“Toward an Understanding of the Medieval Belief in Classical Rabbinic *Peshat*”

Summary

Medieval *peshat* commentary constitutes a new stage in the history of Jewish biblical exegesis. Despite many points of continuity, it is customary in academic research to distinguish this approach from those of previous periods. The essential difference between these eras lies in the use of the *peshat* method, specifically the commentator’s awareness of its methodological principles and commitment to them. It is therefore surprising that medieval scholars, including the *peshat* commentators themselves, casually assumed that *peshat* exegesis had been known from time immemorial and that even the rabbinic sages had been aware of its principles. From their perspective, the difference between them and the sages was merely formal: the sages, for a variety of reasons, paid scant attention to *peshat* exegesis, while they themselves devoted considerable attention to it. However, in their eyes, the *peshat* methodology and its principles were not in themselves innovative. How can we explain this assumption?

[1] Introduction: The Transition from Classical Rabbinic Exegesis to Medieval Exegesis

Exegetical creativity and flexibility, the most prominent and widespread methodological characteristics of Jewish biblical exegesis in the first millennium of the common era, achieved full expression in the vast corpus of classical rabbinic literature – the Talmuds, midrashic literature and the Aramaic translations of the Bible. Despite the wide diversity of the sources, it is possible to identify two fundamental principles of this creative and flexible hermeneutic approach: 1) The Torah can be understood in many ways and expresses infinite meanings. 2) Divine revelation is also transmitted in the Oral Law and thus this “second” Torah is the natural and necessary complement to the written Torah. These principles, which would appear to be products of the tension between the belief in the divine origin of the Torah and its consequent perfection, on the one hand, and its obvious inability to meet this expectation, on the other hand, “solve” all existing textual problems, and no less important, all potential problems -- ‘“For this is not a trifling [*reik*] thing for you” (Deut. 32:47) and if it is trifling – it is only [*rak*] trifling for you.’[[1]](#footnote-1) God’s Torah is as complete and perfect as God Himself. If it seems to the reader that there is an inherent textual flaw (for example contradictory passages or biblical statutes that do not correspond to normative Jewish law) the fault lies with the reader alone. He must delve deeply into the relevant passage and reexamine it carefully until he can find a solution, one solution among an infinite number of possible solutions, to resolve the dissonance and prove that the alleged flaw does not in fact exist.

In the Middle Ages, from the ninth century, a style of biblical exegesis characterized by a relatively fixed literary structure and a distinct hermeneutic methodology became established. In their literary structure, these commentaries are composed of consecutive exegetical comments that follow the order of the verses. These comments are comprised of the “*dibur hamatchil*” or “sub voce” a quotation of a word or several words from the verse which functions as a reference and occasionally as the subject of the commentary.[[2]](#footnote-2) After the quotation comes the exegetical comment itself which can range from a single word to hundreds of words and relate to very specific points, such as the meaning of a specific word or the grammatical function of a particle, or to broader issues, such as the structure of the story or its meaning. Some commentators addressed topics only randomly connected to the verses at hand, such as polemics and educational questions. The methodology of this literary/exegetical genre is characterized by scrupulous attention to language, syntax and context. It is referred to in academic literature as “*peshat*” because several of the commentators used the term “*peshat*” or “*peshuto*” to describe their approach. This new stage in the history of Jewish biblical exegesis was the product of distinct historical-intellectual processes, above all the contemporary dispute between Karaite and Rabbinic Jews, which deeply influenced attitudes toward the Bible, classical rabbinic literature and exegesis.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The terms “*peshat*” and “*peshuto*” have been discussed extensively in academic literature. It is currently accepted that *peshat* is an exegetical genre based upon distinct principles. A commentator fully cognizant of the *peshat* method will interpret the text according to its language, syntactical structure, context, the structure of its literary unit, logic and social convention (“*derech eretz*”) as well in comparison to other biblical passages.[[4]](#footnote-4) This definition, a synopsis of academic research, corresponds to the methodology of several prominent medieval commentators, first and foremost the Rashbam (Samuel ben Meir) considered by academic scholars to be the exegete who, more than any other, identified the methodological principles that characterize *peshat* exegesis. Other exegetes who used the terms “*peshat*” and “*peshuto*” were aware of only some of its principles, in varying degrees of precision.

The fixed structure of the *peshat* commentaries and points of similarity in exegetical methodology define this literary exegetical genre and distinguish it from the biblical exegesis in classical rabbinic literature. It is true that in the vast corpus of rabbinic literature it is possible to find exegetical explanations that reflect an adherence to *peshat* methodology. Several academic scholars have assiduously gathered these sources.[[5]](#footnote-5) However, these are individual, random exegetical comments scattered throughout various works and lacking a defined or fixed structure and, in most cases, methodological awareness. The prevalent exegetical methodology in classical rabbinic literature differs in its goals and methods from the *peshat* approach. It is best defined by what it is not:[[6]](#footnote-6) in contrast to the *peshat* commentators, the sages do not necessarily rely upon the language of the text, its syntax, context, the literary unit, literary genre, logic or rationality. The sages, known for their methodological flexibility and creativity, either made use of some of these principles or ignored them, in accordance with their hermeneutical goals in each specific case.

