

**Zeitschrift:** Judaica : Beiträge zum Verstehen des Judentums  
**Herausgeber:** Zürcher Institut für interreligiösen Dialog  
**Band:** 69 (2013)

**Artikel:** From distinguishing between synonyms to revealing the coherence of the literary unit : on the interpretive method of Malbim  
**Autor:** Frisch, Amos  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-960951>

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# From Distinguishing between Synonyms to Revealing the Coherence of the Literary Unit: On the Interpretive Method of *Malbim*

By *Amos Frisch\**

## **Abstract**

*The article presents characteristics of Malbim's interpretive method, and hopes to change the common view that the most important feature of his commentary is his distinguishing between synonyms.*

*The article examines three representative texts from Malbim's commentary to the Bible, from a narrative in the Torah (Gen. 4), the Prophets (Hos. 14), and Psalms (89). The examination of each text will study the verses in order, together with a comparison with other commentators and scholars, in a manner that will highlight Malbim's singular methodology. This inductive method of inquiry, with an analysis of the three texts (that represent three different literary genres), should provide a more comprehensive and reliable picture of Malbim's commentary than that afforded by the study of a single text or the presentation of a list of characteristics predetermined by the scholar and random examples of these features.*

*Four marked characteristics of the commentary emerge from our analysis: the distinction between synonyms; the discovery of binary oppositions; the conception of the coherence of the literary unit; and in the narrative – delving into the thought of Biblical characters. These four characteristics are tools to realize one of the underlying goals of his commentary: revealing the majesty of Scripture.*

*The historical background for Malbim's activity is the need to meet the challenges posed by the maskilim and the religious reformers. To this end, he adopted tools of the maskilim, and even their conceptions. The article concludes with a call for a balanced view of Malbim's commentary that, despite its advocacy, is of worth to the present.*

*Malbim* – R. Meir Loeb ben Jehiel Michel Wisser (1809-1879) – was one of the leading rabbinic Biblical commentators of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> He served as rabbi in a number of communities: Wreschen (today: Września), Kempen, Bucharest (as chief rabbi of Rumania), Łęczycza, Kherson, Mogi-

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\* Prof. *Amos Frisch*, Department of Bible, Bar-Ilan University, IL-52900, Israel.

1 For *Malbim's* life, see, e. g., MOSHE MEIR YASHAR, – משנתו, חייו, מלבי"ם: הגאון מלבי"ם: פרשנות, (Jerusalem, 1976); NOAH. H. ROSENBLOOM, פילוסופיה, מדע ומסתורין בכתבי הרב מאיר לייבוש מלבי"ם (Jerusalem, 1988), pp. 1-87; AHARON SORSKI, ראשי פרקים במסכת חייו הסוערים של ... מאיר ליבוש (Bnei Brak, 1999).

lev, Königsberg (today: Kaliningrad), and finally, he agreed to accept the post of rabbi of Kremenchug (today: Kremenčuk), but died in Kiev on the way to his new posting. He contended with the new trends that spread in his time, and especially with the Reform movement, that attacked the standing of the Oral Law and attempted to introduce changes in the practice of Judaism that would facilitate Jewish entry to the predominately Christian society. He was a religious leader who led the communities in which he served in accordance with his religious worldview, as he vigorously struggled with the *maskilim* and the reformers.<sup>2</sup> In the social sphere, he addressed the simple folk within the community and cared for the poor; he confronted the wealthy Jews who took advantage of the weak within the Jewish society.<sup>3</sup> His skills as a preacher were overshadowed only by his prolific writing. In the realm of halakhah, he published **אוצר החיים**, an important work on **שלחן ערוך – אורח חיים** (the first volume was published when he was only 28 years old). This original composition reflects his great scholarship, that also incorporated Kabbalah, philosophy, and science, and which received important writs of approval (and the value of which can also be inferred from the many references to it in the authoritative halakhic work **משנה ברורה**).<sup>4</sup> *Malbim's* main contribution, however, consists of his widely-read commentary, that encompassed almost all the books of the Bible (except for Lamentations and Ecclesiastes).<sup>5</sup> The current article examines the latter field of his activity.

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2 For a comprehensive study of this struggle during the time he served as rabbi in Bucharest, see JACOB GELLER, **מאבקו בהשכלה וברפורמה בבוקרשט** (תרח"י-תרכ"ד): על-פי כתבי-יד ותעודות שטרם פורסמו (Lod, 2000).

3 See, e. g., GELLER, **המלבי"ם** (n. 2 above), p. 72.

4 On the book and the writs of approval that it received, see YASHAR, **הגאון** (n. 1 above), pp. 21-37; ROSENBLOOM, **המלבי"ם** (n. 1 above), pp. 16-24.

5 For a general assessment of *Malbim*, cf. Schweid's characterization of him, at the beginning of his discussion of *Malbim*, in which Schweid presents him as "the most prominent Orthodox thinker, in terms of his originality, general education, the scope of his literary oeuvre, his multifaceted personality, and his methodicalness in the period of the struggle against Reform Judaism" (ELIEZER SCHWEID, **תולדות פילוסופיית הדת היהודית בזמן החדש**, vol. 2 [Tel Aviv, 2002], p. 127). Cf. Elman's declaration that *Malbim* is undoubtedly one of the most interesting intellectual figures in Orthodoxy in the nineteenth century, in an age that did not lack for important intellectual figures; see YAAKOV ELMAN, "The Rebirth of Omnisignificant Biblical Exegesis in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," in: *Jewish Studies, an Internet Journal* 2 (2003), pp. 199-249, esp. p. 206."

The immediate association that many make upon hearing the name *Malbim*, as Biblical commentator, is his categorical denial of the notion of “repetition of meaning in different words,”<sup>6</sup> to which end he distinguishes between the meanings of synonyms.<sup>7</sup> He is so closely identified with this approach that the reverse association, too, is never far from our minds: whenever we discuss opposition to the concept of “repetition of meaning in different words,” or speak of the distinction between synonyms, *Malbim*’s name directly comes to the fore,<sup>8</sup> even though he was not the first to adopt this stance.<sup>9</sup> In this article I will show that even though this position is characteristic of *Malbim*, it is only a part of his conception, and is merely a means to attain a more important interpretive end: revealing the perfec-

6 For a comprehensive discussion of “repetition of meaning in different words,” see: JAIR HAAS, כתופעה אופיינית לסגנון מודעות ויחס ל’כפל ענין במלות שונות’ המקראי בפרשנות המקרא היהודית בימי הביניים, PhD diss., Bar-Ilan University, 2005.

7 See, e.g., in the survey of *Malbim*’s commentary in מקראית: “*Malbim*’s commentary to the Bible is constructed of three fixed principles. The first principle: there is no repetition of meaning in different words in the words of the Torah and in the rhetoric of the prophets” (YEHOASHUA HOROWITZ, “תנ”ך, פרשנות: [ו] הפרשנות היהודית בדורות האחרונים,” in: אנציקלופדיה מקראית, vol. 9 [Jerusalem, 1982], col. 735). The presentation of this principle comprises some 30 percent of the survey, and together with the second principle, that is based on it (the internal harmonization of all the words in a hemistich), this covers some 40 percent of the survey. *Malbim* presents these three principles in the introduction to his commentary to Isaiah, and he writes in the beginning of his introduction to Ezekiel that these principles are suitable for all the books of the Bible. The centrality of the first principle in *Malbim*’s commentary is attested by an entire PhD dissertation being devoted to it: HALLEL ESHKOLI, הסינונימיה בלשון המקרא על פי שיטת מלבים: בדיקה ביקורתית של שיטתו, PhD diss., Bar-Ilan University, 2009.

8 Two representative examples: (1) Gross includes in his discussion of the negation of “repetition of meaning” in the commentary of R. Joseph Hayyun (15<sup>th</sup> century) a detailed comparison of the methodology of *Malbim*, who lived some 400 years after Hayyun, and he also compares Hayyun with R. Joseph Kaspi (fourteenth century) only toward the end of his discussion (ABRAHAM GROSS, ר’ יוסף בן אברהם חיון: מנהיג קהילת ליסבון ויצירתו [Ramat Gan, 1993], pp. 66-67); (2) in Kugel’s monumental study of Biblical poetry, in which he presents his conception of the nature of parallelism as complementary and not as synonymous, in contrast with the accepted notion (following Robert Lowth), he devotes a special discussion to *Malbim*’s view on this question; see JAMES L. KUGEL, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (New Haven, 1981), pp. 282-292.

9 For a survey of the commentators who preceded *Malbim* and subscribed to this approach, see ESHKOLI, הסינונימיה (n. 7 above), pp. 39-57; see also SHALOM SPIEGEL, “למדרש הנרדפים בספרותנו,” in: *Leshonenu* 7 (1936), pp. 11-35.



tion and greatness of the Bible. While the interpretive distinction between synonyms is active on the level of the Biblical verse, this does not suffice for *Malbim*, and he seeks to examine Scripture in a much broader perspective, in order to uncover the coherence of the literary unit.<sup>10</sup>

Instead of the widespread manner of describing an interpretive method by presenting conclusions that are illustrated by a few examples taken from throughout the commentary, as the scholar pleases, I wish to engage in a shared reading of *Malbim's* commentary to three Biblical texts, one from each of the three parts of the Bible, each of which also represents a different literary genre (narrative, prophecy, psalm). This diversity is of cardinal importance, since we may assume the existence of certain differences in *Malbim's* interpretive method in light of the differing nature of the texts, and of topics that he will discuss only in his commentary to some textual genres, and not in others. For example: his evaluations of Biblical characters appear only in the commentary to narrative passages; similarly, we would not expect an examination of the time of the composition of the Biblical text in his commentary to narratives in the Torah, but only, in the examples we have chosen, in regard to the Prophets or Psalms. Thus, our examination of all three genres will afford us a broader view of *Malbim's* interpretive methodology.

For each of these three texts we will systematically examine his commentary, in the order of the verses, instead of discussing only a number of arbitrarily chosen examples of a characteristic feature of his commentary. This methodology will provide the reader with direct and authentic contact with complete interpretive units. For each text we will also compare *Malbim's* commentary with a work by a single author (traditional commentary – R. David Kimhi on Hosea 14, modern commentary – Umberto Cassuto on Genesis 4, scholarly article – Shmuel Segal on Psalms 89. This comparison with another author on the same text will aid us in drawing *Malbim's* methodology into sharper focus.

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10 *Malbim's* desire to locate coherence in the Biblical text is expressed also in his declarations concerning his interpretive policy, such as his comments at the end of his commentary to Isaiah. He writes on the actualization of the third principle:

I saw how exalted and tremendous are his words [...] and so, also, in regard to the passages and topics, I greatly distanced myself from the way of the interpreters [...] to the extent that all the words of prophecy are filled with beauty, charm, the most pleasant lyrical sensibilities, on the one hand, and logical order, intellectual worth, and philosophical discourse full of wisdom, knowledge, and order, on the other.

He makes a similar declaration in his introduction to Psalms; see below, n. 49.

## 1. Pentateuchal Narrative (Genesis 4:1-16)<sup>11</sup>

What is the message of the Cain and Abel narrative? Umberto Cassuto speaks of two obvious teachings, and two that are revealed only after careful examination. The two patent teachings are, in his words: (1) “the principle that human life is sacred and may not be violated, and that the crime of murder is inexpressibly terrible, having no atonement;” (2) “[...] no deed of man - be it even performed secretly [...] is hidden from the eyes of God, and that God calls man to account [...] and requiting him according to his works.”<sup>12</sup>

Does *Malbim*, too, make an explicit statement regarding the message of the narrative? I believe that we can reveal a topic that recurs throughout his commentary to the narrative, namely, man’s free choice alongside Divine Providence. This repeated topic is related to the message of the narrative. In our study of his commentary we will note his treatment of the topic, and examine whether the commentary also includes a declaration, even if muted, regarding the message.

