CHAPTER FIVE

SCRIPTURE AS THE SUPREME COMPOSITION:
LITERARY ASPECTS OF YEFET’S EXEGESIS OF GENESIS“*

Biblical narrative, especially that which is contained in the Book of Genesis, requires interpretation not only because of its sometimes “problematic” content, but also because of the inherent features of its form: its terseness makes the meaning oblique and its laconic style leaves many details unexpressed altogether. Interpretation is also necessary in view of Scripture’s general disregard of the temporal-spatial circumstances of the described events and its somewhat casual attitude towards chronology. This is all the more “problematic” since the Holy Writ claims to contain the ultimate truth.¹

Rabbinic tradition has been dealing with these problems for centuries. In response, it erected an exegetical “fence,” a comprehensive system of interpretative traditions known as the Oral Law considered to be the embodiment of a parallel chain of divine revelation and an indispensable complement to the Written Torah. Rejecting the binding character of the whole corpus of rabbinic exegesis, the early Karaite exegetes faced the challenge of once again filling the resulting vacuum and confronting the bare text of the “written” revelation without the intermediary layer of its authoritative “oral” exposition.²

They believed that the divine originator of Scripture wished to convey an unequivocal message to humanity, a message whose one unambiguous meaning follows the rules of logic; He therefore formulated it in conventional human language, subject to the rules of grammar.³ Hence, the only possible way to discover the ultimate, one true meaning of the

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³ Cf. above, pp. 59 ff., and esp. pp. 73 ff.
Bible is to extract it from the scriptural text by a thorough rational analysis of its language and overall structure, using conventional tools. This conviction helped them realize the existence of an inherent connection between the form and content of Scripture (viz., the meaning of the text and the way it is expressed)\(^4\) and gave rise to the interest in its form—not only in terms of grammar and lexicon, but also style and composition—the analysis of which became a significant element and an inseparable part of exegesis, indispensable to understanding the content of the Holy Writ. Consequently, the emergence of the Karaite movement, some time in the ninth century CE, brought about a momentous change in the Jewish outlook toward biblical studies: the advent and dynamic development of what we would today call the literary approach to Scripture, which found its most prominent and mature expression in Yefet’s exegetical oeuvre.\(^5\)

Within the confines of his literary focus, the innovative aspect of his hermeneutical undertaking is his general perception of the Holy Writ as a literary text that requires literary analysis. Yefet gives voice to this literary orientation of biblical exegesis on various levels of his commentary. First, it is reflected in specific terminology drawn from Arabic literature, which Yefet uses extensively when describing Scripture and its inherent elements. He also draws attention to the literary character of the Bible in terms of its form: the manner of expression and style, or the general structure and composition of the text. Furthermore, when analyzing content, Yefet distinguishes, either directly or indirectly, three main categories of what we would consider modern literary criticism:

i. The account, perceived as a cohesively structured, multilayered story—including one main theme and a number of sub-plots—with a precisely defined framework containing basic elements such as an introduction or exposition and an ending or dénouement (the narrative);