As the *peshat* methodology became more fixed and established, the use of the terms “*peshat*” and “*peshuto*” became widespread. At the same time, in the language of the commentators the use of the term “*derash*” also became common to describe in general terms a flexible and creative methodology unconstrained by the principles of *peshat* methodology. In most cases the reference was to classical rabbinic midrash. Hermeneutic development is typically not expressed by the creation of new terminology but rather by infusing existing terms with new meanings. Indeed, the terms “*peshat*” (in practice usually “*peshuto*”) and “*derash”* were known for centuries and can be found in classical rabbinic literature. As academic scholars have pointed out, the term “*derash”* was used by the sages – and even earlier in the Bible and the Second Temple literature – to mean “investigation”, the search for meaning, irrespective of the methodology employed for this purpose.[[7]](#footnote-7) The term “*peshat*” or “*peshuto*” in classical rabbinic literature does not express a clear-cut recognition of specific exegetical principles. An analysis of the context of the three Talmudic sources in which appears the famous phrase" A verse never departs from its plain meaning**”** supports this conclusion.[[8]](#footnote-8) The term “*peshat*” in rabbinic language indicates nothing more than a somewhat vague adherence to the literal meaning of a specific word and its context, in a particular case, not in principle. The expression “*pshatei denehara*” refers to the waters of a river that flow in their course in the river bed and do not rise above the banks (“*nehara nehara u-pashtei*”, Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Chulin* 57a). The expression “*pashtei dikra*” or “*peshuto shel mikra* [the Bible]” should be understood in the same way – the smooth and fixed flow of the text, without disruption to the continuity of the narrative.[[9]](#footnote-9) However, in the transition from rabbinic literature to medieval commentary, the term “*peshat*” underwent extensive changes and was imbued with distinct methodological meaning.[[10]](#footnote-10)

2. Examples of the Medieval Belief that the Sages Knew *Peshat*

Thus far I have argued that the *peshat* commentaries of the Middle Ages constituted a new stage in the history of Jewish exegesis, and that despite many points of continuity it is correct to distinguish it from commentaries of preceding eras. The critical difference between these periods is the *peshat* method, the commentators’ awareness of its principles and their commitment to it. My argument thus far is not only unoriginal, but even universally accepted by academic scholars of biblical exegesis.[[11]](#footnote-11) However, in contrast to the accepted opinion within modern academic scholarship, medieval rabbinic scholars, among them the *peshat* commentators themselves, made the casual assumption that *peshat* exegesis had been known from time immemorial and that even the sages were familiar with its principles. In their opinion, the difference between them and the sages was merely formal: the sages, for various reasons, devoted little attention to interpreting the Bible according to the *peshat,* while they themselves devoted great attention to it. However, the *peshat* methodology itself and its principles were not in the least original.

This assumption is clearly reflected in the writings of Abraham Ibn Ezra who mentioned repeatedly that the *peshat* methodology had been known from time immemorial and that the sages were expert in its use. For example:

And now, my son, know that our ancestors, may their memory be a blessing, who transmitted the commandments, and interpreted sections of the Torah, as well as individual verses, both words and letters, according to the *derash* method, in the Mishnah, the Talmud and the *baraitot,* without doubt knew the straightforward method, such as it is, and they thus formulated the principle: “A verse never departs from its plain meaning” and the *derash* is a supplementary meaning.[[12]](#footnote-12)

In Ibn Ezra’s language the terms “straightforward” [*yashar*] and “*peshat”* are often synonymous and in this case the words “the straightforward method” refers to the *peshat*.[[13]](#footnote-13) Ibn Ezra wrote elsewhere in a similar vein: “One who has a heart [intelligence] will be able to recognize when [the sages] meant *derash* and when they meant *peshat*, Because their words are not based on one way”.[[14]](#footnote-14) Regarding the Aramaic translation of the Torah, considered a part of classical rabbinic literature, Ibn Ezra wrote:

The Aramaic translator of the Targum [...] if, in places, he drew on *midrashim*, we know that he knew the roots [the meanings] better than we. He simply wished to add further interpretations, because even the uneducated could understand its *peshuto.* [[15]](#footnote-15)

Similarly: “The translator knew this better than we, but added a homiletical explanation [*derash*]”.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam) in his famous methodological statement in his commentary on Genesis 37:2 pointed out different aspects of the *peshat* and *derash* methods and defined his exegetical method in relation to the exegetical style of his predecessors. His remarks reflect the belief that the *peshat* method was known from time immemorial and, in this respect, he is similar to Ibn Ezra:

Let those who love reason know and understand that which our Sages taught us [*Shabbat* 63:a], “A verse never departs from its meaning” [...] Due to their piety, the earliest scholars tended to devote their time to *midrashic* explanations, which are the essence of Torah; as a result, they never became attuned to the profundities of the plain meaning of Scripture.

According to Rashbam, the sages made a conscious rational decision to concentrate on *derash* rather than *peshat*: the *derash* is the “essence of the Torah”[[17]](#footnote-17) and it is therefore natural that generations of scholars devoted their efforts to interpreting the Torah according to *derash* rather than *peshat*. Indeed, the disregard of the “earliest scholars” for the *peshat* indirectly attests to “their piety” because they devoted most of their attention to the “essence”.[[18]](#footnote-18) From this it can be concluded that one who devotes himself to the *peshat* method exhibits a lower level of piety. Moreover, according to Rashbam, the focus on a methodological interpretation of the Bible, in and of itself, irrespective of the specific exegetical methodology, is relatively unimportant:

Furthermore, the Sages said, [*Berachot* 28:b][[19]](#footnote-19) “keep your children from *higayon*”. They also said, [*Baba Metzia’h* 33:a] “Study the Bible is but of incomplete merit, but there is nothing more meritorious than studying Talmud”. Accordingly, they never became entirely attuned to the plain meaning of Scriptural verses. As [Rabbi Kehana] says in Tractate *Shabbat* [63a], “I was eighteen years old and I had studied the entire Talmud, and I had never realized that a verse never departs from its plain meaning”.

