

# ANALOGY VS. ANOMALY IN MIDRASHIC HERMENEUTIC: TRACTATES WAYYASSA AND AMALEQ IN THE MEKILTA<sup>1</sup>

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*In memory of Prof. Moshe Held.  
May his memory be a blessing.*

One of the literary documents of which the *Mekilta* is made up consists largely of the interpretive glosses on Exodus 16–18 of three tannaim of the generation following R. Yohanan ben Zakkai. It has not been noticed before that these running controversies show a consistent distinction of interpretive practice, with one of the authorities, R. Yehoshua, regularly opposing the methods of “aggadic midrash” with a “plain” reading. The redactor of this *Mekiltan* document, at any rate, seems to have been interested in presenting these two hermeneutic philosophies. We may have a record here of conflict between older Oriental-Jewish styles of interpretation and nascent Greek-influenced models.

THE QUESTION OF THE RABBINIC UNDERSTANDING of the “plain sense” of Scripture has been much discussed. Raphael Loewe, in an excellent survey of the field, has gathered and studied briefly all of the terms in rabbinic literature which may plausibly be taken as referring to the plain sense as opposed to some sort of applied sense.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of this paper is much more narrow. I wish to show that a particular midrashic text presents us with a consistent conflict between two modes of interpretation, one which may be termed for the time being a “plain interpretation” and the other a “midrashic interpretation.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This paper was read at the American Oriental Society Annual Meeting at Ann-Arbor in April, 1985. I wish to thank Ken Frieden who read an earlier version and made many useful suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> “The ‘Plain’ Meaning of Scripture in Early Jewish Exegesis,” *Institute of Jewish Study, Papers*, I, 1964, 140–85. See however, the review of Loewe’s paper in *Journal of Jewish Studies* 14 (1969): 142–43. There have been many other researches in this field as well, e.g., Israel Frankel, *Peshat (Plain Exegesis) in Talmudic and Midrashic Literature*, Toronto, 1956. Cf. also, Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine*, New York, 1962, 47–52. In the scope of this small paper, a full literature survey is impossible.

<sup>3</sup> For the use of “midrashic,” as opposed to the plain sense, see e.g., Yohanan Muffs, who writes, “Modern scholarship has begun to realize that talmudic scriptural interpretation was not completely midrashic (i.e., fanciful) in nature, and

In order to avoid imposing our own prejudices (to the extent that this is possible), it seems useful to have other terms than “simple, plain, literal” vs. “midrashic,”<sup>4</sup> applied, figurative” to describe this conflict. A useful set of terms and their definition has been suggested by Harold Bloom who writes:

Ratios, as a critical idea, go back to Hellenistic criticism, and to a crucial clash between two schools of interpretation, the Aristotelian-influenced school of

that the rabbis displayed an excellent sense for the simple meaning of words and texts.” “Joy and Love as Metaphorical Expressions of Willingness and Spontaneity in Cuneiform, Ancient Hebrew, and Related Literatures: Divine Investitures in the Midrash in the Light of Neo-Babylonian Royal Grants,” in *Christianity, Judaism and Other Greco-Roman Cults: Studies for Morton Smith at Sixty*, ed. Jacob Neusner, Leiden, 1975, Part Three, 20, n. 33. I mean no disrespect to Muffs if I suggest that contemporary theory leaves us with a much less certain conception for ourselves of what the “simple meaning of words and texts” is, and that the equation of “midrashic” with “fanciful,” may not be appropriate. My use of “plain” as opposed to “midrashic” implies only that the “midrashic” interpretation uses those methods which are peculiar and typical of midrash, and that the “plain” interpretation opposes them, as we shall see. I shall, in any event, immediately suggest alternate terms for this difference.

<sup>4</sup> After all, all of the material we will consider is equally “midrashic” in that it is found in midrash.

