

YAKIR PAZ

From Scribes to Scholars

*Culture, Religion, and Politics
in the Greco-Roman World*

6

Mohr Siebeck

Culture, Religion, and Politics in the Greco-Roman World

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Rabbinic Biblical Exegesis in Light
of the Homeric Commentaries

Mohr Siebeck

Yakir Paz, born 1978; currently lecturer in the departments of Talmud and Classical Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.
orcid.org/0000-0001-8641-2839

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To my parents

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	XIII
Note on Editions, Translations, and Abbreviations	XV
Abbreviations	XVI
 Introduction	 1
1. <i>Midrash, Scrolls, and Homeric Scholarship</i>	4
2. <i>Survey of Scholarship</i>	10
2.1 Rabbinic Literature and the Homeric Commentaries	10
2.2 Homeric and Biblical Scholarship in Alexandria	17
2.3 Homeric Commentaries and Christian Biblical Commentaries	18
3. <i>The Present Study</i>	18
4. <i>Outline of the Book</i>	20
5. <i>Analogy vs. Genealogy</i>	21
6. <i>Sources</i>	28
6.1 Overview of the Homeric Commentaries	28
6.1.1 The A Scholia	33
6.1.2 The bT Scholia	34
6.1.3 The D Scholia	35
6.1.4 Scholia to the Odyssey	36
6.1.5 Papyri	36
6.1.6 Scholarship on the Homeric Commentaries	37
6.2 Halakhic Midrashim	38
 Chapter 1: Source of Knowledge	 41
1. <i>Introduction</i>	41
2. <i>Locus Classicus</i>	43

2.1 Topos Didaskalikos	43
2.2 I too Specify (אף פֿורט אַני)	48
2.3 Conclusion	52
3. <i>Didactic Texts</i>	54
3.1 Introduction	54
3.2 Logos Paideutikos	56
3.2.1 Homer the Philhellen	56
3.2.2 Plutarch, “How to Study Poetry”	60
3.3 The Poet Teaches Us (διδάσκει ἡμᾶς ὁ ποιητής)	64
3.4 Philo: Moses the Educator	69
3.5 The Torah Teaches Proper Conduct	70
3.6 Conclusion	78
4. <i>Re-Scripturizing</i>	80
4.1 Introduction	80
4.2 Re-Scripturizing in Homeric Scholarship	81
4.2.1 Mythological Dependence	82
4.2.2 Mis-Dependence	85
4.2.3 Literary Dependence	87
4.2.4 Philosophical Dependence	88
4.2.5 Dependence of Proverbs	88
4.2.6 Dependence of Ethical Maxims	89
4.2.7 Legal Dependence	90
4.3 Re-Scripturizing in the Halakhic Midrashim	91
4.3.1 Dependence of Ethical Maxims	93
4.3.2 Dependence of Proverbs	94
4.3.3 Legal Dependence	96
4.3.4 Dependence of the Mishna and other Edited Texts	97
4.4 Ideological Bibliographical Note	100
5. <i>Conclusion</i>	101
Chapter 2: Justifying Redundancies	103
1. <i>Introduction</i>	103
2. <i>Repetitions</i>	105
2.1 Introduction	105
2.2 Double Tongues	109
2.2.1 The Paronomastic Infinitive in the Halakhic Midrashim	109
2.2.2 Internal Object in the Homeric Commentators and Philo	113

2.3 Duplication	120
2.3.1 “Man Man” in Halakhic Midrashim	120
2.3.2 Duplication in Rhetorical Handbooks	122
2.3.3 Philo on <i>anthrōpos anthrōpos</i>	124
2.4 Conclusion	125
3. <i>Synonyms</i>	128
3.1 Two Tongues	128
3.2 Synonyms in Homeric Commentaries	130
3.3 Philo on Synonyms	132
4. <i>Transition Formulae</i>	137
4.1 Metabasis	138
4.2 The Verse Transfers It	142
4.3 Separating the Matter	143
4.4 As a Seal of the Matter	148
4.5 Conclusion	150
5. <i>Isolating Particles</i>	151
5.1 Particles in the Early Homeric Commentaries	152
5.2 Particles in the Grammatical Treatises	153
5.3 Particles in Rabbinic Literature	155
5.3.1 Raq – Separated the Matter	157
5.3.2 Akh – Divided	162
5.3.3 Etim, Gamin, Akhim and Raqim	163
6. <i>Conclusion</i>	165
Chapter 3: Questions and Answers	167
1. <i>Introduction</i>	167
2. <i>Whence Does He Know?</i>	172
2.1 Whence Does He Know? (πόθεν οἶδεν;)	172
2.2 Whence Did He Know? (מניין היה יודע?)	179
3. <i>Whence Does He Have?</i>	184
3.1 Whence Does He Have? (πόθεν αὐτῷ;)	184
3.2 Whence Did He Have? (מניין היה לו?)	187
4. <i>Questions of Consideration</i>	190
4.1 Why Did He Not? (διὰ τί ... οὐκ;)	190

4.2 Why Did He Not? (מפני מה לא?)	193
5. <i>Why Character X and not Character Y?</i>	196
6. <i>Verisimilitude</i>	198
6.1 Impossibilities (ἀδύνατα)	199
6.2 How is it Possible? (היאך יכול)	204
7. <i>Contradictions</i>	207
7.1 Opposing Verses (τὰ μαχόμενα)	207
7.2 Two Verses Which Refute One Another	216
8. <i>Conclusion</i>	223
<i>Appendix: Hyperboles</i>	227
 Chapter 4: Ambiguities	 229
1. <i>Introduction</i>	229
2. <i>The Matter is Balanced</i>	231
2.1 Introduction	231
2.2 Amphibolia	232
2.3 And We Do Not Know	237
2.4 Conclusion	244
3. <i>Going Both Ways</i>	245
3.1 Nicanor and Consigning Words to Both Sides	246
3.2 Issi b. Yehuda and Unadjudicated Verses	254
3.3 Nicanor and Issi b. Yehuda	267
4. <i>Conclusion</i>	269
<i>Appendix: Prosody</i>	270
 Chapter 5: Order and Disorder	 273
1. <i>Introduction</i>	273
2. <i>Hyperbaton</i>	274
2.1 The Rhetorical Use of the hyperbaton	274
2.2 Hyperbaton in the Derveni Papyrus	276

2.3 Hyperbaton in Plato, Protagoras	278
2.4 Hyperbaton in Homeric Commentaries	279
2.5 Hyperbaton in Philo and Christian Commentators	284
3. <i>Order</i> (τάξις)	286
4. <i>Sares</i>	288
5. <i>According to the Order</i> (על־סדר)	294
6. <i>Conclusion</i>	297
<i>Appendix: Sares, Anastrophē, and Nestor's Cup</i>	301
 Conclusion	 307
 Bibliography	 315
Index of References	351

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Note on Editions, Translations, and Abbreviations

The translations of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* follow Lattimore 1951 and 1967, but I have occasionally modified them to render the text more literal (and at times more awkward) in order to facilitate the understanding of the commentaries. Translations of the Hebrew Bible follow JPS, at times modified. Translations of Philo are based on Colson and Whitaker 1929–1968, unless noted otherwise.

All translations of the scholia are mine, unless stated otherwise.

Citations from rabbinic literature follow *Ma'agarim: The Historical Dictionary Project* (<http://maagarim.hebrew-academy.org.il/Pages/PMain.aspx>), unless stated otherwise. The references are based on the editions cited in the bibliography. I have noted textual variants only when necessary; in order to facilitate the reading, I have occasionally added punctuation and completed abbreviations.

Abbreviation of biblical books, Philo's treatises and mishnaic tractates follow the SBL guidelines.

In the citations of the scholia the following abbreviations are used: Ariston. = Aristonicus; Did. = Didymus; ex. = exegetical; Herod. = Herodianus; Nic. = Nicanor; pap. = papyrus; sch. = scholia.

