The Bartered Word: 
Midrash and Symbolic Economy*

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[1] Commentary Without Interpretation

Midrash as commentary frequently focuses on the strictly phonetic or sonic aspect of a word; it seems to see meaning in "nothing," in such incidentals as variants of spelling or even the forms of and decorations on letters, and not infrequently finds meanings in words that are the social equivalent of "personal ones." Midrash most frequently (not always) does not proceed by paraphrase, by giving the "meaning" of a passage but rather by expanding the text via the production of more narrative on the same "ontological" level as the text itself. Extreme (and therefore most revealing) forms of midrash interpret that which, on our theories of language, ought to be "nothing"—parts of words, "meaningless" particles,1 accidental spelling differences,2 and even the decorations on letters.3 It is precisely these features that

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1 Aristotle writes explicitly that particles do not signify (Irwin 243).
2 This is a technical term. In contemporary text criticism, spelling and punctuation are referred to as "accidentals."
3 This "extreme" form of midrash is associated with the dominant figure of early rabbinism, Rabbi Akiva and his school. Midrash, however, is not to be absolutely opposed to logocentrism or even allegory, as much that is genuinely midrash seems rather to slide in a certain continuum from this figure's almost rigorous anti-Logos into forms of interpretation
have produced what might be called, "The midrash problem" (Boyarin, Intertextuality). As the great medieval Jewish literary theorist, Moses Maimonides, remarked of midrashic interpretation: "It cannot be reconciled with the words quoted."

From the posture of western philosophy (including that of Jews), midrash can only appear as primitive. Abraham Geiger, one of the greatest historians of Judaism of the nineteenth century, referred to the Rabbis as having 'einen höchst getrübten exegetischen Sinn.' Another way to conceive this would be that the signifying practices that characterize midrash as commentary on the canonical and authoritative Scripture of Judaism are very similar to linguistic procedures that in other signifying systems (including later Judaism) would belong to practices such as homiletics, poetry, or language play, puns, and humor. This is so much the case, indeed, that later forms of Judaism itself interpreted the earlier practice as belonging to the realm of poetry, language play, or homily and not commentary.

I cite no less an authority than Maimonides. It would be no exaggeration to say that Maimonides occupies a place in a specific Jewish literary history and theory analogous to that of Aristotle in the discourse of European literature. Maimonides's considerations on the nature of the Bible and the midrash are the Poetics of Judaism. Here is Maimonides describing midrash as a signifying practice:

... Aggadic [midrashic] interpretation, the method of which is well known to those who are acquainted with the style of our Sages. They use the text of the Bible only as a kind of poetical language, and do not intend thereby to give an interpretation of the text. As to the value of these midrashic interpretations, we meet with two different opinions. For some think that the midrash contains the real explanation of the text, whilst others, finding that it cannot be reconciled with the words quoted, reject and ridicule it. The former struggle and fight to prove and to confirm such interpretations according to their opinion, and to keep them as the real meaning of the text; they consider them in the same light as traditional laws. Neither of the two classes understood it, that our Sages employ biblical texts merely as

much more familiar to us. Moreover, as Ineke Sluiter has pointed out to me, similar strategies can be found in certain Greek commentaries as well. My construction of oppositions here is, then, more a rhetorical strategy to expose and clarify certain cultural differences than an ascription of absolute otherwise.

4 The form of signification that I am calling midrash, that is, midrashic reading in the period in which there was no other form of biblical commentary among rabbinic Jews is attested from approximately the beginning of the second century of the Christian era until sometime in the fifth. For the fate of midrash after this, see below. The issue here is thus not Judaism vs. anything else but only the practice of a very particular moment in Judaism.

poetical expressions, the meaning of which is clear to every reasonable reader. This style was general in ancient days; all adopted it in the same way as poets do (Maimonides 353-4).

Maimonides claims that in order to understand the midrash, we must first have an appropriate conception of what kind of speech it is. Is midrash commentary, homiletic, or perhaps fiction (= poietical expressions)? After rejecting views that propose that aggada is indeed commentary — either bad or good — Maimonides argues that it is poetry, i.e., in his terminology fiction, in this case, didactic fiction.

In his great modern work on the poetics of midrash, Isaak Heinemann argues against the position of Maimonides:

However: if the view which Maimonides rejected brought the aggada too close to the plain meaning, his answer [Maimonides’s] does not take sufficiently into consideration the difference between the midrash and stories which are purely fictions. It is certainly correct that the drash gives greater freedom of movement to the personal character of the interpreter than does the plain sense, and the aggadic drash is “freer” than the halakic, which even Maimonides took seriously ..., but not infrequently the darshanim cited logical proofs for their midrash and also rejected the interpretations of their colleagues; also the most serious controversies between the Sages of Israel and the sectarians and Christians were carried on with the methods of midrash (Heinemann 3).

Heinemann’s argument means that midrash is encoded as biblical commentary and not mainly as poetry or homiletic — on its textual surface and in terms of its function within the system of signifying practices of the culture. One does not argue over the referential truth of fictions, nor does one engage in the most fateful controversies of a culture with conceits and quibbles. To take midrash as something else than serious commentary on Scripture is analogous to the error of taking ancient historiography as fiction, merely because the “facts” described do not jibe with our reading of documents. Following Heinemann, then, an adequate understanding of midrash would be one in which it is comprehended within the system of signifying practices of which it is a part and not trivialized or reduced by being assimilated to poetry or homiletic.

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6 This point has been made elegantly and forcefully with regard to the Bible in Sernberg 24-5.
7 This is why it is beside the point to suggest, as some interlocutors have done, that there is nothing unique in midrash; similar practices can be found in other cultures. The question is the place that those practices hold within the signifying systems of those other cultures. On the other hand, I wish it to be absolutely clear that I have nothing at stake in midrash being unique. Indeed, to the extent that the explanatory model offered below is at all cogent, the expectation would be to find midrash-like practices in other cultures given certain sets of
Now, while I would agree that midrash does not intend to give an *interpretation* of the text, interpretation being understood here as a particular kind of commentary, it does certainly function as the most serious kind of reading and commentary on the most authoritative and holy text that Judaism knows. As Simon Goldhill has remarked, any practice of commentary implies a theory of language. The apparent eccentricity of midrash, its frequent seeming extreme incoherence from the point of view of what counts as commentary in our culture, has to be explained, therefore, via a theory of language. Language itself is embedded in whole systems of signifying practices.

These signifying practices through which rabbinic culture differs all involve a denial of platonistic splits between the material and the ideal. I wish, however, to avoid strenuously any imputation of some sort of special grace that was visited upon “the Jews,” or even some subgroup of the Jews, the Rabbis. Contemporary marxian approaches to historical explanation provide us with modes of thinking about cultural difference that avoid triumphalism and at the same time don’t push us in the direction of scientifistic, economistic reductionisms.

Marxian classicist, George Thomson has proposed a direction for thinking about this issue in remarking the novelty of the platonic revolution in consciousness (although carefully avoiding, correctly, assigning this revolution to the person of Plato himself): “As Plato says, the soul is by rights the ruler and master, the body its subject and its slave. This dichotomy of human nature, which through Parmenides and Plato became the basis of idealist philosophy, was something new in Greek thought. To the scientists of Miletos, as to the Achaean chiefs and to the primitive savage, the soul was simply that in virtue of which we breathe and move and live; and although, the laws of motion being imperfectly understood, no clear distinction was drawn between organic and inorganic matter, the basis of this conception is essentially materialist. The worlds of Milesian cosmology are described as gods because they move, but they are no the less material. Nowhere in Milesian philosophy, nor in the Homeric poems, is there anything that corresponds to this Orphic conception of the soul as generically different from the body, the one pure, the other corrupt, the one divine, the other earthly. So fundamental a revolution in human consciousness only becomes intelligible when it is related to a change equally profound in the constitution of human society” (Thomson, *Aeschylus* 147; Thomson, *Philosophers* 239). It is this revolution in consciousness that enabled as well the idea that meaning is abstractable from the matter of text, that the words are bodies and the meanings, souls. The Rabbis, it could be said, maintained against all comers and against all odds, a consciousness more similar

cultural conditions and structures. Thus, it would hardly surprise me to find midrash-like commentary in non-western cultures and even in Greek or Christian ones (earlier or later) that are not dominated by Logos theories of language and signification. Midrash is to be seen in this paper as a token of what commentary might look like in a world without Logos.
to that of the "scientists of Miletos [Thales and Anaximander]" than to that of Parmenides, Plato, and most of European thought in their wake.\footnote{See Boyarin, \textit{Carnal Israel 5-6} for further elaboration of this point on the anthropological level.}

I am going to imagine here that midrash came about as the product of a happy accident, the confluence of a highly developed valorization of reading and commentary as the central religious and social practice of a group of people for whom the notions of abstraction and meaning which we associate so readily with interpretation had not developed or were being resisted, in part because such notions of meaning were not crystallized at other sites within the cultural system, most notably — dramatically — within the economic and anthropological domains.\footnote{Cp. Thomson, \textit{Philosophers} 100 on the unique set of circumstances that produced the biblical prophets.} Far from economic determinism, then, I will assume, following some of the "best" of recent marxian theory that the relations between economic signifying practices and others are not simply those of base and superstructure but exist in a much more complex relation of homology.\footnote{Goux himself interrupts what might be seen as a "vulgar" Marxist theory of economic base and superstructure by occasionally reversing the historical relations: "Shortly after Saussure had declared that linguistic values in contrast to economic values based on a standard had no foundation in nature, shortly after Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian had abandoned the search for direct empirical reference in order to espouse pure painting, the economic system dispensed with the gold standard, with the evident result of generalized floating" (Goux, \textit{Symbolic Economies} 113). As Shell has pointed out, Marx himself rejected the analogy between monetary and linguistic symbolization (Shell, \textit{Economy} 4.5).} Money is surely one of the most fundamental of symbolic structures within a society, and, as such, can be expected to act upon other signifying practices and be acted on by them. As Jean-Joseph Goux has written, "I have gradually reached the conclusion that all processes of exchange and valuation encountered in economic practice set up mechanisms in relation to what I am inclined to term a symbology, which is in no way restricted to the economic domain. This symbology entails a system, a mode of symbolizing, which also applies to signifying processes in which are implicated the constitution of the subject, the use of language, the status of objects of desire — the various overlapping systems of the imaginary, the signifying, the real. It is not a matter, then, of ascribing to economic symbology an anterior or causal role" (Goux, \textit{Symbolic Economies} 113). Marc Shell has also grasped this well: "Whether or not a writer mentioned money or was aware of its potentially subversive role in his thinking, the new forms of metaphorization or exchanges of meaning that accompanied the new forms of economic symbolization and production were changing the meaning of meaning itself" (Shell, \textit{Money} 3.4).
[2] Reading in a “Barter” Economy

Goux constructs a homology in the development of symbolic economies in four social registers, economic proper — i.e., the development of money —, linguistic/grammatological, the erotic, and the familial. The model for the history of the latter three economies is the marxian narrative of the first of these: “The general equivalent pertains first of all to money: what is in the beginning simply one commodity among many is placed in an exclusive position, set apart to serve as a unique measure of the values of all other commodities. Comparison (essential to equitable exchange) and the recognition of an abstract value despite perceptible difference institute not simply an equivalence but a privileged, exclusive place, that of the measuring object” (Goux, Symbolic Economies 3). Father, money, Logos, the Phallus are all such measuring objects that are excluded through privilege from the commodity system.11

“Thus the accession of the father to the rank of privileged subject, controlling the conflict of identification; the elevation of the Phallus to the place of centralized standard of objects of drive12 in Freudian and Lacanian doctrine, the privileged position of language as a phonic signifier potentially equivalent to all other signifiers through the operation of verbal expression all these appear to be promotions of a general equivalent. In each case, a hierarchy is instituted between an excluded, idealized element and the other elements, which measure their value in it.” And he concludes that “what had previously been analyzed separately as phallocentrism (Freud, Lacan), as logocentrism (Derrida), and as the rule of exchange by the monetary medium (Marx), it was now possible conceiving as part of a unified process.” This thesis, at first seemingly strikingly arcane, is, I suggest, intuitively plausible in the extreme once we see the monetary economy as a signifying system. One does not have to be a “vulgar Marxist” to assume that the same modes of semiotic thought, choate or inchoate, operate at different points within a given cultural entity.13

The historical genesis of money (which is then analogically invoked to interpret the genesis of the Phallus and of the Logos), described by Marx in the beginning of Capital involves the following steps. In the first stage, the stage of primitive barter, commodities are declared identical to each other and thus of equal

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11 Marc Shell adds the tyrant to this list, the one who measures the rights and wrongs of others without himself being measured and whose innovation is also associated with the introduction of money (Shell, Economy 14-18). I am not sure whether anyone before has made the connection between the invisibility of the tyrant (Shell, Economy 31) and the veiling of the Phallus.

