

RASHI'S COMMENTARY ON THE SONG OF MOSES: SOUNDINGS IN MEDIAEVAL JEWISH EXEGESIS

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This paper consists of four sections. Part one introduces the general topic: Rashi and his biblical commentaries. Part two touches upon some of the principal approaches to the study of Rashi's biblical exegesis, as well as stating my own interest in his work. Part three offers a brief survey of Rashi's life and intellectual background, while part four seeks to bring the commentary to life by examining what Rashi has to say about four texts from Deuteronomy 32, the so-called *Song of Moses*.

1. INTRODUCTION

The edifice of Rabbinic Judaism rests on two major textual foundations, the Pentateuch and the Talmud, or the "Written Torah" and the "Oral Torah" respectively. Both texts are central to Judaism, and their study and interpretation have long been the major focus of Jewish intellectual life.

The most famous Jewish commentator on both of these sources is Rashi. He is the Jewish commentator par excellence. His interpretations of the Pentateuch and Talmud are authoritative almost to the point of canonicity. His commentary on the Talmud is so linked to that document that it now appears on the page to the right of the central text, the *Mishnah* and the *Gemara*. This has been the case since the first Talmud was printed in the late fifteenth century.

Not surprisingly, Rashi's Bible commentary is equally esteemed. The first book published in the Hebrew language was not, as one might expect, a copy of the Pentateuch, but rather an edition of Rashi's commentary on that text. This was an edition printed in Rome circa 1470-72 and not, as is often reported, the Reggio di Calabria edition of 1475 (Roth 2003: 561). The *Miqra'ot Gedoloth*, or Rabbinic Bibles, have included Rashi's commentary on their pages since their first printings in Venice in the early sixteenth century.³⁸

The "Chumash with Rashi" became the text-book of the elementary stage of a traditional Jewish education. So closely linked are the Pentateuch and Rashi's commentary on it in the minds of those who have undergone such a traditional Jewish education that the lines between the two often blur. Baron (1958: 278) has described how:

Among many adults the words of Rashi and those of the Bible became so indistinguishably blended that, when citing from memory, they often were uncertain as to which they were quoting.

Knowledge of Rashi's Bible commentary became the basic measure of a Jew's culture. Waxman (1960: 193) has noted,

Not to have learned Rashi meant to the Jew during the centuries, even to the one of only a generation ago, a sign of degradation and one who was actually so unfortunate was considered beyond the pale of Jewish civilization . . . Thus, Rashi's [Bible] commentary became part and parcel of Jewish folk-life for centuries.

Rashi's Bible commentary remains central to traditional Judaism. In his introduction to the 1993 Artscroll *Chumash*, a bilingual edition of the Pentateuch that incorporates Targum Onqelos and Rashi's commentary, and which is representative of the Haredi strand of modern American Judaism, Rabbi Nosson Scherman (2000: xiv) writes:

The new translation in this volume attempts to render the text as our Sages understood it. Where there are differing interpretations,

³⁸ The *Šulḥan 'Arûk* of Joseph Qaro (1488-1575), in describing how the Sabbath Pentateuch portion must be read twice and its Targum once, notes that Rashi's commentary on the passage can stand in place of its Targum (Gruber 2004: 53, n. 84).

we follow *Rashi*, the 'Father of Commentators', because the study of *Chumash* has been synonymous with *Chumash-Rashi* for nine centuries. As *Rambam* says in his introduction, לִי מִשְׁפַּט הַבְּכֹרֶה, to him [*Rashi*] belongs the right of the firstborn.

In the nine hundred years since his death, *Rashi's* commentaries have been extensively studied, even engendering their own corpus of commentary: the super-commentaries, of which some two hundred have been composed. *Rashi* has accumulated an array of picturesque honorific titles: *Father of Commentators* (as seen above), *Master of Troyes*, *Prince of Commentators*, *Teacher of Israel*, *Leader of the Tribes of Judah*, *Parshan-Datha* and so on. However, it is only since the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, that nineteenth-century Renaissance of Jewish learning based in Germany, that the study of *Rashi* can be said to have entered the modern, critical era. *Zunz* (1794-1886) published a pioneering biography of *Rashi* in 1823, while *Berliner* (1833-1915) published the first critical edition of *Rashi's* commentary on the Pentateuch in 1866.

It is a testament to his colossal standing that a figure such as *Rashi* represents different things to different people. The scholars of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* saw in his work a critical spirit and rationalism that prefigured their own approach and endeavours, while traditionalists have seen in his reverence for the biblical text and his reluctance to emend it, support for their own opposition to modern critical study of the Hebrew Bible.

