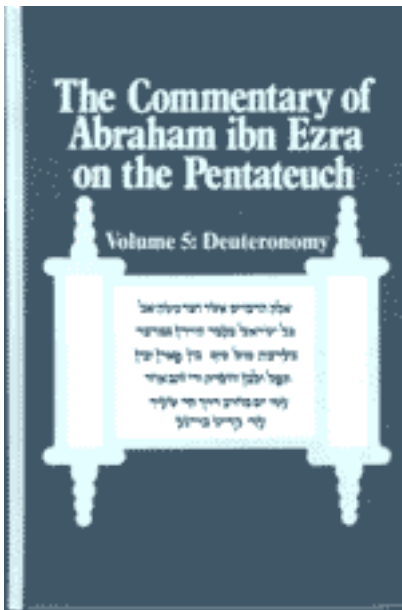


RBL 07/2004



Jay F. Shachter, trans.

The Commentary of Abraham Ibn Ezra on the Pentateuch: Volume 5: Deuteronomy

Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav, 2003. Pp. iv + 204. Hardcover.
\$35.00. ISBN 0881257451.

Mayer I. Gruber
Ben-Gurion University of the Negev
Beersheva 84105 Israel

Abraham the son of Meir Ibn Ezra was one of the most influential figures in the history of biblical exegesis, biblical criticism, and the study of Biblical Hebrew grammar. In addition, Abraham Ibn Ezra wrote important works on astronomy and mathematics. Abraham Ibn Ezra was also a major Hebrew poet. His liturgical poetry continues to be sung in synagogues and Jewish homes to this day. Born in Tudela, Spain, in 1089, Ibn Ezra fathered five sons. Only one of them, Isaac, survived to adulthood. It is widely held that Isaac's conversion to Islam prompted Abraham b. Meir Ibn Ezra to set out from Spain to Rome in 1140.

In the time of Ibn Ezra it was customary for Jews in Spain and other Arabic-speaking lands to write poetry in Biblical Hebrew but to write scientific and exegetical works in Middle Arabic. However, when Jews whose native language was Arabic wrote prose works while living in Christian countries such as France, England, and Germany, they composed these works in Rabbinic Hebrew. Thus, when Ibn Ezra began writing biblical commentaries in 1140 in Rome, he, like his French contemporaries, Rashbam and Rabbenu Tam, composed these exegetical works in Rabbinic Hebrew.

When scribes prepared for the wealthy manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible together with the canonical Aramaic translation of the Torah known as *Targum Onqelos* and the canonical

Aramaic translation of the Early and Later Prophets known as *Targum Jonathan* and a selection of privileged Hebrew commentaries, they often including both Rashi (1040–1105) and Ibn Ezra. For example, the illuminated Hebrew manuscript of the Pentateuch and the Early Prophets found in the Laurentian Library at Florence, Italy, and known as Pluteus II, Codex 1, was written at Ferrara in 1396 by Salomon son of Hasdai for Benjamin son of Menahem of Corinaldo. Interestingly, this manuscript includes the commentary of Ibn Ezra in square Hebrew characters and the commentary of Rashi in so-called Rashi letters. Consequently, it may be an exaggeration to say that the association of Rashi with the so-called Rashi script came about because the 1475 Reggio di Calabria printing of Rashi's Pentateuch commentary employed the so-called Rashi script.

Such manuscripts may have inspired the Roman Catholic merchant Daniel Bomberg of Antwerp to print at Venice for a reading public that included both Jews engaged in an act of holy obligation called “study of Torah” (functional equivalent of Protestant “Bible study”) and Christian clergy and biblical scholars the first (1517–18) and second (1521–24) Rabbinic Bibles containing the pointed text of the Hebrew Bible, the Aramaic Targums, and a selection of Hebrew biblical commentaries, including those composed by Rashi and Ibn Ezra. The result was that the biblical commentaries of Abraham Ibn Ezra became part of the canon of Jewish devotional literature now called “the Jewish bookcase” and the canon of Christian Hebraism in the period of the Reformation. To this day it is taken for granted that a biblical commentator writing for standard commentary series such as the International Critical Commentary and the Anchor Bible will preface her or his remarks on the authorship or provenance of a given book of Hebrew Scripture and the exegesis of a difficult word or phrase by citing, *inter alia*, Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Radaq (= Rabbi David Qimhi [ca. 1160–1235]).