Abbreviations

AFO	<i>Archiv für Orientforschung</i>
AJPh	<i>American Journal of Philology</i>
ANRW	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt</i>
BNJ	<i>Brill's New Jacoby online</i> : https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/browse/brill-s-new-jacoby
BNP	<i>Brill's New Pauly online</i> : http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/browse/brill-s-new-pauly
CQ	<i>Classical Quarterly</i>
CPh	<i>Classical Philology</i>
DSD	<i>Dead Sea Discoveries</i>
RivFil	<i>Rivista di Filologia e di Istruzione Classica</i>
GRBS	<i>Greek Roman and Byzantine Studies</i>
HSCPh	<i>Harvard Studies in Classical Philology</i>
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
JAJ	<i>Journal of Ancient Judaism</i>
JJS	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
JQR	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
JR	<i>The Journal of Religion</i>
JSIS	<i>Jewish Studies, an Internet Journal</i> : http://www.biu.ac.il/JS/JSIJ
JSJ	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism</i>
JSQ	<i>Jewish Studies Quarterly</i>
JSS	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
LGGA	<i>Lexicon of Greek Grammarians of Antiquity</i> : https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/browse/lexicon-of-greek-grammarians-of-antiquity
RAC	<i>Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum</i> , Stuttgart, 1941–
RB	<i>Revue Biblique</i>
RE	A. Pauly et al. (eds.), <i>Pauly's Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft: neue Bearbeitung</i> , Stuttgart 1894–1980
RechSR	<i>Recherches de science religieuse</i>
RQ	<i>Revue de Qumran</i>
RRS	<i>Review of Rabbinic Judaism</i>
SPhA	<i>Studia Philonica Annual</i>
TAPhA	<i>Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association</i>
WCJS	<i>Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies</i>
ZPE	<i>Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik</i>

Introduction

Ὅμηρος δὲ καὶ πρῶτος καὶ μέσος καὶ ὕστατος, παντὶ παιδὶ καὶ ἀνδρὶ καὶ γέροντι τοσοῦτον ἅφ' αὐτοῦ διδοὺς ὅσον ἕκαστος δύναται λαβεῖν.

But Homer comes first and in the middle and last, in that he gives of himself to every boy and adult and old man just as much as each of them can take.

(Dio Chrysostom, *Discourse* 18)¹

In late antiquity, the Homeric poems and the Torah were identity-forming canonical texts in Hellenistic and Jewish cultures, respectively. Their immense impact manifested itself mainly in the pivotal and almost exclusive role they played in the *paideia*, in the wide sense of the term as it was translated by Roman scholars: *humanitas* – that is, the molding and perfecting of the human being.² These texts were at the center of the curriculum of both the novice student and the scholar, and were an important factor in forming social norms.³

In the opening of his treatise *Homeric Problems*, Heraclitus (ca. 100 CE) writes the following:⁴

Εὐθὺς γὰρ ἐκ πρώτης ἡλικίας τὰ νήπια τῶν ἀρτιμαθῶν παίδων διδασκαλία παρ' ἐκείνῳ τιθεῖται, καὶ μονονοῦκ ἐνεσπαργανωμένοι τοῖς ἔπεσιν αὐτοῦ καθαπερὶ ποτίμῳ γάλακτι τὰς ψυχὰς ἐπάρδομεν· ἀρχομένῳ δ' ἐκάστῳ συμπαρέστηκε καὶ κατ' ὀλίγον ἀπανδρουμένῳ, τελείοις δ' ἐνακμάζει, καὶ κόρος οὐδὲ εἰς ἄχρι γήρως, ἀλλὰ πανσάμενοι διψῶμεν αὐτοῦ πάλιν· καὶ σχεδὸν ἐν πέρας Ὅμηρῳ παρ' ἀνθρώποις, ὃ καὶ τοῦ βίου.

¹ Dio Chrys. 18.8; tr. Cohoon 1939, p. 219.

² See Marrou 1956, pp. 98–99 who discusses the widening of the meaning of the term *παιδεία* in the Hellenistic period.

³ On the centrality of Homer in Greek education see Jaeger 1945, pp. 35–56; Marrou 1956, pp. 162–170; Verdenius 1970; Morgan 1998; Hock 2001; Cribiore 2001, pp. 194–197; Lambertson 2002 (on the role of Homeric allegory and rhetoric in education); Sluiter 1997; Sandnes 2009; Niehoff 2012b; Pontani 2011; 2012 (on the use of Homer by the grammarians). On the canonic status of Homer see Finkelberg 2003. On Jewish education in Late Antiquity and the centrality of the Torah see Hirshman 2009 (and detailed bibliography pp. 121–126); Safrai 1976; Aberbach 1982; Hezser 2000b, pp. 39–109; 2010; 2016; Schwabe 1950. On the role of canonical texts in the *paideia* of Late Antiquity see Stroumsa 2012. For a comparative study of the role of the text in education of Pagan, Christians, and Jews in antiquity see Snyder 2000. For a comparison of the status of Moses and Homer in antiquity see Alexander 1998; Hezser 2016.

⁴ Heracl. *Quaest. Hom.*, 1.5–7, pp. 2–3 (tr. Russell and Konstan).

From the very first age of life, the foolishness of infants just beginning to learn is nurtured on the teaching given in his school. One might almost say that his poems are our baby clothes, and we nourish our minds by draughts of his milk. He stands at our side as we each grow up and shares our youth as we gradually come to manhood; when we are mature, his presence within us is at its prime; and even in old age, we never weary of him. When we stop, we thirst to begin him again. In a word, the only end of Homer for human beings is the end of life.

A similar concept can be found in rabbinic literature. So, for example, in a *baraita* adduced to the end of the mishnaic tractate Qiddushin (4:14), R. Nehorai (second half of the second century CE) states:

רבי נהוראי אומר: מניח אני כל אומנות שבעולם ואיני מלמד את בני אלא תורה,
שאדם אוכל משכרה בעולם הזה וקרן קיימת לעולם הבא.
ושאר כל אומנות אינן כן כשאדם בא לידי חולי או לידי זקנה או לידי יסורין ואינו יכול לעסוק במלאכתו הרי הוא
מת ברעב.
אבל התורה אינה כן אלא משמרתו מכל רע בנערותו ונותנת לו אחרית ותקוה בזקנותו.
בנערותו מה הוא אומר? "וקו' ה' יחליפו כח" (יש' מ 31).
בזקנותו מהו אומר? "עוד ינובון בשיבה" (תה' צב 15).

R. Nehorai says: I would set aside all the crafts in the world and teach my son naught save the Torah, for a man enjoys the reward thereof in this world and its whole worth remains for the world to come. But with all other crafts it is not so; for when a man falls into sickness or old age or inflections and cannot engage in his work, lo, he dies of hunger. But with the Torah it is not so; for it guards him from all evil while he is young, and in old age it grants him a future and a hope. Of his youth, what does it say? "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength" (Is. 40:31). Of his old age what does it say? "They shall still bring forth fruit in old age" (Ps. 92:15).⁵

The difference between R. Nehorai's statement and that of Heraclitus reflects the essential gap between the attitude of Greek culture toward Homer and of Jewish culture toward the Torah: for Heraclitus the role of Homer ends when one dies, whereas for R. Nehorai the Torah leads man to the World to Come. Yet the similarity between the texts is no less important. R. Nehorai and Heraclitus agree about the centrality of the Torah and Homer in man's life and believe that their respective texts accompany man from youth through old age, adjusting themselves to the different periods of life.

The centrality of these texts and their undisputed canonical status led to the development of exegetical communities in which these texts were interpreted in a collective effort by dozens of scholars over hundreds of years. In the Alexandrian library from the third century BCE onwards, numerous scholars labored at editing the Homeric poems and interpreting them according to philological, rhetorical, grammatical, and literary criteria, especially from the school of Aristotle, while developing sophisticated hermeneutical tools and technical terms. This exegetical tradition continued to evolve during the first centuries of the Common Era throughout the Roman Empire and was later redacted over

⁵ Tr. Danby 1933, p. 329.

hundreds of years into a voluminous exegetical collection, following verse order, which has come down to us mainly through the scholia on the margins of Byzantine manuscripts.

Parallel to the exegetical efforts on the Greek side, dozens of rabbis dedicated themselves during the first centuries CE to interpreting the Torah, using a wide array of exegetical methods. These rabbis were divided into distinct exegetical schools, and their commentaries were collected and redacted during the third century CE into Midrashic compilations, known as the Halakhic Midrashim, which were organized as a line-by-line commentary displaying a rich terminological system. These Midrashim have exerted a crucial impact on the formation of the role of the exegete vis-à-vis the holy text and on exegetical methods in the Jewish culture down to present times.

The non-allegorical Homeric commentaries and the Halakhic Midrashim which have come down to us are vast and significant corpora. Yet to date they have barely been compared by scholars, despite the fact that the rabbis were active within a distinct Greco-Roman context, and that Saul Lieberman and David Daube have already noted similarities between a small number of methods used by the Homeric scholars and the rabbis.⁶ In light of this, the goal of this work is to systematically compare the two corpora for the first time. My argument is that it is possible to point to various ways in which the Greek commentaries deeply impacted the rabbis' exegetical approach. Moreover, I will argue that we cannot understand the very appearance of the edited Midrashic compilations and some of their core hermeneutical assumptions without a familiarity with the contemporaneous Homeric commentaries.

In addition to its influence on rabbinic terminology and exegetical techniques, I will demonstrate how Homeric scholarship – as a representative of the literary, rhetorical, linguistic, and didactic discourse of the time – impacted the rabbis' methods of organizing knowledge and their learning practices, as well as their very understanding of the concept of the canonical text and the role of the commentator. The rabbis, I will argue, were in many ways part of the exegetical world of their time. Furthermore, the comparison with the Homeric scholarship may also advance our understanding of the background to the development of the distinct approaches of the schools of R. Akiva and R. Yishmael.

