

BIBLICAL FORMATTING: VISUAL AND VIRTUAL

RUSSELL JAY HENDEL

"Formatting" is the use of visual indications in a text to achieve certain literary effects. Besides standard punctuation, modern printing provides a variety of formatting signs, each with its own effect. It is routine practice to use:

- a. boldface, italics, and underlining to indicate emphasis;
- b. parentheses, dashes, and strikeout to indicate de-emphasis;
- c. tables and columns to indicate simultaneous contrastive and unifying emphasis;
- d. bullets to indicate contrastive emphasis; and
- e. paragraph-formats, such as indentation and line spaces, to indicate unity.

Halakhic requirements direct how the text of the Bible be written. Nevertheless, we intend to show that biblical authors used specific visual and literary techniques to accomplish some formatting effects. Specifically, the Bible uses:

- a. word repetition to indicate emphasis, similar to the modern use of bold-face, italics and underlining;
- b. visual dotting of a word to indicate limitation, similar to the modern use of parenthesis, dashes and strikeout;
- c. columns and parallel verbal structures to indicate simultaneous contrastive and unifying emphasis, similar to the modern use of tables;
- d. repetition of connective words, to indicate contrastive emphasis, similar to the modern use of bullets; and
- e. a theme-detail-theme style to indicate paragraph unity, similar to the modern use of line spaces and indentation.

Literary critics unanimously agree that the modern text is not perceived as containing two layers of meaning; a simple meaning imposed by the author and an exegetical meaning imposed by the reader. Rather, it is perceived as conveying one intended message of an author, certain parts of which are explicitly presented by words, while other parts of the message are hinted at by visual format.

Russell Jay Hendel has a Ph.D. in mathematics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and is a professor of mathematics at Towson University, Maryland. He moderates an Internet discussion group at www.rashiyomi.com

In a biblical text, there is similarly a unique, unified, intended meaning, with certain parts of the message explicitly presented by the words, while often certain nuances are hinted at by formatting, both visual and verbal.

This approach, classifying exegetical textual techniques as implicitly intended by the author, was powerfully defended by Samson Raphael Hirsch.¹ By using the model of taking notes at a lecture, Hirsch opens the door to perceiving exegetical nuances as an intended meaning of the author.

The Written Law is to be to the Oral Law like short notes [taken at] a full and extensive lecture on any scientific subject. For the student who has heard the whole lecture, short notes are quite sufficient to bring back afresh to his mind at any time the whole subject of the lecture. For him, a word, an added mark of interrogation or exclamation, a dot, the underscoring of a word, is often quite sufficient to recall to his mind a whole series of thoughts or remarks. For those who had not heard the lecture from the master, such notes would be completely useless. If they were to try to reconstruct the scientific contents of the lecture from such notes they would of necessity make many errors. Words, marks, and so forth, which serve those scholars who had heard the lecture as instructive guiding stars to the wisdom that had been taught and learnt, stare at the uninitiated as unmeaning sphinxes.

On the basis of Hirsch's theory, we associate five note-taking techniques with five methods of formatting, visual, verbal and virtual, that are common to biblical and modern writings, albeit in different forms. Visual formatting refers to items like boldface or italics which achieve their effects, not through words, but through visual changes in the written text. Virtual formatting refers to items like a parallel verbal structure which achieve the effects of visual formatting without words or visual changes in the text. Verbal formatting refers to items like repeating words which achieve the effects of visual formatting.

DOTTING

Example 1: In Torah script, "dotting" means inking in a super-dot above one, or more, or all letters in a word. The masoretic tradition requires that there be dots above every letter in the word "Aaron" in the passage: *All who were counted of the Levites, which Moses and Aaron counted at the com-*

mandment of the Lord, throughout their families, all the males from a month old and upward, were twenty-two thousand. (Num. 3:39). Rashi, citing the Talmud, comments: "Why is [the word] 'Aaron' dotted in the Book of Numbers? Because he [Aaron] was not in that numbering [of the Levites]." (TB Bechoroth 4a). Here, the Talmud is using the principle that "dottings of a word have the purpose of limiting [or entirely excluding] something."² Rashi concurs that the visual dotting of "Aaron" signifies that Aaron should not be included in the count of the Levites.

