Can We Take Holy Scripture *à la lettre*? Biblical Literalism and Yefet ben ʿElī's Hermeneutical Term of the *ẓāhir*

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ABSTRACT

In medieval Judaeo-Arabic exegesis of the Hebrew Bible, scholars used a range of hermeneutical terms to describe the ways in which Scripture was thought to signify. They distinguished between several types of figurative and non-figurative language, as well as between different interpretive approaches that were applied to these contrasting modes of speech. During the second half of the tenth century, the Karaite exegete Yefet ben ʿElī sets a precedent in Jewish history by producing a continuous translation and commentary of the entire Hebrew Bible. Herein, he regularly makes use of the hermeneutical term *ẓāhir* (›outward‹, ›apparent‹, ›literal‹), which he adopts from the Arabic-Islamic tradition, but adapts to his particular needs. Scholarly literature over the past three decades has increasingly pointed to his *œuvre* as one of the most important examples of the so-called ›literal trend‹ in medieval Karaite exegesis. Yet how may scholars, wether medieval or modern, clearly define the literal meaning of Scripture? Prompted by this larger question, the present study analyzes a selection of Yefet's references to the *ẓāhir* and elucidates his usage of the term within the context of the respective biblical passage. It will be argued that the modern academic ascription of literalism to Yefet's work cannot consistently be linked to his use of the Arabic *ẓāhir*.

Introduction

The past decades have witnessed an efflorescence of scholarly research on the tenth-century Karaite exegete Yefet ben ʿElī and his work. This shift in academic attentiveness to his written legacy was significantly spurred by the reopening of Russian libraries to Western scholars. In the following period, the availability of valuable Karaite manuscript material provided the basis for a reevaluation of Yefet's role in the history of Jewish exegesis of the Hebrew Bible. Instead of mainly depicting him as a diligent compiler of previous Jewish interpretive traditions, scholars began to recognize the astonishing scope, as well as the originality of his intellectual heritage.[1]

Zawanowska has pointed out that the extent of attention paid to different parts and stylistic *foci* of his writings has greatly varied. In terms of biblical books studied by modern scholars, academic rigor has been much more pronounced in the case of Yefet's commentaries on shorter narrative texts than, for instance, on legislative portions of the Hebrew Bible.[2] Another tendency in academic research may be observed in the recent preponderance for studies on the so-called ›literal‹, ›literalistic‹, or ›literal-contextual‹ approach ascribed to the commentator's work.[3] This trend is linked to several scholars' assessment of the ›literal trend‹ as the most notable characteristic of Karaite biblical exegesis in the early classical period in general,[4] as well as »the dominant feature of most of Yefet's commentaries«[5] in particular.

These developments have brought up the question whether Yefet uses particular Arabic hermeneutical terms that giving explicit hints at his ›literalist tendencies‹. With regard to ›literalistic‹ Judaeo-Arabic exegesis, several prominent analyses of Yefet's hermeneutic, as well as that of his Rabbanite contemporary Saadia Gaon (d. 942), have pointed to the Arabic participle form

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[1] Marzena Zawanowska, "Review of Scholarly Research on Yefet ben ʿEli and his Works," *Revue des études juives* 173, no. 1–2 (2014): 120–22. Zawanowska notes that Yefet's work represents a »singular example in the history of Jewish exegesis of the holy Scriptures of a continuous translation and commentary of the entire Hebrew Bible.« Ibid., 99.

[2] Ibid., 135–36.

[3] Ibid., 136–37.

[4] Meira Polliack, "Major Trends in Karaite Biblical Exegesis," in *Karaite Judaism: A Guide to Its History and Literary Sources*, ed. Meira Polliack. Handbook of Oriental Studies, section 1; The Near and Middle East, vol. 73 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 364–67.

[5] Meira Polliack, *The Karaite Tradition of Arabic Bible Translation: A Linguistic and Exegetical Study of Karaite Translations of the Pentateuch from the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries C.E.* Études sur le judaïsme médiéval, vol. 17 (Leiden, New York, Cologne: Brill, 1997), 39.

z̄āhir.[6] This expression, which is usually translated as ›outward‹, ›apparent‹, ›external‹ or ›literal‹[7], is widely known from Qur'anic exegesis, and features prominently in the works of medieval Muslim religious scholars such as Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064), al-Jubbāʾī (d. 303/915-16) or al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923). As part of their exegetical approach, the *z̄āhir* enjoys a privileged status and may only be abandoned for a number of specific reasons.[8] This, however, does not imply that all of these exegetes used the term *z̄āhir* with the same meaning and implications, which may easily be rendered as the ›literal‹ or ›plain‹ meaning of Scripture. A thorough analysis of the different connotations and cross-religious interpolations that play a role in the usage of the term, thereby also paying significant attention to Yefet's work, remains a scholarly *desideratum*.

The aim of the present paper is to take a first step in this direction. This shall be achieved through an analysis of selected passages in Yefet's commentary work containing explicit references to the *z̄āhir*. These passages, taken from his commentaries on the books of Ezekiel, Daniel, and Proverbs, have been chosen on basis of their informative value with regard to Yefet's understanding of the *z̄āhir*, their recurring mention in secondary literature, as well as their availability in edited versions. They will be both analyzed by reading the commentary layer on the backdrop of the Masoretic Text itself and through the lens of prominent strands of its interpretation in the Jewish and Christian traditions.[9] This paper shall provide the starting point for a large-scale study that systematically scans edited versions, as well as continuous manuscript material of Yefet's commentaries, in order to analyze his usage of the term *z̄āhir* in context.[10]

In the following, Yefet's exposition of his preference for the *z̄āhir*, as laid out in his commentaries on the books of Daniel and Ezekiel, will first be presented. Therein, the privileged status he assigns to the *z̄āhir* is immediately connected to the legitimate reasons for its abandonment. The paper will then look at Yefet's understanding of the relation between the *z̄āhir* and his concept of scriptural truth as expressed in a passage from the Introduction to his commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy. An analysis of the latter will also serve to set into perspective the hermeneutical terms *bāṭin* and *taʾwīl* in contradistinction to the *z̄āhir*. Lastly, the topic of ›literalism‹ and ›contextualism‹ as analytical categories in modern academic literature will be addresssed. Focusing on Sasson's[11] usage of the terms in relation to the Arabic hermeneutical terminology used by Yefet himself, the hitherto insufficient clarification of the concept of ›literalism‹ in studies on Judaeo-Arabic exegesis will be pointed out.