12 For a clear articulation of this notion see Goux, “The Phallus” 62.

13 This formulation makes historical materialism seem much less reductive. See Goux, Symbolic Economies 72-3. See also Žižek 11 and especially his analysis of the work of Alfred Sohn-Rethel, there pp. 16-21.
value for exchange purposes. In the second stage, "the extended form of value," rather than a relationship of direct and immediate exchange, as in barter, being set up, the value of a given commodity is expressed in terms of its equivalent value in several other commodities. "The exchange value of this single commodity is expressed in the endless number of equations in which the use-values of all other commodities form its equivalents." In the third phase, "the generalized form of value," all commodities express their value in terms of one commodity. In the fourth and crucial stage, the stage of the "universal equivalent," the privileged commodity is taken out of the realm of signified commodities entirely and set apart. "The commodity recognized as universal equivalent becomes, in its monopoly, more than just another commodity; this commodity in a development parallel at every turn to the emergence of the Father [I shall return to this parallel below, DB] — becomes money, assuming the position first of a fetish, then of a symbol, of an idealized standard and measure of values" (Goux, Symbolic Economies 18).

"In short," writes Goux, "the Father becomes the general equivalent of subjects, Language [= the Logos] the general equivalent of signs, and the Phallus the general equivalent of objects [of desire], in a way that is structurally and genetically homologous to the accession of a unique element (let us say Gold, for the sake of simplicity) to the rank of the general equivalent of products" (Goux, Symbolic Economies 4).

It is absolutely not necessary, however, to accept the progressivist "hegelian" side of Marx’s narrative in order to adopt the historical picture itself. Goux’s description of the "unconscious" as the repressed modes of symbolization in each stage of "strata that ‘precede’ or ‘follow’ that period’s dominant level of fixation, with the understanding that this precession or succession refers not to real history but to a structural phenomenon" (76, emphasis added) precludes understandings of the process as being one of a "real" progress. Goux, it must be acknowledged, does seem sometimes to perceive this development as a chronological, almost progressivist one:

Thus occurs the passage from mythology to philosophy. The use of coins, of alphabetic writing, or still more simply the use in all domains of standard units, of common measures based on reciprocal agreement: from this ideal measure of values could be derived all of Platonism, or rather one of the most enduring and essential strata of Platonism. It would be easy to discover the social source of the world of intelligible models, of essences,

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14 This is precisely the function of the Phallus, just as the function of money is to represent all value without regard to the substance of the valued object.
15 See also Goux, Oedipus Philosopher 171-78.
which only the concord (homologia) of minds enables us to perceive. As long as it was “by eye or by hand that they most often judged these nuggets, sticks, bars that were the forerunners of true money in Greece,” the Greeks could think with Protagoras that “man is the measure of all things.” But when the city minted and guaranteed the four-drachma silver coin stamped with the owl of Minerva, symbol of the city of Athens, all the Greeks could think with Plato that the measure of all things is not man but the deity. Moving from an individual approximation to an exact measure acknowledged by all, they had no choice but to cross the boundary between opinion, however correct, and science — between image and concept (Goux, Symbolic Economies 93).

As a historical schema, this formulation is impossible, bordering on the absurd. Protagoras was, after all, a dissester from the common view, indeed almost a heretic, and not an archaising savant. Moreover, it is hard to see that the notion of the deity as the measure of all things is not a much, much older concept and hardly confined to Athens. Coinage itself was at least a century or two older than the Athenian tetradrachm (Thomson, Aeschylus 79; Shell, Economy 66) and so was philosophy. Heraclitus, before Plato, observed explicitly, “all things are exchanged for fire and fire for all things as goods are exchanged for gold and gold for goods” (Heraclitus B 90). One can only conclude (and there is evidence to support this) that Goux himself intends this as a sort of heuristic allegory, a struc-

16 An obviously correct point emphatically made to me by Froma Zeitlin. Oo Protagoras, and this, his most famous apothegm, see Thomson, Philosophers 317. Goux himself knows this very well too, as he remarks explicitly in a somewhat later work that Protagoras was driven out of Athens for impiety and that he was pointing to a new direction of thinking in western metaphysics (Goux, Oedipus Philosopher 114, 121). Rather than to assume that Goux has simply changed his mind, I prefer to interpret the earlier statement as I do presently. Ironically, according to Plato, Protagoras was the first to exchange money for teaching, Protagoras 349a.

17 If not a millennium older and from the Near East, although Thomson himself argues that it was at Athens that coinage was particularly and early developed by Peisistratos and, “[a] century later, Sparta still had the appearance of a village; Athens was already a city” (Thomson, Aeschylus 84). See also: “One of the earliest coins so far discovered in the west is from Elea. It is an isolated specimen, and does not conform to the coin types used by the Pythagorean cities, but at least it suggests that Elea was not behind them in the development of trade; and Elea, too, was the cradle of a new philosophy” (Thomson, Philosophers 288). Thomson is, I think, however, clearly wrong in his description of II Isaiah as also “the product of the new mode of thinking brought into being by the social relations arising out of a monetary economy” (Thomson, Philosophers 297). Again I have to thank Froma Zeitlin, who sent me to Thomson, a highly consequential predecessor to Goux. Marc Shell, interestingly, discusses the Greeks’ own stories about the origination of coinage as being precisely about the ideological significance of money (Shell, Economy 11-12).
tural, not a historical myth. A similar ambiguity attends Goux’s stunning account of the “link between Phallus and Logos.” On the one hand, Goux shows how this link developed historically, as the product of specifiable, and specifiably western historical processes of thought, but then, on the other, “it is only a patient conversation with the monster of the psyche which can unearth and show, without immediate certitude, the tenacious but now unconscious truth. It is here that psychoanalysis assumes its role as a discipline which, according to Lacan, reestablishes ‘the bridge linking modern man to the ancient myths’ (Écrits: A Selection 115)” (Goux, “The Phallus” 52). The status of this “truth” is highly ambiguous. As with this thesis with respect to the Phallus, here too, Goux seems not to be aiming at an accurate historical account, so much as reading back a later situation into an earlier one for its heuristic or rhetorical force. His narrative is more in the nature of a myth of origins than a realistic historical account, and thus also my own narrative in this text. This myth, which may bear very little resemblance to the historical “truth,” reveals something significant about the structure of platonized cultures. Goux’s myth of Greek culture will help me in constructing my counter-myth of rabbinic culture in which I will observe (or rather construct) similar homologies between signifying practices in the realm of money and commentary.

There is a qualitative difference in thought that seems to attend the Parmenidian/Platonic revolution and which is, thus, correlative to the standardization of the tetradrachm. At least one ancient text makes Goux’s point about the tetradrachm explicitly. Zeno, according to Diogenes Laertius, “used to say that the very exact expressions used by those who avoided solecisms were like the coins struck by Alexander: they were beautiful in appearance and well-rounded like the coins, but none the better on that account. Words of the opposite kind he would compare to the Attic tetradrachms, which, though struck carelessly and inartistically, nevertheless outweighed the ornate phrases” (Diogenes Laertius VII.18) (Hicks 129). The association of the tetradrachm with the split between abstract meaning and its concrete expression was accordingly already a topos in Antiquity. The motive (for me, at any rate) is not to construct a real historical account of Greek culture but rather to see in what ways rabbinic culture is different and seemingly unintelligible from the point of view of our (modernist) culture of interpretation, grown largely, as it is, out of neoplatonic roots. For a concise statement of this understanding of language, one need go no further than the French economist-linguist, Turgot, discussed by Shell: “Languages [speech and money] differ from nation to nation, but are all identifiable with some common term. In the case of speech, this common term comprises natural things or our ideas of these things [Logos]. In the case of money, the common term is value” (Shell, Economy 4).

18 See also Shell, Economy 38. I am grateful to Susan Shapiro who led me to these sources.
One genealogy of this commonplace of western thought about language would be Philo>Origen>Jerome>Augustine and thence into the mainstream of western philosophy and interpretation and onto Saussure and Lacan, *mutatis mutandis*.19 Another stream would be the Hellenic20 neoplatonic one with Plotinus as its center also feeding into Augustine.21 Tracing these developments back to Plato’s Athens is rather more like tracing the tree back to the acorn than like describing the tree itself. To the extent that there were both in earlier and in later Christian hermeneutics, nonplatonized streams, one would expect them to be more similar to midrash in their strategies, just as platonized Judaism produces interpretation very similar in tenor to that of most Christians.

Interestingly, perhaps ironically, my account of midrash as a form of the “typically” Judaic renders that formation almost exactly opposite to the conventional ways of representing the Judaic within much contemporary discourse.22 Thus Goux himself writes: “Both Freud and Marx, as I have said, aim to discover and translate the meaning of the hieroglyph (of the dream, of commodities), to formulate the underlying law conceptually. Now, it is no mere coincidence that this Judaic gesture, hatched in the crucible of ancestral theology, becomes at a certain point in the history of symbolic (in the western world, in the twentieth century) an amazingly fertile explanatory theory” (Goux, *Symbolic Economies* 122). Reproducing a characteristic error, Goux accepts modernist accounts of Judaism as somehow “the truth,” and thus inscribes Judaism as modernism. This is the error that conduces to references to Kant as “the Jewish philosopher.” In their desire to produce themselves as “the modern,” both Freud and such figures as Hermann Cohen, rewrite ancient Judaism itself (Boyarin, *Unheroic*), and then this reconnaissance, crucial in the production of modernity — and for reasons that have little or nothing to do with the “ancestral theology” — is accepted uncritically and reproduced by such theorists as Goux and even Derrida.23 The de-

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19 For an elegant discussion of Augustine in Lacan in quite another context, see Barzilai. As Barzilai writes, “An analogous imperative to qualify, reassign, or erase the functions of the mother appears in the textual configurations of Augustine and Lacan” (Barzilai 213). As Barzilai notes there, Lacan explicitly wrote that “Augustine foreshadowed psychoanalysis.”

20 I am adopting the older term “Hellen” to refer to those who are not Christians or Jews, rather than the pejorative “pagan,” or the imprecise “polytheist.” The term is not, I admit, entirely satisfactory, but seems to me better than either of the other alternatives.

21 For Plotinus as a major influence on Augustine, see Russell O.S.A. 162.

22 I wish to thank Susan Shapiro, who in an important response to an early presentation of this material, urged me to think more deeply about this issue (Shapiro).

23 Similarly, Goux accepts uncritically the account of Israel’s God as particularly characterized by “sublime invisibility” and builds much upon this, not realizing, once again, to what extent, here also, the “ancestral theology” has been constituted as a back-formation from modernity (Goux, *Symbolic Economies* 138); see Boyarin, “The Eye in the Torah”; Boyarin, “Imaginary Converse.” Let us take just one highly salient example: Goux builds much on the notion that the Temple was imageless (Goux, *Symbolic Economies* 146-47), and argues that this empty
sire to find in the ancestral theology the harbinger of modernity is a modernist myth to explain, as it were, the complex and prominent involvements of “Jews” in the production of modernity itself. The hermeneutic gestures of Freud and Marx, it could be argued, insofar as they are both fully inscribed within a topology of surface and depth, represent almost the very opposite of midrash, a form of commentary that remains with the surface by proliferating the surface.

The boundary between image and concept is the boundary that the early Rabbis did not cross. “Conceptually formulating the underlying law” is exactly the gesture that — from the point of view of the early Rabbis, a fortiori the Bible — is not a Judaic (but a Hellenic) gesture. Virtually all early rabbinic thought is expressed in narrative (aggada) and praxis (halakha). There is nothing equivalent in form and rhetoric to philosophy or to its Christian younger sibling, systematic theology. Midrashic commentary for the most part, resolutely refuses to provide an interpretation that we could recognize as such. Furthermore, while there was a theory (or at any rate, a practice) of signification — denotation — in midrash, there seems to have hardly been a theory of meaning at all.24 This is the boundary that Levinas would come to refer to as the boundary between Hebrew and Greek, in at least one sense, the very constitution of “Hebraism vs. Hellenism.”

Overturining, as Goux himself does, the classical “vulgar” marxian notions whereby other practices are driven by the economic “base” and form its superstructure, I shall here be exploring the homologies between different aspects of the signifying system exemplary of early rabbinic culture and suggesting that point for point its subsystems are characterized by the absence of the concepts that animate our western (postneoplatonic) signifying practices.

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24 Signification has to do with denotation. Thus midrash will not infrequently designate one thing as another. This word refers to, denotes, this thing, but they do not generally seem to operate with any theory of meaning. But meaning, roughly speaking, involves: “what the learner grasps implicitly when he learns a word; what a competent speaker and hearer grasps but a non-speaker does not grasp; what two synonymous words share; what a word shares with its translation in another language. To be concerned with these aspects of a word is to be concerned with its meaning and with the concept it expresses” (Irwin 242). Now, obviously, in some sense the Rabbis, like all other human speakers, must have had tacit understanding of these factors; otherwise, it seems we could not speak at all. This does not preclude the possibility that the Rabbis, when they interpret texts, operate with a very different understanding of meaning or with none at all.
There are very rich texts about money in early rabbinic literature that enable us to uncover homologies between their discourse about money, language, desire, and kinship. A very sophisticated little narrative from the fourth-century Babylonian Talmud will begin to expose this discourse:

When Rabbi Eli’ezer was arrested [by the Romans] for sectarianism, they took him up to the place of judgment [gradus]. The judge [hegemon] said to him: “An elder such as you, has dealing with these foolish things?” He [Eli’ezer] said: “I have trust in the Judge.” The judge thought that he was speaking about him, but he was speaking about his Father in heaven. He [the judge] said: “Since you have declared your faith in me, you are free [dimus].”