Example 2: The masoretic tradition requires dotting every letter in the word "*vayishakehu* [and he kissed him]" in the passage: *And Esau ran to meet him [Jacob], and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and he kissed him; and they wept* (Gen. 33:4). Rashi, following Genesis Rabbah, comments that the dots indicate that he did not kiss him wholeheartedly (BR 78:9). Here, again, we can reformulate the midrash as interpreting the dotting of a word as a sign of limitation – the kiss remains a physical fact, but emotionally insincere. Using the same visual invitation to interpret, Genesis Rabbah presents an opposing viewpoint: "Although Esau usually hated Jacob, on this occasion, he had genuine emotion for him." This opposing viewpoint interprets dotting as indicating emphasis, not limitation. Using our formatting analogy, we might say: The dotting of "kissed" suggests that in modern times the word should be in boldface to denote positive emphasis – Esau really liked Jacob on this one occasion!

Example 3: The connective Hebrew word "*eth*" introducing a direct object is very common. Yet, the Masoretic text requires the dotting of *eth* in the passage: *And his [Joseph's] brothers went to shepherd [eth] their father's flock in Shechem* (Gen. 37:12). Paraphrasing Rashi, who cites Genesis Rabbah, we would comment: The dotting of the connective word *eth* implies limitation and suggests that the verse is true insofar as the brothers did go to Shechem – but not to shepherd their father's flock, but rather to feed themselves. Hirsch points out that Genesis Rabbah could be offering a more sympathetic alternative: True, it was only ostentatiously for the sheep, but in reality it was to "shepherd themselves," to preserve their independence which they believed to be diminished by Jacob's opinion over the position of Joseph in his latest dream. In either case, the visually formatted word invited a meta-textual exegesis of limitation.

VIRTUAL COLUMNAR FORMAT

The technique of inferring meaning from parallel and chiasmic passages is commonplace in understanding the intent of the text. The parallel or chiasmic structure can be indicated by visual actual columns. Alternatively, it can be indicated by parallelisms in the grammatical functions of the words, phrases, or clauses of verses written in normal fashion.

Example 4: The masoretic tradition requires Deuteronomy 32:4 to be presented in columnar format:

*The **Rock**, His work is **perfect**; → for all his ways are **justice**;*
I ls

God is truth and without iniquity, → just and right is He.

This alignment suggests the following three identifications: (a) Rock = God; (b) Perfect = Truth and without iniquity; and (c) Justice = Just and Right. In addition, we can infer from the parallel passage that the image "Rock" refers to God as being strong and permanent as a rock.

Such parallel phrase pairs are common in the poetic parts of the Bible.

Example 5: Genesis 49:11, written in normal seriatim fashion, reads: *He washed his garments in wine, and his suth in the blood of grapes.* I have visually formatted this verse to indicate that "suth" will be the object of my comments. The very structure of the verse invites the reader to imagine it formatted in columns:

. . . *He washed his garments in wine,*
and his suth in the blood of grapes.

Here, Rashi infers the meaning of an unknown biblical word by working back from the parallel in the aligned structure which in modern notation could be succinctly presented by columnar format: If garments are washed in wine, then that which is washed in the "blood of grapes" must also be clothing. Hence, he comments: "The word *suth* is a type of garment. There is no similar usage in the rest of the Bible." The Jewish Publication Society translation of 1917 follows the written text by printing the verse as if it were prose; the NJPS translation of 1976 prints it with columnar spacing as if it were lines in a poem – a good example of an editor transforming virtual formatting into visual formatting.

REPETITION

The Bible does use dotting and columnar format. However, there is no biblical scribal format comparable to the modern formatting techniques of boldface, italics and underline to convey emphasis. There is, however, a stylistic technique of word repetition to indicate emphasis. The talmudic exegeses extended the strict proximate repetition style – consecutive repetition of a word or phrase – to a broad repetition style, consecutive repetitions of possibly distant words or phrases. The basic rule is that biblical repetition connotes unspecified emphasis similar to the unspecified emphasis implied by the modern formatting techniques of boldface, underline, and italics.

Example 6: The word "strike" is repeated in the following biblical passage: *You shall **strike strike** the inhabitants of that city with the edge of the sword, destroying it completely, and all that is in it, and its cattle, with the edge of the sword* (Deut. 13:16). Rashi, citing the Talmud, comments:

Thou shalt strike strike [the inhabitants of that city with the edge of the sword]: I know only [that you may execute them] with the death that is prescribed in their case [that is by sword]. Whence do I know that if you cannot slay them with the death that is prescribed in their case, you may smite them in any manner you are able? From the verse, '*Thou shalt **strike strike***' implying under all circumstances. (B.T. Bava Metzia 31b).

