

The French Tosafot and *Peshat* (i.e. straightforward) Bible Commentaries .

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#### OTHER PESHAT INTERPRETERS IN FRANCE

The contextual approach, *peshat*, grew into a distinctive, self-conscious mode in twelfth-century France. While many rabbinic scholars devoted their energies to penetrating, often hairsplitting discussion of the Talmud, a number of shrewd commentators set their minds to the Bible. Only one, Rashi's grandson Rashbam, Rabbi Samuel ben Meir, wrote a Torah commentary that was later included in standard editions of *Mikra'ot Gedolot*. But we shall look at three great *peshat* exegetes of this group: Rashbam, Rabbi Eliezer of Beaugency, and Rabbi Joseph Bekhor Shor, each of whom holds special interest for us.

Although Rashbam was an expert Talmudist who completed his grandfather Rashi's commentary to the Babylonian Talmud, he is best known as an arrogant, independent, and immensely clever and successful commentator on the Torah. In a famed comment on Genesis 37.2, Rashbam claims that:

Our rabbi, Solomon [i.e., Rashi], the father of my mother, who enlightens the eyes of the Diaspora, who interpreted the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, also set his mind to explain the direct sense of Scripture. Yet I, Samuel, son of Rabbi Meir, his son-in-law, of blessed memory, debated with him in his presence, and he admitted to me that if he had the opportunity he would compose different commentaries according to the new *peshat* interpretations coming to light every day.

Rashbam suffered no doubts about the superiority of his method and of his interpretations to those that differed among his grandfather's. Yet, Rashi did not commit himself exclusively to the *peshat* approach, nor did Rashbam in any way deny the paramount importance of the *derash* approach for deriving Jewish law and values (see above). Nonetheless, Rashbam may be correct when he suspects that

Earlier commentators out of their piety busied themselves by tending toward the homiletical [*derash*] interpretations, as they are the essential ones, and for this reason did not become trained in the actual *peshat* of Scripture. . . . (comment on Gen. 37.2)

Rashbam understands that the only way to elucidate the *peshat*, or contextual, meaning of the biblical text is to stick to this dimension of meaning and not clutter it by overlapping other dimensions. Even if other dimensions have greater significance, Rashbam would contend, the *peshat* interpretation deserves to be heard.

Rashbam did need to state this point expressly because many midrashic interpreters feel threatened by *peshat*. *Peshat* may differ from the interpretation in rabbinic law. We have a clear example of this in the following passage from Rashbam's commentary to Genesis 1.5. In Jewish tradition the day commences at sundown and ends after sundown the next day. Sabbath and festival observance assumes this definition of the day. Traditional rabbinic interpretation would naturally find support for this definition in the story of creation, when the day was defined for the very first time. Rashbam scrutinizes the language of the text there and reaches a conclusion that would unsettle many a rabbi for whom the midrashic exegesis is the only one. After describing what God created

each day, the text concludes: "There was evening and there was morning," which closes the first, second, third, and so on day. Rashbam says:

It is not written here *There was night and there was day* but rather *there was evening*, meaning that the first day reached evening when the light [there was not sun yet] set, and *there was morning*, meaning the breaking of the night when the dawn rose. With this one day of the six days spoken of in the Ten Commandments [see below] was completed and the second day begun—*God said: "Let there be a dome."* The text does not come to say that evening and morning comprise one day, for we have no need except that it explain what makes six days—when day breaks and night is finished, then one day is finished and a second day begins.

Rashbam tangles two issues here. The first, and simpler, is that of language and style. The repeating formula, *There was evening and there was morning*, refers by dint of language alone to two specific stages in the passing of a day, dusk and dawn, not to two halves of the day, the dark one and the light one. To demonstrate the correctness of his reading, he creates what some literary critics today call a countertext: What else could the text have said? If the text had intended to convey the notion that the day has two consecutive parts, night and day, the text would then have said "There was night and there was day."

It does not. Rather, the text describes the passing of a day. First, the day begins. Then it reaches a point about midway when the light dims—*evening*. Finally, it reaches a point when the light returns—*daybreak*. It is precisely this point that signals the end of one day and the beginning of the next. Day, therefore, begins at dawn, not according to the definition of the day for the purpose of observing Jewish festivals, at sunset.

The second issue concerns a matter of the Bible's style. (For more on this see Chapter One.) Rashbam indicates in a number of places in his Torah commentary what he perceives as a literary feature of biblical narrative: it introduces information that has no immediate import but which will be necessary or significant as the text continues to unfold. This technique of anticipation, or "prolepsis," is the subject of an entire essay by Nahum Sarna.\* For example, in an episode we have referred to above, after Joseph relates his dreams to his brothers and his father, the text says, "And his father kept the matter in mind." (Gen. 37.11) Rashbam:

\* "The Anticipatory Use of Information as a Literary Feature of the Genesis Narratives," in Richard E. Friedman, ed., *The Creation of Sacred Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), pp. 76–82.