Alexandria and the Stoic-influenced school of Pergamon. The school of Alexandria championed the mode of *analogy*, while the rival school of Pergamon espoused the mode of *anomaly*. The Greek *analogy* means "equality of ratios," while *anomaly* means a "disproportion of ratios." Whereas the analogists of Alexandria held that the literary text was a unity and had a fixed meaning, the anomalists of Pergamon in effect asserted that the literary text was an interplay of differences and had meanings that arose out of those differences.<sup>5</sup>

Bloom's strong claim is very suggestive for the study of *midrash*, for we find the battle between Alexandria and Pergamon repeated in more than one way in the *midrash*—not literally, but typologically.<sup>6</sup>

The famous example of such a theoretical clash in rabbinic literature is the controversy between R. Ishmael and R. Aqiba as to whether the Torah has spoken in the language of men or in a special language of God. The battle turned largely on *halakhic* issues and has been extensively explored by scholars.<sup>7</sup> What has not been noticed is that there is (on a smaller scale, to be sure) a similar conflict over the interpretation of narrative (that is *aggadic*) texts in the *Mekilta*, or rather in a particular sub-division of that text, *Tractates Wayyassa* and *Amaleq*.<sup>8</sup> I shall try to show that Rabbi Yehoshua (that is Rabbi Yehoshua as represented by the *Mekilta*) consistently adopts in this text an "analo-

gist" position opposed to the "anomalist" one of his interlocutors.<sup>9</sup>

Four times in *Tractate Wayyasa*, at least, R. Yehoshua makes interpretive statements which seem understandable only as rejections of the views of the other *tannaim*.<sup>10</sup> The reason for reading them in this way, in spite of the paradoxical fact that in this *midrash* the view of R. Yehoshua is always presented first, is that, seen by themselves, they are vacuous or tautological interpretations. Seen as refutations of the opposing view, however, each one reads as a strong rejection of the "anomalous" reading. Such interpretations are "privative," as they exist to deny an opposing reading.<sup>11</sup> Since the gesture is repeated four times or more in the space of this rather circumscribed text, it seems to amount, at the very least, to a claim by the redactor of the *midrash* that R. Yehoshua was an "analogist" who "held that the text was a unity and had a fixed meaning."

The most obviously privative position of R. Yehoshua's in our text is his rejection of a reading of R. El'azar's which involves several midrashic techniques. Among the techniques which the latter adopts here are *ma'al* (paronomasia, the substitution of one word for a similar one by revocalizing it); anagrammatic reading; *notariqon* (reading as if a shorthand writer had written, i.e., taking a word as a series of abbrevia-

<sup>5</sup> Harold Bloom, "The Breaking of Form," in Harold Bloom et. al., *Deconstruction and Criticism*, London and Henley, 1979, 13.

<sup>6</sup> In order to avoid any misunderstanding, let me emphasize that whether or not Bloom's historical claims are correct (or even meant seriously), a matter in which I am not competent to judge at all, his dichotomy is useful, precisely for the novelty of the terminology. I am looking for terms which allow for two different theories of language and interpretation in *midrash*, without implying that one is correct and the other fanciful. This is precisely what Bloom's terminology and definitions accomplish, whether or not they bear any historical relevance to our subject—or his.

<sup>7</sup> See Loewe, 169. See also, Zvi Yehuda, *The Two Mekhilot on the Hebrew Slave*, (dissertation, Yeshiva University, 1974, 43–61.

<sup>8</sup> For a description of the division of the *Mekilta* into tractates, see Jacob Lauterbach, "The Arrangement and Division of the *Mekilta*," *HUCA* 1, 1924, 427–67. These two tractates originally formed an independent unit which has been incorporated into our *Mekilta*, as shown by Louis Finkelstein, "The Sources of the Tannaitic Midrashim," *JQR*, N.S. 31, 1940–41, 214–28, esp 223 and 228.

<sup>9</sup> Loewe *did* notice a similar sort of consistent disagreement between the later (amoraic) authorities, Rav and Shmuel (173), so it is even more surprising that he did not see the patterning of the views of Rabbis Yehoshua and El'azar Hammoda'i, all the more so since he did cite one example of it on p. 171.

<sup>10</sup> The technical term for such a private statement in rabbinic literature is *lehoši mr. ploni ba* = He has come to exclude the view of R.X.

<sup>11</sup> Once again, Loewe has perceived this pattern with reference to other series of disagreements between 'literalists' and their opponents and has not picked it up in our case. I believe that my term, "privative" is far superior to his "apologetic." There is no question of apology here, but it is natural that the position that the text should be read in a simple fashion will be the reactive one. Moreover, I would like to point out that the fact that the simple interpretation appears first does not contradict its privativity, contra Loewe (172), vis a vis Rav and Shmuel (cf. n. 9 above), as our examples here clearly show. The ordering of speakers in the text was largely conventional and not related to the logical or chronological ordering of their statements. Furthermore, there is a certain sense in placing the simple interpretation first, even when it comes as a refutation of a more complicated reading.

tions of other words); and *mashal* (in this case, reading a narrative as a symbol of an abstract concept, a sort of simple allegory).<sup>12</sup> Study of this passage will be instructive in two ways: It will give us an illustrated catalogue of these midrashic methods and give us, as well, some insight into what R. Yehoshua was claiming about textual meaning by his rejection of them.

