to reflect concern with meanings plausible in a specific time period, the often-elusive time of the text's authorship. Establishing the time frame, let alone determining the meaning at that time, is often a slippery and sometimes indeterminable exercise. However, what should be perceived as but one aspect of the *peshat*—avoidance of anachronistic reading and an attempt to anchor the text in a historical setting—became its entirety. *Peshat*, it was felt, was what the text "meant" (to its author or to its "original" audience) while *derash* was what the text "means" to the community of faith using the scripture as its lifeblood.[14] As Jon Levenson notes, "historical study pushes the text further into the past, which, especially in the Near Eastern

10. It is disheartening that use of this terminology will die hard. It is retained even in David Weiss Halivni, *Peshat and Derash: Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis* (New York and Oxford, 1991), in which "simple" (3, 10, 42, 52, 53, 178), "plain" (the book title as well as 19, 52, and 53) and "literal" (3, 10, 19, 178) describe *peshat*, notwithstanding the fact that Halivni clarifies that *peshat* means otherwise (3, 10, 19, 52, 53). Eschewing "simple" to refer to the *peshat*, Hillel Goldberg's use of the phrase "bald meaning" is not a particularly felicitous replacement; "Psalm 22: The Retrieval of Faith," *Tradition* 24:2 (1989), 67.

11. TB *Sanhedrin* 67b.

12. Everett Fox, *Now These are the Names: A New English Rendition of the Book of Exodus* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 46, adeptly translates "the frog-horde."

13. Proponets of this type of literalist reading will insist, for example, that the world was created in six days (Genesis 1) or that women actually have one rib more than men (Genesis 2).

14. In an assessment of curricular shortcomings, Kugel makes note of the differentiation but assigns opposite poles. He charges that "what the Bible *has meant* (even, in some cases, well before the close of the biblical period proper) is largely passed over in favor of what the Bible 'really means,' the latter being identified with the . . . 'original' meaning of the text"; Kugel and Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation*, 12.

mode, means a vanished past."[15] Thus, analyses predicated upon the bifurcation between what the text meant and what it means would assuredly promote a negative answer to the question of whether *peshat* could be religiously enriching. Expounding the Jewish legal structure, Joel Roth explains that "systemically speaking, the *peshat* of the verse is only of historical significance."[16] Raphael Lowe evinces a similar approach, suggesting that *peshat* should be viewed as static interpretation while *derash* is dynamic.[17] *Peshat*, therefore, would lie in the domain of the academician or scholar while *derash* would serve the cleric or faithful religionist. *Peshat* was fine for a good living, but *derash* was necessary for a good life.

To our good fortune, however, recent work has advanced our appreciation of what differentiates the two approaches. Although *peshat* may overlap with the "original" or "earliest" understanding of a text, a functional definition should not be restricted to that alone. As Greenstein has clearly articulated,[18] *peshat* is the "contextual" meaning of a text. An interpretation of a verse, for instance, that takes cognizance of its historical, linguistic, and literary contexts is an understanding according to the *peshat*. This reconceptualization enables critics to move beyond the "meant/means" distinction. It may even accommodate exegetes in the attempt to bridge that gap and to see if the historical-critical and comparative methods may be employed honestly and still used in the service of a faith community.

Gerhard Maier is convinced that they cannot.[19] He writes of "the end of the historical-critical method," promoting what he regards as the "non-critical" historical method. His agenda of faith, however, has restricted his vision: he takes "critical" in a limited, literalist fashion. His definition of critical as "destructive" rather than as "analytical," may be an apt reflection of certain proponents of the approach, but it is an unjust and incorrect characterization of the method as a whole.[20]

The purpose of this article, by contrast, is to suggest that pursuit of the *peshat* can be an essential element in recapturing the religious spirit and function of the Hebrew Scriptures. It is meant to give expression to an approach that has yet to make its full contribution to biblical studies, even though some scholars have already begun to apply such a method, often without making their goal explicit.[21]

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15. Jon D. Levenson, "Response" [to Edward L. Greenstein] in Shaye J. D. Cohen and Edward L. Greenstein, eds., *The State of Jewish Studies* (Detroit, 1990), 51.

16. *The Halakhic Process: A Systemic Analysis* (New York, 1986), 117.

17. "The 'Plain' Meaning of Scripture in Early Jewish Exegesis" in J. G. Weiss, ed., *Papers of the Institute of Jewish Studies London*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1964), 140–85. Lowe's attempt to progress beyond the equation of *peshat* and "simple" is salutary, though his solution still does not recognize the *peshat* as having religious importance.