*Malbim*’s commentary on the narrative part of the Torah has a fixed division into two sections: the body of the commentary, which he calls התורה והמצוה (“The Torah and the Commandment”), and supplementary questions that lay the groundwork for his explanation. One of the questions in his explanation of the Cain and Abel narrative relates to the shift in the names of God:

Why is only the name “God” mentioned in the first section, and the second mentions “Lord God,” while this section mentions only the Tetragrammaton [= “the Lord”]?

His answer is based on a distinction between the meaning of the divine names, and between the nature of the first three narratives in the book of

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11 This is not *Malbim*’s demarcation, but mine, as a technical framework for our discussion. Nonetheless, in light of what *Malbim* writes in his commentary to v. 22 on the purpose of the narrative of the building of the city and the innovations of Lamech’s offspring, he arguably viewed v. 17 as the beginning of a new narrative. On this demarcation of the Cain and Abel narrative (vv. 1-16), see CLAUS WESTERMANN, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (London, 1984), vol. 1: *Genesis 1-11*, p. 279; cf. GEORGE WESLEY COATS, *Genesis, with an Introduction to Narrative Literature* (FOTL; Grand Rapids, MI, 1983), p. 63.

12 UMBERTO (MOSHE DAVID) CASSUTO, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, trans. Israel Abrahams, vol. 1: *From Adam to Noah: A Commentary on Genesis I-VI 8* (Jerusalem, 1961), p. 184.

Genesis (the Creation, the Garden of Eden, Cain and Abel), with the divine name selected in accordance with its suitability for each narrative. The first narrative “speaks of how the laws of nature were established, which is denoted by the name God.” The second narrative contains the combination “Lord God,” since the narrative has two aspects: on the one hand, it is concerned with Divine Providence and reward and punishment (and therefore the name “the Lord” is appropriate), while on the other, Divine Providence does not only watch over all humankind. It also oversees animals, for whom reward and punishment is not relevant (which explains the name “God”). The Cain and Abel narrative speaks only of individuals, and they are judged for reward or punishment on a personal basis (and therefore only the Tetragrammaton is present).<sup>13</sup>

Since our study of this narrative will compare the commentaries of *Malbim* and Cassuto, it should be recalled that Cassuto, as well, explained the substitution of the different names of God in terms of their context. He explains the use of “the Lord” in v. 1 (“I have gained a male child with the help of the Lord”) by means of his third rule governing the appearance of the Tetragrammaton: “when the Bible presents the Deity to us in His personal character.” This is also how he understands this name in the context of the offerings in vv. 3-4. He uses his first rule to elucidate the appearance of the name “the Lord” in v. 6 (“And the Lord said to Cain”) and in the continuation of the narrative: “[...] when Scripture reflects the concept of God, especially in His *ethical* aspect, that belongs *specifically to the people of Israel*.”<sup>14</sup> Despite the basic similarity between *Malbim* and Cassuto, the differences between them should not be ignored: (1) while *Malbim* offers a single explanation for the appearance of the name “the Lord” in this narrative, Cassuto suggests two different explanations, with his point of departure being the individual verse, and not the narrative as a whole; (2) *Malbim* ex-

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13 Cf. his commentary to the first verse in the Torah (end of s. v. ובכל מעשה בראשית).

14 For a formulation of the rules, see CASSUTO, *From Adam to Noah* (n. 12 above), p. 87; for an explanation of the appearance of the name “the Lord” in v. 1, see p. 202; for an explanation for its appearance in vv. 6 ff., see pp. 207-208. Cf. also UMBERTO CASSUTO, *The Documentary Hypothesis and the Composition of the Pentateuch: Eight Lectures*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem, 1961), pp. 15-41. In contrast, Segal, who, too, did not regard the exchange of the names of God as attesting to differing sources, understood these exchanges as insignificant stylistic changes; see MOSHE H. SEGAL, מבוא המקרא, Book 1 (Jerusalem, 1946), pp. 145-147; in his opinion, the instances in which the name is adapted to the context are exceptional.

plains the combination of the two divine names in chaps. 2-3 in accordance with the complex nature of the narrative, while Cassuto offers a “technical” explanation of presenting the identity of “the Lord,” first mentioned here, and “God,” the name that appears in “the story of creation.”<sup>15</sup>

After giving the reason for using the name “the Lord” in the narrative (in his commentary to v. 1), *Malbim* adds:

This comes to teach of the special Providence over individuals, as well, and that reward and punishment is meted out for them, in accordance with their deeds, as was the case regarding Cain.

It is not certain that this statement is meant to specify the sole purpose of the narrative, or perhaps merely mentions in this context one of the understandings that emerges from the narrative by its use of the name “the Lord”. In either event, a study of the details of his explanation leads us (as mentioned above) to the insight that the uniting topic in his explanation is man’s free choice, alongside Divine Providence, including the meting out of reward and punishment. The joining of the declaration and the uniting topic could lead us to the understanding that this indeed refers to what, for *Malbim*, is the purpose of the narrative. Even those objecting to this would nevertheless have to concede that this is at least one “teaching” of the narrative (using Cassuto’s terminology, above).

We can find in *Malbim*’s commentary psychological interpretation that attempts to understand the character’s motives and even his worldview. In his opinion, Cain did not accept two ideas regarding man: (1) that he possesses free choice; (2) that he is composed of a bestial body and a spiritual soul, with the latter being primary in man. Based on his attribution of this intellectual foundation to Cain, *Malbim* explains the Lord’s statement in the difficult v. 7: “Surely, if you do right, there is uplift [...]” as follows: if you conduct yourself so that the intellect will guide your path, then you will be uplifted by the spirit; and if not, then the Evil Inclination will lie in wait to cause you to sin; but man has the ability to overcome the Evil Inclination by means of the “power of freedom [i. e., freedom of choice] within man.”

In v. 8 we encounter what Cassuto defined as a “difficult problem”:<sup>16</sup> in the beginning of the verse, we have: “Cain said,” while the rest of the verse offers no details as to the content of what he said. Many answers have been offered for this question.<sup>17</sup> *Malbim*’s original and surprising

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15 See CASSUTO, *From Adam to Noah* (n. 12 above), p. 87.

16 CASSUTO, *From Adam to Noah* (n. 12 above), p. 213.

17 Including the contextual solution that connects the statement *forward* (Nah-

solution combines the contextual and the semantic: Cain says (to himself) that this statement by the Lord is addressed to Abel, to whom it refers, and not to the Evil Inclination. In other words, Cain did not correctly understand what the Lord said, and he thought that all the actions that were attributed to the Evil Inclination actually refer to his brother Abel.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, Cain ascribes evil intent to his brother, leading him to set upon Abel and kill him. Despite the linguistic basis that could be brought for explaining אל with the meaning of על,<sup>19</sup> *Malbim's* explanation here seems artificial and forced.

Unlike Rashi and R. David Kimhi, who view the Lord's addressing Cain, immediately following the murder: "Where is Abel your brother?" (v. 9a) as a rhetorical question to begin the conversation, *Malbim* understands it primarily as emphatically informative, and meant to show Cain his mistake: "Abel your brother" - who loves you, and My statement was not directed to him. The word "brother", that appears at the end of the Lord's question, and is generally understood in this verse as an unimportant informative word, is highlighted in *Malbim's* commentary, with the main message of the entire statement turning on this one word.<sup>20</sup>

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manides); the contextual solution that connects it *backwards* (Ibn Ezra, Bekhor Shor, R. David Kimhi, and proximately, Seforno); and semantic solutions (R. Saadiah Gaon, R. Meyuhas).

18 For an understanding of the last part of the verse as directed to Abel, cf. two of the explanations of *Hizkuni* and the explanation of *Toledot Yitzhak*; this conception is also at the basis of Tur-Sinai's conjecture (לפתח חטה תצבר – amass wheat for sale, instead of לפתח חטאת רבץ; see NAPHTALI H. TUR-SINAI, הלשון והספר: הספר – בעיות יסוד במדע הלשון ובמקורותיה בספרות [Jerusalem, 1960], pp. 199-203). The advantage of this approach lies in the fact that the masculine language ("its/his urge [תשוקתו, m.] is toward you, yet you can be its/his master [תמשל בו, m.]") refers to a masculine noun that appears in the context, unlike the accepted interpretation that it refers to the feminine חטאת ("sin") in the passage, or to יצר הרע (the Evil Inclination), that does not appear in the Biblical text. *Malbim's* interpretation is distinct from the views mentioned here in that he perceives this explanation as Cain's erroneous subjective understanding, and not as his objective interpretation of the word of the Lord.

19 On the frequent substitutions of אל-על, see the comment by Kaddari at the end of the entry for אל, MENAHEM ZEVI KADDARI, מילון העברית המקראית: אוצר (Ramat Gan, 2006), p. 40 (Hebrew). The nearest substitution is at the end of the verse: "Cain set upon [אל] his brother Abel"; see, e. g., YEHUDA KIEL, תורה נביאים כתובים עם פירוש דעת מקרא: ספר בראשית (Jerusalem, 1997), vol. 1, p. 112.

20 This emphasis can be compared with Bar-Efrat's observation that the word "brother", that is repeated seven times in this narrative, is a key word, that



Cain's answer, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" (v. 9b), that is generally perceived as a deceitful declaration, is refined by *Malbim*. His explanation divides it into two parts that respond, in substantive transposition, to what the Lord said to him: "I do not know" means: I did not understand<sup>21</sup> that he is my brother (that is, by misunderstanding Abel's true relationship to him, Cain understood "sin couches at the door" and "its urge is toward you" as relating to Abel, his loving brother, as if he wanted to harm Cain). This part is a response to the Lord's emphatic "your brother". The second part of Cain's reply, "Am I my brother's keeper?", is not a challenge, but an expression of Cain's notion (as already presented by *Malbim* in his explanation of v. 7) that since man is compelled to act as he does, the Lord is the keeper, and is responsible for the death of Abel ("since it is You who decreed that he be killed, I was compelled to do so"). This is Cain's answer to the Lord's question: "Where is Abel?" *Malbim* concludes this explanation by mentioning the exposition that presents Cain as arguing: the Lord is the keeper, He implanted the Evil Inclination in Cain, and therefore responsibility for the murder rests on Him (*Tanhuma, Bereshit* 9). The exposition is incorporated in his explanation, and is cited in support.<sup>22</sup>

The Lord's response in v. 10: "What have you done? Hark, your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground!" now assumes a meaning different from the usual understanding. First, the Lord rejects Cain's outlook: the rhetorical question "What have you done?" comes to refute Cain's denial of responsibility: you have free choice, and therefore the killing of Abel is your act, and not Mine. Thus, just as Cain's "Am I my brother's keeper?" expresses a position different from that of the Lord, when He said "Where is Abel your brother?", here, too, the Lord's response: "What have you done?" presents the different stance of the Lord, all on the same topic – man's free choice.

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highlights the nature of the murder: fratricide; see SHIMON BAR-EFRAT, *Narrative Art of the Bible*, trans. Dorothea Shefer-Vanson (JSOTSuppl 70; Sheffield, 1989), p. 212.

