

Between History and Theology: Text and Metatext in Jewish Historical Writing

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■ Abstract

Jewish Hebrew writings spanning the Middle Ages to Modern times across multiple genres frequently include a large number of biblical quotations, often merged semantically and syntactically with the original material. This biblical metatext—mostly employed through metaphors, allusions and allegories—serves as a literary device, fulfils an aesthetic function, and endows the text with didactical, historiosophical or theological depth. This article will focus on the influence of this metatext in Hebrew chronicles from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries and will examine cases where it demonstrates a specific type of historical thought, reflective of certain theological perceptions. The article will outline a tentative model of the phenomenon of biblical metatext through its cultural and social functions in traditional Jewish culture. Presenting this phenomenon as an “open work”—a concept developed by Umberto Eco—enables us to more clearly analyze the interaction between author and reader, as well as their creative process.

■ Keywords

theology, historical consciousness, Jewish historical chronicles, biblical metatext, Umberto Eco’s “open work,” allegory, allosemy

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For the whole sensible world is like a kind of book written by the finger of God—that is, created by divine power—and each particular creature is somewhat like a figure, not invented by human decision, but instituted by the divine will to manifest the invisible things of God’s wisdom.
(Hugh of St. Victor, *De Tribus Diebus* 4.3)¹

■ Introduction

One unique feature of traditional Jewish Hebrew texts from a multitude of time periods is that they usually consist of up to twenty percent interposed biblical (and sometimes Talmudic) quotations. These quotations appear in liturgical and profane poetry, in private letters, in exegetical and legal literature, and in various additional literary genres. This phenomenon of allosemic appropriation² has drawn the attention of scholars in the sphere of literary research, especially for poetical texts from the early Middle Ages to the early Modern period. These studies focus on the methods of appropriation of biblical quotations, their aesthetic functions and effects, and technical ornamental devices.³ However, this biblical metatext has almost never been investigated in Hebrew historical texts, where a different research method is required.⁴ The wide utilization of the biblical metatext in the form of allosemic appropriation in historical texts, as well as the implications of its use, can be of interest to scholars of religious studies and literature, historians, and anthropologists. However, historians have tended to analyze chronicles and other historical texts primarily as sources of purely historical data, while literary research has rarely dealt with these texts, leaving them to historians.

The biblically-derived metatext in historical writings can reflect the traditional Jewish attitude toward historical events and figures as evolving in accordance with patterns laid out in the Bible, including the *dramatis personae* in a historical text exhibiting the behaviors and traits of scriptural heroes. Such appropriation frequently turns the use of oft-repeated quotes into stereotypical cultural paradigms when, for instance, every oppressor is called Haman (from the Book of Esther),

¹ *Trinity and Creation: A Selection of Works of Hugh, Richard and Adam of St Victor, Victorine Texts in Translation* (ed. Boyd T. Coolman and Dale M. Coulter; Turnhout: Brepols. 2010) 63.

² Intertextual appropriations from the Bible, creating multiple meanings in the text; called *shibbutš* in Hebrew.

³ See, for instance, Shulamit Elizur, “The Rise and Development of the Resignified and Allosemic Appropriations: From Piyyut in Eretz Israel to the Mahbarot of Immanuel of Rome,” in *Shirat Dvora: Essays in Honor of Professor Dvora Bregman* (ed. Haviva Ishay; Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University, 2019) 1–28 (Hebrew); Chanan Ariel, “The Allosemic Appropriation in the Introduction by Rabbi Chaim Yosef David Azulai (Ha-Hida),” *Carmillim for the Study of Hebrew and Related Languages* 14 (2019–2021) 57–102 (Hebrew); Avi Shmidman, “Intertextual Supplications in the Liturgical Poetry of Yehuda Halevi,” *Frankfurt Jewish Studies Bulletin* 38 (2013) 25–48; Shulamit Elizur, “The Use of Biblical Verses in Hebrew Liturgical Poetry,” *Prayers that Cite Scripture* (ed. James L. Kugel; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006) 83–100.

⁴ See initial analyses of this phenomenon, Golda Akhiezer, *Historical Consciousness, Haskalah, and Nationalism among the Karaites of Eastern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2018) 187–89.

every Muslim (or Muslims in general) is referred to as Ishmael, and a war between great empires is labeled a war of Gog and Magog (which, according to Ezek 38–39, will precede the messianic redemption). In other cases, conversely, certain quotations can add depth to the text and bestow upon it a specific didactic, theological, or historiosophic meaning. Although for chroniclers, historical events are often subjected to accustomed theological paradigms that are appropriated as much as possible from similar biblical plots and personages, this does not mean that all biblical citations add a theological insight to a chronicle simply because they are derived from the Bible. However, this article focuses specifically on the theological meanings evinced in a historical text through the biblical metatext. Among these implied theological meanings we find themes of divine providence and justice, the role of the individual and of the people of Israel in historical processes, the meaning of the exile (*galut*), and more.

Analyzing this metatext in Hebrew historical writings, especially chronicles, is regarded as especially challenging, because such quotations have a significant influence on perceptions of the text's structure and historical accuracy. Allosemic appropriation in historical texts can fulfill a number of functions, some of which are interlocking, such as the melding of theological messaging with didactic and communicative interplay between author and reader. The authors perform the function of interpreters of the divine laws beyond the historical events and everyday life, while conveying certain theological or moral messages through the use of biblical quotations as an instrument for their interpretation.

This article will outline a tentative model for allosemic appropriation of biblical metatext in Jewish historical writings, demonstrating its manifestations through distinctive characteristics and functions. This model will be presented through selected examples of Hebrew historical texts from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. Among examples of this trend, we find the attribution of characteristics of biblical figures to participants in described events and the substitution of historical facts with biblical narratives, when the quotations appear to serve as metaphorical and allegorical tools based on the relevant biblical paradigms. Presenting this phenomenon as an “open work” (a text open for numerous interpretations on different levels, both for an author and a reader)—a concept developed by Umberto Eco—enables us to more clearly analyze the interaction between author and reader, as well as their creative process.

■ Jewish Historical Writing and Its Critics

The historical Jewish texts of the post-biblical period differ greatly from classical Greek treatises (such as those of Herodotus or Thucydides), as well as from the modern concept of historiography. These Jewish texts contain numerous historical events, narratives and tales, both real and imagined. They mostly have a fragmentary character, simply intended to illustrate certain legal or ethical issues. Simultaneously, Jewish historical writing exhibits a level of awareness concerning the meaning of

history. This writing can be described as the history of theophany—of the relations between the people of Israel and their deity, and of the interactions of Israel with other peoples. The early medieval rabbinic literature also contains a historical genre called the “chain of tradition”—the transmission of the unbroken chain of religious heritage from one generation to the next.⁵

The Modern period—when a significant number of chronicles were composed—brought with it historiographical and historiosophical innovations in Jewish historical consciousness and its documentation. Several of these new treatises appeared as reflections on the expulsions of Jews from Spain (1492) and the destruction of Spanish-Portuguese Jewry, with attempts to understand the theological meaning of the large-scale crises of the age by addressing the theological purpose of history and the place of the Jews within it.⁶ They attach great importance to the events of later Jewish history, shifting from the prior emphasis on scriptural times and on the Second Temple period (which were presented by previous authors as the Jewish Golden Age). They also manifest an interest in the history of other peoples as part of efforts to fit the Jewish narrative into the framework of world history.⁷ These writings provide a nascent critical historiographical and scientific perspective and include the first autobiographies—a genre most uncommon in previous Jewish literature.⁸ These important developments, however, do not displace (at least up to the period of the Enlightenment)⁹ the basic established theological approach, which exhibits a Judeo-centric view of history.

