What did the Rabbis know about Grammar?
Exegesis and Grammatical Gender in Late Antiquity

Benjamin Williams

Abstract:
The first systematic analyses of Hebrew grammar were composed by Rabbanite and Karaite scholars of the tenth and eleventh centuries, partly by drawing on the conventions of Arabic linguistics. However certain technical grammatical terms, including the expressions *leshon zakhar* ('masculine') and *leshon neqevah* ('feminine'), can be found in midrashic and talmudic texts. This paper considers the grammatical knowledge underlying the rabbinic expositions. Points of comparison are sought in late-antique grammatical treatises and non-rabbinic interpretive works, including Philo's commentaries and scholia on the *Iliad* and *Aeneid*, with particular attention to perceived relationships between grammatical gender and cultural gender norms. By differentiating this understanding of linguistic gender from those articulated in the commentaries and grammars of medieval Jewish scholars of the Muslim world, this paper argues that the rabbinic expositions were shaped by grammatical concepts that are well-attested in late-ancient Graeco-Roman textual scholarship.

The first systematic analyses of Hebrew grammar were composed by Rabbanite and Karaite scholars of the tenth and eleventh centuries, partly by drawing on the conventions of Arabic linguistic scholarship. However certain technical grammatical terms can be found in earlier Jewish sources. Aron Dotan has pointed to the Masorah as evidence of grammatical knowledge predating the flourishing of Arabic linguistics, and Geoffrey Khan has shown that some grammatical terms used by early Karaite commentators are found in rabbinic texts.[1] Among them are the expressions *leshon zakhar* and *leshon neqevah*, which are used in a small number of midrashic and talmudic passages to classify words in the Hebrew Bible and Mishnah as masculine or feminine.[2] Ostensibly these texts reveal that late-antique rabbinic awareness of grammatical gender extended beyond a passive sense of whether words agree and that the rabbis used technical terms to categorize particular words according to a theoretical linguistic concept. This raises the question of how such a systematic classification was possible before any works of Hebrew grammar had been written and before Hebrew linguistics was an independent subject of study. And when we examine the rabbinic texts in their own right, we encounter the vexed question of whether sources only available in redacted medieval copies reflect late-antique realities. Ironically, the presence of grammatical terminology more familiar from medieval sources has led Günter Stemberger and Yaacov Elman to suggest a post-Islamic date for some of the rabbinic passages in question. This paper will examine what the rabbis could have known about Hebrew gender and how this is reflected in our sources, beginning with the origins of gendered nominal classification in Greek linguistic thought and the use of this concept to describe Hebrew. A comparison of the rabbinic exegetical use of grammatical gender with late-antique interpretive texts will show that it differs from early medieval treatments of Hebrew grammar. This suggests that the terms *leshon zakhar* and *leshon neqevah* were used in late antiquity and that rabbinic exegesis was shaped by concepts of linguistic gender common in the Graeco-Roman world.

Grammatical Gender in Antiquity

Gender is described in the earliest Greek studies of grammar. In the *Art of Rhetoric*, Aristotle attributed the distinction between ἄρρην ('masculine'), θῆλυς ('feminine'), and σκεῦος ('thing') to the pre-Socratic philosopher Protagoras. This categorisation reflects the assignment of gender in Greek (as in Latin, Syriac, and Hebrew) partly by semantic criteria. Enough words for male or female animate beings cluster together

[1] Judith Schlanger, 'The Science of Language among Medieval Jews', in Gad Freudenthal (ed.), *Science in Medieval Jewish Cultures* (Cambridge: CUP, 2012), p. 380; Aron Dotan, 'De la Massora à la grammaire: les débuts de la pensée grammaticale dans l'hébreu', *JA* 278 (1990), pp. 13–30; Geoffrey Khan, *The Early Karaite Tradition of Hebrew Grammatical Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 22–3; cf. Yosef Ofer, *The Masora on Scripture and its Methods* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), pp. 221–40.

[2] Philip Alexander, 'How did the Rabbis Learn Hebrew', in William Horbury (ed.), *Hebrew Study from Ezra to Ben-Yehuda* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), p. 77.

in classes of nouns that behave in similar ways for the groups as a whole to be designated as 'masculine' or 'feminine'. In Greek (as in Latin), a third category lacking a clear semantic core of animate entities lies outside that binary.[3] In the *Sophistical Refutations*, Aristotle further attributed to Protagoras the view that even inanimate objects have innate characteristics that determine their gender. This is explained with relation to the feminine nouns ἡ μῆνις ('rage') and ἡ πήληξ ('helmet') in Aristotle's discussion of solecism, the violation of accepted linguistic usage:

> As Protagoras used to say, if ὁ μῆνις ('rage') and ὁ πήληξ ('helmet') are masculine, then in his view one who says [rage is] a 'destructress' (οὐλομένην) commits a solecism without appearing to anyone else to do so.[4]

Aristotle here refers to the beginning of the *Iliad*, 'Sing, O goddess, the destructive rage of Achilles, son of Peleus', where the adjective οὐλομένην agrees with μῆνιν in the feminine as expected. Apparently Protagoras considered the gender of μῆνις to be problematic, and that the 'rage' characteristic of the male warrior was a masculine entity. The reassignment of πήληξ, the feminine noun signifying the male soldier's headgear, shows that cultural norms have informed his judgement. So for Protagoras, the description of a perceived masculine referent with the feminine οὐλομένην would be a solecism though to others it appeared grammatically correct.

The desire to align grammatical gender with perceived social or biological norms was parodied in Aristophanes' *Clouds*, originally written for performance in the City Dionysia in Athens in 423 BCE. During Strepsiades' tuition at Socrates' Thinking-Shop, the philosopher asked him to name masculine animals, and rebuked him for considering the word ἀλεκτρυών because it may designate a chicken of either gender. Henceforth he must distinguish the masculine ἀλέκτωρ from the newly coined feminine ἀλεκτρύαινα. Then after Strepsiades correctly gave the word κάρδοπον, 'kneeding-trough', the feminine definite article τήν, Socrates advised that the termination -ον was hardly appropriate for a feminine noun and that τὴν καρδόπην would be better. Finally, the cowardly Κλεώνυμος was renamed Κλεωνύμη, while Ἀμυνίας, declining to Ἀμυνία in the vocative, was judged a fitting feminine name for a man who shirked military service. This pseudo-grammatical discussion parodies the recondite speculations and jargon of 'Socrates' and his disciples as pure sophistry. But Aristophanes clearly anticipated that the description of nouns as masculine and feminine (ἄρρην and θῆλυς) and the inversion of commonly associated suffixes would be sufficiently clear for a mass audience of native speakers to get the joke.[5]

In late antiquity, the gendered classification of Greek nouns was expounded in grammatical treatises and texts that aided language learning. A first or second century CE papyrus fragment (PSI inv. 505) conveys this information in catechetical format, pointing to schoolroom use likely as part of the intermediate stage of the Hellenistic *paideia*. The question 'What is a feminine noun? (θηλυκὸν τί ἐστιν;)' prompts the answer, 'A noun preceded in the nominative singular by the definite article ἡ.'[6] Gender was also encountered in bilingual glossaries for those acquiring a second language. In the third-century CE fragment discovered at Hermopolis, the entry *valetudo*, 'health', notes that the noun declines like 'Cato' but is feminine.[7] Another example is the fifth or sixth century CE parchment manuscript (P.Louvre inv. E 7332) in which paradigmatic nouns are translated for the Greek-speaker and declined in full. For instance, *aequor* is rendered τὸ πέλαγος, 'the sea', and serves as an example of 'neuter nouns (*neutralia*) with the termination -*or*'.[8] Though little grammatical

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[3] *Rh.* III.5, 1407b7–8. Cf. Greville Corbett, *Gender* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), pp. 7–32; Sally McConnell-Ginet, 'Gender and its Relation to Sex: The Myth of 'Natural' Gender', in Greville Corbett (ed.), *The Expression of Gender* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), pp. 3–38.

[4] *Soph. el.* 14, 173b17–22 (ed. William Ross, Oxford: Clarendon, 1958, pp. 217–8). Unless otherwise noted, translations are by the author. Marcin Kilarski, *Nominal Classification: A History of its Study from the Classical Period to the Present* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2013), pp. 59–68.

