

GREAT BIBLICAL COMMENTATORS

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Lecture #13: R. Avraham ibn Ezra, Part I

A. BIOGRAPHY

General Background

R. Abu Iṣḥāq Avraham ben Meir ibn Ezra (1089-1164), known simply as Ibn Ezra, was born in Tudela, Spain. Ibn Ezra was educated in the Spanish approach, the guiding principle of which was that in order to reach the ultimate truth, it is incumbent upon a person to be familiar with and understand all areas of human knowledge. Consequently, Ibn Ezra was renowned as a poet, grammarian, philosopher, astronomer, physician, and mathematician.

Ibn Ezra was extremely poor for most his life, and he earned his meager living by tutoring the children of wealthy nobles and composing books for them. This arises from his words in his introduction to the Book of *Eikha*: “These books of mine, in my exile, were holding my hands” – in other words, writing these books allowed him to make a living. It appears that Ibn Ezra succeeded in dealing with his difficulties with a sense of humor, as he describes his fate in a sardonic way.¹

The periods of his life may be split in two, the first lasting until 1140 and the second from that point until his death.

1 The most prominent example is the poem which Ibn Ezra composed describing the advantages of his worn cloak (brought here in part):

I have a cloak which is like a sieve;
To winnow wheat or barley, I could give.
I will spread it out for a tent at evenfall,
And the stars above will put light in it, as I live.

His lack of fortune in every profession he turned to is described in a magnificent poem as well (brought here in part):

Constellations and stars in their state,
To my birthplace, they incline as they rise.
Were candles to be my merchandise,
The sun would not be taken in until my demise.
I try to succeed, but I am not able,
For they have wronged me, the stars of my skies.
Were I a merchant of burial shrouds,
As I live, no man dies.

His Early Years

In the first part of his life, Ibn Ezra lived in Spain (although he visited Algeria and elsewhere in North Africa). Ibn Ezra, as we have noted, like his Golden Age colleagues, received a wide-ranging education. On the one hand, he acquired great expertise in the works of great Jewish minds throughout the generations; on the other hand, he was also fluent in Arabic, and he was involved in the rich Muslim culture, its literature and its scientific innovations. During this period, he wrote mainly secular poetry.

Ibn Ezra had a family in Spain, but we know very little about his family. As far as we know, he had five children.² His wife and four of his children died at a young age while he was still in Spain. His surviving son, Yitzchak, became known in his own right as a poet. Yitzchak was a close friend of R. Yehuda Ha-Levi, and in the year 1140, when R. Yehuda Ha-Levi moved to Israel, Rabbi Yitzchak joined him.

Leaving Spain and Moving to Italy

The second period of Ibn Ezra's life began in the year 1140. In this year, Ibn Ezra started living a life of wandering throughout Christian Spain. During this period, he composed most of his books.

The reason for this departure was apparently the conquest of Muslim Spain by the Almohads.³ In 1140, the Almohads initiated a cruel occupation, which compelled Jews to convert to Islam or face murder or expulsion. Ibn Ezra left Spain for Rome, a city of scholars⁴ and a wealth of books. Ibn Ezra's departure was clearly under circumstances of haste and fear.⁵ The destruction of Spanish Jewry and their rich legacy is lamented by Ibn Ezra in his dirge "*Ahah Yarad al Sefarad*":

Alas! The rain / upon Spain / from heaven was foul.
Greatly distressed / stood the West / hands trembling, to howl...
The Torah was withdrawn, the Holy Writ gone / and the Mishna was hidden;
And the Talmud / barren stood / for all its glory was overridden...
Cordoba was stunned / and wholly abandoned / became like the sea's desolation.

² This is what he mentions in his commentary on *Shemot* 2:2.

³ See lesson #12.

⁴ The most famous of them was the author of the *Arukh*, R. Natan ben R. Yechiel.

⁵ Echoes of this may be found in his poems in the introductions to the *Megillot*.

From his land they did banish,
From the realms of the Spanish;
To Rome he did vanish
With a fainting soul.

(Introduction to *Kohelet*)

And I am Avraham son of Meir, from distant lands.