Here, the Talmud interprets the repetition of *strike* as indicating both emphasis and halakha: strike in any circumstance, even if you do not have a sword.

Rashi's view that it is preferable to smite the city by sword, but if swords are not available it is obligatory to smite the city by whatever means possible, is therefore understood as the simple intended meaning of the text. However, there is a difference between the simple intended meaning of ordinary words and the simple intended meaning conveyed by bold formatting. The intended meaning of words is specific and unique, while the intended emphasis implied by boldface or repetition is unspecific; nevertheless, both methods, verbal and visual formatting, indicate the same intended meaning of the text.

The talmudic passage cited above is rare in the following sense: Ordinarily, talmudic biblical exegesis is based on words used singly, and the talmudic student is left to his own resources to guess at the underlying talmudic ex-

exegetical principle and to review similar passages to ascertain the consistency of the exegetical rule. However, here the talmudic passage contains a dozen exegetical examples which similarly infer emphasized meaning from a textual repetition. The talmudic student is left in no doubt as to (a) the existence of the rule that repetition connotes emphasis, and (b) the consistent usage of this exegetical rule throughout halakhic midrash.

Example 7: The following biblical passage uses a non-consecutive repeated word style to indicate emphasis: *And the sons of Aaron the priest shall put **fire upon the altar**, and lay the wood in order upon the fire; And the priests, the sons of Aaron, shall lay the parts, the head, and the fat, in order upon the wood that is on the **fire upon the altar*** (Lev. 1:7-8). The phrase *fire upon the altar* is repeated in two consecutive verses, but not contiguous to each other. The repetition creates an emphasis and demands a halakhic interpretation: The fire must be *on* the altar; that is, "the wood supporting the fire should not protrude from the altar" (Rashi).

Example 8: The following biblical passage also uses non-contiguous word repetition:

And the Lord said to Moses, 'Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them, There shall be none defiled for the dead among his people; except for his kin, who is a relative to him, that is, for his mother, and for his father, and for his son, and for his daughter, and for his brother, And for his virgin sister, who is a relative to him, who has had no husband; for her may he be defiled' (Lev. 21:1-3).

The phrase *relative to him* is repeated in verses 21:2 and 21:3. Verse 3 allows a common priest to defile himself on behalf of his dead *virgin sister that has had no husband*. The repetition of *relative* creates emphasis: He may defile himself for a virgin sister who is betrothed because she is still his *relative*. Similarly, the repetition of *to him* creates emphasis: He may defile himself for a non-minor virgin sister (that is, 12.5 years or older) since she is still perceived as related *to him* (This contrasts with a married woman who is perceived as primarily related to her husband, not to her father's family).

In the above citation, we applied visual formatting to the repeated occurrence of the phrase *relative to him*. Since talmudic exegesis on two points occurs on this phrase, a modern rendition might use both bold and underline

to indicate that there are two points of emphasis.

BULLETS

The *American Heritage Dictionary* has as the third definition of "bullet": "Printing a heavy dot used to highlight a particular passage." More specifically, bullets indicate contrastive emphasis. The literary critic interprets each bullet item as distinct from the other bulleted items. The bulleted items as a whole exhaust a set of possible consequences or causes.

Example 9: Exodus 3:11 if presented in bullet format would read as follows: *And Moses said to God, who am I,*

- *Ki [that] I should go to Pharaoh, and*
- *Ki [that] I should bring forth the Jews out of Egypt?*

Rashi (in my modern paraphrase) comments: "The two bullet items indicate that the text wished to emphasize two distinct difficulties facing Moses: (a) the difficulty of dealing with a harsh leader, such as Pharaoh, and (b) the difficulty of redeeming an obstinate rebellious people such as the Israelites."³ To appreciate fully Rashi's interpretation as a verse with two virtual bullets, we may glance at Genesis 41:32, where the same Hebrew connective keyword "ki" is not repeated: *As for the dream being doubled to Pharaoh twice: that is ki [because] the matter is established by God, and God will shortly bring it to pass.* To Rashi, "and" – not a repeated "ki" – indicates that these are not two acts by God, but a single continuum: *Because [ki] the matter is established by God, [therefore] God will shortly bring it to pass.* By contrast, the two clauses in Exodus 3:11 are not seen as unified and reflecting one message. It is not the repeated *ki* in itself that leads Rashi to seek additional emphasis. Rather, the repeated *ki* indicates a bulleted structure, and it is the bulleted structure that requires additional emphasis. Hence, Rashi must supply a plausible specification of the contrastive emphasis.

