Noblest Obelus:  
Rabbinic Appropriations of Late Ancient Literary Criticism  

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Our strength grows out of our weakness.  
Ralph Waldo Emerson, Self Reliance  

Introduction: Rabbinic Biblical Interpretation and Ancient Homeric Scholarship—Daube, Lieberman, and Beyond  

In 1949, unbeknownst to each other, two scholars of ancient law, one in England and the other in New York, wrote two very similar papers. In his “Rabbinic Methods of Interpretation and Hellenistic Rhetoric” David Daube, a rising lecturer of law at Cambridge, pointed to some close parallels in content and terminology between rabbinic modes of biblical interpretation and the exegetical methods of Hellenistic rhetoric and grammar that emanated from the scholarly circles of Alexandria. At the same time, Saul Lieberman, a well-known professor of Talmud at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, was putting the final touches on what would go on to become perhaps his most influential book: Hellenism in Jewish Palestine. Lieberman dedicates the first part of the book to an array of striking similarities between rabbinic approaches to the preservation and interpretation of the biblical text and the text-critical, exegetical and rhetorical practices of the Alexandrian grammarians, especially as they were applied to Homer.  

When it came, however, to interpreting their similar, often overlapping array of parallels, Daube and Lieberman reached different conclusions.  

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1 Daube 1949. See further Daube 1953, for more focused attention to the parallels with Homeric scholarship.  
Daube asserted that the Rabbis directly borrowed their methods of interpretation from the Alexandrian scholars, while Lieberman preferred to limit the borrowing to terminology alone. According to Lieberman, the Rabbis developed their methods of biblical interpretation independently from the Hellenistic schools, and only at a later stage did they adopt variations of the Greek terms to label their own homegrown methods. However, despite these slightly divergent conclusions, both scholars shared an underlying methodological assumption, to which I will return shortly: that the proper historical explanation for the parallels they had found was to be conceived in terms of the influence that the Greek scholars had on the Rabbis. Daube and Lieberman took this paradigm seriously: they made a point of demonstrating the ways in which the Rabbis of Palestine in various periods could have access to developments in Ptolemaic Alexandria.

In the sixty years that have passed since their publication, these pioneering twin studies have become classics in the field, repeatedly returned to in discussions about the place of Hellenism in ancient Jewish society. Nevertheless, in the past generation two significant scholarly developments have occurred that require a thorough re-evaluation of Daube and Lieberman’s important contributions. The first development occurred in the study of ancient Homeric scholarship. Daube and Lieberman wrote two decades before Erbse published the first volume of his monumental critical edition of the ancient scholia on the *Iliad*. Working without a

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3 Daube 1949: 240, and *passim*.
5 Daube 1949: 240–241; Lieberman 1950: 26–27. It should, however, be noted that at times Daube and Lieberman also speak of the parallels in terms of a shared Hellenistic or Mediterranean culture, rather than in terms of direct influences: Daube 1949: 240; 257; Lieberman 1950: 67–68.
7 See Matthaios 2011: 1–3 and Montanari 2011 for overviews of these developments in the context of the boom occurring since the second half of the twentieth century in the study of ancient scholarship more generally.
8 Erbse 1969, which includes the major text-critical and exegetical scholia, known by their manuscripts, A and bT. For fuller bibliographical information on the editions of the other Homeric scholia, see Dickey 2007: 18–23; Nünlist 2011. See Lundon 2011 for a survey of Homeric commentaries on papyrus. Although Erbse’s edition of the *Iliad* scholia is by far the best, it is by no means the first. The scholia of Venice A and B have been publicly available since D’Ansse de Villoison’s 1788 edition. Daube and Lieberman could have made use of this edition or that of Dindorf and Maas 1875–1888, but, for whatever reason, they