⁵ Called in Hebrew “*shalsholet ha-qabbalah*.” Kabbalah is the transmitted tradition of any kind in Judaism (the meaning of its root—q'b'l—in Hebrew is “to receive”). Golda Akhiezer, “From Scripturalism to the ‘Chain of Tradition’: Between Rabbanite and Karaite Judaism,” *Religions* 13.2 (2022) 130, <https://doi.org/10.3390/REL13020130>.

⁶ Among these new texts were Ibn Verga’s *The Tribe of Judah (Shevet Yehudah)*, on the Jews’ tribulations and expulsions from various lands, with an inquiry into the phenomenon of the Jewish exile (*galut*); Joseph ben Joshua ha-Kohen’s *Chronicles of the Kings of France and the Kings of the Ottoman Dynasty (Sefer Divrei ha-Yamim le-Malkhei Sharfat u-Malkhei Beit 'Otoman ha-Tugar)*, which describes the Rhineland massacres of 1096, the libels against Jews, the Prague Massacre of 1389, events of European history, and the expulsion from Spain. See *Expulsion 1492 Chronicles: An Anthology of Medieval Chronicles Relating to the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain and Portugal* (ed. David Raphael; North Hollywood: Carmi House Press, 1992).

⁷ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Washington: University of Washington Press, 1982) 62–63.

⁸ See especially the authors who were impacted by the spirit of the Italian Renaissance: ‘Azariah de’ Rossi, *Light of the Eyes (Sefer Me’or 'Enayim)*, in *Kitvei 'Azarya de Rossi* (ed. Reuven Bonfil; Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1991). De’ Rossi turned to historical criticism and adopted a scientific approach in analyzing texts. See also the collection of works by Leon Modena: *The Autobiography of a Seventeenth-Century Venetian Rabbi: Leon Modena’s ‘Life of Judah’* (ed. and trans. Mark R. Cohen; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

⁹ On the changes of Jewish perception of history in the period of the Enlightenment, see Shmuel Feiner, Chaya Naor, Sondra Silverston, *Haskalah and History: The Emergence of a Modern Jewish Historical Consciousness* (Liverpool: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2002); Michael Meyer, “The Emergence of Modern Jewish Historiography: Motives and Motifs,” *History and Theory* 27 (1988) 160–75.

The advent of the late-twentieth century led to numerous studies on Jewish historical writing and memory,¹⁰ as well as fierce debates on the extent to which Jewish historiography was truly historical. Y. H. Yerushalmi, in his classic work, *Zakhor*, claims that generally, Jews displayed no particular preoccupation with history, as expressed by various rabbinic commentaries and legal rulings circumscribing the reading of historical literature, either Jewish or general. According to Yerushalmi, even if some biblical books are relatively historical enough to serve modern scholars, this is not the case for rabbinic sources, which are abundant in anachronisms¹¹ and indifferent to the details of historical events.¹² In his eyes, the historical literature that emerged in the sixteenth century, despite all of its above mentioned novelties, “never reached the level of critical insight to be found in the best of general historical scholarship contemporary with it.”¹³

Jacob Neusner expresses an even more critical position toward Jewish historical writing than Yerushalmi, especially regarding rabbinic literature as a manifestation of the “paradigmatic mode of thinking,” which in his view does not conform with historical thought:

In the paradigmatic mode of thinking about the social order, the categories of the past, present, and future, singular event and particular life all prove useless. In their place come the categories defined by the actions and attitudes of paradigmatic persons . . . places . . . or occasions. We identify a happening not by its consequence (“historical”) but by its conformity to the appropriate paradigm. . . . Great empires do not make history; they fit a pattern. What they do does not designate an event; it merely provides a datum for classification within the pattern.¹⁴

Neusner views this “paradigmatic way of thinking” as a mechanical substitution of certain biblical patterns for particular events and occurrences, as expressed through biblical quotations. He further identifies this phenomenon as the underlying reason for the lack of historical thought among traditional Jewish scholars.¹⁵

Despite the emergence of numerous studies on Jewish historiography, the phenomenon of biblical citations, as well as the related use of metaphorical and allegorical tropes (with the exception of Yerushalmi’s and Neusner’s critique as evidence of a lack of historical thought) has not been the object of scholarly analyses. There is an interesting insight by Meira Polliack on the historicization of

¹⁰ It is impossible to cover all of these studies in this article. See, for instance, Robert Bonfil, “Jewish Attitudes toward History and Historical Writing in Premodern Times,” *Jewish History* 11.1 (1997) 7–40; Moshe Rosman, *How Jewish is Jewish History* (The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization; Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007).

¹¹ Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 17–18.

¹² *Ibid.*, 21.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁴ Jacob Neusner, “Why No History in Rabbinic Judaism? Yerushalmi’s *Zakhor* Revisited,” *The Annual of Rabbinic Judaism: Ancient, Medieval and Modern* 1 (1998) 153–75, esp. 160–61.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 166.

the words of biblical prophets by the tenth-century Jewish-Karaite exegete Yefet ben Eli, who strengthens his polemical arguments by associating these words with actual events.¹⁶ However, the phenomenon and the methods of the “biblicization” of actual historical events and figures in Jewish historical writings has rarely won scholarly attention.

Amos Funkenstein references the phenomenon of historicization in traditional Jewish texts of various genres. According to him, the Bible, as well as the later Jewish literature—the Talmud, Midrash, and medieval exegesis—expresses a historical consciousness rooted in the foundation of Judaism.¹⁷ He claims that the Jewish historicist approach developed during the ancient period as a result of the Jewish need to interpret various theological aspects of their existence (such as fulfilling the commandments, exiles, or persecutions) by formulating historical arguments about such matters, as well as about their difference from non-Jews. This process intensified during the Middle Ages, to a large extent in the course of religious polemics (especially against Christianity).¹⁸ Funkenstein demonstrates the manifestation of historical conciseness in the theological, legal and social realms (including exegesis, kabbalistic commentaries, messianic conceptions, and legal issues), as well as the close link between historicism and theology, thereby providing a foundational basis for research and understanding of the role of biblical metatext in Jewish historical writing. However, he does not aim at analyzing the specific textual structure of incorporating within Jewish historical texts a biblical metatext and associated devices at the morphological and semantical level.

■ Genre Characteristics of Chronographical Texts

The chronographical genre, as less anchored in Jewish tradition and thus unfettered by a pre-existing canon, is not governed by strict models and rules of writing, such as those that typically bound court chroniclers in the Christian or Muslim world. This does not mean that no Jewish chronicler used available texts of this genre as a model; simply that this genre permitted the author greater freedom of expression than traditional, more fully formed genres, such as exegesis or legal works. At the same time, various rabbinic comments and rulings cautioned against the writing of, and sometimes the reading of historical texts, even defining it as *bitul Torah* (wasting time intended for the learning of Torah).¹⁹ Therefore, authors of any new works had to justify their products, typically claiming that they, being “a worm, not a man” did not seek to say anything novel or previously unheard that might

¹⁶ Meira Polliack, “Historicizing Prophetic Literature: Yefet ben ‘Eli’s Commentary on Hosea and Its Relationship to al-Qūmisī’s *Pitrōn*,” *Pesher Naḥum: Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature from Antiquity through the Middle Ages* (ed. Joel L. Kraemer and Michael G. Wechsler; Chicago: University of Chicago, 2011) 149–87, at 165–66.