He took me out from the land of Spain, the wrathful oppressors' hands.

(Introduction to *Eikha*)

The names of the sages / and warriors for the ages / died in famine and privation...

Jews in medieval Europe did not know Arabic, and Ibn Ezra took upon himself the task of translating the works of the Spanish scholars, with a twofold aim: supporting himself financially by doing the translation and maintaining Spanish culture even after its destruction. Ibn Ezra saw himself as having a central role in keeping the cultural tradition of Spain alive.

Not only did Ibn Ezra translate the three grammatical treatises of R. Yehuda ibn Hayyuj from Arabic to Hebrew, he also composed books of grammar for European Jews, after he saw personally how their knowledge of Hebrew was not sufficient.

Ibn Ezra acquired some admirers in Italy, who respected his works and recognized their worth (although simultaneously, some opponents took great exception to his interpretations and labeled them as heresy). For his own part, Ibn Ezra was less than impressed by the compositions of his new acquaintances in Europe. In his commentary to *Kohelet* (5:1),⁶ he criticizes in his caustic way the poetic style imported from the Land of Israel, which influenced the lands of Ashkenazic Jewry. Instead, he provides the reader with specific guidelines for writing poems; he also stresses the importance of being precise⁷ with the Hebrew language, and he complains of the faltering speech of Ashkenazic Jews.⁸

While he lived in Italy, Ibn Ezra composed a number of works; among them was his *Peirush Ha-katzar* to the Torah (which we will deal with presently), his commentary to *Nevi'im* (which was lost, aside from his commentary to *Yeshayahu*), and a book dealing with the calendar, *Sefer Ha-ibbur*. Ibn Ezra did not stay very long in Rome,⁹ and he ended up wandering through different towns in northern Italy.

The Life of Ibn Ezra in France

6 In his commentary to the Five *Megillot*, he indicates that these are the first commentaries which he composed to Scripture.

7 Ibn Ezra opposed and considered inferior the style of R. Eliezer Ha-Kalir (*Eretz Yisrael* poet of the 6th century), which the European scholars imitated. It may be that Ibn Ezra's criticism was the cause of the removal of Ha-Kalir's poems from Sephardic and Eastern prayer books. They were replaced by the poems of Spain, including Ibn Ezra himself, as well as those of R. Shlomo ibn Gabirol and Moshe Ibn Ezra.

8 This is what he writes:

We are obligated to know the grammar of the language, so that we will not make a mistake. For example, there are those who say the Grace After Meals and pronounce the word "zunenu," but they do not know that "zanenu" is from the root *zana* (to stray), just as "anenu" comes from "ana" (to answer). They do not realize that the root is "zan" (to provide food), for "zunenu" is comparable to (*Tehillim* 85:5): "Restore us again (*shuvenu*), O God of our salvation."

9 It may be that sharp criticism of the views of his predecessors brought about a dispute with the sages of Rome.

From Italy, Ibn Ezra wandered to southern France in 1148. It may be that the cause of this peregrination was the influence of the Second Crusade on the Jews of Italy. Although the Crusades did not pass through Italy *per se*, the initiative for this Crusade came out of Italy, and it therefore may be that some Italian Jews emigrated because of the intensification of anti-Semitism.¹⁰ It is possible that he did not feel sufficiently appreciated in Italy,¹¹ but it is also possible that he felt responsibility to transfer to other lands the traditions of Spain.

In southern France, Ibn Ezra encountered a community which was excited by his innovations and appreciated his contributions. The translator Yehuda ibn Tibbon describes the influence of Ibn Ezra's writings on the Jews of southern France:¹²

But the exiles in France¹³ and throughout the borders of the Edomites lands did not know Hebrew and they held these books¹⁴ as sealed tomes... until the sage R. Avraham Ibn Ezra arrived in their lands and helped them in this respect with his brief compositions, including many precious and valuable matters in them... Thereafter, some of them followed this discipline, and they occupied themselves a bit in it. Then I encountered those who diligently are at its doors, who travel by its lights; men began to seek it, and they tasted of its sweetness, and when they saw that their eyes would light up, their ears opened up and