18. "Medieval Bible Commentaries" in Barry W. Holtz, ed., *Back to the Sources* (New York, 1984), 213–59, esp. 217–23.

19. *The End of the Historical-critical Method*, trans. by E. Leverenz and R. Norden (St. Louis, 1977).

20. In this lumping together a method with its practitioners, Maier's accusations are not entirely unlike Solomon Schechter's problematic assessment in "Higher Criticism—Higher Anti-Semitism," in *Seminary Addresses and Other Papers* (Cincinnati, 1915), 35–39. While some early source critics may have tried to derogate Judaism by their work, higher criticism in and of itself, is not anti-Semitic.

21. Uriel Simon provides an insightful treatment of the topic in "The Religious Significance of the *Peshat*," trans. Edward L. Greenstein, *Tradition* 23:2 (Winter, 1988), 41–63. Foremost among Jewish

"Applied *Peshat*," the title of this article, outlines a goal and intimates a plan for its implementation. Exegetes are encouraged to understand the (or an) intrinsic message of a biblical pericope, get behind its metaphorical façade, and only then apply that lesson or value to today's circumstances.[22] This activity is no less than an act of translation,[23] turning the original metaphor into a metaphor appropriate for today. The key, however, is that we must understand the intent of the biblical metaphor before adapting the biblical text. Whether exegetes will choose to proceed along this course is another matter altogether, but the present goal is to advocate a means of doing so.

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scholars raising this and the related issue of establishing a Jewish biblical theology is the late Moshe H. Goshen-Gottstein, whose writings in this area include "Jewish Biblical Theology and the Study of Biblical Religion," *Tarbiz* 50 (1980–81), 37–64 [in Hebrew]; "Tanakh Theology: The Religion of the Old Testament and the Place of Jewish Biblical Theology," in Patrick J. Miller, Jr., Paul D. Hanson, and S. Dean McBride, eds., *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross* (Philadelphia, 1987), 617–44; and "Modern Jewish Bible Exegesis and Biblical Theology," in *Proceedings of the Tenth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem, 1990), 39–50. Moshe Greenberg has recently furthered his earlier work on the subject (e.g., "Can Modern Critical Bible Scholarship Have A Jewish Character?" *Immanuel* 15 [Winter 1982/83], 7–12) by his co-editorial role (with Shmuel Ahituv) of *Mikra Leyisra'el Commentary*, designed to provide a commentary for an adult Israeli readership. Greenberg outlined his concerns in "To Whom and For What Should a Bible Commentator Be Responsible," in *Proceedings of the Tenth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem, 1990), 29–38; and in a lecture on the topic at the Jewish Theological Seminary (Feb. 14, 1991). Jon D. Levenson also offers refreshing thoughts about the relation between criticism and faith in *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (San Francisco, 1985); "Why Jews Are Not Interested in Biblical Theology," in Jacob Neusner, Baruch A. Levine, and Ernest S. Frerichs, eds., *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia, 1987), 281–307; "Theological Consensus or Historicist Evasion? Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies," in Roger Brooks and John J. Collins, eds., *Hebrew Bible or Old Testament? Studying the Bible in Judaism and Christianity* (Notre Dame, 1990), 109–45; as well as his "Response" [to Edward L. Greenstein] (see n. 15 above).

In addition to works cited elsewhere in this essay, the list of relevant studies has grown recently and includes Mordechai Breuer, "Study of the 'natural meaning' of the Bible [*pĕšûṭô šel miqrā'*]—Dangers and Possibilities" (with ensuing suggestions and reactions) in Uriel Simon, ed., *The Bible and Us* (Tel Aviv, 1979), 153–71 [in Hebrew]; Edward L. Greenstein, "Biblical Studies in a State," in Cohen and Greenstein, eds., *The State of Jewish Studies*, 23–46; Robert Polzin, "Contributions of Biblical Studies to Jewish Studies," *Shofar* 7:1 (Fall 1988), 1–13; Rolf Rendtorff, "Must 'Biblical Theology' Be Christian Theology?" *BR* 4:3 (1988), 40–43; Nahum M. Sarna, *Writing a Commentary on the Torah* (The Thirteenth Annual Rabbi Louis Feinberg Memorial Lecture in Judaic Studies, Judaic Studies Program, University of Cincinnati, March 6, 1990); Matitiahu Tsevat, "Should We Develop a Jewish Theology of the Bible," in *Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem, 1986), 101*–107* [in Hebrew]; Gordon J. Wenham, "Contemporary Bible Commentary: The Primacy of Exegesis and the Religious Dimension," in *Proceedings of the Tenth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem, 1990), 1–12.