There is something for everybody, it would seem, in the study of *Rashi* and his works. Historians of the Jewish people, philologists of the Romance languages, students of scripture, historians of the medieval Church, to name but a few, have found ample reward for their efforts in engaging with *Rashi's* work.

Lehmann (1993: 437), who has published an edition of a fragmentary Yemenite manuscript of *Rashi's* commentary on the Pentateuch, recounts an anecdote that nicely illustrates two different approaches to the study of *Rashi* and the resulting tensions.

There was an interesting incident, about 150 years ago, when the Rabbinical Seminary in Breslau was founded and the news reached a very famous Rabbi, Rabbi Moshe Sofer . . . They told him about this new seminary where they were studying *Rashi*. He answered, "If you want to know what colour shoelaces *Rashi*

wore, you should go to that seminary, but if you want to know what Rashi really said, you have to come to the world of Yeshivos, to learn the text itself.”

2. A WELL-TRODDEN PATH?

Much of the previous research on Rashi's Bible commentaries has focused on his exegetical methodology. This research mainly revolves around the relationship between two interpretative approaches known as *peshat* and *derash*. The former term is frequently rendered into English as “plain-sense” or “literal”, the latter as “homiletical” or “midrashic”. There is little unanimity, however, among scholars over the precise meaning of these terms, or even their appropriateness for the study of Rashi's exegetical methodology. Nowhere, for instance, does Rashi use the actual word *peshat*, preferring instead the cognate (but distinct) פשוט (*peshut*).

In terms of Rashi's method, scholars have often quoted from his own comment on Genesis 3:8 where he provides what appears to be a statement of his methodological intent:

There are many haggadic midrashim (on this text וישמעו [“they heard”]) and our Rabbis have already arranged them in their proper setting, in *Bereshit Rabbah* and other midrashim. However, I am only concerned with the *peshut* of scripture and with haggadah that explain the words of scripture in a manner that fits in with them and its meaning.

This statement suggests a clear distinction between two exclusive approaches which is not borne out by the commentary itself. Indeed, Kamin (1980) has convincingly argued that Rashi does not clearly distinguish between these two types of interpretation. Rather this distinction was developed by his intellectual heirs, such as Rashbam. So, the statement quoted above is more of an aspiration than a description. In any case, the question of the relationship between *peshat* and *derash* remains one of the major issues in Jewish studies.

It is worth noting, however, that the significance of Rashi's biblical commentary does not lie solely in its enormous popularity. It also marks a new departure in Jewish biblical exegesis, namely, the transition from rabbinic to medieval exegesis. Grossman (2000) gives the title “The School of Literal Jewish Exegesis in Northern

France” to his recent survey of Rashi and his successors. But, it would be wrong to suggest that Rashi’s commentaries concern themselves solely with “literal” interpretation, since most of Rashi’s commentary, in fact, is composed of material drawn from the midrashic literature, quoted verbatim or closely paraphrased. As Grossman points out, Rashi is a pioneer of a literal biblical exegesis—an approach that only reaches its fullest expression in the work of his grandson Rashbam. Indeed Rashbam himself points out that his grandfather regretted not having more time in which to revise his Bible commentaries, incorporating even more *peshat* interpretations.

I should, at this stage, declare my own interest in the study of Rashi. My research has focused on the linguistic elements in Rashi’s commentary on the Pentateuch, specifically his commentary on Deuteronomy. Let me clarify what exactly I mean by linguistic elements. For my purposes, the linguistic elements of Rashi’s commentary are those elements that attempt to describe the language of the Hebrew Bible and its operations. So, I am interested in what Rashi has to say about the phonology of Hebrew, the morphology of Hebrew, the syntax of Hebrew, the lexicon of Hebrew and so forth. I am also interested in how he does this, and why he does this.

However, it is extremely important not to force modern expectations of linguistic investigation onto Rashi, since a minimal perusal of his work will reveal that he was not a linguist in the modern sense of the word. He does not describe or discuss language for its own sake, nor does he attempt to do so in a systematic fashion. Rashi is, if anything, a linguist *despite himself*. The description and analysis of language are, for him, simply part of the larger exegetical endeavour. This last statement might also be said of any of the mediaeval linguists of Biblical Hebrew; however, it is a question of degree.