¹⁷ Amos Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1993).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 198–201.

¹⁹ For instance, Maimonides claims that the reading of Arab authored historical books is a waste of time. See his introduction to *Pereq Heleq* on m. Sanh. 10:1.

contradict their predecessors.²⁰ The authors would summarize previous works, frequently reiterating them in terms of form, content, and often even conceptually. Their writing novelties were not regarded as *prima facie* of value, but instead would be defended by the authors.

Chronographical writings contain a great range of subjects, including natural disasters, wars, and other upheavals, occurring in both the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds: ethnic conflicts, taxation, prices, details on governmental policy, eyewitness testimonies of various events, and miracle stories. The topics were selected by each of the authors as they saw fit, with personal motivations stemming from intellectual curiosity and the latent desire to express their individuality.

These writings were not addressed to a specific target audience. Readers with a sufficient command of Hebrew enjoyed reading such texts on daily life and broader world events, and these writings apparently served in a similar capacity as both fiction and newspapers (although often providing only very late coverage of events). Many of these texts, especially fragmentary ones, are preserved today only in manuscripts and frequently have no title, introduction or conclusion. These fragmentary records do not necessarily display a coherent and explicit theological tendency; however, in many cases, the biblical metatext can help to identify the theological and historiosophical perspectives of their authors.

Examining chronographical texts enables us to reveal, beyond just the use of this biblical metatext, the influence of biblical quotations on the text's structure and the deeper meaning impressed by authors, as well as their theological views and those concerning the nature and purpose of history.

The practice of freely interposing biblical quotations, which intensified in the early Middle Ages, can still be seen today among religious Jewish authors from all currents of Judaism. This continuing phenomenon reflects the sustainability of specific theological patterns, rather than their belonging to a particular historical period. We chose, as examples, Jewish chronicles and historical accounts from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries—the chronographical genre,²¹ which intends to record historical events as separate texts and not as illustrations of a wider legal or ethical discussion.

■ Structure of the Biblical Metatext in Historical Writings

Within the genres of fictional literature, journalistic pieces and research articles, a metatext may take numerous forms, including notes, explicit authorial references, letters, or direct references to additional texts. However, in Jewish historical writing, the majority of metatext consists of biblical (sometimes Talmudic) quotations. The widespread usage of these quotations and the methods of their incorporation into such chronicles frequently results in issues regarding literal comprehension

²⁰ Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 66–67.

²¹ On the chronographical genre in Jewish literature, see Akhiezer, *Historical Consciousness*, 154–208.

of the main text (pretext)—a complication that is not present to the same extent in other genres of Jewish literature (such as exegesis, legal discussions or liturgical poetry). Unlike other genres, where in most cases there is no difficulty in discerning between the main narrative of events and the metatext, biblical quotations in Jewish chronicles tend to be semantically and even syntactically intermingled in a sentence, mostly without direct reference to the biblical text. Such a structure can be seen, for instance, in the account of an eighteenth century Jewish-Karaite writing on events of the Russian conquest of the Crimean peninsula, when it describes the condition of war victims of the author's community as follows:

We moved from place to place, wandering in all the mountains and hills [in order] to hide there from the . . . evil and cruel enemies, but this did not help us, as "*they surrounded us*" [based on Ps 118:10], and suddenly attacked, looted and plundered us "*leaving neither survivors nor fugitives*" [Josh 8:22] and "*we became spoiled and plundered*" [based on Jer 30:16], and "*no one to rescue us*" [based on Ps 50:22]. . . . "*They dismembered our sucklings and our pregnant women they mercilessly sundered*" [based on Is 13:16; Amos 1:13; 2 Kgs 8:12] and "*there are dead corpses in the streets of the city, and none shall gather them*" [based on Isa 37:36, and Jer 9:22].²²

This example demonstrates the full syntactic incorporation of a biblical metatext in the structure of the pretext. As a result, this metatext indirectly references the main historical narrative about the war without contradicting its central plot, thereby imparting a certain theological gravitas to the described events. The author thus replaces the detailed contemporary events with a biblical metatext. The quotations, taken mostly from the books of prophets, place the contemporary tragic occurrences experienced by the Jewish community within a similar biblical paradigm of divine punishment and foretold persecution of the people of Israel, as described in those books.

The question that arises in case of the allosemic appropriation in historical writings is whether these scenes are instances of figurative imagery, or rather, reflective of actual occurrences of assault, robbery and massacre that occurred in the author's days. Instead of providing a detailed description of the wartime events, the author employs biblically-sourced literary devices to strengthen the reader's conceptualization of the disaster. From this fragment, as well as from numerous other similar texts, we can conclude that among traditional Jewish authors, the precise transmission of the details of an event was frequently a secondary concern to its congruence with a chosen biblical narrative.

It is important to emphasize that identifying this structurally autonomous metatext requires from the reader—beyond a mastery of the Hebrew language—a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures, including the initial context of the biblical

²² A fragment of a letter by a community member from Chufut-Qaleh (in the Crimea) to an unknown recipient. See Jacob Mann, *Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature* (2 vols.; Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press, 1931–1935) 2:459 (here and in further quotations the references to the sources, italics and bracketed content are my own).

quotations used. In addition, accurate analysis of the tropes used (allegories and metaphors of the biblical metatext) necessitates strong abstract thinking skills, the ability to compare contemporary events with biblical patterns and images in order to identify conceptual analogies and other common features shared between them.

The reason behind the common substitution of biblical quotations for detailed description of historical developments may also lie to some extent in the particular cultural-linguistic environment of these authors. Writing such texts in Hebrew, as opposed to their vernacular, may have forced these authors to insert appropriate templates from Scripture, thereby affecting the structure of the text, its content, and its meaning. However, this factor by itself does not explain the obviously theologically-driven aspects of this complex phenomenon, nor the authorial insistence on writing these chronicles in Hebrew instead of their vernacular.

Narrative displacement of factual events by Bible verses, as practiced by chroniclers, creates significant difficulty in comprehending historical texts. Solomon ibn Verga²³ in his chronicle, *The Scepter of Judah* (*Shevet Yehudah*, ca. 1520), depicts the figure of a notable Jewish courtier, Joseph ben Efraim Benvenisti, at the court of King Alfonso: “Joseph had servants, the sons of ministers, who eat from his table, and ‘After this it happened that Absalom provided himself with chariots and horses, and fifty men to run before him.’ [2 Sam 15:1].”²⁴ Here we find Verga replacing concrete details such as Benvenisti’s status, material condition, and even his own name with the incorporation of a passage from 2 Samuel—without appropriating it to the main text.

In the above examples, the authors do not try to demarcate between the picture presented by the prophets in ancient Israel and the details of contemporary events, their minutiae being unimportant for the chroniclers, as if they have already been described in the Scriptures. Instead, the authors wholly replace detailed depictions and interpretations of historical events with established theological paradigms and plotlines, consequently adapting reality to these paradigms as much as possible yet without clearly defining the extent of such and their limits in doing so.

