

GREAT BIBLICAL COMMENTATORS
By Dr. Avigail Rock

Lecture #12:
Summary of Exegesis of Northern France
Introduction to Spanish Exegesis

A. The *Peshat* School in 12th Century France

Over the past few lessons, we have become familiar with the school of northern French¹ exegetes of the 12th century, and in the next few, we will address the exegetical school that developed in Spain. Before proceeding, we will summarize the exegetical path of the northern French exegetes, the men of the *peshat* school. The *peshat* school was founded by Rashi, who wrote his commentary according to the way of *peshat* alongside the Sages' interpretations. Those who followed in his footsteps — R. Yosef (Mahari) Kara, student-colleague of Rashi; the Rashbam, Rashi's grandson; and R. Yosef Bekhor Shor of Orléans² — took this idea of *peshat* to an extreme, shunning use of the Sages' words for purposes of biblical interpretation.

The *peshat* school in northern France lasted for a short period of about a century. The critical literature has raised a number of hypotheses as to the causes of the development of the school during this period. M. Z. Segal claims that there is a connection between the involvement of these scholars in Talmudic interpretation and the nature of their biblical exegesis:

It appears that this compulsion comes from the study of the Talmud, specifically the halakhic section of it, which flourished among them during these years. It is no coincidence that the great *pashtan* of Talmudic explication, Rashi, is also the first *pashtan* of Scripture. Rashi's students and study partners — Rabbi Shemaya,³ the Rashbam, and Ri Bekhor Shor — were also great Talmudic commentators. They were compelled to study Talmud according to the way of *peshat*, because the correct and direct understanding of the Talmudic text was exigent for them in order to extract practical Halakha. Since the Talmud and Scripture were for them the two sides

¹ It is important to distinguish between northern France and southern France (Provence). Provençal exegesis was much closer to that of Spain, as we will see in the coming lessons.

² To this group we may add R. Eliezer of Beaugency, who also lived in the 12th century in northern France. He presumably composed commentaries to all of Scripture, but only his commentaries to *Yeshayahu*, *Yechezkel*, and *Trei Asar* have survived. R. Eliezer of Beaugency is one of the most extreme exegetes of *peshat* in 12th century France. While the Rashbam and Mahari Kara feel a need to explain their relationship to the Sages, R. Eliezer does not feel the need to apologize for his relationship to the Sages.

³ R. Shemaya was one of the most important of Rashi's students, as well as his scribe.

of one Torah, they applied their methodology of studying Talmud to studying Scripture, and they used the same tools for understanding Scripture which they had used in order to understand the Talmud, i.e., evaluating the words according to the demands of the language and explaining the matter in a way faithful to the sequence of the text and clear logic.⁴

Segal believes that the impetus for the development of *peshat* exegesis in the 12th century was internal, coming from the Jewish community, and it was influenced by the Talmudic methodology that demanded a disciplined approach based on the explanation of the text by the techniques of *peshat*, with the intent of applying this exacting reading in the practical world. In contrast, O. Limor believes that the impetus was cultural and external to the Jewish community, connected to the 12th Century Renaissance, which helped to define the period of the High Middle Ages:

Around the year 1100, an innovative cultural movement which historians call the Renaissance began. The center of the movement was in northern France, and it was expressed in many domains of cultural creativity, among which was studying and interpreting Scripture. This movement manifested itself both in the Christian majority and the Jewish minority, each one of them according to its characteristics and its ways. Both the activity of Rashi's students and the activity of the Victorines⁵ should be seen as part of this Renaissance, as the spirit of innovation and critical thinking finds its expression here in biblical commentary. In this sphere, we find that they have specifically those qualities which one may find among the scholars who dealt with classical literature: textual criticism, consideration of the context, and rational thought. Similarly, one may find among the scholars of both camps the same issues being discussed: criticism of the past versus the authority of the past, as well as the attempt to pursue independent thought and objective truth, actively and consistently.⁶

It is important to stress that Limor does not claim that the specific contents and tools of the exegesis of *peshat* were based on Christian culture;

4 M. Z. Segal, *Parshanut Ha-Mikra*, pp. 61-62.

5 This was an important medieval school of monks from the Abbey of St. Victor in Paris. Some of these monks devoted their lives to the study and interpretation of Scripture. In the 12th century, the Victorines began to study the Bible according to the *peshat*. Until this period, the general tendency of biblical commentary by Christians had been allegorical: the Christians preferred the symbolic, spiritual interpretation, and they scorned the literal interpretation. The monks of the Abbey of St. Victor stressed the importance of studying the Bible literally and delved into it. They did not reject the allegorical interpretation; rather, they claimed that one should understand the literary significance, and only afterwards should one pass to the allegorical interpretation.

