In his commentary to selected passages of the Talmud of Babylonia, David Weiss Halivni has given us a complete theory of the history of the formation of the Bavli. This he has worked out in not merely episodic and ad hoc remarks about diverse passages but in a sustained hermeneutics, in which a theory of the whole has guided him in his identification of problems demanding solution. In Sources and Traditions\(^1\) he sets forth the theory that the Bavli is made up of sources, “those sayings which have come down to us in their original form, as they were uttered by their author,” and traditions, “those which were changed in the course of transmission.” Changing these “traditions” required later generations to deal with the remains of earlier statements, and they did so by a “forced interpretation” (in Halivni’s language). The importance of Halivni’s work is simple. He has made a serious effort to confront the problem of finding out how, in the Bavli, we may identify passages that were written prior to the closure of the document as a whole. He has taken as his focus not the document as we have it, peeling back its layers in a patient way, but rather individual items: this saying, that composition, the other composite. But Halivni builds on a shaky premise, for he believes that if a saying is attributed to a given name, that sage certainly said that saying. His entire hermeneutics rests upon that undemonstrated, and surely uncritical, premise. The reliability of attributions is the only justification for that approach, and as we shall presently see, if Halivni did not believe in the attributions as valid, he would have slight reason to claim that he knows anything at all about the condition of materials in the Bavli prior to the Talmud’s redaction.

Now let us turn to the source. Halivni knows how to deal with the

\(^1\) Meqorot umesorot (Tel Aviv, 1968 et. seq.).
problem of the "forced interpretation," distinguishing it from the simple one as follows, in the account of Robert Goldenberg:\(^2\)

The simple interpretation of a text is defined as "the interpretation which arises from the text itself, without either adding to it or subtracting from it." "Sometimes a simple comparison with parallel sources is sufficient to show that a forced explanation has its origin in an incorrect text.... In most cases, however, it is necessary to study the sugya in depth, to break it into its parts before the motivation for the forced explanation becomes clear."

Halivni's sense for the self-evidence of his position is expressed as follows: "Any divergence from the simple interpretation is a divergence from the truth."\(^3\) The work is entirely exegetical; there is no historical inquiry whatever. He takes for granted the reliability of all attributions, the historicity of all stories.\(^4\) Literary criticism plays no role in his identification of exegetical problems or in their solution, and everything is either a source or a tradition. As Goldenberg puts it, "The reliability of the tradition and the manner of its formation are to a great extent simply assumed, despite the mass of evidence of a more complicated situation that Weiss's own book reveals."\(^5\)

Part of the problem of studying Halivni's oeuvre is his failure to deal with competing theories of the literature, on the one side, and his incapacity to compose a null hypothesis for the testing of his hermeneutic, on the other. His unwillingness to read other scholars' treatment of the same literature and problems has now become so notorious as to elicit the comments of book-reviewers.\(^6\) We really do not know, therefore, how Halivni has taken into account other approaches to the same literature, competing theories of its character, origins, and, consequently, correct hermeneutics. That fact, his failure to read and comment on the work of others and its implications for his own work, renders the critical reading of Halivni's oeuvre exceedingly parlous.

The omission of a null hypothesis can be demonstrated to form a fatal flaw in his entire hermeneutical fabrication. I shall show how

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\(^3\) Cited by Goldenberg, p. 137.

\(^4\) See Goldenberg, p. 146.

\(^5\) Goldenberg, p. 147.

\(^6\) Cf., for example, David Singer in *Commentary*, April, 1988, on Halivni's remarkable disinterest in views other than his own. He apparently does not even read and take account of competing readings of the same documents.