Example 10: The following verse in Exodus 18:10 is a sophisticated illustration of nested bullets given in virtual bulleted form:

And Jethro said, 'Blessed be the Lord,

- *A. Who has saved you*
 - *1 from the hand of the Egyptians, and*
 - *2. from the hand of Pharaoh,*

• **B.** *Who has saved the people*

from under the hand of the Egyptians.

The repeating connective keyword "**Who** [*asher*]" introduces the first layer of bullets, while the repeating connective keyword "**from the hand** [*mi-yad*]" indicates the second layer of bullets. Reformulated in terms of these two bullet layers, Rashi's comments take the lettered bullets under "A" to emphasize salvation from ownership by the Egyptian people under the leadership of Pharaoh, and "B" to emphasize salvation from excessive toil.

Rashi indicates that his interpretation is in part defended by the Aramaic translation and by linguistic considerations of the interpolation of a word into the repeated phrase *from under the hand*. However, the virtual bulleted structure by itself is sufficient to suggest and evoke the contrast of ownership and servitude. Further linguistic defense, which does exist, is then seen as merely supportive.

THEME-DETAIL-THEME

The modern author indicates paragraphs by using indentation and line space. The paragraph is based on unity of content in the component sentences. The biblical theme-detail-theme style suggests a similar structure with a unifying theme among its components. In classifying a passage as possessing a theme-detail-theme style we use the word "theme" to indicate the topic sentence of a paragraph. We use the word "detail" to indicate other sentences which develop the theme or topic of the paragraph.

Example 11: There is a classic example of a theme-detail-theme format in Deuteronomy 14:26:

*And you shall bestow that money for whatever your soul desires,
for oxen, or
for sheep, or
for wine, or
for strong drink, or
for whatever your soul desires.*

*You shall eat there before the Lord your God, and you shall rejoice, you,
and your household.*

Here repetition appears not as virtual bullet but as rhetorical closure. The identical opening and closing phrases suggest a paragraph format that in

modern notation would be indicated by indentation and line space. The paragraph structure signifies a unity of contents. Consequently, one point of exegesis must accompany the paragraphing in this example: The details – *oxen, sheep, wine, strong drink* – should be understood as typical, not exclusive, examples of the paragraph theme clause *whatever your soul desires*. That is, because of the verse's paragraph structure it would be incorrect to interpret Deuteronomy 14:26 as allowing purchase only of oxen, sheep, wine and strong drink, but nothing else, even if similar in nature. Because of the paragraph structure, we are required to generalize the examples mentioned in the verse to similar examples. Rashi comments:

For it was taught: *And thou shalt bestow that money for whatever your soul desires* is a generalization; *for oxen, or for sheep, or for wine, or for strong drink* are specifications followed again by *for whatever your soul desires*, again a generalization [in alternate parlance: theme – details – theme]. Now, where a generalization precedes a specification which is in turn followed by another generalization, you include only that which is **similar** [but not restricted] to the specification (B.T., B.K., 63a).⁴

The exegesis in the *Sifri* on Deuteronomy 14:26 clarifies with further examples: "Water, salt and mushrooms are not similar to oxen, sheep, wine and drink." Using the paragraph format model we would reformulate the *Sifri* as follows: "Water, salt and mushrooms, unlike oxen, sheep, wine and drink, are not items *desired by the soul*."

Example 12: The preceding example is a typical theme-detail-theme example in which the detail section consists of a collection of examples, and the talmudic rabbis generalize these examples by seeking attributes common to all the examples and consistent with the theme. A similar approach is used for the generalization-specification-generalization paragraph. The basic difference is that the details of the latter type are specifications, not examples. To illustrate this difference, let us examine Exodus 30:7-8:

*And Aaron shall **burn on it** [the incense altar] **sweet incense***

- *every morning; when he dresses the lamps, he shall burn incense upon it.*
- *And when Aaron lights the lamps at evening, he shall burn incense upon it, an **everlasting incense before the Lord** throughout your generations.*

The opening and closing lines of this paragraph, although not identical in

language, both speak about the general theme of offering incense. The detail section prescribes when the incense should be offered: In the morning and evening, at the time when the Temple candelabrum is lit. Viewing the paragraph as a unified whole the message seems to be: Just as you perform the candelabrum service every day, every morning and evening, so too there is an incense-altar service which is also performed every morning and evening. Rashi emphasizes the command: "Every day, he [the High priest] offers a portion by day and night."