10 Ibn Ezra, as a child of Spanish Jewry and a wanderer in France, was familiar with the anti-Semitism of both Muslims and Christians. He writes in his well-known poem "*Tzama Nafshi*":

See, the true mistress [Judaism]

While the maidservant does stress [Namely Hagar, the mother of Yishmael]

"It is your child who is lifeless [Islam claims that the Jewish nation is not the chosen people, that it is "the dead child;" see *I Melakhim* 3:22-23]

And my child who lives" [They claim that Islam is the chosen faith]

Is this not your portion from the start? [The nation of Israel is God's portion — "For God's portion is his people," *Devarim* 32:9]

Seek out his blood's part! [Seek to avenge the blood of Israel]

Pour wrath on the head of the living goat. [Seek the blood of Israel from the Christians, symbolized by a goat. The Christian Church is seen by the Sages as the successor to Edom, founded by Esav, who was known as "*ish sa'ir*" in *Bereishit* 27:11, which can be translated as "hirsute man" or "hircine man"]

11 As he wrote in his poem, "*Nedod Hesir Oni*":

There is no glory among the Edomites,

For any scholar who there alights,

In the land of the Kedarites.

And they hoot at us.

12 Yehuda ibn Tibbon (1120-1190) is often called "the father of the translators." Among the important compositions which he translated from Arabic to Hebrew are R. Sa'adia Gaon's *Emunot Ve-De'ot*, Bachya ibn Paquda's *Chovot Ha-Ievavot*, and R. Yehuda Ha-Levi's *Sefer Ha-kuzari*. In his youth, when he was thirty years old, he had to leave his birthplace Granada for Provence in southern France; it seems that he left because of the Almohad invasion. He apparently knew Ibn Ezra in Spain, and afterwards encountered him once again in France.

13 Citing *Ovadiah* 1:20. The "Tzarfat" and "Sefarad" mentioned in this verse are most probably not France and Spain, as they have been used respectively for the past millennium in Hebrew, but rather places in North Africa and Asia Minor.

14 This is a reference to the grammarians R. Yehuda ben Hayyuj, Yona ibn Janach, and R. Shmuel Ha-Nagid.

they were drawn after it. Thus, they desired to understand its literature...

During this period, Ibn Ezra composed some wide-ranging compositions in the disciplines of astrology and astronomy.¹⁵

In the year 1152, Ibn Ezra once again took the wanderer's staff into his hand and moved to northern France. It appears that he arrived in the city of Dreux in northern France and fell ill there.¹⁶ Ibn Ezra vowed that if he would rise from his sickbed, he would go back and interpret the Torah a second time. Indeed, after he recuperated, Ibn Ezra wrote a new commentary on the Torah, *Peirush Ha-arokh*.¹⁷

At the time of his sojourn in northern France, Ibn Ezra apparently merited the great respect of the major scholars of northern France, Rabbeinu Tam and Rashbam. One may learn of Rabbeinu Tam's great evaluation of Ibn Ezra from the exchange of poetry among the two. This exchange actually began because of Ibn Ezra's criticism of Rabbeinu Tam's poetic abilities:

What gall brings the Gaul in verse's abode?
Like a stranger in the temple, no fear to tread.
Were Yaakov to make sweet as the manna his ode,
I am the sun that melts his heavenly bread.¹⁸

Rabbeinu Tam responded:

The Abiezrite may still the thought that springs,
That his comrade touched between his wings;
I am the servant of Avraham, his property,
And I bow and prostrate before him in all things.¹⁹

15 His astronomical works were famous from the 13th to the 15th centuries; *Sefer Ha-Ibbur* and *Reishit Chokhma* were translated into Latin, Spanish, and French. For this reason, the lunar crater Abenezra (21.0°S 11.9°E) was named after him. (I thank my brother Avraham Poupko for this point.)

16 It may be that his illness was the result of his extensive travels at an advanced age.

17 This is what he writes in his introduction to *Peirush Ha-Arokh* (in *Ha-Keter* edition, *Bereishit*, vol. I, p. 27): "I made a vow to God in my illness to explain the law given on Mount Sinai."