Another factor complicating the comprehension of historical texts is the transfer of features of biblical heroes or situations to real historical events by way of biblical allegories. This can be found, for instance, in the chronicle, *The Vale of Tears* (*‘Emeq ha-Bakha*) by Joseph ben Joshua of Avignon (1496–1578), a history of the Jewish people from the Bar Kokhba revolt (132–135 CE) to the author’s time. The author herein presents the case of the Jewish messianic figure, Solomon Molkho, a Portuguese *converso* who returned to Judaism and was regarded in numerous Jewish communities as a prophetic and even messianic figure.²⁵ Molkho was arrested on

²³ Solomon ibn Verga (1460–before 1520) was a victim of the expulsion from Spain. He fled to Portugal, where he was forcibly baptized, and later moved to Italy.

²⁴ Solomon ibn Verga, *Shevet Yehudah* (Jerusalem: Bnei Yissaschar Institute, 1992) 43 (Hebrew). Here and further I use the New King James Version.

²⁵ About Solomon Molkho see, Moti Benmelech, *The Life and Death of Messiah Ben Joseph* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2007) (Hebrew).

his way to Regensburg, where he intended to speak with the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (possibly about Molkho's messianic mission), and was thrown into jail ("a pit") by imperial order. He was then sentenced to be burned in Rome, but was given a chance to save his life by returning to Christianity. The author, Joseph ben Joshua, depicts the last scene of Molkho's life and his accompanying words through numerous Biblical quotations:

And "*all the city was excited because of*" him [based on Ruth 1:19] and here is burning a fire before him, and one of the king's ministers said . . . The Emperor sent me to tell you . . . if you repent from your way—you will live, and if you will not—"*evil is determined against you*" [based on Esth 7:7].²⁶ But "*he [Molkho] did not stand or tremble before him*" [Esth 5:9].²⁷ And he answered as a holy one, as a divine angel: "My heart is bitter and discontent for those days when I was in that religion,²⁸ and now do what you want, and my soul '*will return to her father's house as in her youth*' [based on Lev 22:13],²⁹ as '*it is better with me than now*' [based on Hos 2:7]."³⁰ And they threw him on the burning woods and sacrificed "*And the Lord smelled a soothing aroma.*" . . . [Gen 8:21]³¹ and gathered his pure soul in his Paradise. Then, many people in Italy believed . . . that R. S. Molkho was saved by his wisdom from those who wanted his soul . . . and the flame did not take hold of his body. Some people "*in the midst of the assembly and congregation*" [Prov 5:14] swore that Solomon appeared in his home for eight days after the burning and then went on his way, and nobody saw him anymore.³²

The author's quotations from the Book of Esther endow Molkho with the features of a biblical hero through a transformation typical of this book's plot, wherein "Haman the evil one" and "Mordechai the righteous" exchange societal positions and status with one another. In identifying Molkho's fate with the one designated for Haman, the author then introduces a reversal of sorts: the minister,

²⁶ See the entire passage: "Then the king arose in his wrath from the banquet of wine and went into the palace garden; but Haman stood before Queen Esther, pleading for his life, for he saw that evil was determined against him by the king" (Esth 7:7).

²⁷ See the entire passage: "So Haman went out that day joyful and with a glad heart; but when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate, and that he did not stand or tremble before him" (Esth 5:9).

²⁸ A reference to when he was forced to convert to Christianity.

²⁹ See the entire passage: "But if the priest's daughter is a widow or divorced, and has no child, and has returned to her father's house as in her youth, she may eat her father's food; but no outsider shall eat it." (Lev 22:13).

³⁰ See the entire passage: "I will go and return to my first husband, for then it was better for me than now" (Hos 2:7).

³¹ The context is Gen 8:20–21: "Then Noah built an altar to the Lord, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And the Lord smelled a soothing aroma." See also "The sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire on the altar, and lay the wood in order on the fire" (Lev 1:7). Possibly the author alludes to the *hatat* (a sin) offering in reference to Molkho's Christian past, see "It is a trespass offering; he has certainly trespassed against the Lord" (Lev 5:19).

³² Joseph ha-Cohen, *Sefer 'Emeq ha-Bakha* (ed. Robert Bonfil; Jerusalem: Magness, 2020) 149–150 (Hebrew).

who suggested his conversion, warns Molkho, in case of refusal, about “a terrible fate” awaiting him, similar to Haman’s (Esth 7:7). However, the next Bible verse quoted by the author, concerning Molkho’s reaction—“he did not rise or tremble” (Esth 5:5)—makes a parallel between Molkho’s features and those of Mordechai’s exemplary image.

Further quotations from Ruth and Proverbs reinforce allegories found appropriate for this event (which occurred in a large city and in the presence of numerous people), including details and concepts appearing in these biblical books. The words based on Ruth 1:19, “all the city was excited,” here replace a detailed depiction of the occurrences in Rome surrounding this tragic event, the reactions of Jews and Christians to Molkho’s death sentence, and further details of his execution. The witnesses of his reported resurrection are also not specified by the author, who instead uses an impersonal expression from Prov 5:14: “[people] in the midst of the assembly and congregation,” that is, “publicly” in a biblical context.

The biblical metatext here closely mirrors the pattern found in many other chronicles, usually presented through literary devices—mostly allegories, but also through metaphors and allusions. As we can see in this passage, the verse from Lev 22:13 serves as an allegory, with the return to God of Molkho’s soul being likened to a priest’s (*cohen*) daughter, who returns to her father’s home to enjoy the eating of sacrifices (as she did before her married status). The citation from Hosea adds another allegory expressing the same recurring theme of returning to God, which frequently appears in the prophetic books. Here, the image used is an adulterous woman (a classic allegory for the people of Israel) who returns to her husband (God). This image is transposed onto Molkho’s soul, which returns to God through death, thus atoning for his sin of previously being a Christian. At the same time, the burning of Molkho serves as a metaphor for a sacrifice offered to God, with the words from Gen 8:21 confirming God’s acceptance of it. Although Joseph ben Joshua does not express this explicitly in his book, the story of Molkho’s sacrifice offers the reader a wide range of interpretations through the discovery of numerous allusions in the text. Thus, the case of Molkho’s sacrifice may be taken as an allusion³³ to the paradigmatic miraculous deliverance of righteous biblical figures, such as the binding of Isaac and the salvation of Daniel from the lions’ den (Dan 1:3). In addition, Molkho’s mysterious “appearance” following his death—a typical fictional conceit of holy men surviving the destruction of their physical bodies—can also be interpreted as an allusion to the story of Isaac’s resurrection after his death (when Abraham’s knife touched his neck), despite the contextual differences in these stories.³⁴ The narrative of being burnt alive, found in this passage, may also be viewed as an allusion to the story of Hananiyah, Misha’el

³³ Although the allusion is an implied or indirect reference to something outside of the text, as well as allegory, it is based on the likeness. On allusion see William Irwin, “What Is an Allusion?,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 59.3 (2001) 287–97.

³⁴ See, for instance, Yalqut Shimoni on Gen 22:9; Pirque R. El., ch. 31.

and 'Azaryah, who were thrown by King Nebuchadnezzar II into a fiery furnace for devotion to their faith, but who ultimately survived (Dan 3; b. Pesah. 118:1).