At Ex. 16:14 we read:

“And a layer of dew arose.” Behold Scripture has taught how the manna fell for Israel; . . .

R. Yehoshua (for the continuation shows that he is the speaker) takes the physical descriptions of the manna’s falling as literal, non-symbolic, mimetic signs. The verse goes on to describe the manna as “fine, scale-like, fine, like frost upon the ground,” to which R. Yehoshua appends the following tautologies:

“Fine” teaches us that it was fine. “Scale-like” teaches us that it was scale-like. “Like frost” teaches us that it would fall like hoar-frost upon the ground. These are the words of R. Yehoshua.

As pointed out already by the eighteenth-century commentator, R. Yehuda Najar, R. Yehoshua’s seemingly vacuous remarks make sense if we see them as a vigorous rejection of R. El‘azar’s immediately following text:

R. El‘azar Hammoda<sup>c</sup>i says, “And the layer of dew arose.” The prayer of our ancestors who were lying [a pun on “layer”; Hebrew uses the same root for both] in the dust of the earth.

R. El‘azar’s first interpretation is an allegorical<sup>13</sup> one. He takes “dew” as a figure for prayer. As Lauterbach points out, this reading is plausibly based on Deut. 32:2, “May my speech flow like rain, my utterance drip

<sup>12</sup> For description of these techniques and the connection between them and ancient Oriental dream interpretation, see work cited below n. 33.

<sup>13</sup> A very important question that will arise is whether R. El‘azar intends to deny the literal meaning of the verse or add on the allegorical reading as another layer of meaning [pun intended]. And this question will arise in every case of midrashic allegory, and, indeed, with reference to non-allegorical midrashic readings which are opposed to the literal/word meaning as well, as in the *notariqon* and *ma‘al* below. I have no answer to this question as yet, but it must be kept in mind always.

like dew,” which Onkelos<sup>14</sup> already translates, “May my teaching be sweet like rain, my speech be received like dew.” By a pun (paronomasia), R. El‘azar defines the authors of the prayer as “our ancestors.” This interpretation fits the description of *mashal*, for it involves the giving of abstract meaning to what appear literally to be concrete elements in the text. R. El‘azar’s insistence on the intercession of the ancestors has also the pre-determined feel of much allegorical interpretation. R. Yehoshua’s reading: “Scripture teaches us *how* the manna fell for Israel,” can be read as an implicit rejection of the allegorization of R. El‘azar.

R. El‘azar goes on to use other midrashic methods. His first move is another typical *ma‘al* or paronomasia by revocalizing:

“Fine [*daq*]” teaches us that it fell from heaven, as it says, “He spreads out the heavens like gossamer [*doq*] (Isa. 40:22).”

By repointing the word *daq* as *doq*, and by showing that the latter, “gossamer” is used as a simile for heaven, R. El‘azar reads “fine” as meaning that the manna fell from heaven. We understand well now what R. Yehoshua meant when he said “‘fine’ means fine!” The word “*mḥsps*” which R. Yehoshua had also glossed with itself is then dismantled into three words by R. El‘azar’s *notariqon*, and a whole series of propositions are derived from it:

Since it fell from heaven, it could be that it fell and grew cold; the verse signifies [*talmud lomar*]: “hot.”

The *m* and *ḥ* of “*mḥsps*” are taken in reverse order as “*ḥm*,” = hot. And then:

It could be that it fell noisily. Whence do we know that it fell silently? The verse signifies: “ssh!”

The *h* and *s* are read as “*has!*” = ssh! And then:

It could be that it fell on the ground. Whence do we know that it fell only in the vessels? The verse signifies: “bowl.”

The final two letters are read as an anagram of “*sp*” = bowl. Now R. El‘azar returns to his allegorical reading of the verse as a whole and says:

<sup>14</sup> The ancient traditional translation of the Torah into Aramaic.