Given Rashbam’s complete devotion to *peshat* interpretation, it can be argued that these words are empty rhetoric. Rashbam was very much aware of the originality in his approach and for that reason was readying his readers to accept a methodological approach so different from that of the sages and of his grandfather Rashi.[[20]](#footnote-20) In any case, his words reflect the belief that the *peshat* is eternal truth known to all and that a continuous awareness of the *peshat* principles existed from ancient times and reached its apogee in Rashbam’s own commentary. Rabbi Kehana’s own words reveal that the hermeneutic principle “the verse never departs from its plain meaning” was unknown to him, and by extension, to other sages as well. However, as the matter is presented in Rashbam’s commentary, the innovation of Rabbi Kehana does not relate to the validity of the *peshat* approach, but to the relationship between *peshat* and *derash,* namely, the principle that the *derash* does negate the *peshat.*[[21]](#footnote-21) Moreover, the passage in its entirety indicates that Rashbam presented the sages’ familiarity with the *peshat* method as a justification of his own commentary, based entirely on the *peshat* meaning of the text. The principle, “the verse does not depart from its plain meaning” is used as a validation of Rashbam’s exegetical method, which is none other than the full and relentless realization of an ancient, yet neglected, exegetical method.

The passages cited above from the commentaries of Ibn Ezra and Rashbam, the two most important and illustrious medieval *peshat* commentators, express the belief that the *peshat* method was known to the sages.[[22]](#footnote-22) This belief was in fact common and is expressed both directly and indirectly in statements of other medieval commentators and rabbis. Unlike Ibn Ezra and Rashbam, not all these commentators and scholars explained in depth the principles of the *peshat* method or compared it to other exegetical methods. Nonetheless, all of those discussed below express an intuitive distinction between *peshat* and *derash* based upon fidelity to language, context, logic and rationality. All share the belief that this exegetical method was known to the sages, who, for various reasons, preferred to use other exegetical methods.

This belief is revealed indirectly by Rashi, at the beginning of the introduction to his commentary on the Song of Songs:

One thing has God spoken; two have we heard [after Ps 62:12]. One scriptural verse yields many meanings [Sanhedrin 34:a], and the end of the matter is that no scriptural verse ever escapes the hold of its sense [*mashma’o*].[[23]](#footnote-23)

Rashi’s remarks here address the relationship between the literal and allegorical meanings of Song of Songs. The literal level of meaning, referred to by Rashi as “*peshuto*” and “*mashma’o*” is a love story between a man and his beloved, while the allegorical meaning, referred to by Rashi as “*dugma*”, alludes to the love story between God and the Jewish people.[[24]](#footnote-24) Rashi’s comments here combine two well-known Talmudic statements, and as many scholars have pointed out, their fusion here expresses a significant development. The statement from Tractate *Sanhedrin* affirms the Torah’s multiple layers of meaning, in other words, the possibility that one verse will have several legitimate interpretations.[[25]](#footnote-25) Rashi quoted this statement in close conjunction with the maxim “a verse does not depart from its plain meaning”, and, as several scholars have pointed out, in doing so he replaced the concept that each verse has more than one meaning (“many meanings”) with the idea that there exist two different layers of meanings, *peshat* and *derash*.[[26]](#footnote-26) This is the conclusion reached by scholars from a comparison of the statement “one scriptural verse yields many meanings” in its original context in Tractate Sanhedrin with the new context in Rashi’s commentary. However, it appears that Rashi himself was not all aware that his words expressed a radical new development. Both the methodological pronouncements in Rash’s commentaries, as well as their actual content, reveal that he recognized the existence of disparate layers of meaning in one verse -- *peshat* and *derash*.[[27]](#footnote-27) For Rashi this constituted a self-evident hermeneutical truth, known to the sages and expressed naturally and straightforwardly by the principle, “one scriptural verse yields many meanings”. The innovation presented by Rashi in his introduction to the commentary on Song of Songs is not therefore the recognition of two distinct layers of meaning, but rather his aspiration to give expression to the *peshat* layer (in other words the literal level) specifically in the Song of Songs. This is a significant innovation, because according to accepted tradition, the Song of Songs must be understood only as an allegory and never according to its literal meaning.[[28]](#footnote-28)