21 For "know" (ידע) with the meaning of "understand", see, e. g., Ps. 82:5; Job 15:9; 28:23; see KADDARI, מילון (n. 19 above), s. v. ידע (*gal* 3), p. 400.

22 *Malbim* summarized the exposition, giving its essence ("it was not I who killed him, but You, who gave me the Evil Inclination"), while adapting it to fit into his explanation. *Malbim* does not mention the most extreme exegetical element in the exposition – the removal of the word "I" from its context and perceiving it as an appellation for the Lord.



The continuation of the verse, for *Malbim*, consists of the Lord's informing Cain of the type of punishment that he is to receive. Whoever sins against "the godly religion" or "the legislated religion" will receive a providential punishment, while one who sins against "the natural religion" will be given a natural punishment. Despite what is implicit in the Lord's words, that Abel's blood "cries out to Me," presumably waiting for the Lord's response, *Malbim* focuses on the words "from the ground" as denoting the source of the punishment. He explains that the blood demands Cain's punishment from the ground and from nature, which indeed shall be his punishment: "you shall be cursed from the ground" – which shall punish you.

### The Contentual Connection between vv. 8-10a

1	wording	Cain said to his brother Abel	Where is Abel your brother?	I do not know	Am I my brother's keeper?	What have you done?
2	verse	8a	9a	9b	9c	10a
3	speaker	the narrator	the Lord	Cain	Cain	the Lord
4	issue	relations between the brothers			man's mastery of his actions	
5	stance	Hostile	amicable	amicable / hostile	compelled	free

The table graphically illustrates the connection between the various statements, and that the transition from the first issue (the relations between the brothers) to the second (man's mastery over his actions) occurs within a single verse, in Cain's response in v. 9. This transition in the heart of the verse, specifically, tightens the connection between the verses, since this verse functions as a layer of both the preceding issue and the new one.

*Malbim* presents Cain's response in vv. 13-14 as one of despair. He sets his explanation within an intellectual context built on an examination of two possibilities, followed by a tripartite division of the second option: Cain does not hope that the Lord will forgive him, since "my punishment is too great to bear"; all that seemingly is left for him is the possibility of "remaining in the land in the natural way," that is, a natural existence, even when he was not forgiven by the Lord, but for this one of three conditions is necessary: (1) remaining in his original place of residence, as affording security; (2) the Lord's Providence over the wanderer; (3) permanent residence in a new place. But none of these three conditions are fulfilled for Cain, which is the content of what he says in v. 14: his punishment, "you have banished me this day," corresponds to the first condition; "and I must avoid Your pres-

ence” – the Lord removed His Providence from Cain,<sup>23</sup> corresponding to the second condition; and his being “a fugitive and wanderer on earth” corresponds to the third condition. In light of this assessment of his situation, Cain prefers death to continued living (thus *Malbim* explains: “anyone who meets me may kill me!” – as a wish born out of despair). The Lord, however, rejects Cain’s request to die, and emphasizes His will for the fulfillment of the harsh punishment. The Lord establishes here the severity of murdering Cain the murderer, which, according to *Malbim*, ensues from two reasons: (1) it is the Lord’s will that Cain will live, as punishment, and that death will not free him from this punishment; and (2) Cain’s potential murderer already has the precedent of murder.

The wording that, according to my demarcation, ends the Cain narrative: “Cain left the presence of [מלפני] the Lord” (v. 16) is explained by *Malbim* by the use of the preposition מלפני (instead of מפני): this is a departure from the state of “before [לפני] the Lord”: “He departed from being before the Lord and His Providence, and he was left to the vagaries of chance.”<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, for *Malbim* (following the Rabbinical exegesis in WayR 10:5) the end of the verse: “and he settled in the land of Nod” constitutes an alleviation of Cain’s punishment, by canceling half of the decree; Cain is no longer a fugitive and wanderer, he rather resides in the land of Nod. According to *Malbim*, he is a person who left his home, but no longer wanders from one place to another.<sup>25</sup>

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23 CASSUTO (*From Adam to Noah*, p. 223) rejects the approach of “contemporary exegetes,” that this means being in a place beyond Divine Providence. He maintains that these are unsuccessful attempts at hiding by Cain. *Malbim*, on the other hand, adopts the approach rejected by Cassuto: Cain was in a state of הסתר פנים (lit., the hiding of the Divine countenance) – not under the direction of Providence; cf. the commentary by Kimhi on this verse:

You were angry with me, and hid Your countenance and Providence from me, leaving me defenseless before all [...] for You removed Your Providence from me, and You will not protect me.

24 Cf. Kimhi, who connects this departure with the place (possessing a spiritual dimension) where Cain stayed; and similarly Nahmanides, but without the leaving of a specific place, rather, the very state of detachment from the Lord.

25 While the exposition in bSanh 37b maintains that this alleviation is due to his exile, *Malbim* prefers the exposition in WayR that finds the reason in repentance (and in accordance with the fashioning of the character of Cain in his own commentary; see below). *Malbim*’s adaptation of the exposition is noteworthy. His summarization is faithful to its content, but changes its linguistic basis. The exposition is based on a formalistic study, taking note of the disparity between the appearance of the two verbs נע and נד in the decree, on the one hand, and

A striking phenomenon that should be addressed is the relatively positive fashioning of the character of Cain. Unlike the total and methodical negative fashioning of his character by Rashi,<sup>26</sup> *Malbim* begins with his positive evaluation, proceeds to his presentation as a murderer through error, and finally paints him as a repentant.

(1) The giving of the name “Cain”: as Rapeld shows, while in Rashi’s understanding, the name Cain has no personal meaning connected with him, and relates solely to his parents, for Nahmanides, Cain’s name teaches of the life meant for this son, “and he was to inherit his parents in the service of the Lord.”<sup>27</sup> *Malbim*, too, finds personal meaning in Cain’s name. He states that “the early ones would sanctify the firstborn, to be holy to the Lord and engage in His service, while the other sons would engage in mundane affairs.” Accordingly, Cain had pride of place with Eve, and her statement, “I have gained [קניתי] a male child” (v. 1) expresses his being dedicated to the service of the Lord. Despite the similarity between Nahmanides and *Malbim*, the difference between the two interpretations is noteworthy: while, for Nahmanides, the firstborn is the *future* spiritual heir (“when we will die, he will be in our stead to worship his Creator”), according to *Malbim* the firstborn is already the spiritual character *in his parents’ lifetime*. The two commentators likewise disagree concerning the reason for the name “Abel”, which has somewhat of a negative connotation: while Nahmanides

26 Cf. Rapeld's assertion that "Rashi wants to rid Cain of any spark of humanity"; see his full analysis: MEIR RAPELD, "משהו על" (משהו על), "דרכו של רש"י בפירושו לתורה) מגמה חינוכית בפירוש רש"י לספר בראשית ומבחר ספרי התורה, PhD diss., University of Haifa, 2006, sect. 3.3.2.1, pp. 152-56; TMIMA DAVIDOVITZ, "הערכת דמויות מקראיות בספר בראשית לאור פרשנות רש"י: קין, ישמעאל," in AVINOAM COHEN (ed.), "רש"י ותלמידיו (Ramat Gan, 2013), pp. 27-50, esp. pp. 30-32.

says that this is a universal assessment (“because man’s acquisition is likened to vanity [להביל]”),<sup>28</sup> *Malbim* maintains that this is a personal evaluation of this son (by being an addition to the firstborn son).

(2) In the evaluation of Cain’s occupation as a tiller of the soil, Nahmanides does not comment on the choice of work (while Rashi’s commentary contains implicit criticism of Cain’s pursuit). *Malbim* asserts that “they designated the firstborn for working the land, which is pleasing to the Lord,” so that not only was this choice of occupation not an arbitrary decision by Cain, it rather was the realization of the practice of the ancients to designate the firstborn for an occupation that (so they thought) was pleasing to the Lord.

(3) In his explanation of “Cain said to his brother Abel” (v. 8), Rapeld attempts to distinguish between Rashi and Nahmanides in their evaluation of the severity of the crime of murder. In his opinion, Nahmanides somewhat ameliorates the magnitude of the sin: the murder was committed in secret and not publicly, and the reason for the murder was a competitive motive. I believe, however, that the difference between the two interpretations is insignificant, and neither justifies the murder, which was Cain’s initiative, without any provocation by Abel. *Malbim*, in contrast, explains this wording as attesting to Cain’s unfortunate misunderstanding. He took the Lord’s statement: “its urge is toward you, yet you can be its master” (v. 7) as directed to Abel and his evil intent, “and he therefore set upon him and killed him, in accordance with what the Lord told him, that he could be dominant.” Unlike Cain’s competitive motive in Nahmanides’ commentary, *Malbim*’s explanation has Cain finding some support for his action in his erroneous understanding of the statement by the Lord.

(4) In the understanding of Cain’s response: “I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?” – while Rashi defines Cain, based on this answer, as “deceiving the Most High,” and Nahmanides offers no explanation, *Malbim* interprets it in a unique fashion, as the continuation of his explanation of “Cain said to his brother Abel,” thereby removing much of its sting. One who reads the narrative with the commentary of Nahmanides in mind could not conceive of such a favourable understanding of Cain’s response.

(5) In Cain’s final punishment: “and he settled in the land of Nod” – while Nahmanides writes that “he dwelt in that land, perpetually wandering therein and not resting at all in any one place thereof,”<sup>29</sup> *Malbim* cites

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28 Nahmanides to Gen. 4:1 (trans. CHARLES B. CHAVEL, *Ramban (Nachmanides): Commentary on the Torah* [New York, 1971], *Genesis*, p. 87).

29 Nahmanides to Gen. 4:16 (trans.: CHAVEL [n. 28 above], p. 92).

the Rabbinic teaching that half of the decree was abrogated. *Malbim* himself reaches this conclusion by a close linguistic reading: “the **גן** is in his place, dwelling in a single land.”

This said and done, on one point *Malbim* takes a more stringent view than Nahmanides, and even than Rashi, namely, in explaining the rejection of Cain’s offering. While Nahmanides gives no reason for this rebuff, and Rashi explains that he brought it “from the worst” produce, *Malbim* finds in the Biblical text four flaws in Cain’s offering (Cain did not understand that the Lord is the Source of all, and therefore brought it only “in the course of time”; he brought an inferior offering; he thought that the Lord needed the offering; he brought the offering without inner intent), in comparison with that of his brother Abel, which is why the latter’s offering was preferred to that of Cain.<sup>30</sup> *Malbim* might digress here from his advocative policy due to the theological consideration that he preferred – justification of the Lord’s discrimination between the offerings of the brothers. By listing these four differences between the offerings *Malbim* uses one of the means in his interpretive arsenal to illustrate the coherence of the narrative: connecting nearby statements by viewing them as sections in a complete conceptual structure. A methodical, and positive, assessment of the character of Cain in the narrative bonds the different parts of the narrative; according to my explanation, the single digression from the image that he draws of Cain, as well, is bound up in his conception of the narrative as coherent.

We will conclude our study of the first text with a short summation of *Malbim*’s conception of the narrative’s coherence. *Malbim* discusses man’s freedom of action in vv. 7, 8, and 10, and in v. 9 he presents Cain’s opposite understanding (“he thought that man is compelled in his actions”). He mentions Divine Providence in his commentary to vv. 14 and 16. These two matters construct what we regard to be the goal of the narrative according to *Malbim*, as can be learned from the above-mentioned passage at the end of his commentary to v. 1:

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30 If we add to our comparison Cassuto, to whom we compared *Malbim*’s commentary for this narrative, we find that Cassuto paints an interim picture of Cain, between the negative image fashioned by Rashi and Nahmanides’ relatively positive depiction. Thus, e. g., on the one hand, he understands the name “Cain” similar to Rashi, and is silent regarding Cain’s spiritual designation; while on the other hand, unlike Rashi, he finds nothing wrong with Cain’s occupation, and views the two brothers as being of equal standing. In any event, Cassuto’s Cain is distant from the character presented by *Malbim*.