While scriptural exegesis had a long continuous history among the Jews, linguistic investigation of Biblical Hebrew was still a relatively recent development in Rashi’s time. Although linguistic concerns are a feature of earlier Jewish literature (for example, the interest in etymology manifest in the explanation of the name Isaac in Gen 21:6), Hebrew linguistic literature proper is held to have come into its own in the early tenth century CE in the work of Sa’adyah bin Yūsuf (882-942), better known as Saadia Gaon.

Much of this early linguistic literature was written in Arabic by Arabic-speaking Jews. This made it inaccessible to Rashi who seems not to have known that language. So, for instance, he was unfamiliar with the work of Hayyuj, who died around 1000 CE, and who developed the theory of the tri-consonantal nature of Hebrew verbal roots. However, he did have access to the Hebrew language writings of Menahem ibn Saruq (died c. 970) and Dunash ibn Labrat (died 990), two pioneers of Hebrew linguistic literature active in Islamic Spain, during the tenth century. Rashi used both Menahem's *Mahberet* (מחברת) and Dunash's *Teshubot* (תשובות) in his commentaries, and cites them by name on several occasions.³⁹

This field, though, is not virgin territory. Scholars have examined linguistic elements in Rashi's Bible commentaries before. One could mention the work of Pereira-Mendoza and Englander to name but two of the most often cited authorities. My focus, however, is slightly different from theirs. Where they have attempted to present an overall synthesis of Rashi's grammatical knowledge or his understanding of particular grammatical issues (such as weak verbs), my research examines the linguistic elements in their own context: *in situ*—as they occur in the commentary on a particular book, Deuteronomy, and how they relate to the non-linguistic comments with which they are associated. For instance, why does Rashi choose one word or phrase upon which to comment while ignoring others? But before we examine some examples of Rashi's exegesis, let us turn briefly to look at his life and his intellectual background.

3. RASHI'S LIFE AND WORK

Since Zunz's pioneering work of 1823, there has been a steady flow of biographical studies of Rashi. As van der Heide has observed, "[a]lmost every generation of Jewish scholars tends to produce one or more general works on Rashi" (1984: 294). These works vary in both their emphasis and quality. Many rehearse the received pieties of past generations, and belong, ultimately, to the realm of hagiography.

³⁹ The story of the dispute between Menahem and Dunash—both of whom enjoyed the patronage of the Umayyad caliph of Cordoba's Jewish physician and minister Hisday Ibn Shaprut—is one of the most fascinating chapters in Jewish history, and worthy of a paper in its own right!

However, we begin this section on Rashi's life and work by quoting Liber's frank admission: "Little is known concerning the life of Rashi" (1911: 31). Mediaeval Jewish literature was largely impersonal in character. The disciples of the great sages left us little personal information about their masters: "regard for his teaching ranked above respect for the personality of the author" (ibid.). We rely, for what little biographical detail we do possess, on Rashi's *responsa* and the writings of his disciples and contemporaries in the first instance, and, to a lesser extent, on the commentaries themselves.

Given Rashi's exalted intellectual reputation and the paucity of sources for details of his life, it is unsurprising that a whole body of legend and myth has grown up around the man, since legend frequently fills the gaps left by history in the lives of major historical personages. The motifs that feature in these Rashi legends are not unlike those found in mediaeval Christian hagiography. The legends are extended to cover even the period before Rashi was born. One such legend has his father (who was probably called Isaac) find a precious pearl. He is offered vast sums of money for the gem by some Christians who wish to adorn their bishop's vestment with it. However, rather than permit the occurrence of such an eventuality, Isaac returns the pearl to the deep, thereby, in Liber's words, "sacrificing his fortune to his God" (1911: 39).

Another such legend finds Rashi's mother (at the time pregnant with her illustrious son) walking down a narrow street in Worms—the Rhineland city where Rashi would later study in adulthood. Two carriages, speeding in opposite directions, are about to collide. Fearing for the life of her unborn child, the woman (whose name entered neither the historical nor legendary record) pressed herself close against the wall which miraculously gave way and accommodated her. The legend adds that, fearing the probable accusation of witchcraft that would most likely follow such a miraculous event, Rashi's parents decided to flee Worms and move to Troyes where their son was born.

In another legend Godfrey of Bouillon, a leader of the First Crusade, consults Rashi on the possibility of success in his mission prior to his departure for the Holy Land. Further legends feature Rashi wandering throughout the Jewish world: Italy, Greece, Egypt, Palestine and Persia, to name but a few (Liber 1911: 69, 43).

