Abstract One of the peculiar characteristics of the vast body of Jain commentarial literature is the primacy given to artha, meaning, over sūtra, the root text itself. It is the task of the commentator—or, in a pedagogical context, the teacher—to retrieve and explain a text’s true, hidden meaning, which often appears to stretch and even contradict its apparent meaning. This article examines the interpretive processes in one of the most important Jain commentaries on monastic discipline, the Brhatkalpabhāṣya attributed to the sixth-century CE Śvetāmbara Jain exegete Saṅghadāsa. An examination of passages where the commentator claims to uncover the real—but sometimes less-than-apparent—meaning of monastic rules enables us to detect the interpretive moves involved and the underlying assumptions about the nature of text and the work of commentary. I argue that this commentarial tradition presupposes particular practices of memory, and a degree of internalizing the traditional hermeneutical methods, on the part of a monastic practitioner who wants to understand the text correctly and live according to its true meaning.

Keywords Jainism · Commentary · Interpretation · Memory · Brhatkalpabhāṣya · Saṅghadāsa

The problem of knowing what a text really means is hardly foreign to scholars whose work consists largely of reading and translating texts, often ones that have been composed in a cultural context and language very different from their own. Even if one sets aside, for the time being, the difficulties peculiar to the work of translation, and ambitions to be able to uncover something like “authorial intention,” the mere act of making sense of language is a constant process of problem-solving and
decision-making: construing sentences correctly, choosing the word meanings that are most appropriate to the context, making inferences from what we judge to be implicit in the text, deciding when to read literally or metaphorically... The multiplicity of possible readings of a given text assigns a great deal of responsibility to the reader who is engaged in continuous acts of interpretation.

The sixth-century CE Śvetāmbara Jain commentator Saṅghadāsa was also acutely aware of the indeterminacy and instability of meaning in the scriptural texts he was commenting on. He compares the sūtras of the root text to “a box that contains many meanings.” While determining the “right” meaning out of a multiplicity of possible readings was a challenging task, that was not all. As a Jain exegete, Saṅghadāsa held the view that word and meaning could be drastically divorced from each other. The true meaning of canonical texts could be hidden; in some cases, in fact, it might even run counter to what the text appears to be saying. An interpretation of a text on the lexical, syntactical, and semantic levels, then, was not enough; one had to develop a special hermeneutics for accessing a level of meaning that is beyond the level of language. Saṅghadāsa was thus faced with an urgent and demanding task. The stakes were high, for the text he was commenting on, the Kalpasūtra, is one of the most important canonical texts on Jain monastic discipline, and his interpretations would have an impact on how the male and female renunciants in his community sought to conduct themselves.

This essay examines the interpretive processes in Saṅghadāsa’s commentary on monastic discipline, the Brhatkalpabhāṣya. In particular, I focus on sections where his interpretations appear to stretch, modify, or even contradict the apparent meaning of the root text, on the grounds that he reveals instead its true, hidden meaning, the one intended by the Tīrthaṅkaras. I will examine Saṅghadāsa’s justifications for moving beyond the apparent meaning, his discussion of what authorizes one to engage in such interpretation, and the hermeneutical techniques by which one can retrieve the text’s true meaning. I will argue that this commentarial tradition presumes particular practices of memory, and a degree of internalizing the traditional hermeneutical methods, on the part of a monastic who wants to understand the text correctly and live according to its true meaning. First, however, it will be necessary to set the Brhatkalpabhāṣya in the context of the South Asian commentarial tradition in general, and Jain exegetical culture in particular.

Jain Attitudes to Scripture and Commentary

In the last two decades, the role of commentary in South Asian intellectual traditions has begun to attract the scholarly attention it deserves, and the contribution of commentarial literature to intellectual progress in the disciplines of grammar, philosophy, religious thought, and poetics is now increasingly acknowledged. As

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1 pelāsarise sūtte athapayā hanti bahuyā vi || BKBh 191.
2 This Kalpasūtra is not to be confused with the eighth chapter of another Jain text, the Daśāśrutasandha, also known as Kalpasūtra, famously recited during the annual Paryuṣan festival.
3 See, for example, Blackburn (2001), Cutler (1992), Ganeri (forthcoming), Heim (2004), Tubb and Boose (2007); and the overview in Dundas (1996b, pp. 75–76).