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Rashbam's Commentary on Leviticus and Numbers: An Annotated Translation

Translated by Martin I. Lockshin

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Martin I. Lockshin is Associate Professor in the Department of Languages, Literature and Linguistics and Director of the Centre for Jewish Studies at York University in Toronto. In 1990 Lockshin received the Canadian Jewish Congress Book Prize for the best Canadian book in Rabbinics/biblical scholarship for his *Rabbi Samuel ben Meir's Commentary on Genesis: An Annotated Translation* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989). The latter volume was a revision of Lockshin's 1983 Brandeis University dissertation supervised by Nahum M. Sarna, for which Lockshin was awarded the Ph.D. in 1984. In 1998 Lockshin received another Canadian Jewish Congress Book Prize for the best Canadian book in Rabbinics/biblical scholarship for his *Rabbi Samuel ben Meir's Commentary on Exodus: An Annotated Translation*, Brown Judaic studies 310 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997). Having established himself as one of a small number of experts on Rabbi Samuel son of Meir, Lockshin devoted a lengthy study, "Rashbam on Job: A Reconsideration," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 8 (2001), 80-104 to challenging the arguments of Sara Japhet, *The Commentary of Rabbi Samuel Ben Meir (Rashbam) On the Book of Job* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2000) to the effect that she had, in fact, identified Rashbam's commentary on Job in New York, Jewish Theological Seminary Ms. L778.

Rabbi Samuel b. Meir was born either at Troyes or Ramerupt in Northern France or possibly at Worms between 1080 and 1083, and died some time after 1158.¹ It is likely that he was the eldest of the three or four sons son of Jochebed the daughter of Rashi [i.e., Rabbi Solomon Isaaki, 1040-1105] and her husband Meir son of Samuel. The

¹Sara Japhet and Robert B. Salters, *The Commentry of R. Samuel ben Meir Rashbam on Qoheleth* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1985), pp. 11-12.

biblical commentaries written by or attributed to Rabbi Samuel b. Meir, commonly known by his acronym RaSHBaM, have held a special fascination in modern Jewish confessional biblical scholarship. The reason for this fascination is as follows: Both Rabbi Samuel b. Meir and his near contemporaries and modern Jewish confessional exegetes have sought to engage simultaneously in two seemingly mutually exclusive enterprises. The first of these, exemplified by Rashbam's Commentary on the Pentateuch, is the recovery of the original philological and contextual meaning of biblical texts even when such an allegedly correct interpretation of Hebrew Scripture would seem to undermine Rabbinic *halakhah*. The second enterprise, exemplified by Rashbam's virtually canonical commentary on most of Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Bava Batra and on the tenth chapter of Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Pesahim, is the cultivation and elucidation of Rabbinic Literature perceived as constituting alongside of Hebrew Scripture the second of the two pillars of the Torah revealed to Moses.

Life has been complicated for modern Jewish confessional exegetes because the commentary written by Rabbi Samuel b. Meir's famous grandfather, Rashi, came to be accepted as virtually canonical throughout the Jewish world by the end of the Middle Ages. In fact, the codes of *halakhah* or Jewish law—*Arba'ah Turim* (Four Columns) by Jacob b. Asher (d. 1340) of Toledo and *Shulhan Aruk* (The Set Table) by Joseph Caro (b. Toledo 1488, d. Saphed 1575)—both declared in division Orah Hayyim ('Daily Life'), Chapter 285 that a Jew may fulfill the obligation to read twice each Sabbath the weekly portion of the Pentateuch in Hebrew and once the rendering of that portion in the official (believed to have been divinely inspired) Aramaic translation (*Targum*) by substituting Rashi's Hebrew commentary for the Aramaic translation. It is not surprising, therefore, that notwithstanding the many vicissitudes that befell the Jews and their holy books, more than 300 medieval mss. written in places as diverse as Morocco in the West and Iran in the East, Germany in the North and Yemen in the South survived into the 20th and 21st centuries.² While Rashi's biblical commentaries, especially on Psalms and Isaiah, frequently suggest that scientifically based philology supports Judaism's claim that it, rather than Christianity, is the legitimate spiritual heir of Hebrew Scripture, Rashi's biblical commentaries also suggest that there is only one way to interpret the legal texts of Exodus to Deuteronomy, namely, the exegesis given those texts in Rabbinic midrash. Nevertheless, other famous medieval Hebrew exegetes--the most well known are Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1164) and Rabbi Moses ben Nahman [acronymn Ramban] (1135-1204)-- shared Rabbi Samuel b. Meir's tendency to offer interpretations of legal texts of the Pentateuch, which might seem to undermine the accepted *halakhah* and suggest that misbehavior might be "biblically correct."