The *z̄āhir* as the Preferred Mode of Exegesis

Yefet ben ʿElī makes several remarks in his works that attest to his preference for the *z̄āhir* as the ›default mode‹ of exegesis[12]. This commitment to the ›apparent‹ or ›plain‹ sense of Scripture is established, *ex negativo*, through the limitation of cases that allow resorting to figurative modes of interpretation.[13] In his commentary on Daniel 11:1, Yefet writes:

> »It is not justified to abandon the plain meaning of the text of the words of God or of His prophets, save where the plain meaning is obscure or unacceptable, being contradicted by reason [1] or by (other) unambiguous text [2].«[14]

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[6] With regard to Saadia, Ben-Shammai criticizes the vagueness of the term ›plain‹ or ›literal meaning‹, see Haggai Ben-Shammai, "The Tension between Literal Interpretation and Exegetical Freedom: Comparative Observations on Saadia's Method," in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Barry D. Walfish et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 36-39. With regard to Yefet see, for instance, Marzena Zawanowska, *The Arabic Translation and Commentary of Yefet ben ʿEli the Karaite on the Abraham Narratives (Genesis 11:10-25:18): Edition and Introduction*. Études sur le judaïsme médiéval, vol. 46. Karaite Texts and Studies, vol. 4. (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 71-72; Further examples from secondary literature will be presented in the following. As proof for the characterization of Yefet's exegetical approach as ›literalistic‹, apart from the *z̄āhir*, scholars have repeatedly referred to Yefet's Introduction to his Commentary on Genesis and his usage of the terms *ʿibāra* and *al-fāz̄* therein; Michael G. Wechsler, *The Arabic Translation and Commentary of Yefet ben ʿEli the Karaite on the Book of Esther: Edition, Translation, and Introduction*. Études sur le judaïsme médiéval, vol. 36. Karaite Texts and Studies, vol. 1 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2008), 15.

[7] John L. Esposito, "Zahir," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, ed. John L. Esposito (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2003); See also: Rafik Berjak, "Zahir," in *The Qur'an: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Oliver Leaman (Milton Park: Taylor Francis, 2005). For the specific understanding in the Ismāʿīlī context, see Claude Gilliot, "Exegesis of the Qurʾān: Classical and Medieval," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002).

[8] Ben-Shammai, "The Tension," 37-40.

[9] In all instances where references to primary sources are made in the form of English translations produced by other authors, their analysis is still founded on my own reading of the Arabic or Hebrew original.

[10] It would be worthwhile to consider modeling such a study on the excellent work by Zawanowska on Yefet's use of the *muḥkam* (›clear‹, ›precise‹) and *mursal* (›unspecified‹, ›ambiguous‹) in the context of the hermeneutical properties of biblical verses. Marzena Zawanowska, "Islamic Exegetical Terms in Yefet ben ʿEli's Commentaries on the Holy Scriptures," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 64, no. 2 (Autumn 2013): 306-25.

[11] Ilana Sasson, "The Book of Proverbs between Saadia and Yefet," *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* 1 (2013): 159-78; Ilana Sasson, *The Arabic Translation and Commentary of Yefet ben ʿEli on the Book of Proverbs, Vol. 1: Edition and Introduction*. Études sur le judaïsme médiéval, vol. 67. Karaite Texts and Studies, vol. 8. (Leiden, Boston; Brill, 2016), 40-82.

[12] Zawanowska, *Abraham Narratives*, 4, 70-71. Apart from the passages that will be analyzed in the following, Zawanowska also, for instance, reads Yefet's commentary to Gen. 17:23-27 in this light, see Ibid., 71. For the Arabic original see Ibid., 126*.

[13] For secondary literature on this hermeneutical scheme by Yefet, see also Daniel Frank (ed.), *Search Scripture Well: Karaite Exegetes and the Origins of the Jewish Bible Commentary in the Islamic East*. Études sur le judaïsme médiéval, vol. 29 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2004), 255; Sasson, *Yefet ben ʿEli on the Book of Proverbs*, 24, 55. For a comparison to Saadia Gaon's approach with regard to the *z̄āhir* and *taʾwīl* see Frank, *Search Scripture Well*, 255; Cf. Sasson, *Yefet ben ʿEli on the Book of Proverbs*, 55-56; Cf. Zawanowska, *Abraham Narratives*, 71, no. 38. For a more extensive analysis of Saadia's exegetical approach see Ben-Shammai, "The Tension," 33-50. For parallel attitudes in Muslim legal hermeneutics see for instance Robert M. Gleave, "Conceptions of the Literal Sense (*z̄āhir*, *ḥaqīqa*) in Muslim Interpretive Thought," in *Interpreting Scriptures in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Overlapping Inquiries*, ed. Mordechai Z. Cohen and Adele Berlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 183-84.

[14] Translation: Zawanowska, *Abraham Narratives*, 71. Remarks in brackets
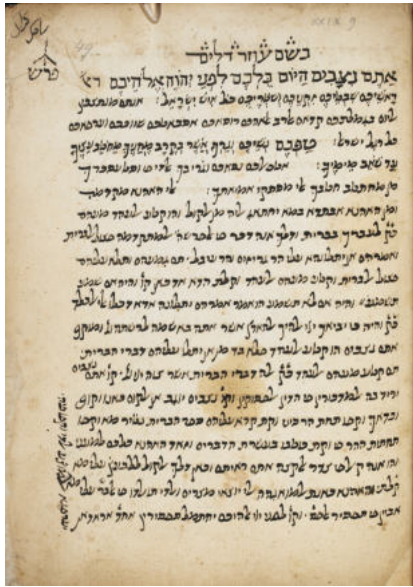
A sample page taken from a manuscript copy of Yefet ben 'Elī's Commentary on Deuteronomy (10th century), produced by a later scribe in 1603. The manuscript evinces the typical tripartite structure of Karaite Judaeo-Arabic commentaries: The biblical verse in Hebrew (here: starting in the first line, vocalized) is followed by a Judaeo-Arabic translation and commentary on the respective verse. [LON BL Or. 2479, fol. 49r]

In the following, the commentator expounds on the first case: The category of scriptural expressions whose literal meaning is rejected by reason [1] is concerned with anthropomorphic expressions.[15] Firstly, this relates to cases of verbs associated with corporeal actions (e.g. movements such as ascending and descending) being predicated of God [1.1.]. Secondly, a conflict with reason arises if verbs expressing human emotions (e.g. jealousy, joy) are used to describe the heavenly creator [1.2.]. Yefet describes these two types of formulations as ›metaphors and expansions‹ (*al-majāz wa-l-ittisāʿ*).[16] Reason enables men to identify such figurative language and refrain from interpreting it literally.[17] Along this line of argument, cases [1.1.] and [1.2.] necessarily open up the possibility of figurative interpretation (*taʾwīl*)[18]:

»Such texts must therefore be capable of being explained away, and either the noun or the verb shall be interpreted figuratively (*yataʾawwalu*).«[19]

