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Eric Lawee

Rashi's Commentary on the Torah: Canonization and Resistance in the Reception of a Jewish Classic

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Large swaths of medieval Jewish intellectual history can be captured by dichotomies embodied in specific people: the rationalism of Maimonides versus the mysticism of Naḥmanides, the French piety of Rashi versus the Andalusian sophistication of Ibn Ezra. Of course, things are never that simple, yet there is a benefit to this type of dichotomization. Eric Lawee's book on the Torah commentary of Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yiṣḥaḳi, 1040–1105) shows that, in the history of biblical interpretation, much of the medieval story revolves around one such dichotomy, with the caveat that two titans have teamed up against one: it is a clash between Rashi versus Ibn Ezra, with Maimonides squarely on Ibn Ezra's team. As Lawee writes late in the book, this posthumous encounter was a battle for the soul of Judaism.

Lawee's masterful book is really two works in one. The second is the more academically novel, but the first is both stunningly impressive and of greater interest to *RBL* readers. Let us begin with the second part, ostensibly the core contribution of the book. This is a detailed study of three texts from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in the eastern Mediterranean who are what Lawee calls "resisting readers" of Rashi. Lawee has devoted earlier studies to each of these figures,[1] but

1. See Eric Lawee, "'אֶפִּיגּוֹן נועז: ר' אלעזר אשכנזי בן ר' נתן הבבלי ופירושו לתורה 'צפנת פענח'," in *Studies in Jewish History Presented to Joseph Hacker*, ed. Yaron Ben-Naeh, Jeremy Cohen, Moshe Idel, and Yosef Kaplan (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2014), 170–86; Eric Lawee and Doron Forte, "'ספר השגות' על פירוש רש"י לתורה המיוחס

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combining them into one discussion, in English, allows for patterns to emerge and a bigger story to be told.

The first is the *Tzafenat Paʿneah* by Elazar Ashkenazi (ch. 4), who writes on one occasion that "all who hear" an interpretation of Rashi's "will laugh"—playing on Gen 21:6 and Rashi's last name. Lawee titles one of the sections of this chapter, "Rashi Criticism in a Maimonidean Key," which provides a key insight in the intellectual history: the eastern Mediterranean Jews had absorbed rationalist thought over the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and when seen in this light Rashi sometimes seemed absurdly naïve.

The second text studied (ch. 5) is one is an anonymous work that had formerly been little known, much less analyzed, until Lawee and a colleague published it from a Cambridge manuscript in 2018. The author falsely attributed his work to the famed stricturist Rabad (Rabbi Abraham ben David of Posquieres). Perhaps emboldened by his anonymity, he is cutting in his criticism of Rashi, especially of midrashic interpretations cited by Rashi. Pseudo-Rabad often blurs the line between criticizing Rashi and criticizing his rabbinic sources, so that there are passages in Pseudo-Rabad that are shocking in their disregard, even disrespect, toward the talmudic and midrashic rabbis.

The last resisting reader studied *in extenso* is Aaron Aboulrabi (Sicily, fifteenth century) (ch. 6). Aboulrabi is not primarily interested in criticizing Rashi but in assessing his work, so alongside striking statements of dismissiveness (labeling one interpretation "a *derash* of barbarians" and another one "a *derash* of a fool"), one also finds admiring comments about the commentary.

Chapter 7 of the book broadens the discussion, focusing on Rashi and Ibn Ezra as rivals "for Judaism's soul" in the late Middle Ages. Lawee tells this story by focusing on one more fifteenth-century book from (perhaps) Crete called the *ʿAlilot Devarim* and the slightly later supercommentary by Rabbi Elijah of Mizrahi of Constantinople. By the beginning of the sixteenth century, it was clear that Rashi had won the soul of Judaism. The subsequent history of Rashi's reception, sketched briefly by Lawee in the afterword, is yet to be written in detail.

As mentioned, it is the first part of the book that will be of primary interest to biblicists. Here also there are three chapters, but they tell a broader story. The introduction and first chapter offer a superb introduction to and overview of Rashi's commentary on the Torah, introducing us to the many questions that provoke the unceasing flow of scholarship focused on this work. Central issues are: (1) The textual history of the commentary, for which we have no autograph or even contemporary manuscript, but only divergent manuscript traditions beginning two generations after Rashi; (2) Rashi's method in selecting, arranging, and rejecting midrashim, and relatedly; (3) the goal of Rashi's commentary, whether *peshaṭ*, as is often said, or an anthology of midrashim, or

לראב"ד," *Ḳobez ʿAl Yad* 26 (2018), 77–34; Eric Lawee, "Aaron Aboulrabi: Maverick Exegete from Aragonese Sicily," *Hispania Judaica Bulletin* 9 (2012): 131–61.

