Can We Take Holy Scripture à la lettre? Biblical Literalism and Yefet ben ‘Elī’s Hermeneutical Term of the žāḥir

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ABSTRACT

In medieval Judaeo–Arabic exegesis of the Hebrew Bible, scholars used a range of hermeneutical terms to describe the ways in which Scripture was thought to signify. They distinguished between several types of figurative and non-figurative language, as well as between different interpretive approaches that were applied to these contrasting modes of speech. During the second half of the tenth century, the Karaite exegete Yefet ben ‘Elī sets a precedent in Jewish history by producing a continuous translation and commentary of the entire Hebrew Bible. Herein, he regularly makes use of the hermeneutical term žāḥir (‘outward’, ‘apparent’, ‘literal’), which he adopts from the Arabic-Islamic tradition, but adapts to his particular needs. Scholarly literature over the past three decades has increasingly pointed to his work as one of the most important examples of the so-called ‘literal trend’ in medieval Karaite exegesis. Yet how may scholars, wether medieval or modern, clearly define the literal meaning of Scripture? Prompted by this larger question, the present study analyzes a selection of Yefet’s references to the žāḥir and elucidates his usage of the term within the context of the respective biblical passage. It will be argued that the modern academic ascription of literalism to Yefet’s work cannot consistently be linked to his use of the Arabic žāḥir.

Introduction

The past decades have witnessed an efflorescence of scholarly research on the tenth-century Karaite exegete Yefet ben ‘Elī and his work. This shift in academic attention to his written legacy was significantly spurred by the reopening of Russian libraries to Western scholars. In the following period, the availability of valuable Karaite manuscript material provided the basis for a reevaluation of Yefet’s role in the history of Jewish exegesis of the Hebrew Bible. Instead of mainly depicting him as a diligent compiler of previous Jewish interpretive traditions, scholars began to recognize the astonishing scope, as well as the originality of his intellectual heritage.

Zawanowska has pointed out that the extent of attention paid to different parts and stylistic foci of his writings has greatly varied. In terms of biblical books studied by modern scholars, academic rigor has been much more pronounced in the case of Yefet’s commentaries on shorter narrative texts than, for instance, on legislative portions of the Hebrew Bible. Another tendency in academic research may be observed in the recent preponderance for studies on the so-called ‘literal’, ‘literalistic’, or ‘literal-contextual’ approach ascribed to the commentator’s work. This trend is linked to several scholars’ assessment of the ‘literal trend’ as the most notable characteristic of Karaite biblical exegesis in the early classical period in general, as well as the dominant feature of most of Yefet’s commentaries in particular.

These developments have brought up the question whether Yefet uses particular Arabic hermeneutical terms that giving explicit hints at his ‘literalist tendencies. With regard to ‘literalistic’ Judaeo–Arabic exegesis, several prominent analyses of Yefet’s hermeneutics, as well as that of his Rabbanite contemporary Saadia Gaon (d. 942), have pointed to the Arabic participle form

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2 Ibid., 135-36.

3 Ibid., 136-37.


This expression, which is usually translated as ‘outward’, ‘apparent’, ‘external’ or ‘literal’, is widely known from Qur’anic exegesis, and features prominently in the works of medieval Muslim religious scholars such as Ibn Hazm (d. 456/1064), al-Jubbâtî (d. 303/915-16) or al-Ṭabarî (d. 310/923). As part of their exegetical approach, the zâhir enjoys a privileged status and may only be abandoned for a number of specific reasons. This, however, does not imply that all of these exegetes used the term zâhir with the same meaning and implications, which may easily be rendered as the ‘literal’ or ‘plain’ meaning of Scripture. A thorough analysis of the different connotations and cross-religious interpolations that play a role in the usage of the term, thereby also paying significant attention to Yefet’s work, remains a scholarly desideratum.

The aim of the present paper is to take a first step in this direction. This shall be achieved through an analysis of selected passages in Yefet’s commentary work containing explicit references to the zâhir. These passages, taken from his commentaries on the books of Ezekiel, Daniel, and Proverbs, have been chosen on basis of their informative value with regard to Yefet’s understanding of the zâhir, their recurring mention in secondary literature, as well as their availability in edited versions. They will be both analyzed by reading the commentary layer on the backdrop of the Masoretic Text itself and through the lens of prominent strands of its interpretation in the Jewish and Christian traditions. This paper shall provide the starting point for a large-scale study that systematically scans edited versions, as well as continuous manuscript material of Yefet’s commentaries, in order to analyze his usage of the term zâhir in context.

