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Mordechai Z. Cohen

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MORDECHAI Z. COHEN

Elazar Touitou. *Exegesis in Perpetual Motion: Studies in the Pentateuchal Commentary of Rabbi Samuel ben Meir* [Hebrew]. Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2003. Pp. 283.

OVER THE PAST QUARTER CENTURY, Elazar Touitou has substantially enhanced our understanding of the hermeneutics of Rabbi Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam; c. 1080–1160), one of the greatest proponents of the *peshat* method in the Jewish tradition of biblical interpretation. Touitou's writing have opened bold new directions in evaluating Rashbam within the context of Jewish learning and his surrounding Christian intellectual milieu. His many studies, augmented by new ones, have been brought together here by the author in an integrated and updated form that reflects the changing landscape of modern research of the northern French *peshat* school founded by Rashbam's grandfather, Rashi (1040–1105). While the form and substance of the original essays dominate this book, Touitou also addresses new matters raised by scholars of biblical interpretation such as G. Dahan, S. Japhet, M. Lockshin, A. Mondschein, R. Salters, and M. Sokolow, as well as historians such as A. Grossman and I. M. Ta-Shma, thereby creating an academic dialogue that paints a multifaceted intellectual portrait of Rashbam enriched by a variety of perspectives. The result is an insightful analysis of this great French exegete and his role in developing the *peshat* method, making *Exegesis in Perpetual Motion* required reading for anyone interested in Jewish biblical interpretation in its cultural context.

The primary challenge for a reader of Rashbam—like other northern French *peshat* exegetes—stems from his lack of clear statements of interpretive theory and principles, which has contributed to the mystification of the very definition of *peshat*, rendered variously as Scripture's "literal

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meaning,” “plain meaning,” “original meaning,” “contextual meaning,” and more.¹ A second, related challenge is to account for the origins of the French *pesbat* method, which emerged suddenly as a departure from the older type of rabbinic exegesis. After its seemingly spontaneous generation in Rashi’s work, this new mode of reading appears as a full-blown exegetical system in the writings of his two great students, Joseph Kara (c. 1050–1130) and Rashbam. *Exegesis in Perpetual Motion*, divided into three major sections, illuminates these issues with sensitivity to their historical and cultural implications. Section one is a dedicated, three-chapter study of the origins of the northern French *pesbat* method. Section two describes Rashbam’s relation to his predecessors: his complex attitude toward rabbinic exegesis (chapter 4) and debt to Rashi (chapter 5). Section three, the largest part of the book, with seven chapters, analyzes Rashbam’s *pesbat* method itself as applied in his Pentateuch commentary. After discussing the problematic state of the text of this commentary (chapter 6), Touitou pieces together Rashbam’s hermeneutical theory based on his sporadic statements regarding the relation between *pesbat* and midrash (chapter 7). The author then defines Rashbam’s interpretive methods as reflected in his analysis of the Pentateuch’s literary structure (chapter 8), its narratives (chapter 9), and halakhic sections (chapter 10). The final two chapters contain additional glosses by Rashbam on selected biblical verses: from the Pentateuch, heretofore unpublished, culled from the margins of an early Rashi manuscript (chapter 11), and from the Prophets and Writings, appearing as citations in the medieval work *‘Aru-gat ha-Bosem* (chapter 12). The two appendices address related subjects: traces of Rashbam in the printed text of Rashi’s Pentateuch commentary; and a contemporary evaluation of Rashbam’s idiosyncratic *pesbat* readings in light of Nehama Leibowitz’s critiques. The bibliography is current² and the indices are helpful, as is the list of Touitou’s earlier studies incorporated in the current book.

1. By now it would seem to be settled that *pesbat* cannot be defined simply as a literal reading of Scripture. (And yet, some scholars continue to render *pesbat* “the literal sense,” evidently for lack of an obvious and suitable English alternative; see, e.g., below, n. 4.) On the complexities of defining the notion of *pesbat*, see Sarah Kamin, *Rashi’s Exegetical Categorization in Respect to the Distinction between Pesha and Deraash* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1986), 11–22; Stephen Garfinkel, “Clearing *Pesbat* and *Deraash*,” in *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: The History of its Interpretation* (henceforth: *HBOT*), ed. M. Sæbø (Göttingen, 2000), I/2:131; see also below, n. 15.

2. Touitou chose to give a list of references rather than a comprehensive bibliography, though his studies are wide-ranging enough that even this format covers most of the relevant material. Two important studies could be added: Robert Harris, “The Literary Hermeneutic of R. Eliezer of Beaugency” (Ph.D. disserta-

ORIGINS OF THE NORTHERN FRENCH *PESHAT* METHOD

In what is arguably his most ground-breaking study, “Shitato ha-pars-hanit shel Rashbam ‘al reka’ ha-metsi’ut ha-historit shel zeman” (which I translate as “Rashbam’s Exegetical Method in the Context of the Historical Reality of His Time”), published in 1982, Touitou advanced a new perspective on the origins of the northern French *peshat* method. Building on earlier scholars who had argued that increased debates with Christians motivated a Jewish reading of Scripture defensible on linguistic and literary grounds, Touitou posits more broadly that the *peshat* movement was powered by the currents of the so-called twelfth-century renaissance in northern France that produced a broad revival of Latin learning in language, science, and history. A new confidence in human reason (*ratio*)—which vied with Church authority (*auctoritas*)—sparked interest among twelfth-century Christian scholars, especially in the Parisian school of St. Victor, in the literal-historical sense of Scripture, aside from the spiritual senses hallowed by Church tradition. Even if Rashi and his students did not read the Latin scholarship of their day, the many striking parallels between their work and the Christian exposition of Scripture’s *sensus literalis* suggest that a common cultural outlook—perhaps exchanged through debates or casual conversations between neighbors over their shared sacred texts—played a critical role in the development of the two movements.³

Touitou’s seminal study, which has been well received in the academic

tion, Jewish Theological Seminary, 1997), which addresses the literary aspects of Rashbam’s exegesis, and Yaakov Thompson, “The Commentary of Samuel Ben Meir on Song of Songs” (DHL dissertation, Jewish Theological Seminary, 1988), which discusses the authenticity of that commentary through a stylistic and methodological comparison with Rashbam’s other known works. (Touitou mentions this work in a footnote on p. 80, but it does not appear in the bibliography.) Although these are both dissertations, by now they have achieved prominence through citation in the scholarly literature; see, e.g., Sara Japhet, *The Commentary of Rabbi Samuel Ben Meir (Rashbam) on the Book of Job* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 2000), 10, n. 6, 161, n. 7, 167, n. 27.