It was Abraham Ibn Ezra through his translations from Arabic into Hebrew of the three treatises on Biblical Hebrew grammar by Judah b. David Hayyuj (ca. 945–1000) of Fez, produced at Rome between 1140 and 1145, that brought to Jewish and Christian scholars in Italy, France, and Germany the now-accepted view according to which the so-called weak verbs derive from trilateral rather than biliteral roots (the view of Menahem Ibn Saruq, Dansh Ibn Labrat, and Rashi).

It is universally recognized that Benedict Spinoza (1632–77) was the father of modern biblical criticism. If so, the grandfathers of modern biblical criticism were the Muslim theologian Ibn Hazm of Granada (994–1064),¹ whom Spinoza does not cite by name, and Abraham Ibn Ezra, whom Spinoza specifically cites as his source of inspiration. In fact,

1. See R. David Freedman, “The Father of Modern Biblical Scholarship,” *JANES* 19 (1987): 31–38.

Ibn Ezra's remarks at Gen 12:6; Exod 6:3; and especially Deut. 1:1 inspired two Orthodox Jewish pentateuchal critics centuries before Spinoza.

The first of these medieval Bible critics was Judah the Pious (d. 1217), whose commentary on the Pentateuch was published by Isaac S. Lange at Jerusalem in 1975. The second of these critics was R. Joseph b. Eliezer Bonfils (fl. 1370), who composed a brilliant supercommentary on Ibn Ezra's Pentateuch commentary called *Zophnat Paneach* "Uncovering the Hidden" (title based upon a Hebrew etymology of the title Pharaoh bestowed upon Joseph in Gen 41:45). The latter work was published in two volumes at Heidelberg between 1911 and 1930. Three important desiderata of contemporary biblical studies are (1) an annotated translation into a European language of the Torah commentary of Judah the Pious; (2) an annotated translation of *Zophnat Paneach*; and (3) fully annotated translations of Ibn Ezra's biblical commentaries. Of special interest to biblical scholars, clergy, and university and seminary students of the Bible is Ibn Ezra's shorter commentary on Deuteronomy produced at Lucca in Northern Italy in 1145. In his commentary at Deut 1:1 (in Shachter's felicitous translation) Ibn Ezra writes as follows: "If you can grasp the mystery behind the following problematic passages . . . you will then understand the truth" (1–2)

Shachter sets apart from the rest of Ibn Ezra's long comment on Deut 1:1 by indentation the list of the five problematic passages. In addition, Shachter assigns each of the problematic passages a number and adds in brackets the biblical source to which Ibn Ezra alludes. Shachter's rendering reads as follows:

- (1) The final twelve verses of this book [i.e., Deuteronomy; clarification by reviewer]
- (2) "Mosheh wrote . . ." [31:22]
- (3) "At that time the Canaanites dwelt in the land" [Genesis 12:6]
- (4) ". . . In the mountain of GOD, He will appear" [Genesis 22:14]
- (5) "behold his bed is a bed of iron. . ." [3:11].

Shachter does not indicate that his supplying of consecutive numbers for each of the cruces does not appear in any of the available editions of Ibn Ezra's commentary on Deuteronomy. Moreover, Shachter neither examines nor supports nor refutes the view of Joseph b. Eliezer Bonfils and modern critical scholarship that Ibn Ezra has here adumbrated the critical view according to which the Pentateuch contains post-Mosaic additions. Rabbi Judah the Pious and R. Joseph b. Eliezer Bonfils held that it was legitimate for post-Mosaic prophets to add to the text of the Torah so long as they did not add or delete any of the God-given laws (see Deut. 13:1). Modern critical biblical scholars, on the other hand, utilized Ibn Ezra's demonstration of non-Mosaic additions to

the Pentateuch to argue that the Pentateuch was largely devoid of both Mosaic and divine authority.