In the case of [1.1], he proposes to understand the subject of the sentence (i.e. ›God‹) as elliptical and thus to interpret it figuratively[20]. Reinsertion of the suppos-

edly elided part of the subject then yields sentences such as ›the Angel of God was descending‹ or ›the Glory of God was ascending‹.[21] With regards to [1.2], he opts for the figurative interpretation of the verb (*yataʾawwalu*), thus expressing »a sense to be evolved in whatever way the words will allow.«[22]

The second case he mentions as a justification for ›non-*ẓāhir*‹ interpretation concerns contradictions between several biblical verses:

»Where one text is precluded by another, the one which admits of two or more interpretations must be explained away.«[23]

In addition to these two cases, on which Yefet expounds in his work on Daniel, he adds a third one in his commentary on Ezekiel 37:13-14. Instead of addressing contradictions between ambiguous and clear verses, the present passage introduces the topic of figurative language:

»The (scriptural) texts should by no means be extracted from their plain meaning, save for one of two (possible) reasons: either because reason rejects it (i.e., the literal exposition) [1] and declares it impossible; or because the text ist (intended as) **a simile** (*annahu mathalʿⁿ maḍrūbᵃⁿ*) [3], like the passage about **a great eagle**, etc. (Ezek 17:3) and the passage (beginning with the words), **Behold, I will kindle a fire in thee**, etc. (Ezek. 21:3), as well as **other biblical passages wherein similes are indicated by (obvious) hints** and by (their location) in a (specific) place (i.e., in a pericope or book containing metaphors), like the Song of Songs and that which is of the same kind.«[24]

Yefet cites here a verse from the book of Ezekiel, in which proponents of the Jewish and Christian traditions have repeatedly spotted a simile (Ezek 17:3). A number of renowned commentators understood the ›great eagle‹ to denote the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar.[25] This understanding is corroborated by an explicit note in the

added by me. Cf. Yefet ben 'Elī, *A Commentary on the Book of Daniel by Rabbi Jephet the Karaite*, ed. D.S. Margoliouth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1889), 56. Arabic original: Ibid.,١١٢.

[15] »Ideas repudiated by the reason, are such as ›God descended‹, ›God ascended‹, etc.; precluded by the reason, because, if we take the verse literally, it follows from it that God must be a material substance, capable of inhabiting places and being in one place more than in another, moving and resting, all qualities of created and finite beings, and He must possess these attributes.« Ibid., 56. Arabic original: Ibid.,١١١-١١٢.

[16] Regarding Yefet's usage of the term *ittisāʿ* (expansion), see Sasson, *Yefet ben 'Eli on the Book of Proverbs*, 59.

[17] »The language has employed in such cases metaphors and [expansions], because the application of the reason can point them out.« Margoliouth translates here ›inaccurate expressions‹ instead of ›expansions‹. 'Elī, *A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, 56. Arabic original: Ibid.,١١٢.

[18] In the context of Yefet's works, the hermeneutical term *taʾwīl* is usually translated as ›figurative interpretation‹, ›indirect interpretation‹, or ›non-literal interpretation‹. This matter will be treated in more detail below.

[19] Translation: my own; based on 'Elī, *A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, 56. Arabic original: Ibid.,١١٢.

[20] For Yefet's concept of scriptural ellipsis (*iḥtisār*), see Sasson, *Yefet Ben 'Eli on*

the Book of Proverbs, 71-74.

[21] »[If the noun is interpreted figuratively] in cases like ›and God descended‹, ›and God ascended‹, where we affirm the action of the person of whom ›ascending‹ and ›descending‹ are attributes; only the person intended is the *Angel of* God, or the *Glory of* God or the *Apostle of* God, with the ellipse of a word.« 'Elī, *A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, 56. Arabic original:١١٢; Ben Shammai's analysis has shown that Saadia's exposition of his exegetical principles, laid out in the *Amānāt*, contains a very similar line of argument, see Ben-Shammai, "The Tension," 35.

[22] »[Or the verb is interpreted figuratively] [*yataʾawwalu*] in cases like ›God was glad‹, or ›God was sorry‹ or ›God was jealous‹; all of which are accidents not to be predicated of the Immortal Creator. This phrase must contain a sense to be evolved in whatever way the words will allow.« 'Elī, *A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, 56. Arabic original: Ibid.,١١٢.

[23] Ibid., 56. Arabic original: Ibid.,١١٢.

[24] Zawanowska, *Abraham Narratives*, 71-72. Bold typeface added by me. Arabic original: Haggai Ben-Shammai, "The Doctrines of Religious Thought of Abû Yûsuf Ya'qûb al-Qirqisânî and Yefet ben 'Elî" (PhD diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem,1977), 227. As cited in Zawanowska, *Abraham Narratives*, 72, no. 41.

[25] In his commentary on Ezek. 17:2, Rashi writes: »[P]ropound a riddle—The

preceding verse declaring the passage as a riddle (*ḥîḏâh*), and as a parable (*māšāl*):

> »1 And the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, 2 Son of man, **put forth a riddle**, and **speak a parable** unto the house of Israel; 3 And say, Thus saith the Lord GOD; **A great eagle** with great wings, longwinged, full of feathers, which had divers colours, came unto Lebanon, and took the highest branch of the cedar.« (Ezek. 17:1-3, KJV)[26]

The nearer context of the second example[27] equally offers an overt indicator of figurative language. Following the expression cited by Yefet («Behold, I will kindle a fire in thee«, Ezek. 21:3), the Hebrew *māšāl* (parable) appears in the Masoretic Text. This suggests that the biblical author intended the whole passage to be understood in a figurative sense:

> »47 And say to the forest of the south, Hear the word of the LORD; Thus saith the Lord GOD; **Behold, I will kindle a fire in thee**, and it shall devour every green tree in thee, and every dry tree: the flaming flame shall not be quenched, and all faces from the south to the north shall be burned therein. **48** And all flesh shall see that I the LORD have kindled it: it shall not be quenched. **49** Then said I, Ah Lord GOD! they say of me, Doth he not speak **parables**?« (Ezek. 20:47-49; KJV)[28]

The above examples attest to Yefet's awareness of Scripture's use of figurative language. The latter, in turn, demands from the exegete to divert from the *ẓāhir*.[29] Stylistic devices such as metaphors, similes, and allegory[30] may be marked by obvious hints in the context of the passage: Departure from the *ẓāhir* is justified in the case of »biblical passages wherein similes are indicated by (obvious) hints«.[31]

We may conclude that Yefet's exegetical approach entails a significant number of exceptions that allow for ›non-*ẓahir*‹ interpretation. This has led several scholars to note that his approach may not be termed as rigidly literalistic.[32] A more extensive analysis of relevant passages of his commentary work is needed in order to determine whether he consistently adheres to the hermeneutical criteria presented above. It is worth examining, for instance, whether theological or polemical motivations might cause him to classify expressions as metaphors or similes, even in cases where there are no relevant contextual indicators on that score.[33]