The above-mentioned episode about Molkho from *The Vale of Tears* is a striking example of an extended metatext, which omits important historical details that are instead replaced by obscuring biblical allegories, metaphors and allusions. On the other hand, this elevates Molkho's main story arc into a multi-dimensional and polysemic text, leaving room both for author and reader to attribute to it numerous additional theological meanings, values and interpretations.

■ A Model of the Biblical Metatext Phenomenon

The phenomenon of metatext, its functions, and its relations with the pretext have been explored in numerous works since the late 1950s, especially those based on fiction and on scientific literary and journalistic articles.³⁵ The interest in this phenomenon stems, to a large extent, from the broad shifting of research focus from main textual narratives or their artistic features to the creative process itself. Focused analysis, therefore, of the allosemic features of biblical metatexts within historical texts offers a unique window into the theological foundations of such works, the presumed functions of author and readers, and the overall creative process. Following our previous analysis of biblical quotations in chronicles, we can tentatively outline a model of the functioning of the larger phenomenon of biblical metatext in Jewish historical writings by examining their cultural and social functions in traditional Jewish society. This model is as follows.

First, quotations of the biblical metatext function as an instrument for expressing the author's own individual creativity. Examples of this vary from new interpretations of original allegories (or other exhibited tropes) to the application of stereotypical thought patterns (often borrowed from or mirroring those of the author's predecessors).

Second, the number of biblical quotations is meant to reflect the author's level of knowledge and attest to the credibility of the author's words—the higher, the better.

Third, the very presence of a biblical metatext in the chronicles and the methods of its incorporation in the pretext structure inherently reflect an aesthetic function. To avoid anachronism, it should be prefaced that the concept of aesthetics did not exist in Jewish traditional consciousness in the same manner as in Greek or European thought, which includes a physical dimension.³⁶ The aesthetic aspect

³⁵ See, for instance, Samuel Kinser, *Rabelais's Carnival: Text, Context, Metatext* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020); *Text, Context, Pretext: Critical Issues in Discourse Analysis* (ed. Henry G. Widdowson; Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); *Text, Extratext, Metatext and Paratext in Translation* (ed. Vallerie Pellatt; Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013); William F. Hanks, "Text and Textuality," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 18 (1989) 95–127; Robert Elbaz and Leah Hadomi, "Text and Metatext in Canetti's Fictional World," *German Quarterly* 67.4 (1994) 521–33.

³⁶ On the Christian medieval perceptions of aesthetic see Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

rather reflects an approach which serves as an unconscious reflection of a broader cultural view that any Jewish text is impossible to construct without using biblical locutions. This further cements the trend of adhering to certain standards of textual arrangement, which includes its ornamentation by numerous quotations (a feature typical of liturgical Hebrew poetry),³⁷ their creative use, and the endowment of a wide polysemy of meanings to the pretext.³⁸

Fourth, one can also identify a paradoxically destructive byproduct of this allegorical metatext in historical writing. The authorial practice of arranging the pretext in accordance with a biblical plot through the interposition of biblical allegories inevitably results in the breakdown of its chronological linearity. Here, we deal with the phenomenon of detemporalization: the dissociation of the reader from the temporal sequence of events, in this case through authorial insertion of biblical episodes among the present-time occurrences or even their complete replacement. One demonstration of this transference of ancient occurrences to contemporary times is seen, for instance, in the earlier textual fragment covering the Crimean invasion, which draws a link between biblical times, depicted by prophets (or taking place in the period covered by 1 and 2 Kings), and the reality witnessed by the author. Detemporalization within the structured narrative is detrimental to historical writing, as this genre is usually committed to a strict chronological frame in its differentiation of epochs, whose keeping is essential for the reconstruction and presentation of historical events and their causative relationship.

Deep exploration of this point necessitates the review of quite a different perspective, expressed by Joseph A. Mazzeo. In his discussion of the construction and functioning of allegories in ancient Greek and medieval European literature, Mazzeo claims that allegory, as a method of interpretation, makes events intelligible and acceptable for readers by turning, in fact, an ahistorical event into a historical one:

I would suggest that constructed allegories should generally be understood as following the typological pattern rather than the more abstract and unhistorical forms of allegorical exegesis. The works of our literary tradition, which demand to be understood as allegory rather than simply allowing allegorical interpretation, assume the existence of a central paradigmatic story, of a sacred or near sacred character, set in the past and assumed to be historical or which we are asked to believe for the purposes of fiction to be historical.³⁹

³⁷ Elizur, "The Use of Biblical Verses."

³⁸ Similarly to the Jewish authors' perception, Hugh of St Victor (1096–1141) expresses the view that the visible world, created by God's word, speaks of the invisible God, his wisdom and power; the world is "like a book written by the finger of God," and the human life, is also a book, from which its nature can be read. However, unlike the Jewish approach, which does not focus on the physical beauty of the visible world, Hugh proposes that the contemplating of God can be achieved by observing the beauty and aesthetics of the universe, as evidence to the invisible beauty of its Creator. On his view see Wanda Cizewski, "Reading the World as Scripture: Hugh of St Victor's *De Tribus Diebus*," *Florilegium* 9 (1987) 65–88.

³⁹ Joseph A. Mazzeo, "Allegorical Interpretation and History," *Comparative Literature* 30.1

Mazzeo further implies that the historicity of biblical allegories, as adopted into European literary tradition, serves to detemporalize the reader's perception of time through metaphor, allusion and personification, thereby establishing a basis for comprehension by linking "then" and "now":

What was once "history," whether the Bible, Homer, or Virgil, has now entered memory, has been detemporalized, and is relived as a fictional event in the actions of the protagonist and as a spiritual event in the consciousness of the reader. Allegory thus takes account of the historicity of a paradigmatic story, its repeatability as a fiction set in new time and place, and the significance of the history and its corresponding fiction for an analogous spiritual or psychological event taking place in the consciousness of the reader.⁴⁰

Mazzeo's claim reveals the difference between fictional events in *belles-lettres* or poetry "which demand to be understood as allegories rather than simply allowing allegorical interpretation," and historical writing, which only uses allegorical interpretation primarily for conveying a certain theological message. As was previously noted, a detemporalization of actual events to a large extent turns a historical text into an ahistorical one.

Fifth, the biblical metatext also fulfills a didactic function by demonstrating the workings of divine law in human history and in everyday life, thus evidencing through the use of quotations the greatness of God. The didactic purpose of quoted biblical verses can be gleaned through various contexts of theological, ethical, or historiosophic character, wherein an author voices an appeal either directly or indirectly, for a certain type of behavior.

For instance, the chronicler, mathematician and astronomer David Ganz of Prague (1541–1613),⁴¹ in his chronicle of Jewish and world history from ancient times to the author's days, *David's Offspring* (*Šemah David*), wrote the following passage pertaining to the year 1402, which serves to illustrate exemplary behavior: "The Emperor Vridrich⁴² [sic!] was wise, modest and God-fearing person, and he ruled his kingdom longer than previous kings, embodying the words '*The fear of the Lord prolongs days*' [Prov 10:27]."⁴³

Karaite-Jewish chronicler 'Azariah ben Eliya, who depicts political events, including the Russian annexation of the Crimea, directly calls on his readers, in a form of moral imperative, to abstain from passing judgments on those events:

It is inappropriate to speak things of the king and of the nations, and a son of Israel must be of short tongue and short arm, for thus are we commanded by King Solomon, and it is not fitting to speak of this people that achieves vic-

(1978) 1–21, esp. 17.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 18.

