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# Rashi, *The Jewish Exegete*

Eric L. Friedland

Until modern times virtually every Jewish child imbibed the teachings, the narrative, and law of the Pentateuch with the assistance of Rashi's commentary, or, as the Yiddish expression has it, *Humash mit Rashi*. Rashi's Bible and Talmud commentaries are still unmatched for conciseness, clarity, and the sure touch of the born educator. Though of medieval French provenance, Rashi's expositions were adopted by Jews everywhere, Ashkenazic, Sephardic, and Oriental, for nearly a thousand years. Nor was his influence restricted to Jews. Within a century after his death, his commentary was taken up by a learned Franciscan monk whose discourses were to lend shape to Martin Luther's rendition of the Hebrew Bible into German, thus indirectly affecting the King James Version.

Rashi is the acronym formed from the initial letters of his Hebrew name Rabbi Shelomoh ben Yitzhaq. He was born in Troyes, France, the capital of Champagne, in 1040 and died there in 1105. There are many legends about his life. In reality we know little concerning him, apart from stray autobiographical tidbits in his commentaries and Responsa. From what we gather, his father died when Rashi was young. His maternal inheritance was several vineyards, a source of income affording him the leisure to devote himself to the pursuit of learning. During his younger years he attended the famous Talmudic academies of Worms and Mainz, on the Rhine. At the age of twenty-five, married, he returned to his birthplace to found his own *yeshivah*. He threw himself heart and soul to rendering comprehensible to all, scholar and uneducated alike, the Hebrew Bible (except for Ezra, Nehemiah, and I, II Chronicles) as well as "Sea" of the Talmud. The encyclopedic range and scope of his work are phenomenal. Thanks to him, the Franco-German *yeshivot* were now to fill the void left by the eclipse of the Babylonian academies.

Rashi's approach to Scripture was of intrinsic importance, as his milieu was Ashkenazic, specifically Franco-German, rather than Sephardic, i.e. Spanish-Arabic. By the eleventh century, the Jews of the Muslim countries had gone a long way toward developing a method of biblical exegesis that was philosophically-rooted and grammatically-oriented. Such leading Sephardic commentators as Sa'adiah Gaon, Abraham ibn Ezra and David Kimhi, influenced by exegetical tools provided by their Islamic counterparts, anticipated some of the modern critical methods of modern biblical scholarship. By contrast, the exegetes of France and Germany tended toward the synthetic interpretation of the text. Rashi was rooted in the world of tradition and all but insulated from outside ideological currents. Moreover owing to his characteristic self-effacing modesty, Rashi regarded himself less an innovator than a faithful transmitter of what others before him had said. Nevertheless, Rashi did break new ground. This is evident in his selectivity and in his discrimination. In face

of the bewildering array of Rabbinic interpretations, he chose, and usually aptly. He drew a distinction between the literal meaning of the biblical text (*peshat*) and the homiletical (*derash*). In the main he strives to present the *peshat*; to the *derash* he assigns a secondary role. His working motto was the Rabbinic dictum, which Marcus Jastrow in his *Dictionary* translates as "a Bible verse never loses its literal sense" (*Sanhedrin* 34a), although its meaning may be extended by interpretation, Rashi makes clear his method in his famous introduction to "Song of Songs":

"God hath spoken once; twice have I heard this." (Psalms 42:11.) "A verse from the Bible can have manifold content" (*San.* 34a), but "there is not a single verse which can be forced into a meaning which is not simple and natural." (*Shabbat* 63b.) Although the prophets make use of imagery, even their figurative sayings must be explained in accordance with the meaning of the context and with due regard to the order of the verses. As for the Song of Songs, I have seen various Haggadic interpretations; some of them cover the book as a whole, and the work verse by verse; and others cover particular passages, and are not in agreement with themselves nor with the text taken in the order of the verses. I propose to hold to the simple sense of Scripture and to explain the text in connection with the verses, but quoting, in the proper places, the Midrashic interpretations which have been handed down by our teachers.