Because Rashi's Pentateuch Commentary was seen as closely wedded to Scripture as are, in the famous 1950's song immortalized by the voice of Perry Como, love to marriage and horse to carriage, it was included in the majority of Jewish Scriptural publications including Moses Mendelssohn's *Netivot ha-Shalom* (1783), which offered

²See D. S. Blondheim, "Liste des manuscrits des commentaries bibliques de Raschi," *REJ* 91 (1931), pp. 71-101; 151-171.

the Jewish reading public the Hebrew text of the Pentateuch and the Massoretic notes, a modern commentary in Hebrew, and a modern translation into standard literary German printed in Hebrew characters. Similarly, Rashi's Commentary on the Pentateuch was included along with the modern one by Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, Joseph Hermann Hertz (1872-1946) in the Hebrew edition of the latter's famous Pentateuch Commentary.³ Likewise, the Modern Hebrew Commentary on all of Hebrew Scripture by S. L. Gordon (1865-1933), which was for several generations the standard commentary in homes and schools in the State of Israel, included on each page a selection from Rashi's Commentary.

Rabbi Samuel b. Meir (hereinafter Rashbam) provides the license to operate for Jewish confessional biblical scholars, who believe 1) that there can be no contradiction between the ways of God and the truth; and 2) that uncovering the original meaning of a biblical text is no less "Jewish" than uncovering the original meaning or original manuscript reading of what Rashi said about a biblical text. In fact, Rashbam in his commentary on Gen. 37:1, invokes the authority of Judaism's master exegete, Rashi, in support of the work of innovative Jewish confessional biblical exegetes:

Similarly, Rabbi Solomon, my mother's father, who illumined the eyes of all the diaspora, who wrote commentaries on the Torah, Prophets and Hagiographa, set out to explain the plain meaning of Scripture. However, I, Samuel son of his son-in-law, Meir—may the memory of the righteous be for a blessing—[often] disputed [his interpretations] with him face to face. He admitted to me that, if only he had had the time, he would have written new [revised] commentaries, based on the insights into the plain meaning of Scripture that are newly thought of day by day.⁴

By virtue of this recollection, which every Jewish confessional biblical scholar hopes is not an instance of false-memory syndrome on the part of Rashbam, Jewish confessional biblical scholars who seek to uncover or recover the true and original meaning of Scripture, can argue that their license to do so derives from Rashi, whom the Jewish law codes had invested with canonical status. Consequently, by syllogistic logic, Jewish confessional philological biblical scholars argue that their very profession has been invested by the *halakhah* itself with canonical authority.

While Rashi's commentaries survived in hundreds of medieval mss. and inspired hundreds of supercommentaries, Rashbam's Commentary on the Pentateuch survived in only one handwritten copy. The commentary first appeared in print only in 1705 in an edition from the press of Daniel Ernst Jablonski at Berlin of the Pentateuch with Targum Onkelos, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and the Commentaries of Rashi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra,

³ See J.H. Hertz, *The Pentateuch* (Jerusalem: Ahvah Vereut, 1942) [in Hebrew].

⁴Lockshin, *Rabbi Samuel ben Meir's Commentary on Genesis*, pp. 241-242.

Jacob b. Asher and the Commentary of Rabbi David Kimhi on the Prophetic readings (*haftarot*) that accompany each of the weekly portions of the Torah-lection.⁵

For a time the single surviving medieval ms. of Rashbam's Commentary on the Pentateuch was owned by the seminal Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786), whose *Netivot ha-Shalom* was one of the first modern works of Scriptural exegesis to make extensive use of Rashbam's Commentary. Notwithstanding the fact that Mendelssohn's *Netivot ha-Shalom* is not one of the mainstays of modern biblical scholarship, Lockshin's presents on almost every page of *Rashbam's Commentary on Leviticus and Numbers* dialogues between 1) Mendelssohn and Rashbam; 2) Wessely and Rashbam; and 3) *Be'ur* and Rashbam. This phenomenon is to be accounted for in two ways. First, it was Mendelssohn and his collaborators on the Hebrew commentaries—called *Be'ur*—contained in *Netivot ha-Shalom*—the poet Naphtali Herz Wessely (1725-1805), Naphtali Herz Homberg (1749-1841), Aron Jaroslaw, and Solomon Dubno—who first brought Rashbam's brilliant exegesis of the Pentateuch to the attention of a large audience. Second, Martin Lockshin is a devoted disciple of the grande dame of Israeli Bible teachers, Nehama Leibowitz (1905-1997). Her unique canon of biblical exegesis included a whole range of medieval Hebrew exegetes as well as Moses Mendelssohn's *Be'ur*, the commentaries of a 20th century Reform rabbi named Benno Jacob, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Martin Buber. Consequently, it is obvious for Lockshin that placing Rashbam in dialogue with the total history of biblical exegesis must include constant attention to the treatment of Rashbam's suggestions by Mendelssohn and his co-workers.

