

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

GREAT BIBLICAL COMMENTATORS
By Dr. Avigail Rock

Lecture #04:
Rashi (Part I)¹

A. INTRODUCTION

The Importance of Rashi's Commentary

The lamps of the pure candelabrum I set as my light,
The words of Rabbeinu Shelomo, coronet of beauty, diadem of glorious
might.
His name is his crown – Scripture, Mishna and Talmud, his delight.
His is the firstborn's rite.
Of his words I think, in their love I sink, to debate and defend, to examine
and excite
Every definition and derivation
And every allegorical citation
Mentioned in his commentation.

(Ramban, Introduction to the Torah)

It is impossible to exaggerate Rashi's importance in shaping the worldview of the Jewish People; it may be said that after *Tanakh* and Talmud, Rashi's commentaries are next in line in terms of their influence. One expression of this phenomenon is the fact that the first Hebrew book ever printed (Rome, 1469) was the Torah with Rashi's commentary.

Rashi's commentary on the Torah is the point of departure and the foundation of many of the biblical commentators who come after him. Hundreds, if not thousands, of articles and studies have been written about Rashi's commentaries. Rashi's commentary on the Torah has more supercommentaries² on it than any other work of biblical interpretation in Jewish history (if we do not view the Talmud itself as a commentary for this purpose). However, before we analyze the influence of Rashi, we must examine the defining characteristics of his historical setting; we may thereby see how the environment influenced Rashi and the nature of his commentary.

1 Due to the importance of the topic and the wealth of material dealing with it, we will discuss Rashi's commentary over the course of four lessons.

2 These are scholars who write about the commentaries of others.

The Era of Rashi

Rabbeinu Shlomo Yitzchaki³ was born in 1040 in Troyes in northern France, and he died there in 1105. One of the characteristic phenomena of 11th century France was the socio-economic link with the Christian community as a result of economic development. An additional phenomenon that defined Rashi's era was the Renaissance of the 12th century, which marked the beginning of the High Middle Ages in Europe. (Although it was in the 12th century that this Renaissance hit its apex, its seeds were planted in the 11th century.⁴) This Renaissance, as two of the scholars of this period define it, was marked by "its restless searching after ancient — and new — authorities, and its audacious criticism of authority; its tireless quest for new knowledge, and its insistence on restructuring knowledge new and old alike."⁵

These two phenomena, economic development and spiritual renewal, were linked to each other. Indeed, as a result of socio-economic development, daily points of contact were formed between the Jewish and the Christian community. Spiritual trends and upheavals that were occurring in one affected the other,⁶ and the common involvement with and analysis of *Tanakh*, whether by Jews or by Christians, propagated the study of Holy Writ and challenged its students on both a religious and an intellectual level. The Renaissance of the 12th century in the Christian community was characterized in the spiritual sphere by limiting the allegorical exegesis of Holy Writ and focusing on literal interpretation; indeed, this trend came to characterize the commentary of Rashi as well.

The involvement with and development of biblical exegesis on the part of both Jews and Christians eventually brought about some theological disputations between the two groups, some of them public. Jews contended with Christians, sometimes because they were compelled to and sometimes because they desired to do so in order to protect Judaism from Christian attempts to combat "apostasy" on the part of Jews. While the character of Rashi's *parshanut* on *Tanakh* was oriented towards *peshat*, the simple meaning of the text, it was also influenced by the need to contend with Christian claims, at a time when Christian scholars of that faith were attempting to wrestle with biblical passages on the basis of *peshat*. We may also find polemical content in Rashi's commentary as he contends with Christian biblical exegesis.

3 His full name should have been R. Shlomo ben Yitzchak; it may be that in order to avoid possibility of confusing him with the Tanna R. Shimon bar Yochai, known as the Rashbi, the letter "bet" was dropped from the acronym.

4 We will deal more expansively with the influence of the 12th-century Renaissance on biblical exegesis when we examine the biblical commentaries of Rashi's students.

5 Robert L. Benson and Giles Constable (eds.), *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century*, p. XXIX.

6 There is a dispute among the scholars of 11th-12th century biblical exegesis about the question of who exerted influence upon whom — Christian exegetes upon Jewish exegetes or vice versa.

Rashi's Biography

Who was Rashi? We have no information about his parents. As Rashi brings no comments in the name of his father,⁷ we may assume that his father was not a Torah scholar. We know nothing of Rashi's wife, but we know that they had three daughters: Yokheved, Miriam, and Rachel. (It is also possible that they had a fourth daughter who died at a young age.)