6 O. Limor, "Parshanut Ha-Mikra Ba-Mei'a Ha-12," in *Bein Yehudim Le-Notzerim* (Open University: Tel-Aviv, 5753), vol. IV p. 61.

rather, she maintains that this type of study, according to the way of *peshat*, was influenced by the methods of study developed by the Christian Church.⁷

Once we have examined the *peshat* exegesis of 12th-century France and the factors which contributed to its development, we must ask the following question: Why did this school last for such a short time? Why, after the 12th century, do we not find another *pashtan* in northern France? The answer is the persecution of French Jewry in the 13th and 14th centuries. This persecution included, among other things, the Crusades and the burning of the Talmud in Paris in 1242, reaching its climax with the expulsion of Jews from France in 1306. The difficult conditions of persecution destroyed the spiritual and material status of French Jewry, and they prevented the continuous development of Torah creativity.⁸ Granted, we still find a few interpretations of the Torah in France after the 12th century, but these interpretations are mainly a collection of previous commentaries.⁹

Thus, the period of the exegesis in northern France was brief, but it had great significance on the development of this type of exegesis and on Torah scholars throughout the generations. Now, let us turn to a description of Jewish biblical exegesis in Spain in the 11th and 12th centuries.

B. The Golden Age of Spain

In the year 711 C.E., Spain was conquered by the Muslims. With the stability of Muslim rule, the Golden Age of Spanish Jewry began. This era was characterized mainly by two phenomena. First, court Jews¹⁰ held key positions in the service of the caliphs.¹¹ Second, there was a flourishing of culture, spirituality, and Torah throughout the Jewish community in Spain. This boom was expressed in many major spheres of Jewish creativity: biblical commentary, halakhic literature, poetry (both holy and mundane), Hebrew grammar, Jewish philosophy, and Kabbala.

There is no doubt that these two phenomena – namely the honored status of the sages of Spanish Jewry in the centers of power and the cultural development of the Jewish community – influenced each other. This period was one in which unique individuals could flourish – rabbis and intellectuals who were well-integrated in society and the developing Arabic culture, which

7 A similar phenomenon exists, according to a number of critics, in Talmudic commentary as well. See E. E. Urbach, *Ba'alei Ha-Tosafot*, pp. 744-52; Yisrael M. Ta-Shma, *Ha-Sifrut Ha-Parshanit La-Talmud*, Vol. I, pp. 93-117.

8 Here as well there is a similar phenomenon found among the Talmudic commentators (for the same reasons); see Urbach, *ibid.*, pp. 521-2.

9 Two examples are *Da'at Zekenim* and *Hadar Zekeinim*, the authors of which are unknown.

¹⁰Court Jews were courtiers who were close to the king and had high positions. For example, Chasdai ibn Shaprut was appointed physician to the caliph Abd ar-Rahman III of Cordoba (912-961), and the warrior and poet R. Shmuel Ha-Nagid moved to Granada, where he was first tax collector, then a secretary, and finally an assistant vizier to the Berber king Habbus al-Muzaffar.

¹¹This was a term for the political leader in Muslim lands; the English "caliph" comes from the Arabic title "*Khalifat Rasul Allah*," the "successor of the messenger of God," Muhammad.

included, among other things, delving into Arabic philosophy (influenced by Greek philosophy), developing science, and studying philology.

Indeed, Muslim culture served as both an example and as a stimulus for Jewish scholars. These sages used the model of enlightened Islam to forge the tools and devices to become the first Hebrew grammarians¹² and biblical exegetes. At the same time, they sought to contend with the Muslim faith in the battle for religious primacy. Due to their greater political power and numbers, the Muslims clearly had the upper hand; nevertheless, in cultural terms, there was certainly a chance for the Jews to prove the superiority of their religion. For this purpose, the sages of Israel enlisted the best of Arabic culture developed in Spain. They used the tools of philology and linguistics to develop the research of biblical language based on the three-consonant root (the Arabic model), and from this sprang many grammatical books and Arabic dictionaries. Furthermore, they wrote beautiful poetry, which borrowed its meter from Arabic poetry and its expression and language from *Tanakh*.