This comes to teach of the special Providence over individuals, as well, and that reward and punishment is meted out for them, in accordance with their deeds, as was the case regarding Cain.<sup>31</sup>

## 2. Prophecy (Hosea 14)

Unlike the modern commentators who definitely view “Return, O Israel” (v. 2) as the beginning of the prophecy (as is also indicated by the demarcation of the *Haftarah* on *Shabbat Shuvah*), *Malbim* clearly connects v. 2 with v. 1 (“Samaria must bear her guilt [...]”), which also suits the division of the chapters.<sup>32</sup> He bonds between the two verses by means of contrast: v. 1 offers no hope, while those mentioned in v. 2 have the option of rectification by force of repentance. Like Rashi, *Malbim* distinguishes between the individuals to whom the verses refer,<sup>33</sup> but unlike Rashi, he differentiates between the kings of Samaria and “the people as a whole.” The limitation of v. 1 to the kings alone seems artificial, but the advantage of this interpretation is that “Israel” in v. 2 is understood as referring to the Northern Kingdom.

Before examining in detail his interpretation of the entire prophecy, it should be noted that, unlike what we found in his commentary to Gen. 4, here we have difficulty in finding a single topic that binds together all the material. Nonetheless, we will seek to indicate the ways in which *Malbim* attempted to integrate the entire prophecy.

We mentioned the manner in which *Malbim* connects v. 2 to the preceding verse, which relates to the punishment of the kings of Samaria who committed the sin of the calves, and caused Israel to similarly sin. *Malbim* writes of their punishment at the end of his commentary to v. 1: “They were deserving of this, from the aspect of strict judgment, since they were incorrigible,” and he immediately continues:

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31 For an instructive modern attempt to demonstrate the unity of the narrative (and of chapter 4 as a whole), cf. YAIR MAZOR, “What You See Is Not What You Get: When Unity Masquerades as Disarray,” in: *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 20 (2006), pp. 264-272, esp. pp. 269-72.

32 Formal expression of this linkage of the verses is given in the word “but”, that ends his commentary to v. 1 and directly connects it to v. 2 (the conjunction of contrast “but” immediately recurs after the citing of the first two Hebrew words of “Return, O Israel”). We clearly learn from his formulation that he viewed v. 1 as the beginning of this prophecy, or at least the beginning of a part of it.

33 Rashi distinguishes between the inhabitants of the Northern Kingdom (v. 1, that mentions “Samaria”) and those of the kingdom of Judah (vv. 2 ff.), and he is forced to interpret “Israel” in v. 2 as “the Israelites in the land of Judah.”



But “Return, O Israel,” but you, O Israel – which is the people as a whole, except for Samaria – you can repent [...] for you did not commit the sin of defiance and rebellion, you merely were led astray by those who caused you to stumble, namely, the kings of Samaria [...] and there is a remedy for you.

Accordingly, v. 2 presents the Lord’s response to the sinners, which is the opposite of His response that is set forth in v. 1 (attention should be paid to the highlighted contrast in his wording: “they were incorrigible [literally, they have no remedy] – there is a remedy for you”), the reason being the difference in the nature of the sin. The reasoning “for you have fallen because of your sin” in v. 2, that is usually understood as explaining the need for the people to repent, is taken by *Malbim* as the reason for giving this possibility to the people. In other words, this wording explains the act of the Lord, showing that, in contrast with the kings’ initiative, the people was passive, and was led astray by its leaders; having acted unwittingly, or even against its will, there is a remedy for it, in the form of repentance.

The call to the people in v. 2 is: “Return, O Israel, to [עַד] the Lord your God,” and in the next verse, “and return to [אֶל] the Lord.” Unlike Kimhi, who takes pains to clarify: “And when it says עַד, this is like אֶל,” for *Malbim* the substitution of prepositions is significant, and he distinguishes between the meanings of the two wordings לְשׁוּב אֶל and לְשׁוּב עַד (both translated as “return to”). For *Malbim*, the latter denotes additional closeness (after coming up to the destination, but not reaching it).<sup>34</sup> These, then, are two stages, with the second built on the first. *Malbim* defines the second stage as “repentance from love,” to which the Rabbinic rule is accordingly applied, that sins committed maliciously are transformed into merits.<sup>35</sup> Thus, while in the first stage of repentance the sins are still ascribed to the repentant (since their malicious sins have been transformed into unwitting ones), in the second stage they are blameless, since these sins have now become merits. He understands the wording regarding the forgiveness of sins, כָּל חַטָּאת עוֹן (“forgive all sin” [v. 3]) as does Kimhi: “it [i.e., the word order] is inverted,” but according to *Malbim*, not with the meaning of all the sins, but rather: the sin in its entirety,<sup>36</sup> that is, now the

34 In *באור המלות*, *Malbim* directs the reader to Joel 2:12-13 (“turn back [...] and turn back”); in his commentary to the passage in Joel, he also distinguishes between the first returning, that is begun while distant, and the second, that is (after coming close) “from love.” See also his commentary to Deut. 30:10.

35 As the dictum of Resh Lakish in bYoma 86b.

36 Cf. the interpretation of Ehrlich on v. 2 (ARNOLD BOGUMIL EHRLICH, *מקרא כפשוטו* [Berlin, 1900], vol. 3, p. 393):

sin will be forgiven in its entirety, leaving no remnant. The forgiveness will be by merit of “and accept what is good” – the acceptance of the good deeds and merits (he adds in a note: the sin itself will become “good”, in accordance with the Rabbinic dictum). The payment of bulls (“instead of bulls we will pay [the offering of] our lips” [v. 3]) is connected to this: in the first stage there was still a dimension of unwitting sin, which required the bringing of a sacrifice; but now, when even the unwitting sins have been forgiven, there no longer is any need for a sacrifice, which is replaced by speech alone.

Why does the prophet mention confession instead of sacrifice? Kimhi, to whom I compare *Malbim* in this section of the article, viewed this as an expression of the superiority of confession, which is more reflective of one’s inner intent than the bringing of a sacrifice by itself, while other commentators regarded this as referring to circumstances in which a sacrifice could not be brought.<sup>37</sup> *Malbim*, therefore, differs from both: neither the fundamental inferiority of the sacrifice, nor the technical inability of offering it, but rather circumstances in which there is no need to offer a sacrifice, since in their religious state the people need only confess.

The content of the confession is specified in the following verse (4): “Assyria shall not save us.” This verse, according to *Malbim*, contains a declaration of loyalty by the people of Israel to its God: “We shall no longer trust in any save You” – not Assyria, not Egypt (“no more will we ride on steeds”),<sup>38</sup> and not “the sculptured images and the [cosmic] constellation.” Here *Malbim* consolidates the text as constructed in accordance

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Change the order of the words in the verse, and thus interpret it: תשא כל עון [“Forgive all the sin”], and this is its meaning: Forgive the sin in its entirety. For this [following] reason, כל [“all”] is at the beginning of the statement, since if the order were different, this would mean: forgive each of the sins.

37 Daniel ben Moses al-Kumisi, פתרון שנים עשר: פירוש לתרי עשר, ed. ISAAK MARKON (Jerusalem, 1958), p. 24 (Hebrew); MEIRA POLLIACK and ELIEZER SCHLOSSBERG, פירוש יפת בן עלי לספר הושע (Ramat Gan, 2009), pp. 247, 487-488; and also in several Rabbinic exegeses, such as: “Forgive all guilt and accept what is good” [Hos. 14:3] – Israel said: Master of the universe! While the Temple existed, we would offer a sacrifice and atone; now, all we have is prayer” (TanB, *Korah* 12).

38 For an understanding of “on steeds [...]” as alluding to Egypt, cf. Rashi, R. Joseph Kara, Ibn Ezra, R. Eliezer of Beaugency, Abrabanel, and R. Samuel Laniado on the verse. Kimhi, in contrast, understands this as a direct continuation of the first part of the verse, as relating to a request for assistance from Assyria, which was dispatched by means of messengers on horseback.

with (in modern parlance) the pattern of the numerical sequence three-four, based on the recurring formula that he coins: “we shall no longer trust,” as he presents the three rejected options: Assyria, Egypt, and the sculptured images. He portrays the end of the verse: “since in You alone orphans find pity” as a contrast to the options that are rejected: “for only in You shall we trust.”<sup>39</sup>

For an interim summation of the manner in which the verses are connected until now: v. 2 is connected to v. 1 as a triple contrast: the nature of the sin (unwitting and under compulsion, as opposed to malicious sin); the response by the Lord (“there is a remedy for them,” as opposed to “they were incorrigible”); and the nature of the ones who are addressed (the masses who were led astray, in contrast with the leadership responsible for their sinning). V. 2 itself constitutes the basis for another linkage, with v. 3: return עַד the Lord, in contrast with return אֶל the Lord – apparently repentance out of fear of God, as opposed to repentance out of love of Him. V. 3 itself contrasts sacrifices with confession: there is no need for the former, and the people therefore turns to the latter alone. The description of the confession comes in v. 4. The confession is dedicated to the source of human trust, as it contrasts the three rejected options to the preferred option – reliance on the Lord. In addition to all these, the contrast between unwitting and malicious sin, with which we began the linkage between v. 2 and v. 1, continues to consolidate the text until the end of v. 3.

The Lord’s response to the people that returns to Him begins in v. 5, which expresses two stages, on the Lord’s part, as well. The first stage: “I will heal their affliction” – the sinful behaviour of the people is compared to an illness, which will be healed by repentance; and in the second stage: “generously in love” – not only forgiveness of the past, but also the renewal of the Lord’s love for them. The Lord’s response in v. 5 seems to correspond to the love that describes the people’s behaviour in v. 3, which *Malbim* characterized as repentance out of love (“to repent *out of love* [...] this is repentance *out of love* [...] they returned to *His love* [...] not out of fear of punishment, but only *out of love*”). In his commentary to v. 5 he stresses

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39 Note should be taken of the structure of his commentary (the repetitious wording is emphasized):

שמעתה לא נבטח עוד על דבר זולתך, לא על אשור שבטחו בו מלכי ישראל בצר להם, כי אשור לא יושיענו, ולא נבטח על מצרים שנתנו לנו סוס ורכב שנלחם בכחנו, כי על סוס לא נרכב, ולא נבטח עוד על הפסילים והמערכת, כי לא נאמר עוד אלהינו למעשה ידינו, כי רק בך נבטח, מצד שידענו אשר בך ירוחם יתום.

the Lord's love of His people ("I will return *to love* them [...] for I will *love* them [...] I will return *to love* them").

The continuation of the prophecy paints a picture of prosperity, which is seen by *Malbim* in a surprising manner. While this is usually understood as a portrayal of the rehabilitation of the people in its land, as it sets down roots on its soil (cf. Kimhi), *Malbim* turns this to a picture of the people in its exile. He bases this on what is written in "scientific books" about the "rose [or: lily] of Jericho," that does not strike roots in the ground, is borne far away by the wind, and is nourished by the dew. This rose is comparable to

Israel, who is borne by the wind from place to place, exiled and thrown around, and the Lord is the dew that revives them in their exile, and it blossoms in its beauty and splendour like a rose.