When he came to his house, his disciples came to comfort him, but he was inconsolable. Rabbi Akiva said to him: “Allow me to say to you one of the things that you have taught me” [an honorific euphemism for the student teaching the teacher]. He said to him: “Say!” He said to him: “Rabbi, perhaps you heard some matter of sectarianism, and it gave you pleasure, and because of that you were arrested for sectarianism.” He said: “By heaven, you have reminded me. Once I was walking in the upper market of Sephoris, and one of the disciples of Jesus the Nazarene, a man by the name of Jacob of Kefar Sekania, met up with me. He said to me, ‘It is written in your Torah: ‘Do not bring the wages of a prostitute or the proceeds of a dog [to the house of your Lord]’ (Deut. 23:19). What about using them to build a latrine for the High Priest?’ And I said nothing to him. And he told me

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25 It is important to emphasize at this point that virtually nothing can be said about the “real economy” or Roman Palestine based on this text. This point was particularly emphasized to me by Erich Gruen, Keith Hopkins, Sally Humphreys, and Shlomo Fischer (and see also the discussion of Susan Shapiro’s response below). As is frequently the case, Marc Shell has been here before me, fortunately leaving the details for lesser minds to work out. In his 1982 book, he wrote: “The Jewish rabbis came to protest against the information of legal thought by new monetary forms. Making the proposition that ‘All wares acquire each other’ the focus of a far-ranging debate about intellectual as well as material exchange, they elaborated conflicting interpretations of an asimon — a ‘current word’ that is not yet legally minted or definitely meaningful” (Shell, Money 2). See also Gibbs and Ochs, who take quite a different discursive tack. For traditional historical interpretations of this text, see Sperber 69-84. See also Kleiman.

26 Lit. “the stairs leading up to the place of judgment,” this is one of the structures of which the Mishna forbids Jews to participate in the building (Hayes). For the “gradus” as equivalent to the catasta of such texts as the Passion of Perpetua and other early Christian martyrlogies, see Lieberman 69-71.

27 I.e., provincial governor serving as judge.
that thus had taught Jesus his teacher: "It was gathered from the wages of a prostitute, and to the wages of a prostitute it will return [Micah 1:7]" — it comes from a place of filth, and to a place of filth it will return' [i.e. for building a latrine one may use the proceeds of a prostitute], and the matter gave me pleasure, and for that I was arrested for sectarianism, since I had violated that which is written: Keep her ways far away from you!" [Proverbs 5:8].

As we shall see, this text makes palpable and almost explicit the homological linkage between coins and their value on the one hand and words (of Torah) and their interpretation on the other. At the same time, however, that this text helps me make the point about rabbinic culture that I seek, it also indicates the nuancing that is necessary in drawing the cultural distinctions that I endeavor to draw here. Rabbi Eli'ezr has been arrested for sectarianism, i.e., on suspicion of Christianity, Christianity being in the third century an illegal religion, while Judaism was legal. The judge asks him what a Jewish elder, a sage, is doing delving into such superstition, and he answers with the double-entendre: I have trust in the judge. Precisely because this is the conventional answer that one is supposed to give under such circumstances in order to declare one's innocence and fealty to the imperial government, Rabbi Eli'ezr is set free, although the text troubles to reveal to us that he really intended that he has trust in the Judge of the Universe and precisely does not have trust in the judge of the Roman government.28 Rabbi Eli'ezr, however, having been set free through this act of trickery, nevertheless is troubled. He wishes to know through what sin was he condemned to the fear and humiliation of a trial for heresy with its possibly very painful and dangerous consequences.

The basic theological question addressed is theodicy, a question that returns over and over in rabbinic literature: Why has God punished the apparently righteous? The commonplace rabbinic theological thought that answers this question is that somehow God's punishments fit the crimes — "measure for measure" in rabbinic parlance. When Rabbi Eli'ezr says in this text, "I have trust in the Judge," he fools the Roman hegemon, but not himself. He assumes that there cannot be any punishment without a crime and that the Divine Judge has found him wanting. Because he had been attracted and pleased by heresy in God's eyes, i.e., Christianity, therefore, the text tells us God allowed him to be arrested by the Romans for engaging in that very heresy. The Roman judge is, in a sense, only an unwitting avatar of God's judgment on earth. The acceptance of the judgment is indeed what releases Rabbi Eli'ezr. However, it is the precise nature of Rabbi

28 For a fuller reading of this text in its larger context, see Boyarin, "Virgin Rabbis: A Study in Fourth-Century Cultural Affinity and Difference."
Eli‘ezr’s “sin” that will interest me here, for it is in this identification that the point about the rabbinic discourse of money and its linkage with interpretation can be seen.

This association is thematized within the text through a powerful analogy between the substance of the discourse of the “Christian” and the outcome of enjoying that very discourse. The Christian proposes a lenient reading of the verse that prohibits the taking of the earnings of a prostitute to the Temple, namely that although such earnings are forbidden for holy purposes, for mundane — and even lowly — purposes like the building of a toilet for the High Priest, they are permitted. An entirely typical and formally impeccable midrashic justification for this conclusion is proposed by the Christian as well. Rabbi Eli‘ezr “enjoys” this utterance, perhaps, for two reasons. First of all, there is the sheer intellectual pleasure of a clever midrashic reading, one that, I emphasize, is in method identical to “kosher” midrash, and second, the result of this midrash would be increased funding for the Temple. The Rabbi is, however, punished for this enjoyment by the humiliation and fright of being arrested by the Romans for being a Christian, which he just barely escapes. The analogy seems clear: just as one may not take the hire of a prostitute for any purpose connected with holiness, so one may not take the “Torah” of a heretic for any purpose connected with holiness. The Rabbi identifies his own sin by quoting a verse from the book of Proverbs that itself speaks of a prostitute. The prostitute is understood, however, as a metaphor for nothing else but heresy. Just as the money, which is exactly identical in form and value whether it comes from the hire of a prostitute or from the wages of one who produces a holy object, is distinguished in quality because of the material origin, so also the word of Torah, identical in form and value whether it comes from a Rabbi or from Jesus, is distinguished in quality and invalidated because of its material origin, in the mouth of the “heretic” Christian. Although the substance of the words of Torah seems identical — just as the money itself is identical —, the source in “impurity” renders them unfit for holiness and punishable their acceptance.

A very important intertext for our story can be found towards the end of the chapter on Vespasian in Suetonius.29 We find there the following report: “Titus complained of the tax which Vespasian had imposed on the contents of the city urinals. Vespasian handed him a coin which had been part of the first day’s proceeds: ‘Does it smell bad?’ he asked. And when Titus said ‘No,’ he went on: ‘Yet it comes from urine.’” (Suetonius 251). For the Rabbis, the coin indeed does stink, pecunia olet. We would say that the truth is the truth whatever its source, separating between the meaning of the utterance and its material origin, just as the

29 I am very grateful to Chava Boyarin who called this vitally important parallel to my attention.
value of the coin has nothing to do with where it came from. For the Rabbis, the material of the coin and the matter of the language itself are crucial and meaning/value is not abstracted from either. On the other hand, this same story indicates the nuancing and complication necessary for this cultural distinction as well, for, obviously, the first part of the text does operate with an idea of meaning. Else, it would be impossible to indicate the gap between what Rabbi Eliezer said and what he meant, or between what he meant and what the Roman judge understood. Even a culture whose explicit theories of language and commentary are not logocentric, it seems, must needs operate with a tacit logos, in order for language to function at all.

A passage from the slightly earlier (mid second century) Mishna and its talmudic commentaries will help us thicken this rabbinic discourse about money and meaning. As Jacob Neusner has written of this passage: "[I]t makes a single point: there is no such things as a market, ... but the economy rather works through barter, that alone" (Neusner 79).30 Note the precision of Neusner’s formulation here. The Mishna makes a point; it does not reflect a reality. Halakhic necessities (requirements of talmudic law) mandated that a determination be made of the relation of commodity to currency in certain circumstances, i.e., that a decision be made as to the very definition of currency versus commodity. A certain transitional phase in the conceptualization of money can thus be reconstructed from these halakhic discussions and determinations:

Gold acquires silver, but silver does not acquire gold. Copper acquires silver, but silver does not acquire copper. Bad coins acquire good coins, but good coins do not acquire bad coins ... Commodities acquire coin, but coin does not acquire commodities. All commodities acquire each other. How does this work? If he has physically taken possession of the fruit but not given the money, he may not change his mind, but if he has not taken physical possession of the fruit and given the money, he may change his mind. Rabbi Simeon says: Whoever has the money in his hands has the power of decision. [Baba Mesi’a 44a]

This passage is from the Mishna, the rabbinic legal textbook codified in the first half of the third century of the Christian era, i.e., early in the “golden age” of midrash. The issue here is when is an actual transaction completed, i.e., when does it become irrevocable. This is particularly relevant, of course, when, for in-

30 Unfortunately, Neusner’s brilliant insight is marred by some errors of detail. Thus it is simply not the case that “the commodity of lesser value effects acquisition of the commodity of greater value” (Neusner 80). Indeed, this is directly contradicted by the Mishna’s statement (quoted by Neusner on the same page) that “All movables acquire each other.” This notwithstanding, Neusner has provided here the most perspicacious analysis of the Mishna’s economy as barter that I have yet seen.
stance, the commodity in question has gotten destroyed in the meantime and we need to know whose property it was that is gone. The rule is that upon taking physical possession of the commodity, the buyer has completed the transaction which is now irrevocable, even if he has not yet paid the monetary price. The question that the text raises, however, is the determination of what constitutes commodity and what money in any given transaction. [It is important to note that if x acquires y, this means that x is commodity and y is currency in that particular transaction, since it is taking possession of the commodity that acquires the currency.] The very fact of such a question being raised is indicative already of the incompleteness of the transition within the rabbinic discourse of symbolic economy to one in which currency is out of the system of use values entirely and functions as a universal mode of exchange. Purchase for precious metal is still considered here a sort of barter, although clearly various metals: gold, silver, copper are arrayed on a scale of abstraction with silver the most abstract and least commodity-like, while gold and copper seem to be more concrete than silver.

There is more, however, for the Talmud goes on to comment on this mishnaic passage:

Rabbi teaches to Rabbi Simeon the son of Rabbi: “Gold acquires silver.” He said to him: “Rabbi, in your youth you taught us that silver acquires gold, and now you revert and teach us in your old age that gold acquires silver.”

In his youth what did he think, and in his old age what did he think? In his youth, he thought that gold, which is valuable, is currency and silver which is less valuable is fruit, and the fruit acquires the currency. In his old age: silver which is “sharp” is coin, gold which is not sharp is fruit and fruit acquires coin.

The passage begins by reporting a narrative purportedly from the real-time of the Mishna, in fact a dialogue between the author of the Mishna and his son. The father, Rabbi Yehuda the Prince, known simply as Rabbi, cites a sentence from his own text. The son, however, recalls that in earlier years the father had cited the text quite differently, in fact in the exact opposite from its current formulation. (Incidentally, the manuscript tradition records both forms of the text, some having one and some the other. The question was never quite resolved.) The controversy between Rabbi Yehuda as a youth and as an elder turns on the relative status of gold and silver as “currency” or as “fruit” vis-à-vis each other. Although it cannot be demonstrated here, it should be emphasized that it is gold and silver coins that

31 Thus the rabbinic law of sale is the precise obverse of the Greek one, in which “[t]ransfer depended on payment, not on delivery” (Pringsheim 91). However, Rabbi Simeon seems already to assume something like the Greek legal position.
are being spoken of here and not bullion.\textsuperscript{32} Now the very fact that the exchange of coins of different types is considered a sale within which one of the items must be considered a commodity, as well as the fact that it is unclear which is the commodity and which the currency, indicates that the rabbinic symbolic economy was not (yet) in the "third phase, 'the generalized form of value,' [in which] all commodities express their value in terms of one commodity," whatever the situation of the "real" economic system.\textsuperscript{33} Nor certainly, was rabbinic economic discourse in "the fourth and crucial stage, the stage of the 'universal equivalent'." Further evidence for this conclusion is provided by the clear ambivalence that the Talmud manifests for the very definition of currency verse commodity. Is it the greater value of gold coins that defines them as currency or the greater fungibility ("sharpness") of silver or even of copper coins that would define them as currency vis-à-vis gold? This question also remains unresolved.