These colourful narratives were often contemptuously dismissed by the early critical scholars such as Zunz. While they may not be of any real value for writing a life of Rashi, they are certainly useful for shedding light on the mentality of the society that shaped him and later revered him.

Despite the high store set on scholarship by mediaeval Jews, and their levels of literacy which were considered higher than those of their Christian neighbours, not every Jew was a scholar. Though many would have been aware of Rashi's exegetical work, they would not all have been capable of reading or studying this work. For these people, the myths and legends about Rashi and his life would have provided them with some access to the sage and given them some sort of ownership of their intellectual patrimony. Yassif (1993: 484) succinctly describes this phenomenon in his article on "Rashi Legends and Medieval Popular Culture".

Rashi's real contribution to Jewish scholarship—his books and commentaries—were intended for a thin layer of Jewish society of the Middle Ages: the scholars and students in the *yeshivot*. The importance of Rashi for the Jewish masses did not lie in his responsa and commentaries, but in the ways his image became exemplary, or in the form it brought light to their lives in the "darkness of the Middle Ages". These channels of influence were mainly the legends spread throughout the Jewish society of the time.

Let us return now to the facts, such as they are. Rashi is widely believed to have been born in Troyes in the year 1040 CE. The basis of this date is a sixteenth-century *responsum* by Rabbi Solomon ben Yehiel Luria (1510-71), who states that Rashi was born in the year that Rabbenu Gershom died. Gershom ben Judah is a seminal figure in the history of Ashkenazi Jewry: "one of the first great German talmudic scholars and a spiritual molder of German Jewry" (Eidelberg 1971: 511). Rabbenu Gershom also bears the title *me'or ha-golah* (מאור הגולה "Light of the Exile")—a title probably given to him by Rashi (ibid: 512). One of his most notable achievements was the founding of the *yeshiva* of Mainz, at which Rashi later studied.

An interesting allegorical interpretation of the text of Qoh 1:5—"the sun rises, but the sun sets"—reverses the order of the clauses to yield "the sun sets, but the sun rises", and interprets the setting sun

as Rabbenu Gershom, and the rising sun as Rashi (Shereshevsky 1982: 19). The message is clear: God will not leave his chosen people without leaders to guide them, even in exile. 'It is not surprising that tradition should seek to link two such great figures, but as we have seen, a far more tangible link in fact exists between the two sages: Rashi's period of study in the *yeshiva* founded by Rabbenu Gershom at Mainz, under two of his pupils, Jacob ben Yaqar and Isaac ben Judah.

Gruber (2004: 1-2), unlike most scholars who are content to repeat the 1040 CE birth-date, suggests that Rashi may have been born some twelve years earlier, in 1028 CE. He bases this on "more accurate documents" that indicate 1028 as the year of Gershom's death, as well as another historical source, the early sixteenth-century *Sefer ha-Yuhasin*, which states that Rashi lived for seventy-five years. Since almost everybody accepts 1105 CE as the year of Rashi's death, this would place his birth in 1030 CE, the two-year difference accounted for by a fondness for round numbers on the part of the author of the *Sefer ha-Yuhasin*.

Of Rashi's father we know little, save his name, Isaac, preserved as it is in his son's cognomen. It is also widely believed that Rashi's father was a scholar, and his son's first teacher. This, however, is based on a statement in the Talmud commentary, the authenticity of which has been questioned. Agus (1966: 216) sums up the state of our knowledge of Rashi's father thus: "[n]othing, however, is known of Rashi's father, who probably died while Rashi was still as child, and is therefore never mentioned by him". Slightly more is known of the distaff side of Rashi's family. His maternal uncle was Rabbi Simeon ben Isaac of Mainz (born c. 950 CE), also known as Simeon the Elder, a student of the aforementioned Rabbenu Gershom, and a celebrated liturgical poet or *payyetan*.

Troyes, the city of Rashi's birth, was the capital of the County of Champagne. During the eleventh century, the power of the French kings was essentially limited to the Île de France, lands known as the Royal Domain. So, the counts of Champagne were effectively independent princes, and the county became extremely prosperous:

The County of Champagne was a classic feudal principality of the high Middle Ages and among the most powerful of the realm. The counts . . . created a sophisticated and well-run government. Their farsighted economic policies led to the vigorous

development of both countryside and their castle towns and to the establishment of fairs that made Champagne the centre of international trade and finance.⁴⁰

Much has been written about all aspects of the Jewish communities of mediaeval France. One of the most noteworthy features of these communities is the degree of self-government they enjoyed. Even the smaller communities had both a rabbinical court to settle issues of Jewish law, and a community council of elders (קהל) headed by a *parnas* (פרנס) to take care of the community's secular needs.