Obviously, a major desideratum of contemporary biblical scholarship is a fully annotated translation of Ibn Ezra's Pentateuch commentary that will shed light on the debate concerning the authorship and provenance of the Pentateuch, which is at the epicenter of modern biblical studies. Unlike Martin I. Lockshin's translations and supercommentaries on Rashbam's Pentateuch commentary, my own translation and supercommentary on Rashi's commentary on Psalms, and Dirk U. Rottzoll's annotated translation of Ibn Ezra's long commentary on Exodus,² Shachter's translation includes a minimum number of annotations and no attempt to place Ibn Ezra in dialogue with the entire history of biblical exegesis. Consequently, Shachter's rendering of Ibn Ezra's commentary on Deuteronomy should be equally acceptable both for a traditional Jewish reading public for whom Ibn Ezra is part of the canon of "traditional Jewish commentaries" and those for whom Ibn Ezra is one of the grandparents of pentateuchal criticism.

A major innovation of Shachter's translation is his yeoman attempt to provide a totally new translation into contemporary English of the entire book of Deuteronomy. In so doing Shachter walks us through, as it were, albeit in English, the book of Deuteronomy as it was understood by Abraham Ibn Ezra at Lucca in 1145 before Ibn Ezra applied inked quill to vellum. The commentary of Ibn Ezra translated into felicitous prose is presented, as in the so-called Rabbinic Bible, in the form of notes below the text. Shachter's translation places each lemma in bold type, and he clarifies his translations of equivocal words and phrases by providing in brackets a transliteration of the Hebrew term or phrase.

Interestingly, in both his translation of Deuteronomy and in his translation of Ibn Ezra's commentary, Shachter provides a combination of the standard English names of biblical persons and places familiar from the King James Version (Jacob, Esau, Zered; see, e.g., Deut 2:13 [9]), transliterations that reflect the pronunciation in Modern Israel Hebrew (Horev with dot under the H to indicate Hebrew chet rather than the familiar Horeb; Deut 1:2 [2]; Moshe rather than Moses at Deut 1:1 [1 and passim]); and scientific translations replete with diacritics, inverted letters, and the conventional scholarly symbols for *aleph* and *ayin*. Following Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–78), Shachter consistently renders

2. Martin I. Lockshin, *Rabbi Samuel ben Meir's Commentary on Genesis* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Mellen, 1989); idem, *Rabbi Samuel ben Meir's Commentary on Exodus* (BJS 310; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997); idem, *Rashbam's Commentary on Leviticus and Numbers: An Annotated Translation* (BJS 330; Providence, R.I.: Brown University, 2001); Mayer I. Gruber, *Rashi's Commentary on Psalms*, (Brill Reference Library of Judaism 18; Leiden: Brill, 2004); Dirk Rottzoll, *Ibn Esras Langer Kommentar zum Buch Exodus* (Studia Judaica 17; 2 vols.; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2000).

the Tetragrammaton as GOD rather than as LORD, as in most English translations (the common rendering reflects, of course, the Qere Adonay; LXX *kyrios*; Vulgate *dominus*).

Readers of all religious persuasions and critical and anticritical stances will welcome an edition of Ibn Ezra's Torah commentary that provides in parentheses the sources of every biblical quotation and allusion, the talmudic sources to which Ibn Ezra refers or alludes (e.g., at Deut 22:21 [103]; Deut 33 [173]), and the identification of Ibn Ezra's cross-references to his other biblical commentaries. Typical of this last feature of Shachter's translation are the following. At Deut 1:6 Ibn Ezra writes, "as I have explained." Shachter adds, "(comment on Exodus 17:9)" (2–3). Similarly, at Deut 31:29, where Ibn Ezra writes "as I have previously indicated," Shachter adds: "(comment on Exodus 5:16)" (153). At Deut 21:15 Ibn Ezra alludes to his commentary on 2 Kgs 2:9. Here Shachter provides both the biblical reference and the following brief annotation: "no copy of this commentary is known—Translator." In addition, Shachter adds in brackets (e.g., at Deut 26:5 [121]) comparisons with Ibn Ezra's commentaries, which Ibn Ezra himself did not provide.

In addition, when Ibn Ezra cites two or more opinions and then presents his own exegesis (as at Deut 21:9 [94]; 21:15 [97]; 32:1 [153]) Shachter gives prominence to the debate by indenting this portion of the commentary and treating each successive opinion as a block quotation.