The assumption that the sages were aware of *peshat* can also be found in *Kuzari* by Judah Halevi in which the rabbinical figure explains to the king of the Khazars that the commentaries of the Talmudic scholars on mishnaic literature lack the flexibility and creativity that characterize their commentaries to the Torah: “Did you see their precision and meticulousness in their interpretation of the Mishnah and the *baraitot*, the accuracy and analysis that they achieve, without any carelessness in wording, let alone in content.” From this methodological difference he derived what appeared to him to be a necessary conclusion: “Is it logical that those who showed such accuracy, did not know what we know about the verse?” [[29]](#footnote-29) Judah Halevi did not use the term *peshat* here. However, there is no doubt that the words, “precision and meticulousness”, as well as “accuracy and analysis”, describe the fidelity of the Talmudic scholars to the language and context of the mishnaic material they interpreted and thus also to the principles of the *peshat* method. Halevi argued that if the Talmudic scholars chose to interpret the Torah in another way, without “precision and meticulousness” and “accuracy and analysis”, this must have been a conscious decision. There is therefore no justification for deriding or ridiculing the words of the sages. Derision and ridicule are mentioned in one of the opinions cited by Maimonides.[[30]](#footnote-30)

In several of his works, Maimonides discussed the status of classical rabbinic midrashim as well as their purpose and categorization.[[31]](#footnote-31) Various statements scattered throughout these discussions indicate that he also assumed that sages knew the *peshat* of the biblical text, though they chose to interpret the texts by different exegetical methods. In his opinion, the midrashim must be read according to the original intentions of the sages. In cases in which the midrash is esoteric or allegorical, there is no reason to evaluate it on the basis of logic or rationality, in other words, on the basis of *peshat* methodology[[32]](#footnote-32): “Regarding the *derash* that appears in the Talmud, one must not think that it is of little value or has no beneficial purpose; it reveals great wisdom.” However, “if you look at it according to its *peshat* meaning”, in other words, if you understand these *derashot* in a literal manner in accordance with *peshat* principles, “you will find in it things that are most illogical”. [[33]](#footnote-33) One must therefore distinguish between “poetical expression” and “the meaning of the text”, “in which there is nothing that should confuse one who is blessed with understanding.”. [[34]](#footnote-34) One must recognize that “the *derashot* whose literal meaning is false and illogical are all allegories”.[[35]](#footnote-35) Only one who assumed that the sages were very familiar with the exegetical use of language, context, rationality and logic would be able to explain the existence of midrashim that contradict “all reason” as a product of a deliberate hermeneutic process.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Samuel Ibn Tibbon also expressed the belief that the sages were well acquainted with the peshat method and made a deliberate choice to interpret the Bible in other ways: “The esoteric meaning of the Torah does not negate the plain meaning of the text, Heaven forfend. For if this were so, the sages would not have interpreted most of the Torah, Writings and Prophets in a non-literal way [“*mepeshutihem*”]. Among the seventy faces of the Torah, one does not contradict another”.[[37]](#footnote-37) His words, a clear paraphrase of the maxim, “the verse does not depart from its plain meaning” express the belief that the sages allowed themselves to interpret according to the “esoteric meaning of the Torah” by relying upon the fundamental principle that the plain meaning of the text would in any case not be negated.

In the statements quoted above, Judah Halevi, Maimonides, and Samuel Ibn Tibbon endeavored to defend the sages and their *derashot*. This line of defense continued throughout the Middle Ages, accompanied frequently by the opinion that the sages, though well acquainted with the *peshat* meaning of the Bible, made a deliberate choice to concentrate on *derash,* with the understanding that they would not thereby negate the *peshat,* because “a verse does not depart from its plain meaning”.[[38]](#footnote-38) This position was also expressed by Menachem ben Solomon in his midrashic compilation, *Sekhel Tov* to Genesis 30:21:

It is my opinion that even though a verse never departs from its plain meaning, that which our holy rabbis received as tradition, they found prooftexts for in the words of the Torah, each one according to the tradition that he received. Midrashim do not contradict each other -- “All are straightforward to the intelligent man, And right to those who have attained knowledge”. [Prov. 8:9][[39]](#footnote-39)

Rabbi Menachem referred to the well-known midrash from *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* which states that God revealed to Jacob four future kingdoms that will rule and then disappear.[[40]](#footnote-40) This midrash is also the basis for the following quote from Isaac Abarbanel:

There is no doubt that these *derashot* are not the plain [*peshutim*] interpretation, according to the definitions of the words in the text. Those people [the sages], who are perfect in our eyes, were not illogical -- they received these ideas from the prophets and used the verses as prooftexts; they did not interpret the texts according to their plain meaning [*peshuteihem]*. [[41]](#footnote-41)

Both these quotations express the idea that the sages possessed an ancient exegetical tradition, referred to by Menachem ben Solomon as “*kabbalah*” [tradition] by which he meant an ancient and accepted tradition (or an ancient tradition that was received at Sinai), and identified by Abarbanel as traditions received “from the prophets”. It is only natural and right therefore that the sages preferred to impart these sacred traditions rather than interpreting the verses according to the *peshat* (as Rabbi Menachem and Abarbanel chose to do). Therefore, it was not out of simple-mindedness that the sages wrote commentaries not in accordance with the “definition of the words in the text” and there is certainly no reason to doubt the sages’ intellectual and spiritual perfection (“they are perfect in our eyes”).[[42]](#footnote-42)

Menachem ibn Zerach (France and Spain, 14th cen.) shared this line of thought. He pointed out that the reader of midrashim is likely to find in them things that “common sense cannot accept” because they contradict “rational principles that are above nature”. However, this must not be seen as the sages’ failure (Heaven forfend), but rather as an indication of the reader’s own intellectual limitations: “If we cannot understand the words of the sages, it is not because of their vacuity, but rather the confines of our own perception. One must not doubt those who are wise and righteous.”[[43]](#footnote-43) A similar idea was expressed by Isaac Aboab (Spain, the beginning of the 14th century) : “We are obligated to believe everything that the sages said in “*midrashot*” and “*haggadot*” as if it were the Torah of Moses, and if we find something that appears to us exaggerated or contrary to the laws of nature, we must ascribe the apparent flaw to the limitations of our own intellect, not to their words.”[[44]](#footnote-44)