The Jewish community of Troyes was known as an important one from the end of the tenth century. Its members made their living through money-lending, trade and agriculture—viticulture in particular, in which Rashi and his family are thought to have been involved. The Jews of Troyes prospered under the rule of the counts, but, following the incorporation of Champagne into the Capetian Royal Domains in the late thirteenth century, their situation deteriorated until their eventual expulsion from the city in 1306 by Philip IV.

That Troyes was not a major centre of Jewish education prior to Rashi's lifetime is clear from the fact that, following what is assumed to have been a typical Jewish elementary education and an early marriage, Rashi left the city to complete the advanced stages of his education in the Rhineland cities of Mainz and Worms. These cities, located in what was known then as Lotharingia, were the main centres of Ashkenazi Jewish higher learning, Mainz, as mentioned above, being the city where Rabbenu Gershom, the light of the exile, founded his *yeshiva*.

Little agreement exists among scholars over the sequence and duration of Rashi's sojourns in the Rhineland academies. Some place him first in Worms, then Mainz (Liber 1911: 45), while others favour a reverse sequence, Mainz then Worms (Shereshevsky 1982: 25-27). Marx, however, admits that "[w]e do not know when and at what age Rashi went to these academies, and how many years he studied at each" (1941: 15). This lack of agreement again points to the difficulty in constructing a precise life of Rashi. The key points are abundantly clear though. Rashi, seeking the best possible

⁴⁰ Evergates (1995: 190).

religious education went to the established centres of rabbinical learning where he studied under the greatest scholars of his day: Rabbi Jacob ben Yaqar, Rabbi Isaac ben Judah (both of whom had been pupils of Rabbenu Gershom) and Rabbi Isaac ben Eliezer ha-Levi.

Following his return to Troyes, Rashi began to attract his own circle of disciples. In the wake of the First Crusade (1096), and its destruction of the Jewish communities of the Rhineland, Rashi's *yeshiva* became even more important. Through his teaching, the whole vanished culture of the academies of Mainz and Worms was preserved.

Rashi had two or possibly three daughters: Jochebed and Miriam (and perhaps Rachel). The first two married prominent scholars, pupils of their father. Jochebed married Rabbi Meir ben Samuel, and among their four sons were Samuel (Rashbam c. 1085-1174) and Jacob (Rabbenu Tam c. 1100-71). Rachel married Rabbi Judah bar Nathan, and they had one son (Yom-Tob).

Baron (1941: 60) paints the following picture of Rashi's life following his return to Troyes,

We may envisage Solomon Yizḥaḳi as the owner of a vineyard, which he cultivated with the assistance of his family, spending most of his free time—vineyards may allow for a good deal of free time—teaching a few pupils, mostly members of his own family, discussing with them the fine points in Bible and Talmud and, perhaps with their assistance, compiling and revising his bulky commentaries. It is astounding with what vigor such a tiny community managed to pursue its independent intellectual career and to spread its cultural influence over a vast area of northern France and western Germany.

Although some doubt has recently been expressed over the picture of Rashi as a viticulturist (Gruber 2004), the second part of the statement of Baron just quoted still rings true—the extent of Rashi's influence relative to his background is astounding.

4. RASHI'S COMMENTARY ON THE SONG OF MOSES: SOME ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES

Before engaging with specific comments, it is worth saying

something about the general nature of the commentary. Rashi's commentaries are not exhaustive. He does not comment on every single verse. In fact, he rarely comments on a verse as a whole. Rather he selects elements from within a verse on which to comment. These units of biblical text (or lemmata) vary in length, ranging from those that consist of a single word to those that consist of phrases or even whole clauses.

Sometimes Rashi will select just one lemma from a verse upon which to comment, while at other times he will choose a number of lemmata. The comments that follow these lemmata are not entirely straightforward. We find very simple cases where a one-word lemma is followed by a comment that just explains that single word. However, another lemma might be followed by a comment that applies not just to it, but to the wider context from which it is drawn, be that phrase, clause, verse or even larger text units such as paragraph, chapter or book. Some verses elicit no comment whatsoever from him.

The type of comment varies widely. It is often difficult to discern why Rashi chooses one lemma rather than another for comment. Sometimes he will explain a point that seems abundantly clear to us today, while at others he will ignore what is, for us at least, a far more difficult one.