In the following, Yefet’s exposition of his preference for the zâhir, as laid out in his commentaries on the books of Daniel and Ezekiel, will first be presented. Therein, the privileged status he assigns to the zâhir is immediately connected to the legitimate reasons for its abandonment. The paper will then look at Yefet’s understanding of the relation between the zâhir and his concept of scriptural truth as expressed in a passage from the Introduction to his commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy. An analysis of the latter will also serve to set into perspective the hermeneutical terms bâṭin and taʾwil in contradistinction to the zâhir. Lastly, the topic of ‘literalism’ and ‘contextualism’ as analytical categories in modern academic literature will be addressed. Focusing on Sasson’s usage of the terms in relation to the Arabic hermeneutical terminology used by Yefet himself, the hitherto insufficient clarification of the concept of ‘literalism’ in studies on Judaeo-Arabic exegesis will be pointed out.

The zâhir as the Preferred Mode of Exegesis

Yefet ben ʿElī makes several remarks in his works that attest to his preference for the zâhir as the ‘default mode’ of exegesis. This commitment to the ‘apparent’ or ‘plain’ sense of Scripture is established, ex negativo, through the limitation of cases that allow resorting to figurative modes of interpretation. In his commentary on Daniel 11:1, Yefet writes:

>It is not justified to abandon the plain meaning of the text of the words of God or of His prophets, save where the plain meaning is obscure or unacceptable, being contradicted by reason [1] or by (other) unambiguous text [2].

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9 In all instances where references to primary sources are made in the form of English translations produced by other authors, their analysis is still founded on my own reading of the Arabic or Hebrew original.

10 It would be worthwhile to consider modeling such a study on the excellent work by Zawanowska on Yefet’s use of the makhfah (clear, precise) and mursal (unspecified, ambiguous) in the context of the hermeneutical properties of biblical verses. Marzena Zawanowska, “Islamic Exegetical Terms in Yefet ben Eli’s Commentaries on the Holy Scriptures,” Journal of Jewish Studies 64, no. 2 (Autumn 2013): 306–25.


12 Zawanowska, Abraham Narratives, 4, 70–71. Apart from the passages that will be analyzed in the following, Zawanowska also, for instance, reads Yefet’s commentary to Gen. 17:23–27 in this light, see ibid., 71. For the Arabic original see ibid., 126.


A sample page taken from a manuscript copy of Yefet ben Elī's Commentary on Deuteronomy ([10th century]), produced by a later scribe in 1603. The manuscript evinces the typical tripartite structure of Karaite Judaeo-Arabic commentaries: The biblical verse in Hebrew (here: starting in the first line, vocalized) is followed by a Judaeo-Arabic translation and commentary on the respective verse. [LON BL Or. 2479, fol. 49v]

In the following, the commentator expounds on the first case: The category of scriptural expressions whose literal meaning is rejected by reason [1] is concerned with anthropomorphic expressions.15 Firstly, this relates to cases of verbs associated with corporeal actions (e.g., movements such as ascending and descending) being predicated of God [1.1.]. Secondly, a conflict with reason arises if verbs expressing human emotions (e.g., jealousy, joy) are used to describe the heavenly creator [1.2.]. Yefet describes these two types of formulations as metaphors and expansions (al-majż wa-l-ittissā).16 Reason enables men to identify such figurative language and refrain from interpreting it literally.17 Along this line of argument, cases [1.1.] and [1.2.] necessarily open up the possibility of figurative interpretation (ta’wil)18:

>Such texts must therefore be capable of being explained away, and either the noun or the verb shall be interpreted figuratively (yatā awwalū),19

In the case of [1.1.], he proposes to understand the subject of the sentence (i.e., God) as elliptical and thus to interpret it figuratively.20 Reinertion of the supposed…


15. «Ideas repudiated by the reason, are such as God descends, God ascended, etc.; precluded by the reason, because, if we take the verse literally, it follows from it that God must be a material substance, capable of inhabiting places and being in one place more than in another, moving and resting, all qualities of created and finite beings, and He must possess these attributes.» Ibid., 56. Arabic original: Ibid.,157.


17. «The language has employed in such cases metaphors and expansions, because the application of the reason can point them out.» Margoliouth translates here inaccurate expressions instead of expansions. Elī, A Commentary on the Book of Daniel, 56. Arabic original: Ibid.,157.