3. Touitou (pp. 37–39) addresses the ways in which Rashi and his students would have learned how their Christian neighbors interpreted Scripture. Apart from direct conversations between Jews and Christians (attested by the polemical literature), Touitou notes that many Christian conceptions of biblical interpretation were reflected in religious art, an important medium for educating a largely illiterate public. Moreover, some Latin works on biblical topics were translated into Old French as early as the beginning of the twelfth century. Touitou tends to dismiss the possibility that Rashi actually read Latin. We have better evidence of Rashbam’s knowledge of Latin, since he cites—and disputes—the Latin translation of Gn 49.10 and Ex 20.13. Yet the extent of his ability to read Latin comfortably is debated; see Japhet, *Rashbam on Job*, 53.

community, forms the basis of chapters 1 and 2 of *Exegesis in Perpetual Motion*, the first focusing on the shared endeavor to develop a historical-literary reading of Scripture, the second on the corollary role played by Jewish-Christian polemics. Yet since 1982 another approach was advanced by A. Grossman, who argues that Rashi's school was also inspired by the Jewish tradition of linguistic and literary biblical interpretation that reached its zenith in Muslim Spain at the time, a tradition that would be transplanted to Christian lands by Abraham Ibn Ezra in the second half of the twelfth century.⁴ Noting that Rashi makes references to Sa'adia Gaon (Egypt-Iraq, 882–942) and occasionally cites Menahem Ibn Saruq and Dunash Ibn Labrat (tenth-century Hebrew linguists who transplanted the Gaon's tradition to Muslim Spain), Grossman reasons that "it is inconceivable that the French scholars could have been so conversant with the linguistic research of Spanish Jewish scholars without being influenced by their approach to scriptural interpretation."⁵ Engaging in the sort of dialogue that enriches *Exegesis in Perpetual Motion*, Touitou devotes a short third chapter to this theory. While agreeing that Menahem and Dunash—who wrote in Hebrew—were avidly read within Rashi's school, Touitou (pp. 46–47) notes that all other important Spanish works related to biblical exegesis (such as those of Jonah Ibn Janah, Moses Ibn Chiquitilla, Judah Ibn Bal'am, and Moses Ibn Ezra) were written in Arabic and thus out of reach for the northern French exegetes.⁶

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the very identity of the French *peshat* school hinges on this debate. If Grossman is correct, Rashi and his students saw themselves as part of an older Jewish exegetical tradition that spread across geographic and cultural boundaries. Touitou, on the other hand, casts Rashi's school entirely as a reflection of its local

4. See Avraham Grossman, "The School of Literal Jewish Exegesis in Northern France," in *HBOT* 1/2:326–30.

5. Grossman, "Literal Exegesis," 327. Japhet has lent support to this view by arguing that Rashbam seems to have had access to the grammatical works of Judah Hayyuj, the eleventh-century scholar credited with having discovered the true workings of biblical Hebrew; see Japhet, *Rashbam on Job*, 51. Although Hayyuj's works were written in Arabic, Japhet maintains some form of Hebrew translation (either written or oral) was available to Rashbam.

6. As Touitou (47) observes, the situation would change a generation after Rashbam, with the advent of Abraham Ibn Ezra's Hebrew writings, which brought the wealth of Spanish Jewish scholarship to the attention of Jews in Christian lands. On the impact of Ibn Ezra's writings, as well as the numerous twelfth-century Hebrew translations of Judeo-Arabic linguistic and philosophical works, see Moshe Idel, "Perush Mizmor 19 le-R. Yosef Bekhor Shor," *Alai Sefer* 9 (1981): 63–69.

Christian cultural milieu. To my mind, Touitou is correct in this portrayal, much as the exegetical achievements of the tradition running from Sa'adia to Abraham Ibn Ezra were firmly anchored in a Muslim cultural context, which included Greco-Arabic philosophy, linguistics, poetics, and Qur'anic hermeneutics.⁷ Isolated from those intellectual currents, Rashi and his students, empowered by the spirit of innovation in northern France, created what for them was an entirely new approach to Scripture, just as their Christian colleagues developed new methods that challenged the older, traditional hermeneutics of the Church fathers.

The northern French spirit of innovation comes into sharper focus in Touitou's discussion of Rashbam's attitudes toward his predecessors (chapters 4, 5). Seemingly unaware of the methods developed by Sa'adia and his school, Rashbam credits Rashi alone for endeavoring to determine "the *peshat* of Scripture" (*peshuto shel mikra*'), in contrast to the prevailing midrashic methods of the rabbis (comm. on Gn 37.2). Yet, unsatisfied with the initial strides made by his grandfather, who still relied heavily on midrash, Rashbam goes on to record:

I debated with him and before him and he admitted to me that if he had the opportunity, he would be obliged to compose new commentaries according to the *peshat* [interpretation]s that emerge anew (*ba-mithadeshim*) every day.⁸

This precious moment of self-reflection in Rashi's school reveals a perception of *peshat* interpretation as a rapidly unfolding dynamic force in twelfth-century northern France. It is noteworthy that Abraham Ibn

7. See Mordechai Z. Cohen, "A Possible Spanish Source for Rashi's Concept of Peshuto Shel Miqra" (Hebrew), in *Rashi: His Image, His Work and His Influence for Generations*, ed. S. Japhet and A. Grossman (Jerusalem, forthcoming). On the use of Greco-Arabic learning by Jewish biblical interpreters in Muslim lands, see Moshe Zucker, *Saadya's Commentary on Genesis* (Hebrew; New York, 1984), 35–69; Dan Becker, *Arabic Sources of R. Jonab Ibn Janab's Grammar* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv, 1998); Mordechai Z. Cohen, "The Aesthetic Exegesis of Moses Ibn Ezra," in *HBOT* 1/2, 282–301; idem, *Three Approaches to Biblical Metaphor: From Abraham Ibn Ezra and Maimonides to David Kimbi* (Leiden, 2003), 9–15.