⁴¹ About the author and his book, see Rachel L. Greenblatt, "In their Order and in their Time: Prague, Past and Place in David Ganz' *Semah David*," *Judaica Bohemiae* 51.1 (2016) 97–110.

⁴² Ganz intends Frederick III (1415–1493), the first emperor of the House of Habsburg, who was Holy Roman Emperor from 1452 until his death.

⁴³ David Ganz, *Sefer Šemah David* (Jerusalem: Huminer, 1966) 378 (in Hebrew).

tory and that people that is defeated, for [all] are in the hand of [God]. “*God is the Judge: He puts down one, And exalts another*” [Ps 75:7].⁴⁴

In addition, ‘Azariah conveys the concept of the limitations in human comprehension of divine plans and intentions, calling his readers to abstain from value judgments concerning historical figures or processes. He puts his imperative in the context of the idea of divine providence (*hashgahah*) in history—as the fate of nations is in the hands of God, human judgments are inadequate, because they are unable to understand the full depth of the divine plan.

Another author from the same region, Rabbi David ben ‘Eliezer Lekhno (d. 1735)—a scholar and leader of the Jewish community of Karasubazar—expresses in his extended historical chronicle support for a similar approach concerning the idea of limitations of human understanding.⁴⁵ He explores this idea through the means of a biblical metatext. In his introduction, Lekhno begins with quotations from the Book of Job: “*My tongue has spoken in my mouth*’ [based on Job 33:2], ‘*I shall show my opinion*’ [Job 32:6] . . . ‘*in a moment shall they die and pass away*’⁴⁶ [based on Job 34:20].” These are the words of the prophet-figure Elihu, whose rhetoric is “that God is greater than man,” and “we know him not.” Elihu reproaches Job, blaming him for “striving against Him,” and emphasizing the existence of a divine justice, unfathomable to humankind though it may be. Lekhno continues:

“[And] there arose a nation against a nation, city against a city, kingdom against a kingdom” [based on Isa 2:4, Mic 4:3] “*for the Lord of Hosts hath purposed, and who shall disannul it? And his hand is stretched out, and who shall turn it back*” [Isa 14:27] . . . “*He putteth down one, and setteth up another, for God is the judge*” [Ps 149:7], for “*only on Israel’s account that punishment comes into the world*” [b. Yebam. 63:1], for it is said “*I have cut off the nations, their corners are desolate; I have made their streets waste*” [Zeph 3:6].⁴⁷

At first glance, these quotations from Job are seemingly irrelevant to Lekhno’s goal of writing a detailed history. However, this rather short and ostensibly out of place passage provides an important metatext, which elaborates on the theme of human limitations in comprehending and judging the historical process against

⁴⁴ Akhiezer, *Historical Consciousness*, 176.

⁴⁵ This work consists of 54 chapters, covering the years 1681 to 1731, and recounts many historical events associated with European, Ottoman and Crimean Khanate history. See its English scholarly edition, Yaron Ben-Naeh, Dan Shapira, and Aviezer Tutian, *Debar Šepatayim: An Ottoman Hebrew Chronicle from the Crimea (1683–1730), Written by Krymchak Rabbi David Lekhno* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2021).

⁴⁶ See the entire passage: “Yet He is not partial to princes, Nor does He regard the rich more than the poor; For they are all the work of His hands. In a moment they die, in the middle of the night; The people are shaken and pass away; The mighty are taken away without a hand.” (Job 34:19–20).

⁴⁷ Ben-Naeh, Shapira, and Tutian, *Debar Šepatayim*, 52.

the backdrop of God's divine plan (as expressed in the general context of Elihu's words, addressed to Job).⁴⁸

Concerning the structure of the text, it is worth noting that in this example, and in many other cases, we deal with fragmentary quotations removed from their initial context and without references to the original biblical material. However, Lekhno, along with other Jewish authors, believed that readers who had a good command of Scripture would understand the implicated message through their preexisting knowledge of the entire biblical text and context.

The previously mentioned Jewish theological tradition—of stressing human limitations in understanding the divine plan of history—could in theory prevent the authorial drive to comprehend the social and political factors of historical processes. In practice, however, especially in large chronicles, these and other authors reveal no lack of initiative and inquisitiveness in analyzing these factors, frequently providing their own evaluations of political situations, powers, or standpoints held within larger conflicts.⁴⁹ This naturally raises the question of the extent to which these authors followed their own appeals to abstain from judgments, and whether calling on the readers to do so in their writings was only a matter of convention.

Within Lekhno's above-mentioned text, we encounter a traditional concept quoted here from the b. Yebam. 63:1: "Only on Israel's account does punishment come into the world." This passage expresses the centrality of the Jewish mission in the world through the fulfillment of the divine commandments. According to this conception, the people of Israel are at the center of human history, with the fate of nations dependent on their treatment of the Jews. This idea, appears in numerous Jewish writings, serving as a basis for individual interpretations of historical processes. As in Lekhno's texts, it usually appears in the context of divine justice, including divine revenge.⁵⁰

An explicit example of this viewpoint can be found in a polemical anti-Christian book—including numerous fragments dealing with Jewish and Christian history—entitled *Hizzuq 'Emunah (The Strengthening Faith)*. Its author is Isaac ben Abraham (1533–1594) from Troki (of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth),

⁴⁸ See Job 32–37.

⁴⁹ See, for instance, on the approach of de' Rossi and some other chroniclers in this respect, Akhiezer, *Historical Consciousness*, 169–80.

⁵⁰ This view was common in Jewish chronicles even in other languages. See, for instance, the historical interpretation of the emergence of Protestantism and its implications by Samuel Usque, a Portuguese converso who settled in Ferrara, in his work *Consolação às Tribulações de Israel* [Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel], published in Ferrara in 1553. According to Usque, in Europe, especially in Provence, where mass forcible conversions of Jews to Catholicism in 1346 took place, their descendants became Protestants, and this "looks like divine revenge, 'an eye for an eye' [Ex 21:22], when the Jews responded to them [Catholics] by striking . . . in order to punish those who forced them to convert . . . through making a breach in the unity of Christianity." See: Samuel Usque, *Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel* (trans. M. A. Cohen; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1965) 193, Dialog III, no. 20.

who lived during the period of the Polish Reformation. He expresses this idea in the following passage:

In the Land of England, "*great acts of vengeance*" [based on Ezek 25:17] have been performed in these times, and even still they kill in bizarre ways all the priests of the faith of the Pope of Rome and all the believers drawn after that faith, and concurrently they do so in the lands of Spain and France, killing in bizarre ways all of the believers drawn after the dictates of Martin Luther . . . and all of this befalls them for their sins, for in these . . . kingdoms shed much blood of the nation of Israel with false libels and decrees and compulsory conversion, "*until they drove us out of the land*" [based on Num 22:6] . . . while "*no such thing was done*" [2 Chr 9:19] in all the other lands where we Jews live⁵¹ . . . where perpetrators and villains are . . . punished, and the Jews are granted with charters. . . . Therefore, God, may He be blessed, bestowed peace and serenity among them, and even those who maintain competing beliefs do not harass one another.⁵²

Isaac ben Abraham emphasizes the striking difference between European countries that suffered from large-scale religious warfare and Poland, which, according to him, enjoyed "peace and serenity." According to the author, this state of affairs reflects the punishment accurately meted out to Western European countries for persecuting and converting the Jews, as compared to the reward of Poland for its tolerant policy toward them. The didactic aspect in this case of the centrality of Jewish people appears to work parallel to the similarly didactic goal of demonstrating the nature of divine justice and law within history.