In order, however, to maintain this conception, *Malbim* is forced to interpret the end of v. 6: ויך שרשיו כלבנון ("he shall strike root like a Lebanon tree") in an exceptional manner, not as the continuation of a description of the *future* (he apparently could not accept this as referring to striking roots in the soil of the Exile),<sup>40</sup> but as a depiction of the *past*: "even though He struck its roots, that were first in their land, as strong as a Lebanon tree" – and the striking of roots is understood to have a negative meaning, namely, their being struck and harmed. *Malbim* provides the interpretive basis for this conception in a short note in באור המלות: "Like Ephraim is stricken, their stock is withered." This passage, from Hos. 9:16, that also explicitly mentions Ephraim, is generally seen to contrast with 14:6, so that the latter is the favourable opposite of the evil depicted in 9:16, while *Malbim* understands the two verses as having the same sense.

*Malbim* also understands the following verse as presenting the situation in the Exile: the sons ("his boughs" – the tender branches that sprout after the roots are severed) will become trees and will give light ("his beauty shall be like the olive tree's" – just as the olive tree provides oil for light, so will the sons shine in the light of the Lord), and will have the fragrance of the Lebanon – "the sanctity and purity that are ascribed to the Lebanon that is in the Land of Israel, the place of purity and sanctity." Only in the follow-

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40 In a contrasting view, for Kimhi (and also Abrabanel), who understands "blossom like the lily" as a depiction of the people's flourishing in its land, the end of the verse: "he shall strike root like a Lebanon tree" is a necessary completion: "And if you were to say: The rose has no roots, and can easily be uprooted?" – the picture of the Lebanon tree striking roots completes the portrayal of the people striking roots in its land.

ing verse (8), according to him, is there a reference to the Land of Israel: among the sons there will be those who will return to the Land of Israel, be fruitful and multiply there, and have fine livelihood. Not all, however, will return to the Land of Israel, and the end of the verse refers to those who will not return: “his scent shall be [זכרו, literally, his remembrance; or, mention] like the wine of Lebanon” – those who remain in the Exile

will always remember the Lebanon, and just as they remember the very good wine of the Lebanon, and its memory will not leave the mind of one who drinks it, so too, they will mention in their prayers the good hill and the Lebanon, setting Jerusalem above their highest joy [based on Ps. 137:6].<sup>41</sup>

The explicit reference to the mention of Jerusalem in the prayers is a definite allusion to Reform Judaism, that sought to remove Jerusalem from the prayers.

What led *Malbim* to take this exceptional path, and maintain that the text postponed the description of the return to the Land of Israel until v. 8, unlike commentators such as Kimhi, who viewed vv. 6-7 as already relating to the people’s renewed life in its land? We might have here a combination of interpretive considerations together with ideological motivations. From the interpretive aspect, the verb יָשְׁבוּ, that *Malbim* interprets (like many commentators) as return to the Land of Israel, appears only in v. 8; thus, in order to avoid the problematic nature of relating to life in the Land of Israel before the mention of return to the Land,<sup>42</sup> he avoids relating to life in the Land of Israel before v. 8. The interpretive consideration alone, however, is not decisive, since he could have offered a different meaning for this verb, and therefore it seems that we also have here an ideological-educational consideration, of the desire to express a message of prophetic trust in the Lord’s aid to those living in the Exile, together with the hope of returning to the Land, along with the question of mentioning the return to Zion in prayer.<sup>43</sup>

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41 *Malbim* alludes here to the Rabbinic conception that “Lebanon” is an appellation for the Temple; see GEZA VERMES, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism: Haggadic Studies* (Leiden, 1973), pp. 26-39.

42 This problematic exists, for example, in the interpretation of Kimhi, who, as mentioned above, sees vv. 6-7 as referring to the return to the Land of Israel, while at the same time he understands יָשְׁבוּ as “they will return to their land.”

43 We find such a conception, of understanding these passages as referring to the Lord’s help to His people in Exile, also in his commentary to “I will give her her vineyards from there” (Hos. 2:17), unlike Kimhi, who has it as describing the situation of the Israelites in the Land of Israel at the time of the Redemption.



These three verses (6-8) are finely connected by this interpretation: the first presents the Lord's compassion to His people in their Exile; the second, the continuation of this compassion while progressing in time, with preparation for the next verse at its end ("his fragrance like that of Lebanon" – the sanctity and purity in the Land of Israel); and the third, continuing the end of the preceding verse, the act of return to the Land, and also a continuation of the divine compassion. The end of the verse is concerned with those who remained in the Exile, and draws somewhat of a parallel between them and the returnees ("for those who will not return, too [...] will always remember the Lebanon").

V. 9 is vague regarding the identity of the speakers in its various parts. Like additional commentators before him, including Kimhi, *Malbim* understands "Ephraim," not as address, but as identification of the speaker in the first part of the verse ("Ephraim: What more have I to do with idols?"). In his explanation, "Ephraim" (= the royal house),<sup>44</sup> which initiated pagan worship, too, will regret his actions and declare that this idolatry is illusory, and nothing more. The distinction that *Malbim* draws between "Ephraim" and "Israel", even though its validity could be questioned, contributes to enriching this prophecy on two points: (1) it solves a problem in the order of what the prophet says, namely, why his declaration about the abandonment of idolatry, a matter that was already mentioned in v. 4 ("nor ever again will we call our handiwork god"), appears in such an advanced stage – actually, the end - of the prophecy of return. For *Malbim*, what is new here is the identity of the one making this declaration: while before, he spoke of the people that had been led astray, now it is the one responsible for the sin himself who recants; (2) v. 9 closes the circle that began in v. 1, which *Malbim* interpreted, as we saw, as referring to the grievous sin of the "kings of Samaria."

The continuation within v. 9 is understood as the response of the Lord, who promises to answer the people's prayer. The Lord portrays Himself as a verdant cypress with many branches, and the one sitting in its shade "will find shelter, from all the vicissitudes of time, at any and all

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44 In his commentary to v. 9 *Malbim* says nothing about the term "Ephraim"; he apparently assumed that the reader would remember his recurring definition that the prophet's intent is to "the royal house"; see his commentary to Hos. 4:17; 5:3 (and also in **באור המלות**), 10; 6:10; 13:1; cf. 12:1 ("'Ephraim' – this is the tribe that rules"). In most of these passages, "Israel" appears together with "Ephraim", thereby supporting this explanation by distinguishing between the synonyms.



time.” *Malbim* interprets “Your fruit is provided by Me,” that is not fitting for a cypress, as ascending a further degree: the Lord clarifies that He is not like a cypress, that does not bear fruit, but gives “the material and spiritual good, as well.” Thus, the first phrase speaks of the Lord’s protection against trouble, and the second, as awarding bounty.

*Malbim* provides a lengthy explanation of v. 10. Unlike Kimhi, who views this verse as the summation of the entire book of Hosea, *Malbim* apparently perceives this verse as the conclusion of this prophecy alone,<sup>45</sup> although he says nothing explicit about this verse’s connection to those preceding it. According to his interpretation, the verse is a critique of those who complain about the difficulties of the Exile, and the prophet explains that the discerning understand that the Exile is a punishment from the Lord, as an expression of His just Providence. The attitude to Providence and Exile (according to *Malbim*’s singular interpretation, vv. 6-8 already allude to the latter) is what connects v. 10 with the preceding verses.<sup>46</sup>

Even without the express mention of a uniting topic, a reading of Hosea 14 in light of *Malbim*’s commentary reveals a diverse range of ways to connect the parts of this prophecy, including binary oppositions (unwitting-malicious, there is a remedy-incorrigible, love-fear); the pattern of the numerical sequence three-four, and its emphasis by means of repetitive language (“we shall no longer trust X” [three times] – “for only in You shall we trust”); measure for measure (return from love – the Lord’s love of His people); coming full circle (the sins of the kings of Samaria in v. 1 - the return of the kings of Samaria in v. 9); and a shared topic (Exile, in vv. 6-8 and 10; Providence, in vv. 9-10)

### 3. Psalm (Psalms 89)

*Malbim*’s commentary to this psalm is a prime example of my thesis that the distinction between synonyms is not all that his interpretive method

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45 Cf. the conception of R. Eliezer of Beaugency: “The prophet concludes his words, that he told them to return [i. e., repent], to submit, and to recall His boons.”

46 To a certain degree, modern scholarship can be viewed as continuing Kimhi’s interpretation that the verse is the conclusion to the entire book. These scholars, however, do not credit the prophet with authoring the verse. Ibn Ezra, in contrast, stressed the integral nature of the verse (as I argue is *Malbim*’s intent), and he asserts that v. 2: “while sinners stumble [יכשלו] them” returns to “for you have fallen [כשלת] because of your sin.”

comprises. In both **באור המלות** and **באור הענין**, *Malbim* draws a distinction between synonyms that appear in the various verses of the psalm, beginning with **חסד** and **אמונה** in v. 2; but these distinctions are merely the foundation for his contentual interpretation that appears throughout (almost) all the verses of Ps. 89, which it weaves into a single topic.

In **באור המלות** on v. 2, *Malbim* distinguishes between **חסד** and **אמונה** in reference to humans: **אמונה** is the fulfillment of a promise or commitment; while **חסד** is voluntary, without the obligation of promise or commitment. According to this understanding, when these concepts refer to the Lord, they have the meanings: **אמונה** - the natural order, the maintenance of the laws of nature; **חסד** – the miraculous direction of the world, beyond any presumed “commitment”.<sup>47</sup> *Malbim* notes there the appearance of this pair of terms also in vv. 3, 15, 25, 29, 34, and 50.<sup>48</sup> He further adds there a far-reaching observation that reveals his singular method in the interpretation of the psalm: “Besides this, it transpires that each utterance [i.e., verse] revolves around this axis;”<sup>49</sup> that is, he presents here a binary opposition that appears, either openly or concealed, throughout the psalm.

*Malbim* writes of the orientation of the psalm in his commentary to v. 1, which consists in its entirety of a general view of the psalm. He notes the parallel between “the general direction of the Lord with which He directs the world” and “the covenant that He made with David,” both of which are based on “two pillars” – **חסד** and **אמונה**. The parallelism between the direction of the world and the covenant with David is so strong that “it seems as if one is the mould for the other.” On the background of this parallelism, the psalmist cries out that, while steadfast love and faithfulness are present in the direction of the world, they are not fulfilled regarding the covenant of David.

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47 *Malbim* makes frequent use of this contrast between the two modes of Divine Providence, the natural and the miraculous. For example, the following twelve passages from his commentary: Exod. 20:8-11; Josh. 3:9-11; I Sam. 8:6; I Kings 7:21; Isa. 12:4; Hab. 3:2; Ps. 22:24; 33:1; 36:6; 47:6; 66:1; 92:2-3.

48 To be precise, two of the verses do not contain the word **אמונה**, but proximate words: **אמת** (v. 15), and **נאמנת** (v. 29).

49 *Malbim* thus realizes his declaration in his introduction to Psalms:

Most of the psalms, almost all of them, contain passages that are parts of the psalm separate one from the other, and they have no connection, continuation, linkage, or relation [...] I accordingly laboured greatly until I found the axis of each psalm and its centre, and until the bones drew closer, bone to bone. Then I prophesied to the breath, saying, Come, O breath, and breath into these sacred bones that they may live again [see Ezek. 37:9].