At the age of eighteen, Rashi went to study in the famous *yeshiva* of Mainz, Germany, founded by Rabbeinu Gershom, "Light of the Exile."⁸ Rabbeinu Gershom put great emphasis in his *yeshiva* on the necessity of knowing and understanding *Tanakh* as a prerequisite for studying Talmud. As for studying Talmud, Rabbeinu Gershom invested great efforts in correcting the text of the Talmud, so that the students would have one authoritative version.⁹ After putting together a definitive text, the main pursuit of the *rosh yeshiva* and the students was the commentary on the Talmud. Rashi, who was born shortly before Rabbeinu Gershom's death (or a number of years after his death), did not study Torah from him directly, but he benefited from and was greatly influenced by Rabbeinu Gershom's students, primarily from R. Yaakov ben Yakar,¹⁰ from whom Rashi learned both *Tanakh* and Talmud. After a number of years, Rashi relocated to the *yeshiva* in Worms. The *yeshiva* of Worms was known for its revolutionary approaches to the field of Torah study, in which it blazed many new paths.

At the age of thirty, having acquired a thorough knowledge of *Tanakh* and Talmud, Rashi returned to France — to Troyes, the city of his birth. Upon his return, he immediately took a central role in leading the community. In parallel to his communal involvement, Rashi also established a *yeshiva* in his city. The *yeshiva* began with a very limited number of students, but as the years progressed, the number of students gradually increased. The success of the *yeshiva* is demonstrated by the great number of students of Rashi whose works have become indispensable tools in the area of biblical and Talmudic exegesis.¹¹

What was the secret of Rashi's success as a teacher?

7 There is one exception (*Avoda Zara* 75a): "This is the language of my honored father, may he repose in honor."

8 The title "Light of the Exile" was given to Rabbeinu Gershom by Rashi, and all who came after him used this title for Rabbeinu Gershom. See, for example, Rashi's commentary to *Yeshayahu* 46:1 and *Beitza* 24b.

9 As the Jews reached Germany, different versions of the Talmud abounded.

10 Rashi mentions him in his commentary to *Pesachim* 48b and *Sanhedrin* 92b.

11 Professor A. Grossman (*Rashi* [Merkaz Zalman Shazar], p. 64) lists the creative spheres in which Rashi's students were active, and he points out that we are talking about a partial list only, since much of their work was unfortunately lost.

Professor Avraham Grossman, in his fascinating book on Rashi cites a number of factors,¹² and I will suffice with mentioning his main points:

1. The democratic character of the *yeshiva* encouraged critical and creative thinking. (In this, it greatly differed from the *yeshivot* of Babylonia and was even set apart from those of Mainz and Worms).
2. Rashi based his methodology on textual analysis and his great familiarity with the disciplines of *Tanakh*, Talmud, halakhic writings, aggadic material and poetry.
3. Rashi's hearty and radiant personality, along with his compassion, allowed him to forge a lasting relationship with his students.

Besides his occupations of *rosh yeshiva*, rabbinical court justice, and communal leader, Rashi wrote a commentary on all of the books of *Tanakh*¹³ and most of the Babylonian Talmud; in addition, Rashi composed hundreds of responsa.

B. THE TEXT OF THE COMMENTARY

It is quite difficult to determine the original version of Rashi's commentary on the Torah due to the plethora of manuscripts. There are not merely minor variations among these manuscripts, but rather significant distinctions.¹⁴ The theologian and historian Abraham (Adolf) Berliner (1833-1915) published (in 5665/1905)¹⁵ a critical edition of Rashi's commentary on the Torah based on over one hundred manuscripts and printed editions; despite this, it is logical to assume that the result is not a work wholly reflective of what Rashi wrote in his own hand.

It is evident why so many manuscripts of Rashi's commentary on the Torah exist: Rashi's commentary quickly became the most popular commentary throughout all Jewish communities worldwide, both Ashkenazic and Sephardic. But what caused so many versions to abound? It appears that a number of factors conspired:¹⁶ The scholars who studied or taught the commentaries of Rashi sometimes added their notes in the margins of the manuscripts; as time passed, the names of these scholars were elided and these notes were integrated into the body of the commentary.¹⁷ An additional factor is Rashi's extensive reliance on Midrashic sources — sometimes Rashi changes the Sages' language (apparently deliberately) or abbreviates the *midrash*, and a copyist later

¹² *Rashi*, pp. 59-60.

¹³ However, the commentaries attributed to Rashi in the printed versions of *Ezra*, *Nechemia*, *Divrei Ha-yamim* and part of the book of *Iyov* were apparently not written by him.