The *ẓāhir* in Relation to *bāṭin*, *ta'wīl* and *ĕmet*

In the Introduction to his commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy, Yefet offers two definitions for the idea of ›truth‹ (Heb. *ĕmet*) in a scriptural context. According to the first definition, truth is equated with the *ẓāhir* devoid of any elements of *bāṭin*[34]. This entails that a particular passage in Scripture may be understood without any interpretation by way of *ta'wīl*[35]. He bases his argument on three verses in the Book of Daniel, which are provided as examples of ›literal‹ and ›non-literal‹ speech. The second definition he offers relates to a statement's compatibility with reason, and thus will not be elaborated on in the present context.[36]

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prophecy in this chapter is expressed as a riddle, [in] which he compares Nebuchadnezzar to an eagle and the kings of Judah to the lofty top of cedars.« A. J. Rosenberg, *Ezekiel – Volume One – A New English Translation*, (New York: The Judaica Press, 1991), 126; Redak provides the following commentary on the verse: »A riddle is an enigmatic example, from which another thought can be understood; a parable is the likening of one thing to another. This is a parable, since the king is likened to an eagle. […]« Ibid., 126; Cf. also the commentary by Keil and Delitzsch: C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol. 9, *Ezekiel, Daniel*, transl. James Martin (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1988), 236–37.

[26] Bold typeface added by me.

[27] I.e. the passage of the MT surrounding Ezek. 21:3.

[28] These verses in the KJV correspond with Ezek. 21:1–5 according to the division of verses used by the BHS. Bold typeface added by me.

[29] Cf. Sasson, *Yefet ben 'Eli on the Book of Proverbs*, 55.

[30] On Yefet's conception of biblical metaphor see Meira Polliack and Sivan Nir, "Many Beautiful Meanings Can Be Drawn from Such a Comparison': On the Medieval Interaction View of Biblical Metaphor," in *Exegesis and Poetry in Medieval Karaite and Rabbanite Texts*, ed. Joachim Yeshaya et al. Études sur le judaïsme médiéval, vol. 68. Karaite Texts and Studies, vol. 9 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2017), 40–79. Cf. also Sasson on Yefet's usage of the term *majāz*. Sasson, *Yefet ben 'Eli on the Book of Proverbs*, 57-58. On *amtāl* and *tašbih* ibid., 60–64.

[31] Yefet's commentary on Ezekiel 37:13-14, see note 23 above. Zawanowska, *Abraham Narratives*, 72.

[32] See Zawanowska's comment: »This limited literalistic approach to the Bible, which is demonstrated by Yefet's attempt to produce, as far as possible, a close Arabic translation and his overall tendency to elucidate Scripture according to its plain sense, does not, however, imply a slavish reliance on the literal meaning of particular words and expressions irrespective of their context, for such ›absolute literalness‹ would lead to a misreading of the Bible.« Ibid. Cf. Ibid., 164.

[33] Cf. Wechsler's remark: »Further underscoring Yefet's essentially *rationalistic*, rather than strictly *literalistic*, approach to exegesis is his not infrequent recognition of non-literal meaning—in most instances, specifically, idiomatic or figurative language—where the literal meaning would pose a theological or contextual-rational difficulty.« Wechsler, *Yefet ben 'Eli the Karaite on the Book of Esther*, 19.

[34] In the Arabic-Islamic, as in the Judaeo-Arabic context, *bāṭin* is usually translated as the ›inner‹, ›internal‹, ›hidden‹, or ›esoteric‹ meaning of Scripture. As pointed out by Zawanowska, Yefet »perceives the Bible as a text, undoubtedly inspired by God, but nevertheless written by a human author-redactor in conventional human language, and not in a divinely secret code.« In the context of Yefet's work, it is thus more adequate to draw on the former options of translation and not to evoke the association of esotericism. Zawanowska contends that Yefet's position against the idea of the Bible as a ›secret code‹ may also be at the basis of his overall limited use of the term *bāṭin* in contradistinction to the *ẓāhir*. Zawanowska, "Islamic exegetical terms," 322-23. For *al-bāṭin* in the exegesis of the Qur'an and the Bible in general, see Daniel De Smet, "Esotericism and Exotericism," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* 3 Online, ed. Gudrun Krämer et al, accessed December 4, 2020, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_26230; Gilliot, "Exegesis of the Qur'ān." For *al-bāṭin* in the context of Yefet's work see Sasson, *Yefet ben 'Eli on the Book of Proverbs*, 58-59.

[35] *ta'wīl* is usually translated as ›figurative‹, ›non-literal‹, or ›allegorical interpretation‹. For *ta'wīl* in the context of Yefet's work see Zawanowska, *Abraham Narratives*, 69, 72; no. 42; Zawanowska, "Islamic exegetical terms," 323, no. 65; Sasson, *Yefet ben 'Eli on the Book of Proverbs*, 55. For *ta'wīl* in the Islamic context see Smet, "Esotericism and Exotericism."; Gilliot, "Exegesis of the Qur'ān."

[36] See Zawanowska, *Abraham Narratives*, 69. Arabic Original: Ibid., 69, no. 33.

»The word truth (*ĕmet*) bears two meanings.

First, it (the truth) is according to its (the Bible's) *ẓāhir* [apparent meaning], devoid of any *bāṭin* [hidden meaning], as this word possesses a similar meaning when it is said in Daniel {›And now will I shew thee the truth.‹} (Behold, there shall stand up yet three kings in Persia; and the fourth shall be far richer than they all: and by his strength through his riches he shall stir up all against the realm of Grecia.) (Dan 11:2), to wit: ›And now I will tell you the words according to their *ẓāhir* [apparent meaning]‹.

For Daniel was listening to things that had *ta'wīlāt* [figurative interpretations], like {›The ram which thou sawest having two horns are the kings of Media and Persia.‹} (Dan 8:20) {and four great beasts} (came up from the sea, diverse one from another) (Dan 7:3) which he saw. And this time he did not see anything that had *ta'wīl* [figurative interpretations] and did not hear any speech that bears anything but the *ẓāhir* [apparent meaning].«[37]

In the second half of this passage, Yefet refers to a nocturnal, as well as a diurnal vision of the prophet Daniel. Chapter Seven of the eponymous biblical book gives account of a dream, in which Daniel is confronted with four creatures possessing both animal-like and anthropomorphic characteristics. When Daniel approaches a person to help him understand these surreal events, the Aramaic *yaṣṣîbā'*, as equivalent of Hebrew *ĕmet*, is associated with their correct interpretation:

»I came near unto one of them that stood by, and asked him the truth of all this. So he told me, and made me know the interpretation of the things. These great beasts, which are four, are four kings, which shall arise out of the earth.« (Dan. 7:16–17, KJV)

In the subsequent chapter, Daniel receives a vision of a ram and a buck entering a fight. We are informed that the former possesses two horns, while the latter is equipped with one horn located between his eyes. Despite his seeming physical disadvantage, the buck smites the ram and destroys his horn. The buck's horn then breaks and makes way to four large and one small horn. The events narrated, here again, clearly defy the natural principles of reality.[38] Yet Daniel is able to make sense of them by means of the interpretation delivered by the angel Gabriel:

A street sign in modern Tel Aviv (Israel) named after Saadia Gaon. He may be considered as Yefet ben ʿElī's most important intellectual opponent. He is known for having acted as the head of the Rabbanite academy of higher learning in Babylonia (Gaon), for his biblical translations and commentaries, as well as his works on Hebrew linguistics, Halakha, and philosophy.