[5] *Nub.* 658–693; Kenneth Dover, *Aristophanes: Clouds* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), p. xvii.

[6] John Lundon and Stephanos Matthaios, 'Nominal Accidents by Question and Answer: Two Fragments of a Τέχνη Γραμματική, One New', *ZPE* 154 (2007), pp. 97–116; Raffaella Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 212–3.

[7] Eleanor Dickey, 'The Creation of Latin Teaching Materials In Antiquity: A Re-Interpretation of P. Sorb. inv. 2069', *ZPE* 175 (2010), p. 207; Eleanor Dickey and Rolando Ferri, 'A New Edition of the Latin-Greek Glossary on P. Sorb. inv. 2069 (verso)', *ZPE* 175 (2010), p. 185.

[8] Eleanor Dickey, Rolando Ferri, and Maria Chiara Scappaticcio, 'The Origins of Grammatical Tables: a Reconsideration of P.Louvre inv. E 7332', *ZPE* 187 (2013), pp. 173–89; James Zetzel, *Critics, Compilers, and Commentators* (New York: OUP, 2018), pp. 103, 115, 242, 286, 332.

information is otherwise conveyed, the bearing of gender on morphology leads to it being singled out in bilingual manuals as an essential complement to the acquisition of vocabulary.

Among the Greek grammatical treatises most widely disseminated in late antiquity was the *Tekhnē Grammatikē* attributed to Dionysius Thrax, which likely reached its final form by, at the latest, the third or fourth century CE.[9] It also served as a model for the analysis of Syriac grammar. The explanation of gender in the Greek text is, 'There are three genders — masculine, feminine, [and] neuter (ἀρσενικόν, θηλυκόν, οὐδέτερον).' In the Syriac translation attributed to Joseph Ḥuzāyā (*ca.* 500CE), creative paraphrase was needed to explain οὐδέτερον ('neither') in a language without the neuter: 'There are three genders in Greek – masculine, feminine, and another besides which is neither masculine nor feminine, according to the particular nature of the Greek language. But in Syriac, there are two genders, masculine and feminine.'[10] Here the terms *dekhrā* and *neqbethā* render ἀρσενικόν and θηλυκόν, and demonstrate the use of terms cognate to Hebrew *zakhar* and *neqevah* for grammatical gender outside the rabbinic corpus.

Hebrew gender is discussed several times by Jerome. According to his own testimony, Jerome studied grammar in Rome under Aelius Donatus, and his knowledge of Donatus's *Art of Grammar* is confirmed by the use of parallel terminology and illustrative examples.[11] This is evident in Jerome's commentary on Isaiah 1:2, 'Hear, O heavens (*shimʿu shamaim*),' where he contrasted the plural form of *shamaim* with the singular *caelum* usual in classical Latin.

> For 'heaven' (*caelo*), the Hebrew *samaim* expresses 'heavens' (*caelos*) in the plural, particularly since it said 'hear', that is *semu*, which is expressed in the plural rather than the singular. But some in fact want 'heavens' (*caelos*) to be stated in the plural but understood as singular, just as we designate the individual cities Thebes and Athens (*Thebas et Athenas*). It is a characteristic of the Hebrew idiom that all [words] (*omnia*) that end in the syllable *-im* are masculine plural (*masculina sint et pluralia*), like *cherubim* and *seraphim*, and those that [end] in *-oth* are feminine plural (*feminina pluralia*), like *sabaoth*.[12]

The terms Jerome used for masculine and feminine are noteworthy since those in the earliest extant Latin grammar, *De lingua latina* of Marcus Terentius Varro, are *virile*, *muliebre*, and *neutrum* ('manly', 'womanly', and 'neuter'). But the fourth- and fifth-century CE Latin grammarians, including Donatus, used *masculinus, femininus,* and *neutrum.*[13] Jerome has thus applied current terminology for Latin gender to Hebrew. His generalization that 'all words' ending in *-im* or *-ot* are masculine or feminine provides evidence for a rudimentary categorization of Hebrew nominal gender based purely on morphology by the early fifth century CE.

Grammatical Gender in Midrash and the Babylonian Talmud

Grammatical gender is also discussed in rabbinic texts. The Hebrew expressions *leshon zakhar* and *leshon neqevah* are employed in just ten different midrashic and Babylonian Talmudic texts.[14] Further passages respond implicitly to the gender of nouns, verbs, and gentilics, but without using the technical terms.[15] The rabbis' grammatical vocabulary extended also to terms for singular and plural, usually *leshon yaḥid* and *leshon rabbim*. Synonyms including *le-shem yaḥid, le-shem rabbim*, *ʿal shem neqevah*, and *ʿal shem zakhar*

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[9] Eleanor Dickey, *Ancient Greek Scholarship* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), pp. 77–8.

[10] Raimund Köbert (ed.), 'Syriac', in Franz Rosenthal (ed.), *An Aramaic Handbook*, pt II/1 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1967), p. 38; Riccardo Contini, 'Considerazioni interlinguistiche sull'adattamento siriaco della Τέχνη γραμματική di Dionisio Trace', in Rosa Finazzi and Alfredo Valvo (eds), *La diffusione dell'eredità classica nell'età tardoatica e medievale: il Romanzo di Alessandro e altri scritti* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso: 1998), p. 101; A.M. Butts, 'The Classical Syriac Language' in Daniel King (ed.), *The Syriac World* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), p. 235.

[11] Michael Graves, *Jerome's Hebrew Philology* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. 15, 45–6; Matthew Kraus, *Jewish, Christian, and Classical Exegetical Traditions in Jerome's Translation of the Book of Exodus* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. 79–80.

[12] Jerome, *Commentary on Isaiah* I, 1:2 (ed. Roger Gryson, Freiburg: Herder, 1993–99, vol. 1, p. 145).

[13] Varro, *De lingua latina* 8.46 (*Varro: On the Latin Language II* (LCL334), ed. Ronald Kent (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1951), pp. 406, 605); Donatus, *Ars maior* 2.2 (*Grammatici Latini*, ed. Heinrich Keil (Leipzig: Teubner, 1864), vol. 4, p. 375). Jaana Vaahtera, 'Observations on *Genus nominum* in the Roman Grammarians', *Arctos* 34 (2000), pp. 233–51; John Sandys, *A Short History of Classical Scholarship* (Cambridge: CUP, 1915), p. 57.

[14] *Sifra* be-Ḥukotai 11:1, *Mek. de-R. Ishmael* Shirta 1 (par. *Mek. de-R. Shimon bar Yoḥai* Exod. 15:1 [ed. Jacob Epstein and Ezra Melamed, Jerusalem, Mekitsei Nirdamim, 1955, p. 72], *Exod. Rab.* 23:11, *Song Rab.* 1.5, 3), *Ruth Rab.* 7:2, *bZebaḥ.* 43b, *bMenaḥ.* 93a (baraita also cited in *bʿArak.* 2b and *bTem.* 2b), *bTem.* 17b, *bQidd.* 2b, *Tanḥ.* (printed) Shofetim 14, *Eccl. Rab.* 7:27 (27.1), *Exod. Rab.* 38:3.

[15] E.g. *Sifre Deut.* 249, *bḤul.* 137b.

show these concepts are categories into which words can be classified.[16] The rabbis' limited repertoire of grammatical terms betrays a predominant interest in morphology, enabling the articulation of why particular words, and those with which they agree, are manifested visibly or audibly in particular forms. By contrast, the abstract overarching concepts of grammatical gender and number are not (to my knowledge) discussed in their own right. The following examples show how the terms *leshon zakhar* and *leshon neqevah* are used to explain distinctive forms encountered in textual exposition, including the presence or absence of the feminine suffix, lack of agreement between subject and verb, and the treatment of a noun of common gender. In each case, an analogy between grammatical gender and perceived biological or social gender norms serves to explain the text.