8. *Ha-peshatot ba-mithadeshim be-khol yom*, translated more loosely as "exegesis in perpetual motion," in the title of Touitou's book. For other suggestions of how to translate this critical characterization, see Sara Japhet, "The Tension Between Rabbinic Legal Midrash and the 'Plain Meaning' (Peshat) of the Biblical Text—An Unresolved Problem? In the Wake of Rashbam's Commentary on the Pentateuch," in *Sefer Moshe: The Moshe Weinfeld Jubilee Volume*, ed. Ch. Cohen, A. Hurvitz, and Sh. Paul (Winona Lake, Ind., 2004), 422.

Ezra, Rashbam's younger Spanish contemporary, does not characterize *pesbat* as an innovation (*ḥidush*); indeed, for him linguistic and literary analysis of Scripture was the product of a well-established tradition.⁹

The vibrancy of northern French Jewish scholarship extended beyond the realm of biblical studies and produced the revolutionary tosafist school of talmudic analysis, in which Rashbam participated alongside his younger brother, the brilliant talmudist Jacob Tam. Although talmudic study by nature is structured within strict authoritarian legal boundaries, the twelfth-century tosafists—as Touitou (p. 103) observes in light of I. M. Ta-Shma's recent studies—made ample room for creativity in their celebrated “new [interpretation]s” (*ḥidushim*) of ancient rabbinic legal texts. Rashbam's references to “intellectuals” (*maskilim*) and “lovers of reason” (*ohave sekhel*) in his Pentateuch commentaries (pp. 22, 103–4) likewise indicate that his biblical exegesis responds to the needs of a new class of Jewish scholars thirsting for innovative readings of Scripture matching the intellectual interests and curiosities of the twelfth-century renaissance. This social context helps explain Rashbam's occasional boastful claims of having discovered apt *pesbat* interpretations that had eluded his predecessors, especially pronounced in a fragment of his commentary on Deuteronomy published by M. Sokolow (pp. 75–76). Indeed, the notion of *pesbat* as a discovery that challenges the authoritative rabbinic reading of Scripture is entirely natural in the context of the struggle between *ratio* and *auctoritas* in twelfth-century Latin learning, and the revolution it sparked in Christian biblical exegesis (pp. 22, 32–33, 178–79).

PESHAT AS A RATIONAL-LITERARY READING

In seeking to define the interpretive principles that make up Rashbam's *pesbat* method, Touitou again turns to the writings of the great French exegete's Christian contemporaries, who devoted much attention to interpretive theory. Recent scholarship has shown that twelfth-century Chris-

9. As Uriel Simon, “Abraham Ibn Ezra,” in *HBOT* 1/2, 387, argues, “Abraham ibn Ezra[s] . . . importance in the history of exegesis seems to lie less in his original contributions and more in the standards he established for his critical evaluation of the accomplishments of the Babylonian-Iberian school.” On the implications of this difference between Rashbam's perception of *pesbat* as an innovation, as opposed to the established Babylonian-Iberian *pesbat* tradition, see Mordechai Z. Cohen, “Rashbam vs. Moses Ibn Ezra: Two Perspectives on Biblical Poetics,” in *Shai le-Sara Japhet: Studies in the Bible, its Exegesis and Language*, ed. M. Bar-Asher, N. Wazana, E. Tov, D. Rom-Shiloni (Jerusalem, 2007), 193*–217*.

tian exegetes, most notably the Victorines, argued that Scripture must be interpreted in light of the secular disciplines that saw a revival in the twelfth century, including history, science, grammar, and rhetoric (pp. 24–25). As Touitou demonstrates, Rashbam's *pesbat* method can likewise be defined as a rational-literary reading of Scripture (pp. 30–31, 112, 134). Yet, unlike his Christian colleagues who drew upon a wide range of Latin theoretical concepts and terms, Rashbam lacked the tools to establish fixed exegetical terminology (pp. 29–31). Nonetheless, Touitou succeeds in identifying two characteristic quasi-technical coinages that shed light on his methods: (1) *derekb erets* (lit. 'the way/manner of the world')—along with similarly constructed expressions ("the manner of [*derekb*] . . . [people in a given situation]"); and (2) *derekb ha-mikra'ot* (the way of Scripture).

The expression *derekb erets* was adapted by Rashbam from rabbinic literature (where it is used in a different sense) to denote an understanding of nature and human behavior based on scientific observation (pp. 135–45).¹⁰ On Ex 14.21, "the Lord drove back the sea with a strong east wind," for example, he comments: "God acted in accordance with *derekb erets*, as the wind dries and freezes the rivers," in an effort to explain the miracle of the splitting of the Red Sea in scientific terms. Rashbam likewise explains that the "wind from God" (*ruah elohim*; Gn 1.2) depicted in the story of creation functioned to dry the primordial waters. While this scientific reading of Gn 1.2 appears in Sa'adia's (Arabic) commentary on Genesis,¹¹ it would seem more reasonable to attribute its adoption by Rashbam to his own milieu in light of the Christian endeavor to explain the creation story *secundum physicam* (p. 25).