18. In the context of Yefet's works, the hermeneutical term ta'wil is usually translated as figurative interpretation, indirect interpretation, or non-literal interpretation. This matter will be treated in more detail below. Translation: my own; based on Elī, A Commentary on the Book of Daniel, 56. Arabic original: Ibid.,157.

19. For Yefet's concept of scriptural ellipsis (ihtijār), see Sasson, Yefet Ben 'Elī on the Book of Proverbs, 71–74.21

20. «If the noun is interpreted figuratively, in cases like and God descended, and God ascended, where we affirm the action of the person of whom ascending and descending are attributes; only the person intended is the Angel of God, or the Glory of God or the Apostle of God, with the ellipse of a word.» Elī, A Commentary on the Book of Daniel, 56. Arabic original:157.

21. Ben Shammā’s analysis has shown that Saadīa’s exposition of his exegetical principles, laid out in the Amānūt, contains a very similar line of argument, see Ben-Shammā, “The Tension,” 35.

22. In his paper on literalism as part of Saadīa’s exegetical understanding is corroborated by an explicit note in the work. «Elī, A Commentary on the Book of Daniel, 56. Arabic original: Ibid.,157.

23. «And for his exigencies (of daily life) and his means of subsis…» Ibid., 56. Arabic original: Ibid.,157.


25. In his commentary on Ezek. 17:2, Rashi writes: «[P]ropound a riddle—The
preceeding verse declaring the passage as a riddle (ḥidāh), and as a parable (māšāl):

1 And the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, 2 Son of man, put forth a riddle, and speak a parable unto the house of Israel; 3 And say, Thus saith the Lord GOD; A great eagle with great wings, longwinged, full of feathers, which had divers colours, came unto Lebanon, and took the highest branch of the cedars. (Ezek. 17:1-3, KJV)

The nearer context of the second example equally offers an overt indicator of figuraiive language. Following the expression cited by Yefet (*Behold, I will kindle a fire in thee*, Ezek. 21:3), the Hebrew māšāl (parable) appears in the Masoretic Text. This suggests that the biblical author intended the whole passage to be understood in a figuraiive sense:

47 And say to the forest of the south, Hear the word of the LORD; Thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, I will kindle a fire in thee, and it shall devour every green tree in thee, and every dry tree: the flaming flame shall not be quenched, and all faces from the south to the north shall be burned therein. 48 And all flesh shall see that I the LORD have kindled it: it shall not be quenched. 49 Then said I, Ah Lord GOD! they say of me, Doth he not speak parables? (Ezek. 20:47-49; KJV)

The above examples attest to Yefet’s awareness of Scripture’s use of figuraiive language. The latter, in turn, demands from the exegete to divert from the ḥāthīr.* Stylisitic devices such as metaphors, similes, and allegory may be marked by obvious hints in the context of the passage: Departure from the ḥāthīr is justified in the case of biblical passages wherein similes are indicated by (obvious) hints.*

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We may conclude that Yefet’s exegetical approach entails a significant number of exceptions that allow for non-ḥāthīr interpretation. This has led several scholars to note that his approach may not be termed as rigidly literalistic. A more extensive analysis of relevant passages of his commentary work is needed in order to determine whether he consistently adheres to the hermeneutical criteria presented above. It is worth examining, for instance, whether theological or polemical motivations might cause him to classify expressions as metaphors or similes, even in cases where there are no relevant contextual indicators on that score.

The ḥāthīr in Relation to bāṭin, ta’wil and ēmet

In the Introduction to his commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy, Yefet offers two definitions for the idea of ḥāthīr (Heb. ēmet) in a scriptural context. According to the first definition, truth is equated with the ḥāthīr devoid of any elements of bāṭin. This entails that a particular passage in Scripture may be understood without any interpretation by way of ta’wil. He bases his argument on three verses in the Book of Daniel, which are provided as examples of literal and non-literal speech. The second definition he offers relates to a statement’s compatibility with reason, and thus will not be elaborated on in the present context.
The word truth (ʾēmet) bears two meanings. First, it (the truth) is according to its (the Bible’s) ẓāhir [apparent meaning], devoid of any bāṭin [hidden meaning], as this word possesses a similar meaning when it is said in Daniel {And now will I shew thee the truth.} (Behold, there shall stand up yet three kings in Persia; and the fourth shall be far richer than they all: and by his strength through his riches he shall stir up all against the realm of Grecia.) (Dan 11:2), to wit: And now I will tell you the words according to their ẓāhir [apparent meaning].