The starting point of opinions such as those expressed by Menachem ibn Zerach and Isaac Aboab is not the methodological difference between *peshat* and *derash* – between a commentary based upon the “definition of the words in the text” (in the words of Abarbanel) and “the esoteric meaning of the Torah” (in the words of Samuel Ibn Tibbon) -- but rather a general distinction between interpretation that is cogent and rational and that which is exaggerated.[[45]](#footnote-45) They share the same line of thought: the sages were familiar with the rational and logical exegetical methods, but chose to deviate from them for reasons that are beyond our capacity to understand.

During the Middle Ages, *peshat* exegesis underwent transitions and ultimately decline. Nonetheless, throughout this extensive period, as well as the early modern period, and up until our own time, Jews in both the East and West continued to interpret the Bible according to the *peshat*, in addition to other approaches. It appears that they did so out of a basic assumption that this method was not totally innovative and that the *peshat* method had been known and accepted from time immemorial. Although, in contrast to Rashbam and Ibn Ezra, most of these commentators and scholars did not mention this assumption explicitly, I am not aware of a single one who made a statement to the contrary.

[3] Toward an Understanding of the Belief that the Sages Knew the *Peshat*

It goes without saying that an examination of classical rabbinic literature does not lead to the conclusion that the sages were proficient in the *peshat* method. The obvious question is, how did these commentators and other scholars, who were so familiar with classical rabbinic literature, several of whom distinguished clearly and precisely between *peshat* and *derash,* take it for granted that the sages knew the *peshat* of the biblical text?

It would seem possible to connect this assumption to the perpetual confusion between the various meanings of the term “*peshat*”. As we have seen, in classical rabbinic literature, while the term “*peshuto*” (in Aramaic “*pashtei*”) appears several times and the root *dalet-resh-shin* (*derash*) appears frequently, there is no indication of a full awareness of the exegetical principles that differentiate the two methods. The commentators themselves did not consider the possibility that these terms underwent semantic transformations over time. To them, the very use of the term “*peshuto*” in classical rabbinic literature was proof that the sages were familiar with the *peshat* method. Similarly, these commentators understood the saying “a verse never departs from its plain meaning” as a fundamental methodological principle positing a sharp distinction between *peshat* and *derash*. This understanding is reflected in several of the statements quoted above.[[46]](#footnote-46) It is also clearly reflected in the following words of Nachmanides: “The verse does not depart from its plain meaning” but along with the *peshat* there is midrash and the verse does not depart from either of them, but rather the text is inclusive and both meanings are correct.” [[47]](#footnote-47) The author of *Ha-Emunah ve-ha-Bitachon* (once attributed to Nachmanides) proposed that the *peshat* is none other than one of the seventy faces of the Torah:

Our sages, may their memory be a blessing, said, “The verse does not depart from its plain meaning.” When they said, “the verse does not depart” they did not say “the verse is interpreted according to the *peshat*” to teach us that although the Torah has seventy faces none of them negate the *peshat* and perhaps the *peshat* is one of the seventy.” [[48]](#footnote-48)

Moreover, it appears that for some of the commentators and other scholars this saying did not only express the distinction between different exegetical methodologies known to the sages but also provided a fundamental authorization to concentrate on *peshat* interpretation, and occasionally even to express a certain preference for it. This can be seen in the commentary of Joseph Kara on Isaiah 5:8-10:

Bend your years and take heed of this verse, because when the sages, may their souls dwell in peace, (based Ps. 25:13), interpreted a verse, [even] when they composed a midrash, they themselves said that in the end, “the verse does not depart from its plain meaning”, because there is nothing preferable to the *peshat* meaning of the verse.[[49]](#footnote-49)

It appears that polemical and apologetic factors also contributed to the formation of the belief that the sages knew *peshat*. From the ninth century, with the establishment of the Karaite movement and the rise of rationalist thought among both Karaites and Rabbinites, the status of classical rabbinic literature became the subject of bitter controversy. Research has shown that these controversies influenced the attitude of scholars, among them commentators, to midrash and perhaps even motivated the study of midrashic literature in the first place. [[50]](#footnote-50) The tendency to defend the exegetical excesses of the sages and present them as commentators who, though very familiar with the *peshat* method, deliberately chose to ignore it, correlated well with the medieval rabbinic objective to exalt the sages’ commentaries and present them as full of depth and esoteric meaning. This provided a response to both the Karaites, who argued that the excessive *derash* exegesis in the Talmud and midrash are proof that rabbinic literature lacks authority, and to rationalists, both Karaite and rabbinic, who demanded logic and rational exegesis and challenged the validity of *derash* exegesis.