Sixth, the biblical metatext also serves the author's intermediate role as both an interpreter of the laws of the universe and the purveyor of their functions and workings within everyday reality. This undertaking is strictly associated with the aforementioned didactic function (see point five above), as well as a communicative function conveyed through the author's interaction with readers. This exchange can take the shape of a dialogue with readers in a direct form—by calling them to a certain behavior in accordance with the divine laws and then strengthening this claim's validity through the use of quotations, such as 'Azariah's imperative. This interaction can also be expressed indirectly—by providing biblical examples of "correct" behavior, such as in the case of David Ganz, or as Lekhno did through the inclusion of biblical metatext from the Book of Job.

Seventh, the author's interpretative and intermediate role within the intra-reader dialogue is intended to specifically dissect "a real hidden meaning" contained within historical events—yet another functional aspect deeply built upon the interpretive function of biblical metatext. R. Moshe ben Nahman from Girona (aka Nachmanides, or Ramban, 1194–1270) expresses the notion of "hidden meaning" within the Torah in the following way: "And know that in the truest sense Scripture

⁵¹ A reference to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

⁵² Isaac ben Abraham, *Hizzuq 'Emunah* (Ashdod: Hevrat ha-yehudim ha-Kara'im be-Israel, 1975) 155–56 (Hebrew).

speaks of lower matters and alludes to higher matters.”⁵³ In our case, the chronicles allude to “higher matters” while speaking of mundane events. Depicting historical events, the authors render their meaning intelligible to the reader by deciphering the “hidden aspects” of their historical narratives through biblical metatext, which serves as a device for the interpretation of the pretext—the actual accounting of historical events. Thus, the biblical metatext conveys the concept that aspects of the “visible world” are in fact referents, or representations of the “invisible” one. In this way, the author’s interpretation of the “visible” events functions as a bridge between the reader and reality (both “higher” and “lower”), thus fulfilling an important social role in traditional Jewish society. For instance, the above-quoted words from *The Strengthening Faith* by Isaac ben Abraham, who compares political conditions in Europe (large-scale religious warfare) and Poland (overall peacefulness), implies that, beyond the material surface-level political events, there are hidden laws pertaining to divine justice and the centrality of the Jewish people in history.

Building upon the previous functional aspects of the metatext, the incorporation of biblical quotations in the pretext may be viewed in the context of didactically adding depth to descriptions of historical events, thereby transforming the merely profane deeds, acts, or occurrences into those expressing certain theological notions. This depth derives from the conception that every episode or process has within it a hidden meaning centered in divine wisdom. This meaning finds its expression in the consistent patterns and divine laws that are revealed through the relations of the people of Israel with the creator, the attitudes of the nations toward Israel, and the historical consequences of all these accumulated dynamics.

The concept of divine wisdom being sourced through these consistent patterns and laws also stems from the traditional Jewish belief that there is no deed or occurrence in the world that lacks a corresponding scriptural analogue. This view is most strikingly exhibited in the Midr. Rab. on Gen. (3:5; 64:8) and in the *Book of Zohar* on Gen. (20:5): “When God created the world, He looked at the Torah and created the world. And the world was created by the Torah.” That is, in the Torah, one can find an infinite store of things that happened and will happen over the course of reality. This view, relayed in historical texts through the relevant biblical metatext, can justify the act of writing texts on such “mundane” matters as historical events and even depicting occurrences from everyday life.

⁵³ *Perush ha-Ramban 'al ha-Torah* (ed. Chaim Dov Chavel; 2 vols.; Jerusalem: 'Oz ve-Hadar, 1959) 1:15.

■ The “Open Work” of Umberto Eco and Jewish Chronicles

Retracing the structure of the author’s dialogue with a reader is essential for understanding the social role an author inhabits through this mode of communication. The model of such communication as suggested by Umberto Eco—“open work”⁵⁴—highlights the components and effects of this interaction. Eco presents his concept of “open work” as a text that implies multiplicity, plurality, and polysemy of its meanings. This “openness” allows for a wide range of potential text interpretation on several different levels, both for an author and for a reader, with an emphasis on the active role of the latter. The reader is involved in what is an interactive process with the text, forming from it a unique literary interpretation influenced by various elements of his or her individual perspective. Eco claims that “the work is ‘open’ in the same sense that a debate is ‘open.’ A solution [for an ambiguity in the text] is seen as desirable and is actually anticipated, but it must come from the collective enterprise of the audience. In this case the ‘openness’ is converted into an instrument of revolutionary pedagogics.”⁵⁵

The very concept of the “open work” implies the existence of a wide field for interpretation, while a “closed work” implies a single or limited number of meanings that are strictly defined and prescribed by a canon of previous tradition, thus restricting the interpretative opportunities. In this respect, any text can be an “open” or “closed” work to varying degrees. As previously shown, the genre of Jewish historical writing enables an author a greater creative freedom than traditional, more fully formed genres, such as exegesis or legal works, not to mention Mishnaic, Talmudic and the Midrashic literature. Each of these latter genres has been a fruit of the endeavors of numerous authors across hundreds of years, all of whom often have different notions and expectations from their readers. Additionally, Mishna and Talmud specifically aim to address certain behaviors or prescriptions, and all of these genres (including Midrashic literature) constitute collections of various texts rather than a single coherent work which can be addressed “openly” to a reader. That is not to say that these genres are completely “closed” and lacking in any characteristic of the “open work” (as, according to Eco, any text has these characteristics); however, their analyses from this point require another methodology which is beyond the scope of the present piece. Historical writing, by contrast, is a more self-contained and coherent genre, usually written by one author in covering a concrete epoch. Such works, as we have explored, use a biblical metatextuality-rooted reader dialogue to mainly focus on the meanings of historical and everyday events on various levels—thereby leaving room for varying multi-layered interpretations.

Eco emphasizes that medieval European literature is characterized by the use of metaphorical language, and that the allegory invoked can serve as a guiding key for

⁵⁴ Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (trans; Anna Cancogni; intro. by David Robey; Harvard University Press, 1989).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

comprehension of the text, not only on its literal level, but also in order to unveil its potential spiritual, moral, and mystical messages. His model echoes similar characteristics in Jewish traditional historical writing, whose biblical metatext turns it into a de facto “open work”.

The use of these literary devices for conveying certain messages is evident from the above-quoted fragment on Solomon Molkho, which demonstrates their function. As was shown in the earlier discussion of this fragment, a particular item, image, or situation is illuminated by the author through allusions and multiple metaphorical and allegorical vehicles connected to a biblically-derived metatext. These devices allow for a deeper interpretative dialogue between the author and readers wherein the author leaves the text as an “open system” with its polysemous meanings, rather than advancing a single authoritatively fixed position. This polysemy, generated by means of the author’s biblical metatext and its devices, provides the reader with an opening for involvement in the interactive process, in which the reader generates additional textual analysis through the endowment of additional meanings.