For Daniel was listening to things that had taʾwīl [figurative interpretations], like {The ram which thou sawest having two horns are the kings of Media and Persia.} (Dan 8:20) [and four great beasts] came up from the sea, diverse one from another) (Dan 7:3) which he saw. And this time he did not see anything that had taʾwīl [figurative interpretations] and did not hear any speech that bears anything but the ẓāhir [apparent meaning].

In the second half of this passage, Yefet refers to a nocturnal, as well as a diurnal vision of the prophet Daniel. Chapter Seven of the eponymous biblical book gives account of a dream, in which Daniel is confronted with four creatures possessing both animal-like and anthropomorphic characteristics. When Daniel approaches a person to help him understand these surreal events, the Aramaic yassibā, as equivalent of Hebrew ʾēmet, is associated with their correct interpretation:

I came near unto one of them that stood by, and asked him the truth of all this. So he told me, and made me know the interpretation of the things. These great beasts, which are four, are four kings, which shall arise out of the earth. (Dan. 7:16-17, KJV)

In the subsequent chapter, Daniel receives a vision of a ram and a buck entering a fight. We are informed that the former possesses two horns, while the latter is equipped with one horn located between his eyes. Despite his seeming physical disadvantage, the buck smites the ram and destroys his horn. The buck’s horn then breaks and makes way to four large and one small horn. The events narrated, here again, clearly defy the natural principles of reality. Yet Daniel is able to make sense of them by means of the interpretation delivered by the angel Gabriel:

53 Translation: my own; cf. Ibid., 69; parts in braces are translations of Hebrew quotations in Yefet’s Arabic commentary. Arabic original: Ibid., 69, no. 33.
54 “Therefore he the goat waxed very great; and when he was strong, the great horn was broken; and for it came up four notable ones toward the four winds of heaven. And out of one of them came forth a little horn, which waxed exceeding great, toward the south, and toward the east, and toward the pleasant land. And it waxed great, even to the host of heaven; and it cast down some of the host and of the stars to the ground, and stamped upon them.” (Dan. 8:10, KJV)
55 Dan. 8:21-22 continue as follows: “And the rough goat is the king of Grecia: and the great horn that is between his eyes is the first king. Now

From this commentary, one may gather why »Daniel [here] was listening to things that had taʾwīlāt: According to Yefet, the interpretation that Gabriel offers makes use of figurative language indicative of another layer of meaning. The number of horns shall be interpreted in order to understand the biblical author’s statement about the power of these two empires.

In the first verse cited in the Introduction to Deuteronomy (Dan. 11:2), the angel Gabriel abstains from this stylistic device and instead informs Daniel in entirely plain speech:

57 From Yefet’s Introduction to the Commentary on Deuteronomy, see above. Translation: my own; cf. Zawanowska, Abraham Narratives, 69. Arabic original: Ibid., 69, no. 33.

And now will I shew thee the truth. Behold, there shall stand up yet three kings in Persia; and the fourth shall be far richer than they all: and by his strength through his
riches he shall stir up all against the realm of Grecia." (Dan. 11:2, KJV)

Along Yefet’s line of argument, the term ‘truth’ (ḥaṭāʾīla) here functions not as an antonym to concepts such as falsehood, lie or deception, but to the use of allegorical speech. Telling the truth, in other words, means speaking to the addressee in plain Hebrew.

With regard to Yefet’s usage of the term zāhīr, we may therefore conclude the following: The zāhīr relates to the meaning of a statement which the reader/listener may decode without understanding any of the words as indicators of other objects not explicitly mentioned. The antonym of the zāhīr is defined as the bāṭīn. Tāwil, in turn, functions as the appropriate mode of exegesis applied to statements containing bāṭīn.

Overall, Zawanowska has shown that Yefet does not consistently use the terms tāwil and tafsīr to only designate modes of exegesis, while zāhīr and bāṭīn are reserved for the specific layers of meaning of a linguistic expression. At times, the Karaite also makes use of tāwil as an antonym to zāhīr, blurring the line to the bāṭīn. This indicates that, as part of Yefet’s work, these terms may not be understood as clear-cut termini technici; rather, they may be described as borrowings from an existing Arabic literary tradition which he readily adjusts to his own exegetical agenda, as well as to the nuanced demands of particular biblical passages.