What need is there for this phrase? None except that when [later on] the news comes to [Jacob that Joseph is alive and viceroy of Egypt] and he didn't believe his sons [who brought the news that Joseph] was living, and when Israel saw the wagons that Pharaoh had sent—for they could not have been sent except by order of the king as it is written there, *wagons at the order of Pharaoh*—then [Jacob/Israel] believed on the basis of the dreams, which predicted that [Joseph's] future was to be a ruler, and these wagons come by dint of royalty and rulership. For this reason [Jacob] said *It is great that Joseph my son still lives* (Gen. 45.28). Isn't it surprising that [Jacob] would believe [this message] after he had seen his tunic full of blood? [He must have reacted] like Isaac did to Jacob [when Jacob convinced his father that he was Esau by wearing furry skins] by trembling, since he had found fur [like Esau's] on the area of [Jacob's] neck.

In other words, in a wordy style quite unlike his grandfather's, Rashbam explains that the only reason that Jacob could believe that Joseph was alive many years after he had thought that Joseph was killed by a wild animal was that he remembered the dreams; the dreams had come true. Only in order to establish the premise for this astonishing newsbreak did the text tell us earlier, "and his father kept the matter in mind."

Thus, in the Creation story of Genesis 1 the limit of the day must be defined, in Rashbam's view, in order that the fourth of the Ten Commandments can be readily comprehended:

Pay mind to the Sabbath day, to hallow it. Six days you shall work and do your labor; but the seventh day is the Lord your God's. . . .

—EXOD. 20.8–10

Genesis 1 instructs us how to count out six days. We wait until six evenings have passed and six new mornings have broken.

One unmitigated drawback of the sort of straightforward, commonsensical exegesis that we find in Rashbam is that it lacks the spiritual and ethical dimension that a commentator like Rashi tends to provide. A final contrast of Rashbam and Rashi will exemplify this. In Exodus 3 God appears to Moses in the burning bush and commissions him to return to Egypt, confront Pharaoh, and liberate the Hebrews. Moses shares his diffidence with God and says:

"Who am I that I may go to Pharaoh and that I may take the Israelites out of Egypt?"

Rashbam reads the statement pragmatically:

*Moses said, "Who am I?"* Whoever wishes to understand the actual direct sense of these words will become enlightened by my interpretation here, for the commentators before me did not understand a thing of it. Moses is responding to two matters that the Holy One had told him: to go to Pharaoh, and to take the Israelites out by the command of Pharaoh. Moses responded to each matter in turn. *Who am I that I may go to Pharaoh?* Even if I brought him tribute and gifts [could I get in to see Pharaoh]? Can a foreign man like me be suitable to enter the king's court? *And that I may take the Israelites out of Egypt?* That is to say, even if I were suitable to enter before Pharaoh, fool as I am in other matters, what could I say to Pharaoh that would be acceptable to him? Is Pharaoh a fool that he would listen to me and send a large nation of his own slaves free from his land? And what could I say that would be acceptable to him by which saying I would take them out of Egypt with the permission of Pharaoh?

Rashi prefers to see in Moses, a man the Torah calls more humble than any other, a model of humility:

*Who am I?* What importance have I to speak with kings? *That I may take the Israelites out.* And even if I have the importance, what merit has Israel that a miracle should be done for them by my taking them out of Egypt?

Thus the grandson finds Moses to be ordinary, a man absorbed in his own predicament; the grandfather holds up Moses as a model of pious conduct.

Rabbi Joseph Bekhor Shor (twelfth century) was a younger contemporary of Rashbam's and, like him, a practitioner of *peshat*. His work is distinguished, however, by a more profound rationalism and an openness to appropriate sermonizing here and there. Like Rashbam, his commentary to the Torah does not flinch from exposing the contextual sense of biblical law, even where it contradicts the Talmudic interpretations. But more than Rashbam, and somewhat akin to Maimonides, the great Spanish philosopher, Bekhor Shor probed for the reasons underlying the particular commandments. Perhaps his most extraordinary venture in this region is his explanation of the Torah's taboo on hybrids, a theory that closely anticipates that of some recent anthropologists (see Chapter One, "Biblical Law"). The Torah forbids the Israelites to breed two species of animal together, to mix two types of seed, and to interweave

two kinds of fabric (see especially Lev. 19.19). The Torah assumes that each mixture would produce, or at least smack of, hybridization. This law has generally been taken as illogical, mystical. But Bekhor Shor elucidates its rationale:

