

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

GREAT BIBLICAL COMMENTATORS
By Dr. Avigail Rock

Dedicated in memory of Gertrude and Samuel Spiegel z”l
by Michael and Patti Steinmetz

Lecture #7a:
Rashi, Part IV —
Rashi and Christianity

A. INTRODUCTION

Perfect Torah/ Of two millennia prior,
Beseech now the face of God/ For the unblemished dove.
Implore in supplication/ He Who dwells above
To show compassion to those who probe your depths/ At every moment
and time...

Approach in supplication/ The face of the ancient succor.
Garb yourself in black/ Like a woman widowed.
Avenge the oppression of your saints/ And the spilled blood of your
scholars
From the hands of the harlot’s children/ They who cut off your servants.
(“*Torah Temima*,” *Piyutei Rashi*).¹

In the previous lectures, we have seen that by way of Rashi’s commentary to the Torah, we may understand his character, values, and educational philosophy. In this lecture, we will deal with the comments and *midrashim* that Rashi brings not because of any interpretative need, nor because of their educational or moral significance, but rather because of their exigency for his generation, a generation living beneath the shield and the sword of the Christian faith. Rashi, as a communal leader and public figure, could not ignore the growing Christian propaganda emerging from Ashkenazic lands. As we have seen, sometimes Rashi is inclined to stray from the *peshat* in order to transmit a moral message which is important to him. Similarly, as we shall see in this lesson, Rashi sometimes strays from the *peshat* of the verses because of the

¹ See note 3.

need to contend with Christian claims against the Jews, out of his desire to strengthen the spirit of his nation.

The position which reads Rashi's explanations against the background of Jewish-Christian polemics was developed by a number of critics, led by the historian Y. Baer.²

In Rashi's time, literary polemics between Judaism and Christianity began, growing in parallel to the general development of Christian theology and scholasticism. Only in the middle of the 12th century did these polemics reach their climax; the beginning of this revolution belongs to the last chapter of Rashi's life. With this spiritual background, we may understand and explain a number of things that Rashi wrote in the last years of his life.

B. INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that Rashi, in his commentary to *Shir Ha-shirim*, is responding to the First Crusade (1096), also known as the "Decrees of Tatnu" (after the acronym for the Jewish year, 4856).³ Similarly, in his commentaries to a number of psalms⁴ and the Book of *Yeshayahu*, Rashi relates to the cruelty of the Christians,⁵ their claims against the nation of Israel, and the punishment that God is destined to bring upon them. For example, this is what Rashi writes in his introduction to *Shir Ha-shirim*:

² Y. Baer, "Rashi Ve-Hametzziut Ha-Historit shel Zemano," *Tarbitz* 20 (5709), pp. 320-332.

³ On November 27, 1095, in the Hebrew year 4856, Pope Urban II made a speech calling on the faithful to launch a Crusade to the Holy Land and reclaim it from the heretics (Muslims). This speech resounded throughout Europe and led to a mass movement eastward. In order to provide basic equipment and provisions for themselves, the Crusaders pillaged the lands they passed through; when they happened to encounter Jewish communities along the way, they raided and murdered them. Sometimes, the Jews were offered the opportunity to convert and thereby save their lives, but many Jews preferred to be killed to sanctify God's name, and there were even suicides among Jews during this period. On the basis of the events of Tatnu, a number of dirges were composed, dealing mostly with the slaughter of Jewish communities and the loss of *yeshivot* and Torah scholars. In the poem "*Torah Temima*," part of which was quoted at the beginning of the lesson, Rashi bemoans the loss of Torah scholars in his time during the Crusades.

⁴ See A. Grossman, "Peirush Rashi Li-Tehillim Ve-Ha-Pulmos Ha-Yehudi-Notzri," in D. Rafel (ed.), *Mechkarim Ba-Mikra U-Va-Chinukh Mugashim Le-Professor Moshe Ahrend* (Jerusalem, 5756), pp. 59-74.