The Tension between Literal and Contextual Interpretation

The Karaite exegetical approach, as well as Yefet ben ‘Elī’s in particular, have repeatedly been described as ‘literalistic’, as well as ‘contextual’. These attributes are often further combined with the ascription of a rationalistic and philologically-grounded approach. Referring to these terms, as commonly used in modern academic literature, this paper argues that Yefet’s inclination towards either of the two former poles (literalism/contextualism) is fluid and dependent on the demands of particular biblical passages. At the same time, the two English terms are neither in all cases clearly defined by individual scholars nor consistently used across the academic literature. The exegetical term of the zāhīr, as employed by Yefet, may not be generally identified with either one of them. This shall be shown, by way of example, through an examination of Yefet’s commentary on Proverbs 18:22-19:2, as well as Sasson’s analysis of the commentator’s hermeneutic.

In her thorough study of Yefet’s commentary on the book of Proverbs, Sasson dedicates a whole chapter to the discussion of the commentator’s hermeneutical scheme. Therein, she postulates a number of principles in order to point out overarching trends in Yefet’s way of approaching the scriptural text. The term juxtaposition is brought into play to describe Yefet’s tendency to identify a logical reason behind the arrangement of biblical passages. In her discussion of this principle, Sasson includes an important terminological distinction established by Yefet himself: At times, the commentator differentiates between the zāhīr and the nizām, or nizāmīhī ma’nā of a verse without overtly rejecting either version. Sasson translates these terms as the plain meaning and the contextual meaning. She regularly uses these, or synonymous, expressions to refer to the hermeneutical terminology rooted in the Arabic text. However, a close reading yields that her use of the relevant English vocabulary is not restricted to such an indexical function. By implication, it also serves to incorporate a modern reading of the biblical text itself.

Yefet’s commentary on Proverbs 18:22-19:2 provides important indications of the commentator’s usage of the term zāhīr in contradistinction to nizāmīhī ma’nā. Yefet interprets the whole passage of the verses 18:22-19:2 as addressing the topic of marriage, more specifically the choice of a wife and the correct molding of inter-marital sexual relations. In the first verse of the passage, Yefet does not distinguish between the two different realms of the text (the zāhīr vs. the nizāmīhī ma’nā), but only offers one interpretation:

»He says ‘he who finds a suitable wife’ in order to assert that it is the obligation of every person to search for the one who is appropriate for him with regard to both his spiritual and worldly life. For a man’s religious and world-

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42 The term tafsīr is traditionally used in the Arabic-Islamic tradition to refer to Qur’anic commentary and interpretation, both as a process or method and as a literary genre. Medieval Jewish commentators writing in the Arabic language, such as Yefet ben ‘Elī and Stadia Gaon, adopted the term for the designation of biblical commentaries and translations, as well as for the process of biblical interpretation. As Rippin has pointed out, in the first three Islamic centuries, there appears to be no clear differentiation between the terms tafsīr and tāwil. In later centuries, the term tāwil becomes more developed and in a narrow sense denotes interpretation based on the bāṭīn (inner meaning) of a scriptural passage. See Andrew Rippin, ‘Tafsīr’, in Encyclopaedia of Islam 2 Online, ed. P. Bearman et al., accessed December 4, 2020, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-9121.islam_SIM_7294.

43 Zawanowska, “Islamic exegetical terms,” 323, no. 65.

44 Compare for Zawanowska’s analysis of a similar tendency of Yefet’s with regard to his usage of the terms muḥkam and mursal: Ibid., 320-21.

45 Some important contributions to the analysis of Karaite exegetical hermeneutics in the early classical period, and Yefet’s in particular: Wechsler, Yefet ben ‘Elī on the Book of Esther, 14-18; Fränkel, Search Scripture Well, 1; Zawanowska, Abraham Narratives, 72; Pulliaik, Karaite Tradition, 39; Sasson, “Book of Proverbs,” 160.

46 Sasson, Yefet ben ‘Elī on the Book of Proverbs, 40-82.

47 Ibid., 43-44.

48 See also Zawanowska’s analysis of contextualism as a characteristic of Yefet’s translation technique. Herein she also refers to nizām al-balām, a related hermeneutical term, Zawanowska, Abraham Narratives, 163-64. See also Ibid., 164, no. 28.