The assumption made by medieval scholars and exegetes about the sages’ knowledge of the *peshat* can also be connected to the fact that interpretations compatible to the *peshat* can be found in classical rabbinic literature. The following quotations from medieval *peshat* commentators illustrate this point: “I heard a midrash aggadah in accordance with the peshat”; “this is a midrash agada that agrees with my interpretation”; “our sages said […] and there is no better *peshat* interpretation”; “the correct *peshat* is what the sages said.”[[51]](#footnote-51) These quotations indicate that according to these exegetes, classical rabbinic literature is methodologically diverse and in each individual case it must be determined if the sages interpreted according to the *peshat* or the *derash*. This premise is indirectly revealed in Rashi’s commentaries, by tracking the appearance of words with the roots *yud-shin-beit (leyashev, yeshev, agada meyashevet), pey-shin-tet (peshuto)* and the word *“mashma” (“mashma’o”),* which is synonymous in his language to the term *“peshuto”*. Rashi used these terms only to refer to classical midrashim or the Aramaic translations and not to later scholars or grammarians. Moreover, when Rashi used these terms in reference to his own commentaries, he did not do so in order to describe his own exegetical approach in and of itself, but to compare it to that of the sages.[[52]](#footnote-52) It would seem therefore that these terms reveal Rashi’s preliminary expectations from rabbinic sources, expectations derived from his general methodological perspective. In his opinion, this literature is characterized by a dynamic methodology which includes both *peshat* and *derash* exegesis and it is therefore worthwhile to note if a specific midrash is compatible with the “*peshuto*” or “*mashma’o*” of a verse.

On the subject of the identification of *peshat* exegesis in the corpus of rabbinic commentary, it must be added that the medieval commentators and scholars attributed the midrash delineating the thirty-two hermeneutical rules to Rabbi Eliezer the son of Rabbi Jose the Galilean and regarded the rules (correctly, to some extent) as the elaboration of the thirteen hermeneutical rules attributed to Rabbi Ishmael, which in turn elaborate upon the seven rules of Hillel the Elder.[[53]](#footnote-53) However, in reality, the thirty-two rules were composed much later by the Geonim.[[54]](#footnote-54) The opening lines of the midrash make it clear that it addresses the rules of midrashic composition: “*Aggadah* is expounded according to thirty-two rules”.[[55]](#footnote-55) Nonetheless, several of the rules and of the examples brought to illustrate them actually correspond to the *peshat* method and it would be correct to understand them as a reflection of the gradual transition from the *derash* to the *peshat* approach. In fact, certain rules included in the midrash serve as significant milestones in the methodological journeys of several important *peshat* exegetes. The most important of these is rule seventeen: “from a word that is not understood in its place and can be understood in another place.”[[56]](#footnote-56) Apparently, the attribution of these rules to the sages led medieval commentators and other rabbis to conclude that the sages delved deeply into methodological questions and aspired, just like them, to ascertain the exegetical rules and principles characteristic of the *peshat* and *derash* methods.

It can therefore be concluded that the medieval commentators correctly identified *peshat* exegesis within the classical rabbinic literature. Although these interpretations are quantitatively negligible and in no way indicate a real methodological awareness, it is possible that the very fact of their existence, as well as the dating of the thirty-two rules to the time of Eliezer the son of Rabbi Jose the Galilean, contributed to the establishment of the belief that the sages were well acquainted with the biblical *peshat*. Nonetheless, it seems to me that neither this point, nor the ignorance of the changes in the meaning of the term “*peshuto*”, nor the polemic with the Karaites or the rationalists who mocked the midrash, provide a complete explanation as to why medieval commentators believed that the sages knew the *peshat* meaning of scripture. Ultimately, it is clear that the essence of biblical exegesis in classical rabbinic literature is very far removed from the principles of *peshat* exegesis. Occasional appearances of the term “*peshuto*” or of declarations of some level of adherence to the principles of *peshat* methodology do not alter this overridding impression. In the case of key figures such as Ibn Ezra and Maimonides, rabbinic polemic against both Karaism and rationalist derision of midrash can certainly be considered formative influences. However, as there are few traces of anti-karaite polemic in Western Europe, this cannot be considered a direct source of influence on medieval commentators and scholars active in these countries.[[57]](#footnote-57) It is therefore possible that we must posit the existence of a preconceived supposition that formed the basis of the belief that the sages were familiar with *peshat*. Ignorance of the changes that developed in the meaning of the term “*peshuto*”, the paucity of interpretations in classical rabbinic literature which conform to the *peshat* method and a history of various controversies and polemics were nothing more than supplementary factors which strengthened this presupposition.

Believers in the prophetic religions have always experienced tension between the preservation of what they consider to be divine revelation or truth and inevitable changes and developments mandated by changing times. Principles of faith and religious practices confront this eternal tension, as it has been said: “The ultimate principles of most religions are the stumbling blocks of their believers”.[[58]](#footnote-58) This is true even regarding the ways of reading and interpreting the sacred writings that constitute the textual expression of divine truth: “It is necessary to present equality between what is understood as divine truth and the original intention of the divine text.” [[59]](#footnote-59) A religion must acquire mechanisms of some kind that facilitate controlled development and necessary changes. In the case of Judaism, one such example is the concept that all was revealed to Moses at Sinai, even that which a future student will teach in front of his teacher. The tension between the divine origin of the Torah and the freedom of scholars to develop and refine it, between remaining faithful to the Torah and making it relevant by adding ordinances and decrees, has been thoroughly discussed.[[60]](#footnote-60) It would appear however that these overt and institutional aspects are unable to meet all the challenges confronting an age-old religion. In the end, we must assume the existence of a cognitive mechanism, semi-conscious or unconscious, that enables believers to unconditionally accept significant change, out of deep inner conviction that it is not a real change and that in essence the principles of their faith, the fundamental practices to which they cleave and their ways of reading and understanding their sacred texts have never changed. This internal mechanism of persuasion has enabled radical change throughout Jewish history, from the transition from ritual sacrifice to prayer at the destruction of the Second Temple, up until the modern expressions of Judaism familiar to us now in Israel and the diaspora.[[61]](#footnote-61) It appears that the medieval commentators’ belief that the *peshat* was not a current methodological innovation but rather the continuation of an ancient and accepted exegetical method must be attributed to this natural inclination inherent to the average believer.