22. In *Post-Biblical Jewish Studies* (Leiden, 1975), 63–91, Geza Vermes differentiates between applied and pure *midrash* (exegesis). The former reflects the derivation from a biblical source of an already-known outcome or accepted behavior pattern, while the latter is the result of exegetical interpretation of a verse regardless of what the hermeneutic exercise may yield. The use of the term "applied" here, however, is different. "Pure *peshat*" becomes the first stage, establishing a *peshat* of the verse or pericope; "applied *peshat*" would be the next stage, employing for religious appreciation or behavior that which was determined in the first stage.

23. See also Edward L. Greenstein, "What Might Make a Bible Translation Jewish?" in *Translation of Scripture*, *JQR* Supplement, 1990 (Philadelphia, 1990), 77–101.

Crucial to this endeavor is sympathy with an understanding of *peshat* as the "contextual" interpretation, described above. Merely avoiding the stumbling block of viewing *peshat* as "simple" or "literal" places us closer to the goal than we may realize. It allows us to recognize that getting beneath the surface literalism of the texts may enable us to discern their "significances"—an admittedly risky, if not downright dangerous, prospect in this post-deconstructionist era. Employing this approach successfully—its use will not be without false starts and pitfalls—may revivify the static and make it dynamic. If this type of exegesis can bring about a melding of Lowe's categories (see above), both the text and the community that embraces it will be enriched.

At this juncture, one might legitimately launch an attack against the dangers of the intentional fallacy, but here I want to broaden what the historical-critical method allows the careful exegete to uncover.[24] One cannot claim with certitude that authorial intention has been unearthed. The trained reader can, however, identify early *possibilities* of a text, and that is an essential preliminary strategy.[25] Even more compelling is the avoidance of interpretations that could not have been historically intended by the text. This may appear to be a limited benefit, but its importance lies in the prevention of (unintentional) misappropriations of a text by providing limits for likely, or at least plausible, interpretations of it. This is not to say that once the possible intentions of the text are understood the hermeneutic task is completed; it is merely begun. But such a beginning, *by being rooted in the text as understood through historical-critical method*, may claim a degree of legitimacy that exegeses lacking it should not.

One other outcome of the historical-critical and comparative methods has been to underscore the fact that the biblical narrative is not quite "history." This statement is based on two postulates: first, that at least some elements of the biblical text are (probably) based on a historical kernel, and, second, that the biblical presentations of those events reflect a theologically significant retelling of the episodes. One aspect of the biblical scholar's work is to ascertain what "facts" underlie the biblical text, looking for a "reality" which the Bible pericope has embellished or modified. What "historical data" serve as the foundation for the biblical material? When that is established to a level of confidence we find acceptable given our present tools and methods, or when we admit we have peeled away as much of the canonical wrapping as possible, we have a foundation on which to build. But why, to return to the original question, should this yield any religious benefit? Why should this activity be considered the study of *Tanakh* and not the study of history?

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24. In his "Reading the Bible Critically and Otherwise," in Richard E. Friedman and H. G. M. Williamson, eds., *The Future of Biblical Studies: The Hebrew Scriptures* (1987, 61–79), Alan Cooper has argued for "literary-critical" study rather than historically-based research, since "the literary study of the Bible . . . seeks to redress the imbalances in the perception of the Bible fostered by historical criticism," which relegates "the book to the status of historical artifact" (p. 65).

25. Does the account of Genesis 1, for example, intend to give the precise and specific order of divine creation actions, or is its purpose to project the sense of an orderly creation and an orderly world? Many exegetes correctly reject the first possibility, based upon their studied analyses of the very first word of Genesis and the syntax of its opening phrases.

The picture we draw from our critical investigation—be it with historical, archaeological, or literary tools—should serve as a "baseline" for measuring, a point of reference against which to assess the biblical version of the events.[26] However, neither the raw data (as if the facts can exist separate from their interpretation) nor the biblical recasting of them gives us the full picture of their significance. It is the difference between them, the distance separating the two, that comprises the religious message. In other words, the theological importance of a narrative must be seen in how and to what degree the biblical author manipulated his (or her) data. The Bible's theology—that is to say its message—is in the gap. We can discover the message only when we recognize and assess the gap, and we can find the gap only when we look at the text through the eyes of *peshat*.