49 At time Yefet’s adherence to the principle of thematic juxtaposition seems stretched. This is especially noticeable when his understanding of one verse is motivated by the meaning of a juxtaposed verse even if the plain meaning of the two does not support such an interpretation. In such cases Yefet distinguishes between the plain meaning (al-zāhīr) and what he labels as the contextual (bi nizāmīhī) meaning. Sasson, Yefet ben ‘Elī on the Book of Proverbs, 43-44.
ly affairs depend upon his wife. It is therefore the obligation of a man to examine her background before he marries her, and once he finds what he wants he will obtain goodness. His (i.e., the author[s]) saying "obtains favor" is similar to "it is not good for man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18). For, when one marries ēshet hayāl (a woman of good judgment) he obtains ṣāf (favor) which is ṣāf (good) both from spiritual and worldly points of view [...]."\(^{50}\)

As demonstrated above, Yefet repeatedly mentions in his work the idea that the ẓāhir functions as the "default mode" of exegesis. It can thus be assumed that the interpretation at hand represents the understanding of the verse according to the ẓāhir.

An important component of Yefet's notion of the ẓāhir is his conception of the biblical text as composed in ordinary human language.\(^{51}\) A possible definition of literalism may thus entail the correspondence of a lexeme's meaning in a particular biblical passage with its ordinary, coined meaning in the Hebrew language.\(^{52}\) With regard to the present verse, we are able to establish that this holds true, for instance, for Yefet's treatment of the words īṣāḥ (woman) and ṭāṣā (finds). The commentator takes these as immediate indicators of the topic treated in the present verse, which he identifies as the process of finding a woman (to marry). This reveals that Yefet's understanding of the ẓāhir does not preclude an inference from context. Just as ordinary human communication relies on contextual information, the reader of the biblical text understands a passage through his knowledge of its context.\(^{53}\) From Yefet's commentary it may be gathered that he deemed it to be "apparent" that this statement was situated in the realm of marital relations. Sasson describes Yefet's commentary on Proverbs 18:22 as "guided by the plain meaning of the verse."\(^{54}\) We may thus conclude that she also regards a contextual approach as being in accordance with a tendency towards exegetical literalism.\(^{55}\)


51 Sasson, Yefet ben 'Eli on the Book of Proverbs, 40; Cf. Wechsler, Yefet ben 'Eli on the Book of Esther, 15-17.

52 The ordinary, coined meaning in the Hebrew language in this case is defined as Yefet's idea of a such, based on his knowledge of biblical literature and the usage of Hebrew as a scholarly language in his days.

53 In his paper on conceptions of the literal sense (ẓāhir, ḥaqīqa) in Muslim interpretative thought, Robert Gleave demonstrates the integral role of conversational context in Muslim legal hermeneutics by reading a ḥāidith and its legal implications through the lens of Paul Grice's modern pragmatic theory of conversational implicature. As part of future studies, it might also be worthwhile to apply modern pragmatic theories on conversational contexts to the hermeneutical approach of Yefet and other Judaeo-Arabic exegetes. Gleave, "Conceptions," 186-87.

54 Sasson, Yefet ben 'Eli on the Book of Proverbs, 44.

55 In her discussion of Karaita hermeneutics, Sasson equally equates the terms "litera", "apparent", and "plain meaning", see Ibid., 58.

56 Cf. Wechsler, Yefet ben 'Eli on the Book of Esther, 15. Yefet's clear devotion—like that of his coreligionists—to a hermeneutic focused upon the words (al-faṣl) or text (ṭext) of Scripture should not, however, be taken to reflect, as it occasionally has been by the Arabic heresiographers (vis-à-vis the Karaites generally), a hermeneutic which is rigidly literalistic, and so preclusive of ijtihād or, as the method is otherwise designated, qiyās (analogical or deductive reasoning)."


Hebrew text. This again supports the thesis that Yefet’s notion of the zāhir is not in contradiction to inference by context. Sasson’s evaluation of the commentary reveals that the same holds true for her conception of literalism: »[He] first gives the literal meaning of the verse (al-zāhir), which pertains to the relationship and power play between the poor and the rich.«

However, Yefet also includes a second possible understanding as fi nizāmihī maʿnā. This interpretation reads the content of this verse through the lens of its predecessor. It is based on the assumption of a contingent topic spanning the whole passage of Proverbs 18:22-19:2. The statement on the differences and power relations between rich and poor is thus related to the process of finding the right match for marriage. Both for the medieval and the modern author, this mode of interpretation represents a departure from the zāhir and the literal meaning, respectively. On the basis of Yefet’s parallel implementation of these two possible hermeneutical approaches we may conclude that he did not regard them as mutually contradictory. It is likely that, according to him, the primary intention of the biblical author is still to be found in the zāhir. Referring amongst others, to the present verse, Sasson on the other hand regards such an attempt at establishing a coherent topic as »stretched«.