This culture left its mark on Jewish exegesis of Spain. However, despite these influences, which were external to the community, there was another characteristic of Spanish Jewry that also influenced the biblical commentators, albeit indirectly –the relationship to the Talmud. In Spain, a new genre of Jewish writing was created and developed, the literature of halakhic codes, developed by R. Yitzchak ibn Ghiyyat¹³ and R. Yitzchak Alfasi. In this literature, the methodology is to present to the student the halakhic conclusion, in its most pragmatic form, disconnected from the Talmudic analysis. This changed irrevocably the importance of study for the reader, since using these texts, one could reach a halakhic conclusion even without a throughout knowledge of the Talmud. Professor U. Simon expands on this:

Using this literature, it became possible for the first time in our history to achieve a reasonable proficiency in Halakha without dedicating oneself to long and deep study of the Talmud. This breakthrough not only freed spiritual energy for the construction of that multi-branched culture mainly based on Scripture, but it allowed also emancipation from the Sages' exegesis, while being faithful to Halakha. Thus it happened that the *Geonim* of Babylonia at one end and the greats of northern France at the other gave their power to Scripture and Talmud. At the same time, the first linguistic scholars (such as R. Yehuda Hayyuj and R. Yona ibn Janach) and biblical scholars (such as R. Moshe ibn Gikatilla and R. Avraham ibn Ezra) arose on Spanish soil. These luminaries did not innovate anything in the Talmudic arena, and they even minimized their use of the Sages' interpretations and derivations in clarifying the meaning of the verses... They could allow themselves to ignore the literature of halakhic Midrash because they

12 These were Dunash ben Labrat, Menachem ben Saruk, and Yosef ibn Janach.

13 He was an 11th-century halakhic authority who composed a code of law.

were confident in their interpretive ability to reconcile the halakhic ruling with the simple meaning of the verses.¹⁴

An additional result of being disconnected from the Sages' interpretations, also characteristic of the Spanish sages of this era, was a stunning expertise in the twenty-four books of *Tanakh*. This great proficiency is the result of the freeing of energies from studying Talmud in order to delve into Scripture. This encyclopedic knowledge is expressed in the integration of verses and verse fragments in the writings of these commentators, as well as their use of biblical wordplay.

Unfortunately, the writings of most biblical commentators of this era were lost, mainly because they were written in Judeo-Arabic. Thus, for example, the commentary of R. Moshe ben Shmuel Ha-Kohen ibn Gikatilla (middle of the 11th century), who was a poet, linguist, and biblical commentator, was lost to posterity. Of his biblical interpretations (written in Arabic), only some citations have survived. Another important exegete was R. Yehuda ben Shmuel ibn Balaam (second half of the 11th century), who was also a linguist and biblical commentator. All of his writings were written in Arabic; from his commentaries on the Torah, only those on *Bamidbar* and *Devarim* have survived.

The Golden Age reached its end with the invasion of extremist Muslims, who founded the Almohad Caliphate in southern Spain in the middle of the 12th century. After this conquest, the Jews of the area were ordered to convert to Islam. Some of them fled south to North Africa, but most of them relocated to northern Spain's Christian principalities.

Despite the destruction of southern (Arabic) Spanish Jewry, the influence of the Golden Age extended far beyond its limitations of time and space. The sages of Spain who were compelled to abandon their homes wandered penniless, but they brought with them treasures of wisdom which they had acquired in the land of their birth. From the second half of the 12th century, we find the development of Judaism in Arabic in the realms of Christian Spain, under the influence of R. Avraham ibn Ezra, R. Yehuda Ha-levi, and R. Yehuda Alharizi.

C. The Distinction Between the Schools

We can summarize the distinctions between the biblical exegesis of northern France and the biblical exegesis of Spain in the following way: The Jewish exegetes of northern France based their approaches, for the most part, on sources and ideas from Jewish tradition, which we may describe as internal concepts. These are not based at all on the ideas and outlooks of the Christian culture amidst which the exegetes resided. (As we stated above, even according to those who believe that the methodology of *peshat* was influenced by Christianity, the contents and the tools were certainly not drawn from Christianity.) In contrast, the Jewish exegetes of Muslim Spain drew their

¹⁴ *Encyclopedia Mikra'it, Tanakh — Parshanut*, p. 660.

tools from internal sources as well as external sources. The many domains to which the scholars of Spain had been exposed left their mark on the character of the Spanish commentaries.

In the sphere of biblical commentary, the main representative of the Golden Age was R. Avraham ibn Ezra, and we will dedicate the coming lectures to his commentary.

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