# Grammatical Thought in Medieval Jewish Exegesis in Europe

## 1. Introduction

The Hebrew Bible is a linguistic entity of some complexity. Given the centrality of this text to Judaism, it is not surprising that the development of a systematic and theoretical analysis of the language in which it was expressed is so closely linked to the enterprise of Jewish biblical exegesis. One of the primary impetuses of linguistic analysis was the desire to understand the biblical text more accurately and in this context, it is sometimes difficult to draw a clear line of demarcation between works that are purely exegetical and those that are purely linguistic in their motivation and character. In examining medieval Jewish biblical exegesis, we encounter works that exhibit varying degrees of interest in grammatical issues as well as a gradual move towards a universal acceptance of the triconsonantal conception of the Hebrew root.

The genesis of Hebrew linguistics as an independent discipline is to be located among those Jews who lived under Islamic rule in the East in the 10th century C.E. Saʿadia Gaon (882–942) is usually presented as one the pioneers in this field. Téné (2007:30) has identified three main factors behind this particular starting point for Hebrew linguistics: the completion of the activity of the Masoretes—especially in the provision of the standard Tiberian vocalization; the exposure of Jewish scholars to the linguistic analysis of Arabic conducted by their Muslim peers; and the need to answer the challenge posed by the emergence of Karaism with its singular emphasis on the careful analysis of biblical language. The Karaites of the East had their own tradition of Hebrew grammatical thought in the 10th and 11th centuries (→ Grammarians: Karaite; Morphology in the Medieval Karaite Grammatical Tradition; Root: Medieval Karaite Notions).

However, awareness of and reflection upon the nature and operations of language have a long history among the Jews—predating the medieval period by many centuries. The Hebrew Bible itself displays an interest in the workings of language in several places. The *Volksety-mologien* of Genesis offer several examples of this phenomenon. For instance, at Gen. 21.6 the meaning of the name יִצְחָק *yiṣḥāq* 'Isaac' is explained in terms of its relationship to the verb צָחַק *ṣāḥaq* 'to laugh'. Weinberg (1980) has presented a succinct survey of materials displaying a consciousness of language in the Hebrew Bible. Pre-medieval post-biblical Jewish literature (the Talmud, Midrash, and Kabbalah) also contains material of a linguistic nature. Such material is often dismissed as unsystematic and haphazard. However Gottlieb (1984) has contended that the midrashic literature possesses a philological component of some sophistication. This entry is primarily concerned with the grammatical thought among the Jewish medieval exegetes of Europe.

## 2. Menaḥem and Dunash

A pioneering work of linguistic biblical exegesis was the מחברת *maḥberet* 'Lexicon' of Menaḥem ibn Saruq (c. 910–c. 970), who worked at the court of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān III, the Umayyad caliph of Cordoba. Menaḥem composed this dictionary of Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic in Hebrew. While primarily a dictionary, the *Maḥberet* also contains a good deal of grammatical material. Menaḥem's choice of language was significant: most Jewish scholars working in al-Andalus (that part of the Iberian Peninsula under Islamic rule) wrote in Judeo-Arabic. Such works were largely inaccessible to those non-Arabic-speaking Jews who lived under Christian rule. So, the *Maḥberet* was to serve as a major source for such non-Arabic-speaking exegetes as Rashi. The *Maḥberet* and Menaḥem's methodology therein were roundly criticized by Dunash ibn Labraṭ (c. 920–990) in the latter's תשובות על מנחם *tešuḇot ʿal menaḥem* 'Responses on Menaḥem'. Sáenz-Badillos (2000) has described the linguistic exegesis of Menaḥem and Dunash, while Elwolde (1995) has presented an analysis of Menaḥem's lexicographical theories which contains translations of a number of entries from the *Maḥberet*.

## 3. Judah Ḥayyūj

While both Menaḥem and Dunash saw Hebrew
words as composed of root and servile let-
ters, neither articulated an understanding of
the triconsonantal nature of the Hebrew root.
This was first articulated by Judah Ḥayyūj
(c. 945–c. 1000)—a native of Fez who moved
to Cordoba in 960 and whose achievement in
this field represents a milestone in the develop-
ment of Hebrew grammar. In addition to his
three grammatical treatises, Ḥayyūj produced
a commentary on the Prophets informed by
his grammatical theories: the *Kitāb al-Nutaf*
'Book of Plucked Feathers' (critically edited
by N. Basal 2001). The work of Ḥayyūj and
his successors has been described by Maman
(2000), while Sarna (1971) has written on the
study of Hebrew and biblical exegesis in medi-
eval Spain.

## 4. Rashi

The foremost medieval Jewish biblical exe-
gete in Europe was רש"י Rashi (an acronym
formed from his title and name: Rabbi Šelomo
Yiṣḥaqi) of Troyes (1040–1105). Rashi wrote
commentaries on both the Hebrew Bible and
the Talmud. His commentary on the Hebrew
Bible—especially that part that deals with the
Torah—has achieved an almost canonical sta-
tus. Rashi is often presented as the founder of a
northern French school of biblical exegesis that
stressed the פשט *pešaṭ* or literal meaning of
the text—as opposed to its דרש *deraš* or homi-
letical meaning. Many studies of Rashi have
tended to focus on the presence of and relation-
ship between these two modes of exegesis.