Before offering several examples of his interpretations in this vein, we will first compare this understanding with a similar statement by Shmuel Segal, a modern scholar who published a detailed literary analysis of Ps. 89.<sup>50</sup> After mentioning the unity of the psalm, Segal determines that the psalm is composed of three sections (hymn, vision, and lament) that are linked to each other, and argues that

the poem as a whole possesses a quality reminiscent of the medieval girdle poem: 2-3, 15, 25, 34, 50 - these are the girdle verses, that recurringly emphasize the basis on which the psalmist's address is founded: the Lord's steadfast love and faithfulness.<sup>51</sup>

Although Segal mentions the repetition of *חסד* and *אמונה* (he includes v. 15 in this phenomenon, but not v. 29),<sup>52</sup> and he relates to their contribution to the consolidation of the psalm, unlike *Malbim*, he does not distinguish between the meanings of the two synonyms, and therefore does not construct the nature-miracle binary opposition. As regards the orientation of the psalm, Segal seems to concisely and clearly present the same position set forth by *Malbim*:

It seems that this was the author's direction: to link these two commitments of the Lord and place them on the same level, in order to justify his claim-complaint.<sup>53</sup>

Already in the first appearance of the pair, in v. 2 ("I will sing of the Lord's steadfast love [*חסדי*] forever, to all generations I will proclaim Your faithfulness [*אמונתך*] with my mouth"), *Malbim* is faced with an interpretive challenge, since each of the words of the pair appears in a context that suits the other: the fixed order of natural law (*אמונה*) should be connected with the word *עולם* ("forever", which, for *Malbim*, means: "indivisible continuing time"), while *חסד*, which the Lord bestows from time to time, in accordance with the merits of the generation, should rightly appear together with *לדר דר* [usually translated: "to all generations"] ("time divided into two generations"), while the opposite is the case in the psalm. *Malbim* himself presents this difficulty, and offers an explanation that we might find artificial: the psalmist's message here lies specifically in this

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50 SHMUEL SEGAL, "תהלים פט," in: *Beit Miqra* 15 (1970), pp. 149-180.

51 SEGAL, "תהלים פט" (n. 50 above), p. 157.

52 Segal's argument, however, contains an internal contradiction: on p. 157 he includes v. 15 among the "girdle verses," that speak of the Lord's steadfast love and faithfulness, while his listing of the appearances of "key words" on p. 159 does not include v. 15 among the verses that contain "faithfulness".

53 SEGAL, "תהלים פט" (n. 50 above), p. 157.

reversal. It comes to teach us that the laws of nature, too, are influenced by the acts of men; and on the other hand, steadfast love, as well, is predetermined, as “The Holy One, blessed be He, stipulated with the sea, that it would part before the Children of Israel.”<sup>54</sup>

*Malbim* maintains that v. 3 (“I declare, ‘Your steadfast love is confirmed forever; there in the heavens You establish Your faithfulness’”) presents the divine attributes in the Creation: the very act of Creation was God’s steadfast love, after which the Creator established the laws of nature in the six days of Creation, as if He promised that all existents and the laws of nature will endure. “Faithfulness” is mentioned in regard to the heavens, for they represent the laws of nature (while steadfast love is above the heavens).

The two consecutive verses in which the two terms appear are followed by v. 4 (“I have made a covenant with My chosen one; I have sworn to My servant David”), that contains neither. *Malbim*’s task is to connect this verse to the basic dichotomous structure that he presented. He first notes the change in the speaker, who now is the Lord, and not the psalmist (who had declared “I will sing of the Lord’s steadfast love forever”). This comment is followed by a clarification of the second expanse in which the Lord’s steadfast love and faithfulness are at play – not only in the general direction of the world, but also in regard to the Davidic line. According to *Malbim*, the first hemistich of the verse speaks of the attribute of steadfast love: the making of a covenant with David was a volitional act of steadfast love, and not a result of David’s actions. Additionally, the Lord swears to him to care for him, in accordance with his conduct (“faithfulness”), and thus, in this hemistich, specifically, he is called “My servant”. *Malbim* further mentions the similarity in the order of these attributes: just as steadfast love came first in the Creation, to be followed by faithfulness, so too, in the selection of David.

*Malbim* maintains that the parallelism expressed in v. 5 (“I will establish your offspring forever, I will confirm your throne for all generations. *Se-lah*”), too, is complementary, and not synonymous. The distinction he drew in v. 2 between עולם and לדר דר is valid for this verse, as well: “forever”, which is “indivisible continuing time,” refers to “your offspring,” and this hemistich expresses the eternal existence of the Davidic line. The realization, however, of the kingship, “your throne,” is not constant, but

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54 The exposition of R. Jonathan brought in BerR 5:5 (ed. THEODOR-ALBECK, p. 35). *Malbim* contends with this same difficulty in v. 6 in similar fashion; see also below.

changes between generations, and will return at the time of the Redemption. As we see, this verse did not pose the difficulties for *Malbim* that he encountered in v. 2.

The word *Selah* at the end of v. 5 is seen by *Malbim* as “the end of the matter,” with v. 6 beginning the second part of the psalm, which continues through v. 38. He begins his commentary to v. 6 with a brief summary of the content of this part, that:

relates that the general steadfast love and faithfulness still exist in the world at large. The reality attests to this every day, both in the natural order, and in the wondrous direction [of the world], and the general reality attests that the Lord’s establishment of the kingship of the House of David accords with the general steadfast love and faithfulness.

The word “faithfulness” appears by itself in v. 6 (“Your wonders, O Lord, are praised by the heavens, Your faithfulness, too, in the assembly of holy beings”). In *Malbim*’s dichotomous division, this poses a problem: “the heavens,” that for *Malbim* represent the laws of nature (“there in the heavens You establish your faithfulness” – v. 3), appears in the first hemistich of the verse, alongside “Your wonders,” terminology that evidently suits the miraculous direction of the world, while “your faithfulness” (= natural direction) appears in the second hemistich. *Malbim* adopts here the same tactic of “crossing the lines” that he had also used in v. 2: although the heavens operate in accordance with the laws of nature, they, too, acknowledge concealed miracles, and that there is direction of the world in accordance with reward and punishment. Thus, the “congregation of the holy beings,” the angels responsible for the miraculous direction of the world, too, acknowledge the natural direction of the world, since miracles, as well, are part of the predetermined direction of the world. Thus, this verse also relates to the two modes of direction of the world, and the lack of accord between terms and conceptions is resolved.

The following verses are interpreted as continuing the reference to these two modes of divine direction of the world. The verses are consolidated, not only on the contentual level by means of the deep structure described above, they also are united linguistically by connective wording, as we see in the openings of his interpretations to different verses: “Now he will explain that these two types of direction that he mentioned, both the wondrous [...] and the natural [...]” (v. 8); “He begins to explain these two matters that he mentioned, how they are revealed by these two modes of direction [...] corresponding to the wondrous direction that he mentioned in v. 8 [...]” (v. 10); “And corresponding to the natural direction



that he mentioned in v. 9 [...]” (v. 12); “After explaining the two types of direction with which the Lord directs His world [...] he ends by saying [...] this is the fixed natural direction [...] and that is the providential miraculous direction” (v. 15); “After he spoke of [all the details of] the direction of general Divine Providence, he returned to speak of individual Providence” (v. 16); “Then they [= the people] will accept these two types of direction [...]” (v. 17); “He explicates this in detail: corresponding to what he said [...] and corresponding to what he said [...]” (v. 18); “He explicates these two things a second time” (v. 19). In this fashion the reader is guided to sense the conceptual continuity of the course of the psalm, with its underlying reference to these two modes of divine direction.

At the end of his commentary to the last verse listed above (v. 19: “Truly our shield is of the Lord, our king, of the Holy One of Israel”), *Malbim* prepares the reader for the themes of the following verses:

Now he turned to relate in detail concerning what he had said: “our king, of the Holy One of Israel.” He will propose a lengthy explanation of the Providence that was revealed to the House of David, and how in this, as well, these two modes that were revealed in the general direction [of the world] that are called “steadfast love” and “faithfulness” were evident.

The reader is thereby prepared for a minor and gradual transition from the description of the reality in the world to the Lord’s kindnesses to David and his line, with the conceptual connection clarified in advance.

*Malbim*’s constant reference to the two modes of divine direction is absent in the third and fourth sections of the psalm (vv. 39-46, 47-49), and is present only in the beginning of the third part (vv. 39-40), in which *Malbim* connects the depiction of the violation of the covenant with David with the promise in v. 4 (“I have made a covenant with My chosen one; I have sworn to My servant David”). He indicates the parallelism between the two parts of v. 40 and the two parts of v. 4 (“You have repudiated the covenant with your servant” – corresponding to “I have sworn to My servant David,” a “faithfulness” covenant, in accordance with David’s actions; “You have dragged his crown in the dust” [v. 40] - corresponding to “I have made a covenant with My chosen one,” a “steadfast love” covenant, selection without cause). *Malbim* returns to discuss the modes of divine direction in the beginning of the fifth part, in v. 50, in which the two key words recur.

The artificiality in this approach and its attempts to impose a single underlying structure on the various verses is clear. This said and done, it is



difficult not to be impressed by the very attempt to consolidate the psalm in this manner.<sup>55</sup>

I wish to relate to two additional characteristic features of *Malbim's* commentary to Ps. 89. The first is his treatment of its structure, which is related to his conception of the coherence of the psalm. *Malbim* divides the psalm into five sections. He does not discuss this question, but in the opening of each part he notes its beginning, and characterizes its content.<sup>56</sup> His division (with my headlines, which seek to follow his intent) is as follows:

- vv. 2-5:<sup>57</sup> the Lord's two modes of directing the world and the covenant with David
- vv. 6-38: the realization of the two modes of direction in the world and in the covenant with the Davidic line
- vv. 39-46: the violation of the covenant with David
- vv. 47-49: the prayer for the renewal of the Davidic monarchy
- vv. 50-53: the prayer for the renewal of the covenant with David and the hope for the advent of the Messiah

By way of comparison, I will present the structure presented by Segal, who does not offer a division of his own, and states: "We will use the accepted division of the chapter,"<sup>58</sup> that divides the psalm as follows:

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55 The extent to which the commentary of *Malbim* has not received the attention it deserves is attested by the observation of the scholar to whose literary analysis of the psalm I compare *Malbim's* interpretation. As Segal summarizes his discussion with the statement that "the ideational development is done in an artful manner, layer after layer" (SEGAL, "תהלים פט" [n. 50 above], p. 179), he then adds: "R. David Kimhi noted the phenomenon of the intentional verbal connections between the different parts of the psalm, as he observes in his commentary to vv. 43, 47, and more" (n. 123). The contribution by *Malbim*, whose treatment of the cohesiveness of the psalm is much more intensive than that of Kimhi, on the other hand, goes unnoticed by Segal.

56 What he writes at the beginning of the short fourth section of the psalm (commentary to v. 47) is more of a connective and an opening than a full characterization of the topic of the section.

57 While at the beginning of his commentary to each of the other sections, *Malbim* parenthetically denotes where it begins, he does not do so for the first section. I prefer to view this section as beginning with v. 2, and not v. 1, since *Malbim* relates to v. 1 as introductory; his commentary to it is of a general nature, with a short discussion of the questions of the time of the psalm's composition, its topic, and the course it takes.