¹⁴ For example, full Midrashic passages have been omitted or added.

¹⁵ 2nd edition.

¹⁶ See Grossman, loc. cit., pp. 78-80.

¹⁷ This is true of other works published before the invention of the printing press as well.

fixes the text. This phenomenon has great significance when it comes to the study of Rashi's commentary; sometimes, students of Rashi's commentary build mountains upon every jot and tittle of his phrasing, but inspecting the text proves that every one of these theses is based on a certain version of Rashi, which may be inapplicable to other versions. Therefore, before one attempts to craft an approach based on a close reading of Rashi, one must at least consult the Berliner edition and see how reliable a given version is.¹⁸

C. TARGET AUDIENCE OF THE COMMENTARY

Once we have dealt with the question of text, we must think about the question of who the target audience of the commentary was. This is a matter of some debate among scholars of Rashi. According to Lifschitz,¹⁹ Rashi's commentaries were designed for educated people. He declares:

He did not compose his commentary so that it might be an open book for the masses and the ignoramuses, but rather for the intelligentsia of his generation who knew the Torah well.

On the other hand, it is quite striking how much is absent from Rashi's commentary: grammatical essays, lengthy discussions of halakhic subjects, complex analyses of philosophy and theology. Therefore, it appears that his commentary was designed for everyone, and anyone can study his commentary on the Torah on his own level: a simple Jew without background can read his words and easily understand them, while a scholar can delve into all of their depth. His commentary was not directed towards Torah scholars alone, and the goal of making the Torah approachable and understandable for all readers is noticeable even today.²⁰ It appears that this is one of the advantages of Rashi's commentary: his ability to compose a text which is equally engaging to Torah scholars and to schoolchildren. This is a very rare trait for biblical exegetes, and indeed Rashi has had no challenger in this field throughout the generations.

D. "AGGADA HA-MEYASHEVET"

Rashi did not compose an introduction or preface to his commentary, but there is a certain declaration of principles in his commentary to the verse, "And they heard the voice of God going in the garden" (*Bereishit* 3:8):

"And they heard" — there are many aggadic *midrashim* about this, and our Sages have already presented them in their proper arrangement in *Bereishit Rabba* and other Midrashic works. As for me, I have come for no

18 The *Mikraot Gedolot Ha-keter* edition, published by Bar-Ilan University, is based on a great number of manuscripts, not on a lone, trustworthy manuscript, which does not exist.

19 E. M. Lifschitz, *Rashi* (Mosad Harav Kook), p. 174.

20 In cases in which he is worried that his Hebrew will not be understood, Rashi does not hesitate to translate the word into French (as spoken in his time).

purpose other than the simple meaning of Scripture and the aggadic material which harmonizes the words of Scripture, each word according to its properties. The simple meaning of it is that they heard the voice of the Holy One, Blessed be He, Who was walking about the garden.

Rashi sees himself, above all, as a champion of *peshat*: “I have come for no purpose other than the simple meaning of Scripture.” In this, he is a revolutionary in the annals of Ashkenazic Jewry; until his era, Torah was not studied according to its *peshat*. (In Sephardic communities, studying *Tanakh* according to the *peshat* was already widely accepted, following in the footsteps of Shemuel ben Chofni, Rabbeinu Saadia Gaon, and ibn Janach.) A *pashtan*, an exegete who interprets biblical verses according to their simple meaning, must engage in the endeavor of judging verses on their own terms, according to the literal,²¹ immediate definition, which complements the context according to the rules of grammar and linguistics.

However, Rashi adds that in his commentary he will integrate certain homiletic material, but only of a specific type: “the aggadic material which harmonizes (*meyashevet*) the words of Scripture, each word according to its properties.” At this point,²² I will suffice with describing the phrase “*aggada ha-meyashevet*” in the following way. Rashi saw a number of *midrashim* on each verse; how did he pick and choose? What was his yardstick for selecting some *midrashim* and rejecting others? Rashi, as a *pashtan*, brings before the reader only those *midrashim* which are harmonious with the syntactic structure of the verse, only if the additional details which are found in the *midrashim* dovetail with the context and sequence of the verses. In the *midrashim* which Rashi cites, there is supplementary information, beyond what is mentioned in the verse, but this addition must not contradict the *peshat*; it must be harmonious with it.