The text, moreover, goes on:

Rav Ashi said: "It seems correct according to his youth, since it teaches that copper acquires silver. Were you to say that silver with respect to gold is fruit, therefore he teaches that copper acquires silver, for even though with reference to gold it is fruit, with reference to copper, it is money, but if you say that silver with reference to gold is money, then with reference to gold which is more valuable than it, you say it is money, with reference to copper, where it is valuable and it is sharp, do we even need to state this?"

Yes, it would be necessary [to state it], because you might think that in a place where the pruṭah [the standard copper coin] is abundant, it is sharper than silver, and I would think that it is currency, therefore he teaches us that since there are places where they are not abundant, they are fruit.

Rav Ashi, a late amora, uses a very sophisticated argument to claim that Rabbi Yehuda Hanassi's youthful opinion that gold is currency and silver is fruit is the correct one and therefore the correct text of the Mishna. His argument is that if we say that "silver acquires gold," which means, I remind, that silver is commodity and gold is currency, only then is it necessary for the Mishna to state, as it does, that "copper acquires silver." For since silver coin, on this version, is commodity with respect to gold coin, it would be necessary to inform us that it constitutes

\textsuperscript{32} Cf. the commentary of Rashi ad loc.

\textsuperscript{33} Several Roman historians, including Erich Gruen, Keith Hopkins, and Sally Humphreys have indicated to me the improbability that the economic system of Roman Palestine was "really" so anomalous, vis-à-vis the rest of the Empire. One wonders, for all that, about differences between urban centers and rural backwaters.
currency with respect to copper. However, were we to say that even gold coin is commodity with respect to silver coin, because silver is “sharp,” i.e., more fungible, then clearly with respect to copper where it has two “advantages,” both greater intrinsic value and fungibility, it would be obvious and therefore unnecessary to state that it is currency. This argument is answered, however, by stating that there are places where the pruṭah, i.e., the standard copper coin, is the most common coin, and we would think that in such places copper is always currency with respect to both silver and gold, therefore the Mishna teaches that even though with respect to gold, silver is currency and gold is commodity, similarly with respect to copper, we must nevertheless be informed separately that this is the case as well. The textual tradition that has gold as commodity and silver as currency is thus also demonstrated to be supportable and coherent.

Note that the sugya [the talmudic argument] remains unresolved. We simply do not know which of these metals is currency and which is commodity with respect to the others.

At this point another argument is suggested:

And also Rabbi Ḥiyya is of the opinion that gold is currency, for Rav Iqra borrowed dinars [the standard gold coin] from the daughter of Rabbi Ḥiyya. Later on, the dinars became more expensive. [The case] came before Rabbi Ḥiyya, who said to him: “Go and pay her good and full-weight dinars.”

Now if you say that gold is currency, then it is fine, but if you say that it is fruit, is this not [borrowing] a bushel for a bushel which is forbidden?

No. Rav Iqra had dinars, and since he had dinars, it is similar to the case of one who says: “Lend me until my son comes or until I find the key.”

By rabbinic law, one is not permitted to loan a commodity and to receive the same amount of the commodity in return, because if the price of the commodity has gone up that would constitute interest which is forbidden to Jews. Rabbi Ḥiyya’s insistence that the debt be repaid coin for coin would seem to indicate that gold coins are, for him, not commodity but currency and do not vary, therefore, in value. Commodities vary with respect to them. However, the assumption that golden coins, explicitly “dinars,” can go up or down in value and thus constitute a commodity in this sense is upheld. The reason for the permission to refund full-weight coins in this case, in spite of the coin being “fruit,” is a special one. When the borrower already has the “fruit” in question but simply has not access to his fruit for technical reasons, one can lend him fruit for fruit, since he will not gain or lose on the transaction and even if the value has gone up in the meantime, no interest is understood as having been earned. Finally, the talmudic text itself re-
mains unresolved as to the question of whether or not even Rabbi Hyya considered gold coins as currency or as commodity.

It thus seems apparent that we do not have here an economic theory which has passed to the stage of the "universal equivalent." Far from it. The Palestinian Rabbis seem entangled in their pecuniary theory in a complicated stage somewhere between the stage of "the extended form of value" and the "generalized form of value." As Neusner has remarked of this talmudic passage, "I cannot imagine a more stunning or subtle way of denying the working of the money market and insisting upon barter as the 'true' means of effecting trade and therefore permitting exchange and acquisition" (Neusner 81). In another sense, this could be taken as a special instance of Thomson's general point about Palestinian (Israelite) society: "They were thus drawn from the beginning into the cross-currents of international trade, always in a subordinate capacity but with lasting effects on their social relations" (Thomson, Philosophers 98). Marx himself points out that it is not the very existence of coinage that indicates passage to the universal equivalent but that that itself is one of the possible functions of money (Marx 1: 148-9). Thus it is not the very existence of coinage that is decisive but the function and understanding of coins that makes the crucial difference.35

I thus suggest that we consider midrash to be a mode of commentary which is discursively consistent with the discourse of money produced by the same Rabbis who produced midrash. Even more pointedly, perhaps, the demise of midrash within Jewish cultural history (towards the end of late antiquity) is coeval with certain shifts in discourse of money as well, thus providing dramatic affirmation/validation of Goux's general thesis. Susan Shapiro has made this point well by quoting a later passage in the talmudic text:

It has been stated: Rab and Levi — one maintains: Coins can effect a barter, the other rules that they cannot. Said R. Papa (fl. 4th century, Babylonia): What is his reason who maintains that a coin cannot effect a barter? Because his mind is set on the legend thereof, and the legend is liable to cancellation.

As Shapiro remarks, "R. Papa claims that the reason a coin cannot effect a barter is because the recipient only focuses on the coinage, the stamp or legend that marks the value of the currency. It is, as such, not part of the barter economy, but part of an economy based on an external standard assigning value to money as currency. ... This argument signifies a crisis in economic representation. It is important to note that it is not the giver who determines whether a coin may be used in ḫalifin, but rather the recipient. And the recipient — according to R. Papa's

34 For a compelling analysis of the economic system of the Mishnah as a "distributive" (i.e., barter-like) rather than market economy, see Neusner 7-14.
35 See also the discussion of Susan Shapiro's intervention in next section below.
interpretation, although others disagree — will be fetishistically fixated on the legend of the coin, on the value it is assigned in a primarily money economy” (Shapiro). In order to better understand the point here, one needs a bit more exegesis. The rabbinic practice known as halifin is equivalent to the form of contract-making known from Greek as the symbolon: “Some small article, such as a ring (sphragis), sufficiently specific to relate back to the original pact, was exchanged as a token of the agreement. ... As a symbolon, the broken coin did not function as money” (Shell, Economy 33). The question that the Talmud asks is whether or not an unbroken coin can function as a symbolon, and suggests, in the name of Rav (or Levi), that it cannot. In Greece as well, there were those who thought that the new invention, the coin, played the same role as the symbolon, but, as Shell has remarked, “[i]n fact, however, coins and symbola (and the economic classes whose interests they served) were quite different” (Shell, Economy 36). In thus explicitly resisting this economic transformation, the Rabbis were resisting the socio-cultural transformations that it entailed or that were homologous with it.

Shapiro, accordingly, goes on to suggest a crucial corollary to my hypothesis that the rabbinic symbolic economy as barter economy impinged on other forms of symbolic practice. She brilliantly hypothesizes that the ambivalence regarding money had to do precisely with its symbolic value, i.e., that it was precisely the proverbial “owl of Minerva” — i.e., the coin per se as symbol of Roman power and of the claims of the abstract universal — that “bothered” the Rabbis:

Focusing on the legend, therefore, may not only be a matter of the monetary value of the coin. It may also be an instance of idolatry, of carrying a deity’s sanctioned measurement of value in one’s hand. In the Roman context, the coins were stamped with figures, some of which were of deities, including representations of the Imperial cult. As I understand it the Jews were forbidden to mint their own coins and while various cities and localities in Palestine minted their own coins, they were produced by the Roman authority. Whether one considers all figures idolatrous or only those of deities, these coins raise the problem of both fetishism and idolatry, with the fascination and fixation on the image as constituting ultimate value. Is this, perhaps, also what is at stake in the equivocation between these two economies, barter and money based? Is the dugma, as I have explored here, a way of understanding not only midrashic exchange through barter, but to understand barter, then, through midrash? Our subject would be not only midrash in a barter economy, but the imagination of barter in a midrashic mode.36
Following Shapiro’s lead, we can begin to think of the resistance to Logos and Phallus that characterized early rabinim as part and parcel of a resistance to the hegemony of the coin itself, and as an expression of resistance to the power and abstract universality of the Empire (Harl 52-70). Neusner has referred to our specimen talmudic text as manifesting “the demonetization of money” (Neusner 81), i.e., an explicit moment of resistance.

Here, the homology between the coin and the discourse of the Phallus is also highly relevant (Boyarin, “Who Wrote the Dominant Fiction?”). It is the transcendent immateriality of the Phallus, and thus its separation from the penis, that constitutes its ability to project masculinity as the universal — as the Logos — and by doing so significantly enables male projects of domination, including especially “the terror of abstract universality” that is empire. Accordingly, as Sally Humphreys has emphasized (oral communication), the situation of the Rabbis as always living and working under conditions of imperial domination (colonization and diaspora) is certainly also highly relevant in understanding their resistance to universal equivalents and universals in general, including “the utopia of the neutral sex” (Goux, “Luce Irigaray”). This gives us a concrete way to conceive of the homologies between the discourse of money and other symbolic economies without reductive economism or a positivistic historicism which would assume that the Mishna gives us a “real picture” of economic conditions. As Shlomo Fischer has put it, “The point is that the normative representation of economic activity in Chazal [the Rabbis] is barter. This normative representation is the result of a political/cultural struggle.” Shapiro’s analysis thus provides us with another mode within which to think about the colonized rabbinic political condition as that which furnished the ground of their alternative consciousness.

36 Curiously, considering his other misprisions of Judaism, this seems a moment in which Goux’s characterizations of Judaism work well: “In denouncing the fetishism of money, Marx repeats a pattern quite comparable to the critique of idolatry that comprises the religious originality of Judaism” (Goux, Symbolic Economies 160). We must be careful, however, of fetishizing the very distinction between Judaism and idolatry. For a brilliant analysis of another Jewish response to the inscription of the Imperial cult on the coins of the Roman realm, see Shell, Economy 82-3.

37 See also Brown 18.

38 Goux, Symbolic Economies 207.

39 I am not suggesting a politically privileged access to “truth” that is the ordained inheritance of the disadvantaged subject, gay, female, colonized, black, Jewish, but rather a condition of the possibility of access to such a position of understanding. Analogously, David Halperin writes that “The aim, rather, is to treat homosexuality as a position from which one can know, to treat it as a legitimate condition of knowledge. Homosexuality, according to this Foucauldian vision of un gai savoir, ‘a gay science,’ is not something to be got right but an eccentric positionality to be exploited and explored: a potentially privileged site for the
If Goux’s hypothesis is cogent, then we would expect in such a symbolic economy that neither Logos, nor Phallus, nor father would be active concepts. In early rabbinic discourse, we are not yet in the “moment of general equivalent value form” in which “all meaning is condensed in a few graphic signs of phonetic value, just as economic exchange-value appears to be reified in official currency” (Goux, Symbolic Economies 71). And indeed, this is the culture that produced midrash, that mode of reading a text which is not founded in a Logos, in which meaning is not derived from fixed and arbitrary associations between graphic signs of phonetic value and meanings, or even phonetic signs of phonemic value and meanings. This culture, moreover, does not symbolize male as transcendence, “the Phallus,” and, as I have argued elsewhere, does not develop the symbolic role of the father as form for the maternal matter.  

All of these idealities are, moreover, correlated with gender, owing to the very platonic binary opposition between form (the father, ideal, male) and matter (mater, the real, female), as expressed most exhaustively in the Platonic/Aristotelian myth that the mother provides all the matter for propagation and the father only the idea (hence “conception”). As Plutarch has epitomized it:

The better and more divine nature consists of three parts: the conceptual, the material, and that which is formed from these, which the Greeks call the world. Plato is wont to give to the conceptual the name of idea, example, or father, and to the material the name of mother or nurse, or seat and place of generation, and to that which results from both the name of offspring or generation (Plutarch, Moralia V 5:135) = Moralia 373C.  

This may seem surprising to readers used to the dogma that it was precisely definitionally for biblical “Judaism” that it represented the advance of the father over the mother. For arguments against this dogma, see Boyarin, “Imaginary Converse.”

The way that this series of oppositions (again without the key connection to money) works its way into modern philosophy, idealism, metaphysics as a structuring principle of gender can be most conveniently studied in Lloyd.

For the meaning of “nurse” in this context, it seems not inappropriate to refer to the famous passage in the Oresteia in which Apollo argues, “It is not the mother who is the parent of the child, although she is so called; she is merely nursemaid to the newly planted fetus” (Aeschylus, Eumenides 658-9). Thus, also “seat” and “place” of generation, as opposed to generatrix. For the best account of the relation between the “mythos” of Aeschylus and the Logos of the philosophers, as well as the clear semantic connections in Greek thinking between phallos, Logos, and father, see Zeitlin 107-12. This paper, published originally in
Without subscribing to the frequently "racist" presuppositions of ethnopyschiatry, I would nevertheless claim that midrash (at least in its most extreme and therefore typical forms) does not operate with language understood as the realm of logic of the concept but with language as the realm of the logic of the image.43

No Phallus, no Logos. The very foundations of philosophy, as a specifically European practice (analogous, of course, but not identical to practices in other human cultures), are grounded in "bring[ing] together phallos and head ... for the ending of the [Orestesia] is also concerned with a shift in modes and behavior, as it charts a progression from darkness to light, from obscurity to clarity. Representation of symbolic signs [symbolic here is not in the Lacanian sense, DB] perceived as a form of female activity gives way to the triumph of the male Logos. Representation and lyric incantation yield to dialectic and speech, and magic to science. Even more, this 'turning away from the mother to the father,' as Freud observed, 'signifies victory of intellectuality over the senses'" (Zeitlin 111). Zeitlin proceeds to provide an extensive list of the ontological oppositions grounded in the primary opposition of male as Apollo and female as Erinyes that grow from this "turning" or "victory" (Zeitlin 112) and which are characteristic of Greek philosophy from some pre-Socratics to Plato and Aristotle. Freud, however, quite mistakenly assigned this "turning" to biblical culture.44 Neither biblical nor early rabbinic culture, however, made this move toward idealism, toward what Goux has called,

1978, has become the often unacknowledged origin of entire spheres of research, especially in the Anglo-American context.

43 These are perhaps mappable onto Lacan's Imaginary and Symbolic (counter-respectively). There is, of course, another interesting ambiguity here. If the Rabbis did not understand the Symbolic in that way, does this mean, then, that the Symbolic did not exist? Or to put this in other terms, if the rabbinic culture did not operate with a concept of the Phallus, does this mean that the Phallus was absent in their culture? This is exactly the ambiguity that my paper turns on.

44 As Zeitlin remarks, "Freud's view of the female as a mutilated male lies squarely within the Aristotelian doctrine of the woman as a 'deformity in nature'" (Zeitlin 111, n. 49) and see continuation there. See also Boyarin, "Imaginary Converse." Charles Shepherdson has contributed another valuable insight for this discussion: "Indeed, when Freud speaks of 'the force of an idea' in order to explain the basic distinction between psychoanalysis and organic medicine, every reader of Heidegger will note that this ambiguity characterizes a long philosophical tradition, and is internal to the very term idea: as many commentators on Greek philosophy have pointed out, the classical term eidos means both the 'concept' or 'idea' and something 'seen'. Seeing and knowing are thus constitutively linked, and easily confused, but this should not conceal the fact that the logic of the concept has a very different structure from the logic of the image, understood as a supposedly immediate, 'physiological' perception. Where the image provides us with an illusion of immediacy and presence, ... the symbolic confronts us with a play of presence and absence, a function of negativity by which the purportedly 'immediate' reality (the 'natural' world) is restructured. This is the difficulty Lacan takes up with the concepts of the imaginary and the symbolic, thus rendering the ambiguity less of a mystery" (Shepherdson 166). The mysterious ambiguity, however, that this paper is dealing with is the historical origin of the logic of the concept.
quite brilliantly, paternalism. Both remained as materialistic at least as the Milesian scientists. Biblical and rabbinic culture resists the abstraction of the male body and the veiling of the penis that produces the phallus, and forms, accordingly, a subdominant fiction within the cultural space of the dominant fiction. This subdominant fiction is no less oppressive than the dominant (Boyarin, *Unheroic* 151-85).

No Logos, no Phallus: "But the truth psychoanalysis tells us about the logic of truth, and thus about philosophy, is 'that the feminine occurs only within models and laws devised by male subjects,' that this model 'is a phallic one, [which] shares the values promulgated by patriarchal society and culture, values inscribed in the philosophical corpus: property, production, order, form, unity, visibility ... and erection'.”

Neither in hermeneutical strategies nor in the production of philosophical (as opposed to mythical) documents do the texts of the classical rabbinic period indicate the “passage” of which Goux speaks. No one would characterize early rabbinic culture as being one in which “order, form, and unity” are dominating values, and there is, as I have already emphasized, no philosophical body at all.

The identification of Logos with Phallus is not an artefact of a modern attack on the “west” (Goux, “The Phallus”). Neoplatonic texts are unabashed about this equation. Plutarch writes:

And that is the reason why they make the older Hermæ without hands, or feet, but with their private parts stiff, indicating figuratively that there is no need whatsoever of old men who are active by their body’s use, if they keep their mind [or their power of reason, *Logos energon*], as it should be, active and fertile (Plutarch, *Moralia* X 10:153) = *Moralia* 797F.47

For Plutarch, as for the later Plotinus, it was so obvious that the stiff private parts of the Herm were not related to the “body’s use” that he didn’t even have to argue the point; he could assume that his readers would understand it implicitly.

45 Once more, the advantages of this term are palpable in my opinion. By referring to rabbinic Jewish culture here as the “subdominant fiction,” I immediately disarm any reading of my work — finally, after much internal and external struggle — that would interpret the presentation of rabbinic gender “theory” as more “true” or less mystified than that of the dominant fiction. Also, by using the term subdominant fiction, as I do here, I clearly indicate that rabbinic Jewish culture is not separate from the cultures of which it is a part but forms a complexly related subculture, at the same time avoiding as well, the romanticism and claims for privilege that a term like subaltern (which I have used previously) would levy. Finally, the relation of the term subdominant fiction to the primary term from which it is derived allows as well for that culture also to be riven by conflict, local variation and shift, and resistance, as well as resistant individual subjects within itself.

46 Chisholm 271 citing Irigaray 86/85.

47 See also Goux, “The Phallus” 49.
arch doesn’t need to tell us that the phallus is the logos or why this should be so; he can assume that we already understand this and then applies this assumption to the interpretation of the Hermac. In other words, Plutarch’s rhetoric here suggests that this association had become virtually commonplace by his time. He may be innovating in his interpretation of the Hermac, but he can’t be with respect to the meaning of the phallus, or his very comment would have been incoherent or even laughable to his readers. The stiff Phallus of the herm simply is the Logos (Plotinus 287)! This would be an absurd statement for a talmudic Rabbi (although, interestingly enough, quite possible in later Judaism). Theories of signification are thus deeply imbricated with and implicated in theories of sexual difference.

No Logos, no Phallus, no father. The symbolic role of the father had also not been fully realized within rabbinic Judaism. As Pietro Pucci has well summed up a virtual topos: “The father comes into being not by sowing his seeds, but with the Logos: for only humans have a father, though animals are often begotten like humans. A father is a figure that, within the strategies of the Logos, acquires a set of meanings and functions. ... In a word, he may be equated to a sort of transcendent signified” (Pucci 3). The father simply does not have that transcendental status in early Jewish culture. Although the father had power over the mother, and is distinctly marked as more important socially, the difference between father and mother functions with respect to the child is not marked symbolically within rabbinic culture. Both have the same ontological status vis-à-vis the child; in short, the father-function is not removed from the system of “commodities” of kinship relations. As Goux, once more, has perspicaciously phrased it: “Western civilization is not patriarchal in the sense in which certain societies have been or still are patriarchal. It is pervaded by the abstraction of the Father” (Goux, Oedipus Philosopher 204). Among these “certain societies” is surely classical rabbinic Judaism, an ideal-type, in this sense, precisely of a patriarchy, because the father was not an abstraction. The abstract “father” in the western civilization is an exact parallel to the abstract phallus. The father for the Rabbis is not a transcendental signified (for all his power and privilege) but a physical genitor exactly like the mother, just as the penis in that culture (for all its socio-religious significance) is no less an organ and a part of a body than is the vulva. Rabbinic Judaism, I suggest, is not pervaded by the abstraction or the Name-of-

48 Such as medieval and early modern kabbalism, as we learn well from the work of Elliot Wolfson. Interestingly enough, just as it seems the Phallus drops out of western philosophy, so fully veiled that it need not be named at all, it becomes central to the discourse of Jewish Neo-Platonism.

49 God is, of course, a sort of transcendental signified in early Jewish culture, and it is not trivial, that Godhead is most often (but not only) imagined as a father. However, as Howard Eilberg-Schwartz has elegantly argued, the disproportion between divine and human father is as relevant as the homology (Eilberg-Schwartz).
the-Father; rabbinic Jewish society was undoubtedly pervaded by the power of fathers.

There is nowhere in rabbinic Judaism a suggestion that the father contributes the essence of the child, in any sense, neither in the Aristotelian "form" vs. "matter," nor in the spirit vs. body that occurs in much of the surrounding cultures of rabbinic Judaism. It seems highly significant that nowhere in rabbinic literature is there a representation, for instance, that would have the body of the embryo supplied by the mother, while the spirit is provided by the father, nor, a fortiori, one in which the father supplies the form and the mother the raw matter.

Indeed, the official and explicit myth of conception in rabbinic texts is a partnership of three in that the father supplies the white parts of the body: bones, teeth, the white of the eye, brain matter; the mother the red parts: blood, muscle, hair, the pupil of the eye; and God supplies the intelligence, the spirit, the soul, eyesight, motion of the limbs, and the radiance of the face [Nidda 30a]. The Rabbis are thus closer to Hippocrates than to either Plato, Aristotle, or to the Oresteia, all of which impugn the significance of the mother as generatrix (Zeitlin 107-12; Hanson). In other words, that which in Aristotle (and many other Greek cultural texts) was bestowed by the father is provided here by God. For rabbinic Judaism, the father and mother provide the matter, the white and the pupil of the eye, and only God provides spirit, the capacity of the eye to see. The father and the mother provide the muscle and sinew, only God provides the spirit, the active motor capacity. Both father's and mother's contributions to the child are equally corporeal within the rabbinic myth (the spirit comes from the Shekhina). I do not suggest, of course, that this has anything to do with "feminism" but it does, it seems, have everything to do with a different orientation towards the gendered

50 Goux writes, "What man brings to procreation is the form of the progeny; what woman brings is matter; so say all mythical discourses on procreation" (Goux, Symbolic Economics 212). Not quite all, it seems, although the fact that the Rabbis generally consider the child to resemble the father (Is this true only of the boy-child?) gives me pause. Strikingly, rabbinic ideas of conception seem very similar to those of the Trobriand islanders, as discussed by Goux following Malinowski. According to that authority, the role of the father as genator is entirely denied and yet, the child is expected to resemble the father and not the mother (Goux, Symbolic Economics 219). In Aristotle, on the other hand, the child can resemble either the father or the mother. These points require considerable further investigation.

51 This point should make it clear, if it is not by now, that the issue here is not a generalized and essentialized binary opposition between Jewish and Greco-Roman culture but an exploration of the ways that certain themes came together in one dominant strand of the latter and were resisted in the former and the consequences of that resistance. Hansen's paper, among its many virtues, makes clear that an agricultural metaphor for the woman's body does not preclude notions of women's seed and equality in the formation of the embryo, for the Hippocrates use such metaphors for the woman's body, but abandon them, as it were, at the moment when the "farmer plants his seed" (Hanson 36-48). I would like to thank Prof. Hanson for her generosity in sharing unpublished work and texts and for very, very useful conversations on these topics over the last several years.
body and its essentiality in the constitution of the human being, that is in the resistance to a platonic ideal self that is before and beyond the gendered body. Not surely feminism in any sense, but certainly materialism.

Isaak Heinemann himself described midrash, long before Derrida, as the “shattering of the Logos” (Heinemann). What is most striking and troubling about midrash is, indeed, its refusal to interpret words as signifiers that are paired with signifieds in any stable fashion. Classical midrash interprets the forms of letters, even decorative flourishes, grammatically required but semantically empty particles, and fragments of words (sometimes taking a part of a Hebrew word and reading it as Greek!). All these phenomena suggest an entirely different sensibility about the meaning of meaning from the logocentric one that drives western thought (including most Jewish thought from the earliest Middle Ages or).

Interpretation is the dominant mode of commentary in a culture within which value is expressed in terms of an abstract, universal, and in itself substance-free standard: the coin. By interpretation I mean virtually all of our methods of formal response to texts by which the text is taken to mean something, by which meaning is extractable from a text and presentable, even if incompletely and not exactly, in paraphrase. Even the most extremely antiparaphrastic of western interpretative methods, for instance the poem-interpretation of the New Critics, still is infinitely more paraphrastic than midrash, which simply refuses to take even the text as verbal icon, preferring almost to read each word, and sometimes each letter, and sometimes the shape of the letter or even its serifs, as a virtual icon in itself. One way to bring this point home would be to insist that even according to those who would argue that “a poem must not mean but be,” the poem remains at least partially translatable. With the modes of linguistic operation which are characteristic of early midrash in place, the text is simply untranslatable (something on the order of the untranslatability of Finnegans Wake). Too many of the features upon which midrash founds its meanings are simply artefacts of the materiality of the language in its Hebrew concreteness. Midrash is the dominant mode of commentary in a signifying economy without the “universal equivalent.” Famous by now is the moment in talmudic legend when God himself seeks to intervene in midrashic interpretation and is informed that he has no status whatever since the majority of the sages disagree with his interpretation. In commentary, at any rate, for the Rabbis, even the deity is not the measure of all things. The final sections of the paper will be an attempt to illustrate what such commentary looks like.