Much as the historical-literal reading of Scripture was regarded by Hugh of St. Victor and his colleagues in opposition to the explicitly ideological allegorical and tropological senses (pp. 24–25), *pesbat* for Rashbam amounts to a naturalistic alternative to the religiously and morally oriented traditional rabbinic interpretations. For example, his scientific interpretation of Gn 1.2 departs from the rabbinic reading of the verse (recorded by Rashi) as a depiction of the *spirit of God* (*ruah elohim*) hovering over the primordial waters. This dichotomy is also evident in Ex 17.11, which describes how Israel prevailed in battling Amalek only as

10. S. Japhet has observed a similar tendency in the Job commentary attributed to Rashbam, although there the expression *be-nobag she-ba-'olam* is used instead; see Japhet, *Rashbam on Job*, 148–49; see below at n. 27.

11. See Zucker, *Sa'adya on Genesis*, 29 [Arabic], 214 [Hebrew]. Sa'adia's reading, itself influenced by Greco-Arabic notions of physics, was adopted by Abraham Ibn Ezra and Maimonides; see Cohen, *Three Approaches*, 219.

long as Moses's hands were raised. The rabbis (as recorded by Rashi) explained this correspondence in religious terms: when Moses raised his hands to heaven, Israel turned their hearts to God, thereby earning merit to be granted a miraculous victory. But Rashbam offers a naturalistic interpretation based on psychological insight: "This is the manner of those who wage war (*derekb 'orkbe milhamah*); as long as they see the raising of their battle flag (*confanion* in the vernacular [i.e., Old French]) they prevail, but when it is cast down, they typically flee and are vanquished" (p. 139).

The expression *derekb ha-mikra'ot* is used by Rashbam to identify biblical stylistic tendencies and thereby develop a literary approach to Scripture (pp. 126–34). Rashbam's poetic awareness is especially evident in his remarkable awareness of parallelism, as noted by earlier scholars, and most fully detailed in recent studies by S. Japhet.¹² Touitou, however, focuses attention on Rashbam's structural literary analysis, especially his notion of the *hakdamah* ("introduction," "anticipatory use of information"), that is, the tendency of the biblical narrator to reveal seemingly extraneous information that the reader will require at a later point. To be sure, the *hakdamah* was not Rashbam's invention: traces of this conception can be found already in Rashi and appear prominently in Joseph Kara (pp. 146–49). Moreover, the stock example typically cited by Rashbam, "and Ham was the father of Canaan" (Gn 9.18), was also explained by Hugh of St. Victor in similar terms (pp. 30–31). Yet, as Touitou demonstrates, Rashbam goes far beyond his colleagues in applying the *hakdamah* and other structural concepts to explain the arrangement of the large and small literary units within the Pentateuch (pp. 112–21, 145–64).

Of particular interest is a conclusion Touitou draws from Rashbam's references to Moses as the narrator-editor (*sofer*) responsible for the arrangement and formulation of the text of the Torah (pp. 120–21). For example, the northern French exegete writes regarding the story of creation in Genesis 1 that "Moses placed it early (*bikdim*) [in the Torah] in order to clarify . . . what the Holy One said at the time of the giving of the Torah [i.e., the ten commandments], 'Remember the Sabbath day . . . for in six days the Lord made the heaven and the earth' (Ex 20.8)." From this and similar remarks, Touitou boldly infers that Rashbam regarded the Torah as a literary structure of two concentric circles: the central

12. See Japhet, *Rashbam on Job*, 170–200; see also Sara Japhet and Robert Salters, *The Commentary of R. Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam) on Qobeleth* (Jerusalem-Leiden, 1985) 39–40, 51–52. This subject is treated in great detail by Robert Harris, *Discerning Parallelism: A Study in Northern French Medieval Jewish Biblical Exegesis* (Providence, R.I., 2004), chapter 5.

halakhic portions, representing God's exact words, and the surrounding supporting narratives and the entire book of Deuteronomy, written by Moses as God's trusted servant. To be sure, this portrayal seems to conflict with the talmudic doctrine of "Torah from heaven"—a doctrine that would be strictly defined in the Spanish tradition by Maimonides and Nahmanides. Touitou admits that he cannot resolve this inconsistency but instead suggests that in the less critical northern French environment (in which there was no need to articulate anything akin to Maimonides' thirteen principles of faith) Rashbam did not have to confront all of the problematic implications of the literary notions that his *pesbat* readings of Scripture yielded. In any case, the literary conception Touitou identifies in Rashbam links him to a larger endeavor among a wide range of medieval exegetes—from the tenth-century Karaites Qirqisani and Yefet to the eleventh-century Byzantine school to the twelfth-century northern French school, and, in the Spanish tradition, Abraham Ibn Ezra in the twelfth century and Nahmanides in the thirteenth—all of whom sought to define the role of the biblical narrator-editor, a subject that has attracted a great deal of recent scholarly interest, making Touitou's analysis of Rashbam an especially welcome contribution.¹³

PESHAT AND POLEMICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The portrayal of Rashbam's *pesbat* method as a rational, literary analysis of Scripture would seem to commend it as being objective and precise, by contrast with midrash, which is often characterized as notoriously subjective and even fanciful. And indeed, Rashbam is celebrated in modern critical scholarship for having reached the "correct" interpretation of the biblical text that had eluded his medieval colleagues.¹⁴ Yet Touitou astutely observes throughout *Exegesis in Perpetual Motion* that many of his *pesbat* readings are motivated by cultural and ideological concerns. Rash-

13. See Meira Polliack, "Karaitic Conception of the Biblical Narrator (*Mudawwin*)," in *Encyclopaedia of Midrash: Biblical Interpretation in Formative Judaism*, vol. 1, ed. J. Neusner and A. J. Avery-Peck (Leiden-Boston, 2005), 350–73; Richard C. Steiner, "A Jewish Theory of Biblical Redaction from Byzantium," *Jewish Studies Internet Journal* 2 (2003); Robert Harris, "Awareness of Biblical Redaction among Rabbinic Exegetes of Northern France" (Hebrew), *Sbnaton: An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 12 (2002): 289–309; Uriel Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms: From Saadia Gaon to Abraham Ibn Ezra*, trans. L. Schramm (Albany, N.Y., 1991), 89–93, 182–83, 216–20, 224, 250–57; Mordechai Z. Cohen, "Nahmanides' Literary Hermeneutic In Light of his Commentary on Gen 1:1" (forthcoming).