"Like frost [*kikfor*]: God put out His hand, as it were, and received the prayers<sup>15</sup> of the ancestors who were lying like dust in the earth, and brought down manna to Israel, as in the Text which says, "I have found redemption [*kofer*] (Job 33:24)."

R. El'azar picks up his opening theme again, thus creating a sort of *inclusio*. The prayer [dew] had gone up from the ancestors [layer], and now for their sake, as an answer to the prayers [as "frost" repointed to mean "redemption"] of the ancestors [frost on the earth = ancestors lying in the earth], the manna is sent down. Thus R. Yehoshua's apparently tautological commentary. He states his decisive rejection of the *ma'al* and *notariqon* of his colleague.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> This phrase may well be the intertextual clue that connects his reading of "dew" as prayer with the *Targum* cited above, where the speech was "received like dew."

<sup>16</sup> Once having seen this instance in which R. Yehoshua decisively rejects *notariqon* as a solution to a difficult passage, we are in a position to understand another controversy of R. Yehoshua and the same R. El'azar Hammoda'i, which has been misunderstood by a recent writer. The midrash in question is in the *Mekilta* on Exodus 17:14:

"And Joshua weakened Amaleq and his people by the sword." R. Yehoshua says, he descended and cut off the heads of the mighty ones who were standing with him in the ranks. R. El'azar Hammoda'i says, this is the language of *notariqon*: He began; he frightened; he broke them [breaking up *wayyahalosh* to *wayyahel*, *wayyaza*, *wayyishbor*].

Yaaqov Elbaum, ["R. El'azar Hammoda'i and R. Yehoshua on the Amaleq Pericope," *Researches of the Folklore Research Centre* (Hebrew), 7, Jerusalem, 1983, 99–116.] has tried to use this dispute as evidence for his thesis that R. El'azar opposed the Bar Kokhba rebellion while R. Yehoshua supported it. That is to say, he held that the differing interpretations here arose out of different political philosophies:

R. El'azar Hammoda'i also limits the power of the victory. In opposition to R. Yehoshua who interpreted the verse as, "he descended and cut off the heads of the mighty ones with him [Amaleq] in the ranks," R. El'azar interpreted it as *notariqon* . . . and hence we do not hear of a decisive victory in which Amaleq was smitten. What made R. El'azar lead us by this path? The conclusion seems to arise of itself. [104]

In fact, so far from arising of itself, the conclusion of Elbaum's argument is irrelevant, because the premise upon which it is founded is erroneous. Not different political philosophies but different hermeneutic philosophies lead the tannaim down their respective paths. Both of the tannaim are responding to a genuine exegetical difficulty which remains

A similar case, in which R. Yehoshua rejects a *notariqon* of R. El'azar Hammoda'i is found in *Tractate Amaleq*.<sup>17</sup> On the verse, "a stranger in a strange land (Ex. 18:3)," the *Mekilta* reads:

R. Yehoshua says, it was a strange land to him—certainly.<sup>18</sup> Rabbi El'azar Hammoda'i says in a land strange to God.

R. Yehoshua takes the word *nokria* in its usual sense as a simple adjective meaning "strange," while his colleague breaks it up into two, using *notariqon* and reads "strange to God = *nekar Y-ah*."<sup>19</sup> Again we have found, then, that R. Yehoshua is opposed to the "anomalist" readings of midrash.

What we do not yet understand is the reason that R. Yehoshua rejects such well-known midrashic reading-practices so vigorously, but fortunately he has, himself, given us a partial clue to his practice.

On two occasions in our text, R. Yehoshua remarks of a particular verse that it is to be read "*kishmu'o*" = "in accordance with its sound."<sup>20</sup> In the first of these

outstanding until the present day [cf. Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, Philadelphia, 1974, ad loc]. The statement that Joshua weakened Amaleq with a sword seems to be a contradiction in terms. One does not weaken with a sword; one kills with a sword. R. Yehoshua's solution is, as usual to take the language literally. How did Joshua render Amaleq weak with the sword? He killed off his mighty soldiers—leaving only the weak. R. Yehoshua's use of dramatic language does not obscure the fact that his comment is a straightforward solution to an obvious exegetical problem. R. El'azar solves the same problem by use of *notariqon*, taking "to weaken" precisely in the sense of to defeat completely, the exact opposite of Elbaum's reading. The hermeneutic stances are thus precisely what we would have expected from these tannaitic personae, and there is no warrant for determining their political philosophies from this passage, any more than from the one on the manna.