»The ram which thou sawest having two horns are the kings of Media and Persia.« (Dan. 8:20, KJV)[39]

To this verse, which he cites in the Introduction to his commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy, Yefet confers the following interpretation:

»This is said generally, and we must further interpret, as we have done in other cases. He said in the Vision that the one horn was less than the other, i.e. the horn which came up first; which symbolizes the fact that Media was less in military power [and anything else]; their sole king being Darius the Mede, who reigned one year; whereas from Persia five kings arose, who reigned fifty-five years. And by the words **I saw the ram butting** (v. 4) is meant that he had armies which marched to the three quarters.«[40]

From this commentary, one may gather why »Daniel [here] was listening to things that had *ta'wīlāt*«[41]: According to Yefet, the interpretation that Gabriel offers makes use of figurative language indicative of another layer of meaning. The number of horns shall be interpreted in order to understand the biblical author's statement about the power of these two empires.

In the first verse cited in the Introduction to Deuteronomy (Dan. 11:2), the angel Gabriel abstains from this stylistic device and instead informs Daniel in entirely plain speech:

»And now will I shew thee the truth. Behold, there shall stand up yet three kings in Persia; and the fourth shall be far richer than they all: and by his strength through his

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[37] Translation: my own; cf. Ibid., 69; parts in braces are translations of Hebrew quotations in Yefet's Arabic commentary. Arabic original: Ibid., 69, no. 33.

[38] »Therefore the he goat waxed very great: and when he was strong, the great horn was broken; and for it came up four notable ones toward the four winds of heaven. And out of one of them came forth a little horn, which waxed exceeding great, toward the south, and toward the east, and toward the pleasant land. And it waxed great, even to the host of heaven; and it cast down some of the host and of the stars to the ground, and stamped upon them.« (Dan. 8:8–10, KJV)

[39] Dan. 8:21-22 continue as follows: »And the rough goat is the king of Grecia: and the great horn that is between his eyes is the first king. Now

that being broken, whereas four stood up for it, four kingdoms shall stand up out of the nation, but not in his power.« (KJV)

[40] Translation: ʿElī, *A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, 41. Arabic original: Ibid., ٨٦-٨٥.

[41] From Yefet's Introduction to the Commentary on Deuteronomy, see above. Translation: my own; cf. Zawanowska, *Abraham Narratives*, 69. Arabic original: Ibid., 69, no 33.

riches he shall stir up all against the realm of Grecia.« (Dan. 11:2, KJV)

Along Yefet's line of argument, the term ›truth‹ (ĕmet) here functions not as an antonym to concepts such as falsehood, lie or deception, but to the use of allegorical speech. ›Telling the truth‹, in other words, means speaking to the addressee in ›plain Hebrew‹.

With regard to Yefet's usage of the term ẓāhir, we may therefore conclude the following: The ẓāhir relates to the meaning of a statement which the reader/listener may decode without understanding any of the words as indicators of other objects not explicitly mentioned. The antonym of the ẓāhir is defined as the bāṭin. Taʾwīl, in turn, functions as the appropriate mode of exegesis applied to statements containing bāṭin.

Overall, Zawanowska has shown that Yefet does not consistently use the terms taʾwīl and tafsīr[42] to only designate modes of exegesis, while ẓāhir and bāṭin are reserved for the specific layers of meaning of a linguistic expression. At times, the Karaite also makes use of taʾwīl as an antonym to ẓāhir, blurring the line to the bāṭin.[43] This indicates that, as part of Yefet's work, these terms may not be understood as clear-cut termini technici; rather, they may be described as borrowings from an existing Arabic literary tradition which he readily adjusts to his own exegetical agenda, as well as to the nuanced demands of particular biblical passages.[44]

The Tension between Literal and Contextual Interpretation

The Karaite exegetical approach, as well as Yefet ben ʿElī's in particular, have repeatedly been described as ›literal(istic)‹, as well as ›contextual‹. These attributes are often further combined with the ascription of a rationalistic and philologically-grounded approach.[45] Referring to these terms, as commonly used in modern academic literature, this paper argues that Yefet's inclination towards either of the two former poles (literalism/con-

textualism) is fluid and dependent on the demands of particular biblical passages. At the same time, the two English terms are neither in all cases clearly defined by individual scholars nor consistently used across the academic literature. The exegetical term of the ẓāhir, as employed by Yefet, may not be generally identified with either one of them. This shall be shown, by way of example, through an examination of Yefet's commentary on Proverbs 18:22-19:2, as well as Sasson's analysis of the commentator's hermeneutic.

In her thorough study of Yefet's commentary on the book of Proverbs, Sasson dedicates a whole chapter to the discussion of the commentator's hermeneutical scheme.[46] Therein, she postulates a number of principles in order to point out overarching trends in Yefet's way of approaching the scriptural text. The term ›juxtaposition‹ is brought into play to describe Yefet's tendency to identify a logical reason behind the arrangement of biblical passages.[47] In her discussion of this principle, Sasson includes an important terminological distinction established by Yefet himself: At times, the commentator differentiates between the ẓāhir and the niẓām, or niẓāmihi maʿnā of a verse without overtly rejecting either version.[48] Sasson translates these terms as ›the plain meaning‹ and ›the contextual meaning‹.[49] She regularly uses these, or synonymous, expressions to refer to the hermeneutical terminology rooted in the Arabic text. However, a close reading yields that her use of the relevant English vocabulary is not restricted to such an indexical function. By implication, it also serves to incorporate a modern reading of the biblical text itself.