In terms of the book of Deuteronomy, Rashi comments on verses from every one of the book's thirty-four chapters. The average of verses per chapter on which Rashi comments is 70%. In only one chapter, 33, does every verse elicit comment from Rashi. The chapter with the least amount of comments is 8, where only four of the twenty verses contain lemmata selected by Rashi for comment.

In order to better understand the nature of Rashi's exegesis, we shall now examine four examples taken from his commentary on Deuteronomy 32, the so-called *Song of Moses*. Lemmata from four verses from the *Song* have been selected for a closer examination.

4.1 *Deuteronomy* 32:3

כִּי שֵׁם יְהוָה אֶקְרָא הִבּו גְדֹל לְאֵל הֵינוּ:

For I will proclaim the name of the LORD;
ascribe greatness to our God! (NRSV)

For the name of the LORD I proclaim;
Give glory to our God! (JPS)

Our first practical example comes from Deut 32:3. The sole lemma upon which Rashi comments in this verse consists of the first four words of the Hebrew text: כִּי שֵׁם יְהוָה אֶקְרָא. This is the first colon of a poetic verse.

Rashi's comment on this lemma begins with a strictly linguistic issue: the nature of the conjunction כִּי. Rashi does not understand this conjunction in its more frequent sense, as introducing a causal clause (for; because), rather he understands it as introducing a temporal clause (when). Rashi conveys this to us in very concise terms: "See [how] כִּי functions [here] with the sense of כַּאֲשֶׁר ("when")". The word he uses for "sense" is לְשׁוֹן. It is one of Rashi's most common technical terms which he uses with a wide range of meanings: "language", "form", "tense", "expression" to list but four.

Following his assertion of the temporal function of כִּי, Rashi gives a scriptural citation that contains this conjunction used in the same way. The text, which he introduces with the prepositional phrase כַּמוֹ "as" or "like", is כִּי תִבְאוּ אֶל הָאָרֶץ ("when you come into the land"), occurs at both Exodus 12:25 and Leviticus 23:10. So far, then, we have,

See [how] כִּי functions [here] with the sense of כַּאֲשֶׁר, as it does in [the text] כִּי תִבְאוּ אֶל הָאָרֶץ ("when you come into the land").

After his grammatical observation and supporting scriptural citation, Rashi goes on to offer a rendering of the whole verse. This rendering incorporates the original text, changing the wording in places and amplifying it in others: he reverses the word order of the first colon and adds the verb אֶזְכִּיר ("mention"). He prefixes the second colon of the verse הִבּוּ גְדֹל לְאֱלֹהֵינוּ with the second person masculine plural pronoun אַתֶּם in order to make clear that it is a second person plural imperative, and follows it with the phrase וּבְרַכּוּ שְׁמוֹ ("and bless his name"). So Rashi's rendering of the whole verse is: "When I proclaim and mention the name of the Lord,

ascribe ye greatness to our God, and bless His name” as against the text’s “For the name of the Lord I will proclaim, ascribe greatness to our God”.

Rashi’s understanding of the verse differs quite markedly from that of most modern commentators. While most of the latter group take the first colon of verse three as a causal clause that supplies an explanation for the volitional forms of verses 1 and 2, Rashi understands the verse as an independent unit.

The final section of Rashi’s comment refers to the verse as a whole, and tells how it is the scriptural support for a practice prescribed in the Talmud: a blessing uttered in the Temple must be responded to with a longer formula than the usual *amen*, namely ברוך שם כבוד מלכותו (“Blessed is the name of the glory of his Kingdom”). This prescription is to be found in the Babylonian Talmud at *Ta’anit* 16b and *Berakhot* 21a. This final part of the comment is drawn from *Sifre Deuteronomy* (§306), one of Rashi’s main midrashic sources in the commentary on Deuteronomy. It may be that this understanding of the verse as a liturgical prescription is behind Rashi’s interpretation of it.

In summary then, Rashi selects only one lemma from Deuteronomy 32:3 upon which to comment. This lemma is the first colon of the verse. The comment begins by stating that the conjunction כִּי is to be understood temporally and not causally, and a scriptural citation supporting this understanding is provided. In view of this, an expanded rendering of the verse follows. Rashi concludes the comment by stating that this is the verse that provides the scriptural support for a religious practice prescribed in the Talmud. It is worth noting that the comment on this lemma does not confine itself to the lemma alone; rather, it covers the whole verse.