To clarify what the paragraph structure contributes, let us consider several admissible interpretations of how the verses would be interpreted if there were no paragraph structure: that is, if only the two detail sentences were present without the theme sentences before and after. In such a case we could interpret these two detail sentences as follows:

Permissively: *If* you decide to offer incense as a voluntary offering you can only do so in the morning and evening.

Obligatory component: The priests *must* offer incense in the morning and evening, but the Bible is silent about whether other voluntary communal incense offerings may be offered.⁵

Exclusively obligatory: You must offer incense every morning and evening. You may not offer it at any other time, or as a voluntary offering.

All three interpretations are reasonable. Precedents are abundant for interpreting verses as indicating one component of a procedure or as indicating voluntary or obligatory, with restrictions or without, **if** the procedure is done at all. The Bible's use of virtual paragraph structure indicated by the theme-detail-theme style requires an exclusive literal interpretation in this case: incense (theme) must be offered, twice a day, in the morning when the High Priest prepares the lamps and in the evening when he lights them.

We believe the approach of this section, perceiving certain talmudic biblical exegesis as the result of the interaction between a paragraph theme sentence and its development can shed light on many passages needing exegesis. It should be clear, however, that we have only presented the basic idea. Much more serious study must be done to clarify all specifications of the theme-detail-theme method.

CONCLUSION

We have examined five formatting effects and their method of implementation in modern and biblical writing. To summarize: (a) Emphasis is achieved in modern writing through boldface, italics, and underline, and in biblical writing through repetition. (b) De-emphasis is achieved in modern writing through parentheses and similar printing devices, and in biblical writing through word dotting. (c) Contrastive emphasis is achieved in modern writing through bullets and in biblical writing through repeating connective keywords. (d) Alignment is achieved in modern writing through columnar format and in biblical writing through parallel and chiastic grammatical structure. (e) Unity is achieved in modern writing through the paragraph and in biblical writing through the theme-detail-theme structure.

We believe that the idea of viewing biblical exegesis in terms of virtual formatting is a fruitful idea that can be extended beyond these five areas.⁶

NOTES

1. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Pentateuch Translated and Explained*, trans. Isaac Levy, 2nd ed., (London: L. Honig and Sons, 1960) Exodus, pp. 288-289.
2. *The Soncino Talmud Translation in Judaic Classics*, Version 3.0.6 (Brooklyn, N.Y., Institute for Computers in Jewish Life, Davka Corp. and Judaica Press, 1991-2003), Tractate Bechoroth, folio 4a. Other citations in this article are from the Midrash Rabbah, the Babylonian Talmud and Tanakh in *Judaic Classics*, version 3.0.6 (individual words in translations have been occasionally adjusted when a special point is being made).
3. The latter difficulty arises from the fact that Moses had been forced to flee Egypt because of the obstinacy of two Israelites who criticized him for killing an Egyptian who was beating an Israelite (Ex. 2:10-15).
4. The theme-detail-theme style highly resembles, but is not identical to, the *Klal-Prat-Klal* exegetical rule of Rabbi Ishmael. Moreover, the Talmud makes a difference between the generalization-specification-generalization and the amplification-limitation-amplification method. It seems that the generalization-specification-generalization method requires generalization of the detail-section, while the amplification-limitation-amplification method requires generalization of both the theme and details. Hence, the amplification-limitation-amplification gives a wider scope of interpretation than the generalization-specification-generalization method. However, both methods can be understood using the theme-detail-theme method.
5. The prohibition of a voluntary offering of incense mentioned in the next verse, Exodus 30:9, could easily be interpreted to proscribe either voluntary individual incense offerings, or, incense offerings from non-Israelites who were permitted to bring burnt offerings; but communal voluntary incense offerings would be permissible. The paragraphing of Exodus 30.8-9 prevents such interpretations as well.
6. Perhaps the reader has realized that in printing this article as many visual formatting devices were used as were appropriate to compare with the virtual formatting we stressed.