Yefet's commentary on Proverbs 18:22-19:2 provides important indications of the commentator's usage of the term ẓāhir in contradistinction to niẓāmihi maʿnā. Yefet interprets the whole passage of the verses 18:22-19:2 as addressing the topic of marriage, more specifically the choice of a wife and the correct molding of inter-marital sexual relations. In the first verse of the passage, Yefet does not distinguish between the two different realms of the text (the ẓāhir vs. the niẓāmihi maʿnā), but only offers one interpretation:

»He says ›he who finds a suitable wife‹ in order to assert that it is the obligation of every person to search for the one who is appropriate for him with regard to both his spiritual and worldly life. For a man's religious and world-

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[42] The term tafsīr is traditionally used in the Arabic-Islamic tradition to refer to Qurʾanic commentary and interpretation, both as a process or method and as a literary genre. Medieval Jewish commentators writing in the Arabic language, such as Yefet ben ʿElī and Saadia Gaon, adopted the term for the designation of biblical commentaries and translations, as well as for the process of biblical interpretation. As Rippin has pointed out, in the first three Islamic centuries, there appears to be no clear differentiation between the terms tafsīr and taʾwīl. In later centuries, the term taʾwīl becomes more developed and in a narrow sense denotes interpretation based on the bāṭin (inner meaning) of a scriptural passage. See Andrew Rippin, "Tafsīr," in Encyclopaedia of Islam 2 Online, ed. P. Bearman et al., accessed December 4, 2020, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_7294.

[43] Zawanowska, "Islamic exegetical terms," 323, no. 65.

[44] Compare for Zawanowska's analysis of a similar tendency of Yefet's with regard to his usage of the terms muḥkam and mursal: Ibid., 320-21.

[45] Some important contributions to the analysis of Karaite exegetical hermeneutics in the early classical period, and Yefet's in particular: Wechsler, Yefet ben ʿEli on the Book of Esther, 14-15; Frank, Search Scripture Well, 1; Zawanowska, Abraham Narratives, 72; Polliack, Karaite Tradition, 39; Sasson, "Book of Proverbs," 160.

[46] Sasson, Yefet ben ʿEli on the Book of Proverbs, 40-82.

[47] Ibid., 43-44.

[48] See also Zawanowska's analysis of contextualism as a characteristic of Yefet's translation technique. Herein she also refers to niẓām al-kalām, a related hermeneutical term, Zawanowska, Abraham Narratives, 163-64. See also Ibid., 164, no. 28.

[49] »At time Yefet's adherence to the principle of thematic juxtaposition seems stretched. This is especially noticeable when his understanding of one verse is motivated by the meaning of a juxtaposed verse even if the plain meaning of the two does not support such an interpretation. In such cases Yefet distinguishes between the plain meaning (al-ẓāhir) and what he labels as the ›contextual‹ (fī niẓāmihi) meaning.« Sasson, Yefet ben ʿEli on the Book of Proverbs, 43-44.

ly affairs depend upon his wife. It is therefore the obligation of a man to examine her background before he marries her, and once he finds what he wants he will obtain goodness. His (i.e., the author['s]) saying ›obtains favor‹ is similar to ›it is not good for man to be alone‹ (Genesis 2:18). For, when one marries *ēshet ḥayil* (a woman of good judgment) he obtains *ṭōḇ* (favor) which is *ṭōḇ* (good) both from spiritual and worldly points of view […].«[50]

As demonstrated above, Yefet repeatedly mentions in his work the idea that the *ẓāhir* functions as the ›default mode‹ of exegesis. It can thus be assumed that the interpretation at hand represents the understanding of the verse according to the *ẓāhir*.

An important component of Yefet's notion of the *ẓāhir* is his conception of the biblical text as composed in ordinary human language.[51] A possible definition of ›literalism‹ may thus entail the correspondence of a lexeme's meaning in a particular biblical passage with its ordinary, coined meaning in the Hebrew language.[52] With regard to the present verse, we are able to establish that this holds true, for instance, for Yefet's treatment of the words *ʾiššāh* (woman) and *māṣāʾ* (finds). The commentator takes these as immediate indicators of the topic treated in the present verse, which he identifies as the process of finding a woman (to marry). This reveals that Yefet's understanding of the *ẓāhir* does not preclude an inference from context. Just as ordinary human communication relies on contextual information, the reader of the biblical text understands a passage through his knowledge of its context.[53] From Yefet's commentary it may be gathered that he deemed it to be ›apparent‹ that this statement was situated in the realm of marital relations. Sasson describes Yefet's commentary on Proverbs 18:22 as »guided by the plain meaning of the verse.«[54] We may thus conclude that she also regards a contextual approach as being in accordance with a tendency towards exegetical literalism.[55]

Yefet's commentary on Proverbs 18:22 is further based on the resemblance between a part of the verse and a short sequence of words in the book of Genesis. The author's statement on man's obligation to examine the background of his future wife is clearly based on the employment of analogy. Neither Yefet nor Sasson consider this expansion as a departure from the *ẓāhir*, nor the ›plain‹ or ›literal meaning‹, respectively.[56]

In his commentary on the subsequent verse (Prov. 18:23), we may observe that Yefet distinguishes between two different layers of signification:

»The *ẓāhir* [apparent meaning] of this statement is that if the poor needs the rich, it is his obligation to be kind and humble towards him in order to reach his goal. If he has a verbal disagreement with the rich, and he (the rich) is foolish towards him, then it is his (the poor's) obligation not to change his friendly behavior, but to abase himself even more in front of him. For the rich is in no need of him, but he (the poor) needs him, so he endures everything that happens to him.

And according to the *niẓāmihi maʿnā* [contextual meaning], it is the obligation of a man to marry a wife whose circumstances resemble his in order for them to have a pleasant life together. For if one of them were rich, the other one would be submissive and humiliated, as wealth swells the heart and (only) few people can resist that.«[57]

The *ẓāhir* here relates to the appropriate behavior of the poor towards the rich. The interpretation Yefet offers takes the Hebrew words *rāš* and *ʿāšir* according to their coined meaning (a poor and a rich person/man) without introducing further agents or relating the statement to a specific group of (male) subjects of that sort. On the whole, it takes into consideration the possible semantic realm of each Hebrew word without understanding any of them in a figurative sense. The commentary thereby remains close to the Arabic translation of the verse supplied by Yefet, »the poor speaks in compassion, and the rich speaks in stubbornness«.[58]

This provides good arguments in favor of describing the commentary according to the *ẓāhir* as ›literal‹. On the other hand, the call upon the poor to behave in a certain way in front of the rich adds to the statement a prescriptive character which is not explicit in the

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[50] English translation of commentary: Ilana Sasson, "Gender Equality in Yefet ben ʿEli's Commentary and Karaite Halakhah," *AJS Review* 37, no. 1 (April 2013): 71. Arabic Original: Ibid., 70. Biblical passage Yefet comments upon (Prov. 18:22, KJV): »*Whoso* findeth a wife findeth a good *thing*, and obtaineth favour of the LORD.« Yefet's Arabic translation of Prov. 18:22: Ibid. English translation of Yefet's Arabic translation of Prov. 18:22: »He who finds a suitable wife finds goodness and obtains favor from the Lord.« Ibid., 71.

[51] Sasson, *Yefet ben ʿEli on the Book of Proverbs*, 40; Cf. Wechsler, *Yefet ben ʿEli on the Book of Esther*, 15–17.