58 SEGAL, "תהלים פט" (n. 50 above), p. 159. In the same place he mentions vv. 2-3 and 4-5 separately, while he himself views vv. 2-5 as a single introductory unit.

vv. 2-5: introduction  
 vv. 6-19: hymn  
 vv. 20-38: vision  
 vv. 39-52: lament

Among the significant differences between the two divisions: (1) Segal's pronounced awareness of the genres, which were the basis for his internal division, as can be seen from the titles that he gave to the different parts of the psalm (additionally, he begins his discussion by referring to the "royal psalm" genre), a question on which *Malbim* is silent (for *Malbim*, the formal consideration is decisive – the appearance of the word *Selah*);<sup>59</sup> (2) except for the short introductory passage, on the scope of which both concur, the three other sections in Segal's structure are close in length to each other, while there is a striking disproportion in *Malbim*'s structure – along with the second part, that is comprised of 33 verses, we have two extremely short sections: the fourth (3 verses), and the fifth (4 verses);<sup>60</sup> (3) in contrast with the clear distinction that Segal makes, based on topic, between all the parts of his structure, the two last sections in *Malbim*'s division seem quite similar to each other, and it is difficult to find a conceptual singularity in each that would justify its separate existence,

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59 *Selah* appears in the psalm at the end of vv. 5, 38, 46, and 48, which, in *Malbim*'s division, conclude the sections (the last section does not end with *Selah*, but in the conclusion of the psalm). *Malbim* notes succinctly in his commentary to these verses: "*Selah* – the end of the matter," a comment that is absent only from his commentary to the end of the second section (v. 38). This omission ensues from the nature of his commentary to v. 38, that ends with this section's connection to the next one ("This is not so regarding the steadfast love and faithfulness that He promised the House of David, which do not endure, as will be stated in the next section"). Thus, *Malbim* found no way to insert this comment there. It is noteworthy that at times in his commentary to other psalms, *Malbim* explicitly declares the use of *Selah* as a criterion for determining the structure of the psalm; see: "It is divided into three sections, each section ends with the word *Selah*" (commentary to 3:1); "And this psalm is divided into three sections that are denoted by the word *Selah*" (4:1); "the psalm is divided into four quarters, as the number of *Selah* words" (68:1).

60 The sharpness of this distinction is somewhat blurred in light of Segal's admission in the course of his discussion of the fourth section:

The section is divided into two distinct parts: 39-46; 47-52. Actually, they should also be called by different names. (Community) "lament" is a term fitting for only the first part, while the second part is a supplication (SEGAL, "תהלים פט" [n. 50 above], p. 174).

which is also reflected in the titles that we gave them;<sup>61</sup> (4) the treatment of the last verse (53): while Segal, as a modern scholar, sees it as “a doxology to end the third book, that was introduced by the redactors of the book of Psalms, and it resembles the conclusions of the other books,”<sup>62</sup> *Malbim* relates to the verse as an integral component of the original psalm, and he links its content with the preceding verse, including a formal connection, using the connective wording “therefore” at the end of his commentary to v. 52.<sup>63</sup>

An additional important feature of *Malbim*’s commentary to Ps. 89 is his unequivocal determination at its beginning: “It was established in the Exile.” This statement brings us back to the fundamental notion that he presented in his introduction to Psalms that is surprising when voiced by a nineteenth-century Orthodox rabbi who fought against non-traditional views.<sup>64</sup> He declares in the introduction:

As long as the spirit of the Lord went about in the Land and His glory rested on His prophets and seers [...] the gates of this treasure house were not closed, for the elders of each generation continued to fill its granaries with the harvest of the generations, between the shoots of ancient times [...] between the plantations of the divinely inspired men who came after him [= David]

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61 The motif of the Messiah, that could have served as a specific characteristic of the fifth section (in light of *Malbim*’s understanding of “Your anointed” in v. 21 as “the anointed king [= Messiah]”), is not unique to this section, since *Malbim* already introduces the messianic motif in vv. 47 and 48, in the fourth section.

62 SEGAL, “תהלים פט” (n. 50 above), p. 179.

63 Segal’s perception of the verses that end the books in Psalms as the conclusions of the books, and not as the ends of the specific psalms in which they appear, is to be found in the traditional commentary. See, e.g., the opinion of R. Judah Halevi, cited by Ibn Ezra to Ps. 82:20 (cf. the latter’s commentary to 89:53); Kimhi to Ps. 41:14, 72:18; R. Isaiah di Trani to Ps. 89:53. *Malbim* himself states, in his commentary to 41:14: “it is the conclusion of the words of the first book,” but he links the ending verses of the other books with the contents of the psalms. It therefore seems that *Malbim*’s interpretive decision here is the result of a literary consideration, and not a theological one.

64 See Rosenbloom’s assessment on this issue: “In my work I attempted to highlight [...] also his willingness to give a later time for the composition of certain chapters of Scripture, to the period of the Babylonian Exile and the Return to Zion. Taking into account the fact that he was surrounded by enemies, both internal and external, and the communities in which he was active teemed with those searching for sins and those critical of blemishes, *Malbim*’s position on this is worthy of esteem” (ROSENBLOOM, המלבי”ם [n.1 above], p. XII).

[...] to the prayers that were established in the Babylonian exile for the burning of the Temple and the Exile, until the Lord brought back those who returned to Zion [see Ps. 126:1] in the time of Cyrus.

In a note, he offers an alternative two-stage explanation (similar to S. D. Luzzatto's conception of the composition of Isa. 40-66):<sup>65</sup> these psalms were first composed by the spirit of prophecy in the time of David, but they were not voiced in public "until this actually happened, and then they were uttered in a loud voice on the pulpit, each in its [appropriate] time." It should be recalled that Ps. 89 is brought in *Malbim's* introduction to Psalms (at the beginning of the note) as an example of "the claims of the mockers": How is it possible that, in the time of David when the kingdom was still in force, Israel on its land, and the decree had not yet been issued, they already sang on the pulpit of the negation of the kingdom and the exile of Zedekiah in Ps. 89?

*Malbim* is ready to offer a rational explanation that accepts the basic argument of the *maskilim*, that the psalm was indeed composed in a later period,<sup>66</sup> but this late dating does not, in his opinion, impinge on its sanctity. Along with this, he brings support from a Rabbinic dictum concerning the late dating of psalms.<sup>67</sup> As it turns out, *Malbim* had to face two different audiences – the ultra-Orthodox and the *maskilim*.

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65 For an extensive discussion of Samuel David Luzzatto's conception of Isa. 40-66, see SHMUEL VARGON, "S. D. Luzzatto's Approach regarding the Unity of the Book of Isaiah," in: *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 4 (2001), pp. 272-296. In the opinion of David Berger, *Malbim* might have been influenced on this point by Luzzatto; see DAVID BERGER, "Malbim's Secular Knowledge and His Relationship to the Spirit of the Haskalah," in: *Yavneh Review* 5 (1966), pp. 24-46, esp. p. 34.

66 The determination: "It was established in [-ב] the Exile" (see also: "It was established in the Babylonian Exile" [84:1]; "It was established in the Babylonian Exile, about the return to Zion and the Exile" [126:1]) unequivocally expresses the notion of the late dating of the psalm. On the other hand, his wording: "It was established [...] about [על] the Exile" (42:1; 44:1; 77:1) is ambiguous, since it could denote not only a late composition, but also (and mainly) a prophetic reference to a later period (an example of this is the above citation from his commentary to 126:1, as he explains that the psalm was written in [-ב] the Babylonian Exile about [על] the Return to Zion).

67 Cf. BERGER, "Malbim's Secular Knowledge" (n. 65 above), p. 33, who states that *Malbim* grants a minor concession here in order to strengthen the foundation of the faith, by attempting to find support in Rabbinic teachings for the idea that prophetic inspiration continued beyond the time of David, thereby preserving the sanctity of Psalms.

A comparison with Segal's article illustrates *Malbim's* daring in his dating of the psalm. Segal writes at the end of his article that there is no basis for a precise dating of the psalm, and he makes do with a general assessment: that it was composed as a response to a military defeat and the depression of one of the kings of Judah, between the division of the kingdom and the Destruction.<sup>68</sup>

*Malbim's* late dating of the psalm, to the time of the Babylonian Exile, is instructive. In addition to the interpretive consideration, an educational aim might have been at work here: to find in the psalm hope for the situation of his contemporaries in the Exile (as I explained the intent of his commentary to Hos. 14:6-7), since, in terms of the simple meaning of the text, it would have been preferable to date the psalm to the time of one of the kings of the Davidic line, before the Exile.

#### 4. Summation

We examined *Malbim's* commentary to three texts, each of which represents a different genre: narrative, prophecy, and psalm. We did not explore his commentary on the legal part of the Bible, the Torah, that is deserving of a separate study, in which he interpreted *midreshei ha-halakhab*, and not the Torah itself.

What characterizes his methodology in the interpretation of *midreshei ha-halakhab*? Elsewhere,<sup>69</sup> I referred to *Malbim's* interpretation of the verse "If you follow My laws" (Lev. 26:3), in which he expands the Sages' explanation of the verse: "to labor in the Torah".<sup>70</sup> *Malbim* explains their dictum as follows:

That is to say, toil in the study of the Torah to understand these laws and the rules by which the Torah is expounded, and to derive, by means of these rules and these laws, the halakhot of the Torah and the Oral Torah, for this is attained only by great labor and toil.

This is a paradigmatic passage, and it reflects *Malbim's* way of interpreting *midreshei halakhab*: revealing the system of linguistic rules on which, he maintains, *midreshei ha-halakhab* are based. He assembled these rules in אילת השחר, a collection of 613 linguistic rules that appears at the beginning of

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68 SEGAL, "תהלים פט" (n. 50 above), p. 180.

69 AMOS FRISCH, "פרשנותו של המלבי"ם למקרא," in: *Mahanaim* 4 (1993), pp. 370-379, esp. p. 373. The article offers a general survey of his commentary, in contrast with the current article, that focuses on three texts within his commentary.

70 Sifra, *Behukotai*, 1:2 (ed. WEISS, fol. 110b).



his commentary to the book of Leviticus. *Malbim* advocated מדרש יוצר, (“creative midrash”) that is, the conception that the Sages derived the halakhot from a precise study of the language of Scripture.

By revealing the linguistic rules possessed by the Sages, *Malbim* sought to confirm the Oral Torah, while facing the challenges posed by the *maskilim* and the religious reformers, who questioned the validity of Rabbinic expositions.<sup>71</sup> In this struggle he drew upon an accepted tool of his opponents, linguistics,<sup>72</sup> and sought to show that, not only did the Sages not distort the

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71 He sets forth their view in his introduction to the book of Leviticus, the first book of the Pentateuch to which he wrote a commentary (Bucharest, 1860). When he presents the background for his decision to compose a commentary to the Bible, he expressly mentions, in a lengthy paragraph, the first conference of Reform rabbis in Brunswick in 1844:

It happened in the year 5604 [= 1844] of the Creation [...] they assembled to violate religion and laws [...] as regards the Oral Torah, which was for them a proverb and a byword [i.e., an object of derision and mockery; the original wording comes from Deut. 28:37], they denied it [...] They [the Reform rabbis] despised its Sages, and said that they [= the Sages] did not know the simple meaning of Scripture, that they were unaware of the grammar of the language, and that they followed a twisted and tortuous path, and they were derided and mocked [by the Reform rabbis] the entire day.

Even earlier, in the third exposition in his book ארצות השלום (Krotoszyn, 1839), he speaks of

the lawless ones of our people, who have begun to call whoever casts off the yoke of religion a philosopher, and whoever fills his stomach with all manner of abomination, by the name of scholar. The priests of the shrines [see I Kings 12:32] who examine the unity of the Creator and “bend their tongue, the bow of falsehood” [see Jer. 9:2] have begun to renounce the Torah and loose the reins of its commandments.