4.2 Deuteronomy 32:15

וישמן ישרון ויבעט
 שמנת עבית בשות
 וימש אלוה עשהו
 וינבל צור ישעתו:

Jeshurun grew fat, and kicked.
 You grew fat, bloated and gorged!

He abandoned God who made him,
and scoffed at the Rock of his salvation. (NRSV)

So Jeshurun grew fat and kicked—
You grew fat and gross and coarse—
He forsook the God who made him
And spurned the Rock of his support. (JPS)

Our second example comes from Deut 32:15. Rashi selects three lemmata from this verse for comment. Two of these lemmata consist of single words: the verbs עבית and כשית, while the third lemma is a phrase: וינבל צור ישעתו. The second lemma, כשית has two comments, taken by some editors as a single comment. Our focus will be on these two comments.

The verb כשית (a second person masculine singular *qal* of root כשה) is a hapax, and Rashi, in his first comment, follows *Sifre Deuteronomy* in linking it to the verb כסה found in Job 15:27. This verb כסה (with ס, not שׁ) is a *pi'el* form that is taken to mean “to cover”. In the text from Job which Rashi quotes the verb is used to describe covering the face with fat. Rashi then expands upon this usage, quoting almost word for word from *Sifre Deuteronomy* (§318): “like somebody who is fat on the inside, his loins are folded over on the outside”. So, for Rashi, the verb means “you were covered”, *with fat* to be understood. From a linguistic point of view, in line with developments found even in late Biblical Hebrew, for Rashi שׁ is completely interchangeable with ס. For him, these two verbs are the same, even though historically they are distinct and unrelated.

In his second comment on this lemma, Rashi focuses on the conjugation or form of the verb. He notes that it is a *qal* form, as is the verbal form found in the text of Prov 12:16. Both these forms he understands as intransitive, meaning “to be covered”, since he continues by stating: “if [the verb] had been written כסית with *dagesh* it would have implied *you covered others* as in *he covered his face* [Job 15:27]”. So, for Rashi, the *qal* form of כסה is intransitive, while its *pi'el* form is transitive.

So, in his two comments on this lemma, Rashi begins by echoing one of his main sources *Sifre Deuteronomy*, in deriving a meaning

for the hapax כָּשִׂית by postulating a relationship between it and the verb כָּסָה found in Job 15:27. He then goes beyond *Sifre* by discussing the form of the lemma. He notes that it is a *qal* as opposed to a *pi'el*, giving it an intransitive as opposed to transitive force “you were covered [with fat]” as opposed to “you covered”.

4.3 Deuteronomy 32:20

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶסְתִּירָה פְּנֵי מֵהֶם
 אֲרֵאֵה מָה אַחֲרֵיהֶם
 כִּי דֹר תִּהְיֶה הַמָּה
 בָּנִים לֹא אֱמֶן בָּם:

He said: I will hide my face from them, I will see what their end will be; for they are a perverse generation, children in whom there is no faithfulness. (NRSV)

He said: I will hide my countenance from them,
 And see how they fare in the end.
 For they are a treacherous breed,
 Children with no loyalty in them. (JPS)

Our third example is from Deut 32:20. Rashi comments on four lemmata from this verse. Our focus here will be on what he has to say about the word אֱמֶן. His comment begins by quoting the text וַיְהִי אֱמֶן from Esth 2:7: “he was foster-father”. So Rashi sees our lemma as cognate with the word for a foster-father. As if to reinforce this understanding of the word, Rashi provides us with a *la'az*—a French language gloss, of which there are around 250 in his commentary on the Pentateuch. The *la'az* that Rashi provides is *noureture* which in Old French means “(good) upbringing”.

The comment continues by offering an alternative understanding of the lemma, אֱמֶן לְשׁוֹן אֱמוּנָה (“אֱמֶן means faithfulness”). Rashi backs up this alternative interpretation of the word by referring to *Targum Onqelos*’ rendering of the word as הִימְנוּ (“faith”). The grounds for this lack of faith are then given: a citation from Exod 24:7, where the Israelites, having listened to the Book of the Covenant, declare “we shall do and we shall obey”, yet make the golden calf a short time later, thereby breaking their promise. This final part of the comment, with its reference to Exod 24:7 and the

episode of the golden calf, is taken from *Sifre Deuteronomy* (§320).

This lemma is preceded by another, of which אמן is an element, namely, the phrase לא אמן בם. Rashi explains the whole phrase thus: “my rearing is not discernable in them, for I taught them a good way from which they turned”. This comment obviously supports Rashi's first explanation of אמן as “(good) upbringing” or *noureture* in Old French.