This is how Dr. Sarah Kamin puts it:

In his approach to the interpretation of the verses, Rashi keeps upmost in his mind the categories which make the unit whole, in which all of its elements are found — the syntactic and grammatical structure, linguistic meaning and content — the reciprocal relationship among them and between them and the unit in its entirety.

We will demonstrate Rashi’s method in his interpretation of *Shemot* 15:22: “Moshe led Israel away from the Reed Sea, and they went out into the desert.”

21 Sarah Kamin (*Peshuto Shel Mikra U-midrasho shel Mikra* [Jerusalem, 5740]) defines well the concept of *peshat*: “*Peshat* is not the narrow, literal explanation of some element or another or of a given expression, but an explanation which takes into account all the linguistic foundations, in their permutations, and gives to each of them a meaning, according to the rules.”

22 We will later learn of other possibilities explaining Rashi’s terminology of “*aggada ha-meyashevet*”.

Rashi has many *midrashim* to choose from in order to compose his comment on this verse, and we will present two of them:

“Moshe led Israel away from the Reed Sea” — he led them away against their will, at their displeasure. How so? When Israel left Egypt, Pharaoh came out to pursue them with all of these troops. What did he do? When Pharaoh [decided to] pursue Israel with chariots and cavalry, he arose and adorned all of these horses with precious stones and gems. When they came to the sea and the Holy One, Blessed be He, drowned them, all of those precious stones and gems floated, and they were cast on the seashore. The Israelites would go down each day and take some of them, and they had no desire to leave there. Once Moshe saw this... he arose and led them away, against their will. (*Tanchuma Yashan, Beshalach* 16)

“Moshe led Israel away from the Reed Sea” – R. Eliezer says: “This tells you the praise of Israel. When Moshe told them to leave, they did not say, “How can we possibly set out for the desert without provisions for the journey?!” Instead, they believed in and followed Moshe. About them, it is stated explicitly in the *kabbala*²³ (*Yirmiyahu* 2:2): ‘I recall for you the kindness of your youth, the love of your betrothal, when you went after Me in the desert, in an unsown land.’” (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, Beshalach, Va-yassa* 1)

These two *midrashim* try to explain the phrase “Moshe led Israel away (*va-yassa Moshe et Yisrael*) from the Reed Sea.” According to the *Mekhilta*, these words come to indicate the great ease with which Moshe convinced the Israelites to venture into “an unsown land;” according to the *Tanchuma*, these words indicate the great difficulty with which Moshe convinced the Israelites to move, overcoming their reluctance to abandon the plunder of the sea. Despite Rashi’s great affection for the Jewish People, which is expressed within his commentaries in other places, Rashi prefers the *midrash* mentioned in *Tanchuma*, which is critical of the behavior of the Israelites, over the *midrash* in the *Mekhilta*, which praises Israel:

“Moshe led [Israel] away” — he led them away against their will, for the Egyptians had adorned their horses with jewelry of gold, silver, and precious stones, and the Israelites were finding them in the sea... Therefore, he had to lead them away against their will.

Rashi’s motivation for choosing this *midrash* is exegetical; the *midrash* as cited in the *Tanchuma* is chosen by Rashi because this *midrash* is appropriate for the context of the unit. In this very verse, we find: “And they came to Mara, and they could not drink the water of Mara,” followed in the next verse with a formal complaint: “And the people complained to Moshe, saying ‘What will we drink?’”

23 This is a Talmudic term for the books of the Prophets.

(vv. 22-23). Lauding the Israelites who “believed and followed Moshe” (in the language of the *Mekhilta*) does not match the context of the words.

Moreover, the *midrash* in the *Tanchuma* complements not only the situation described in the verses, but also the language of *Tanakh*. According to the Masoretic punctuation of the text, the word is conjugated in the causative (*va-yassa*), so that the verse must be rendered “And Moshe made Israel journey;” however, according to the *Mekhilta*, it should be conjugated in the intensive (*va-yissa*), so that the verse may be rendered “And Moshe journeyed with Israel.” (The word “*et*” can mean “with” or merely indicate a direct object, so it is the punctuation of the first word that tells us whether the Israelites are being moved by Moshe or he is moving with them.) Rashi selects the appropriate *midrash*, whether in terms of the context of the verses and the grammatical viewpoint.

The conclusion drawn from here is that Rashi’s method is to cite Midrashic sources that dovetail with the *peshat* of the verses. In this, we have determined his way of choosing among different *midrashim*.

Next week, God willing, we will continue to discuss the question of the impetus to cite a *midrash* in the first place. When does Rashi turn to the *midrash*, and when does he satisfy himself with the *peshat*?

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch