The imaginative language—the *mashal*—is false if taken literally; its “corrected” meaning conforms with “truth” (*emet*).12

1.1.4 Literal Sense of a Mashal: Pesahot?

Ibn Ezra’s use of the term *pesahot* in his *mashal* exegesis differs from his normal use of this term to denote biblical interpretation based on sound hermeneutical principles, as opposed to midrashic homiletics.13 While in that case *pesahot* is a label of approbation indicating a literal reading, in Ibn Ezra’s *mashal* exegesis the term *pesahot* denotes a literal reading, which is not necessarily correct.14 For example, when formulating his rule, “anything that does not contradict, we interpret *ki-pesahot*” (above),15 Ibn Ezra implies that otherwise a *mashal* reading is indicated, in which case the literal reading is not the correct one.16 This becomes a problem when he speaks about the literal—and thus incorrect (or at least incomplete)—reading of the Song of Songs, a cluster of love poems that Ibn Ezra, following the Rabbis, interpreted allegorically.17 Ibn Ezra wrote two versions of his commentary on the Song: the “standard” one in the Rabbinic Bible was completed in France in 1156; but an earlier recension dates to Ibn Ezra’s arrival in Rome ca. 1140.18 He advocates the rabbinic position consistently, as he writes in his introduction to the standard recension: “Heaven forbid that the Song of Songs [consists of] erotic matters, except by way of *mashal*.” Accordingly, he structured both commentaries according to the same three-level format: one level of commentary addresses difficult words and grammar; he second the literal story of the lovers and his beloved; the third the deeper meaning, namely, God’s relationship with Israel throughout history. In Arabic, he could have used the *zahir* vs. *ba‘it* dichotomy to label the second and third levels, as Moses Ibn Ezra, for example, does when defining erotic medieval Hebrew poetry by adopting a precedent in the Song:

> The love and passion... [depicted by Hebrew] poems... is not repugnant since this is found in the Holy Writings, even though the deeper meaning (ba‘it) of that work is different from the obvious meaning (zahir) of the words. (Kidd. 143a)

Although he follows rabbinic tradition and sees divine love as the deeper meaning (ba‘it) of the Song, the great Andalusian poet recognizes the charm of the literal sense (zahir) that makes it a noble artistic model.19

Abraham Ibn Ezra had to coin Hebrew terms to express the *zahir-ba‘it* dichotomy.20 His choice of terminology in the introductory poem of the first recension (which was, in fact, one of his earliest commentaries) is revealing.21 There he refers to the second tier as being

12 The *mashal* vs. *emet* dichotomy occurs in rabbinic literature (see LeCoe 1967:75). Yet authors educated in a Muslim environment would have naturally associated this terminology with the magid-ba‘it dichotomy. In fact, in Arabic literature, *mashal* is occasionally opposed to *ba‘it*; see Heinrichs 1984:135. Compare the Qur’anic *mashal* vs. *ba‘it* (truth) antithesis, see Westerdijk 1937:420; Maimonides, e.g., contrasts *mashal* and *ba‘it* in MT, *Hilkhot Tekunot* 6:1 [my thanks to Prof. Bernard Silverman for his reference. See also ‘Ude 1122:68, “the sage [*ba‘it*] to whom the term *ba‘it* may be applied in truth (in-*ba‘it*);” i.e., not merely as a figure of speech (i.e., “as way of magic”).

13 The superiority of the former is Ibn Ezra’s view is indicated, by the rabbinic dictum: *zahir* is the literal sense; by contrast, he explains, *ba‘it* is merely “extra meaning”; see above, n. 10 and below, p. 131.

14 In Arabic, *sa‘id* refers to the latter as *zahir*, i.e., the apparent or superficial sense. When Sa‘id wished to contrast the plain meaning of Scripture with a far-fetched midrashic reading, he used the term *ba‘it*, which he equates with the Hebrew term *pesahot* in the Rabbinic *maxim* *zahir* is the literal sense; *ba‘it* is the plain. See his comm. on Prov 50:1 and Simon 1991:58.

15 See also his comm. on Ex 135 (above).

16 In other words, according to Ibn Ezra *zahir* is not equivalent to *pesahot* in the rabbinic dictum opposed to *ba‘it*. Samuel ben Hofni Gaon, on the other hand, used the rabbinic dictum to support Sa‘id’s view that a verse must be taken literally unless it contradicts a reason, another verse of rabbinic tradition (see Zucker 1964:448; Foa 1997:276). He thus equates Hebrew *pesahot* with Arabic *zahir*, i.e., the literal sense (whether correct or incorrect). To oppose the idea of the *enqit* interpretation, Samuel ben Hofni uses the term *ba‘it*. As he explains, in a case that does not call for reinterpretation, the *zahir* (obvious sense) in the *ba‘it* (correct interpretation): *zahir* is *enqit* and *ba‘it* the meaning of the two is one; see Zucker 1964:101 (compare Samuel ben Hofni, Pentateuch comm., Greenbaum ed., 478); Foa 1997:277.

17 In the cases cited above, the two meanings of *pesahot* coincide because a *mashal* reading is not indicated. In such cases, the *zahir* is the correct reading (as noted by Samuel ben Hofni [see previous note]).

18 See Beloff 1992:245 Simon 1991:147. References below are to the standard commentary unless otherwise noted.

19 See Pagis 1972:273; 1967:191–96; Foa 1991:78. Ibn Ezra’s attitude is echoed by Joseph Ibn ‘Aqiq, who argues that the Song’s poetic beauty is intended to captivate readers; see Ibn ‘Aqiq, Song of Songs commentary (Hākain ed.) 2; English trans. in Halkin 1950:87.

20 He does just this in his introduction to the Pentateuch (above, n. 15), when coining the *enqit-ba‘it* dichotomy (a literal translation of *zahir* vs. *ba‘it*). Ibn this was an ad hoc usage, and he does not apply it elsewhere.

21 The text of this poem reads:
1.2 Moses Ibn Ezra and the Poetics of Masahal

We will revisit Ibn Ezra’s application of Sa’adia’s exegetical rules below, but to speak with precision about his mashah exegesis, we now explore the underlying literary phenomena he includes in this category. For his purpose, it is helpful to consult Moses Ibn Ezra’s Ktibah al-Mahdafa, in which metaphor (ist’ila’), simile (tashbih) and allegory (al-timl) are defined among other Arabic poetic devices. Although

these three poetic techniques can be subsumed in the more general nusaf category, Moses Ibn Ezra considers it important to classify them separately.\(^{65}\) Abraham Ibn Ezra may have actually read Ktibah al-Muhdafa (where he is mentioned honorably [above, p. 35]), which was written in the 1130’s while he was still in al-Andalus. If he did not have direct access to Moses Ibn Ezra, his friend Judah ha-Levi, who was in contact with the older poet,\(^{66}\) could have made him aware of this singular work on Hebrew poetics. Even if Abraham Ibn Ezra did not actually read Moses Ibn Ezra’s poetics, the two authors certainly shared a common cultural perspective that included the poetic terms and concepts defined in Ktibah al-Mahdafa. And indeed, as we shall demonstrate the Andalusian emigré considered thinking primarily about isti’ara, tashbih and mashah when using the Hebrew term mashah.

1.2.1 Mashah (Allegory)

Moses Ibn Ezra defines the biblical technique mashah, which he identifies with Arabic mashah,\(^{67}\) as a literary text that has

a hidden interpretation (ta’wil batin) other than that which is obvious (ta’wil tsurat) from its language.\(^{68}\) (Ktibah 146a)

He uses the usual Arabic term for the two parts of a mashah, its superficial, literal meaning (zahir, as opposed to its deeper, “hidden

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\(^{65}\) Maimonides, e.g., regularly used the term zahir (translated into Hebrew by Samuel Ibn Tibbon as pesah) to denote incorrect, superficial interpretations; see Guide 1:36/85, 1:53/119, 1:29/338, see also Harter 1988a:13-14.

\(^{66}\) It is conceivable that he was influenced here by Samuel Ibn Hofni who explicitly equated the Hebrew term pesah with Arabic zahir (above, n. 56).

\(^{67}\) On this possibility, see below, 5:31.

\(^{68}\) Surprisingly, the opening poem of the first recession is embedded in his introduction to the second recession. (The super-commentary Mechonpiya Yehuda [Krinsky 1969] notes this confusion and glosses: ‘כ辣 פשוות טעמא—כד פשוות תגנוב. ’ Perhaps a copyist confused the two recensions. Elsewhere Ibn Ezra uses the term b-mashahnu to label the literal sense of a mashah; see below, n. 150 and comm. or Hos 3:2 (with Simon 1989b-46n). Unlike the multivalent term pesah, the term b-mashahnu means only a literal interpretation.

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which are very hot and are not extinguished for a long time. And even when they seem outwardly extinguished and seem like ashes, they still are internally a burning fire." So too (ken) the words of [a person with] "a tongue of deceit": he presents himself as though he has no evil intent towards, so that [the other person] will not guard himself, but when he parts from him, he will speak badly. Now it says "with hot coals of a broom-wood," because he has both [attributes]: the "arrows" and "coals" are both included together within him.

Although he takes his Andalusian predecessor’s reading of the sharp arrows as his point of departure, Radak argues that the "hot coals" image is not merely poetic flourish, but actually reflects another dimension of the deceitful enemy. Ibn Ezra’s tendency to explain details of biblical mashiach in purely formal aesthetic terms, rather than viewing them as vehicles of additional meaning, conforms with the role it normally assigns to aesthetics in his exegesis. As U. Simon (1992:134) has noted, Ibn Ezra typically identifies biblical poetic techniques such as paronomasia and inclusio specifically to avoid any need to attribute expressive value to the locations that produce them. In other words, at times the Andalusian poet-exegete does ask: Why did Scripture employ this wording specifically, and not another that would express a similar idea? Whereas this question might launch a sharp rabbinic reading aimed at: revealing Scripture’s omniscience, Ibn Ezra typically answers that this wording enhances Scripture’s aesthetic quality and poetic design.

In the Psalms in particular he pays careful attention to the inner correspondences between a supplement’s complaint and his prayer for salvation. He thus comments on Ps 43:3, “Send Your light and [your] truth, let them guide me”:

Your light— as opposed to (kenegef), “I walk in darkness” (43:2).
Your truth— is opposed to “[Save me from] a man of trickery” (43:1).
... Let them guide me— as opposed to “I walk in darkness” (43:2).

In these observations, Ibn Ezra indeed pays close attention to the formulation (melah), in addition to the content (hemim). Yet, in doing so, the poet-exegete aims only to demonstrate that the psalmists chose their language carefully in order to enhance the poetic unity of their supplications, but he does not seek additional meaning in these correspondences, as the Midrash might do.

5.3 Exception to the Rule

Having defined the principles of Ibn Ezra’s substitution-based mashiach exegesis, we should take note of some exceptional examples and trends. Apart from making our evaluation of its method complete, this study also sheds light on his own perception of the pesah principles he had revised. In other words, revealing the circumstances under which the great Andalusian pesah exegete permitted himself to diverge from those principles tell us something about his methodological self-awareness.

5.3.1 Interpreting The Song of Songs

Although Ibn Ezra normally focuses on the mashiach and avoids the analysis Radak would lavish on the melach, he conspicuously focuses on the literal sense of the Song of Songs, a book he takes to be a mashiach. In his programmatic introduction (above, 1.1.4.) he makes a point of fully explaining the literal level (which he calls the mashiach) before interpreting the book allegorically (the melach). Accordingly, he first explains the Song as a love story between a shepherd and his beloved, a young farmer girl; he then explains in detail how each episode of that pastoral symbolizes another episode of the relationship between God and Israel throughout the course of history. In

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79 His source is Bereshit Rabba 98 [p. 1269], cited by Rashi here. On Radak’s use of Midrash in his pesah exegesis in general, see Cohen 1994. On its role in his mashiach exegesis in particular, see below, 6.2.
80 Radak elsewhere attributes symbolic meaning to details of a mashiach that Ibn Ezra explained merely as elaboration of earlier imagery; compare, e.g., their commentaries on Gen 49:9 (“Judah is a lion’s whelp... he crouched, laid down...”) and Ps 84:12 (“God is sun and shield”).
81 For examples of paronomasia (wordplay) that Ibn Ezra attributes to the biblical authors’ notion of literary elegance (halach; see Maimonides 1978:578-79; 582. In his comment on Ps 104:1, Ibn Ezra notes King David’s tendency to employ inclusio. In seeking to identify the elements of biblical poetic style, Abraham Ibn Ezra manifests the thinking of his older Andalusian contemporary, Moses Ibn Ezra, who devoted much energy to this subject in his poetic, Kitab al-Muhaddara; see Cohen 2006b:294-97. On the possible link between these two authors, see above p. 49. Abraham Ibn Ezra’s use of stylistic observations to account for biblical situations can be found in the northern French exegeses Joseph Bekker Shor and Eliezer of Beaugency; see Harris 1997:211-48.
82 For similar observations, see Ibn Ezra on Ps 38: 113, 134, 36, 35:11.
paying close attention to the details of the literal level and then scrutinizing them to derive the Song’s allegorical meaning, Ibn Ezra foreshadows Radaš’s program, stated on Isa 28:24ff, that he “first will explain the melqah and then explain the mashal.” (above, 3:2 1.) This leads to a surprising resemblance between Ibn Ezra’s commentary on the Song and that of Rashi, which manifests a clear midrashic orientation. But in light of the Andalusian exegete’s typically reductionist method, we might have expected something akin to Maimonides’ analysis of the mashal in general terms, and a view of the details merely as literary embellishment.