<sup>17</sup> This example has been mentioned already by Loewe (171), but again he failed to notice how it fits into a consistent pattern.

<sup>18</sup> "Certainly (= waddai)" is another term whose meaning is close to "literal." See Loewe loc cit.

<sup>19</sup> Horowitz and Rabin in their edition of the *Mekilta* do indeed remark here that R. El'azar's *notariqon* is in accord with his normal practice.

<sup>20</sup> This is the form of this term in all Palestinian literature, where it is contrasted with "*mashma'*," which has the sense of "implication" or the like. Lack of recognition of this distinction mars Loewe's discussion (169–70).

cases, the context is the verse: “And they went three days in the desert and found no water (Ex. 15:22)”. R. Yehoshua comments only “*kishmu<sup>c</sup>o*”. The force of his comment—in its present midrashic context—may be inferred from the views of his opponents. The first of these is R. Eliezer:

But indeed there was water under the feet of Israel, for the earth floats on water, as it is said, “To Him, Who spreads the earth on the water” (Ps. 136:6), so, what is the significance of saying, “they did not find water,” but it was to exhaust them.

R. Eliezer is filling in gaps in the Biblical Text, but his own discourse is somewhat elliptic. It must be read something like: It cannot mean just that they searched and did not find water. Water can be found anywhere. God, therefore, must have performed a miracle, and made it impossible for them to find water, in order to exhaust them (thus preparing them for obedience).<sup>21</sup> This is a very common midrashic practice, filling out the extremely elliptical Biblical narrative, but R. Yehoshua rejected it here in favor of a severely limited literal reading.<sup>22</sup>

A second interpretation of the verse uses a similar midrashic technique and thus need not be reproduced here, but the third offered is extremely important:

<sup>21</sup> The statement of R. Eliezer may be better understood in the light of another statement of his found in *Mekilta, Wayhi* (Lauterbach 1, 173), where we read:

*And God led the People about, by the way of the wilderness, by the Sea of Reeds: Why so? . . . R. Eliezer says: “By the way” indicates that it was to exhaust them, as it is said, “He weakened my strength in the way (Ps. 102:24); “of the wilderness” indicates that it was to refine them . . . “by the Sea of Reeds” indicates that it was to test them.*

In our passage, the parallel *Mekilta d’ Rabbi Shim<sup>c</sup>on* reads “to exhaust them and to test them.”

<sup>22</sup> We find a very similar disagreement between these two tannaim at the very beginning of *Wayyassa*, where R. Yehoshua insists that the verse “And Moses removed Israel from the Reed Sea (Ex. 15:22)” means precisely that Moses instigated this move, while R. Eliezer argues that this cannot be the correct interpretation, since everywhere else the Torah tells us that God was the initiator of the moves, so it must be read that even though God initiated the move, the People’s faith was such that they obeyed Moses implicitly. The pattern is nearly identical. R. Yehoshua reads the local verse as is, as it were, while R. Eliezer argues logically that this cannot be correct, and suggests an expansion of the verse’s narrative.

The interpreters [lit. searchers out] of obscurities<sup>23</sup> said, “They did not find water”: The words of Torah which are symbolized by “water.” And whence that the words of Torah are symbolized by water? As it is said, “Ho, anyone who is thirsty, go to water!” (Isa. 55:1). Because they separated themselves from the words of Torah for three days; that is why they rebelled.

This text calls for some close reading. At first glance, it appears to be a thorough-going allegorization of the verse, reading “water” only as a metaphor for “Torah,” and thus eliminating the concrete event of the need for water entirely. The rebellion would then be read as something like, we preferred to live in Egypt, why did you take us out? The thirst would only be an excuse or even simply a metaphoric statement of the cause of the rebellion. Another possibility, however, is that the *dorshe reshumot*<sup>24</sup> are suggesting here an additional level of meaning to the literal, namely that they went three days in the desert, and studying no Torah, they found no water. Since their faith had been weakened through lack of study, they did not trust in God but rebelled. I can see no clear index in the text that would require one of these readings or the other,<sup>25</sup> so both must be considered possibilities.<sup>26</sup> In any case, it is

<sup>23</sup> This is my translation of *dorshe reshumot*, assuming the *rashum* means something like *hatum*, as both share the sense of sealed. I am not certain it is correct, but I am certain that Lauterbach’s “The ancient Jewish Allegorists,” *JQR NS I*, 1910–11, 291–333, is wrong. Most of the interpretations preserved in the name of this obscure group can be made allegorical only by extreme slight of hand, in which Lauterbach engages. I will attempt to deal with this question more fully in another place, dv. Cf. n. 29 below.

<sup>24</sup> See previous note.

<sup>25</sup> Contra Lauterbach, 310–11. It must be admitted that the following statement of the *dorshe reshumot* does seem to imply somewhat that the whole story was read allegorically and that the literal sense is completely suppressed by them as Lauterbach claims. Compare, however, next note. Lauterbach’s statement that this interpretation of the *dorshe reshumot* was considered somehow dangerous to normative Judaism in that it, “might lead to a denial of the historic facts narrated in the Bible, and especially to a disbelief in the miracles (330),” is, in any case, obviously wrong, as their interpretation was used to support the *halakhic* innovation of thrice-weekly Torah readings. Moreover, it is precisely (and for the same reason) the interpretation of the *dorshe reshumot* which is cited in the authoritative commentary of Rashi!

<sup>26</sup> They must both be considered possibilities in the sequel as well, where the tree which God shows them is read as “words

clear that this group read the verse in a metaphorical way, either in place of the concrete reading or in addition thereto. It may very well be that in its original context, R. Yehoshua's statement, "*kishmu*<sup>o</sup>" was intended to reject this ancient allegory, and not the simple gap-filling of his fellow *tannaim*. In the present *Mekiltan* context, R. Yehoshua appears to reject both approaches.

In another case, there is no ambiguity as to what reading it is that R. Yehoshua is rejecting by his "according to its sound." "Tomorrow I will stand at the top of the hill (Ex. 17:9)":

R. Yehoshua said, tomorrow we will be standing at the top of the hill—*according to its sound*. R. El'azar Hammoda<sup>c</sup>i says, tomorrow we will declare a fast and be prepared with the deeds of our ancestors. "Top": these are the deeds of the fathers. "Hill": these are the deeds of the mothers.

R. El'azar has made the verse conform to his theological vision of the whole narrative, as reflecting the reward by God to an undeserving people by virtue of the merits of their ancestors.<sup>27</sup> His reading is typically

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of Torah" by these same interpreters. In other words, we can easily understand (contra Lauterbach, cf. previous note) that what the *dorshe reshumot* wish to say is that the tree was a real tree, but its value is to be interpreted symbolically. There is, accordingly, no definitive proof that the interpretation of the *dorshe reshumot* denies the reality of the events. The 17th century neo-Aramaic midrash recently published by Yona Sabar understands this to mean that there were two events, the "Mixed Multitude" rebelled and complained about water, but the rest of the People were really thirsty for Torah. [Yona Sabar, *Homilies in the Neo-Aramaic of the Kurdistan Jews*, Jerusalem, 1984, 178.] Although the editor remarks there that there is no warrant in rabbinic literature for such a reading, it is clear that this is an attempt by the author of the late midrash to solve the very interpretive problem we are considering here. Moreover, this move is consistent with the general late midrashic view that all of the negative indices in the text point to the "Mixed Multitude." See my forthcoming paper, "Voices in the Text," *Revue Biblique*, Oct., 1986, n. 9.

<sup>27</sup> The motivation for R. El'azar's near-obsessive relating of everything in these narratives to the "merit of the Ancestors" is not clear to me. Ephraim Urbach [*The Sages*, trans. Israel Abrahams, Jerusalem, 1975, 497] discusses R. Yehoshua's objections to the idea but not the reason for his opponent's commitment to it. Elbaum may or may not be correct in his interpretation of the historical background of the discussion; in my opinion, he has not proved his case.

midrashic, and perhaps reflects ancient tradition,<sup>28</sup> and R. Yehoshua rejects it summarily, arguing again that the language is to be interpreted "according to its sound,"—univocally, literally, mimetically. In the light of R. Yehoshua's repeated rejection of *ma<sup>c</sup>al* and *notariqon* and in the light of his explicit repeated use of the term *kishmu*<sup>o</sup>, we may consider his hermeneutic differences with his colleagues to have originated in what Bloom has termed an "analogical" theory of language.

Now the term, "according to its sound" is not exclusive to R. Yehoshua even in our document. Its other occurrences both relate, however, to proper names. Thus we find once R. Eliezer himself interpreting that the place-name Refidim is to be taken as only that—in opposition to a view that it means "laxity," by a punning *notariqon*.<sup>29</sup> R. Yehoshua, therefore, has

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<sup>28</sup> It is reflected in the Palestinian Targum to this verse, but it may be that R. El'azar's comment is the source of that translation.

<sup>29</sup> This case is an example of the extreme tact required in the critical interpretation of rabbinic literature, for Lauterbach ("Allegorists," 313–15) has interpreted it in a manner that would quite undermine my generalization of R. Yehoshua's views as held by the *Mekilta*. Consideration of this text at some length will not only justify my reading of the *Mekilta*, but also illustrate Lauterbach's method. The *Mekilta* in the beginning of *Amaleq* reads as follows:

*And Amaleq came*: R. Yehoshua and R. El'azar Hasma says [!], This Scripture is obscure [*rashum*, see note 23 above] and explained by *Job*, for it says, "Can Papyrus grow without a swamp? Can a meadow flourish without water? (Job 8:11)." Is it possible for this Papyrus to grow without an swamp, and is it possible for this meadow to live without water? Thus, it is impossible for Israel without Torah, and because they separated themselves from the words of the Torah, therefore the enemy came upon them, for the enemy only comes because of sin and transgression. Therefore it says, "And Amaleq came." R. El'azar Hammoda<sup>c</sup>i says, "And Amaleq came." Since Amaleq would come under the wings of the cloud and kidnap people of Israel and kill them, as it says, "who has ambushed you on the way."

Lauterbach's treatment of this text is barely short of violent. He "interprets" our text by harmonizing it with others. Thus, in the parallel *Mekilta d'R. Shim<sup>c</sup>on*, we read that the *dorshe reshumot* interpreted the place-name, Refidim of the continuation of this verse by *notariqon*, as "Weakness of Hands," saying that since they "weakened their hands from observance of the Torah, the enemy came upon them, for the enemy only comes because of sin and transgression." Lauterback claims

clearly not invented the term. In our text, however, he is the only one who uses it out of the context of proper names. He seems to be saying that not only proper names, i.e., clearly referential signs, are to be taken literally, but also common nouns and narratives. The

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that this statement of the *dorshe reshumot* is the same as that of R. Yehoshua and his colleague here in our *Mekilta*, and consequently emends the text of our *Mekilta* to make it equivalent to the parallel. He thus expands the lemma to include the end of the verse, "And Amaleq came and battled Israel at Refidim," so as to make R. Yehoshua's comment a propos that word, and, moreover, he deletes the words, "and explained by Job . . . without Torah," against the evidence of all manuscripts of our *Mekilta*, because they contradict his interpretation that what is involved here is an *notariqon*-allegory on the name, Refidim. As further support for this view, he adduces the parallel of the Babylonian Talmud, which cites the view of the *dorshe reshumot* in the name of R. Yehoshua. Lauterbach's restoration, if correct, would make R. Yehoshua, in our *Mekilta*, a representative of the position of the *dorshe reshumot*, quite the opposite of the position I am claiming he represents.

However, Lauterbach's interpretation is untenable. First of all, there is absolutely no textual warrant for deleting the sentence he deletes, since it is in all witnesses to the *Mekilta* including ancient Oriental ones. Secondly, the context of the comment of R. Yehoshua, as it is placed in our *Mekilta*, strongly argues for a different interpretation. When we look at the comment of R. El'azar Hammoda'i which follows R. Yehoshua's, it is quite clear that the exegetical problem is not the name, Refidim, but the difficulty of, "And Amaleq came." They were in Amaleq's territory, so why did he "come," and from where? R. El'azar explains that he came into the camp, under the cloud, and that is why it says "came." R. Yehoshua explains that it says "came" to imply that the tragedy came upon them owing to their sins. The interpretation of the word, Refidim, and specifically, R. Eliezer's comment that it is to be read *kishmu'o*, against the view of the *dorshe reshumot* is found in our *Mekilta* only quite a bit later in the text, rendering it clear that Rabbis Yehoshua and El'azar are dealing with the first words of the verse, as the lemma indicates in any case, if not emended. I do not know, of course, what the historical Rabbi Yehoshua said, but the "truth of the text" of the *Mekilta* does not show him adopting a *notariqon* reading of Refidim. In fact, if the historical Rabbi Yehoshua did use such a *notariqon* here, then my point is even clearer, for the editor of the *Mekilta* would have been the one who formulated R. Yehoshua's words in such a way as to suppress such an interpretation of them, both by their placement, as well as by the gloss from Job, which would have been added, *ex hypothesi*, by him.

language of the Text has a fixed and univocal sense—"*shmu'o*"—its sound.<sup>30</sup> Other tannaim may hold that for proper nouns there is a fixed meaning, but employ allegorical, paronomasic and *notariqon* interpretations of other signifiers.