14. See, e.g., Japhet, "Tension," 405–6, 419 ("Rashbam grasped correctly the 'plain meaning' of the text").

bam explicitly states more than once that his rational explanations of the *mitotot* are intended to defend Jewish adherence to the literal sense of the biblical text from Christian criticism (*le-fi derekh erets ve-li-teshuvat baminit*; “according to the way of the world and as a response to the heretics”; 179). This and other references indicate that he was well aware of biblical interpretations circulating in the Christian world around him and that the presentation of a viable alternative Jewish reading was an integral part of his exegetical endeavor (p. 168).

Indeed, in studies of his published over the last twenty years incorporated at various points into the current book, Touitou points to many other possible instances of unstated, and perhaps even unconscious, apologetic and polemical motives behind Rashbam’s exegesis. For example, on Ex 32.19, “As soon as Moses . . . saw the [golden] calf . . . he threw the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain,” Rashbam glosses: “He became weakened . . . and threw them away from himself so that he would not hurt his feet as they fell, as is the manner of all throwers of a load (*derekh mashlikbe masui*) when they do not have the strength to carry [it] . . . and this is its essential *pesbat* (*‘ikar pesbuto kakb*).” Touitou (p. 245) cites N. Leibowitz’s harsh reaction to this reading:

We utterly reject Rashbam’s interpretation . . . Though he is considered one of the great *pesbat* interpreters, here he has strayed far from the *pesbat*¹⁵ of Scripture . . . Did Scripture here intend to show us Moses’s physical weakness . . . [that caused] the tablets to drop from his hands? . . . Rather it is evident . . . that Moses did what he did with all his energy and might . . . he hurled them and shattered them.

Touitou responds by taking a different methodological turn, seeking to explain *why* Rashbam offers this reading and even promotes it as “the essential *pesbat*” (something he does only occasionally). Underlying Rashbam’s reading of Ex 32.19, he suggests, was a desire to undercut the Christian view—one going back to Barnabas and Origen—that Moses deliberately threw away the tablets at Sinai in order to prevent the Jews from receiving the covenant of the Lord (pp. 166, 246).

15. Leibowitz here seems to use the term *pesbat* in the sense of *the correct interpretation*, a common tendency among modern Hebrew writers. But this usage is often less than helpful in aiming to define the medieval notion of *pesbat*, as noted by Kamin, *Rashi’s Categorization*, 12–15. Indeed, Kamin (15) cites authors, who—in the spirit of this rather circular usage—argued that many of Rashbam’s *pesbat* readings “are *derashot*” and “stray from the truth.”

It is often difficult to disentangle the various possible motives for Rashbam's readings, including some of those cited above as examples of his scientific concept of *derekh erets*. In light of the traditional Christian portrayal of Moses as a prefiguration of Jesus, Touitou suggests that Rashbam's reading of Ex 17.11 (cited above) may have been intended to undermine the Christian notion that Moses's outstretched hands hint at Christ on the cross by interpreting this as a military tactic rather than a religiously significant act (p. 169). And perhaps Rashbam's interpretation of *ruah elohim* (Gn 1.2) as a natural wind was intended to negate the Christian view that this is a reference to the Holy Ghost (p. 124).

In placing Rashbam's exegesis in cultural context, Touitou acknowledges the problem with the facile equation of *pesbat* and "objective" interpretation, since every reader of a text—the sacred text of Scripture all the more so—will necessarily import their own assumptions and world view into their interpretation, *pesbat* or otherwise.¹⁶ As Touitou responds to Leibowitz's critiques:

Based on an assumption that interpretation of the Torah is a purely spiritual act, disconnected from the circumstances of the time and place, Nehama [Leibowitz] does not generally take into account that social and psychological elements are bound to influence an interpreter, whether consciously or unconsciously. (p. 244)

For Rashbam, *pesbat* was an interpretive approach that fulfilled a variety of new needs within his community of the readership audience of the sacred text, as Touitou continues in response to Leibowitz:

It appears that she ignored two elements that seem to have been the essential factors motivating Rashbam in his commentary: one being the influence of the twelfth-century renaissance on Rashbam's way of thinking; the other, the obligation he took upon himself to struggle with the Christians in their religious polemic with the Jews. (p. 244)

On the one hand, Rashbam answered the call of the vibrant intellectual currents of his time for sparkling new readings guided by rationalism and

16. This argument is central to what is now known as reader response criticism, although Touitou does not state this explicitly. On the implications of this connection for a contemporary appreciation of Jewish biblical interpretation, see Adele Berlin, "On the Use of Traditional Jewish Exegesis in the Modern Literary Study of the Bible," in *Tehillat le-Mosheh: Biblical and Judaic Studies in Honor of Moshe Greenberg*, ed. M. Cogan, B. Eichler, J. Tigay (Winona Lake, Ind., 1997), 173–83.

literary analysis: “The twelfth-century renaissance awakened an intoxicating enthusiasm in the intellectuals among whom Rashbam belonged, and for whom he wrote his commentaries . . . [His] sharp pronouncements . . . express the feeling of Rashbam and his colleagues that they are revealing wondrously new ways of understanding Scripture . . . unfathomed by their predecessors” (p. 244). At the same time, it was crucial for Rashbam to provide an ideological justification for Jewish existence within a dominant Christian society that posed an alternate reading of Scripture; and he deemed this goal, as well, an integral element of *pesbat* exegesis.¹⁷