Before being acquired by Jablonski, who produced the first printed edition of Rashbam's Commentary on the Pentateuch, the manuscript was briefly owned by David Oppenheim (1664-1736), most of whose collection is now found in the Oriental Section of the Bodleian Library at Oxford University, a veritable Mecca for students of medieval Jewish texts. In what later turned out to be a tragic turn of events, at the end of the eighteenth century the manuscript was acquired by the Fraenckel family, which endowed the Jewish Theological Seminary at Breslow in German-occupied Poland (now Wroclaw in restored independent Poland). Consequently, while many of the mss. and printed books of the former Jewish Theological Seminary at Breslow are now housed in the Jewish Historical Institute at Warsaw, the manuscript of Rashbam's Commentary on the Pentateuch, which is the basis of all printed editions of the commentary, is one of the many mss. from that collection which disappeared when the Breslau seminary was pillaged by the Nazis.⁶ Hopefully, the ms. was not destroyed but was rather appropriated for safe keeping by some person, whose heirs, *Deo volente*, will one day make it available both for collation of the text and codicological analysis.

⁵See David Rosin, *R. Samuel b. Meir asl Schrifterklärer*, Jahresbericht des jüdisch-theologischen Seminars "Fraenckel'scher Stiftung (Breslau: F. W. Junger, 1880), p. 30.

⁶See D.S. Loewinger and B. D. Weinryb, *Catalogue of the Hebrew Manuscripts in the Library of the Juedisch-Theologisches Seminar in Breslau* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1965), p. viii.

In Lockshin's *Rashbam's Commentary on Leviticus and Numbers* each lemma is printed in unpointed Hebrew, making it easy to check the annotated translation against the standard edition of Rashbam's Commentary on the Torah, ed. David Rosin (Breslau: Schottlander, 1882). The Hebrew is followed by the translation of the lemma, printed in capitals, in turn followed by Lockshin's rendering of Rashbam's commentary on Leviticus and Numbers into fluent standard English. The fascinating supercommentary, twice as long as Rashbam's terse commentary and presented in the form of footnotes to the translation, explains lucidly and in great detail the reasoning behind both 1) Rashi's and ancient Rabbinic exegesis with which Rashbam often differs; and 2) the reasoning which compels Rashbam and modern critical exegetes such as Erhard S. Gerstenberger, R. K. Harrison, Baruch Levine, Jacob Licht, Jacob Milgrom, and Martin Noth, among many others whom Lockshin cites on every page, to reject Rashi's interpretation. Going beyond the critical editions of and supercommentaries on Rashi, Lockshin not only identifies but also analyzes the Rabbinic sources which Rashi quotes or summarizes. Lockshin's analysis of Rashi continually sets the stage for Lockshin's explaining why Rashbam must reject his revered grandfather's exegesis. Again and again Lockshin calls his readers' attention to the instances where Rashbam was the first to advocate a particular interpretation, which is now almost taken for granted in biblical scholarship. In addition, Lockshin constantly compares Rashbam's interpretations to those of his Christian contemporary, Andrew of St. Victor (1110-1175)

Typical of the fascinating dialogue, which Lockshin recreates between Rashi and the ancient Rabbis on the one hand and Rashbam on the other, is the discussion on p. 13 with reference to Lev. 1:1, "He called to Moses, and the LORD spoke to Moses from the Tent of Meeting to say," concerning the apparently redundant Hebrew infinitive *lemor* 'to say' at the end of numerous narrative sentences in Hebrew Scripture. Lockshin proves that Rashbam holds that the infinitive is redundant. If so, perhaps the best English translation would be colon or comma followed by quotation marks. Lockshin explains (p. 13, n. 11), "Rashbam objects to the common rabbinic explanation that the word *lemor* means that the person being spoken to was asked to pass the message on to someone else." Lockshin pejoratively labels the latter interpretation advocated by Rashi as "midrashic". Interestingly, Galia Hatav, "(Free) Direct Discourse in Biblical Hebrew," *Hebrew Studies* 41 (2000), 7-30 suggests that Rashi and Rashbam are both wrong, for "the finite form *wayyomer* marks quotation. . . [while] the infinitival [*sic*] *lemor* marks quasi direct-discourse" (see there, p. 30).

Characteristic of Lockshin's creative analysis of Rashbam's brilliant originality is his demonstration of Rashbam's adaptation of the *halakhic* principle of "a general statement followed by details followed by a summary general statement" to serve as the functional equivalent of *inclusio* in the analysis of the biblical narrative of Dathan and Abiram in Num. 16:12-14 (p. 231).

If it seemed that Rashbam's lucid commentaries, written in a language which closely resembles modern newspaper Hebrew, are simple and straightforward, Lockshin's meticulous analysis uncovers multiple layers of thought that underlie almost every line of Rashbam. After studying Lockshin's *Rashbam's Commentary on Leviticus and Numbers*,

I would no longer dare read or discuss Rashbam's Torah Commentary without checking Lockshin's supercommentaries.

Lockshin's *Rashbam's Commentary on Leviticus and Numbers* belongs in every private and public library of biblical and/or Judaic studies. It should be included in the syllabi of courses in medieval Hebrew biblical exegesis in colleges, seminaries and universities. It should be a *sine qua non* for anyone who would like to understand or interpret the immensely difficult but highly rewarding biblical books of Leviticus and Numbers.