18 This means the following:

What gall brings the Gaul in verse's abode? [What makes this Frenchman, Rabbeinu Tam, think he can write poetry?]

Like a stranger in the temple, no fear to tread. [Rabbeinu Tam is trampling the holy precincts of poetry]

Were Yaakov to make sweet as the manna his ode [If Rabbeinu Yaakov Tam would write poetry as sweet as manna]

I am the sun that melts his heavenly bread. [Then Ibn Ezra will take the role of the midday sun, melting the manna, as described in *Shemot* 16:21; i.e., Ibn Ezra's poetical abilities far exceed those of Rabbeinu Tam]

19 This means the following:

The Abiezrite may still the thought that springs [Ibn Ezra may rest at ease]

That his comrade touched between his wings [That his friend has stolen his occupation]

In his response to Rabbeinu Tam, Ibn Ezra expresses his humility, and he recognizes Rabbeinu Tam's superiority:

Is it right for the bull of God's people, their shepherd prized
To bow his head in a missive to the people's most despised?
Heaven forfend that God's own angel
Should bow and prostrate before Bilam chastised.²⁰

While in France, Ibn Ezra wrote additional commentaries to some of the *Ketuvim*. He also produced a number of compositions dealing with mathematics,²¹ astrology, and astronomy. In 1158, he moved to England, and there he lived until his death in 1164.²²

Ibn Ezra, Renaissance Man

Despite his difficult and peripatetic life, Ibn Ezra composed dozens of books, more than one thousand poems, mathematical and biblical riddles,²³ and various exercises of wit.²⁴

I am the servant of Avraham, his property [Rabbeinu Tam sees R. Avraham ibn Ezra as his master, referencing the eponymous patriarch in *Bereishit* 23:18 and 24:34]
And I bow and prostrate before him in all things [Rabbeinu Tam concedes that Ibn Ezra has the greater skills]

20 This means the following:

Is it right for the bull of God's people, their shepherd prized [*Avir*, bull is used as a term for the patriarch Yaakov, *Bereishit* 49:24; here it refers to Rabbeinu Tam, the bull of God's people and their shepherd]
To bow his head in a missive to the people's most despised? [To humble himself before the lowly Ibn Ezra]
Heaven forfend that God's own angel [a term of honor for Rabbeinu Tam]
Should bow and prostrate before Bilam chastised.

Since Rabbeinu Tam concluded with the words "And I bow and prostrate before him," words based on Bilam's self-effacement before the angel of God in *Bamidbar* 22:31, Ibn Ezra compares himself to Bilam and Rabbeinu Tam to the angel of God.

21 It is accepted among researchers that the decimal numeral system, which had been known for ages in India, first appeared in Europe in Ibn Ezra's writings. The following comes from Ibn Ezra's "*Sefer Ha-mispar*", describing the number zero:

Now, if he does not have any one, but he does have in the next level, i.e., the tens, he should put a circular symbol first, to indicate that in the first level there are none, and then he should write the number of tens afterwards.

22 It is told of Ibn Ezra that in the year of his death, he jokingly applied the following verse to himself (*Bereishit* 12:4): "And Avraham was seventy five years old when he left Charan" the city; he said, "And Avraham was seventy five years old when he left *charon*" — the furious wrath of the world.

23 Here are two of his riddles:

What is the name which has the quality,
That the fourth is a fourth of the third,
And the second is a tenth of the fourth,
And the first to the second is a fifth?

The answer is Aharon (*alef-heh-reish-nun*), and the values are based on *gematria*:

"That the fourth is a fourth of the third" — the fourth letter (*nun* = 50) has a value which is one quarter of the third letter (*reish* = 200).