His overt controversy with Reform Judaism also appears in his commentary to “And when, in time to come, your son asks you” (Exod. 13:14), in which he defines the “reformer, who retorts and asks reproachful questions” as the wicked son, and the masses who follow him as the son who does not know how to ask. The PhD dissertation of Michal Dell contains a discussion of the open and covert disputation of *Malbim* in his commentary to the Torah (and of J. Z. Meklenburg, as well) with Reform conceptions regarding certain halakhot. See MICHAL DELL, פרשנות אורתודוקסית לתורה בעידן של תמורות: הפולמוס, PhD diss., Bar-Ilan University, 2008, pp. 108-124.

72 Schweid describes the Orthodox middle path “that extends the Orthodox conception toward neo-Orthodoxy, without exceeding its bounds”; among its characteristics is the ability “to smite the ideational rival with his terminology, and thereby prove the superiority of the Torah.” Schweid sees *Malbim* as a

language with artificial expositions, to the contrary: they were great linguists, and their expositions rely on their extensive linguistic knowledge.<sup>73</sup> Although this refers primarily to *midreshei ha-halakha*, our study of the Cain and Abel narrative showed *Malbim*'s attempts to offer his own linguistic explanation for Rabbinic, aggadic expositions, in a manner that would make these Rabbinic teachings more appealing to the *maskil*.

Here we touch upon what we maintain is one of the two underlying goals of *Malbim*'s interpretive undertaking. This goal was to firmly establish the standing of the Oral Torah and of the sages of the Oral Torah, showing that their teachings were not forced and distorted. Another such goal was to reveal the "fullness" of the Biblical text: the presentation of its contentual and formal perfection, as a consequence of its sanctity. As Touito observes, *Malbim* viewed all the books of the Bible as being written with the spirit of divine inspiration, and therefore "all the books of the Bible are perfect in their language, style, and content."<sup>74</sup> *Malbim* set these goals for himself as an intellectual challenge in the face of the reality of his times. Faced by the rise of the aesthetic commentary from the Mendelssohnian school, that emphasized the "how" and led to a comparison of the Bible with other literatures,<sup>75</sup> *Malbim* aspired to highlight the "what", while restoring the dimen-

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typical example of this; see ELIEZER SCHWEID, *בין אורתודוכסיה להומניזם דתי* (Jerusalem, 1977), pp. 16-20.

73 He writes in the beginning of his commentary to the book of Leviticus:

I showed and clarified in it that the Sages possessed treasures, the strength of salvations, replete with wisdom and knowledge [see Isa. 33:6]; they possessed great rules, fixed fundamentals in the ways of grammar and the basic principles of language and logic, most of which were hidden and concealed from the eye of all those wise of heart who came after them.

Touito argues that in this approach the concept of "acceptance of the sages" acquires new meaning: the acceptance of Rabbinic exegesis, not necessarily out of religious obedience, but by force of the scientific authority of the Sages, the masters of language; see ELAZAR TOUITO, *עיון במשנתו, "בין פשט לדרש: עיון במשנתו, "בין פשט לדרש"*, in: *Deoth* 48 (1980), pp. 193-198, esp. p. 198.

74 TOUITO, "בין פשט לדרש" (n. 73 above), p. 195. There is an illuminating parallelism between *Malbim*'s attitude to the entire Bible and that of Abrabanel (to whom *Malbim* frequently refers) to the Torah. On the theological motive at the root of Abrabanel's singular attitude regarding the perfection of the Torah in every aspect, see YAIR (= Jair) HAAS, *סטיות מתודולוגיות של אברבנאל בפירושו לתורה, לאור תפיסתו את מהות התורה*, master's thesis, Bar-Ilan University, 2001.

75 Cf. *Malbim*'s portrayal in his introduction to Leviticus:

Regarding the Written Torah, which this evil congregation has compared to one of the tales of the ancient peoples, and its poetry and sublime turns of phrase, they cast together with the poems of Homer and the Greeks.

sion of sanctity to the study of the Bible.<sup>76</sup> In his understanding, this sanctity is bound up with revealing its sublime content, without forgoing the aesthetic dimension. In his introductions to different books of the Bible, his emphatic declarations of the sanctity of the books make repeated use of the root קד"ש (see, for example, the beginning of his introductions to the books of Ezekiel, Psalms, and the Song of Songs).

Our study of these three texts from *Malbim's* commentary teaches of three prominent characteristic elements of his commentary. These typical features can be perceived as tools for attaining the second of his underlying goals: revealing the greatness of the Biblical text. These elements are the following:

(1) *distinguishing between synonyms*: this is a gateway to comprehending the wealth of the verse, which is not merely the "repetition of meaning in different words." *Malbim* writes (in the introduction to his commentary to Isaiah) that differentiating between synonyms is a method that preceded him; he specifically mentions the works by the *maskilim* Naphtali Herz Wessely (גן נעור) and Solomon Pappenheim (יריעות שלמה), but notes that he examined every case himself.

(2) *revealing binary oppositions*: we found this basic structuralist concept, openly and systematically, in *Malbim's* commentary to Ps. 89, and we also encountered it in his commentary to Hos. 14. The perception of such contrasts could serve as a connecting link between the first and the third elements here, by infusing the distinction between synonyms with significant content, and it also aids in enriching the content of Biblical texts and consolidating their topics. Such treatment of Scripture is present, first and foremost, in the Rabbinical literature,<sup>77</sup> and possibly also in Rashi's commentaries.<sup>78</sup>

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76 Cf. ROSENBLOOM, המלבי"ם (n. 1 above), p. 97:

The aesthetic-poetical worldview of the Bible that Mendelssohn adopted had negative consequences [...] the Bible was brought down from its sanctity, and became, at best, a classical poetical work, that was judged in light of literary and aesthetic criteria. Mendelssohn unwittingly made a sharp turn from sacred to mundane, and desanctified the Torah, bringing it down from the Revelation at Mount Sinai to the literary sphere.

77 See JONAH FRAENKEL, דרכי האגדה והמדרש (Givatayim, 1991), vol. 1, chap. 4: "יסודות דרכי החשיבה של המדרש," pp. 67-85.

78 See AMNON SHAPIRA, "הפירוש הכפול אצל רש"י: נטייה לדואליזם," in: SARA JAPHET (ed.), המקרא בראי מפרשיו – ספר זיכרון לשרה קמין (Jerusalem, 1994), pp. 287-311.

(3) *the coherence of the literary unit*: this is an important element in realizing the greatness of the finely-organized Biblical corpus. While *Malbim*'s occupation with the distinction between synonyms is quite limited in his commentary to the narrative (we saw the example of *נִרְדַּגְנוּ*), coherence is seen in the different genres. At times *Malbim*, in impressive fashion, indicates the consolidation of the verse (such as Hos. 14:4), but he does not stop on the level of the verse,<sup>79</sup> and seeks to reveal the coherence of the entire literary unit. We saw from the three texts that we selected that this conception finds far-reaching expression in the commentary to Ps. 89, and is present also in Gen. 4 and Hos. 14.<sup>80</sup>

*Malbim* tread a very narrow path, with opponents on both sides.<sup>81</sup> On the one hand, he waged a stubborn battle against nontraditional elements: the *maskilim*, and especially the proponents of Reform Judaism. On the

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79 In his introduction to the book of Joshua, *Malbim* speaks of the contribution of the classical commentators. In his praise of Rashi and Kimhi, he observes:

The entire occupation of the commentators, and the fruit of their labor, was to find, first of all, the solutions of the words and their grammar alone, and they were not inclined to conceive the derivatives of the sublime ideas that soar so strongly to the heights of the godly turns of phrase.

80 We may add a fourth characteristic, that manifests itself, by its inherent nature, only in the narrative genre: *delving into the thought of Biblical characters* in the attempt to understand them. There might also be instances in which revealing a character's outlook might have been intended for current polemical ends. One clear example of this is *Malbim*'s explanation of the seductive serpent's words to Eve, that he linked with seeking the meaning of the commandments and basing their observance on the reason that was so deduced. *Malbim* states outright (in his commentary to Gen. 3:3-4): "We learn from this the serpent's way of incitement and seduction, which he follows to this day [...] thus did those among the people who cast off the yoke when they sought for themselves why the Lord forbade the impure species, and wanted to find a reason in them [= these species] why they harm the body when eaten, and when it later became clear to them that they posed no danger to the body, they discarded the commandment."

81 In a certain passage in his introduction to Leviticus, *Malbim* might allude to his being caught in the middle, facing criticism from both sides:

Now, some of the intelligent might fail in refining, clarifying, and elucidating [see Dan. 11:35], vacillating between the two opinions [see I Kings 18:21], at times their hearts will tend to the wisdom of linguistics and the simple meanings of the Biblical passages, exposition would be loathsome to them, and it was called bitter [see Exod. 15:23]; and at other times they would be attracted to exposition and received tradition, and they would spurn whoever applies his reasoning to understand the Bible.

other, he did not refrain from mentioning opinions that came from non-Jewish sources. On the question of the dating of Psalms, we found that he advanced a daring position,<sup>82</sup> to which objections were raised from the conservative side of the spectrum.<sup>83</sup>

From a distance of more than 130 years after his death, *Malbim* emerges as a major Torah scholar. Following the high esteem in which he was held following the publication of his first book, *אוצרות החיים*, he simply could have continued to publish important halakhic works, but rising to the challenges of his time, he directed his efforts to the field of Scripture, and he published a comprehensive commentary that encompasses almost the entire Bible. There is some of the forced and the artificial in his interpretive method and in his work on the history of Biblical interpretation, Segal levelled trenchant criticism at *Malbim's* commentary.<sup>84</sup> In my opinion, Segal's critique is exaggerated, and when coming to judge his commentary we should take a balanced view, that would consider the end to which he harnessed his commentary, and also understand the worth of his interpretive undertaking to the present.<sup>85</sup>

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82 According to BERGER, "Malbim's Secular Knowledge" (n. 65 above), p. 33, the most significant passage in *Malbim's* writings that discusses higher criticism is to be found in his introduction to the book of Psalms.

83 On the ultra-Orthodox reservations concerning *Malbim*, see ROSENBLOOM, *המלבי"ם* (n. 1 above), p. 27.

84 MOSES H. SEGAL, *Biblical Interpretation: A Survey of Its History and Development*, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem, 1951), pp. 111-113 (Hebrew); for more moderate criticism, see ESHKOLI, *הסינונימיה* (n. 7 above), pp. 287-290.

85 As a small statistical illustration of this worth of *Malbim's* commentary, we could mention the findings of an examination of six contemporary works in which *Malbim* is quite prominently represented, and in four of which he is the most heavily cited postclassic commentator (in one, he shares the first place with another commentator); see AMOS FRISCH, *הערכה מחדש של פרשנות המקרא*, "מחקרים במקרא ובחינוך, מוגשים," in: DOV RAPPEL (ed.), *היהודית במאות הט"ז-הי"ט* (Jerusalem, 1996), pp. 122-141, esp. pp. 135-137. An additional, and nonstatistical, example: *Malbim's* explanation of the exchange of the names of God in Gen. 1-4 as referring to the modes of divine direction of the world has regained considerable prominence in religious thought, due to the "aspect theory" of R. Mordechai Breuer; see MORDECHAI BREUER, *פרקי בראשית* (Alon Shevut, 1999), chap. 2: "שמות ה' והנהגותיו," pp. 48-54, and many more references.