TEXTUAL PROBLEMS IN THE COMMENTARIES
OF RASHBAM AND RASHI

A new study appearing in *Exegesis in Perpetual Motion* (pp. 79–92) revisits issues raised in the nineteenth century regarding the text of what was then the sole surviving manuscript of Rashbam’s Pentateuch commentary (and has subsequently been lost) published by D. Rosin in 1882. In Rosin’s view, Rashbam originally wrote his commentaries on the margins of his “sacred books,” perhaps Scripture or Rashi’s commentary (whose midrashic readings often prompt his *pesbat* alternative), and those marginal notes were gathered together by a scribe (identified by Rosin as a student of Eliezer of Beaugency) who also added the incipits.¹⁸ This might explain the tendency of the commentary to diverge from the order of the biblical text, which Rosin attributed to the scribe’s carelessness in copying the marginal notes (which may have appeared in a haphazard manner in the original autograph of Rashbam) and proceeded to rectify in his 1882 edition. S. Japhet and R. Salters have observed that this conception reflects a view of Rashbam’s “commentary” as little more than a collection of local glosses on individual words and phrases. But as they demonstrate in their edition of Rashbam’s commentary on Kohelet, that

17. A similar motivation is clearly at work in Rashi’s analysis of the Song of Songs, except that he (characteristically) relied on Midrash in fulfilling this goal; see Sarah Kamin, “Rashi’s Commentary on the Song of Songs and Jewish-Christian Polemic” (Hebrew), in *Jews and Christians Interpret the Bible*, ed. Y. Zakovitch (Jerusalem, 1991), 31–61.

18. See David Rosin, ed., *Perush ha-Torah asher katav Rashbam* (Breslau, 1882), xxxvi. This would make the original work produced by Rashbam analogous to that of his older colleague Josef Kara, whose marginal *pesbat* glosses abound in medieval Rashi manuscripts. To date, however, we do not have a separate commentary by Joseph Kara on the Pentateuch. Grossman (“Literal Exegesis,” 348), however, has recently found fragments of what he conjectures was, in fact, just such a commentary by Kara.

work “is by no means a glossary! It is a well-structured . . . composition . . . guided by a literary insight into the book of Qohelet,” an assessment they apply to the Pentateuch commentary in a brief remark.¹⁹ Harnessing his own study of Rashbam’s insights into the literary structure of the Pentateuch, Touitou likewise argues that the great French exegete’s commentary is a unified work that presents a comprehensive view of the biblical text for which the marginal gloss format would hardly have been appropriate. As for the anomalous ordering of the commentary, Touitou argues that it actually reflects a deliberate organizational principle by Rashbam himself, who tended to first explain conceptual matters before turning to philological and grammatical details.²⁰ For example, to explain the seemingly surprising placement of Rashbam’s philological note on the word *ve-yirkesu* (‘they shall tie’; Ex 28.28) after the commentary on 28.30, Touitou notes that Ex 28.15–30 deals with the breastplate, followed by 28.31–36, devoted to the priestly robe. Rashbam reserved his philological note on v. 28 until after he had concluded his analysis of the first unit, and before beginning the next one. Touitou thus criticizes Rosin’s attempts to “rectify” the arrangement of the text of the commentary, which, in fact, reveals Rashbam’s keen sense of biblical literary structure.

Touitou’s holistic approach to the text of Rashbam contrasts with the one he applied to Rashi in his groundbreaking 1987 study, “Concerning the Presumed Original Version of Rashi’s Commentary on the Pentateuch” (in Hebrew), which has important implications for understanding Rashbam’s role in the northern French *pesbat* school. Students of Rashi’s celebrated commentary have long been puzzled by its tendency to offer multiple interpretations for a single expression. Sometimes the alternatives are labeled simply “another reading [lit. word]” (*davar aher*); at other times they appear with methodological labels: “this is its *pesbat* [interpretation]” (*pesbuto*) vs. “its midrash” (*midrasbo*). To account for this phenomenon, Touitou advanced the bold new theory—based on inferences from early manuscripts—that the majority of the Pentateuch commentary in its current form was not written by Rashi at all but rather represents the work of his students, Joseph Kara, Rashbam, and others, whose readings were first recorded on the margins of Rashi’s original commentary.²¹

19. Japhet and Salters, *Rashbam on Qohelet*, 42–43.

20. Touitou acknowledges his debt here to the method developed by S. Japhet; see *Rashbam on Job*, 106–8.

21. This may seem to contradict Touitou’s view (following Japhet) cited above that Rashbam’s Pentateuch commentary was written as an independent work, not as glosses on the margins of Rashi. One could reasonably argue, however, that the marginal notes attributed to Rashbam were taken by a scribe from

Later scribes copying such annotated manuscripts incorporated these marginal notes into the body of the text, in effect rendering “Rashi on the Pentateuch” a compilation of readings offered within the school he pioneered.²²

Apart from its obvious textual implications, Touitou’s characterization of this influential commentary situates Rashi’s work in its cultural milieu. From a formal perspective, it highlights the parallel between “Rashi on the Pentateuch” and the *Glossa Ordinaria*, the authoritative Christian medieval collection of glosses on the biblical text by various authors. On a substantive level, the notion that Rashi’s original readings were “updated” with marginal notes that were eventually incorporated into the text of the master’s commentary itself (a process well on its way within just a generation or two) indicates that Rashi’s exegesis was not viewed as the final word but rather as a springboard for further analysis. Indeed, since Rashi himself acknowledged the superiority of “the *pesbat* [interpretations] that emerge anew every day,” we can even say that the multiple interpretation format captures the spirit of progress which he inspired in his students Joseph Kara and Rashbam.

Touitou’s 1987 study, which focused on Rashi, not Rashbam, was not included in the current book (though the bibliographic reference does appear in the list of Touitou’s earlier publications), but the interests and methodology it reflects feature prominently in *Exegesis in Perpetual Motion*. In the appendix entitled “Traces of Rashbam’s Commentary in Rashi’s Commentary on the Torah” (originally published in 1990), Touitou posits that Rashbam would never simply repeat what his grandfather had already written and concludes that any shared readings in their two commentaries must therefore have originated in Rashbam, from which they were imported into Rashi by his later copyists. What can be viewed as an arrested step of that process is the subject of chapter 11, “Unknown Commentaries of Rashbam on the Torah According to Vienna MS 23,”

his original complete commentary and appended to Rashi where appropriate. See, however, below, n. 23.