It may be that the riddles were composed by Ibn Ezra when he was lonely or during his wanderings, whether because of the need to dispel his boredom or because of the need to challenge himself in the absence of intellectual equals. However, Ibn Ezra was not only a sharp-tongued thinker; he was a believing Jew, with a passionate love for his people and his Creator, for the Torah and its commandments. Two elements – that of the man of science and the man of spirit – have left their mark very deeply on the different compositions of Ibn Ezra.²⁵

We will finish this biography with a quote from Professor Simon's introduction to his edition of Ibn Ezra's "*Yesod Mora*":²⁶

In absolute contrast to his difficult and miserable personal life, his intellectual life was rich. He was a poet and liturgist of great stature, an innovative and authoritative astronomer, a sought-after astrologer. He was is an expert in mathematics and the Hebrew calendar, a grammarian and a linguist, a man of intellect and thought, and above all, the greatest of the biblical commentators throughout the generations.

B. Survey of His Commentaries

Ibn Ezra wrote commentaries on the Torah, the Five *Megillot*, *Yeshayahu*, *Trei Asar*, *Tehillim*, *Iyov*, and *Daniel*. It appears from his words that he wrote commentaries to other books of *Tanakh* as well, but they have

"And the second is a tenth of the fourth" — the second letter (*heh* = 5) has a value which is a tenth of the fourth letter (*nun* = 50).

"And the first to the second is a fifth" — and the first letter (*alef* = 1) is a value which is a fifth of the second letter.

An additional riddle:

In a country without soil,
From knights to the blood royal,
They walk with no toil.
If the king is made spoil,
All shuffle off this mortal coil.

This is description of chess.

24 Ibn Ezra loved palindromes. Consider the following examples:

אבי, אל חי שמך, למה מלך משיח לא יבא?

(My father, named Living God, why will the King Messiah not come?)

דעו מאביכם כי לא בוש אבוש, שוב אשוב אליכם כי בא מועד.

(Know from your Father that I will certainly not tarry; I will certainly return to you when the appointed time comes.)

25 See his commentary to the verse (*Shemot* 31:3), "And I fill him with the spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge, in every discipline," which describes Betzalel:

Betzalel was filled with every subject of mathematics, algebra, geometry, astronomy, science, and the secrets of the soul. He had an advantage over all of the men of his generation: he knew every discipline, while many of the "wise of heart" did not know even one discipline. This is why it says, "in every discipline."

It appears that Ibn Ezra is actually describing himself.

26 This is book dealing with the reasons for the *mitzvot*.

been lost.²⁷ As we noted above, he wrote two commentaries to the Torah, *Peirush Ha-katzar* and *Peirush Ha-arokh*, the Short and Long Commentary. *Peirush Ha-katzar* was written first, and after a number of years, he produced *Peirush Ha-arokh*, from which there remain only fragments on *Bereishit* and the entirety on *Shemot*.²⁸

Ibn Ezra's commentaries, unlike those of the commentators of northern France, are difficult to comprehend. There are a number of reasons for this. First, it may be that these are summaries of lectures that he presented to his students, and the text therefore displays extreme terseness. Second, Ibn Ezra was the first of the commentators of Spain to write in Hebrew, and he was therefore sometimes compelled to coin phrases and expressions that have not endured in the Hebrew language and are thus unintelligible today. In addition, Ibn Ezra believed that some interpretations should be kept secret, and he therefore wrote them in a sort of code. Because of the difficulties of understanding his explanation, various supercommentaries were composed very soon after Ibn Ezra wrote his commentary.

C. Introduction to the Commentary on the Torah

As opposed to the French commentators, the sages of Spain were accustomed to writing introductions to their compositions. In Ibn Ezra's introduction to his commentary (written in rhyme), Ibn Ezra presents the different approaches to biblical interpretation followed by the commentators of previous generations. He voices strong criticism of these approaches, and in the end, he presents his own path. In order to understand his method, we must first survey the interpretive options that Ibn Ezra rejects.