(Cf. Rashi on Gen 3:8; Ex. 6:9; and Ex. 15:1 beginning.) Try as he did he could not altogether escape the mood of the *derash*. Later on in his life he came to realize that his commentary had not implemented the method of *peshat* systematically enough. Interestingly, his grandson Rabbi Samuel ben Meir wrote a commentary that devoted itself exclusively to the *peshat*; and on occasion Rashi deferred to him and to other disciples too. Nonetheless, Rashi's commentary endured among the people precisely because of its periodic use of the *derash* that gave Jews uplift and comfort during unsettling times. Let me offer two or three illustrations of how Rashi explains in diverse ways the meaning of the biblical text with the aid of Rabbinic exegesis, so that we might perhaps see how significant a literary transformation was wrought. For our first example we shall draw upon the well-recognized *Shema*, Israel's sacred watch-word of faith, as found in Deuteronomy 6:4. Rashi's comment thereto reads as follows (based on Rosenbaum's and Silbermann's translation): The Lord who is now our God and not the God of the other peoples of the world will in the future be the one sole Lord (YHWH), as it is said, "For then I will turn to the peoples a pure language that they may all call upon the name of the Lord" (Zeph. 3:9), and it is further said, "On that day the Lord shall be one and His name one" (Zech. 14:9). Briefly, what Rashi did was to paraphrase the Midrash *Sifrey* and add the prooftext from Zechariah.

Later on, in a different vein, in the book of Deuteronomy (23:8), we have the command, "thou shalt not abhor an Egyptian, because thou wast a stranger in his land," evoking this remark from our exegete: Thou shalt not abhor an Egyptian although they cast your male children into the Nile River. What is the rea-



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son that you should not abhor them utterly? Because they were your hosts in time of need (during Joseph's reign when the neighboring countries suffered from famine). A bold admonition not to hate the enemy and instead to recall past favors done! The notion of hereditary guilt is one that has almost always run against the Jewish grain. The idea that each generation bears its own responsibility for guilt, as reflected in Deuteronomy 24:16, is the view that eventually won out. In light of this prevalent view as concerns intergenerational responsibility one can then understand Rashi's discomfort with the verse in Leviticus (24:40), "And they that remain of you shall pine away in their iniquity in your enemies' lands; and also in the iniquities of their fathers (*ve-af 'avonot avotam ittam*) shall they pine away with them." In this instance, guilt is compounded: not only are the violators of the covenant to suffer for their sins but they are to bear the consequences of the dastardly deeds committed by their fathers. With an assist from the *Targum, Sifrey*, and *Sanhedrin* 27b, Rashi reads the fateful verse differently: *ba-'avonot avotam ittam* means if the iniquities of the fathers be with them, i.e. if they hold fast to (imitate) the doings of their (erring) fathers. The revolutionary insights of Jeremiah and Ezekiel concerning individual responsibility are preserved in this short medieval gloss.

From time to time Rashi admits his uncertainty as to the intended import of a biblical text. Here and there learned Rabbinic conjectures satisfy him little or simply prove of no avail. Although he customarily subordinates his personality to the material before him and to his teachers, he is not afraid to come out and say *lo yadati perusho*, I don't know its meaning.

It goes without saying that Rashi's direct influence upon subsequent generations of Israel has been incalculable. His commentaries opened the door not only to Scripture but to the world of the Talmud, which had become all but inaccessible because of the disuse its Aramaic had fallen into and because of its often tangled dialectic. His influence is further reflected in the mighty labors of his rabbinic grandsons. (He and his wife had three daughters, one of whom bore three sons each becoming a noted rabbi in his own right.) Through one of these grandsons, particularly Rabbenu Tam, a family tradition sprang up of expounding on Rashi's compressed and masterly clarifications of talmudic passages. This tradition, lasting some two hundred years, is embodied in what is known as the *Tosafot* ("addenda," as it were, to Rashi). Furthermore, Rashi's influence ranged beyond the confines of the Jewish community. A French Franciscan friar, Nicholas de Lyra (1279-1340) composed a Latin commentary to the Bible that drew extensively upon Rashi's glosses. In his exhaustive and engrossing *Rashi and the Christian Scholars*, Herman Hailpern noted, "It is no exaggeration to say that there is hardly a page in Lyra's *Postillae* without one or more references to Rashi." Phrases like *ut dicit Rabbi Salomon* or *secundum quod dicit Rabbi Salomon* crop up every so often (cf. Aquinas' sporadic citations of Maimonides); more often Lyra's source goes unnamed, his absorption in Rashi having been so thoroughgoing. The cleric/commentator took up Rashi's distinction between *derash* (now classed *sensus spiritualis*) and *peshat* (or *sensus literalis*). A ditty has come down to us showing the connection between Lyra's literary efforts and Martin Luther's momentous translation of the