The hypothesis that I wish to offer here is, then, that early rabbinic culture, and particularly midrash as its emblematic mode of discourse and especially of commentary, is the (surely not unique) product of a particular set of historical circumstances, neither determined wholly by a “material” base nor the product of some kind of mystical special understanding either. The set of historical circumstances that produced midrash is, on this speculation, the product of a cultural situation within which an intensive communal effort at the production of commentary took
place within a discourse which understood itself to be a non-monetary economy, once again, Neusner's “demonetization,” understood as a politico-symbolic practice and not a “real” historical situation. If allegory (interpretation) is the archetypical commentatorial mode of a monetary economy, then, I would suggest midrash is the typical commentatorial mode that corresponds to barter. Like the presocratic Archilochus who in his metaphors “barterers without money” (Shell, *Economy* 55), early rabbinc interpretation, true midrash, barterers without money, exchanges signification for signification, or places significations side by side, without positing a realm of abstract meaning.

In order to rend this point clear (and to prepare as well for a later and related point), let me give an example: A certain analysand came to a colleague of mine, Dr. Michael Pokorny, and related a dream in which the adjective “talismanic” was used. The analyst interpreted this as a reference to the man’s grandfather, “the talis man,” i.e., the traditional Jew who wore the prayer-shawl, the talis. This dream text, if this is the mode of interpretation, is only intelligible in the English, and the Torah, according to the very similar methods of midrashic reading is only intelligible in Hebrew. If allegory is founded on the equivalence of concrete objects with an abstract measure of value and meaning, midrash is founded on the exchangeability of concrete objects, signs, directly one with another without passing through an abstract meta-language of meaning. To be sure, even barter ultimately involves logically the presumption of a “value” as a supersensible and immaterial substance in which the “use value” of one commodity is expressed as the value of another (Dolar 67-68). And ultimately, even midrash in its concreteness, in its production of narratives beside narratives and refusal of abstract meanings and paraphrases, is, of course, proposing in some sense meaning. However, just as in barter, the immaterial substance “value” seems to remain unexpressed, so also meaning in midrash. Just as in barter the equation “1 quarter ton of wheat = x of iron” just seems to be the equivalence of a concrete with a concrete, a material with a material entity, so also the values that are expressed when midrash puts narrative beside narrative. Perhaps, heuristically, we might argue that midrash is most like that Egyptian economy within which there were coins to measure the values of commodities but they were never exchanged. What were exchanged were the commodities themselves (Goux, *Oedipus Philosopher* 127).

“The privileged position of language as a phonic signifier potentially equivalent to all other signifiers through the operation of verbal expression,” as Goux so sharply has put it, represents the very foundation of any science of western

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52 Throughout this text, I am distinguishing between “commentary” as a purely formal structure of a text accompanying closely another text and “interpretation” which is a particular and singular mode of commentary, “one that requires the text or its figures ‘to produce an identity.’” (Ronell 186 as quoted by Anidjar).

53 This “true” is merely a term of convenience, not an ascription of essence.
interpretation. Language, according to this view, operates as a system of abstract signifiers in another ontological space, as it were, from the things that they signify with two results for hermeneutics. On the one hand, signifiers are paired in a reiterable way with particular signifieds (Saussure’s famous double-articulation) and, on the other hand, the pairing is arbitrary (the second great foundation of Saussure’s linguistics). The phonic sign is thus removed from the circulation of meanings, referents, in just the way that money is removed from the circulation of commodities and the Phallus from the circulation of bodies. This understanding of language is so foundational for our interpretative practices that it becomes almost impossible to think any other one.

Midrash can be plausibly interpreted as a system for reading texts within which it is not the case that “all meaning is condensed in a few graphic signs of phonetic value, just as economic exchange-value appears to be reified in official currency” (Goux, *Symbolic Economies* 71). If all of our methods of interpretation, whether suspicious or not, are finally founded on the assumption that a text can be “translated,” or paraphrased, that at least a great deal of its “meaning” can be expressed in other words, precisely because concrete language points to abstract meanings, midrash refuses such translatability entirely. The extended discussion of a particular, and highly privileged, form of midrash, the mashal will bear out this observation.

[3] *Dugma: The Mashal vs. Interpretation*

Western hermeneutics is a hermeneutics of interpretation. One text is stated to mean another through the mediation of the Logos. The most obviously logocentric of hermeneutical modes is allegory *strictu sensu*, and the most often allegorized text in the western tradition is arguably The Song of Songs. The following text will accordingly effectively demonstrate the anti-allegorical cast of midrashic reading. A further purpose of this analysis will be to show that commentary without the Logos can be as sophisticated and complex as anything that a logocentric western culture can offer. Precisely the obsession with reading combined with the relative social and economic “primitivity” opened the way for salient alternative modes of understanding to the paraphrastic ones that the Logos economy makes available:

> And command you the Israelites that they will bring olive oil [Exodus 27:20]. Your eyes are doves [Song of Songs 1:15].

Rabbi Yishaq said, God said to them, Your dugma is like that of a dove. One who wishes to buy wheat says to his associate,

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54 Some of the argument of the following paragraphs is taken from Boyarin, “Take the Bible for Example” where it served quite different purposes.
show me their dugma, you also: your dugma is like that of a dove. How so? When Noah was in the ark what is written? And he sent the dove [Genesis 8:10], and the dove came to him in the evening [and behold, it was grasping an olive leaf in its mouth] [Genesis 8:11]. Said the Holy One to Israel, just as the dove brought light into the world, also you who have been compared [nimšalt] to a dove, bring olive oil and light before me, for it says, And command you the Israelites that they will bring olive oil (Buber, Midrash Tanhuma 2:96).

This is a complex and interesting text that justifies a somewhat lengthy analysis. In typical midrashic fashion, it uses a passage from the later Holy Writings to interpret a passage from the Five Books of Moses. This is a midrashic text of the type called “petiṭa,” the motive of which is to show how all of the Prophets and Holy Writings can be shown to be commentary on the Torah. Accordingly, R. Yishq demonstrates here that the verse of Song of Songs is a commentary on a passage in Exodus. The way that The Song of Songs is understood to interpret is by its being a mashal, a parable or example.

In the Hebrew of the midrash and of the Talmud, the same words mean “example” and “parable,” and this is a point that is going to be of some importance to me later on in the argument. The Rabbis actually use the word “dugma,” a normal word for “sample” or “example,” as another name for the mashal, or midrashic parable, that special kind of exemplary narrative that they deployed as a hermeneutic key for the understanding of the Torah. It is not insignificant that these two words derive from different lexical sources in Hebrew, “dugma” being of course a Greek-derived word while “mashal” is of Semitic origin. “Dugma,” from Greek δείγμα carries with it from its etymon more abstract senses of “pattern,” “model” as well as “sample” or “example,” while “mashal” has an original and basic sense of “likeness.” We learn the partial equivalence of these two vocables from the following text:

And not only that Kohellet was wise, he moreover taught knowledge to the people, and proved and researched [yahqor], and formulated many meshalim [= parables; Ecclesiastes 12:9] “and proved” words of Torah, “and researched” words of Torah, he made handles for the Torah. You will find that until Solomom came forth, there was no dugma (Dunskey 5).

The last sentence in the midrash, “until Solomom existed there was no dugma” is a paraphrase of the last phrase in the verse, “formulated many meshalim.” It follows that the midrash has glossed “meshalim” by “dugma.” We will see, moreover, below that the verb “researched,” ḤQR, for the Rabbis, is also glossable by “dugma,” and means, something like to find an ad hoc (not universal) standard for
comparison of a given object. "Dugma," it is clear, is a synonym for "mashal." "Example" becomes "parable."

The Song of Songs is the parable that Solomon produced in order to make handles for the Torah. In contrast to an allegorical (logocentric) culture of commentary within which the Song is figured as an enigma that needs to be solved, in midrash, it is the Torah which is enigma and the Song of Songs which provides the solution. The same midrash in the preem to Song of Songs Rabbah continues by giving a series of *meshalim* or *dugnot* (the plural of *dugma*) to explain "dugma":

Rabbi Naḥman said two: It is like a great palace that has many doors, and anyone who goes into one would err from the way to the door. A sage came and hung a clue [of thread] on the doorway. And now, everyone came in and went out by way of the door.55 Similarly: Until Solomon came forth, no one could understand the words of Torah, but once Solomon came forth, everyone began to make sense of the Torah.

Rav Naḥman gave also another version: It was like a thicket of canes, and no one could enter it. A sage came and took a scythe and cleared [a path]. Everyone began to enter through the clearing. Similarly: Solomon.

Rabbi Yose said: Like a large basket full of fruit, and it had no handle, and it couldn't be carried. A sage came and made handles for it, and it began to be carried by its handles. Similarly: Until Solomon came forth, no one could understand the words of Torah, but once Solomon came forth, everyone began to make sense of the Torah.

Rabbi Shila said: Like a cauldron full of boiling water, and it had no handle with which to be carried. And someone came and made it a handle, and it could now be carried by its handle.

Rabbi Hanina said: Like a deep well full of water, and its water was cold and sweet and good, but no creature could drink from it. And someone came and attached a rope to a rope, a chain to a chain, and drew from it and drank. Everyone began to draw water from it and drink. Similarly: From word to word, from mashal to mashal, Solomon understood the secret of Torah, for it is written (Proverbs 1): "These are the meshalim of Solomon

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55 This usage is, according to Webster's Third International, the origin of the modern sense of "clue," as first the thread that enables one to find one's way and thence the thread of a narrative.
the son of David, King of Israel." By means of his meshalim, Solomon came to understand the words of Torah.

This is a remarkable series of meshalim, of dugmot for the activity of commentary itself. Either the text is a labyrinth which one enters and cannot exit from, without a thread of Ariadne, or it is a thicket that one cannot enter into at all. Either it is a basket of fruit that one cannot take advantage of, or even more ominously, a cauldron of boiling water that without handles might cause one to burn oneself or even kill oneself. The final dugma is, however, perhaps the richest of all. Exactly at the point where one would expect an image of surface and depth, such a figure is avoided. The Torah’s language is not the well, and the meaning the water, but The Torah is the sweet water itself, in a well so deep that one cannot get the bucket down there at all without tying a rope to a rope. That is what Solomon did. He connected text to text via the medium of the mashal, and thus produced a rope long enough so that everyone can send down a bucket and come up with the sweet water of understanding of the Torah. The Song of Songs is the rope that provides the dugma that enables “everyone to make sense of the Torah.” Still we could imagine that the point of these images is that one goes down into the depths of the Torah and draws out from there, from below the surface, the meanings, but the actual practice of midrash, of dugma, of mashal, reveals clearly that this is not the point of the image.

The time has come to begin reading our actual example of dugna. “Your eyes are doves” [Song of Songs 1:15]. Rabbi Yishaq said, God said to them, Your dugma is like that of a dove.” The Song of Songs is the mashal, the parable, the dugma that Solomon formulated to “make handles for” the Torah. But the Song of Songs is hardly an interpretation or paraphrase of the Torah in any sense that is intelligible to western hermeneutics. Indeed, in the west (including later Judaism), the Song of Songs as allegory is the text that requires interpretation, not the text that provides the handles with which to read another text. This is the distance between allegory and mashal.

This hermeneutic relation is adumbrated in the cited text by the focus upon one highly privileged instance of an elucidatory use of the Song, namely the metaphorical depiction of Israel as a dove. The key to the midrash is its opening move, which I cite here from its original source in the midrash on Song of Songs: “Your eyes are doves” [Song of Songs 1:15]. Your dugma is like that of a dove” (Dunsky 49). This hermeneutic assertion is based on an elaborate pun. The Hebrew word “ayin” (“eye”) also has the meaning “color.” From this sense derives a series of prepositions, such as “me’ein” and “ke’ein”, which mean “according to the likeness of; following the example of.” From this there develops a midrashic topos by which verses that include the word “eye” can be glossed as having the sense of “dugma” as form or likeness, “figure” in both the sense of plastic form and the spiritual or moral significance.
Thematizing the notion of example directly, the text of R. Yishqiq constitutes a meta-midrash, a rare and precious explicit rabbinic comment on hermeneutics. The text depends for its effect on the fact that “dugma” is polysemous. In fact, I would suggest that the text plays with this polysemy deliberately, creating examples within examples, each of a slightly different type.