The first chapter of tractate Shirta in the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael explains the introduction to the Song of the Sea: 'Then Moses, with the children of Israel, sang this song to the Lord' (Exod. 15:1). The midrash focuses on the tense of *az yashir* and the feminine gender of *ha-shirah ha-zot*. According to one interpretation, the imperfect *yashir* indicates a future to the audience's present, so the song is a future event that will be sung by Moses at the resurrection of the dead. The Mekhilta then lists ten biblical songs, beginning with those in past narratives and culminating in the 'new song', the masculine *shir ḥadash* (Isa. 42:10, Ps. 149:1) that will be sung in the future. The difference between the feminine *shirah* and the masculine *shir* is then explained:

> All the songs in the past are designated in the feminine (*bi-leshon neqevah*). Just as a female gives birth, so the past redemptions were followed by oppression. But the future redemption will not be followed by oppression, for which reason it is designated in the masculine (*bi-leshon zakhar*). This is in accordance with the verse, 'Ask and consider whether a male can give birth' (Jer. 30:6). Just as a male does not give birth, so the future redemption will not be followed by oppression, as it is said, 'Israel is saved by the LORD with an everlasting redemption' (Isa. 45:17).[17]

Here the morphological distinction between *shirah* and *shir* is explained by a gendered analogy. Likening each *shirah* of the Hebrew Bible to a pregnant woman, the midrash claims that such songs were followed by the birth pangs of oppression by successive gentile nations. A masculine *shir ḥadash* heralds no such pangs since it refers to the 'future redemption' that marks the end of imperial subjugation. What, then, of the *Shirat ha-Yam*? Though this feminine *shirah* was followed by oppression, the song of the Exodus will be sung by Moses at the resurrection of the dead and so will not be displaced even by the *shir ḥadash* that heralds the future redemption.[18]

A second example is from Midrash Ruth Rabba, an amoraic text dated *ca.* 500CE.[19] According to Ruth 3, the morning after Ruth and Boaz's *rendezvous* at the threshing floor, Ruth departed early so as not to be recognised. The midrash focuses on the subterfuge necessary to conceal the gender of Boaz's nocturnal visitor. Verse 15 reads, '[Boaz] said: Give [me] the shawl you are wearing and hold it and she held it.' Ruth Rabba 7:2 explains:

> '[Boaz] said: Give [me] (*havi,* הָבִי) the shawl.' This is written הביא. This indicates that [Boaz] addressed [Ruth] in the masculine (*bi-leshon zakhar*) so that no one should notice her.
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> 'And hold it and she held it (*ve-ʾeḥozi vah va-toḥez bah*)' teaches that she girded her loins like a man.[20]

The first interpretation is structured as a distinction between the written text and the reading tradition, of the type later systematised as masoretic *ketiv-qere*. As such, the lemma cites the *qere*, the feminine singular imperative of the root *yod-he-bet*, הָבִי, 'give'. The verb *katav* then introduces the written form, which appears to be the masculine singular *hiphil* imperative of the root *bet-vav-alef,* הָבֵיא (*have*), 'bring'. This is one of

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[16] See Shlomo Naeh, 'Between Grammar and Lexicography' (in Hebrew), *Language Studies* 5–6 (1992), pp. 277–313 and Mek. de-R. Shimon bar Yoḥai, Exod. 15:1.

[17] *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael,* ed. Jacob Lauterbach, 2nd edn (Philadelphia: JPS, 2004), vol. 1, pp. 169, 173.

[18] Cf. *tBer.* 1:10–15. James Kugel, 'Is there but one Song?' *Biblica* 63 (1982), pp. 329–50; Judah Goldin, '"This Song"', in Saul Lieberman (ed.), *Salo Wittmayer Baron Jubilee Volume*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1974), pp. 539–54; Judah Goldin, *The Song of the Sea* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), pp. 65–76; Martin Pickup, 'Eschatological interpretation in Shirata', *The Annual of Rabbinic Judaism* 1 (1998), pp. 83–99.

[19] Günter Stemberger, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrasch*, 9th edn (Munich: Beck, 2011), p. 351; Myron Lerner, *The Book of Ruth in Aggadic Literature and Midrash Ruth Rabba* (in Hebrew; PhD thesis, Hebrew University, 1971), pp. 171–3.

[20] Lerner, *The Book of Ruth*, vol. 2, p. 178. In the standard printed text, the *ketiv* is הבה; the textual confusion may be due to the lack of a *ketiv-qere* in MT.

several rabbinic comments on the orthography of the Bible that does not correspond with most extant texts, in which the *ketiv* itself is הָבִי.[21] However many copies of the Masorah, including in the Aleppo Codex, indicate that the word has been spelt defectively through the omission of a final *alef*.[22] One rabbinic response to divergences in written or reading traditions is to incorporate both texts within a single overarching interpretation.[23] According to this midrash, Boaz cleverly concealed Ruth's gender by addressing her using what appears to be a feminine imperative but is actually a different verbal form. Together the *qere* and *ketiv* reveal the deliberate ambiguity in Boaz's doublespeak, the former being what he said and the latter what he wished to be understood.

The second comment addresses the words *eḥozi* and *toḥez*. The first is the feminine singular imperative of the root *alef-ḥet-zayin* (vocalized in some manuscripts as the expected *eḥezi*).[24] But *toḥez* could be third person feminine or second person masculine. Construing *va-toḥez* as if vocalised as simple *vav, ve-toḥez*, and part of Boaz's speech, the midrash treats both verbs as if they referred to Ruth. Boaz then told her to hold the shawl twice, first in the feminine and then in the masculine. The gender switch indicates how Ruth wore the shawl, girding her loins like a man. Read together with the preceding interpretation, perceived switches of grammatical gender are now understood as gender inversions in the characters' words and actions that explain how Ruth evaded prying eyes and ears as she took her leave from the threshing floor.[25]

A final example is from the opening *sugya* of Babylonian Talmud tractate Qiddushin. The mishnah begins, 'A woman is acquired in three ways (*shalosh derakhim*) and acquires herself in two ways (*shetei derakhim*).'[26] This 'acquisition', the process by which a prospective husband receives oversight of a future wife from her father, may be secured through the exchange of money, a written deed, or by means of sexual intercourse. The dissolution of the union, by which the woman gains independence from the oversight acquired by her prospective husband, is effected by a deed of divorce (*get*) or by his death.[27]

The Babylonian *gemara* on this mishnah attracts curiosity for its unusual subject matter and mode of discourse. Rather than a halakhic exposition of betrothal, we encounter a grammatical disquisition on why the noun *derekh* is sometimes masculine and sometimes feminine. This is expressed not in the dialogical structure so characteristic of rabbinic literature but as the discourse of a single anonymous voice.

> For what reason does the Mishnah teach *shalosh* [in the feminine]? Should it not teach *sheloshah* [in the masculine]? It is because it wants to teach [about] *derekh*, and *derekh* is feminine (*leshon neqevah*), as it is written, 'And you will teach them the way in which to walk (*ha-derekh yelekhu bah*)' (Exod. 18:20). However, it is taught in the Mishnah [*Zavim* 2:2], 'In seven ways (*be-shivʿah derakhim*) does one examine the *zav*.' Should it not teach *shevaʿ* [in the feminine]? It is because it wishes to teach about *derekh*, and we find that *derekh* is referred [to in] the masculine (*leshon zakhar*), as it is written, 'They will come out against you one way (*be-derekh eḥad*), but they will flee before you seven ways (*u-v-shivʿah derakhim*)' (Deut. 28:7).

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[21] Jacob Weingreen, *From Bible to Mishna* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1976), pp. 14–5; Israel Yeivin, *Introduction to the Tiberian Masorah* (trans. E. J. Revell; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1980), pp. 135–6 #149. An exception is Bodleian Library MS Digby Or. 33 (Neubauer 15), a fourteenth-century Italian manuscript, in which the *ketiv* is הָבִיא and the marginal *qere* is הָבִי (f. 369r).

[22] Elvira Martín-Contreras, 'Masoretic and Rabbinic Lights on the Word הָבִי, Ruth 3:15 – יהב or בוא?' *VT* 59 (2009), p. 264; Elvira Martín-Contreras, 'Comments on Textual Details: Relationships between Masorah and Midrash', *JJS* 54 (2003), pp. 66–7. Ibn Nuḥ's commentary (*ad loc.*) cites the possibility that הָבִי is a defective spelling of the infinitive הָבִיא; Khan (ed.), *The Early*, pp. 451–52.