Si Lyra non lyrasset,

Luther non saltasset.

(If Lyra had not piped, Luther had not danced.) I don't know whether all roads lead to Rome - or to Jerusalem, for that matter - but as we can see, at some points they intersect.

Rashi's importance outside his own religious community owes not only to his massive exegetical works on the Hebrew Bible and Rabbinic literature but also to his contribution in the area of linguistics. Although Rashi added not in-substantially to the rich development of the Hebrew languages beyond its biblical and talmudic stages, it is those adentitious explanations in Old French that he would introduce from time to time in his Hebrew commentaries that have caught the eye of the lexicographer. It is estimated that there are some two to three thousand terms in Old French (*la'azim*, as they are designated in Hebrew) scattered throughout Rashi's commentaries to clear up many an obscurity of term or phrase. Let us look at the comment to Exodus 28:41:

*U-mileta et yadam* ["and thou shalt consecrate them"; literally, fill their hand] - wherever the term 'filling the hand' is used it denotes the installation ceremony when one enters for the first time an office. . . when a person is appointed in charge of a matter, the ruler puts in his hand a leather glove called in Old French (*be-la'az*) *gant* [cf. our 'gauntlet'], and thus gives him a right in the matter; and they label that transmission of the glove and the office *revestir* in Old French (*be-la'az*).

Obviously, then, in more ways than one, the Middle Ages were more ecumenical than we normally give them credit for. Apparently, though, the intellectual exchanges that went on were circuitous, largely by way of textual translations or commentaries, as in the case of Rashi and his Christian borrowers or in the case of the Muslims Averroes and Avicenna, the latter appearing in Maimonides who, in turn, helped set the course the Catholic Aquinas was to take in his *Summae*. What marvelous instances of crossfertilization! But how subterranean and surreptitious it all seems! Scarce a worthwhile idea gained admission except through the back door or in a polemical context. Nonetheless, it is remarkable that exchanges were carried out at all. In another sense, sadly, the Middle Ages were very much dark. After a near-idyllic existence as scholar/vintner (working in his own vineyard and in that of the Lord), with its normal share of ups and downs, the usual vicissitudes of life, Rashi was to see in his last years the zeal of the First Crusaders devastate Jewish communities along the Rhine. In marked contrast to his typically calm tone, Rashi vents his indignation in the following lines for this one of his rare liturgical outpourings, by calling on the Torah, the object of his lifelong scholarly devotion to plead vindication before God on behalf of His persecuted:

Perfect Torah, pre-existing the world,/

Entreat before God for the pure dove (Israel).

Relentlessly supplicate before Him who dwells on high/

To have compassion on those who occupy themselves with thee (the Torah) every minute and occasion.



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Approach in entreaty before thine ancient Help,  
Bedeck thyself in black as a woman widowed.

Demand redress of thy pious ones and the bloodshed of thy disciples./  
From the hand of the sons of whoredom, who cut down thy pupils;/  
Who tore thy sheets (of the scrolls), trampled upon thy letters,  
and in overflowing wrath laid waste thy sanctuaries.

The offspring of thy saintly ones, companions and students./  
will surely set up (again in Zion) a seat of learning.

Seeing those long disconsolate for the sacred city,  
He will comfort His mourners for the time of redemption is due.

(The full Hebrew text of this lament may be found in Aharon Mirsky, ed., *Yalqut ha-Piyyutim*, Jerusalem, 1958, pp. 79-82.)

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