In contradistinction to the previous verse, Yefet reads Proverbs 18:24 exclusively within the context of the topic of marriage as introduced in Proverbs 18:22:

»This verse speaks about a man who thinks about what will happen to him by (marrying) a woman. So he says to himself: Why should I marry a woman whose circumstances with regard to her religion, her manners, her intellect and her resoluteness I do not know. I might bring upon myself harm from which I will not be delivered. So it is best for me to acquire a friend who will be with me in hard times and whose circumstances I know. This is better for me than something hidden and concealed.« So the wise sage (Salomon) says to him: »He who takes for him a friend for his exigencies (of daily life) and his means of subsistence, he will always be in need for a friend, for it will always be difficult for him to find one to his liking. So perhaps there is a friend who sticks to (that) person more than a brother, in good as in evil, and who does not part from him, but forms a partnership with him in all his conditions (in life). So you, too, if you do not want to run the risk of marrying a woman out of fear of not finding the right one, so this, too, will catch up with you (in the case of) the friend and the companion.« So he (the biblical author) explains that taking a wife (in marriage) is more pious, as she is appropriate for things for which the friend is not appropriate.«

The commentator refrains from describing this interpretation as fi nizāmihī maʿnā. One possible explanation is that he regarded his commentary as being based on the zāhir. Another possible understanding of his hermeneutical entails that nizāmihī maʿnā for Yefet did not function as a terminus technicus, but merely as a further description of the peculiarities of the zāhir. Both possibilities stress the strong contextual approach that Yefet applies.

For an analysis of the recurring ascription of literalism to Yefet’s exegesis, this verse is crucial. In this regard, Sasson writes:

»The plain meaning of the following verse »There are companions to keep one company, and there is a friend more devoted than a brother:« is about friendship and the comparison between a friend and a kin. There is no overt indication that this verse treats the topic of marriage. Even though Yefet addresses the plain meaning of this verse, namely friendship, he steers his discussion once again towards the topic of marriage arguing that this verse speaks of the man who avoids marriage out of fear of failure to find the right match.«

This shows that she does not, in all cases, identify the zāhir with the »true« literal meaning of a verse. Instead, 

60 At times Yefet’s adherence to the principle of thematic juxtaposition seems stretched.» Sasson, Yefet ben ‘Eli on the Book of Proverbs, 43.
61 English translation of commentary: my own, partly based on Sasson’s; cf. Sasson, “Gender Equality,” 71-72. Arabic original: Ibid., 70. Biblical passage. Yefet comments upon (Prov. 18:24, KJV): »A man that hath friends must shew himself friendly, and there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother.« Yefet’s Arabic translation of Prov. 18:24: Ibid., 70. English translation of Yefet’s Arabic translation of Prov. 18:24: »A man of friends keeps friendship, and there is one who loves and adheres more than a brother.« Ibid., 71.
62 In her analysis of Yefet’s usage of the hermeneutical terms mukham and mutashābīh. Rather, he skillfully varies his hermeneutic vocabulary, each time enlisting a different term to convey precisely the subtlest shades of meaning which he wishes to express. In this way, he treats the ready-made exegetical terms from the existing Arabic repository at this disposal not as mere labels, which one could more or less automatically assign to different scriptural passages comprising interpretive cruxes or theological conundrums.» Zawanowska, “Islamic exegetical terms,” 320.
the modern scholar draws on her own understanding of what constitutes an `overt indication' of the topic of a biblical passage. This is further corroborated by Sasson's overall remark on Yefet's `principle of juxtaposition'.

Two interconnected points can be inferred from the above analysis of Yefet's commentary on Proverbs 18:22-18:24 as well as Sasson's examination thereof. Drawing upon the analytical terminology of modern scholars, such as Polliack, Zawanowska, and Sasson, Yefet's comment on the pericope is indicative of both the tendencies of `literalism' and `contextualism' as the dominant characteristics of his exegetical approach. In the present biblical passage, his emphasis on the role of context for establishing the correct meaning of Scripture, expressed by his repeated recurrence to the niẓāmihi ma'ānā, is particularly strong. The passage therefore underscores Polliack's evaluation that the `literal trend (of Karaite exegesis) becomes the dominant feature of most of Yefet's commentaries.' Yet at the same time, it also attests to Zawanowska's remark that Yefet's `limited literalistic approach [...] does not [...] imply a slavish reliance on the literal meaning of particular words and expressions irrespective of their context.'