The exaggerations, the emphases, and the reformulations of historical data provide an important key to the material. What the biblical writers (or editors) make the "facts" into is what they want to tell the listener or reader, and *that* is the message conveyed. Reality may anchor the religious story but does not and must not weigh it down. To the degree to which the biblical narrative presents historical reality, it is historiography. But to the degree to which it recreates the reality, it is historiosophy,[27] and that is where we find its religious message. Having only the literary end-product, we cannot always fully appreciate the author's message, and so, paradoxically, the historical-critical endeavor is essential to interpreting the religious meaning of the text. By this reasoning we also expose a basic irony of the search for historicity in the biblical text. The degree to which a reader's primary concern is for the historical veracity of biblical pericopae is inversely proportionate to his or her reading of the text as a *religious* document. Thus, insistence upon the text's historicity comes at the expense of its religious significance. The historicity of a text is irrelevant to its religious significance, and demanding it, ironically, is not only contrary to the religious quest but may undermine the Bible as a religious work.

We return now to the approach promoted here since it has been described thus far largely as an abstraction. For this brief article, three examples will suffice, and those only in skeletal form, to represent the proposed approach. Let each exegete be reminded that different genres may necessitate different forms of the overall method of analysis and that some forms or texts will be elucidated to a greater degree than others. We look first at an issue of prophetic texts, then legal material, then narrative.

In considering prophetic literature, we must recall that whatever insight we derive is incidental, and possibly even coincidental, to the original message. The so-called "classical" prophets spoke to, or wrote for, the contemporary audience. The Hebrew Bible is not of one cloth, and so different books—in this case different prophetic books—may embody different messages. As their contexts varied, their messages differed. Thus, Isaiah ben Amoz proclaims the inviolability of Jerusalem while Jeremiah accepts its devastation as necessary and inevitable divine

26. This returns the text to the original sense of "canon," as well!

27. For the term and its value, see E. A. Speiser, "The Biblical Idea of History in its Near Eastern Setting," *IEJ* 7 (1957), 201–16; reprinted in Judah Goldin, ed., *The Jewish Expression* (New Haven and London, 1977), 1–17.

punishment. Which prophet was correct? Obviously, from the biblical perspective, both were, each speaking to the conditions and times of his listeners. Even as we struggle to determine the "message" of a particular prophet, therefore, we must sometimes reassess his intention in light of his historical circumstances. We can, in fact, appreciate the import of his message only by applying constraints imposed by the *peshat*. We must not read a prophetic work and quickly jump to apply its insights or guidance without ascertaining if the conditions of the prophet's time were, in basic and important ways, like our own. Preachers may tell a congregation that Amos' message is as vibrant today as it was in the 8th century B.C.E. Yet that is true only to the degree that the social and economic conditions of which Amos spoke were similar to our own. Once that is done, and only then, we may appropriate the prophet's message. Richard Shenkman's advice about history is entirely apt as a guide to the use (i.e., religious benefit of) prophecy: "The belief that 'those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it' is misleading. The hard part is not remembering to consult history but figuring out how to interpret it."[28]

To see how our approach can function with legal material, one need only take as a starting point Moshe Greenberg's important study, "Some Postulates of Biblical Criminal Law."[29] Greenberg defines many values of biblical criminal law on the basis of comparison with other ancient Near Eastern legal corpora. One point that becomes obvious by the contrast[30] is that biblical law considers human life to be irreplaceable; it is not susceptible to monetary valuation for compensatory purposes.[31] That, in a nutshell, is a value determined to be inherent in the *peshat*, and from that "starting point" one should apply the *peshat* in order to seek religious significance. It must be stated, however, that the outcome of such an application can be frustratingly variable, determined by the biblical text to only a limited degree. From the unalterable starting point of the sacredness of human life, one might derive diametrically opposite conclusions about the acceptability of capital punishment for a capital offense, for example. One might argue that, paradoxically, the only suitable punishment for murder would be the death of the criminal. Alternatively, one might cogently argue that even the judicial system has no right to take a life, given the sacredness of life. Extracting (by historical-critical methods) the core value embedded in the Bible's legal formulation does not provide a definitive answer to questions of religious meaning or practice.[32] Yet the lessons offered by the *peshat* should not be ignored simply because they are not conclusive.

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28. Richard Shenkman, *"I Love Paul Revere, Whether He Rode or Not"* (New York, 1992), 188.

29. The article first appeared in Menahem Haran, ed., *Yehezkel Kaufmann Jubilee Volume* (Jerusalem, 1960), 3–28, and was conveniently reprinted in Judah Goldin, ed., *The Jewish Expression* (New Haven and London, 1976), 18–37.