[23] Philip Alexander, 'Why No Textual Criticism in Rabbinic Midrash?' in George Brook (ed.), *Jewish Ways of Reading the Bible* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), pp. 175–90; Michael Fishbane, *Garments of Torah* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 20; Weingreen, *From Bible*, p. 16. Ruth Rab. 7:3 may betray an awareness of textual variety. While the majority MT reading of Ruth 3:15 concludes *va-yavo ha-ʿir*, at least forty manuscripts have *va-tavo*. The latter reading was known in late antiquity as the Peshitta and Vulgate render the phrase in the feminine (*w-etaṯ la-mdītā, ingressa est civitatem*). Uniting both possibilities, the midrash explains that Ruth went to the city and that Boaz followed hot on her heels. *Biblia Hebraica Quinta: Megilloth*, ed. Jan de Waard (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2004), p. 55*.

[24] Jack Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), p. 96.

[25] On midrashic wordplays on verbal gender, see Judith Baskin, *Midrashic Women* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2002), p. 121; Marc Bregman, 'Mordechai Breastfed Esther', in Michal Bar-Asher Siegal (ed.), *The Faces of Torah* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), pp. 257–74.

[26] The numerals *shalosh* and *shetei* are the Vilna edition of the Bavli (*sic mQidd.* 1:1 in MS Parma, f. 81a; *yQidd.* 1:1 (58a) in MS Leiden, f. 150b; *bQidd.* 2a in MS Munich 95, f. 202a). The reading is *sheloshah* and *shetei* at *mQidd.* 1:1 in MS Kaufmann, f. 164a (*sic tQidd.* 1:1 in MS Erfurt, p. 296); *sheloshah* and *shenei* at *mQidd.* 1:1 in MS Cambridge, f. 98b (*sic tQidd.* 1:1 in MS Vienna, f. 148a); and *shalosh* and *shenei* at *bQidd.* 2a in MS Vatican 111, f. 124a.

[27] Michael Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 69–83; Jacob Epstein, *Prolegomena ad litteras tannaiticas* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1957), pp. 52–3; Judith Romney Wegner, *Chattel or Person?* (New York: OUP, 1988), pp. 42–5.

If so, do these biblical verses not pose a difficulty, and the *mishnayot* likewise? [On the contrary,] the verses need pose no difficulty. In the first instance (Exod. 18:20), the verse is about the Torah, which is referred to [in the] feminine (*leshon neqevah*), as it is written: 'The Torah of the LORD is perfect (*torat adonai temimah*), reviving the soul.' [For that reason] Scripture wrote *derekh* as a feminine term (*leshon neqevah*). The latter instance (Deut. 28:7) is about war. It is the way of a man to wage war but not the way of a woman, so it referred to *derekh* in the masculine (*bi-leshon zakhar*).

Neither do the *mishnayot* pose any difficulty. The former instance (*mQidd.* 1:1) is about a woman, so it teaches about her in the feminine. The latter case (*mZavim* 2:2) is about a man. (*matnitin ahadadei la qashyan hakha dilegabei isha qaʾei qa-tanei lah bi-leshon neqevah hatam di-le-gabei ish qaʾei*) This is because it is the way of a man to be questioned [regarding a genital discharge] and not the way of a woman, as a woman becomes impure even if the discharge is caused [by external factors]. It thus teaches in the masculine.[28]

This discussion concerns the variable gender of *derekh* in two biblical and two mishnaic passages. Its feminine gender in *mQidd.* 1:1 is justified by comparison with Exodus 18:20, where the suffix of the preposition *bah* shows that *derekh* is treated as a feminine noun. But a problem arises in *mZavim* 2:2 and Deuteronomy 28:7 where the numerals *shivʿah* and *eḥad* agree with *derekh* in the masculine. The divergence is resolved with reference to the subject matter. The identification of the 'way' in Exodus 18:20 as the Torah, a feminine word, accounts for the feminine gender of *derekh* in that particular context. However the subject of Deuteronomy 28:7 is the Israelites' military success, identified in the Bavli as an intrinsically male matter, and *mZavim* 2:2 considers the questions posed to a man to determine whether a genital discharge may be attributed to illness or not. The masculine gender of *derekh* in these passages is explained through analogy to the referents, in this case male soldiers and the male *zav*.

The dating of this *sugya* has long been a subject of interest. Sherira Gaon, in his responsum to Jacob ben Nissim of Kairawan of 987CE, indicated the passage was 'arranged by the later Savoraim and established by them.'[29] Following in the footsteps of the Gaon, recent scholars have pointed to the absence of named authorities and the discursive treatment of topics germane to the tractate as a whole as indications that the passage is an anonymous, prefatory addition to the tractate.[30] The place of the grammatical ideas it articulates in the history of Hebrew linguistics is thus of importance for our understanding of the formation of the Babylonian Talmud. If the passage's grammatical content reflects early Arabic linguistic knowledge, it would lend support to a post-Islamic dating of this late *sugya*. Indeed Yaacov Elman claimed that its concern with grammatical gender is 'all but unknown in rabbinic literature', betrays an awareness of early Arabic philology, and that it should be dated to 796–850 CE.[31]

Having examined tannaitic and amoraic texts about grammatical gender, the assumption that associated terminology *de facto* belongs to the post-Islamic period appears problematic. Stemberger advanced this point in his rejoinder to Elman, but nevertheless considered midrashic references to grammatical gender to be 'isolated within contemporary rabbinic literature' and possibly 'late additions.'[32] Yet the aforementioned discussions of Greek, Latin, Syriac, and Hebrew gender show that they are not isolated when considered in the wider context of late-antique understandings of grammatical gender.

There is also a clue in the talmudic text itself regarding the source of its grammatical terminology. Though predominantly in Aramaic, the terms for masculine and feminine are invariably Hebrew. This is conspicuous at the beginning of the final section where the expression *leshon neqevah* is embedded within an Aramaic sentence. A common reason for code-switching or the use of a loanword is the need for technical

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[28] *Talmud Bavli* (Vilna: Romm, 1880–88), vol. 11, f. 2b.

[29] *Iggeret Rav Sherira Gaon*, ed. Benjamin Lewin (Haifa: Itzkovsky, 1921), p. 71.

[30] See the discussion in Yehuda Brandes, 'The Conceptual Significance of the Prefatory Sugya in the Babylonian Talmud', *JJS* 69 (2018), pp. 22–43.

[31] Yaakov Elman, 'The World of the 'Sabboraim'', in Jeffrey Rubenstein (ed.), *Creation and Composition: the Contribution of the Bavli Redactors (Stammaim) to the Aggada* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), pp. 384, 415. Daniel Boyarin has observed that dating editorial contributions to the Bavli to the seventh and eighth centuries necessitates a rethinking of 'the nexus between the Talmud and the beginnings of Islam and the Karaite movement'; 'Hellenism in Jewish Babylonia', in C.E. Fonrobert and Martin Jaffee (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), p. 360 n. 19.

[32] Günter Stemberger, 'Preliminary Notes on Grammar and Orthography in Halakhic *Midrashim:* Late Additions?' in Elvira Martín-Contreras and Lorena Miralles-Maciá (eds), *The Text of the Hebrew Bible: From the Rabbis to the Masoretes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), p. 100.

terminology attested in another language.[33] Had the composer been at a loss for a term to designate a novel grammatical concept, or had they perhaps acquired a knowledge of gender via Syriac grammatical scholarship, we would have expected an Aramaic expression. But resorting to Hebrew at the very point of using grammatical vocabulary suggests familiarity with an established Hebrew term. This is comparable with the Tiberian Masorah and early Karaite biblical commentary, in which the terms for grammatical gender are also Hebrew, even in Aramaic or Arabic contexts.[34] Hebrew vocabulary is therefore a point of continuity in tannaitic, amoraic, Masoretic, and early Karaite sources, and is used in the preface to tractate Qiddushin as established terminology.

Grammatical Gender and Exegesis

The rabbinic association of grammar and gender norms has parallels in ancient commentarial literature. Three examples from Philo and scholia on the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid* will be considered, followed by a fourth which rejects the link between grammatical gender and stereotyped roles (the odd-one-out is Jerome). This comparison between commentarial traditions follows in the footsteps of Saul Liebermann's and David Daube's studies of the relationship between Graeco-Roman textual scholarship and rabbinic exegesis.[35] Unlike Liebermann and Daube, though, I do not assume that similarities provide evidence of one-directional influence or borrowing. Rather, I suggest that a common underlying notion of linguistic gender offered solutions to similar exegetical queries in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew texts.