⁵ In a number of places, Rashi identifies Esav and Edom with Rome (that is, the Romans). The Jews of Europe in the Middle Ages would identify Rome with Christianity and the (Roman) Catholic Church; therefore, prophecies in the Bible which speak about Esav and Edom were understood by them as relating to Christianity, as were the references of the Sages to Esav, Edom, or Rome. See G.D. Cohen, "Esau as Symbol in Early Medieval Thought," Alexander Altmann (ed.), *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies* (Cambridge, 1967). See also the course offered by the Open University of Israel, "[Bein Yehudim Le-Notzerim: Yehudim Ve-Notzerim Be-Ma'arav Europa ad Reishit Ha-Et Ha-Chadasha](#)," Prof. Ora Limor (1993-1997), Vol. I, pp. 9-15 in particular.

I say that Shlomo foresaw with divine intuition that Israel was destined to suffer a series of exiles and would lament, nostalgically recalling her former status as God's chosen beloved. She would say, "I will return to my first husband, for it was better with me than it is now" (*Hoshea* 2:9).

The children of Israel will recall His beneficence and the trespasses which they trespassed (*Vayikra* 26:40). Moreover, they would recall the goodness which He promised for the End of Days.

The prophets frequently liken the relationship between God and Israel to that of a loving husband angered by a straying wife, who has betrayed him. Shlomo composed *Shir Ha-shirim* in the form of that same allegory. It is a passionate dialogue between the husband, God, who still loves his exiled wife, Israel, and the veritable widow of a living husband (*Shemuel II* 20:3),⁶ who longs for her husband and seeks to endear herself to him once more, as she recalls her youthful love for him and admits her guilt. God too, is "afflicted by her affliction" (*Yeshayahu* 63:9), and He recalls the kindness of her youth, her beauty and her skillful deeds for which he loved her so. He proclaims that he has "not affiliated her capriciously" (*Eikha* 3:33), nor has she cast away permanently. For she is still His wife and He her husband, and He will yet return to her.

In other places in his commentary to *Shir Ha-shirim*, Rashi stresses the relevance for his time, and we will see a number of examples of this (noting in particular his use of the word "today").

Draw me, we will run after you; the king brought me to his chambers. We will rejoice and be glad in you. We will recall your love more fragrant than wine; they have loved you sincerely. (*Shir Ha-shirim* 1:4)

Rashi explains:

"The king brought me to his chambers" — And even today, to this very day, I still have joy and happiness that I clung to you.

"We will recall your love" — Even today, in living widowhood, I recall your early love more than any banquet of pleasure and joy.

Let us explain the words of Rashi. The verse begins with the past tense and switches into future tense. The congregation of Israel says that it has clung to God in the past ("the king brought me to his chambers") and even "today" (namely, in Rashi's time); despite the difficulties and sufferings of exile, it does not regret its relationship with God, but it is still happy to have chosen to cling to

⁶ This expression appears a number of times in Rashi's commentary on *Shir Ha-shirim*. This refers to an *aguna*, a woman whose husband is missing, who sits and waits for him to return and cannot marry anyone else. She is like a widow, because her husband is not with her, but he is still alive somewhere; thus, she is a widow not to the dead, but to the living. This is the position of the Jewish nation in exile — it still waits, like a living widow, for God to return to His people.

God. In the continuation, Rashi says that “even today, to this very day,” when the nation of Israel is found in a situation of living widowhood, it recalls God’s love.

In Rashi’s commentary to *Shir Ha-shirim*, one may also find a direct reference to the dedication of the nation of Israel.

Behold, you are fair, my beloved; behold, you are fair; your eyes are doves, from within your scarf; your hair is like a flock of goats that stream down from Mount Gilead. (4:1)

Rashi explains:

“Your eyes are doves” — Your hues and your appearance and your characteristics are like those of a dove, which clings to its mate, and when they slaughter it, it does not struggle but stretches forth its neck; so have you offered your shoulder to bear My yoke and My fear.⁷

This appears to be Rashi’s personal testimony about the dedication of his acquaintances, perhaps even his colleagues and classmates from the *yeshivot* of Worms and Mainz.

