“Many Beautiful Meanings Can Be Drawn from Such a Comparison”:¹ On the Medieval Interaction View of Biblical Metaphor

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Abstract

This article aims to demonstrate that the renowned tenth-century Karaite exegete, Yefet ben 'Eli, held an “interaction view” of metaphor, which seems to resemble concepts associated with modern theorists (especially Max Black), where primary and subsidiary metaphorical subjects interact in a manner that surpasses their individual literal meanings. Such a perspective differs significantly from the notion of biblical metaphor as decorative attire for the embellishment of literal meaning that was standard among medieval Jewish poets and thinkers. We analyze select examples of Yefet’s interpretation of biblical metaphors from his edited works on Hosea, Nahum, Habakkuk, and the Song of Songs, as well as interpretations by other Jewish medieval exegetes, especially David Qimḥi, who—as Mordechai Z. Cohen has shown—also subscribed to such an interaction view of metaphor. Three distinct phenomena emerge from this inquiry: First, Yefet systematically interprets biblical synonymous parallelism to convey two distinct units of meaning, a quality that he applies more consistently than does Qimḥi. Second, Yefet deems certain metaphors to interact with the content of other verses in their immediate context, thus highlighting the cohesion of larger biblical units. Sometimes Yefet’s translations of specific verses also reflect this tendency. Third, Yefet’s comments at times transform semantic fields or primary metaphorical subjects due to perceived discrepancies between the primary and subsidiary subjects of certain metaphors. Yefet therefore developed a view of metaphor that relies on the interaction of context and metaphor. His treatment of repetition as well as his method of translation may have influenced this view. Yefet’s contextual emphasis distinguishes his interpretive approach from the didactic treatment of metaphor that typifies midrash; thus, his oeuvre appears to reflect a Karaite innovation. Future study will concentrate on additional Karaite sources that may further explain this hermeneutical and poetic development.

¹ מין חית’ אנה יג’מע מעאני ג’ילה — See J. Alobaidi, Old Jewish Commentaries on the Song of Songs I: The Commentary of Yefet Ben ‘Eli (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), 45 (see discussion below).
It is broadly recognized that poetic thought—especially during the Middle Ages, though also up to the Romantic era—tended to dichotomize the relationship between the message being conveyed and the figurative language expressing it. Figurative language was deemed to be an external factor that provided an outer layer for a poem's abstract essence which was, by definition, independent of the language that the poet used to articulate it. Therefore, such imagery could be distinguished from its meaning completely. Poetry was not conceived as the unique expression of an author's individuality, the fruit of a creative mind that was infused with original language, but rather as a vessel that had been adorned by a poet to express a particular message. An ideal poem was one that a reader could decipher and comprehend in its entirety, despite the effort that would necessarily be required. Herein was the heart of its aesthetic achievement and beauty.

In his seminal work on metaphor, Mordechai Z. Cohen determined that medieval Arabic and Jewish Andalusian poetics display what Max Black defined as a “substitution view” of metaphor, where metaphorical expressions are understood as substitutes for precise, literal references. From this perspective, reading a metaphor is akin to deciphering a code: the reader is expected to identify the literal content that undergirds the non-literal expression. In this process, the non-literal focus (as Black defines it) is informed by the literal context of its frame. According to a substitution view, figurative language is

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2. See D. Pagis, *Secular Poetry and Poetic Theory: Moses Ibn Ezra and his Contemporaries* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1970), 83–85. Ibn Ezra expresses this view by stating that ideas comprise the heart of a text. A prophet must articulate the exact meaning of the divine oracle that he received; however, he has the agency to choose how to convey that message. Cf. Moses ibn Ezra, *Kitāb al-muḥāḍara wa-ʾl-mudhākara*, transl. [in Hebrew] A. Halkin (Jerusalem: Mĕqīṣē Nirdāmīm, 1975), 145. On the dichotomy between form and content in writings of Moses ibn Ezra and in Arabic poetics, see also the contribution by Mordechai Cohen in this volume.

3. We find Max Black’s interactionist theory of metaphor to be far better suited to this analysis than the more current conceptual and cognitive approaches. Black draws a contrast between metaphors that represent mere style trapping, an approach that is compatible with the medieval form-content dichotomy, and those that serve as filters for commonplace connotations that introduce a novel dimension to a text (see below). As a result, Black’s categories provide a prism for identifying when medieval exegetes overstep the standards for figurative language in their particular eras.