It would appear that the Song of Songs is an exceptional type of mashal that required special treatment. In the first recession of his introduction, Ibn Ezra describes the literal tier of his commentary as being “by way of its peshat,” whereas the allegorical tier follows “the paths of the Midrash” (above, p. 48). This suggests that he saw the need to explain the literal sense of the Song as a peshat directive. Though Ibn Ezra normally did “not pay attention to the words” (above, p. 212; i.e., the incidental poetic wording, he may have made a distinction between the Song and other mishnelim. In a typical biblical mashal, the surrounding literary context points to its metaphorical nature and suggests the identity of its mishna as well; but neither are indicated in the Song, which is a self-contained literary work. Hence, the peshat method would militate against analyzing this text as a mashal, and our Andalusian exegete does so out of deference to rabbinic tradition, a choice that led one scholar of Ibn Ezra to say that here he “sold out to folklore and naive” (Levin 1969:33). This does not mean that Ibn Ezra’s rabbinic position is insincere, but it is possible that he explains the Song’s literal sense in order to show how the peshat method otherwise would render this book. The external imetus to interpret the Song allegorically may also explain his unusual detail by detail derivation of the simshal: since this reading is dictated by rabbinic tradition rather than his own peshat method, he yields to the manner of the midrashic analysis.114

5.3.2 Creative Philosophical Mashal Analysis
But other exceptions stem from Ibn Ezra’s own exegetical wellsprings. For example, he independently devises a Midrash-like mashal analysis of Ps 1:3, said about a righteous man:

He shall be like a tree planted beside streams of water,
Which yields its fruit in season
And its foliage never fades
And whatever he does prospers.115

What might we expect here from our rationalist exegete? This psalm praises the righteous man, who “has not followed in the counsel of the wicked” and for whom “the teaching of the Lord is his delight” (the Rabbi; see, e.g., his comm. on Lev 21:2; Num 31:21; see also Melamed 1978:680; Simon 1963:138; Lockwood 1988:178–83; Moazi 2002:203).

His acceptance of the midrashic model causes Ibn Ezra to write uncharacteristically:

There is nothing greater that he Midrash or Song of Songs that the Rabbis expounded. Therefore, since I have seen great sages, pillars of the world, who likewise devised deraït [readings] by adding and detaching [i.e., from earlier midrashic sources], I have followed in their footsteps. This enthusiastic assessment conflict sharply with Ibn Ezra’s usual attitude, reflected in his pointed criticism (Tenturk Introduction, fourth approach) of contemporary exegetes who composed new midrashic readings (see above, p. 39). I am indebted to Mrs. Shira Shapira for pointing out this comparison. Although Ibn Ezra normally took a dim view of such “rewoven Midrash,” he deemed it necessary in the case of the Song of Songs. It is conceivable that Ibn Ezra had Rashi in mind when speaking here about “the great sages and pillars of the world,” who composed midrashic commentaries on the Song that Ibn Ezra took as his model. Indeed, the similarity between Ibn Ezra and Rashi on the Song of Songs is striking. Although these two exegetes normally take very different paths, they find common ground here because Rashi on the Song serves most consistently to choose midrashic interpretations that correspond to his peshat analysis (see Kimhi 1991:13–30), while Ibn Ezra on the Song is at his “most midrashic” (see Reif 1990).

Or: Whatever it produces thorns. This ambiguity, noted in NJPS, is observed by Ibn Ezra, who comments:

“And whatever he does prosper”—[the pronoun] refer to the man compared to (the mishna) a tree. And others say that “and whatever it does prosper” refer to the tree, that if a branch is taken from it and is planted it will be successful, etc.

In his early recession of this commentary (see Simon 1991:32–23), Ibn Ezra seems to adopt the first reading, whereas the second view is attributed there to Moses Ibn Chupati.