An additional element in Rashi’s commentary to *Shir Ha-shirim* is confronting the Christian claim that the low position of the Jews testifies to their rejection by God. Rashi claims that God remains with the nation of Israel in their exile:

“With me from Lebanon shall you come” (4:8) — And when you return from the exile, I will return with you, and also all the days of the exile, I will share your troubles. Therefore, he writes, “With Me from Lebanon you shall come.” When you are exiled from this Lebanon, you shall come with Me. It does not state: With Me **to** Lebanon you shall come, denoting that from the time of your departure from here until the time of your arrival here, I am with you wherever you go and wherever you come.

In his commentary to many verses in *Shir Ha-shirim*, we find direct references to the troubles of Rashi’s generation. In his commentary to *Shir Ha-shirim* 5:9, when the daughters of Jerusalem ask the female, “What is your beloved more than another beloved?” (in other words: what makes your beloved so unique, so precious that you still look for him), Rashi explains:

“What is your beloved more than another beloved?” — This is what the nations were asking Israel, “What is it about your God more than all the

⁷ A description of the nation of Israel like a dove appears also in Rashi’s dirge, cited at the beginning of this lecture.

other gods, that you allow yourselves to be burned and hanged because of Him?”

In a number of places in the Book of *Yeshayahu*, one may find in Rashi's commentaries direct references to the events of his era. The most distinct example is in Rashi's commentary to chapters 42-43. Similar to his comments to *Shir Ha-shirim*, we may find here evidence of Rashi's struggling with the events of his time. For example, Rashi appears to give chilling testimony regarding those killed to sanctify God's name in explaining verse 53:9: “And he gave his grave to the wicked and to the wealthy with his kinds of death.”

“And he gave his grave to the wicked” — He subjected himself to be buried according to anything the wicked of the nations would decree upon him, for they would penalize him with death and the burial of donkeys in the intestines of the dogs.

“To the wicked” — according to the will of the wicked, he was willing to be buried, and he would not deny the living God.⁸

Up to this point, we have seen a relationship to Christianity in Rashi's commentary to *Nevi'im* and *Ketuvim*. Can we find a similar trend in Rashi's comments on the Torah?

C. ANTI-CHRISTIAN TRENDS IN RASHI'S COMMENTARY ON THE TORAH⁹

Overt and Covert Debates with Christianity

It is unclear whether Rashi composed his commentary to the Torah before or after the Decrees of Tatnu, but even if the composition of Rashi's commentary to the Torah preceded the Crusade, we may still claim that there is occasion to find in his interpretations a Jewish response to Christian claims.¹⁰ Sometimes,

⁸ Additional examples will be cited below.

⁹ A. Grossman, “*Pulmos Dati U-Megamma Chinukhit Be-Feirushei Rashi La-Torah*,” in *Pirkei Nechama — Sefer Zikaron Li-Nechama Leibowitz* (Jerusalem, 5761), pp. 187-205, brings a number of examples of anti-Christian tendencies in Rashi's commentary on the Torah. We will also bring a number of examples of this, and some of them overlap with Grossman's examples.

¹⁰ For the most part, we deal in these lectures with Rashi's commentary on the Torah, but in the framework of this chapter, which deals with the debate with Christianity, we must note the words of Rashi to *Yeshayahu* 53:4: “Indeed, he bore our illnesses; and our pains, he carried them. Yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted.” According to the claim of Christianity, this verse is a prophecy about Jesus, about his suffering and dying for the sins of Israel. Rashi, in his commentary to this verse, explains this in the exactly opposite way:

“Indeed, he bore our illnesses” — ...But now we see that this came to him not because of his low state, but that he was chastised with pains so that all the nations be atoned for with Israel's suffering. The illness that should rightfully have come upon us, he bore.

Rashi does this in an overt, obvious way, as for example when he uses the term *minim*, sectarians. (This term precedes Rashi, and it appears in the literature of the Sages in describing the heretics of their time; Rashi, however, uses this term to describe the claims of the Christians of his time.) However, sometimes the reference is not explicit, and it is important to stress that when Rashi does not explicitly address Christian claims, it is hard to prove that we are indeed talking about a polemical position. At the same time, the use of certain arguments, the absence of the interpretative need for choosing a certain *midrash* from among a number of possible *midrashim*, as well as the particular working of a *midrash* can certainly support our approach.