[52] The ›ordinary, coined meaning in the Hebrew language‹ in this case is defined as Yefet's idea of a such, based on his knowledge of biblical literature and the usage of Hebrew as a scholarly language in his days.

[53] In his paper on ›conceptions of the literal sense (*ẓāhir*, *ḥaqīqa*) in Muslim interpretive thought‹, Robert Gleave demonstrates the integral role of conversational context in Muslim legal hermeneutics by reading a *ḥādīth* and its legal implications through the lens of Paule Grice's modern pragmatic theory of ›conversational implicature‹. As part of future studies, it might also be worthwhile to apply modern pragmatic theories on conversational contextualism to the hermeneutical approach of Yefet and other Judaeo-Arabic exegetes. Gleave, "Conceptions," 186–87.

[54] Sasson, *Yefet ben ʿEli on the Book of Proverbs*, 44.

[55] In her discussion of Karaite hermeneutics, Sasson largely equates the terms ›literal‹, ›apparent‹ and ›plain meaning‹, see Ibid., 58.

[56] Cf. Wechsler, *Yefet ben ʿEli on the Book of Esther*, 15. »Yefet's clear devotion—like that of his coreligionists—to a hermeneutic focused upon the ›words‹ (*alfāẓ*) or ›text‹ (*ʿibāra*) of Scripture should not, however, be taken to reflect, as it occasionally has been by the Arabic heresiographers (vis-à-vis the Karaites generally), a hermeneutic which is rigidly literalistic, and so preclusive of *ijtihād* or, as the method is otherwise designated, *qiyās* (analogical or deductive reasoning).«

[57] English translation of commentary: my own, partly based on Sasson's; cf. Sasson, "Gender Equality," 71. Arabic original: Ibid., 70. Biblical passage Yefet comments upon (Prov. 18:23, KJV): The poor useth intreaties; but the rich answereth roughly.

[58] Translation: my own. Arabic original: Sasson, *Yefet ben ʿEli on the Book of Proverbs*, 355.

Depiction of Abraham Ibn Ezra (d. c. 556/1161), taken from the Psalter of Blanche of Castile (illuminated manuscript, 13th century, Paris). Ibn Ezra, resident of Spain, was one of the most distinguished Jewish exegetes and philosophers of his days. Despite his Rabbanite allegiance, Ibn Ezra quotes from Yefet's writings 42 times in his commentary of the minor prophets. This is one of many examples of the notable impact that Yefet's work had on later Jewish scholars.

Hebrew text. This again supports the thesis that Yefet's notion of the *ẓāhir* is not in contradiction to inference by context. Sasson's evaluation of the commentary reveals that the same holds true for her conception of literalism: »[He] first gives the literal meaning of the verse (*al-ẓāhir*), which pertains to the relationship and power play between the poor and the rich.«[59]

However, Yefet also includes a second possible understanding as *fī niẓāmihi maʿnā*: This interpretation reads the content of this verse through the lens of its predecessor. It is based on the assumption of a contingent topic spanning the whole passage of Proverbs 18:22–19:2. The statement on the differences and power relations between rich and poor is thus related to the process of finding the right match for marriage. Both for the medieval and the modern author, this mode of interpretation represents a departure from the *ẓāhir* and the literal meaning, respectively. On the basis of Yefet's parallel implementation of these two possible hermeneutical approaches we may conclude that he did not regard them as mutually contradictory. It is likely that, according to him, the primary intention of the biblical author is still to be found in the *ẓāhir*. Referring, amongst others, to the present verse, Sasson on the other hand regards such an attempt at establishing a coherent topic as »stretched«.[60]

In contradistinction to the previous verse, Yefet reads Proverbs 18:24 exclusively within the context of the topic of marriage as introduced in Proverbs 18:22:

»This verse speaks about a man who thinks about what will happen to him by (marrying) a woman. So he says to himself: ›Why should I marry a woman whose circumstances with regard to her religion, her manners, her intellect and her resoluteness I do not know. I might bring upon myself harm from which I will not be delivered. So it is best for me to acquire a friend who will be with me in hard times and whose circumstances I know. This is better for me than something hidden and concealed.‹ So the wise sage (Salomon) says to him: ›He who takes for him a friend for his exigencies (of daily life) and his means of subsistence, he will always be in need for a friend, for it will always be difficult for him to find one to his liking. So perhaps there is a friend who sticks to (that) person more than a brother, in good as in evil, and who does not part from him, but forms a partnership with him in all his conditions (in life). So you, too, if you do not want to run the risk of marrying a woman out of fear of not finding the right one, so this, too, will catch up with you (in the case of) the friend and the companion.‹ So he (the biblical author) explains that taking a wife (in marriage) is more pious, as she is appropriate for things for which the friend is not appropriate.«[61]

The commentator refrains from describing this interpretation as *fī niẓāmihi maʿnā*. One possible explanation is that he regarded his commentary as being based on the *ẓāhir*. Another possible understanding of his hermeneutic entails that *niẓāmihi maʿnā* for Yefet did not function as a *terminus technicus*, but merely as a further description of the peculiarities of the *ẓāhir*.[62] Both possibilities stress the strong contextual approach that Yefet applies.

For an analysis of the recurring ascription of ›literalism‹ to Yefet's exegesis, this verse is crucial. In this regard, Sasson writes:

»The plain meaning of the following verse ›There are companions to keep one company, and there is a friend more devoted than a brother,‹ is about friendship and the comparison between a friend and a kin. There is *no overt indication* that this verse treats the topic of marriage. Even though *Yefet addresses the plain meaning of this verse*, namely friendship, he *steers his discussion once again towards the topic of marriage* arguing that this verse speaks of the man who avoids marriage out of fear of failure to find the right match.«[63]

This shows that she does not, in all cases, identify the *ẓāhir* with the ›true‹ literal meaning of a verse. Instead,

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[59] Sasson, "Book of Proverbs," 44.

[60] »At times Yefet's adherence to the principle of thematic juxtaposition seems stretched.« Sasson, *Yefet ben ʿEli on the Book of Proverbs*, 43.

[61] English translation of commentary: my own, partly based on Sasson's; cf. Sasson, "Gender Equality," 71–72. Arabic original: Ibid., 70. Biblical passage Yefet comments upon (Prov. 18:24, KJV): »A man that hath friends must shew himself friendly: and there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother.« Yefet's Arabic translation of Prov. 18:24: Ibid., 70. English translation of Yefet's Arabic translation of Prov. 18:24: »A man of friends keeps friendship, and there is one who loves and adheres more than a brother.« Ibid., 71.