Eco himself affirms the possibility of reading the Scriptures and other literature in a moral, allegorical, and anagogical sense, in addition to their literal sense. In his words:

In the Middle Ages, there grew up a theory of allegory which posited the possibility of reading the Scriptures (and eventually poetry, figurative arts) not just in the literal sense but also in three other senses: the moral, the allegorical, and the anagogical. This theory is well known from a passage in Dante, but its roots go back to Saint Paul . . . and it was developed by Saint Jerome, Augustine, Bede, Scotus Erigena, Hugh and Richard of Saint Victor, Alain of Lille, Bonaventure, Aquinas, and others in such a way as to represent a cardinal point of medieval poetics. A work in this sense is undoubtedly endowed with a measure of “openness.” The reader of the text knows that every sentence and every trope is “open” to a multiplicity of meanings which he must hunt for and find . . . the reader might choose a possible interpretative key which strikes him as exemplary of this spiritual state. He will use the work according to the desired meaning (causing it to come alive again, somehow different from the way he viewed it at an earlier reading).⁵⁶

Along with some structural similarities shared by the European texts mentioned by Eco and Jewish historical writings, we can distinguish a significant difference between Christian and Jewish medieval approaches to allegorism in scriptural exegesis. Unlike the Christian practice, Jewish exegetes expressed ambiguous attitudes toward the allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures. Therefore, it was not the major tool of such interpretation used by Jewish scholars, unlike other methods, especially that of *peshat* (usually defined as dealing with literal meaning and considering grammatical, syntactic, morphological and semantic characteristics of the text).⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Eco, *The Open Work*, 5–6.

⁵⁷ However, this is a complicated phenomenon, the essence and definition of which were debated

Conversely, in the medieval Christian world, allegorical commentaries on the Scriptures were quite common as a spiritual kind of interpretation, while Jewish *peshat* was frequently perceived as evidence of a materialistic worldview (referred to as *corporaliter*).⁵⁸ Jewish scholars, in turn, expressed opinions about the arbitrariness of Christological interpretation of Scriptures (and later also of the Talmud and kabbalistic literature) in using prefigurations.⁵⁹ Paradoxically, despite some Jewish reservations and discussions about the use of allegorism in exegesis, in practice, it appears to be a commonly-found biblical interpretative approach in the *derash* method,⁶⁰ in employing philosophical and mystical allegories,⁶¹ and in certain cases even in using prefigurations.⁶²

It has been established that, in the case of historical writing, events were interpreted primarily through biblical allegories. However, despite the textual polysemy leaving such narratives open to multiple interpretations, this flexibility has its limits—such analysis is confined by the biblical paradigm, as established by the author. Eco points out this same aspect in the context of the “open work”:

In this type of operation [the reader’s interpretation of the text], “openness” is far removed from meaning “indefiniteness” of communication, “infinite” possibilities of form, and complete freedom of reception. What in fact is made available is a range of rigidly pre-established and ordained interpretative

by Jewish scholars for centuries; see, for instance, Mordechai Z. Cohen, *The Rule of Peshat: Jewish Constructions of the Plain Sense of Scripture and Their Christian and Muslim Contexts, 900–1270* (Jewish Culture and Contexts; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020); Stephen Garfinkel, “Clearing *Peshat* and *Derash*,” in *The Middle Ages* (ed. Chris Brekelmans, Menahem Haran, and Magne Sæbø; vol. 1.2 of *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of its Interpretation*; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000).

⁵⁸ Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964) 94. On Christian allegorical interpretation of the Bible, see Annewies van Den Hoek, “Allegorical Interpretation: Dictionary of Biblical Criticism and Interpretation” (ed. Stanley E. Porter; London: Routledge, 2006) 11–12; A. K. M. Adam, “Allegoric Reaction: Revulsion, Desire, and Method in Interpretation,” in *Bible and Theory: Essays in Biblical Interpretation in Honor of Stephen D. Moore* (Oxford: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2020) 21–37.

⁵⁹ See, for instance, a polemic of Nachmanides (which he was forced to conduct in Barcelona in 1263), where he tries to demonstrate to his Christian opponent the importance of strictly following the text’s meaning and taking into consideration historical realities. See Moses Nahmanides, *Kitvei ha-Ramban* (ed. Chavel Charles Ber (Hayyim Dov); 2 vols., Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1963) 1:302–20 (Hebrew), for instance num. 8, 12, 28.

⁶⁰ The *derash* method is an intuitive, homiletical exposition of scriptural verses, based to a large extent on allegories. On this method see: Russell Jay Hendel, “Peshat and Derash: A New Intuitive and Analytic Approach,” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 18.4 (1980) 327–42.

⁶¹ See, for instance, Warren Zev Harvey, “On Maimonides’ Allegorical Readings of Scripture,” in *Interpretation and Allegory: Antiquity to the Modern Period* (ed. Jon Whitman; Brill’s Studies in Intellectual History; Leiden: Brill, 2000) 181–88; Moshe Idel, “Allegory and Divine Names in Ecstatic Kabbalah,” in *ibid.*, 315–48.

⁶² See about the use of prefigurations by Nachmanides in Funkenstein, *Perception*, 115–18. He comes to the conclusion that Nachmanides used prefigurations in his exegesis on the Scripture, widely referring to the Midrashic literature, while trying to avoid this type of interpretation as a purely Christian method.

solutions, and these never allow the reader to move outside the strict control of the author.⁶³

At the same time, despite the existence of certain theological and exegetical boundaries, the use of biblical metatext in Jewish historical texts enables a reader, as well as an author, to create free associations between biblical verses and extra-textual reality—historical events, everyday occurrences, and one’s own life experience. This association has the potential to generate the perception of the biblical text as a means of guidance in everyday Jewish life, as constituting a “textual community,” whose values, lifestyle, behavior, and relationship with the external world are determined to a large extent by biblical text.⁶⁴ However, this topic is outside the scope of the present article.

■ Conclusion

The incorporation of biblical quotations into Jewish historical texts is a multidimensional subject of research which embraces a wide variety of academic spheres. These quotations, mostly expressed as allegories, merge semantically and even syntactically with the main text, and replace the pretext’s basic elements, thus complicating its comprehension. This biblical metatext, often perceived by historians as evidence of an ahistorical worldview by traditional Jewish society, can, in fact, present a specific theological perception of history, thereby serving as a device for its interpretation by authors of the historical events. In addition, authors generate a margin of flexibility of interpretation by way of this metatextual multidimensionality, turning their writing into an “open work,” with the associated creative license for themselves and for their readers. This provides both readers and authors with a wide range of possibilities for seeking specific meanings and values within the pretext, as well as an associative link between biblical passages, historical reality, and their own individual experiences.

The tentative outlining of a model of the biblical metatext phenomenon in Jewish historical writing enables us to locate a number of its cultural and social functions that it fulfilled in traditional Jewish society and culture, as well as to shed light on the relationship between author and reader of such works, and on the creative process of both of these actors.

⁶³ Eco, *The Open Work*, 6.

⁶⁴ This concept was suggested by Brian Stock in *Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983). Stock researched medieval European heretical groups as “textual communities,” and their interpretation of biblical text, around which the members of the group have come together.