



Jonathan Kearney, Rashi—Linguist Despite Himself: A Study of the Linguistic Dimension of Rabbi Solomon Yishaqi's Commentary on Deuteronomy

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KEARNEY, JONATHAN. *Rashi—Linguist Despite Himself: A Study of the Linguistic Dimension of Rabbi Solomon Yishaqi's Commentary on Deuteronomy*. Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies. New York: T&T Clark, 2010. 210 pp. \$110.00 (cloth).

Jonathan Kearney examines the linguistic elements of the Bible commentary of Rashi, undoubtedly one of the most important medieval Jewish exegetes. Inasmuch as Rashi's biblical commentary has earned him undeniable primacy as an exegete, a close analysis of his work in English is sure to arouse interest. The book is organized well, presenting its arguments coherently and systematically. The first part of the book reviews the body of scholarly evaluations of Rashi's life and works, while the second part analyzes the linguistic aspects of his commentary on Deuteronomy. To buttress his conclusion that Rashi was not primarily a linguist, in three chapters Kearney offers careful and specific analysis of Rashi's comments: chapter 4 painstakingly analyzes the commentary on one verse, Deut. 32:2; chapter 5 examines the linguistic aspects of the commentary on one chapter, Deuteronomy 32; and chapter 6 considers linguistic aspects in the commentary on all of Deuteronomy.

Kearney's overarching question (and the title of his dissertation, which differs only slightly from this book) "Is Rashi a linguist?" (181) is somewhat disingenuous, inasmuch as Rashi's fame has never rested on his linguistic insights, albeit there are many such scattered throughout his commentary. At the beginning of his work, Kearney presents a somewhat one-sided characterization of prior scholarship on the linguistic question, where he says, "Rashi is so often cited as an exegete with an interest in linguistics, without detailed examples" (7). He does present a more balanced summary of the prior scholarly views on Rashi's linguistics at the end of his study: "The linguistic dimension of Rashi's biblical exegesis . . . has often been dismissed as somehow primitive. . . . On the other hand, the hagiographic tendencies of some scholars have prompted them to overplay the linguistic dimension of Rashi's commentary" (183). Based on this latter characterization, which appears to be accepted almost universally as the more accurate, the question of whether Rashi was a linguist is less compelling.

In the opening half of the book, Kearney's lengthy review of scholarship on Rashi renders a tremendous service to those previously unfamiliar with scholarship about Rashi. However, this part of the book overlooks seminal works in Hebrew on Rashi's oeuvre, in general, and on the question of linguistics in his commentary, in particular. Kearney is apparently unaware or for some reason uninterested in Hebrew works on the topic, such as Simcha Kogut's *Ha-Miqra Bein Tahbir le-Parshanut* (Jerusalem, 2002) and Aharon Mirsky's analysis of Rashi's use of the *Mahberet* of Menahem (*Sinai* 100 [1986/87]: 579–86). Since scholarship in Hebrew on both biblical exegesis and Hebrew linguistics is often the most cutting edge, inclusion of this material would have greatly enriched Kearney's study. Moreover, his discussion of many issues that are irrelevant to the detailed analysis that he presents in the second part of the book, such as the year of Rashi's birth and the number of his children, leads to the conclusion that he is writing for either a non-Hebrew-speaking scholarly audience or possibly even a moderately knowledgeable lay audience.

The second part of the book is by far the more valuable from a scholarly point of view. In it, Kearney displays a thorough understanding of linguistic nuances and demonstrates meticulously his grasp of Rashi's analysis. In a most innovative and useful approach, he suggests categorizing Rashi's comments as

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either “linguistic” or “literary” rather than as *peshat* (plain sense) or *derash* (homiletical, noncontextual). Kearney notes the drawbacks of employing the usual *peshat/derash* dichotomy (it is “limiting” [72], the relationship between *peshat/derash* is a “fraught question” [7]), yet he also admits to misgivings about his own approach, claiming, “Rashi himself . . . would doubtless find such a taxonomy of his writing alien, if not repugnant” (72).

Kearney’s new distinction might indeed hold promise for evaluating biblical commentaries in a fresh light. Unfortunately, he fails to cultivate fully this new approach. In a too short chapter 4, he expertly examines the linguistic elements in the commentary side by side with the literary elements, which permits his assessment of the linguistic elements “*in situ*” (7). Certainly, his chapter 4 offers an exciting and competent model for future scholarly application. However, in the later chapters he virtually abandons this approach, assessing linguistic elements almost exclusively. His sally into the uncharted waters of a novel approach is regrettably brief.

Chapter 4 would also be eye-opening for an uninitiated student of religion or Judaism, as it gives a coherent, systematic methodology for probing the structure of one of Judaism’s central commentaries on the Bible. Kearney not only shows how Rashi incorporated and adapted his sources but also, just as important, he opens up a window to the complex decision-making processes Rashi needed to employ. Kearney’s analysis in chapters 5 and 6 provides less detail but is useful nonetheless. Chapters 4 and 5 are certainly important for one interested in commentary traditions on Deuteronomy 32, the famous Song of Moses.

While this book is eminently readable, the lack of a general index is a serious omission. Furthermore, in his analysis, Kearney sometimes makes obscure references. He refers to discussions in primary sources without including them, which can leave the reader floundering (e.g., on 83–84, where even with n. 36 the reader would have a hard time understanding Kearney’s reference to Rabbi Nehemiah and Rabbi Yehudah). In chapters 5 and 6 he only rarely provides the actual text of Rashi’s commentary and its translation, which makes it difficult to follow his reasoning in these chapters. Another puzzling stylistic feature is that in the body of the text he refers back to a discussion that appeared previously only in footnotes (e.g., p. 18 refers to p. 3 n. 3), and repeatedly makes references to his own earlier and later discussions (e.g., p. 47), a characteristic sign of a dissertation that is inappropriate here. The inclusion of a factual error such as the confusion between Moses ibn Ezra and Abraham ibn Ezra (104 n. 1) is somewhat disconcerting.

In sum, as an introduction to appreciating Rashi’s oeuvre and as a fresh look at the question of its linguistic contribution, this book is an excellent study. Kearney is to be commended for making this material available to the English-speaking public.

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HAUS, JEFFREY. *Challenges of Equality: Judaism, State, and Education in Nineteenth-Century France*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009. 240 pp. \$49.95 (cloth).

In *Challenges of Equality*, Jeffrey Haus explores a century of Jewish parochial education subsidized by the French government. The book begins with 1808, when the Central Jewish Consistory of France—the official body charged with