[62] In her analysis of Yefet's usage of the hermeneutical terms *muḥkam* and *mursal*, Zawanowska similarly expounds that Yefet »does not adopt […] the ready pair of Arabic antonyms known from Qurʾan exegesis, *muḥkam* and *mutashābih*. Rather, he skilfully varies his hermeneutic vocabulary, each time enlisting a different term to convey precisely the subtlest shades of meaning which he wishes to express. In this way, he treats the ready-made exegetical terms from the existing Arabic repository at this disposal not as mere labels, which one could more or less automatically assign to different scriptural passages comprising interpretive cruxes or theological conundrums.« Zawanowska, "Islamic exegetical terms," 320.

[63] Sasson, *Yefet ben ʿEli on the Book of Proverbs*, 44–45.

the modern scholar draws on her own understanding of what constitutes an ›overt indication‹ of the topic of a biblical passage. This is further corroborated by Sasson's overall remark on Yefet's ›principle of juxtaposition‹.[64]

Two interconnected points can be inferred from the above analysis of Yefet's commentary on Proverbs 18:22–18:24[65] as well as Sasson's examination thereof. Drawing upon the analytical terminology of modern scholars, such as Polliack, Zawanowska, and Sasson, Yefet's comment on the pericope is indicative of both the tendencies of ›literalism‹ and ›contextualism‹ as the dominant characteristics of his exegetical approach. In the present biblical passage, his emphasis on the role of context for establishing the correct meaning of Scripture, expressed by his repeated recurrence to the *niẓāmihi maʿnā*, is particularly strong. The passage therefore underscores Polliack's evaluation that the »literal trend [of Karaite exegesis] becomes the dominant feature of most of Yefet's commentaries«.[66] Yet at the same time, it also attests to Zawanowska's remark that Yefet's »limited literalistic approach […] does not […] imply a slavish reliance on the literal meaning of particular words and expressions irrespective of their context.«[67]

The preceding analysis has further revealed that caution should be exercised in identifying the criterion of literalism with Yefet's term of the *ẓāhir*. Sasson's analysis of Proverbs 18:22-19:2, and her remark on Proverbs 18:24, in particular, have shown that the English terms ›literal‹ and ›literalism‹ not only serve as translations of the relevant Arabic hermeneutical terminology. Rather, they may also communicate an author's response to the vague question of whether a biblical passage ›actually means what it says‹.

In his paper on literalism as part of Saadia's exegetical approach, Ben-Shammai remarks that

> »[t]he term ›literal‹ may be understood in different ways. It is used in the title [›The Tension between Literal Interpretation and Exegetical Freedom‹] as a convenient convention, and the terms and concepts relevant to Saadia in relation to that convention will be discussed.«[68]

We may thus conclude that in working with secondary literature on Yefet, as well, we should expect to encounter such a usage of the term as a ›convenient convention‹. In order to accurately analyze Yefet's hermeneutics, a discussion that remains close to the primary source text, and the Arabic exegetical terminology used therein, constitutes an indispensable prerequisite.

Conclusion

The preceding chapters have presented a preliminary outline of Yefet ben ʿElī's usage of the term *ẓāhir* in his exegetical work, as well as its relation to the modern analytical categories of ›literalism‹ and ›contextualism‹. This has been achieved through an analysis of a small number of significant passages taken from his abundant extent writings. These contain, for one thing, statements on his general methodology incorporated into his commentaries on single verses. Moreover, commentaries in which he distinguishes between interpretations ʿala al-ẓāhir and fī niẓāmihi maʿnā have served to elucidate the usage of the two terms in contradistinction to each other.

This small-scale study has allowed to further substantiate a number of claims that have already been presented in secondary literature over the course of the past three decades. These claims concern, among others, Yefet's preference for the *ẓāhir* as the customary mode of exegesis. A close reading of the primary sources has succeeded in further clarifying the nuanced exceptions Yefet presents to this tendency. These have been shown to bear significant resemblance to those of Saadia Gaon as analyzed by Ben-Shammai.

Furthermore, an inquiry into the relationship between *ẓāhir* and *ĕmet* has corroborated Zawanowska's claim of a close link between Yefet's concept of truth and the hermeneutical term in question.[69] The same holds true for Yefet's usage of the terms *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin*. As Zawanowksa has already pointed out, these are juxtaposed, yet not formally construed as antonyms. At times, Yefet also employs the hermeneutical categories of *bāṭin* and *taʾwīl* interchangeably. On the other hand, paying close attention to the context of the relevant passage in the book of Daniel, a simple equation between ›truth‹ and the *ẓāhir* turns out to be ill-advised; rather we are given arguments in favor of a possible understanding of the *ẓāhir* as ›plain speech‹.

With regard to suitable translations of the word *ẓāhir*, as well as adequate analytical categories to describe Yefet's hermeneutical approach, the present paper has pointed out insufficiencies in hitherto academic study. With respect to the commentary layer, the criterion of ›literalism‹ and its relation to ›contextualism‹ remain barely clarified in secondary literature. Yefet's structurally imitative tendencies in the realm of Judaeo-Arabic translation have already been subjected to close scrutiny over the past decades.[70] With the tools of (Semitic)

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[64] See above, note 60.

[65] While only Prov. 18:22-24 are presented in detail in this chapter, Sasson's analysis addresses the whole passage of Prov. 18:22-19:2. Yefet's hermeneutical approach with regard to the remaining two verses has equally been taken into consideration in my evaluation presented above.

[66] Polliack, *Karaite Tradition*, 39.

[67] Zawanowska, *Abraham Narratives*, 72. Italics added by me.

[68] Ben-Shammai, "The Tension," 33.

[69] Zawanowska, *Abraham Narratives*, 69.

[70] The most significant contribution is Polliack's extensive study: Polliack, *Karaite Tradition*. Beyond that, see for instance: Meira Polliack, "Medieval Karaite Methods of Translating Biblical Narrative into Arabic," *Vetus Testamentum* 48, no. 3 (1998): 375-98; Ronny Vollandt, "Whether to Capture Form or Meaning: A Typology of Early Judaeo-Arabic Pentateuch Translations," in *A Universal Art: Hebrew Grammar across Disciplines and Faiths*, ed. Nadia Vidro et al. Studies in Jewish History and Culture, vol. 46 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 58-83.

philology, scholars have accurately analyzed aspects of the resemblance between the source and the target text, composed in two cognate languages. The question of whether the meanings of two texts coincide, however, raises an intricate set of questions that touches upon the fields of pragmatics and the philosophy of language.

It has become a common scholarly *locus* to note that every translation also represents an interpretation. In other words: the meaning of a text in one language may not be identically reproduced in another language, perhaps not even in a second linguistic expression in the same language. Yet in the realm of Judaeo-Arabic exegesis, this general hermeneutical crux of human communication has only been insufficiently addressed. Through an exhaustive analysis of the *ẓāhir* as employed by prominent Judaeo-Arabic exegetes, we might be able to demonstrate both a shared basic understanding of what makes up a ›literal reading‹ of Scripture, as well as its ultimate relativity.

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