22. Manuscript evidence demonstrates the occurrence of this process in a number of instances, as scholars already noted in the nineteenth century; see Abraham Berliner, *Raschi: Der Kommentar des Salomo B. Isak Über den Pentateuch* (2d ed.; Frankfurt A/M, 1905), 9–13. Touitou, however, went much further by applying indirect evidence to argue that only a small core of the commentary is original to Rashi. This extreme claim has been challenged by A. Grossman, sparking a lively debate between the two scholars; for references, see Avraham Grossman, *The Early Sages of France* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1995), 184–93.

which features examples of Rashbam's readings appearing in that manuscript on the margins of Rashi's commentary as *pesbat* alternatives to the master's midrashic readings. The text of these marginal readings by Rashbam differs from the parallel comments appearing in the full commentary published by Rosin (hence Touitou's designation "unknown commentaries"), which leads Touitou (p. 207) to conclude that the great *pesbat* exegete's interpretations circulated in oral form among later scholars in the northern French exegetical school.²³

NEW SCHOLARLY PERSPECTIVES

Having highlighted a number of Touitou's significant contributions to Rashbam scholarship, I would like to address some additional perspectives that have emerged since the appearance of his original studies that might offer a fuller picture of this great exegete within the emerging French *pesbat* school. The source-critical approach we have adopted (difficult for biblical scholars to resist, especially when the source documents are available) by citing the earlier studies underlying *Exegesis in Perpetual Motion* will help to place Touitou's views within the unfolding scholarship of Rashbam over the last two decades. As we have seen, Touitou's new book does incorporate some of the subsequent studies; yet in my opinion there are three areas in which we can benefit by augmenting his discussion with new developments.

1. *Rashbam's other biblical commentaries*

In line with the scope of his original studies, Touitou's analysis of Rashbam in *Exegesis in Perpetual Motion* is limited to the Pentateuch commentary (with the exception of the citations from *Arugat ha-Bosem* in chapter 12). But the past twenty years have witnessed the publication of fine annotated editions of Rashbam's commentaries on Kohelet (1985), Song

23. In other words, these marginal notes were not copied from Rashbam's written commentary. Even if Japhet and Touitou are correct that Rashbam's Pentateuch commentary is an independent composition and not simply a collection of glosses, we see from this phenomenon (which may have motivated the nineteenth-century view) that Rashbam's comments (like those of Joseph Kara) did circulate in gloss format, as a corrective to specific comments by Rashi. Perhaps we can suggest that before he wrote his commentary, Rashbam began his exegetical career with such local observations, which were committed to writing independently on the margins of Rashi. This would be an alternate explanation for the differences of formulation between the marginal notes in MS Vienna 23 (and other Rashi manuscripts) and the parallel glosses in the full version of Rashbam's Pentateuch commentary.

of Songs (1988), and Job (2000),²⁴ and these would certainly help paint a comprehensive portrait of this great exegete. All three of those commentaries, for example, manifest Rashbam's remarkable awareness of biblical literary structure and verse forms, especially those related to parallelism.²⁵ The commentary on Kohelet likewise manifests Rashbam's awareness of the literary function of the biblical editor in that book, akin to the function he attributes to Moses in the Torah.²⁶ While the expression *der-ekh erets* does not appear in the Job commentary, a similar endeavor to explain the text based on reason and scientific observation is reflected by the expression *be-nohag she-ba-'olam* ('what is usual in the world').²⁷ Sara Japhet has further noted the absence of Rashbam's characteristically spirited advocacy of *peshat* in the Kohelet and Job commentaries, which leads her to conjecture that they were written late in his exegetical career, at which point he had "reached a certain degree of conviction which allows him to follow his own principles without the need for polemic or self-justification."²⁸ If so, these commentaries attest to the strength of the growing circle of intellectuals supporting Rashbam's interest in *peshat* within a traditional community previously enthralled exclusively by midrashic exegesis.

2. A Christian parallel to the *peshat/derash* dichotomy

In one of his earliest studies, "Concerning the Methodology of R. Samuel B. Meir in His Commentary to the Pentateuch" (in Hebrew), published in 1979 and incorporated largely in its original form in the current book, Touitou tackles the vexing issue of the theoretical status of *peshat* in Rashbam's thought. Scholars have long been perplexed by this question because Rashbam, a talmudist of no mean rank, was committed to the rabbinic legal system, which is based on midrashic exegesis, that is, non-*peshat* exegesis. At the same time, Rashbam seems fully invested in his

24. See above, nn. 2, 12. (A new annotated critical edition of Rashbam's commentary on the Song of Songs is currently being prepared by Sara Japhet.) Some scholars question Rashbam's authorship of these commentaries; see Japhet and Salters, *Qobelet*, 19–33; Martin Lockshin, "'Rashbam' on Job: A Reconsideration," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 8 (2001): 81–104; Thompson, "Song," 170–213. Touitou (p. 7), however, fully accepts the attribution of the Kohelet and Job commentaries, though he expresses some doubts about the one on Song of Songs.