The first example is the ancient discussion of whether, in Homeric Greek, the feminine ἡ ἀήτη, meaning 'wind', or the masculine ὁ ἀήτης is correct. This was the subject of a witty allusion in the poem of Callimachus, the scholar associated with the Library at Alexandria in the third-century BCE, on the lock of hair of Berenice II that was wafted to the stars by Zephyrus. Callimachus cleverly designated the West Wind as a 'feminine breeze' by writing θῆλυς ἀήτης in the masculine. According to the accompanying scholion in the surviving Greek fragment, 'The breeze is [said to be] feminine on account of its fertility.'[36]

The gender of ἀήτη(ς) was of exegetical importance at *Iliad* 15.626. Here the attack of Hector that prompted Patroclus to join battle is likened to a 'terrible blast' of wind against a ship's sail. In Venetus A, the tenth-century manuscript that preserves the Aristarchian text-critical signs, the reading is δεινὸς ἀήτη; apparently a masculine adjective agrees with the feminine noun. The line is marked with a *diple,* indicating a text-critical problem. According to a scholion attributed to Aristonicus's treatise on the text-critical signs, written around the turn of the era, the *diple* serves to confirm the reading, and the expression κλυτὸς Ἱπποδάμεια ('famous Hippodameia') at *Iliad* 2.742 is cited as proof that an apparently masculine adjective may sometimes accompany a feminine noun (it is perhaps being treated as a two-termination adjective).[37] But Aristonicus's defense of the *lectio difficilior* was in vain as most extant sources read δεινὸς ἀήτης, both words being

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[33] Einar Haugen and Marianne Mithun, 'Borrowing', in *International Encyclopedia of Linguistics,* 2nd edn, vol. 1, p. 244; Willem Smelik, *Rabbis, Language and Translation in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: CUP, 2013), pp. 110–38.

[34] Khan, *The Early*, p. 22; Yeivin, *Introduction*, p. 68 #116; Ofer, *Masora,* pp. 223, 231–2, 245.

[35] David Daube, 'Rabbinic Methods of Interpretation and Hellenistic Rhetoric', *HUCA* 22 (1949), pp. 239–64; Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine*, 2nd edn (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1962), pp. 47–82. Recent studies include Philip Alexander, '"Homer the Prophet of All" and "Moses our Teacher": Late Antique Exegesis of the Homeric Epics and of the Torah of Moses', in Leonard Rutgers (ed.), *The Use of Sacred Books in the Ancient World* (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), pp. 127–42; Philip Alexander, 'Heraclitus's "Homeric Problems" and Midrash "Genesis Rabbah": Comparisons and Contrasts', in Joel Baden et al. (eds), *Sibyls, Scriptures, and Scrolls*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. 38–67; Philip Alexander, 'Quid Athenis et Hierosolymis? Rabbinic Midrash and Hermeneutics in the Graeco-Roman World', in Philip Davies (ed.), *A Tribute to Geza Vermes* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), pp. 101–24; Richard Hidary, *Rabbis and Classical Rhetoric* (Cambridge: CUP, 2018), pp. 174–215; Yakir Paz, *From Scribes to Scholars: Rabbinic Biblical Exegesis in Light of the Homeric Commentaries* (unpublished PhD thesis, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2014); Maren Niehoff, *Jewish Exegesis and Homeric Scholarship in Alexandria* (Cambridge: CUP, 2011).

[36] E. Lobel et al. (eds), *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri: Part XX* (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1952), p. 84; Fausto Montana, 'The Making of Greek Scholiastic Corpora', in Franco Montanari and Lara Pagani (eds), *From Scholars to Scholia: Chapters in the History of Ancient Greek Scholarship* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), pp. 143–4; Manu Leumann, *Homerische Wörter* (Basel: Reinhardt, 1950), p. 268 n. 13; Richard Janko, *The Iliad: A Commentary*, vol. 4, *Books 13–16* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), p. 297; Kathleen McNamee, *Annotations in Greek and Latin Texts from Egypt* (New Haven: American Society of Papyrologists, 2007), pp. 209–10. Callimachus's poem inspired the Latin adaptation in Catullus 66.

[37] '[The critical sign is placed here] because it is masculine, *deinos aētē* rather than *deinē,* just like *klytos hippodameia*. Some mistakenly put *deinos aētēs*, but it is not necessary to write [it] in this way.' ('ὅτι ἀρσενικῶς δεινὸς ἀήτη, ἀλλ' οὐ δεινή, ὡς "κλυτὸς Ἱπποδάμεια". ἔνιοι δὲ ἀγνοοῦντες ποιοῦσι "δεινὸς ἀήτης" ἀλλ' οὐ δεῖ γράφειν οὕτως.') Hartmut Erbse (ed.), *Scholia Graeca in Homeri Iliadem (scholia vetera)* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1969–88), vol. 4, pp. 130–1; Stephanos Matthaios, *Untersuchungen zur Grammatik Aristarchs* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), pp. 272–8; Antonios Rengakos, *Der Homertext und die hellenistischen Dichter* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1993), pp. 100–1.

masculine.[38] In manuscripts containing a later stratum of late-antique exegetical scholia, the Aristonican comment has been revised so as to lend support to *textus receptus*. A justification has been added: 'the masculine construction makes the expression more emphatic and shows the wind to be more violent.'[39] By associating the masculine gender with the trait of violence, a semantic distinction between ἀήτης and ἀήτη is inferred. As a violent wind is more appropriate to a simile about the decisive attack of the mighty Hector, the reading ἀήτης is deemed correct.

The association of grammatical gender and gender roles is apparent in the commentaries of Philo of Alexandria. Commenting on Genesis 24:15, Philo gave the etymology of Bethuel as 'daughter of her God,' and identified Bethuel as 'Wisdom, who is the first-born mother of all things.'[40] But a problem emerged at Genesis 28:2, where Mother Wisdom is designated as Rebecca's father. To explain how Bethuel could be both, Philo linked grammar, personification, and gendered notions of status and function. In relation to God, wisdom has an inferior status, signaled by the feminine gender of the Greek word σοφία and the etymology of Bethuel's name. The association coheres with gendered distinctions between active and generative, and passive and receptive articulated repeatedly in Philo's works. It also echoes the notion of the Alexandrian grammarian Apollonius Dyscolus that grammatical genders are hierarchically ordered with the masculine taking precedence.[41] The biblical identification of Wisdom as Rebecca's father is thus of great significance, revealing that Mother Wisdom is also male in power and works, 'sowing and begetting' the virtues in human beings. Only by 'disregarding the verbal discrepancies', setting aside the etymology of Bethuel's name and the grammatical gender of σοφία, can one appreciate the masculine aspect of Wisdom.[42]

As shown by Anthony Corbeill, the manipulation of grammatical gender was a common rhetorical device in Latin literature.[43] According to the etymology attributed to Varro, the Latin word for gender, *genus*, was derived from *generare*, 'to procreate', because 'genders are those things that beget'.[44] Masculine and feminine nouns thus have an intrinsic link to procreation according to a heterosexual binary. Terms in unexpected genders can thus signal a transgression of these norms,[45] and commentators on the *Aeneid* searched for and explained instances of this rhetorical technique. An example is in the longer version of the commentary transmitted alongside that of Servius (*Servius Auctus*), which has tentatively been attributed to Jerome's teacher Donatus.[46] At *Aeneid* 4.366–367, Dido railed at Aeneas for abandoning her and attributed his heartlessness to bad parenting: 'Rough Caucasus with its rocky cliffs begot you and Hyrcanian tigers suckled you.' The scholion contrasts Dido's sentiment to that of Patroclus in *Iliad* 16.34–35, who berated

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[38] *Homeri Ilias: Volumen Secundus,* ed. Martin West (Munich and Leipzig: Saur, 2000), p. 93.