*Your animals do not breed together two species. If you would breed a horse and an ass, it would produce a mule, which I [God] did not create; you see, you would have altered the act of creation. This applies to any two species, such as a sheep and a goat, for [by breeding them together] you would be making yourself into the creator! . . . You would be creating a creature which is not natural in the world, you would be altering the order of the world, and it is forbidden. . . .* (commentary to LEV. 19.19)

God created the world in divisions of species; it is a violation of the created order, and God's will, to blur those divisions. Bekhor Shor's penchant for the rational also informs his attitude toward miracles in the Bible. Lot's wife, he says, did not really turn into a pillar of salt (Gen. 19.26); she was simply coated with lime and sulphur and appeared to have turned into a pillar of salt.

Nor does the Torah, according to Bekhor Shor, mean to stretch our beliefs with respect to its literary arrangement. The Torah contains two very similar stories about the Israelites lacking water in the wilderness and Moses extracting water by smiting a rock. (Exod. 17; Num. 20.8–13) In the first story the location was named Massah and Meribah ("Trial and Contention"), and in the second the water was called the Water of Meribah. Aren't these two episodes actually two versions of the same event? Are we supposed to believe that the same hardship happened twice, with similar results, in the same spot? No, according to Bekhor Shor:

It seems to me that this episode (in Num. 20) is the event in Exodus 17. . . . Only there the narrative tells of how the Holy One provided Israel with manna, quail, and water in the wilderness; afterwards, the narrative writes each episode in its own place.

The passage in Numbers presents the story in its sequential position in the wilderness narrative; the passage in Exodus joins that episode to thematically related ones. It is a stylistic technique:

And such is the way of many passages, where it speaks concisely in one place but elaborates in another place.

Such interpretations run directly against the grain of Midrash, in which there can be no insignificant duplication, but *peshat* allows for a component of literary style in the formation of Scripture.

Nowhere is this more explicit in medieval Jewish exegesis than in the commentaries to the prophets by Rabbi Eliezer of Beaugency, another great French exegete of the twelfth century. It is most regrettable that Rabbi Eliezer's commentaries to the Torah and other books besides the prophets have not survived, because his keen sense of style, his eclectic interests, and his lucid writing make him as fine a Bible commentator as there has been. See how he explains a word that tradition had regarded as unknowable. When the prophet Ezekiel first caught a glimpse of the Lord descending on his heavenly chariot, he described the image as *hashmal*. What does *hashmal* look like? What is it? In modern Hebrew the word denotes electricity, but the Talmud cautions against any attempt to define it.\* Rashi incorporates the Talmudic approach:

*Like the appearance of HASHMAL.* Hashmal is an angel bearing that name. And like the color of the appearance of [that angel] [Ezekiel] saw from within the fire. Thus said our rabbis: There once was a boy who was studying the episode of the heavenly chariot and was deliberating on the *hashmal*. A flame came out of the *hashmal* and burned him up.

Rabbi Eliezer uses the language of the larger context as his guide. He observes that everything to which Ezekiel compares his vision is part of our everyday reality:

*Like the appearance of the HASHMAL.* We are compelled [to interpret]: The prophet makes comparison to things that are visible to us: *like the appearance of Tarshish stone, like the look of torches, like the appearance of the awesome icecap, like the look of lightning, like the appearance of burnished bronze, like the look of a rainbow*—all of these are visible in the world. So, too, *like the appearance of the HASHMAL*, a thing that is in the world, but we just aren't proficient enough in the language of Scripture in many things, and we only have the context [to go by]. But the context instructs us that it is a very very lucid and moist radiance, like the radiance of the sun's rays, when it appears to ebb and flow like waves of water.

Recent philological study, benefiting from our knowledge of Babylonian language, suggests that *hashmal* is a jet-bluish mythical stone, but Rabbi Eliezer's explanation is a noble effort and a lovely image nonetheless.

\* Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Hagigah, 13a.

There is, though, a radical side to his interpretation of Ezekiel: he doesn't think the prophet composed the book as we have it. He, like earlier commentators, notices how the beginning of the Book of Ezekiel wavers between first person narrative and third person description. The third person passages had been attributed by Rashi to "the holy spirit." But Rabbi Eliezer infers that the third person descriptions are the work of an editor who compiled the book and summarized statements made by Ezekiel elsewhere at the beginning of the book.

The French school of biblical exegesis had by the end of the twelfth century run its brief but energetic course, leaving a permanent legacy of unsurpassed Jewish commentaries in its wake. The Spanish scholars, and those of Provence in the border area between France and Spain, continued the process of Bible interpretation for another century or two.