Shachter's successful rendering into fluent, idiomatic English of Ibn Ezra's laconic commentary is a major contribution to the body of translations of ancient and medieval biblical exegetes into modern European languages. This book is highly recommended for biblical and Judaic scholars; public, university, seminary, and synagogue libraries; and synagogue, Jewish-center, and home-study groups. However, this reviewer adds two caveats.

One of the major purposes of a translation of a work of medieval Hebrew exegesis into a modern language is to facilitate readers who may have some knowledge of Biblical Hebrew as well as Modern Hebrew and even ancient Rabbinic Hebrew to access the varieties of idiosyncratic Medieval Rabbinic Hebrew employed by the classic Hebrew exegetes. In order to achieve this goal, the translator must translate the text found in one or another of the available editions: the problematic but readily available *Mikraot Gedolot* or Rabbinic Bible; the somewhat less problematic edition of Ibn Ezra's Torah commentary produced by Asher Weiser (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1977); or the edition called *Mehoqqeke Yehudah* prepared and supplied with a supercommentary by Yehudah L. Krinsky (Pietrov, 1910)—or supply the reader with an alternative Hebrew text based on one or more good manuscripts or early printed editions. Shachter's brief

introduction in the form of “Acknowledgments” at the bottom of the dedication page indicates that Shachter made use of *Mehoqqeke Yehudah* and that he briefly had access to the Weiser edition. However, a perusal of the translation indicates that the unidentified Hebrew text translated by Shachter corresponds to none of the published editions of Ibn Ezra’s commentary on Deuteronomy. Hopefully, in a revised edition Shachter will uncover the mysterious identity of the Hebrew text that served as the basis for his translation.

No less disturbing is the assertion on the back cover of the volume here reviewed that “This recent English translation of Abraham Ibn Ezra’s commentary on Deuteronomy is the only known translation into any language of any portion of Ibn Ezra’s Pentateuchal commentaries.” Moreover, the publisher concludes the description of the volume with the following: “The remaining four volumes of the translation are expected to appear over the next several years.” It is simply irresponsible for Ktav to assert that Shachter’s translation of Abraham Ibn Ezra’s commentary on Deuteronomy is the only known translation into any language of Ibn Ezra’s pentateuchal commentaries. First, Ktav released already in 1986 in the identical format Jay F. Shachter’s translation of Abraham Ibn Ezra’s commentary on Leviticus. Second, H. Norman Strickman and Arthur M. Silver produced between 1988 and 1999 under the imprint of Menorah Publishing of New York English translations of the commentaries by Abraham Ibn Ezra on Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Third, in the interim Walter de Gruyter of Berlin published in 2000 the two-volume *Abraham Ibn Esras Langer Kommentar zum Buch Exodus* by Dirk U. Rottzoll.

It should be taken for granted that the piety of Jay F. Shachter, which leads him to apologize on pages ii–iii for receiving material benefit from the sale of a book of Torah lore, precludes the possibility that he was aware that Ktav would provide his 2003 translation of Ibn Ezra on Deuteronomy with a blurb that asserts that this volume rather than Shachter’s 1986 translation of Ibn Ezra on Leviticus was the first translation into a modern language of Ibn Ezra’s commentary on the Pentateuch. Indeed, Shachter’s Leviticus volume appeared two years before the first of the four volumes produced by Strickman and Silver and fourteen years before the extensively annotated translation produced by Rottzoll. There is a lesson to be learned: series editors, publishers, and authors should check over most carefully the blurbs inscribed on the books they edit, publish, and write lest they led credence to the charge that they have been at least negligent if not willfully dishonest.

Hopefully, this problem, which is dwarfed in comparison to the immensity of Shachter’s contribution to our understanding of Ibn Ezra’s commentary on Deuteronomy, will be corrected in subsequent printings of Shachter’s important translation of that commentary.

Shachter's translation of Ibn Ezra's commentary on Deuteronomy is considerably enhanced by two appendices. The first appendix (183), entitled "astronomical units," explains, *inter alia*, how many days and seconds are contained in a mean Jewish year. The second appendix (184), entitled "weights and measures," provides the average metric equivalent of basic weights and measures mentioned in Hebrew Scripture and discussed in the commentary. Finally, Shachter provides indices of all texts from Hebrew Scripture cited in the commentary (185–201) and all references to *Mishnah Abot* and the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds cited in the commentary (203–4).