The first approach is the way of the scholars of Spanish *yeshivot*, such as R. Shmuel ben Chofni, R. Yitzchak Ha-yisraeli, and R. Sa'adia Gaon, who weave philosophical views into their commentaries on the Torah. Ibn Ezra has no problem with external wisdom — he himself includes many diverse disciplines in his writings, and he claims that they are essential in order to understand the Torah. Rather, the main argument of Ibn Ezra is that in the framework of a "straight" commentary on the Torah - that is, an interpretation based on *peshat* - one should not expand upon or explore philosophical questions, since they do not contribute to our understanding of the verses and the readers do not understand the philosophical debate:

One way is long and broad again,
Beyond our contemporaries' ken...
And one who wants to understand external science,
Let him learn from books by men of understanding and reliance...

²⁷ In fact, R. Moshe Kimchi wrote his commentaries to *Mishlei* and *Ezra-Nechemya*.

²⁸ *Peirush Ha-katzar* to *Sefer Bereishit* is published in the *Ha-keter* edition (Bar-Ilan University).

We should note that despite the fact that Ibn Ezra rejects this path, in a number of places Ibn Ezra himself presents long and convoluted philosophical or scientific analysis.²⁹

The second way is that of the Karaites, who deny the tradition of the Oral Torah. Ibn Ezra fights against the Karaites with all of his power, and in his commentary he works hard to prove that there are many commandments which cannot be understood without the Sages' traditions:³⁰

The second view chosen by the twisted...
And this is the way of Anan and Binyamin,³¹ like the Sadducees,
As well as ben Mashiach,³² Yeshua,³³ and all who voice heresies.
The scribes' words they treat with spite,
And each inclines to the left or to the right.
Every man as he wants interprets each clause,
Both in the commandments and in the laws...
How shall they rely in commands on what their notions have wrought,
Each moment veering to and fro by their thought;
For in the Torah you will not find
Even one commandment fully defined...
This shows us that Moshe relied on the oral tradition,
Which provides the heart joy and balm for our condition,
For there is naught between the oral and written teaching;
They both are our patrimony, beyond impeaching...

The third way is the way of those who understand the Torah as allegory. Ibn Ezra mainly opposes this as a path leading to Christianity:

The third way is one of darkness and murk...
In all things, they see secrets as they piddle,
Believing that the Torah and its rules are a riddle;
I decline to address at length their arts,
For "they are a people of wayward hearts" (*Tehillim* 95:10).

Ibn Ezra believes that one may use allegory only when there is no other way to interpret the verse.³⁴

If logic forces one to deny it,
If the pure senses³⁵ make one defy it,

29 For example, in his commentary to *Shemot* 12:2, Ibn Ezra explains at length the Hebrew calendar, and he rejects the Karaite approach to the topic. In his commentary to *Shemot* 3:15, Ibn Ezra deals at great length with the Holy Names and the significance of their numerical value.

30 We will expand on this in the coming lesson.

31 This is Binyamin ben Moshe Nahawandi, of the 9th century, one of the founders of the Karaite community in Jerusalem.

32 This is Hasun ben Mashiach, a Karaite sage who lived in Baghdad in the 10th century.

33 This is Yeshua ben Yehuda, a Karaite sage of Ibn Ezra's generation.

34 For example, Ibn Ezra describes the term "foreskin of the heart" as an instance of a situation in which one is obligated to explain the verse in a metaphorical way.

Then we must seek out the transcendental,
For common sense³⁶ is the fundamental.
The Torah was not for the unintelligent designed,
And the emissary between man and God is his mind.
As long as one's intellect does not reject it,
We must explain the verse simply and thus respect it.

The fourth way is that of the homiletic exegetes in Christian lands, who do not relate to the *peshat* of the verses, instead following the Midrashic approach. This is superfluous, as the Sages have already done this, and there is no need to "reinvent the wheel:"

This is the way of the sages in the lands of the Edomites and the Greeks
Who do not give weight to grammatical techniques...
Now since we have found in the ancient books this lore
Why should the latter-day scholars do this anymore?

To describe his own interpretive path (which we will analyze in the coming lecture, God willing), ibn Ezra uses the metaphor of the point inside a circle. The point symbolizes the "straight" interpretation, the truth, and everything else radiates out from it. For example, the Christian path is outside the circle entirely, but the fourth way is very close to the center.

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch

35 This indicates that one denies that which is obvious to the senses.

36 This refers to a rational approach.