The comparison between the two corpora, however, will not only reveal similarities, but will also enhance our understanding of the unique features in the rabbinic exegesis. Indeed, only by understanding how the rabbis adopted and adapted the hermeneutical principles and methods of Greek scholarship while incorporating them into a different exegetical system can we appreciate the novelty and uniqueness of the rabbinic project.

⁶ On Lieberman's and Daube's research, as well as later scholarship, see below.

1. Midrash, Scrolls, and Homeric Scholarship

One of the greatest enigmas in the study of rabbinic literature is the seemingly sudden appearance of a rich, fully-crystallized scholastic exegetical corpus, divided into different schools, comprised of the sayings of dozens of sages, and applying well-developed sophisticated hermeneutical techniques and a wide array of technical terms. Is this a product of a continuous evolutionary process; did it result from a “Big Bang” – a dramatic and sudden change during the relevant period; or was there perhaps some kind of combination of the two? In other words: what is the relation between the rabbinic Midrash and the Jewish biblical commentaries that preceded it?

The fact that almost nothing has survived from the literature of the Pharisees or from the non-allegorical Jewish-Hellenistic commentaries poses great difficulties in reconstructing the development of the Midrash. Various scholars have tried to locate the buds of the Midrash in inner-biblical commentary and in the Second Temple literature.⁷ Some of these studies have emphasized the similarities in common narrative expansions and legal traditions, and thus outlined an exegetical continuum.⁸ Others, as I shall discuss below, looked to Hellenistic culture for the Midrashic roots.

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls significantly advanced the study of the ancient Jewish commentaries. Alongside the genre of rewritings of the Bible that does not explicitly disclose its exegetical thrust,⁹ the scrolls also include commentaries such as the *pesharim*,¹⁰ which follow the order of the verse, differentiate between verse and commentary, and contain the beginnings of technical terminology, at times even employing the term “Midrash.”¹¹ Many

⁷ See, e.g., Zeligman 1980; Vermes 1975a; Fishbane 1985; Shinan and Zakovitch 1986. For attempts to reconstruct early Jewish commentary see Goldberg 1981; Albeck 1969, pp. 84–93; Lieberman 1963, pp. 186–189; Urbach 1958; Brewer 1992 (who anachronistically projects later sources onto the Second Temple period).

⁸ See, e.g., Kugel 1998, who is one of the dominant scholars of the school which focuses mainly on shared traditions, which began with Ginsburg’s monumental project *The Legends of the Jews* (1913–1928).

⁹ See, e.g., Kugel 2009.

¹⁰ Most of the *pesharim* are dated to the end of the second-first centuries BCE. Some consist of a running commentary to the verse, where a citation of a verse is followed by such formulae as פֶּשֶׁר הַדָּבָר or פֶּשֶׁר עַל. Most of the *pesharim* address prophetic texts giving them an actual or eschatological interpretation. The commentator is anonymous and authoritative. On the *pesharim* see Nizan 2009, Berrin 2005; Jassen 2012; Machila 2012; Goldman 2019, pp. 30–42.

¹¹ There is extensive scholarship on the hermeneutics and exegetical terminology in the scrolls. See, e.g., Fishbane 1973; Maier 1996 (general overview); Nizan 2009; Shemesh 2004; Elledge 2003; Bernstein 1994a; 1996; 1998; 2013 (collection of essays); Berrin 2005 (with bibliography), as well as references in the following note. Special scholarly attention has been given to the commentary known as *Peshar Genesis A* (4Q252), see Bernstein 1979; 1994b; Brock 1996; 2005; Werman and Shemesh 2011, pp. 54–55; Machila 2012.

scholars have sought to identify in this literature the “missing link” between the Bible and rabbinic Midrash.¹² Some have compared the terms used in the scrolls to those found in rabbinic literature,¹³ at times even trying to reconstruct the hermeneutical methods that supposedly lie at the basis of the commentaries of the scrolls and comparing them to the rabbinic *middot* (measures of interpretations).¹⁴ So, for example, Aaron Shemesh writes:

I do not claim that there is an actual literary connection between the formulae in the scrolls and rabbinic midrash, but the comparison is important in order to show that already in the scrolls there are beginnings of fixed exegetical formulae also regarding Halakha, and these represent the first stages of the *middot* for commenting on the Torah.¹⁵

There can be no doubt that there are important common features between the exegetical methods of the authors of the scrolls and the rabbis. However, there are also crucial differences. First, unlike the scrolls, the Halakhic Midrashim do not present their commentary as the sole and unequivocal interpretation of a divinely-inspired authority, but rather as a commentary based on human efforts to resolve various difficulties in the biblical text.¹⁶ In addition, Steven Fraade has highlighted several central characteristics of the rabbinic Midrash that seem almost self-evident, but are almost never documented in the scrolls:¹⁷

¹² For a comparison between rabbinic and scroll commentaries see, e.g., Goldberg 1981; Werman and Shemesh 2011, pp. 51–71 (see p. 53 for a discussion of the term “Midrash” as representing a written treatise); Kugel 2009; Fraade 1991, pp. 1–23; 1998; 2005; 2006a; 2006b; 2007b; 2007c; Shemesh 2000; 2004; 2009; Kister 1998; 1999 (esp. pp. 332–335); Bernstein 1996; Bernstein and Koyfman 2005; Mandel 2001; 2006; 2017; Milgrom 1989; Brock 1985; 2000; 2009; Heger 2005; 2011; Shiffman 2005; Schremer 2001; Milikowsky 2013, vol. 1, pp. 61–62 and notes on pp. 99–101.

¹³ For example, some have pointed out the similarity between the exegetical formula א ב הוה א (“for A is B”) found in the scrolls and the rabbinic formula א ב אלא א ב א (“A is nothing other than B”). See Werman and Shemesh 2011, p. 57. It is worth noting that Lieberman (1962, p. 49 n. 19) suggested that the rabbinic formula is equivalent to the Greek formula οὐδὲν ἄλλο Α ἢ Β. I have not, however, found use of the formula in the Homeric scholia.

¹⁴ Bernstein and Koyfman 2005, for example, sought to identify in the scroll the use of such *middot* as *qal va-homer* (*argumentum a fortiori*) and *biyan av* (prototype) alongside more general techniques such as harmonization and combining of verse. Cf. Milgrom 1989.

¹⁵ Werman and Shemesh 2011, p. 57 (my translation).

¹⁶ See, e.g., Fraade 1998 (and in many more articles; see note below); Heger 2005; Kahana 2006, p. 10. On the difference in the concept of authority in scrolls and Jewish Alexandrian commentary see Niehoff 2012c, pp. 456–457.

¹⁷ Fraade 2006c, p. 279. Fraade has often emphasized the fundamental differences between rabbinic commentaries and that found in the scrolls. See, e.g., idem 1991; 1998; 2006a; 2006b; 2007b. Kahana (2006, pp. 10–11) noted further differences between the scroll commentaries and the Halakhic Midrashim: The latter are written in Mishnaic Hebrew whereas the scrolls language is closer to Biblical Hebrew; the Halakhic regulations are much more detailed in the Halakhic Midrashim; in many cases the interpretation in the Halakhic Midrashim is further from the literal meaning of the verses.

(1) In the Midrash, numerous traditions are attributed to various named sages. In the scrolls, by contrast, no *specific* commentary is attributed to any individual, not even to the Teacher of Righteousness.¹⁸

(2) The sages explicitly point out the exegetical methods they use. That is, there is a reflexivity concerning the techniques used by the commentator. A wide range of technical terms present the exact method implemented in a given instance. In the scroll commentaries, on the other hand, the exegetical process is usually implicit. It is indeed possible that this process was based on various methods used during the teaching of the text.¹⁹ However, our interest lies in the textual product, and, as noted, we do not find in the scrolls an explicit use of the techniques, contrary to the rabbinic texts.

(3) Exegetical intertextuality is common in the Midrashim; that is, the creative use of a biblical verse from elsewhere in order to explain a given verse. This technique is relatively rare in the scrolls. This does not mean, as Fraade once again emphasizes, that in the background of these commentaries there was no use of intertextuality; but even if there was, it is not stated explicitly.²⁰

(4) The Midrashic discourse is dialogical and contains question and answers as well as rhetorical alternatives, which are absent from the scrolls.

(5) A distinct feature of rabbinic literature is the appearance of several interpretations for a single verse. In the scroll commentaries only one opinion is presented, whereas in the Halakhic Midrashim there are explicit disagreements between different sages from different generations within a single editorial framework.²¹

¹⁸ This is also an important difference between the rabbinic and Mesopotamian exegesis. As Frahm notes (2011, p. 377): “[T]he commentators in the Assyrian and Babylonian tradition always remain anonymous”.