In the light of Bloom's dichotomy, then, we could say that R. Yehoshua is an "analogue,"<sup>31</sup> and the other tannaim that are represented are "anomalists." That is to say, if my reading of R. Yehoshua's interpretations is correct, he is arguing that there is a fixed and privileged pairing [an analogy] between the word and its meaning, the signifier and the signified in Saussurian terms; that is what *kishmu'o* implies, while R. El'azar, by his interpretive practices, strongly implies an absence of such analogical pairing of word and meaning.<sup>32</sup>

From our perspective, of course, it is R. El'azar's hermeneutic which seems strange. However, his

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<sup>30</sup> The image is strikingly *logocentric*, as is the position too. If I may be permitted some extravagance, I will suggest that this is perhaps no accident.

<sup>31</sup> It must be emphasized that on the basis of an investigation such as this, there can be no question of arriving at conclusions vis a vis the positions of the historical R. Yehoshua. In order to do that, one would have to show that R. Yehoshua holds similar positions in other works of rabbinic literature, and not only sporadically, but consistently enough to prove that they represent a pattern in his thought. Such an investigation would certainly be exceedingly arduous and given the present state of textual fidelity of most rabbinic literature, perhaps nigh impossible. I content myself, therefore, with a weaker claim: that the redactors of the *Mekilta* document in question had a *tradition* of R. Yehoshua, the analogue. In the felicitous phrase of my late lamented teacher, Saul Lieberman, we are concerned here with "textual truth and not historical truth." The *terminus ante quem* for the position called here R. Yehoshua is, therefore, the date of the redaction of our *Mekilta* document (*not of the whole Mekilta*), which in my opinion is no later than the third century of the Christian Era at the latest.

<sup>32</sup> Note, once more, that I am not claiming that the tannaitic controversy is influenced by the alleged Hellenistic one, or even that the controversy of Alexandria and Pergamon has been authoritatively interpreted by Bloom [The lack of references in his text suggests that he is using it as a device and not making scholarly claims. See also, n. 6 above.]. What I am claiming is that R. Yehoshua's tendentious rejection of "mid-rashic" reading techniques amounts to an argument by him [or, at any rate, by the editor of the *Mekilta*] in favor of an analogical view of language, which is, after all, both Platonic and Aristotelian. It would be most interesting, of course, if historical influence could, some day, be shown.

approach is typical of rabbinic midrash and parallels to all of his moves can easily be adduced from other *tannaitic* sources, as well as *amoraic* ones. Moreover, as my late lamented teacher, Saul Lieberman showed decades ago, all of these methods belonged to ancient Oriental modes of interpretation.<sup>33</sup> This view has been strengthened considerably recently by Stephen Lieber-

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<sup>33</sup> *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine*, 2nd ed., N.Y., 1962, 68–82. Specifically, Prof. Lieberman showed that these are reminiscent of Oriental dream interpretation, a fact that may be of great significance for midrash. The connection between dream interpretation and text interpretation is being explored in a forthcoming book by Ken Frieden.

man's discovery of such "midrashic" methods in Akkadian literary commentaries.<sup>34</sup> It is R. Yehoshua's rejection of these methods which requires explanation. Bloom's report of such a controversy in the ancient world, which *may* ultimately be shown to be a conflict between the Oriental and the Hellenic in Hellenistic culture is very suggestive, but for the moment I shall be content if my suggestion contributes to the reading of *The Mekilta*, even if the historical determiners of the text are not yet (and may never be) clarified.

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<sup>34</sup> Stephen Lieberman, "The Babylonian Background of the So-Called 'Aggadic' Methods of Biblical Exegesis," (forthcoming). I wish to thank Prof. Lieberman for permission to refer to this paper.