In his initial move after “translating” *Your eyes are like doves* by “Your dugma is like that of a dove,” Rabbi Yishqiq explains the meaning of “dugma” by exemplifying it with the little narrative of one who goes to the market to buy wheat and brings home a sample first. (Note that for this midrash itself, the generation of a parallel between economic and hermeneutic life seems an almost irresistible impulse). The primary usage of “dugma” is thus that of “sample” in the sense of a small portion of a substance that serves as a way of communicating to others the properties of the substance, as, for instance, a small amount of colored wool that a dyer would carry about as an indication of the quality of his wares and work:

*The tailor should not go out at the advent of the Sabbath with the needle in his garment, nor the carpenter with the splinter on his collar, nor the dyer with the dugma on his ear, nor the money changer with the dinar in his ear.* [Tosefta Shabbat 1:8]

This text describes craftsmen whose custom is to advertise by carrying a small sign of their trade. The dyer would attach to his ear [or put in his ear] a small sample of dyed cloth, so that people would know what his work was, just as the money changer would advertise himself with a coin and the carpenter with a splinter. The dugma, here then, has two signifying functions. It serves as a conventional sign of the trade of its bearer but also as an iconic sign of his ability and standards. If we compare it to the other two signs mentioned in the text, which are not called “dugma,” the point will become clearer. On the one hand, the dugma of the dyer functions like the needle of the tailor or the splinter of the carpenter. It tells people that the trade of this person is such and such. On the other hand, the dugma stands in a part-whole relationship to the dyer’s product and as such signifies directly the quality of his work. The word “dugma” here signifies a concrete portion of a mass [a “fusion” of all such similar objects] which through its characteristics manifests the characteristics of the entire mass. The mass which it signifies is just as concrete as the portion of the mass, as the dugma. In English we would use the word “sample” or “specimen” to convey this meaning. Dugma, then, clearly has the sense of “sample” or “example” as a portion or member of a class chosen and pointed out to show the characteristics of the entire class. The operative figure here is, then, synecdoche.

When God addressed Israel with the metaphor *Your eyes are doves*, he was saying according to R. Yishqiq, that the dugma of Israel is like that of a dove. In order to illustrate this point, the rabbi gives an example of the literary form “dugma,” that is to say, a dugma of dugma. The first dugma is very concrete
indeed. It refers to the simplest usage of the word that I considered above, that of a sample of merchandise. This dugma of dugma [the dugma of the comparison of dugma to the sample of wheat] has its own parabolic application, namely, it exemplifies the type: parabolic signification. It is a dugma of the class “dugma” in exactly the same way that the dugma of the sample of wheat is a dugma of all the wheat. Everything is equally concrete. The sample of wheat is as concrete as the silo full of wheat from which it was taken. Similarly, the example of the “wheat” is as concrete as the group [fusion not class] of other instances of parabolic discourse to which it is being compared. Nelson Goodman has discussed exactly this type of exemplification as its very prototypical form:

Exemplification is reference by a sample to a feature of it. A tailor’s swatch, in normal use, exemplifies its color, weave, and thickness, but not its size or shape, the note a concertmaster sounds before the performance exemplifies pitch but not timber, duration, or loudness.

Exemplification, then, far from being a variety of denotation, runs in the opposite direction, not from label to what the label applies to but from something a label applies to back to the label [or the feature associated with that label]. ... Exemplification is not mere possession of a feature but requires also reference to that feature; such reference is what distinguishes the exemplified from the merely possessed features (Goodman 124-5).

Goodman thus gives as his most basic type of example precisely the type that R. Yišaḥq adduced as his, the sample used by the merchant or tradesman to show off his wares.

Following the self-reflexive exemplification of dugma, the relation of the dove to Israel is discussed as similar to the relation of a sample of wheat to all of the wheat, or of this particular dugma [= example] to the whole category of dugma [= exemplification]. Israel’s dugma is a dove, just as the dugma of the wheat is the sample. This comparison is, however, considerably more complex. It is not nearly so straightforward as the one that compares the ratio of an example to the class “exemplification” with the ratio of a sample of wheat to the fusion “wheat,” for, after all, a dove is not a member of the fusion “Israel” nor of the class “Israel.” What we have here is what Goodman calls “complex reference.” The way that “Israel’s dugma is like a dove” works is most similar to the following case cited by Goodman:

I may answer your question about the color of my house by showing a sample rather than by uttering a predicate; or I may merely describe the location of the appropriate sample on a color card you have. In the latter case, the chain of reference runs down from a verbal label to an instance denoted and then
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up to another label [or feature] exemplified. And a picture of a
bald eagle denotes a bird that may exemplify a label such as
"bold and free" that in turn denotes and is exemplified by a
given country.56

Note that this is almost precisely the way that "Israel's dugma is like a dove"
functions. The word picture "dove" denotes a bird that exemplifies a label that in
turn denotes and is exemplified by a given people, Israel. However, we must rec-
ognize (as certainly Goodman does) that the exemplification of the label "bold
and free" by a bald eagle — actual, depicted, or denoted — is a culturally deter-
mined or intertextual function. The process of interpretation by exemplification is
thus a picking out of the feature to which the exemplification will refer. The
phrase "your dugma is like a dove" means a feature that you possess is like a
feature of a dove, and by pointing to that feature in the denotation, "dove," that
feature is referred to — exemplified. And what is that? Both the dove and Israel
are light-bringers. The dove brought light to the world by bringing an olive
branch, the concrete symbol of light, and Israel brings light to the world by
bringing oil to the Temple.57 Thus finally, but in a very complex way, dove and
Israel do stand to each other in a relation similar to the relation of the sample of
wheat to the rest of the wheat. Israel and the dove are both members of the fusion,
"light-bringers."

It is important, however, to make clear that the Rabbis are not thereby exhaust-
ing the description of a dove or of Israel. There is no abstraction here (in either a
nominalistic or a realist sense) but the placing of a concrete entity beside another
concrete entity in such a way that characteristics that are obscure in the one are
revealed by association with those same characteristics in the other, where they
are obvious or explicit.58 This possibility of exemplifying Israel by a dove, once
established on conventional, cultural, intertextual grounds, can be (as will yet be
seen) very productive of other exemplifications. In other words, the very process
of reading by example produces (cultural) knowledge.

It is certainly illuminating to note once more how close this brings us to
Goodman's descriptions:

56 Goodman 127, emphasis added.
57 For the olive as a symbol of "light" in rabbincic dream interpretation, see Hasan-Rokem
110-15.
58 Interestingly enough, Goux himself exemplifies this "midrashic" mode of interpretation at
least once when he places Engels beside Freud and argues: "We have only to adhere as
closely as possible to their respective discourses, deliberately but barely touching them
together to match them, like the scattered pieces of a puzzle needing simply juxtaposition in
order to reveal a new shape" (Goux, Symbolic Economies 215). This is almost exactly what
"dugma" does.
Such correlative chains must be understood as schematic constructions, and not by any means as providing literal translations for metaphors. The transfer of "mouse" from mice to a man may not be via the label "timid" or any other specific predicate. Moreover, metaphorical transfer need not follow antecedently established coexemplifications of a feature or label, verbal or nonverbal; the metaphorical application itself may participate in effecting coexemplification by the mice and the man of some one or more of their common features; and just what is exemplified may be sought rather than found (Goodman 128).

This seems to me a near-perfect description of the hermeneutic process by which the midrash establishes that Israel's dugma is a dove and then seeks the answer to what this means. In the hermeneutics by example which rabbinic midrash practices, this becomes a doubly productive process, for once a certain mashal is established on the grounds of a given verse, that very metaphorical coexemplification is used precisely to seek that which is exemplified. The common midrashic questions: "Why is the Torah compared to water?" and "Why is Israel compared to a dove?" are exact object correlatives of this searching process.

"Dugma" also conveys the meaning of the whole correlative chain or schematic construction that effects a coexemplification and points to a common feature between the denoted object and the example. We find this usage with reference to the unknowable essence of God Himself:

Tsorfar Hana'mati said to Job: Will you discover the extent of God's nature [hêger]? ... His measure is longer than the Universe [Job 11:7 and 9]. Who can research [yathgor] his dugma, but indeed, will you grasp the height of the heavens? [verse 8]. What is the meaning of will you grasp the height of the heavens? Are you able to describe the One who made the heavens and the earth? Even Moses, who arose to the firmament and received the Torah from hand to hand did not understand his form (Buber, The Midrash on Psalms 452).

"Dugma" here obviously does not mean "example" or "sample" but something like "God's essential form." This emerges from the context, where it is clear that what is being talked about is the inability of humans to perceive or understand the essence of God. Even Moses, who was closer to God than any other human being, to whom God showed himself, could not understand God's dugma or describe him. The biblical Hebrew word hêger, which I have translated "extent of God's nature," is here again (as in the instance of Solomon above) glossed by "dugma;" so understanding hêger may give us some insight into "dugma."

The verb from which the biblical noun is derived means to delve, to search out, to explore. The noun, as the object of the activity of the verb, often connotes that
which is deep, hidden, essential, and unsearchable. Thus the sea is described in Job 38:16 as having no ḥeqer. The most significant text for our exploration here is, however, the following passage from Isaiah:

Unto whom will you compare me, and to whom am I similar, says the Holiness. Raise up your eyes to the heavens and see who created these ... Do you not know, have you not heard? The eternal God ... His wisdom is unfathomable [has no ḥeqer]

(Israel 40:25-28).

The second quoted verse follows logically from the first. God’s wisdom is unfathomable because there is no one to whom he can be compared, that is to say in rabbinic parlance, he has no dugma, no other member of his class, no standard with which to compare him. It seems quite likely that this text of Isaiah is what lies behind the glossing of “ḥeqer” by “dugma” in the midrash. The same verb, yahqer “research,” was used above to describe Solomon’s activity of teaching Torah to the people, and also glossed by “dugma” in the midrash. We thus disclose something of the significance of dugma itself. It is by placing an individual into a class that we can understand its nature. Or better, because this formulation almost inevitably leads us into a Logos, an abstract class or category: by placing an individual beside others and denoting those others, we see what the features are that characterize that individual and understand them. Rather than the logic of classes, what we need here is something like prototype (or family similarity) semantic theory, in which items are grouped owing to shared features, without their entering into an abstract pattern or class. God, in being sui generis, is thus beyond our ken, although, somewhat paradoxically, it was precisely through the medium of the mashal — i.e., as opposed to theology —, that the Rabbis were able to evince something of God as they experienced and understood him.

“Dugma” is thus a denoted object that refers to a label or feature exemplified between the object we wish to understand and the dugma. At the same time, however, it is also the exemplified label or feature itself. This explains, by the way, the vacillation between “your dugma is a dove,” “your dugma is like a dove,” and “your dugma is like that of a dove.” Putting this into Goux’s terms, we see here the logical equivalent of “the stage of primitive barter, commodities are declared identical to each other and thus of equal value for exchange purposes.” There is, for God, no such other commodity, but God is also not the measuring standard, the universal equivalent, by which other entities are measured and described. Were there, however, a notion of “universal equivalent,” then philosophy, i.e.,

59 See Lacan alluding to Kant: “the rule of reason, the Vernunftsgesetz, is always some Vergleichung, or equivalent” (Lacan, Four Fundamental Concepts 21).

60 I hope to develop this idea further in future versions of this project. See Lakoff.
theology would have existed and some possibility of description of God, even in negative terms, would have been conceivable.

What we learn here finally is that reading for the Rabbis consists not of translating or paraphrasing a text by its meaning but finding (or making) some other text to which it can be declared, in some sense, identical in value. Texts are bartered for other texts, as it were, and the mashal, which in its very semantics declares its equal value, is thus the prototype of midrash.

As in Rabbi Yishaq’s discourse, moving from example as a denoted object to example as a denoted narrative raises the complexity of analysis geometrically. However, when we read a mashal, we will see a correspondence between the semantic complexity of the notion of example and the semiotic complexity of the functioning of the example narrative. A mashal is an explicitly fictional narrative that is placed beside an obscure biblical narrative as a means of bringing light to its dark places, or, in modern literary terms, filling in gaps. Our very dugga here, a dugga of light-bringing, thus forms a perfect dugga for dugga. This description of commentary via the dugga as the illumination of obscure textual sites is, moreover, “native” to rabbinic texts themselves, as we shall presently see. As the dominant mode of early rabbinic reading, it thus provides a direct contrast with allegoresis. In allegory (interpretation), a story is taken to signify a set of meanings — it is dominated, therefore, by the Jakobsonian sign of metaphor; in midrash, a story is placed beside another story, and connections or analogies between the stories provide mutual illumination of understanding without paraphrase or translation into abstraction. Its dominant sign is, therefore, metonymy.

There is in the mashal both a fictional text and a textual representation of the “actual” events, standing in the relation of example and exemplified, as the dove stands to Israel. The figure of Israel as a dove became, in fact, one of the most productive sources of the mashal. One such text is found in Song of Songs Rabba, on the verse “My dove in the clefts of the rock, let me hear thy voice” (Song of Songs 2:14):

The one of the house of R. Ishmael teaches: In the hour in which Israel went out from Egypt, to what were they similar? To a dove that ran away from a hawk, and entered the cleft of a rock and found there a nesting snake. She entered within, but could not go in, because of the snake; she could not go back, because of the hawk that was waiting outside. What did the dove do? She began to cry out and beat her wings, in order that the owner of the dovecote would hear and come to save her. That is how Israel appeared at the Sea. They could not go down into the Sea, for the Sea had not yet been split for them. They could not go back, for Pharaoh was coming near. What did they do? “They were mightily afraid, and the Children of Israel cried out
unto the Lord” [Exodus 14:10], and immediately, “The Lord saved them on that day” [Exodus 14:30] (Dunsky 72-73).