“Nothing is certain except the pretense of truth.”[[62]](#footnote-62) If the divine truth is revealed by means of *peshat* exegesis of the Bible, it is imperative that this exegetical method be as old as exegesis itself.

1. … [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. … [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a summary of the causes that led to the development of *peshat* exegesis and its subsequent decline, as well as an extensive bibliography, see: E. Viezel, “The Rise and Fall of Jewish Philological Exegesis on the Bible in the Middle Ages: Causes and Effects”, *Review of Rabbinic Judaism*, 20 (2017), pp. 48–88. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For this definition see… See also the extensive methodological discussion of …On the meaning of the term “*peshat*” in classical rabbinic literature, see below, note 000. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See especially…For a balanced description of the place of *peshat* exegesis in classical rabbinic literature see: Sara Japhet, “The Pendulum of Exegetical Methodology: From the *Peshat* to the *Derash* and Back”, Michael Fishbane, and Joanna Weinberg (eds.), *Midrash Unbound: Transformations and Innovations*, Oxford 2013, pp. 251–252. See further below. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Compare to: “*Peshat* is a negative term because it refers to an approach that negates any other exegetical method – the homiletical, philosophical-allegorical and so forth.” In Frank Talmage, *The Commentaries on Proverbs of the Kimhi Family* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1990) 20 and similarly… [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. … [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. … [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. … [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. ... [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In this context, it is sufficient to examine the historical surveys of Jewish biblical exegesis. As far as I know, all such works present a sharp and clear distinction between biblical exegesis in classical rabbinic literature and medieval *peshat* exegesis. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Enriques Ruiz Gonzalez, and Ángel Sáenz-Badillos, *Abraham Ibn Ezra, Śafah Bĕrura: La Lengua Escogida*, Córdoba 2004, p. 4\*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. … [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. … [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. From the introduction to the short commentary on Genesis, the fifth section. His words can be understood in one of two ways: 1. Onkelos deviated from the literal translation in cases in which the meaning of the verse was clear even to the ignorant (in which case “*peshuto*” refers to the verse in the Torah). 2. Onkelos deviated from the literal interpretation because he wanted to explain the meaning of the verse to the ignorant (in which case “*peshuto*” refers to the verse in the Aramaic translation). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Yesod Diqduq Hu Sefat Yeter*, Nehemia Aloni ed. (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1985) 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The word “essence” [*ikar*] here can mean either “the most important part” or “truth”; See the bibliographic summary of this point of controversy in …. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The word “the earliest” [*rishonim]* here can refer either to the Sages or to the commentators who preceded Rashbam, first and foremost, his grandfather Rashi, or to both; see … [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. In accordance with Rashi’s commentary to Tractate *Berachot*, ibid: “from *higayon” –* do not accustom them too much to the study of Bible.” [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. … [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. This is the order of the discussion in the rabbinic texts: In the Mishnah Tractate *Shabbat* 6:4 it is written…in the Babylonian Talmud Tractate *Shabbat* 63a the sages are perplexed by the words of Rabbi Eliezer…The answer is : …, in other words the sword is like an ornament. Rabbi Kehana challenges this…. In other words, the meaning of the verse is symbolic; the sword is the Torah and therefore it is said “the verse does not depart from its plain meaning”. It thus appears that this principle was unknown to Rabbi Kehana, although he was considered an outstanding scholar… [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The difference of opinion between Ibn Ezra and Rashbam regarding *derash* and the different way in which they related to extra-biblical information as a legitimate source in *peshat* interpretation are not relevant to this discussion. See, inter alia, Japhet, Dor {??} (note 000 above), pp. 35-54. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. In the older editions, the text of Rashi’s commentary here corresponds to the sages’ statement: “the verse does not depart from its plain meaning” and see …, for a survey of the textual variants. In any case, Rashi uses the words “*peshuto*” and “*mashma’o*” synonymously. See also … [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. … [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. … [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. …, and see, in this vein: … [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. This point has been emphasized in many studies; See especially the oft-cited work of Sara Kamin… [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Sara Japhet offers an interesting explanation: for a commentator who understands the Song of Songs as an allegory (a love story between God and Israel), the allegorical meaning is inherent and should be seen as part of the *peshat* of the text. In this light, the distinction made by Rashi between the literal layer [“*peshuto*” and “*mashma’o*] and the allegorical level [“*dugma*’] indicates a certain lack of clarity in his understanding of *peshat*. See…. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. … [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. … [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. For a precis of the sources and their analysis see… [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. On Maimonides’ approach to *peshat* exegesis, its Muslim and Jewish background, its sources and its place in his writings, see the very thorough study: Mordechai Z. Cohen, *Opening the Gates of Interpretation: Maimonides’ Biblical Hermeneutics in Light of His Geonic-Andalusian Heritage and Muslim Milieu* (Études sur le judaïsme médiéval 48) (Leiden Brill, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. …Similarly, “One’s immediate reaction is to deride them [the midrashim} because their *peshat* meaning is so far removed from reality. The reason for this is that they spoke in riddles on account of the profundity of their ideas (…), “if you regard it [the midrash] according to its *peshat* meaning it will appear to be far from the truth” (…); “they who saw the words of the sages or heard them and understood them according to their *peshat* meaning; and thought that they sages referred only to the simple [*peshat]* meaning” (…) [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. … [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. … [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Maimonides’ approach is echoed strongly in the work of his son, Rabbi Abraham, in *Ma’amar al Odot Derashot Chazal* … and were repeated and developed by others including Hillel ben Samuel of Verona in *Sefer Tagmule ha-Nefesh* (…) . See a precis of the relevant statements in … [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Samuel Ibn Tibbon, *Ma’amar Yikkavu ha-Mayim*, …Although the phrase “the esoteric meaning of the Torah” is not synonymous with the term “*derash*” they both refer to an expansive interpretation of the text that goes beyond its language and context; See …; …, according to the index on page 331. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. On divergent lines of development in attitudes toward homilies [*aggadot*] in the Middle Ages including the indifference of the Geonim and several other scholars to rabbinic midrashim, see the overview by … [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. … [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. … [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Isaac Abarbanel. *Yeshu'ot Meshicho*  [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Compare: “If we consider what the sages wrote to be folly or error…”, Abarbanel, idem, 9b. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. *Shulchan Ha-Tahor* and on it *Tzeida La-Derech* [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. *Menorat Ha-Ma’or* …, and idem: “and although we find that they say things that seem to us to be exaggerated, one who investigates will find such cases”. On these last two sources see… [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. … [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. … [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. His wording is very similar to that of Samuel ibn Tibbon cited earlier and it is possible that Nachmanides was influenced by it. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. …, and on the attribution of the book to Nachmanides see there…inter alia, compare to the words of Abarbanel: “Regarding the words of the prophets, when we interpret them in a spiritual manner we do not as a result negate their *peshat* meaning, because the verse does not depart from its plain meaning, but rather we affirm that the *peshat* is true and hints in a concealed manner to the spiritual meaning. We do not believe that the spiritual meaning is the opposite of the *peshat* or contradicts it”, … [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. See also Joseph Kara on Isaiah 1:18: “There is nothing preferable to the *peshat* of the verse, for even in the case of midrash our sages taught us: ‘the verse does not depart from its plain meaning’”, and similarly in the legal rulings of Isaiah ben Elijah di Trani (died 1280) :”the sages said: ‘The verse does not depart from its plain meaning’ for even though everyone has the right to interpret the verse in any way he can, as they said, ‘Expound and receive reward’ [Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Sanhedrin* 71a and comparable texts], in any case, the *peshat* meaning is the most important and it is the truth”…, [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. In particular, see Marc Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis: A Thirteenth-Century Commentary on the Aggadah*, Cambridge 1980, pp. 1–20. For a summary of the attitude to *aggadah* (homily) see above, note 000. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. The order of citations:…, and outside the circle of the *peshat* commentators, see also, inter alia: “These midrashim should be understood according to the *peshat*”,…;”*Derashot* [interpretations] according to the *peshat*, should not be understood in any way other than *peshat*”, Abraham ben Moses (son of Maimonides) , *Milchamot ha-Shem*  (see above note 000), p. 89; “All of the writings of our sages can be divided into six parts. The first part is interpretation according to the *peshat*, without plene/defective spelling,” Hillel of Verona, *Sefer Tagmule HaNefesh* (above note 000) …If so it is possible that at least some scholars used the term “*peshat*” to refer to the literal meaning (in other words midrashim that should be understood literally ) and did not understand it to refer to a distinct exegetical category. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. E. Viezel, “Targum Onkelos in Rashi’s Exegetical Consciousness”, *Review of Rabbinic Judaism*, 15 (2012), pp. 5–8. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. On the seven rules of Hillel see…: on the thirteen rules of Rabbi Ishmael see…; on the belief that these rules were given on Sinai (and there are those who declared that both the rules of Hillel and of Ishmael were given at Sinai) see the discussions and sources in …; this view was expressed as early as the 11th century by Rabbeinu Gershom, Ma’or Ha-Golah (960-1028 approx..), … [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. On the dating of this midrash see…., and see arguments for an earlier dating, in the pre-Islamic period, in … [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. … [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. For several key examples of the role of this midrash in medieval biblical exegesis, see … [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. The influence of the Karaite controversy on scholars and commentators in Christian environments is indirectly revealed in the preservation of traditions originating in the controversy which found their way to the Jews of Western Europe and became established among people unaware of the controversy itself. For a key example of this process see Eran Viezel, “An Examination of Statements in Rashi’s Commentaries concerning Targum Onkelos”, *SHNATON: An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 16 (2006): 183, n. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. … [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. … [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. For a summary of this subject see … [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. In this vein: “In the first centuries of the common era, the Jews […] succeeded in effecting a radical transformation in their religion. They “modernized” it, as it were, surreptitiously, by pretending (and sometimes believing) that they were making no significant changes”, … [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. … [↑](#footnote-ref-62)