4.4 Deuteronomy 32:24

מזי רעב ולחמי רשף
וקטב מרירי ושן בחמות
אשלח בם עם חמת זחלי עפר:

wasting hunger, burning consumption, bitter pestilence.

The teeth of beasts I will send against them,
with venom of things crawling in the dust. (NRSV)

Wasting famine, ravaging plague,
Deadly pestilence, and fanged beasts
Will I let loose against them,
With venomous creepers in the dust. (JPS)

Our fourth and final example comes from Deut 32:24. Rashi selects seven lemmata from this verse for comment. Our focus here will be on his comment on the first lemma: the first two words of the verse מזי רעב.

The comment begins with a citation from *Targum Onqelos*: “Onqelos translated [this phrase] as *swollen from starvation* (נפיחין) (כפין)”. Rashi then makes one of his very rare explicit personal appearances in the commentary when he states of Onqelos' rendering: “but I have no evidence to support that”. This personal reference is also noteworthy since Rashi's diffidence rarely permits him to state his disagreement with established sources like Onqelos or the Midrashim.

Rashi continues his comment by offering an alternative to the targumic rendering: “In the name of Rabbi Moshe ha-Darshan of Toulouse I have heard [that the phrase] means ‘hairy through

hunger', [since] an emaciated person grows hair on their skin". Moshe ha-Darshan, or Moses the Preacher, as his Hebrew title is often inaccurately rendered, was the *Rosh Yeshiva* in Narbonne in the generation preceding Rashi, and one of the leading sages of Provençal Jewry.⁴¹ Rashi cites him elsewhere, in his comment on Deut 21:14 for instance, where his main work of biblical commentary is mentioned by name: the *Yesod*.

Rashi's second lemma from this verse consists of the word מַזִּי alone, though some editors take this comment as part of the first. Here, Moshe ha-Darshan's interpretation of מַזִּי as "hairy" is reinforced by invoking an Aramaic cognate: מַזִּי. "מַזִּי [can be understood as *hairy* since] the Aramaic word for *hair* is מַזִּי, [as in the text:] 'who was twirling his hair' [*Meg.* 18a]." So Rashi uses comparative philology to relate the lemma to an Aramaic word for hair, and gives a citation from the Babylonian Talmud that contains the word in question.

Ingenious as this derivation is, it belongs to the realm of pareymology, since despite their similarity, the two words are not historically cognate. This phenomenon, however, is a typical feature of Rashi's philological endeavours: ingenious, utilizing all that is available to him in terms of comparative data, but not yet in the realm of advanced, scientific philology.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is hoped that these few examples have conveyed something of the nature of Rashi's biblical commentary, particular its linguistic and philological dimensions. This part of Rashi's exegetical endeavour, as I hope I have demonstrated, is worthy of study in its own right for the insight it provides into eleventh-century Jewish conceptions of the Hebrew language, particularly among those Jews not in touch with linguistic writing on Hebrew in the Arabic language—and not just as part of the study of the development of *peshat* and *derash* interpretation.

But this is not the only reason to study Rashi. His work is also of interest in that it opens a window onto the life of his community.

⁴¹ מַזִּי would be better rendered in English as "interpreter" or "expounder".

Rashi's biblical commentaries provide us with a glimpse at the vitality and energy of mediaeval Jewish biblical exegesis. For Rashi and his contemporaries, these texts were not simply verbal artefacts providing opportunities for dry philological comment; rather they were the very life-blood of a faith community. The commentaries demonstrate to us again, how central the word of God was to mediaeval Judaism.

At the start of this paper, we mentioned the title *Parshan-Data* as one of Rashi's many honorifics. In the Bible, Parshandata is the name of the first of Haman's ten sons mentioned at Esth 9:6. This name is purely Old Persian and historically attested as such. Mediaeval Jews however, could read it as *Parshan* (commentator) and *data* (the Law), yielding *Commentator on the Law*, hence its suitability as an honorific title for Rashi. We shall now conclude by quoting from the poem, attributed to Ibn Ezra (1089-1164) entitled *Parshandata*.⁴²

A star arose from France [. . .]
 Through him there is light for every blind person . . .
 Through him every thirsty person
 drank honey from his sweet water.
 He provided for the Torah an awesome commentary
 Therefore, they named him Parshan Datha.
 His book provides answers to all who ask,
 and in all Israel it is the accepted solution.

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⁴² The Hebrew text and translation into English are those of Gruber (2004:121-23).

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