The text here rests on two common rabbinic assumptions — the identification of Israel with a dove, one of the sources of which we have seen above, and the identification of the entire Song of Songs as a dialogue between God and Israel at the time of the Crossing of the Red Sea (Boyarin, *Intertextuality* 105-16). What is going on in this text? First of all, the figurative utterance, “My dove in the clefts of the rock, let me hear thy voice,” is being expanded into a full narrative, or rather it is being provided with a narrative context in which it can be read. What is the dove doing in the clefts of the rock? Who is addressing her? Why does he want to hear her voice, or why is it necessary that she makes a sound? All of these questions are answered by filling in the gaps of the narrative (Stemberg 186-229). The dove is in the rock because she is afraid. But the rock is not a sufficient protection for her. The speaker is her master, and she must cry out so that he will save her. However, the claim is also being made that this figure refers to a concrete situation in Israel’s history, the crisis situation at the shore of the Red Sea. In order that we experience that situation fully, that we understand the predicament of the People, why they cried out unto the Lord and why he answered them, the verse of Song of Songs is associated with it by means of the mashal or narrative figure. The way that this parable is linked to the biblical story is identical to the way that the dove is linked to Israel in the meta-midrash above.

This is an interpretation, then, not so much of a verse of Song of Songs as of a verse of Exodus. The Rabbis explicitly refer to the Holy Song as a mashal, which is for them synonymous with fiction (Boyarin, “Take the Bible for Example” 30); and, moreover, they clearly refer to the hermeneutic function of the fictional text:

The rabbis say: Do not let this mashal be light in your eyes, for by means of this mashal one comes to comprehend the words of Torah. A mashal to a king who has lost a golden coin from his house or a precious pearl — does he not find it by means of a wick worth a penny? Similarly, let not this mashal be light in your eyes, for by means of this mashal one comes to comprehend the words of Torah. Know that this is so, for Solomon, by means of this mashal [i.e., The Song of Songs], understood the exact meaning of the Torah. Rabbi Yehuda says: it is to teach you that everyone who teaches words of Torah to the many is privileged to have the Holy Spirit descend upon him. From whom do we learn this? From Solomon, who because he taught words of Torah to the many was privileged to have the Holy Spirit descend upon him and utter three books, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs.
It follows that for the Rabbis, the Song of Songs is the parable that Solomon formulated in order that the people will understand the Torah. Characteristically enough, and as we have seen, in order to explain the importance of the mashal, the Rabbis use a mashal. (There is, for them, no meta-language). The fictional text of the king who has lost his pearl interprets the “real” one by being put beside [parabole] it and thus exemplifying some feature that is discovered as common to it and the “real” story (and thus present in the real story). Since in the mashal what is being referred to is a story — the story of Solomon’s revealing the meaning (not the interpretation but the significance) — of the Torah via the Song of Songs, it is the meaning of the story in this sense that is the exemplified label or feature.

Similarly, the meaning of the events in Exodus is revealed by associating this text with another narrative, the fictional narrative of the Song of Songs, with its dove and dovecote. The placing of a fictional narrative beside a real one is the association of the concrete with the concrete — the fictional particular with the actual particular. The figures of the Song of Songs are made concrete by being identified with particular situations and characters from the Torah history. However, those situations and characters are also made more intelligible and concrete by being associated with the very homely figure of the dove, the dovecote, and the dove’s master. This double concretization is achieved, however, by an exemplified label, the dugma, with respect to which the characteristics of the two concrete examples can be said to be alike. The text always explicitly or implicitly cites a specific feature or label under which the comparison of the two particulars is applicable, to which the exemplification refers.

However, as we have seen, the word “dugma” has a double meaning. In the case of a sample of wheat, “dugma” means the sample, but in the case of the dove and Israel, it means rather the exemplified feature or label (or even the potential set of such exemplified features or labels). Once more, that is why the text says there “Your dugma is like a dove,” and not “Your dugma is a dove.”

The mashal or dugma thus provides a very elegant dugma of midrash as a whole. If the dominant mode of interpretation is metaphor: This means something; the dominant mode of midrash is metonymy: This should be put aside this something else. The something else is always more concrete language, frequently another narrative, not a translation of arbitrary and fixed signs into an abstract plane of meaning. In a culture in which spirit is not privileged over flesh (Boyarin, Carnal Israel), the only way in which a text can be read is by the production of more text on the same ontological and logical level as the text that is being read. This is the distinctiveness of midrash.


Galit Hasan-Rokem points out in her new book on folk literature in Palestinian midrash: “The discourse of dream interpretation of [the Rabbis] was connected
with the dominant interpretative discourse that they employed, the commentary on the Bible and interpretation of written texts]" (Hasan-Rokem 109). Hasan-Rokem cites there a very elegant example in which a dreamer dreams that his dead father commands him to go to Cappadocia. Upon ascertaining that the father had never been to that place, the dream interpreter suggests the following: "Count to the tenth beam in your father's house, and there you will find his treasure." And so it was, the treasure was in the κατακά σκοτία. κατακά is the tenth letter of the Greek alphabet, and the relatively rare word "δοκός" means a roof or floor beam.61 We see here a non-allegorical, non-interpretative reading practice at its epitome. As Hasan-Rokem has pointed out perspicaciously, rabbinic dream-interpretation practices (as indeed those of the ancient world in general, including such exemplary figures as Artemidorus) seem very similar to modern practices of the interpretation of dream-language, both psychoanalytic and cognitive. This example is strikingly like the "talisman" instance cited above. I would, therefore, argue that for the Rabbis, the reading of texts was not unlike the interpretation of dreams (Hasan-Rokem 116).62 The point is not, as some theorists have claimed, that Freud was somehow influenced by midrash in the development of his interpretation of dreams, but rather that the Rabbis read texts in a dream-interpretation-like fashion (Handelman; Frieden; Hasan-Rokem 142). As Hasan-Rokem emphasizes, at least one text indicates that the same expertise and spiritual characteristics are requisite for successful dream interpretation and for successful Torah interpretation, or rather that intensive training in the reading of Torah renders one capable of interpreting dream-texts as well (Hasan-Rokem 118). In other words, I would suggest that language itself was perceived by them in a non-logocentric, or perhaps better-stated, not yet fully logocentric modality. For the earliest Rabbis, both the language of dreams and the language of texts work through rebus, through puns, through the concrete forms of letters, through allusions to verses of the Bible, and all of the phenomena that Heinemann has referred to as "creative

61 Palestinian Talmud, Ma'aser Shenai, chapter 4. In the versions in the Palestinian midrash, Eikha Rabba, that Hasan-Rokem analyzes, the interpretation is included within the text itself, in two versions. In one version, κατακά is interpreted as "twenty," because the letter kof represents the number twenty in the Hebrew system of using letters as numbers, and δοκός read there as "beam." In another version, found in other mss., κατακά is interpreted as "beam," and δοκός is read as if it were δέκα! This is an example, similar to many exposed by my teacher, Prof. Saul Lieberman, in which rabbinic literature provides evidence for the everyday use in late antique Greek of a word that is otherwise only attested rarely in Greek literature. I have consulted with my colleague, Erich Gruen, on the distribution of the word.

62 Some would claim, therefore, that midrash is literally dream interpretation, i.e., that the Rabbis considered the Torah to be oracles and read it as such. This constitutes, from my point of view, an ethnocentric begging of the question.
philology," and that we can see are no philology at all but rather a sort of misology.63

A very elegant example of such misology can be offered from a classical midrash text, a text that has, moreover, important legal consequences, indeed potentially lethal consequences, since it involves the assessment of a verse that deals with capital punishment. It is striking how similar the midrashic understanding adopted in this highly serious context, both in origin (Scripture) and consequence, is to the example of rabbinic dream-interpretation just adduced. In this text, Rabbi Akiva argues with respect to a verse that includes as the object of capital punishment the plural feminine pronoun 'ethem, that only one of the two female offenders is, in fact, to be executed. When objected to that the pronoun is plural, Rabbi Akiva's response is that hen in Greek means "one"[1], exactly the sort of interpretation that we found above for Cappadocia and as far from a logocentric understanding of language as could be imagined. This is in a situation of the most serious religious endeavor imaginable, assessment of the law of Holy Scripture in a capital case.

It is precisely at this site that we mark the difference between midrash and the later logocentricity of Jewish signification practices, as Maimonides gives the absolute difference in meaning of a word that sounds the same in two languages (Hebrew and Arabic) as the basis and cause for a misunderstanding, while for Rabbi Akiva, this is the basis and cause for understanding. As Gil Anidjar has written of this exemplary moment in Maimonides, the Aristotelian par excellence of later rabbinic tradition: "The encounter between the two languages effectively sundered the word 'aba [Hebrew: he wanted] or 'abâ [Arabic: he refused] — which, according to the description that precedes, still qualify as "one word [kalima]" — from its signification, or, more accurately, it sundered its signification (dalâla) into two in both languages. It is, moreover, one word that goes in two directions at once establishing, or rather ungrounding, an incommensurable difference which is not, strictly speaking, discernible or knowable but must be read. This is however also covered over, as we saw, since the dalâla also marks the very knowledge of one's 'own' language. It is that language "itself" — assuming such self-identity is still possible — which gets in the way and interferes in the gravest manner, leading one to believe that one knows what one has said, or what one has heard. Accurately enough, then, Maimonides remains in the right when he asserts that no knowledge (one may want to say, no meaning, no signification) is exchanged in the process, since what has been communicated, if at

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63 It will be of great interest to observe if and to what extent such methods are used in the commentaries on texts outside of the rabbinic tradition and even in other Greek commentary traditions, but this is, up to a point, outside of the scope of this project.
all, is wrong” (Anidjar). But, for Rabbi Akiva, what has been communicated through a misconnaissance of Hebrew as Greek is — right. It is exactly in the breakdown between languages that the earlier Rabbi marks the absence of the Logos.

One could claim, however, at this point that there is not yet any evidence for a different understanding of language per se on the part of the Rabbis, that precisely the comparison between methods of dream-interpretation and Torah-interpretation suggests only a commonality in the understanding of mantic language. It would, accordingly, seemingly be easy to dismiss the thesis of this essay if one could claim that the Rabbis ascribed some special status to Divine language alone and that with respect to human language, their interpretative methods were identical to those of the “Greeks,” and ours. However, this does not seem to be the case. At least some Rabbis used dream-like, midrash-like methods for the application of *contractus* as well. In other words, I am suggesting that at least for Rabbi Akiva and his school among the early rabbis, it is precisely the distinction between sacred signifier and language that has not appeared (or has been resisted). Goux describes the platonic revolution in language: “Meaning no longer appears, as the symbolist illusion of sacerdotal writing would have it, to be adherent in the signifying material; it exists apart from the sensuous element. A reification of meaning, in the form of a transcendentalized Logos, can then [but has not yet in Rabbi Akiva’s midrash, DB] take place” (Goux, *Symbolic Economies* 172). This reification is precisely what is absent in Rabbi Akiva’s midrash. Meaning still does appear there to be adherent in the sacerdotal signifying material. As Thomson has pointed out, “[P]uns [are] a universal characteristic of primitive speech, designed to invest it with a magical or mystical significance” (Thomson, *Philosophers* 132). Lacan himself, interestingly enough, seems to have had some sense of this difference of rabbinic commentary. Certainly his repeated and famous (some would say notorious) interpretations of “Wo Es war, soll Ich werden” (Fink 46), represent a sort of midrash, in the strict sense, on this text, and Lacan himself

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64 Anidjar also writes that, “[T]he analogy that Maimonides makes marks an epistemological break, though not an absolute break (assuming such would be possible), one which cannot but fundamentally alter the subsequent activity, the subsequent poetics and readings, of any midrashic text.” Exactly!

65 No wonder, then, that Maimonides could only read midrash as a species of poetic or homiletic use of language and not as commentary.

66 See for the nonce, *Tosefta* Ketuboth 4:9. This requires further elaboration.

67 It would not be inappropriate, then, to emphasize that his opponent, Rabbi Ishmael and his school, insisted that the Torah has been given in human language.

68 In this respect, midrash has some affinities with some of the most recent practices of literary criticism that take the “matter” of language very seriously indeed. This goes far beyond any facile comparisons of midrash to deconstruction which are in any case quite questionable, as argued most persuasively by Stern. For the high seriousness of wordplay in a context surprisingly not entirely unlike this one, see *Parker 1-5.*
referred to his commentary on Freud as "talmudic," correctly insisting that he attached more importance to the letter of the text than to its interpretation (Lacan, Ethics of Psychoanalysis 58).

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