Rashi did not read Arabic, so the works
of Ḥayyūj and his triliteral conception of the
Hebrew root were inaccessible to him. For
this reason, his grammatical views are some-
times dismissed as somewhat primitive. Despite
this, the linguistic dimension of his work has
not been neglected. Englander (1930–1943)
wrote a series of articles on this aspect of
Rashi's biblical exegesis, while the monograph
of Pereira-Mendoza (1940) presents a broad
survey of his grammatical interests. Avinery
(1979–1985) produced an encyclopedic sur-
vey of Rashi's grammatical and lexicographical
insights. Rabin (1974) has also written on the

nature of the Hebrew in which Rashi wrote his
commentaries. Grossman (1996) has presented
his extensive research on Rashi and his school
(research summarized in Grossman, 2000).

Another scholarly focus in the linguistic
dimension of Rashi's biblical exegesis is the
presence of a large number of (mainly) Old
French vernacular glosses written using the
Hebrew script (לעזים *le'azîm*; singular לעז
*la'az*). Some of the earliest research on these
glosses is that of Darmesteter (1907–1908).
Banitt has published extensively on this aspect
of Rashi's exegesis (see, especially, 1985 and
the bibliography therein).

More recently, Kearney (2010) has sought to
identify the extent and nature of the linguistic
dimension of Rashi's commentary on the Pen-
tateuch. Taking Deuteronomy as a representa-
tive book, he shows how some 25 percent of
Rashi's commentary is primarily linguistic in
its focus. This linguistic material can be further
analyzed in terms of its particular area of inter-
est. The overwhelming majority of Rashi's lin-
guistic comments were found to be of a lexical
nature (75 percent). Within this category, the
most represented were comments focusing on
the lexis of nominals (44 percent).

Rashi's comment on the lemma וּפְתַלְתֹּל *u-
pṯaltōl* 'perverse' (Deut. 32.5) offers a good
example of the nature of his linguistic meth-
odology. He begins his comment with a *la'az*,
glossing the lemma with the Old French
אנטורט"יליש *entortiliés* 'twisted'. Rashi then
explains the lemma in his own Hebrew: כפתיל
הזה שגודלין אותו ומקיפין אותו סביבות הגדיל *kap-
petil haz-ze šeg-godlin 'oto u-maqqiṗin 'oto
sebiḇot hag-gedil* 'like the thread which one
weaves and twists around the central strand'.
The focus of the comment then moves from the
semantic to the morphological, with Rashi not-
ing that the lemma has a reduplicated stem (it
belongs to a class of words he describes as התי־
בות הכפולות *hat-teḇot hak-keṗulot* 'the doubled
words'). He then offers four examples of words
with similarly reduplicated stems. Three of
these are Hebrew and biblical—יְרַקְרַק *yəraqraq*
'greenish' (Lev. 13.49); אֲדַמְדָּם *'ăḏamdām* 'red-
dish' (ibid.), and סְחַרְחַר *səḥarḥar* 'reel' (Ps.
38.11)—while a fourth is Aramaic—סגלגל
*segalgal* 'rounded', Targum Jonathan's render-
ing of עָגֹל *'āḡōl* (1 Kgs 7.23).

## 5. Ibn Ezra

Abraham ibn Ezra (1089–1164) left his native Spain in 1140 and spent the remaining years of his life travelling through the Jewish communities of the Christian West—going as far as England, where he may have died. Ibn Ezra's great significance lies in his transmission of the evolved grammatical theories of Ḥayyūj and his successors to the non-Arabophone Jews of Europe; indeed, he translated some of the latter's work into Hebrew. Ibn Ezra's many biblical commentaries (written in Hebrew) reflect a major focus on the *pešaṭ* of the text informed by a sophisticated grammatical consciousness. Simon (2000) outlines ibn Ezra's biblical exegesis, while his linguistic system has been described by Charlap (1999 and 2001).

## 6. David Qimḥi

David Qimḥi (c. 1160–c. 1235)—or the *Radaq* to use his acronymic cognomen—was a member of an illustrious family of rabbis and biblical exegetes (his father was Joseph and his brother was Moses). Harris (2009:155) views Qimḥi as the exegete who "synthesized the exegesis of the Spanish school, particularly as exemplified by Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra, and the French school, particularly as exemplified by Rashi". Qimḥi is especially renowned for his grammar of biblical Hebrew (the ספר מכלול *seper miklol* 'Book of Perfection') and his dictionary (the ספר השורשים *seper haš-šorašim* 'Book of Roots'). Both were to become standard references for both Jewish and Christian scholars. Talmage (1975) has written the definitive work on Qimḥi as an exegete, while Chomsky (1952) has translated the *Miklol* into English. Cohen (2000) surveyed the work of the Qimḥi family.

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