It would not be an exaggeration to say that nearly all Jewish writing in the medieval period was in one way or another commentary on Scripture.\(^1\) Little wonder, then, that this all-encompassing exegetical activity was not always a neutral, objective discipline aimed at discovering the true meaning of the Holy Writ. In reality, Bible commentaries often served the quite mundane interests of their authors, being used and abused as weapons for polemics to prove or disprove disparate religious claims.\(^2\) Especially in the case of a new religious movement, it seems reasonable to expect that its adherents would attempt to find legitimation for their innovative religious tenets in Scripture, if not its very existence.

Apparently Yefet was well aware of this common trend of interspersing the interpretation of the Holy Writ with unholy matters unrelated to the Bible. Therefore, as we saw above, at the very beginning of his vast commentary on the Pentateuch, this well-known supporter of a rational and linguistic-contextual, or limited-literal approach to exegesis declared that—unlike other exegetes, who filled their commentaries with diverse opinions and “engaged in their refutation”—he would not go beyond his aim of translating the words of Scripture and explaining their meaning

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* A draft of this chapter was presented at the 41st Annual Conference of the Association for Jewish Studies (Los Angeles, 20–22 December 2009).

1 For similar reflections concerning Jewish writing as a whole throughout history, see, e.g., Harold Bloom’s “Foreword” to Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, where the author states: Till today “nearly all subsequent Jewish writing has been commentary upon Scripture, however indirect” (p. xxiv). And: “their Jewishness consists in their intense obsession with interpretation, as such. All Jewish writing tends to be outrageously interpretative.” (…) “What Jewish writing has to interpret, finally, and however indirectly, is the Hebrew Bible, since that always has been the function of Jewish writing, or rather its burden” (p. xxiii).

2 Cf. with Gerson Cohen’s remark that history, too, was not always a neutral discipline; it often served as a weapon for religious polemics, being used (or it would be better to say abused) to prove or disprove “the validity of disparate religious claims.” See Cohen, *Qabbalah*, p. 190.
“according to what its words require.” Along with this declaration, Yefet depicted what he regarded as an ideal Bible commentary: it should focus only on the interpretation of Scripture with the aim of finding its true meaning, and not diverge from this main, holy task to discuss or refute diverse opinions unrelated to the text at hand.4

The above notwithstanding, it seems reasonable to question whether Yefet really managed to completely avoid “entering into different matters” and “engaging in their refutation.” In this chapter we will therefore scrutinize Yefet’s massive commentary on Genesis in order to verify: first, whether Yefet was indeed able to completely refrain from polemicizing against specific individuals or religious movements, irrespective of the theoretical declaration about his genuine quest for the best interpretation and despite the ethos of anonymous citation; and second: the object of his critique, if it nonetheless turns out that he was prepared to temporarily desist from—as he puts it—the “translation of the words of Scripture and explanation of its meanings according to what its words require” so as to enter into polemics. Finally, an attempt will be made to address the question: Why did Yefet—in a limited number of cases, and contrary to his habit of anonymous quoting and avoiding polemics—decide to cite certain opinions in order to refute them while mentioning the name of their authors.6

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3 Cf. above, p. 78, n. 56.
4 See Yefet’s comment on Gen 1:14, where he apologizes for engaging into polemics, his goal being to interpret Scripture (Ms. SP IOS Bo51, fol. 48v). Cf. Sklare & Batat, “Catalogue,” p. 27; Poznański, “Opponents” (18), p. 229, par. [12] [= (1908), p. 21; = Birnbaum, Studies, p. 151]. For the assessment that Yefet clearly “distinguishes between his role as an exegete and his role as a polemicist,” see Sasson, Proverbs, pp. 63–64 and n. 80 there.
5 For the assessment that Yefet’s Bible commentaries in general, and his commentary on Genesis in particular, are replete with polemics, see, e.g., Hirschfeld, Nāḥūm, pp. 5–6, where the author states: “One might say that Jefeth began his task (= writing commentaries on the Bible) with the primary object of refuting Sa’adyāh’s expositions. This, at any rate, is the impression gained by the perusal of his commentary on the Pentateuch.” Cf. also Lehrman, “Jephet,” p. 234; Poznański, “Opponents” (18), p. 230, par. [12] [= (1908), p. 22; = Birnbaum, Studies, p. 152]. For a more moderate view on this matter, see, e.g., Sasson, Proverbs, pp. 292–323, 324.
6 For the exceptions to this general tendency in Yefet’s commentaries on other biblical books, see, e.g., Margoliouth, Daniel, pp. 151–201 (Ar.), p. 86 (Eng.) (Ibn Bakhtwāl, Benjamin, ben Yerušālim, in a comment on Dan 12); Poznański, “Anan” (44), pp. 184–185 (‘Anan, Benjamin in a comment on Zech 5:8). Cf. also Vreugd, Zechariah. See above, p. 64, n. 17; p. 71, n. 39; below, p. 95, n. 13.