The preceding analysis has further revealed that caution should be exercised in identifying the criterion of literalism with Yefet's term of the zāhir. Sasson's analysis of Proverbs 18:22-19:2, and her remark on Proverbs 18:24, in particular, have shown that the English terms `literal' and `literalism' not only serve as translations of the relevant Arabic hermeneutical terminology. Rather, they may also communicate an author's response to the vague question of whether a biblical passage `actually means what it says'.

In his paper on literalism as part of Saadia's exegetical approach, Ben-Shammai remarks that `[t]he term `literal' may be understood in different ways. It is used in the title `The Tension between Literal Interpretation and Exegetical Freedom' as a convenient convention, and the terms and concepts relevant to Saadia in relation to that convention will be discussed.'

We may thus conclude that in working with secondary literature on Yefet, as well, we should expect to encounter such a usage of the term as a `convenient convention'. In order to accurately analyze Yefet's hermeneutics, a discussion that remains close to the primary source text, and the Arabic exegetical terminology used therein, constitutes an indispensable prerequisite.

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**Conclusion**

The preceding chapters have presented a preliminary outline of Yefet ben 'Eli's usage of the term zāhir in his exegetical work, as well as its relation to the modern analytical categories of `literalism' and `contextualism'. This has been achieved through an analysis of a small number of significant passages taken from his abundant extent writings. These contain, for one thing, statements on his general methodology incorporated into his commentaries on single verses. Moreover, commentaries in which he distinguishes between interpretations ala al-zāhir and niẓāmihi ma'ānā have served to elucidate the usage of the two terms in contrastdictin and to each other.

This small-scale study has allowed to further substantiate a number of claims that have already been presented in secondary literature over the course of the past three decades. These claims concern, among others, Yefet's preference for the zāhir as the customary mode of exegesis. A close reading of the primary sources has succeeded in further clarifying the nuanced exceptions Yefet presents to this tendency. These have been shown to bear significant resemblance to those of Saadia Gaon as analyzed by Ben-Shammai.

Furthermore, an inquiry into the relationship between zāhir and ēmet has corroborated Zawanowska's claim of a close link between Yefet's concept of truth and the hermeneutical term in question. The same holds true for Yefet's usage of the terms zāhir and bāṭin. As Zawanowska has already pointed out, these are juxtaposed, yet not formally construed as antonyms. At times, Yefet also employs the hermeneutical categories of bāṭin and ta’wil interchangeably. On the other hand, paying close attention to the context of the relevant passage in the book of Daniel, a simple equation between truth and the zāhir turns out to be ill-advised; rather we are given arguments in favor of a possible understanding of the zāhir as `plain speech'.

With regard to suitable translations of the word zāhir, as well as adequate analytical categories to describe Yefet's hermeneutical approach, the present paper has pointed out insufficiencies in hitherto academic study. With respect to the commentary layer, the criterion of `literalism' and its relation to `contextualism' remain barely clarified in secondary literature. Yefet's structurally imitative tendencies in the realm of Judaeo-Arabic translation have already been subjected to close scrutiny over the past decades. With the tools of (Semitic)

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64 See above, note 60.
65 While only Prov. 18:22-24 are presented in detail in this chapter, Sasson's analysis addresses the whole passage of Prov. 18:22-19:2. Yefet's hermeneutical approach with regard to the remaining two verses has equally been taken into consideration in my evaluation presented above.
66 Polliack, Karaite Tradition, 39.
67 Zawanowska, Abraham Narratives, 72, Italics added by me.
68 Ben-Shammai, `The Tension,' 33.
69 Zawanowska, Abraham Narratives, 69.

philology, scholars have accurately analyzed aspects of the resemblance between the source and the target text, composed in two cognate languages. The question of whether the meanings of two texts coincide, however, raises an intricate set of questions that touches upon the fields of pragmatics and the philosophy of language.

It has become a common scholarly locus to note that every translation also represents an interpretation. In other words: the meaning of a text in one language may not be identically reproduced in another language, perhaps not even in a second linguistic expression in the same language. Yet in the realm of Judeo-Arabic exegesis, this general hermeneutical crux of human communication has only been insufficiently addressed. Through an exhaustive analysis of the zāhir as employed by prominent Judeo-Arabic exegetes, we might be able to demonstrate both a shared basic understanding of what makes up a ›literal reading‹ of Scripture, as well as its ultimate relativity.

Bibliography