¹⁹ According to Fraade, the sectarian authors systematically refrain from presenting the exegetical technique which led to the creation of a Halakha, even in cases where it is clear that such a technique was used. The reason for that, in his opinion, is ideological and stems from the belief that the source of the authority of the new halakhot is grounded in inspiration. Shemesh supports Fraade’s approach and notes: “Exposing the exegetical moves inherently acknowledges the possibility to offer other interpretations, and this is exactly what the writers of the scrolls seek to avoid” (Werman and Shemesh 2011, p. 64, my translation). The few cases in which the writers of the scrolls reveal their exegetical logic are found in polemical contexts (ibid.).

²⁰ Fraade 2006c, pp. 270, 279.

²¹ Scholars have debated the significance of multiple interpretations in rabbinic literature (i.e., whether it should be understood as polysemy, indeterminacy, pluralism etc.). See, e.g., Stern 1984; 1985; 1996; Handelman 1985; Mack 1992; Boyarin 2002; 2004, pp. 151-201; Yadin 2003; 2004, pp. 69-76; 2014; Fraade 2007a; Hiday 2010a. For the possibility that already in Peshar Habakkuk (1:16–2:10) three distinct interpretations are offered to Hab. 1:5; see Weigold 2012, who discusses other cases from Second Temple literature which possibly contain multiple interpretations. Philo at times offers additional interpretations, but that is part of

These differences might seem at first to be merely external and technical. Yet, in fact, they represent a paradigmatic change in the concept of the text and the role of the commentator: the human commentators are external to the commented texts.

How can we explain these differences? One possibility is that they are the result of chronological and evolutionary processes.²² Between the Dead Sea Scrolls and rabbinic literature there is a temporal gap of at least two hundred years. During this “dark” period, Jewish commentaries might have evolved so that they began to approach the rabbinic model. In other words, it is possible that the rabbinic Midrash is the end product of an exegetical development whose inception may be discerned in the scrolls.

In his studies, Menachem Kister has highlighted the continuum between the Qumran commentaries and those of the rabbis, suggesting that some of the differences are anchored in the gradual transition from the biblical to the post-biblical period.²³ In addition, the period between the composition of the scrolls and the appearance of rabbinic literature also included some momentous historical events that might have also impacted the commentaries. So, for example, Kister argues that some of the differences between Qumran and the rabbis are a result of the failure of the revolts, which created a shift from an impending sense of eschatology to a suspended one, impacting the exegetical goals.²⁴

Another significant development that occurred between the writing of the scrolls and the appearance of the Halakhic Midrashim was the full canonization of the biblical literature. The fact that it was no longer possible to add books, or even to change the version of the verses, created the need for works that distinguished between the commentators and the canonized text. Moreover, canonization deeply impacts the exegetical methods, as Moshe Halbertal has noted:²⁵ “Canonizing a text results in increased flexibility in its interpretation,

his authoritative presentation (see Fraade 1991, p. 16). In the homily of Samson of Ps.-Philo (*de Sam.* 21) the author offers several interpretations and rejects them.

²² Fraade 2006c, p. 281.

²³ Kister 1998. See Werman and Shemesh 2011, pp. 63–64 for a comparison between the approaches of Kister and Fraade.

²⁴ Kister 1998, p. 103 n. 9.

²⁵ Halbertal 1997, pp. 32–33. See also p. 29: “The degree of canonicity of a text corresponds to the amount of charity it receives in its interpretation. The more canonical a text, the more generous its treatment.” For an implementation of these insights to the Homeric corpus see Finkelberg 2004, p. 241 (cf. eadem 2003, p. 92): “In the centuries that followed, the tendency to avoid altering the received text of Homer became the dominant one. What was offered instead were various methods of interpretation. To borrow the terms introduced by Moshe Halbertal in his discussion of the reception of the Hebrew Bible, “textual closure” of the Homeric corpus was accompanied by “hermeneutical openness” towards it – a sure sign of the canonical status that the poems of Homer had acquired.”

such as the use of complex hermeneutical devices of accommodation to yield the best possible reading.”

These explanations emphasize the continuity between the exegetical communities of Qumran and the rabbis. Another direction is to underscore the ideological differences between the two communities. According to Fraade, it is possible to explain some of the differences by assuming a different social structure with differing concepts of authority.²⁶ The formation of a rabbinic scholarly community that did not have a single authority, such as the Teacher of Righteousness, enabled the development of a dialogical literature. Menahem Kahana has suggested that the effort to confront opinions that undermined the Pharisaic Halakha motivated the creation of Halakhic Midrashim, at the center of which lies the effort to connect the Halakha to the verses. Kahana further suggested that the accumulation of Halakhic details which had no foundation in the literal sense of the verses, and the growing rift between the biblical law and the Pharisaic Halakha, alongside internal polemics between the different schools, may also provide a reason for the formation of the Halakhic Midrashim.²⁷

All these explanations are possible and, moreover, are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Yet they explain in different ways the possibility for change, but do not provide a sufficient answer as to why the Halakhic Midrashim were formed in this very specific mold.²⁸

A preliminary overview of the Homeric commentaries, which are the product of the intellectual effort of generations of scholars, reveals that all five of the distinctive features of rabbinic commentary mentioned above also appear in these texts:

(1) The opinions of the scholars are very often cited with their names. So, for example, hundreds of comments state φησὶν Ἀρίσταρχος (“Aristarchus says”).

(2) The Homeric commentaries are transparent and reflexive. The commentators usually note their hermeneutical methods, employing a wide array of technical terms.

²⁶ See, e.g., Fraade 2006c, p. 283. Cf. Mandel 2001, pp. 167–168: “[T]he tool used by the Qumran sect, and by the early Christians, of reading the Bible as a treasure of hidden historical references may be seen as a major incentive to the rabbis’ peculiar reading of Scripture. The authority of the *doresh ha-Torah* at Qumran, understood to come directly from divine inspiration, was transmuted into the authority of the rabbinic *doresh*, who found his inspiration ultimately in the text itself.”

²⁷ Kahana 2006, 11. See also Schremer 2001.

²⁸ See, e.g., Fraade 2006a; 2006b; 1991, pp. 1–19.

(3) The Homeric scholars frequently use intertextuality as an exegetical tool. They often use citations from Homer and other authors in order to clarify obscure verses. Aristarchus was even credited with the rule “to clarify Homer from Homer”.²⁹

(4) The Homeric scholarship contains hundreds of questions and answers reflecting a lively dialogue between scholars. It also includes direct references to the reader and the student.³⁰

(5) A common phenomenon in the Homeric scholarship is the multiplicity of comments on the same words or verses. The editors of the exegetical compilations collected the opinions of various scholars from different periods, sometimes hundreds of years apart. Occasionally the names of the scholars are not stated explicitly and the various opinions are introduced by such terms as *ἐνιοι/τινὲς φασίν* (“some say”) and *ἄλλοι φησίν* (“others say”), identical to the rabbinic editorial terms *יש אומרים* (“some say”) and *אחרים אומרים* (“others say”), respectively.³¹ Alternative opinions taken from separate sources are usually introduced in the scholia by the technical term *ἄλλως* (“in another way”), equivalent to *דבר אחר* (*davar aher*, “another way”).³²

This clear similarity between the scholarly product of the Greek scholars and the rabbis justifies and enables a deeper and more comprehensive comparison than previously conducted. It points to the possibility that the essential differences between rabbinic exegesis and the earlier Jewish exegesis may be

²⁹ For a discussion of this rule see Chapter 1 Section 2.1.

³⁰ For a comprehensive discussion on the genre of questions and answers see Chapter 3. On the difference between the scrolls and rabbinic literature in this context see Niehoff 2012c, pp. 457–458. Van der Valk 1963–1964, vol. 1, p. 474, points to the direct addresses to the reader or student in the bT scholia by the common use of interjections such as *ὄρα* and *σκόπει* and suggests that this may reflect oral instruction.

³¹ On the use of the term *אחרים אומרים* in Tannaitic literature see Kahana 1999, pp. 334–335; Epstein 2010, p. 19 n. 1. In b. Hor. 13b it is suggested that this term refers to R. Meir.

³² On *davar aher* see Goldberg 1982. Dating the beginning of the use of *ἄλλως* (and *aliter*) as a technical term for marking a transition to another source is highly important for dating the rise of scholiography. For a comprehensive discussion see Montana 2011. Previous scholars argued that this is a byzantine development influenced by the emergence of the catena, see Zunz 1975; Wilson 1967; 1968 (who even suggested that the term which appears in the catena of Procopius was influenced by Talmudic literature). In Mesopotamian commentaries, consecutive interpretations are marked by the terms *šanīš* (second), *šālšīš* (thirdly), *rebīš* (fourthly). Uri Gabbay (2015b; 2012, pp. 308–309 n. 128) has suggested that the term *šanīš* should be translated as ‘other’ and that originally it was used as a general term for introducing an alternative interpretation and not necessarily a second one (*šālšīš* and *rebīš* were therefore introduced only later). Furthermore, it is likely that the term designated the use of another source and not just another interpretation suggested by the same authority. In light of this, Gabbay suggests that the terms *šanīš* and *דבר אחר* are parallels not only in their scholarly role but also lexically (cf. Frahm 2011, p. 378, n. 1812). I will address the relation between the scholastic terms *šanīš*, *ἄλλως*, *aliter* and *דבר אחר* in a future study.

explained in part by the rabbis' direct or indirect acquaintance with contemporary Hellenistic scholarship.³³

2. Survey of Scholarship

2.1 Rabbinic Literature and the Homeric Commentaries

Many studies have dealt with comparisons between various aspects of Hellenistic culture and rabbinic literature, as well as the impact of Greek on rabbinic Hebrew and Aramaic.³⁴ In the context of the present study, it is important to note those studies that have focused on the impact of Hellenistic rhetoric on the form and content of the rabbinic *derashot*, and in particular on the *chreia* (χρεία), diatribe, and the *progymnasmata* literature.³⁵ Yet surprisingly there are almost no studies offering a comparison between rabbinic and Hellenistic commentaries, despite the centrality of biblical exegesis for the rabbis and the large corpus of Homeric scholarship that has survived. The main studies dedicated to this comparison remain those of David Daube and Saul Lieberman, written over sixty years ago. Since scholars have cited and referred to these studies dozens of times, I shall now review them in detail.

In his groundbreaking 1949 article "Rabbinic Methods of Interpretation and the Hellenistic Rhetoric," Daube argued that "in its beginnings, the Rabbinic

³³ See, e.g., Niehoff 2012c, p. 445: "[T]he scholarly form of commentary culture, known in the Land of Israel from rabbinic sources, seems to have developed as a result of active engagement with Hellenistic culture."

³⁴ For a general overview of Greco-Roman culture and the rabbis see Schäfer 1998; Levine 1998; Lieberman 1962; 1965; Hidary 2022. For studies on the impact of Greek on Hebrew and Aramaic of the rabbinic literature see Lieberman 1963; 1965; 1991; Rosen 1963; Sperber 2006. On Greek and Latin loanwords in rabbinic literature see Krauss 1898 and the review of Zunz 1956; Sperber 1982; 1984 (and review by Katzoff 1989); Sperber 1986; 2012; Hirshman 2010 and the review by Bar Kokhva 2013; Krivoruchko 2012; Heijmans 2013; Shoval-Dudai 2019. For the impact of Greek philosophy on the rabbis see, e.g., Goldin 1973; Fischel 1973a; 1973b; 2000a; Harvey 1992; Satlow 2003; Niehoff 2022. For the literary impact of the Greek novel see, e.g., Levinson 1996; Stern 1998. See also Kovelman 2004; Boyarin 2009 for the possible impact of Menippean satire. For a comparison between etymological methods used by the rabbis and Hellenistic scholars see Alexander 2004; Zingerman 2011. For an approach which minimizes the impact of Hellenistic culture and language on the rabbis see Alon 1970; Feldman 1983; Wasserstein 1994.

³⁵ For the impact of Greek rhetorical models and *progymnasmata* on rabbinic literature see Marmorstein 1929; Bickerman 1952; Fischel 1973a; Jaffee 1988; Ulman 1997 (on the diatribe); Visotzky 2006, pp. 120–126; Furstenberg 2012 (on the *agon*); Brodsky 2014; Hidary 2010b; 2018a; 2018b. On the impact of the *chreia* genre see Edelman 1961; Fischel 1968; 1969; 1973a; 1975; Avery-Peck 1993; Hezser 1996; Tropper 2004, pp. 174–184.

system of hermeneutics is a product of the Hellenistic civilization then dominating the entire Mediterranean world.”³⁶ Based on a tradition in the Babylonian Talmud (b. Git. 57a; b. Yoma 71b), according to which Hillel’s teachers Shmaya and Avtalion were converts from Alexandria, Daube sought to argue that Hillel’s seven exegetical principles (*middot*) were derived from Alexandrian rhetorical techniques. Thus, קל וחומר (*qal va-homer*) originated from a *minori ad maius*³⁷ and גזרה שווה (*gezera shava*) was derived from analogy.³⁸ An important point raised by Daube is that while some of these rabbinic methods may seem intuitive, so that there is no reason to assume a genetic link to Hellenistic methods, a deeper examination reveals that several hermeneutical systems lack such methods.³⁹ The adoption of these methods by both the Jews and the Romans is due to their shared Hellenistic background:

We have before us a science the beginnings of which may be traced back to Plato, Aristotle and their contemporaries. It recurs in Cicero, Hillel and Philo – with enormous differences in detail, yet *au fond* the same. Cicero did not sit at the feet of Hillel, nor Hillel at the feet of Cicero; and there was no need for Philo to go to Palestinian sources for this kind of teaching. As we saw, there are indeed signs that Hillel’s ideas were partly imported from Egypt. The true explanation lies in the common Hellenistic background. Philosophical instruction was very similar in outline whether given at Rome, Jerusalem or Alexandria.

Whereas in his 1949 article Daube focused mainly on Hellenistic rhetorical, legal, and philosophical writings, in a later article from 1953, “Alexandrian Methods of Interpretation and the Rabbis”, he dealt directly with exegetical literature.⁴⁰ Yet, despite the promising title, in this article Daube barely cites any examples of Alexandrian methods of interpretation, and in fact did not engage at all with the Homeric scholia.⁴¹ Rather, almost all of his examples were taken from authors such as Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian.

³⁶ Daube 1949, p. 240.

³⁷ For a reassessment see Hidary 2018b.

³⁸ Daube 1949. For example, Daube suggested that the term שנאמר (“for it is said”) which indicates a direct citation might be a translation of the rhetorical term ὁπτόν. Yet a similar term appears already in the scrolls (e.g., ואשר אמר) and, as Uri Gabbay has recently demonstrated (2015b), the term probably originated in Mesopotamian commentaries.

³⁹ Daube 1949, pp. 255–256.

⁴⁰ Daube 1953.

⁴¹ It would seem that the main reason Alexandrian methods of interpretation are mentioned in the title of the article is the example from Athenaeus’ *Deipnosophistae* (11.85, 494a–b) where he cites a solution by Sosibius who was supposedly active in Alexandria in the third century BCE. This example, also cited by Lieberman, is highly problematic, as I show in the appendix to Chapter 5. As well as this anecdotal example Daube also mentions in passing a case where Aristarchus marked a verse as spurious (Daube 1953, p. 179 and n. 73). Yet this example too was taken from Athenaeus and not from the scholia.

In this article Daube compares the terms σύνθεσις (*synthesis*) and διαίρεσις (*diairesis*), used by Greek grammarians, to מקראות שאין להם הכרע (“verses without adjudication”); as well as the method of ἀναστροφή (*anastrophē*) to סרס (*sares*, transposition of words or verses).⁴² He emphasizes not only the similarities but also the differences in the ways the rabbis and the Greek scholars used these methods. As we shall see throughout this book, although Daube was correct in assuming a Hellenistic background to these rabbinic methods, his analysis of both the Greek and rabbinic sources was at times somewhat superficial, and as a result some of his conclusions need to be reexamined.

From the rather meager evidence he presented in both his articles, Daube drew some farfetched conclusions:⁴³ “[T]he whole Rabbinic system of exegesis initiated by Hillel about 30 B.C. and elaborated by the following generations was essentially Hellenistic.”

However, Daube’s studies should be appreciated in the context of his time when most of the Dead Sea Scrolls were not yet published, and therefore he was not aware of the possibility that part of the rabbinic exegetical system was grounded in the Second Temple literature composed in Palestine.

In several chapters of his book *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine*, one of the most influential studies in rabbinic scholarship, Saul Lieberman compares Greek and rabbinic commentaries. Lieberman’s discussion is characterized by a tension between the convincing evidence he presents for Hellenistic influence on rabbinic interpretations and his efforts to minimize this impact.⁴⁴

In the chapter “Critical Marks (σημεῖα κριτικά) in the Hebrew Bible,” Lieberman argues that “[i]t is quite apparent that the Rabbis of the second century interpreted the critical marks in the same way that the Alexandrian grammarians treated the critical signs in the classic texts.”⁴⁵

Similarly, in the chapter “Corrections of the Soferim,” Lieberman notes similarities between the emendations of the Jewish scribes and those of the Alexandrian grammarians (in particular Zenodotus), motivated by the need to avoid indecent and improper statements (ἄπρεπές). Yet despite the fact that he claims to have found “exact parallels,”⁴⁶ he concludes the chapter with the following statement:⁴⁷

⁴² On Daube’s comparison of σύνθεσις and διαίρεσις to *hekhre’a* see Chapter 4 Section 3.3. For a critique of Daube’s (as well as Lieberman’s) comparison of ἀναστροφή and *sares* see appendix to Chapter 5.

⁴³ Daube 1953, p. 44.

⁴⁴ For a critical discussion of Lieberman’s approach see Levine 1998, pp. 113–116; Visotsky 2006, pp. 120–126; Furstenberg 2012, pp. 300–305; Moss 2012, pp. 245–250.

⁴⁵ Lieberman 1950, p. 46.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

We can hardly assert Alexandrian influence on the Soferim in regard of the above-mentioned textual corrections, even if we extend their activity beyond the time set by the Rabbis. It may simply be a natural similarity in human attitudes. Furthermore, there is an immense difference between Greek and the Jewish alterations. The Soferim altered the text only when the honor of the Lord was involved. The Alexandrians changed it whenever it was not in conformity with the manners of the court of the Ptolemies, or the customs of certain Greeks.

This conclusion seems somewhat apologetic; while Lieberman claims that “there is an immense difference between Greek and the Jewish alterations,” in fact one of the only two examples he offers for alterations by Greek scholars was made in order to preserve the honor of a goddess.⁴⁸

Lieberman’s primary discussion of the comparison between Greek and rabbinic commentaries appears in the chapter “Rabbinic Interpretation of Scripture”.⁴⁹ In order to establish the meaning of difficult and rare words, the rabbis, in a manner analogous to Hellenistic philologists “often explained the ‘Bible by the Bible’”,⁵⁰ used other languages;⁵¹ and “sometimes explained expressions of the Bible by customary usage (i.e., the *χρησις*, *συνήθεια*) of the language.”⁵²

Yet, in a famous passage, Lieberman retreats at the last moment from reaching the conclusions his examples had led him to, stating:

The early Jewish interpreters of the Scripture did not have to embark for Alexandria in order to learn there the rudimentary methods of linguistic research. To make them travel to Egypt for this purpose would mean to do a cruel injustice to the intelligence and acumen of the Palestinian sages. Although they were not philologists in the modern sense of the word, they nevertheless often adopted sound philological methods.⁵³

Lieberman dedicates most of his discussion to the seven *middot* of Hillel and the thirteen *middot* of R. Yishmael, seeking to prove that the terminology used is in fact derived from Greek. The main terminological parallels to the *middot* are found in rhetorical handbooks and the *progymnasmata* (preparatory exercises).⁵⁴ So, for example, Lieberman argues that *היקש* (*heqesh*), a term for analogy, “is the literal equivalent of the Greek *παράθεσις*.”⁵⁵ Similarly, the term *גזירה שוה* (*gezera shava*) – literally, a comparison with the equal – is a rendition

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 36–37. The example is based on Sch. A II. 3.423a Ariston.

⁴⁹ In the following section, ‘The Hermeneutic Rules of the Aggadah’, Lieberman compares some of the 32 *middot* in the aggadah with some Greek hermeneutic techniques, especially from the realm of dream interpretations (ibid., 68–82).

⁵⁰ Lieberman 1950, p. 49.

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 51–52.

⁵² Ibid., p. 52.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 53.

⁵⁴ As emphasized by Furstenberg 2012, p. 300.

⁵⁵ Lieberman 1950, pp. 60.

of the Greek σύγκρισις κατὰ ἴσον (*synkrisis kata ison*), and the implementation of this method by rabbis and Greeks was similar.⁵⁶

Despite these striking similarities, Lieberman concludes: “We have no ground to assume that the method itself of both logical and verbal analogy was borrowed by the Jews from the Greeks. However, the method and definition of the method – the terminology – are two different things.”⁵⁷ In other words, Lieberman sought to limit the Hellenistic influence in these cases to terminology, whereas the methods were independently developed by the rabbis. Yet, as noted by Lee Levine, Lieberman provides no evidence that such methods were previously used in Palestine.⁵⁸

Alongside his discussion of the *middot*, Lieberman pointed to a similarity in the manner in which the rabbis and the Greek rhetors “taught the art of twisting the law according to the required aim and purpose.”⁵⁹ It is interesting that in this case Lieberman explicitly argues for influence.⁶⁰

The Jews with their love and devotion to παιδεία would be much more susceptible than the Romans to the sound contribution of the Greeks to learning. They would certainly not hesitate to borrow from them methods and systems which they could convert into a mechanism for the clarification and definition of their own teaching, the instruction and the works of the rhetors were most suitable for the application in the hermeneutics of the ἀντιστοιχία (support) type. For this purpose, the τέχνη γραμματική and the τέχνη ῥητορική were combined and fused into one device.

Only toward the end of the chapter does Lieberman turn to an explicit comparison between the Midrash and Homeric commentaries, focusing on the solution of problems. Most of his discussion is dedicated to a comparison between the technique of *anastrophe* and the rabbinic word-transposition (*sares*), founded, independently, on the same anecdotal solution of Sosibius taken from Athenaeus, which Daube also used in his study.⁶¹ Yet, like Daube, Lieberman does not examine the context and the way this technique functions in the Greek and rabbinic commentaries, nor the textual and literary concepts which enable the use of such a technique.

Lieberman later adduces only one more example where Aristarchus and the rabbis solve a problem in a similar fashion.⁶² Yet although he discusses only two rather random examples from Alexandrian commentators (Sosibius and Aristarchus), Lieberman concludes the chapter with the following general as-

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 59–62. Cf. the discussion in Visotsky 2006, pp. 122–124.

⁵⁷ Lieberman 1950, p. 61.

⁵⁸ Levine 1998, p. 115.

⁵⁹ Lieberman 1950, p. 63.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 64.

⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 64–67. For a critique of this suggestion see appendix to Chapter 5.

⁶² Ibid., p. 67.

sertion: "Literary problems were solved in a similar way in the schools of Alexandria and those of Palestine."⁶³ However, he refrains from fleshing out the implications of such a statement.

In comparing the Homeric and rabbinic commentaries, Lieberman and Daube emerge as mirror images: Lieberman favored a minimalistic approach, seeking to confine the impact of Hellenistic culture on the rabbis mainly to terminology; while Daube preferred a maximalist view, arguing that all the rabbinic hermeneutical methods were Hellenistic.⁶⁴ Yet both Lieberman and Daube based their arguments on a rather small and anecdotal textual foundation. Indeed, in their entire comparison of Hellenistic scholarship and Midrash, they each present only two examples from the Homeric commentaries,⁶⁵ and these came solely from the Alexandrian tradition. Thus, they made almost no use of the vast corpus of Homeric scholarship, and hence failed to distinguish between its different layers. In addition, as noted above, they did not provide a systematic examination of how the various methods functioned within the context of Hellenistic scholarship and Midrash, nor of the underlying hermeneutical assumptions.

Despite these criticisms, the pioneering works of Daube and Lieberman revealed for the first time the great potential for comparison between Hellenistic and rabbinic commentaries. Moreover, their works also have to be appreciated within the context of their time. Unfortunately, rather than functioning as an incentive and paving the road for further comprehensive studies, over the decades following Daube and Lieberman's publications scholars have rehashed the same examples, while slightly modifying their conclusions.⁶⁶ In fact, to the

⁶³ Lieberman 1950, pp. 67–68.

⁶⁴ For an analysis of the methodological differences between Daube and Lieberman see Levine 1998, pp. 113–116.

⁶⁵ It should be noted though that in his discussion of critical signs in the Bible and *tiqqunei sofrim* (corrections of the Scribes) Lieberman adduced several more examples from the Alexandrian commentaries (Lieberman 1962, pp. 36–37).

⁶⁶ Tauner (1982) regarded the examples presented by Lieberman and Daube as insufficient in order to prove that the Tannaim learned their exegetical methods from Greek rhetors and grammarians. Rather, he argues, they developed their intricate hermeneutical system by themselves, with almost no external influence. Similarly, Feldman 1986 argued that the impact of Hellenistic culture on the rabbis in general, and in terms of their commentary in particular, was not as deep as scholars had presumed. In several studies (Halevi 1960; 1972, pp. 36–71; 1979, pp. 153–205; 1982, pp. 32–112), E. E. Halevi, following Lieberman, sought to compare what he called "Homeric Midrash" (מדרש הוֹמֵרוֹס) and rabbinic Midrash in dozens of topics. Yet while occasionally illuminating, these parallels are random, lacking in method, analysis, and logical order, and Halevi fails to distinguish between earlier and later sources in the Greek or the rabbinic literature. Moreover, despite the dazzling array of Greek sources, Halevi did not make any use of Homeric scholia. In two programmatic articles, Philip Alexander (1990; 1998) discussed the relation between biblical and Homeric commentaries and the role of Moses and

best of my knowledge, none of these studies adduced a single additional example from the systematic Homeric commentaries beyond those cited by Lieberman (Daube, we should recall, did not consult the scholia at all).⁶⁷ This is all the more striking since in the decades following the appearance of Lieberman's and Daube's studies the field of Homeric scholia has progressed significantly (see below).

However, in the last few years some scholars have begun to compare the rabbinic hermeneutical methods with new examples drawn directly from the Homeric scholia.⁶⁸ In several studies, Maren Niehoff has pointed to various similarities between *Genesis Rabba*, compiled in the fifth century CE, and the Homeric and Jewish-Hellenistic commentaries. The rabbis addressed redundancies, problems of verisimilitude, and contradictions in similar ways to the Hellenistic scholars.⁶⁹ Niehoff emphasizes that the rabbis' interactions with contemporary Hellenistic scholarship, at times mediated by Greek-speaking

Homer in each of the cultures. However, he relied almost entirely on examples gleaned from previous scholarship, adding virtually no new material (For a critique of Alexander's studies see Milikowsky 2013, vol. 1, pp. 95–96). Alexander argued that the rabbis were at home in the Hellenistic culture, and therefore it is not at all problematic to compare the commentaries on Homer and the Bible. However, he did not see much similarity between Aristarchus' philological-critical approach and that of the rabbis, arguing that the parallels should rather be sought in the allegorical Homeric commentaries (Alexander 1998, p. 140). Chaim Milikowsky (2013, vol. 1, pp. 55–66; 93–96; cf. idem 2005) distinguishes between “interpretive commentary” and “Midrashic commentary”: the former adheres to the context and grammar and does not embellish the biblical story with new narratives, whereas the latter ignores context, grammar, and logic. According to Milikowsky, the roots of “interpretive commentary” can be found in self-standing Jewish-Hellenistic commentaries composed mainly in Egypt. However, regarding the “Midrashic commentary,” he argues that “it is hard to see clear points of contact between it and the commentary which was prevalent in the Hellenistic culture.” (idem 2013, vol. 1, p. 95, my translation).

⁶⁷ The need for new studies in these directions has already been highlighted by Bar Kochva 2013, pp. 212–213, n. 75.

⁶⁸ Alongside Niehoff's studies see also Novick 2012, pp. 27–29; 2014, p. 45, who noted the similar use of expressions of wonder in the Homeric commentaries and the Halakhic Midrashim (οὐ θαυμάστον; אל תמה) as a rhetorical address to the reader. In addition, Novick briefly compared the use of focalization by the Midrash and Homeric scholia (idem, 2009, pp. 49–51). In another study, Novick (2014, p. 41 n. 12) refers in passing to the similarity between the terms שבוה and הכתוב משבוה and cases where a scholium remarks that Homer praises (ἐπαινεῖ) a certain character. Yonatan Moss (2012a; 2012b) has compared the various approaches to narrative non-linearity by the rabbis and Homeric scholars. In addition, Guy Darshan (2012; 2008) has suggested that the division of the Bible into 24 books was based on a similar division to 24 books of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* by the Alexandrian scholars.

⁶⁹ See especially Niehoff 2012c, pp. 459–462 and eadem 2008, pp. 56–57. Niehoff also pointed out the resemblance between the term אמתהא used in *Genesis Rabba* and similar terms used by the Hellenistic scholars (eadem 2012c, p. 458.)

Jews in Palestine, were the main reason for the differences between the scholarly rabbinic commentaries and those found in the Dead Sea Scrolls.⁷⁰

2.2 Homeric and Biblical Scholarship in Alexandria

Although the main center of Homeric scholarship was in Alexandria, only in recent years have scholars begun to study its impact on Alexandrian Jewish-Hellenistic biblical commentary. Silvey Honigman examined the impact of the Homeric scholarship on *The Letter of Aristeas* in the second century BCE;⁷¹ Adam Kamesar compared Philo's commentary to that found in the D scholia;⁷² Tzvi Novick discussed the similarity in the use of focalization (perspectival exegesis) in Philo and the Homeric commentary;⁷³ and Peder Borgen briefly discussed the similarity between the questions and answers in Philo and the Homeric scholars (although he cited only one example from the latter).⁷⁴

Major progress was achieved with publication of Maren Niehoff's groundbreaking study *Jewish Exegesis and Homeric Scholarship in Alexandria*, in which she convincingly demonstrated the deep impact the Alexandrian Homeric commentary had on the Jewish-Hellenistic commentators.⁷⁵ This is the first study to make comprehensive and systematic use of the A scholia – which preserve the Alexandrian commentaries – for comparison with Hellenistic biblical commentaries, and accordingly it laid the foundation for the present study.

Niehoff demonstrated how the author of *The Letter of Aristeas*, Aristobulus, and Demetrius (and the anonymous commentators he cites) – all active during the second century BCE in Ptolemaic Alexandria – engaged with the Homeric scholarship of the day, spearheaded by Aristarchus.⁷⁶ In addition, Niehoff demonstrated that Philo himself was fully aware of the Homeric scholarship of his day, and that despite his allegorical approach he made use of terms from the contemporary text-critical and non-allegorical study of the Homeric poem.⁷⁷ Moreover, Niehoff convincingly argued that Philo directly polemizes with Jewish commentators who used the same terminology and the same hermeneutical, literary, and historical methods as their Alexandrian contemporaries, and may even have engaged in textual criticism.⁷⁸ Thus Philo, who was

⁷⁰ See Niehoff 2012c; 2020; 2021a; 2021b.

⁷¹ Honigman 2003.

⁷² Kamesar 2004.

⁷³ Novick 2009.

⁷⁴ Borgen 1997, p. 90. For an examination of Philo's *quaestiones in genesim et exodum* on the background of the Greek tradition of questions and answers see Wan 1993, and for references see *ibid.*, p. 33 n. 54.

⁷⁵ Niehoff 2011.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 17–74.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 133–151; see Niehoff 2012b for Philo's acquaintance with the Homeric poems as well as Berthelot 2012.

⁷⁸ Niehoff 2011, pp. 75–130.

a Platonist, does not in fact fully represent Jewish-Hellenistic commentary; indeed, he opposed the common exegetical approaches of his day which embraced an Aristotelian non-allegorical reading of the Bible.

As we shall see throughout the present study, it is possible that these Jewish-Hellenistic scholars constitute one of the channels by which the methods of Hellenistic scholarship reached the rabbis.

2.3 *Homeric Commentaries and Christian Biblical Commentaries*

Several scholars have pointed to the impact of Alexandrian Homeric scholarship on the beginnings of Christian biblical exegesis,⁷⁹ and especially on the writings of Origen (185–254CE). As Neuschäfer and other scholars have demonstrated, Origen, who was educated as a grammarian in Alexandria in the early third century, had a deep acquaintance with the Homeric hermeneutical and critical methods, which he applied in his biblical commentaries.⁸⁰ Origen even adopted the Alexandrian critical signs for his work on the *Hexapla*.⁸¹ However, since most of this study will focus on the Halakhic Midrashim and on rabbis who were active decades before Origen arrived in Caesarea, he cannot be regarded as an intermediary between the Hellenistic scholarship and the rabbis. Nonetheless, throughout this study I shall compare the way Origen and the rabbis implemented Alexandrian methods in their respective biblical commentaries.

3. The Present Study

This study focuses on a comparison between the non-allegorical Homeric commentaries and the rabbinic biblical commentaries, especially the Halakhic Midrashim. The choice to focus on the Homeric commentaries is due to the fact that they are relatively well preserved and best represent the Hellenistic hermeneutic approaches, combining rhetorical, literary, grammatical, and didactic

⁷⁹ See, e.g., Grant 1945. Adam Kamesar (1994a;1994b) has even demonstrated that some Church Fathers interpreted the rabbinic methods through a Greco–Roman prism.

⁸⁰ For the impact of the Alexandrian Homeric commentaries and textual criticism on Origen, see Schironi 2012, pp. 100–109; Neuschäfer 1987, pp. 122–138; Villani 2008; de Lange 1976, pp. 195–196 n. 48. In his *Homilies on Kings* (Reg. 1.1) Origen declares (in Rufinus’ translation): “*cognata quippe est sibi scriptura divina*”. This statement echoes the one attributed to Aristarchus: “to clarify Homer from Homer”; see discussion in Neuschäfer 1987, pp. 276–285.

⁸¹ See Schironi 2012, who demonstrates how Origen repurposed the Alexandrian critical signs for his philological project. Another Christian author who was impacted by Aristarchean methods is Eusebius, see Schironi 2020.

methods.⁸² The Halakhic Midrashim are the earliest that have come down to us, and accordingly I have preferred them over the Aggadic Midrashim. The fact that the Halakhic Midrashim were edited during the third century CE, and that most of the sages they mention lived in the second century CE, limits the possibility that various methods derived from Homeric scholarship reached the rabbis through the mediation of Christian scholars (unlike the Aggadic Midrashim, especially *Genesis Rabba*, edited in the fifth century CE). Thus, in cases of striking similarities between the Homeric commentaries and the Halakhic Midrashim, it is very likely that the cause is direct interaction between some rabbis and Hellenistic scholarship.

Alongside the formal similarities noted above, an initial reading of the Homeric scholia alongside the Halakhic Midrashim reveals mainly differences. The most obvious ones are the language and the text interpreted. In addition, a large part of the discussions in the scholia focus on text criticism, accents, and grammar (especially in the A scholia), as well as the aesthetic and literary evaluation of Homer's poems (mainly in the bT scholia) – topics that are very rarely addressed in the Midrash.⁸³ The rabbis, on the other hand, tend to deal with legal dialectics and homiletics, which are completely lacking in the Homeric scholarship.

In light of these differences, in order to compare these corpora, it is necessary to turn to the building blocks: that is, to locate similar technical terms reflecting similar exegetical methods. This is the most complicated stage, since it is difficult to anticipate in advance where such terms will be found. Yet once located, the discussion of similar terms grants the comparison a reasonably stable foundation. The comparison of the terms, however, is not a goal in itself.⁸⁴ Rather, an analysis of the various terms will help unearth their fundamental hermeneutical assumptions, enabling a more profound comparison of the approaches to language, canonical texts, and the role of the commentator in both corpora.⁸⁵ Such a general comparison will also assist in finding further similarities not based on terminology.

⁸² On the acquaintance of the rabbis with the Homeric poems themselves see Naeh 2011 and references there, as well as Sperber 2012, pp. 135–138; Naeh 2007, pp. 243–249; Lieberman 1963, pp. 108–110. See also Niehoff 2020, pp. 202–204, who argues that the rabbis reacted to Homeric reading practices among Greek-speaking Jews.

⁸³ The rabbis, as is well known, never suggest an emendation to the biblical text, although they are aware of alternative versions. See appendix to Chapter 4.

⁸⁴ Similarity and even identity between Greek and Hebrew terms does not necessarily point to influence beyond terminological borrowing, just as the absence of similar terms does not indicate a lack of influence on exegetical methods.

⁸⁵ Cf. Rosen-Zvi 2012, p. 329: “Assessment of interpretive techniques in any two corpora tend to embellish trivial similarities that are easily seen; the more important task is to search for fundamental hermeneutic assumptions.”

In this study I shall first analyze how an interpretive method or term is used in each of the exegetical corpora separately, in order to avoid, as much as possible, curtailing the presentation for comparative purposes. While the discussion of the terms and methods may extend beyond what seems to be immediately necessary for the comparison, this is important for understanding the broader context. Only afterwards will I compare the findings in detail and analyze the similarities and differences. In many cases I will also refer to the rhetorical and grammatical compositions of the period, as well as the works of Philo and the Church Fathers, in order to enrich the discussion and the understanding of the context.

Throughout my study, I shall distinguish between the different sources and layers in both corpora. In the Homeric scholarship, I shall distinguish between the A and bT scholia (see below) and between the approaches of the various ancient critics, such as Aristotle, Aristarchus, Nicanor, Porphyry, and others. In the rabbinic literature, I shall pay close attention to the differences between the schools of R. Yishmael and R. Akiva (see below), attempting when possible to identify the sage to whom a specific method may be attributed. As we shall see, such distinctions will have significant ramifications on dating and contextualizing the diverse impacts of Hellenistic scholarship on the rabbis.

The vast majority of modern scholars of Homeric commentaries have no acquaintance with rabbinic literature. Similarly, scholars of rabbinic literature have little knowledge of the Homeric scholarship, and in particular of the scholia, which has not been translated and is written in a highly technical and elliptic style. In light of this, I have chosen in this book to present a large array of examples from both corpora and to analyze them in detail, in order to expose their richness and make them accessible to a broader readership.

It should be noted that since the choice of topics for comparison was often triggered by engagement with the rabbinic commentaries, it encourages the examination of the Homeric commentaries in a new light and from angles and perspectives that are not usually addressed by many of the modern scholars. In addition, this study could be of further importance for Classicists since the rabbinic use of methods and terms derived from Greek scholarship testifies to their wide distribution.

4. Outline of the Book

This study is divided into five thematic chapters: The text as a source of knowledge; stylistic redundancies; questions and answers; textual ambiguities; and order and disorder in the text.

Chapter One examines how the perception of the text as a source of knowledge manifests itself in the commentaries. The first part will address what, according to the commentators, the text aims to teach us; the second part

will describe their exegetical efforts to return to the canonical text various traditions which were supposedly derived from it. Beyond concrete comparisons, I shall demonstrate how the rabbis share with the Homeric scholars the mechanism for organizing knowledge around the canonical text.

In Chapter Two, I shall examine the fundamental dispute between the schools of R. Akiva and R. Yishmael regarding redundancies in the Bible against the backdrop of the Homeric, rhetorical, and grammatical literature of the time alongside Jewish-Hellenistic commentaries. The discussion will focus on reduplications, synonyms, transitional phrases, and particles.

Chapter Three will explore the genre of questions and answers in the Homeric and rabbinic commentaries. I will compare a wide range of questions, noting the striking similarity in the format of the questions and in the methods reflected in the answers.

In Chapter Four, I shall demonstrate how the rabbis and Homeric scholars shared the same grammatical discourse, by examining the different ways with which they address ambiguities in the text.

Chapter Five will focus on how the commentators addressed disorder in the text, particularly through a close analysis of the technique of transposition and its underlying hermeneutical assumption.

5. Analogy vs. Genealogy

One of the central questions facing any comparative study is whether identified similarities reflect an analogical resemblance or a genealogical link. In the current study, the question is how we can determine whether the similarities in terms and methods between the Homeric commentaries and the Halakhic Midrashim are due to historical and cultural influence reflecting concrete contact, or the result of independent and parallel hermeneutical developments that could occur in any scholarly community interpreting a canonical text.

This question is further sharpened in light of the fact that many of the terms analyzed in this study – such as מלמד (“he teaches”); מפני מה (“why”); מנין היה (“whence does he know?”); מכאן אמרו (“from here they say”) – might seem so basic, so “natural”, that some might argue that these are a-temporal terms that can appear in any interpretative community, and thus there is no need to cross the borders of rabbinic literature in search of a historical and cultural context for their appearance. It is interesting to note that, in most cases, those who make such claims do not provide any evidence that these are indeed widespread phenomena (a claim that would require a broad comparative study), but rather place the burden of proof on those who wish to point to an external influence, based on the chronological, geographical, and social proximity of the rabbis and the Greek scholars.

As Glenn Most has rightly observed, however, there is nothing “natural” about an interpretative text.⁸⁶

For commentary is not a natural type but is always constructed variously in various social formations, and may therefore be expected to respond differently to different kinds of identifiable exigencies. This constructedness of the form of commentary may well be disguised to a certain extent from its producers and consumers by its very ubiquity, both within their own work and across the spectrum of cultures available for historical and geographical comparison; [...] But there is nothing natural about the general form of commentary itself, and no matter how natural a particular form of commentary may seem to its own practitioners in any one place and time, it need not seem at all natural to other practitioners.

It is important to distinguish between commentary as a mental act, where similar structural patterns may be identified across time and cultures, and the textual product, which is firmly anchored in a historical, social, and linguistic context. In light of the assumption that there is no “natural” commentary, one of the goals of the present study is to demonstrate that even certain simple terms and methods that have become almost transparent for us actually have a context and genealogy. The fact that the rabbis do not usually disclose their sources often hinders us from realizing that certain terms and methods are the product of engagement with contemporary Hellenistic scholarship. Only a close comparison with external sources will enable us to examine them afresh.

Moreover, against the argument that these are “natural” interpretative phenomena, so that the similarities between the Homeric and rabbinic commentaries are merely analogical, it is important to note that these phenomena do not appear in every interpretive community. In the context of this study, the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Mesopotamian commentaries can serve as control groups. As noted, almost all the exegetical terms and methods discussed in this study are absent from the Second Temple literature composed in Palestine. In light of this, the appearance in rabbinic literature of interpretative techniques not previously documented in Palestine, but which already existed in Hellenistic commentaries, strengthens the argument that this is not merely an analogical resemblance.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Most 1999, pp. vii–viii. Cited also by Fraade 2006b, p. 65. Fraade himself similarly states (pp. 44–45): “In comparing and contrasting the two textual corpora, we need to attend not only to their *contents*, but also to their textual *forms*, hermeneutical *strategies*, and rhetorical *functions*; that is, not only to the shared traditions but to the *morphological* means by which those traditional understandings of Scripture are performatively both connected to Scripture and communicated to their respective studying communities. Traditions are never communicated or engaged by their tradents apart from ideologically freighted and socially formative rhetorical embodiments. The medium may not alone be the message, but it certainly contributes mightily to it.”

⁸⁷ Hartog (2017) argues for the impact of Hellenistic Alexandrian *hypomnemata* (commentaries), as preserved in the papyri (he barely addresses the scholia), on the *peshet* commentaries. However, rather than demonstrating similarities, his study actually further highlights the stark