30. Values and tendencies inherent in biblical law (or narrative, for that matter, as we will see below), might be ascertained without the comparative method. However, in the juxtaposition of two texts, biblical and extra-biblical material in this instance, the unique aspects of each become more readily apparent.

31. Arnold Enker recently considered whether the mishnaic law requiring compensation for personal injury reflects the *peshat* of Exod. 21:23 ("an eye for an eye"); "Lex Talionis: The 'Plain Meaning' of the Text," *S'vara: A Journal of Philosophy and Judaism* 2:1 (1991), 52–55.

32. Admittedly, deducing religious significance is not identical with establishing religious practice, although the two may be related. This article focuses on the former but raises the possibility of using the *peshat* in the service of praxis, as well.

For the third example, narrative, we look at the well-known parallel of the biblical flood (Genesis 6–9) and Tablet XI of the Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic. After an initial stage of comparing the texts to discern their similarities—a venture undertaken for a variety of academic and religious motives—scholars mined the two for even greater riches by focusing on differences between them. Despite indisputable similarities in the general plot line and many details, the variances, sometimes quite subtle, elucidate the unique orientation of each. That uniqueness reflects the theology of each text. As the theology of a historical text can be found in the gap between its historical "kernel" and its canonical expression, the theology of the biblical epic becomes conspicuous in the gap between it and a Mesopotamian counterpart.

Nahum Sarna's now-classic presentation of the comparison,[33] offers a fine overview of the results of the comparison and the particular slant embedded in the biblical narration of the flood. Once Gilgamesh comprehended the finality of the death of his friend Enkidu, his own quest was for immortality. Utnapishtim recounted the flood narrative in response to Gilgamesh's question about how he came to 'stand in the assembly of the gods,"[34] i.e., how he became immortal. The lesson for Gilgamesh was, to his disappointment, that immortality was granted only ad hoc to Utnapishtim and would not be accessible to other mortals. However, one point Sarna and other exegetes who have followed his lead neglect may be of the greatest consequence for determining the religious significance of the pericope. In it there may be a lesson for us, later readers of the epic who also read Genesis, different from the lesson Gilgamesh received. Utnapishtim and his wife were granted immortality after the flood when Enlil went up into the boat, touched their foreheads, and "blessed us: Prior to this, Utnapishtim has been human; now Utnapishtim and his wife will become like us gods"[35] (immortal). In the biblical text at precisely this point, "God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth'."[36] Not only does the biblical text describe a re-creation by using language virtually identical with Gen. 1:28; by incorporating the divine blessing of a command to replenish the earth, it offers a different definition of immortality. Humans become immortal through reproduction; the species, not the individual, gains immortality. It is a joyous conclusion, not a disappointing one. Both narratives encapsulate the meaning of immortality in the blessing[37] granted the protagonists, and we deduce this religious message by viewing the biblical passage in its cultural context, by the *peshat* method.

Despite the suggested potential religious benefit to be derived from the *peshat*, one would be foolish to expect a reassessment of current Jewish religious observance. After all, practices determined by Jewish law which differ from the "applied *peshat*" are, obviously, neither wrong nor not-Jewish. They should, however, be recognized for what they are, fulfillment of an "Oral Torah," i.e., rabbinic

33. *Understanding Genesis* (New York, 1966), 4–10, 21–23, 56–57.

34. Gilgamesh XI:7.

35. Gilgamesh XI:192–94.

36. Gen. 9:1.

37. Each uses the regular word for bestowing a blessing, *brk* in Hebrew and *krb* in Akkadian. That the two roots are cognate (differing only by metathesis) is widely accepted.

tradition, not of the "Written Torah."[38] The challenge for the traditionalist community and codifiers of Jewish law today is to ponder and weigh biblical insights gleaned by the *peshat* method rather than to assume *a priori* that such insights cannot enrich the religious fabric of the community.

This paper is not a call for Rabbinists to become Karaites, but it is a chance to give renewed life to the talmudic maxim, "What is Torah? Exegesis of Torah."[39] It is an opportunity to enrich current religious traditions by encouraging exegetes to use the *peshat* method to extract meanings deeply embedded within the metaphor of the biblical text and to listen more carefully to what they uncover.

38. The talmudic sage Hillel made explicit that the written and the oral are "two Torahs"; TB *Shabbat* 31a.

39. TB *Qiddushin* 49a–b; the text is also cited by Lowe, "'Plain' Meaning," 183, n. 200.