[39] 'ὅτι ἀρρενικῶς δεινὸς ἀήτης (ἔνιοι δὲ ἀγνοήσαντες πεποιήκασι "δεινὸς ἀήτη") ὡς "κλυτὸς Ἀμφιτρίτη" (ε 422)· ἡ γὰρ ἀρσενικὴ ἐκφορὰ ἐμφαντικώτερον τὸν λόγον ἀπεργάζεται καὶ τὸν ἄνεμον σφοδρότερον δείκνυσι.' Erbse, *Scholia*, 4:131. Dickey, *Ancient,* pp. 18–23; N.T. Richardson, 'Literary Criticism in the Exegetical Scholia to the Iliad: A Sketch', *CQ* 30 (1980), pp. 265–87; Francesca Schironi, *The Best of the Grammarians: Aristarchus of Samothrace on the Iliad* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), pp. 6–15; Marchinus van der Valk, *Researches on the Text and Scholia of the Iliad* (Leiden: Brill, 1963–64), vol. 1, pp. 414–535 (esp. p. 460).

[40] *QG* 4.97; trans. Ralph Marcus, *Philo: Supplement 1* (LCL380; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953), p. 381. Lester Grabbe, *Etymology in Early Jewish Interpretation* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), pp. 28–9, 138.

[41] Jaana Vaahtera, 'On Grammatical Gender in Ancient Linguistics – The Order of Genders', *Arctos* 42 (2008), pp. 247–66.

[42] *Fug.* 51–52; *Philo: Volume V* (LCL275), ed. F.H. Colson and G.H. Whittaker (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1934), pp. 36–8. Leslie Baynes, 'Philo, Personification, and the Transformation of Grammatical Gender', *SPhilo* 14 (2002), pp. 31–47; Sharon Lea Mattila, 'Wisdom, Sense Perception, Nature, and Philo's Gender Gradient', *HTR* 89 (1996), pp. 103–29; Joan Taylor, *Jewish Women Philosophers of First-Century Alexandria: Philo's 'Therapeutae' Reconsidered* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), pp. 230–6, 251–2; M.R. D'Angelo, 'Gender and Geopolitics in the Work of Philo of Alexandria: Jewish Piety and Imperial Family Values', in Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele (eds), *Mapping Gender in Ancient Religious Discourses* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 63–88; Scott Mackie, 'The Passion of Eve and the Ecstasy of Hannah: Sense Perception, Passion, Mysticism, and Misogyny in Philo of Alexandria, De ebrietate 143–52', *JBL* 133 (2014), pp. 141–63; David Winston, 'Philo and the Rabbis on Sex and the Body', *Poetics Today* 19 (1998), pp. 41–62.

[43] Anthony Corbeill, *Sexing the World: Grammatical Gender and Biological Sex in Ancient Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

[44] Pompeius, *Grammatici Latini* V.159.23–24; Vaahtera, 'Observations'; Anders Ahlqvist ''Gender' in Early Grammar', in V. Law and W. Hüllen (eds), *Linguists and Their Diversions* (Münster: Nodus, 1996), pp. 43–52.

[45] Corbeill, *Sexing,* pp. 93–4. This technique is familiar from the poems of Catullus; Stephen Harrison, 'Altering Attis: Ethnicity, Gender and Genre in Catullus 63', in Ruud Nauta and Annette Harder (eds), *Catullus' Poem on Attis: Texts and Contexts* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 11–24.

[46] Zetzel, *Critics*, pp. 131–6, 262–3; Fabio Stok, 'Commenting on Virgil, from Aelius Donatus to Servius', *DSD* 19 (2012), pp. 464–84; Don Fowler, 'The Virgil Commentary of Servius', in Charles Martindale (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Virgil* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), pp. 73–87; David Daintree, 'The Virgil Commentary of Aelius Donatus ' Black Hole or 'Éminence Grise'?' *GR* 37 (1990), pp. 65–79; C. Murgia, 'The Dating of Servius Revisited', *CP* 98 (2003), pp. 45–69; Robert Maltby, 'Donatus and Terence in Servius and Servius Danielis', in Thorsten Fögen (ed.), *Antike Fachtexte / Ancient Technical Texts* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005), pp. 207–20.

Achilles' refusal to fight by attributing his birth to the gleaming sea and the steep rocks. Comparing the birth of Achilles from the sea, ἡ θάλασσα in the feminine, to that of Aeneas from 'rough Caucasus', *horrens Caucasus* in the masculine, the gloss explains: '[Dido] took care to make it all the more incredible by saying "begot" with relation to a mountain of the masculine gender.'[47] Born of male mountains and nursed by Hyrcanian tigers, a deficiency of maternal affection accounts for Aeneas's inhumane treatment of Dido.

According to Philo and the scholiasts, then, a masculine wind is more violent than a feminine one, the feminine gender of σοφία reveals Wisdom's inferiority relative to God, and being born of a masculine mountain is a metaphor for unnatural birth. As in the rabbinic texts, these comments tease out distinctions between masculine and feminine forms of the same term, address apparent solecism, reveal inversions of gender norms, and convey gendered stereotypes, including the association of the masculine with war and violence, and the feminine with childbearing.

While these examples reveal similarities between exegetical traditions, a counter-example will sharpen the comparison: Jerome's discussion of the gender of the Holy Spirit. In accordance with the gender of *ruaḥ* and cognates, the Holy Spirit was treated as grammatically feminine in Christian Palestinian Aramaic and early Syriac and Arabic Bible translations. Grammar and motherhood imagery are intertwined in early Syriac descriptions of the Holy Spirit, notably the Odes of Solomon.[48] Furthermore, according to Jerome and Origen, the Holy Spirit was designated as a mother in the Gospel according to the Hebrews, a text extant only in quotations in patristic sources.[49] Jerome cited it in his *Commentary on Isaiah*:

> The Hebrews claim, and there is no doubt among them in this regard, that the Holy Spirit is designated in their language in the feminine gender, that is, *ruha codsa…* Moreover, in the Gospel written according to the Hebrews, which the Nazarenes are accustomed to read, the Lord says, 'My mother, the Holy Spirit, has just carried me away.' But no one should be scandalized on this account, that among the Hebrews 'spirit' is expressed in the feminine gender, though in our language [it] is designated in the masculine gender, and in the Greek language in the neuter; for in the godhead there is no gender. Therefore in the three principal languages, in which the inscription of the Lord's passion was written (John 19:3), it is designated in three genders, so that we may know that what is essentially different has no gender.[50]

References to grammatical gender throughout Jerome's commentaries show that, unlike the aforementioned commentators, he did not conflate it with the gender of animate beings. Gendered characteristics apply to people or animals by virtue of them being male or female,[51] not because they are designated by a masculine or feminine noun. This distinction was crucial with regard to the 'heavenly beings'. Though *deus* is masculine in Latin, as are *cherubim* and *seraphim* in Hebrew*,* Jerome asserted that neither God nor God's ministers are male since they have no gender.[52] To prove this is the case regarding the Holy Spirit, Jerome noted the disparity between the genders of the terms for spirit in the 'three principal languages' – the Latin masculine *spiritus*, the Hebrew feminine *ruaḥ*, and the Greek neuter τὸ πνεῦμα*.* Jerome concluded that the Hebrews' reference to the Spirit in the feminine was merely an accident of language rather than a scandalous indication that the Holy Spirit was female.[53]

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[47] 'nam quod ait "genuit Caucasus," elaboravit, dicendo "genuit," incredibilius facere de monte masculini generis. sed hic imitatur Graecos, qui magis proprie γλαυκὴ δέ σε τίκτε θάλασσα; quod hic ad propria nomina transtulit.' ed. Arthur Stocker, *Servianorum in Vergilii carmina commentariorum editionis Harvardianae: volumen III* (Oxford: OUP, 1965), p. 370; Corbeill, *Sexing,* pp. 32, 85.

[48] Sebastian Brock, 'The Holy Spirit as Feminine in Early Syriac Literature', in Janet Soskice (ed.), *After Eve: Women, Theology, and the Christian Tradition* (London: Collins, 1990), pp. 71–85; Sebastian Brock, ''Come, Compassionate Mother…, Come Holy Spirit': A Forgotten Aspect of Early Christian Imagery', *Aram* 3 (1991), pp. 249–57.

[49] Andrew Gregory, *The Gospel according to the Hebrews and the Gospel of the Ebionites* (Oxford: OUP, 2017), pp. 32–3, 36–52, 69–74, 94–7. Origen, *Commentary on John* II.12.87; Origen, *Homilies on Jeremiah* 15:4; Jerome, *Commentary on Micah* II.7:6; Jerome, *Commentary on Ezekiel* IV.16:13.

[50] The context concerns the gender of those who bring good tidings in Is. 40:9 and Ps. 68:12, designated in the feminine as *mevaseret* and *mevaserot*. Jerome interpreted the latter to mean 'those souls who have attained the Holy Spirit'. Jerome, *Commentary on Isaiah* XI.40:9 (ed. Gryson, vol. 3, p. 1246).

[51] See Jerome's commentaries on Eccl. 2:8; Dan. 7:4; and *Hosea* I.1:8–9. Jane Barr, 'The Influence of Saint Jerome on Medieval Attitudes to Women', in *After Eve*, pp. 82–102.

[52] Jerome, *Ep.* 18 *ad Damasum*; *Commentary on Ezekiel* III.9:3.

[53] Cf. Jerome, *Commentary on Ezekiel* IV, 15:13; and *Micah* II.7:5–7.

Jerome's reasoning is familiar from arguments that, as languages are different, linguistic expression cannot reflect an object's essential nature (φύσις) but is instead a matter of convention (θέσις), as articulated most famously by Hermogenes in Plato's *Cratylus* (*Crat.* 38). The implications for gender were indicated in the late-second century treatise *Against the Grammarians* by Sextus Empiricus, who reasoned: 'Fire … "naturally (φύσει)" warms barbarians and Greeks … and does not warm Greeks but chill barbarians. But the same nouns are not the same for all, but are masculine for some, feminine for others, and for others neuter.'[54]

The conclusion drawn from linguistic diversity by Jerome and Sextus Empiricus contrasts with the rabbinic gendered analogies. The comparison of gender morphology in Hebrew and Greek in Genesis Rabba 31:8 suggests a reason. Expounding the account of the 'bronze serpent' that healed the Israelites bitten by snakes (Num. 21:9), the midrash focuses on the similar sounding Hebrew words *neḥash neḥoshet*.[55] As such wordplay would be lost in translation, it concludes that Hebrew must be the Torah's original language. A similar example is adduced from Genesis 2:23, where the first woman is called *ishah* because she was taken from *ish*. This wordplay posed a challenge to translators; Symmachus coined the Greek ἡ ἀνδρίς as a feminine counterpart to ὁ ἀνήρ, though Jerome cleverly resorted to *virago* and *vir* in Latin.[56] According to Genesis Rabba, though, the creation of *ishah* from *ish* is uniquely reflected in Hebrew:

> R. Pinehas and R. Hezekiah said in the name of R. Simon, 'Just as the Torah was given in the Holy Tongue, so was the world created in the Holy Tongue. Did you ever hear anyone say *gynē, gynēyah* [or] *anthropē, anthropēyah*? But [one does say] *ish* and *ishah.* Why so? Because the two words sound alike.'[57]

Space does not permit an examination of the eventful textual transmission of this midrash and the curious inflections of the Greek words γυνή, 'woman', and ἄνθρωπος, 'person'.[58] Suffice it to say that, for purposes of satire and mockery, the midrash claims that the Hebrew words for man and woman are morphological inflections of *ish* while Greek uses completely different terms.[59] The wordplay in Genesis 2 not only proves that Hebrew is the Torah's original language but also points to a fundamental congruity between the Hebrew words and the creation of the first humans one from the other. This coheres with the statement in Genesis Rabba 1:1 that God looked into the Torah and created the world and that the Torah is the architype or blueprint of creation. If Torah is the blueprint, and the blueprint is in Hebrew, then features of Hebrew are manifested in reality.[60] The creation of men and women from a single human is thus perfectly reflected in the similarity between *ish* and *ishah.* But the difference between γυνή and ἄνθρωπος shows that the same can certainly not be said for Greek.

Discrepancies between different languages thus led the rabbis of Genesis Rabba in a different direction to Jerome. For Jerome, the use of differing genders for the same entity in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin indicated that gender was an accident of language. But for the rabbis, the contrast of *ish–ishah* and *anthrōpos–gynē*

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[54] Trans. R. Bury, *Sextus Empiricus IV: Against Professors* (LCL382; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1949), p. 89; cf. Baynes, 'Philo', pp. 37–9.

[55] The serpent is called Neḥushtan in 2 Kgs 18:4.

[56] Alison Salvesen, *Symmachus in the Pentateuch* (Manchester: University of Manchester, 1991), p. 13.

[57] British Library MS Add. 27169, f. 71a

[58] On the inflection of Greek words with Hebrew suffixes in rabbinic texts, see Moses Segal, *A Grammar of Mishnaic Hebrew* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1958), p. 125. In MS Add. 27169, f. 42a, the parallel at Genesis Rabba 18:4 includes the Aramaic *gavra, gevarta* as part of the main text and *ita, iteta* has been added above the line. The Theodor-Albeck edition incorporates these into the main text of Genesis Rabba 18:4 and inserts them at 31:8 (*Midrash Bereshit Rabba,* Berlin: Ittskovski, 1903–29, pp. 164–5, 280–1). These editorial constructions have informed previous studies, including Yonathan Moss, 'The Language of Paradise: Hebrew or Syriac? Linguistic Speculations and Linguistic Realities in Late Antiquity', in Marcus Bockmuehl and Guy Stroumsa (eds), *Paradise in Antiquity* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), pp. 120–37. The existence of a text without the Aramaic glosses and the evidence that *ita, iteta* was a scribal addition to the British Library manuscript support the argument that they are secondary in M.A. Friedman, 'גיניי גינייה, גנתה גננה, גנונית גנונייה', in Moshe Bar-Asher and Chaim Cohen (eds), *Mas'at Aharon: Linguistic Studies Presented to Aron Dotan* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2009), pp. 196–200.

[59] Smelik, *Rabbis*, p. 20. Transliterations of *ish* and *ishah,* including Eusebius of Caesaria's εις–εσσα (*Praeparatio Evangelica* 11.6.18) and Jerome's *is–issa* (*Questions on Genesis* 2:23)*,* reflect the doubled *shin* of *ishah*. Genesis Rabba appears to ignore this for the sake of the argument. See further Alison Salvesen, ''Hebrew, Beloved of God': The Adamic Language in the Thought of Jacob, Bishop of Edessa (c. 633–708 CE)' (forthcoming); Milka Rubin, 'The Language of Creation or the Primordial Language: A Case of Cultural Polemics in Antiquity', *JJS* 49 (1998), pp. 306–33.

[60] Philip Alexander, 'Pre-emptive Exegesis: Genesis Rabba's Reading of the Story of Creation', *JJS* 43 (1992), pp. 230–45; Peter Schäfer, 'Bereshit Bara Elohim: Bereshit Rabba, Parashah 1, Reconsidered', in A. Houtman et al. (eds), *Empsychoi Logoi – Religious Innovations in Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 267–89.

led them to privilege Hebrew as the sole language that cohered with the created order. This is not because *ish* and *ishah* merely reflect the gender of the referents, but the other way round – human gender reflects the morphology of the language of the Torah.