Monotheism

A. In *Bereishit* 1:26, discussing the creation of man, the Torah states, “And God said, ‘Let us make man.’” The plural language “us” is used by the Christians to prove their Doctrine of the Trinity. Therefore, Rashi cites the words of the *midrash*:

“Let us make man” — Even though [the angels] did not assist Him in His creation, and there is an opportunity for the sectarians to rebel,¹¹ Scripture did not hesitate to teach proper conduct and the trait of humility, that the greater person should consult with and receive permission from the lesser. Had it been written, “I shall make man,” we would not have learned that He was speaking with His tribunal, but to Himself. And the response to the sectarians is written alongside it (v. 27): “And God created;” it does not say: And they created.

One of the bases of the Christian faith is belief in the Trinity, that God is composed of three entities: God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Ghost). Here, Rashi sets out explicitly against the Doctrine of the Trinity, and he adds that even though this could be misconstrued, God still chooses a potentially

“Yet we accounted him” — We thought that he was hated by the Omnipresent, but it was not so; he was pained because of our transgressions and crushed because of our iniquities.

In other words, the low status of the nation of Israel is not testimony to the fact that he is hated by God; rather, he is low because he suffers the sins of the nations of the world. Rashi continues this idea in the next verse as well: “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him:”

“The punishment that brought us peace was upon him” — The punishment, which was for the sake of the peace enjoyed, came upon him, for he was punished so that there would be peace for the entire world.

Thus, Rashi devises an innovative interpretation of this verse, and he maintains the opposite of the claims of the Christians. Jesus did not bear suffering because of the sins of Israel; it is rather the nation of Israel which bears suffering because of the sins of the nations of the world. There is no doubt that this is one of the places most remarkable for tendentious anti-Christian exegesis in Rashi’s commentaries on the Torah.

¹¹ That is, to defeat Israel in a debate (see *Midrash Sekhel Tov*, *Vayikra* 1:2).

misleading term in order to transmit an important message: “That the greater person should consult with and receive permission from the lesser.”

B. The verse which literally reads, “Hear, Israel: Lord our God, Lord one” (*Devarim* 6:4) may be most simply explained in the following way: “Hear, Israel: Lord, Who is our God, He is one.” Indeed, this is R. Saadia Gaon’s interpretation. This oneness can be explained as meaning that He alone is our God (and thus He alone should be worshipped), as the Rashbam and ibn Ezra explain.¹² However, Rashi reworks the *Sifrei* to craft the following interpretation:

“The Lord is our God; the Lord is one” — God, who is now our God and not the God of the other nations, will be [declared] in the future “the one God,” as it is said: “For then I will convert the peoples to a pure language, that all of them call in the name of God [and to serve him as one]” (*Tzefanya* 3:9), and it is [also] said: “On that day will God be one and His name one” (*Zekharya* 14:9).

Now, let us examine the original in the *Sifrei* (32), and let us note the alterations that Rashi introduces:

“Lord is our God” in this world; “Lord is one” in the World to Come. Thus it is written: “God will be king over the entire land; on that day will God be one and His name one.”

It appears that the simple meaning of the terminology of the *Sifrei* is that “Lord is one” comes to include the World to Come; the oneness of God is equated to this world, for the oneness of God is immutable in both.

Rashi, on the other hand, stresses that there is a universal unity that is lacking in this world, as the nations of the earth fail to recognize and embrace God’s kingship and oneness in this world, in his time. In order to support the idea of the people of the world coming to recognize God’s kingship and oneness, Rashi enlists the verse from *Tzefanya*.

An additional change that Rashi makes in relation to the *Sifrei* is that instead of speaking of “this world,” Rashi talks about “**now**,” a term that stresses the relevance of the reading for his era, his audience, his readers. It is clear that this interpretation does not arise from the *peshat*, as there is nothing to indicate that “Lord is one” is meant to be in the future. Therefore, we may definitely see this comment as a tendentious interpretation, which comes to strengthen the members of his generation with the determination that in the future, even the nations of the world will recognize God’s oneness and accept the yoke of His kingship.

¹² Naturally, Rashi never saw these commentaries, but these interpretations arise from the *peshat* of the verses.

Translated by R. Yoseif Bloch