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something else; (4) the reasons for Rashi's immediate and enduring appeal among readers; and, most theoretically, (5) the definition of a canonical work and whether Rashi's commentary qualifies. There is no comparably comprehensive and incisive overview of Rashi's commentary in English, so this chapter will henceforth be on the syllabus for my own course in medieval Jewish biblical interpretation.

The second chapter then tells the history of the reception of Rashi's commentary over the rest of the Middle Ages (1105–1527), in the great cultural centers of Al-Andalus, Christian Spain, and Provence. The year 1527 is the date of publication of Rabbi Elijah Mizrahi's supercommentary, and given its proximity to the expulsion of the Jews from the Iberian peninsula and the conventional end of the Middle Ages, it serves Lawee's purposes well as an end point to this history. The second half of the book spins out some of the themes of this chapter. Aboulrabi makes an appearance here (60), as do a dizzying cast of other characters; the discussion encompasses both familiar luminaries and minor figures who are little known. Detailed study of dozens of texts, plus attention to the material history of the book, allows Lawee to trace the dissemination of Rashi's commentary throughout western Europe. The work also admirably situates intellectual developments within social and cultural historical contexts. We watch as scholars throughout Europe and elsewhere debate Rashi's merits and struggle with perceived flaws and see the commentary emerge as an increasingly "canonical" companion to Scripture itself. By the thirteenth century, Jews were enjoined to fulfill the talmudic injunction to study the weekly Torah reading, "twice Scripture and once Targum," with Rashi in place of Targum.

One result of this was that, whatever his intentions, Rashi's selection of midrashim shaped Jewish education and consciousness forever. As Lawee indicates, midrashim that Rashi includes were guaranteed fame (but sometimes ignominy in place of fortune), whereas comparable midrashim not included by Rashi were doomed nearly to oblivion. The results are still visible in contemporary Jewish education, and a full study of these processes and their results would be illuminating.

Finally, chapter 3 zooms in on one aspect of this history: the tradition of supercommentaries. The classical period of Jewish biblical interpretation was roughly from the tenth through the thirteenth centuries, beginning with Saʿadia Gaon in the east, then Rashi in the northwest, and reaching a climax of sorts in the grand synthetic work of Naḥmanides. While new commentaries continued to be written after this time, there was also a turn toward supercommentaries, commentaries written on earlier commentaries, in particular commentaries on Rashi and Ibn Ezra. The number of supercommentaries on Ibn Ezra (studied by Uriel Simon) numbers in the dozens; the number of supercommentaries on Rashi numbers in the hundreds. Lawee has already been a pioneer in this field, both documenting and theorizing the medieval supercommentarial tradition, and the discussion here is both lucid and groundbreaking. As Lawee elsewhere notes, supercommentaries are known also within the history of qur'anic exegesis as well as in the medieval philosophical and mystical traditions. This chapter is, therefore, not only of interest to students of Rashi and medieval

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Jewish biblical interpretation but to anyone interested in medieval intellectual history more broadly.

Lawee seems to have read not only all the scholarship on Rashi and his reception but also on the various figures with whom Rashi's story intersects: Ibn Ezra, Maimonides, Naḥmanides, and the subsequent centuries of Jewish intellectual history, especially as reflected in biblical exegesis. The writing throughout is precise, elegant, and dense, befitting a book of impeccable scholarship and discerning analysis. The 124 pages of endnotes and 60 pages of bibliography also allow readers to follow up on the many dozens of topics broached and discussed by Lawee. In sum, this is a book that both makes original contributions to important fields and surveys broad swaths of larger areas of inquiry. It repays its readers at every turn.

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One final note: after a lull of a few decades, there has been an explosion of high-quality scholarship on Rashi in the past few years. (I mention here only books.) In the early 1990s, Avraham Grossman identified the manuscript (Leipzig 1) that is now seen as the best witness to Rashi's commentary and that opens a window onto his dynamic *bet midrash*. The recent boom was perhaps sparked by two books by Avraham Grossman, *Rashi* (Jerusalem: Shazar, 2006), originally in Hebrew and translated into English by Joel Linsider (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012), and *Religious Beliefs in the World of Rashi* (Alon Shvut: Tevunot, 2007). More recently there have been at least two thorough and insightful dissertations: Yedida Eisenstat, "Rashi's Midrashic Anthology: The Torah Commentary Re-examined" (Jewish Theological Seminary, 2014), and Ariel Shaveh, "Rashi's Hebrew Based on Selected Manuscripts of the Commentary on the Torah" [Hebrew] (Hebrew University, 2017). Now we have, besides Lawee, Mordechai Z. Cohen, *Rashi, Biblical Interpretation, and Latin Learning in Medieval Europe: A New Perspective on an Exegetical Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), and another book by Grossman, *Rashi and the Jewish-Christian Polemic* [Hebrew] (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2021).

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