New Horizons in Hebrew Grammar

The rabbis' solutions to textual problems regarding gender contrast with those of medieval Jewish grammarians of the Muslim world. These are based on different understandings of gender and gender mismatches, which are also found in the works of Arabic grammarians. From the ninth century, Arabic grammatical gender was the subject of dedicated monographs providing systematic treatments of the morphological forms associated with one or both genders, the use of the feminine marker to identify a singular instance of a collective, and words that look feminine but are actually masculine and vice versa. Muhammad Ibrahim distinguished this approach from speculative theories that seek the origins of linguistic gender in perceived biological analogues, since here the gender of inanimate objects is determined by morphology and usage in authoritative sources.[61]

The first monograph on Hebrew gender, written on the Arabic model, was the eleventh-century *Book of Masculine and Feminine* of Moses ibn Gikatilla of Córdoba. It lists Biblical Hebrew nouns with plural forms typical of the opposite gender. For instance, the entry on *tehom* identifies it as a masculine noun with the plural *tehomot*.[62] The expression *tehom rabbah* in Genesis 7:11 poses a problem as *rabbah* apparently agrees with *tehom* in the feminine. Ibn Gikatilla therefore suggests that *rabbah* describes a feminine qualifying term that has been omitted through elision.[63] This explanation of solecism, sometimes designated by the terms *majāz, taqdīr*, or *muḍmar*, was widely employed by medieval Muslim grammarians.[64] The ninth-century Basran grammarian Abū ʿŪbaida gave the example of Qur'an 73:18, where the feminine noun *al-samāʿu*, 'the heaven', is accompanied by the apparently masculine participle *munfaṭirun*, 'torn apart'.[65] Identifying this as one of 39 types of *majāz*, he explained that *al-samāʿu* functions as a substitute for the masculine noun *al-saqafu*, 'ceiling'. The substitution resolves the gender discord according to regular grammatical principles.[66]

The variable gender of Hebrew words was addressed by the tenth-century Karaite scholar Yūsuf ibn Nūḥ of Jerusalem. Commenting on Psalm 104, he explained that particular terms may appear in the Hebrew Bible in either gender with no difference in meaning:

> Whenever we find something expressed in both the masculine and the feminine gender, we should not make this a problematic issue, for it cannot be precluded that a lexical item (*lughah*) can be given two variant forms… A thing may be made either masculine or feminine in the language when there is nothing preventing this.[67]

Ibn Nūḥ's approach is well-attested in the works of rabbanite grammarians. The *Book of the Responses to Saadia Gaon* attributed to Dunash ben Labrat, the *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ* of Jonah ibn Janāḥ, and the *Maḥberet he-ʿArukh* of Solomon ibn Parḥon all treat the variability of gender. The discussions are catalogues of verses in

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[61] Muhammad Ibrahim, *Grammatical Gender: Its Origin and Development* (Mouton: The Hague, 1973), pp. 22–3, 46–8; Atiqa Hachimi, 'Gender', in Kees Versteegh et al. (eds), *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics*, vol. 1, pp. 155–64; Ramzi Baalbaki, *The Arabic Lexicographical Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 239–41; Jonathan Owens, *Early Arabic Grammatical Theory* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1990), p. 26; Yasir Suleiman, *The Arabic Grammatical Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), pp. 79, 186–7, 193.

[62] Ps. 42:8, Exod. 15:5.

[63] José Martínez Delgado, 'El *Kitāb al-taḏkīr wa-l-ta'nīṯ* de Mošeh Ibn Ǧiqaṭela (S. XI). Edición y traducción', *Biblid* 57 (2008), pp. 205–36.

[64] Hadassa Shy, '*Taqdīr* and its Counterparts in Mediaeval Judaeo-Arabic', in Joshua Blau and Stefan Reif (eds), *Geniza Research after Ninety Years* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992), pp. 144–54; John Wansbrough, '"Majāz al-qur'ān": Periphrastic Exegesis', *BSOAS* 33 (1970), pp. 247–66.

[65] 'Then how will you guard yourselves, if you do not believe, on a day which will turn children grey-haired, on which the heaven is rent asunder (*al-samāʿu munfaṭirun bihi*) and his promise is carried out.' Q 73:17–18.

[66] Wansbrough, 'Majāz', p. 253. Gender mismatch was among the reasons that Ibn Janaḥ frequently resorted to lexical substitution. Mordechai Cohen, *Three Approaches to Biblical Metaphor: From Abraham Ibn Ezra and Maimonides* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), p. 80; Maaravi Perez, 'The Substitution of One Word for Another as an Exegetical Method Used by Medieval Scholars' (in Hebrew), in Uriel Simon (ed.), *Studies in Bible Exegesis* (Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University, 1986), vol. 2, pp. 207–28; Mordechai Cohen, *Opening the Gates of Interpretation* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), p. 60; Uriel Simon, 'Who was the Proponent of Lexical Substitution whom Ibn Ezra Denounced as a Prater and a Madman?' in Barry Walfish (ed.), *Frank Talmage Memorial Volume* (Haifa: Haifa University Press, 1993), vol. 1, pp. 217–32.

[67] Khan, *The Early*, pp. 59–60, 93–4, 103–8 (translation at p. 318).

which words including *paʿam, esh,* and *shemesh* appear in each gender. The lists illustrate a phenomenon taken to be an intrinsic feature of Biblical Hebrew, and no special meaning is attached to the variants.[68]

These medieval approaches to the variability of gender and gender mismatches differ from those in the rabbinic texts discussed above. While the Babylonian Talmud distinguished the appearance of *derekh* in the masculine and feminine depending on whether its meaning concerns men or women, these early post-Islamic discussions treat the use of inanimate nouns in different genders as insignificant. While Ruth Rabba perceived masculine forms with female referents as indications that gender and associated norms were concealed or inverted in the narrative, the aforementioned medieval exegetes appealed to ellipsis and substitution to explain apparent solecism. The rabbinic texts on grammatical gender cannot, then, be explained as interpolations of post-Islamic grammar. Instead, they are similar to earlier interpretative texts that harnessed the exegetical potential of associating grammatical gender with stereotyped traits.

Recent comparisons of rabbinic and Graeco-Roman exegesis, including by Alexander and Moss, have sought an explanation of partial similarities in 'cultural elements that by late antiquity were common' to the Mediterranean and Near East and which were adapted to suit distinct purposes.[69] I suggest that the attention to grammatical gender, as manifested in grammars, bilingual wordlists, rabbinic and non-rabbinic expository texts, comparisons between languages, literary allusions, and satire, was one such commonality. This particular grammatical category was discussed in multiple contexts because of the relevance of morphological inflection within and without of formal grammatical instruction, and because systematic grammatical training is not necessary to associate common suffixes with male or female animate entities.

The importance of grammatical gender in rabbinic texts is its relevance to details of orthography and pronunciation, and to associated questions concerning solecism and the gender of distinctive terms in the Bible and Mishnah. The similarities with non-rabbinic interpretations may be attributed to the similarity of the textual problems and to a common awareness of grammatical gender. Invoking stereotyped traits according to the gender of a particular term, the exegetes independently sought to reveal the full meanings of their texts. In Genesis Rabba 31, the reason for the rabbis' association of the gendered morphological distinction between *ish* and *ishah* with reality is that the world was created in the language of the Torah.

The differences between the midrashic expositions of gender and those of the medieval grammarians alert us to the implications of changing understandings of grammar for the history of biblical interpretation. In a provocative article of 1982, William Braude parodied the attitude that, because midrash does not conform to up-to-date philology, it is simply wrong, and argued instead that the quest for the 'deep peshat' inevitably leads to a multiplicity of interpretations.[70] To contemporary readers who consider grammatical genders to be, according to the textbook definition, 'classes of nouns reflected in the behaviour of associated words',[71] the midrashic notion that *shirah* is feminine because it is like a pregnant woman may seem like pure fantasy. But as we have seen, it is in accordance with the Varronian principle that 'gender is that which begets'. Rather than being whimsical, the rabbinic expositions are based on a different understanding of what gender is and what its implications are. By teasing out what rabbis of late antiquity might have known about what sort of grammar we can assess the assumptions they bring to their exegetical task.

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[68] *Kritik des Dunasch ben Labrat,* ed. Robert Schroeter (Breslau: Schletter, 1866), pp. 50–3; Jonah ibn Janāḥ, *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ*, chapters 39–41; Ibn Parḥon, *Maḥberet he-ʿArukh*, Shaʿar ha-Ḥiluf and Shaʿar Zakhar u-Neqevah. Sara Japhet and Barry Dov Walfish, *The Way of Lovers: The Oxford Anonymous Commentary on the Song of Songs* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. 98–107.

[69] Philip Alexander, 'Hellenism and Hellenisation as Problematic Historical Categories', in Troels Engberg-Pedersen (ed.), *Paul Beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p. 71.

[70] William Braude, 'Midrash as Deep Peshat', in Sheldon Brunswick (ed.), *Studies in Judaica, Karaitica and Islamica* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1982), pp. 31–8.

[71] Charles Hockett, *A Course in Modern Linguistics* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), p. 231.