25. See above, n. 12 and Thompson, "Song," 134–43, 158–59.

26. See Japhet and Salters, *Rashbam on Qobelet*, 34–35; Harris, "Redaction," 292, 302.

27. See above, n. 10.

28. Japhet and Salters, *Rashbam on Qobelet*, 61; compare Japhet, *Rashbam on Job*, 55.

own innovative *pesbat* readings of Scripture, insisting that they supersede those of his predecessors. It has long been recognized that the crux of this dilemma is to be found in Rashbam's cryptic remark in his commentary on Gn 37.2 that the rabbis themselves stated that "Scripture does not depart from its *pesbat*," even though the *derash* is "essential" (or: "fundamental"; *ikar*). Japhet has argued recently that Rashbam indeed considered the *pesbat* to be the single original meaning of the biblical text, what he elsewhere refers to as "the truth of its *pesbat*" (*amitat pesbuto*), whereas the *derash* is the product of later rabbinic exegesis, which is ultimately the exclusive determinant of *halakhab*, and thus "fundamental" for the purposes of Jewish practice.²⁹ While this may account for Rashbam's emphatic adherence to *pesbat*, it would seem out of character for a medieval talmudist. The more traditional approach, to which Touitou subscribes, is that Rashbam believed that Scripture was formulated originally with two different levels of meaning: *derash*, derived according to the hermeneutical rules transmitted by the rabbis, and *pesbat*, a rational literary analysis of the text (pp. 54–55).³⁰ But Touitou notes that this account creates its own difficulty: "Is it possible to say, according to the laws of human logic, that one biblical text has two different meanings, which are at times contradictory, and [yet] both are true?" (p. 54). Evidently aiming to mitigate this problem, he refers to the double-meaning theory as a "mystical" belief about Scripture, citing the Spanish kabbalist-exegete Nahmanides (1194–1270) who argued that *pesbat* and *derash* coexist, "and both are true" (*shnehem emet*).³¹

29. See Japhet, "Tension," 413 ("[Rashbam's] interpretation is 'the plain meaning of Scripture' [*pesbuto shel mikra*], the decision of the rabbis . . . [m]ay obligate a Jew in his or her practical/legal behavior, but it does not represent the meaning of the biblical text as is"); 421–22 ("Rashbam distinguishes between . . . the 'Peshat,' which uncovers the original meaning of the Torah, and has the full authority of the original statement . . . and the Midrash, which is indeed 'hinted at' in the biblical text, but its authority and binding power derive from later exegesis, that of the rabbis"). See also Japhet and Salters, *Rashbam on Qohelet*, 61 ("The understanding of the literal meaning as *amitat pesbuto* is the origin of one of the leading characteristics of Rashbam's commentaries, i.e., that a text has only one, single meaning").

30. On this understanding of Rashbam, see also Uriel Simon, "The Exegetic Method of Abraham Ibn Ezra, as Revealed in Three Interpretations of A Biblical Passage" (Hebrew), *Bar Ilan Annual* 3 (1968): 130–38; Martin Lockshin, "Tradition or Context: Two Exegetes Struggle with Peshat," in *From Ancient Israel to Modern Judaism: Essays in Honor of Marvin Fox*, ed. J. Neusner et al. (Atlanta, 1989) 2:173–86.

31. For analysis of this theory, see Elliot Wolfson, "By Way of Truth: Aspects of Nahmanides' Kabbalistic Hermeneutic," *AJS Review* 14 (1989): 103–29.

But simply by calling this perspective “mystical” (implying that it therefore need not conform to “the laws of human logic”), and pointing to a similar view attested in a later exegete working in a different intellectual environment, does not sufficiently explain how Rashbam would have arrived at it. A more complete explanation was given in a 1988 study by Sarah Kamin, who looked no further than the great French *pesbat* exegete’s own Christian neighbors.³² The notion that Scripture conveys multiple layers of meaning simultaneously was a cornerstone of Church tradition, and even the twelfth-century exegetes who devoted attention to the literal sense still saw it as a stepping stone to the deeper and more spiritual allegorical and anagogical senses of the biblical text. With this supposition permeating Rashbam’s intellectual milieu, it is hardly surprising that his devotion to *pesbat* could go hand in hand with a genuine commitment to what he would have regarded as Scripture’s “essence” (*ikar*)—rabbinic tradition embodied in *derash*. As Kamin writes:

Hugh [of St. Victor] and Rashbam both appear as advocates of the literal sense. Both conceive this sense as but one in the two- or three-fold division of sense embodied in the nature of Scripture . . . Both Hugh and Rashbam do not consider the literal sense to be the apogee of Scripture’s intention. Hugh composed *ad litteram*, Rashbam *le-fi pesbuto*, exegetical notes which presuppose the existence of a non-literal exposition.³³

Rashbam of course did not embrace the three Christian senses of Scripture; but the underlying conception of the biblical text’s multivalence offered a convenient way for him to posit the coexistence of *pesbat* alongside tradition rabbinic midrashic exegesis.

5. Debates regarding the text of Rashi

Finally, an alternative perspective emerges from A. Grossman’s critique of Touitou’s bold claim about the text of Rashi’s Pentateuch commentary.

32. Sarah Kamin, “Affinities between Jewish and Christian Exegesis in Twelfth-Century Northern France,” in *Jews and Christians Interpret the Bible*, ed. Y. Zakovitch (Jerusalem, 1991), 12*–16*. This study was originally published separately in 1988, based on Kamin’s lecture at the World Congress of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem in 1985. Our source critical analysis reveals the irony that Kamin applies the very method that Touitou developed in his 1982 study (mentioned above) that highlighted the influence of Rashbam’s cultural milieu, a perspective that he evidently had not yet conceived in his 1979 study.

33. Kamin, “Affinities,” 16*.

Based on his analysis of MS Leipzig 1, Grossman put forth a different theory by citing evidence that Shemaiah, Rashi's student and secretary, added interpretations into that work at his master's request.⁵⁴ Indeed, other manuscript evidence indicates that Rashi at times revised his commentaries in accordance with interpretations offered by his students.⁵⁵ Grossman thus argues that many of the *pesbat* interpretations absent in the "original" Rashi commentary and added subsequently represent revisions made by the author himself or at his request. This theory conforms with Rashbam's testimony that his grandfather expressed a desire to rewrite his work "according to the *pesbat* [interpretation]s that emerge anew every day." Grossman thus offers an alternative to Touitou's assumption that readings appearing in Rashbam must be excluded from the genuine text of Rashi: it is possible that these were originally suggested by Rashbam and accepted by Rashi himself, who revised his commentary accordingly. Beyond the important question of determining the correct text of Rashi on the Pentateuch, Grossman's hypothesis makes this classic work a testimony to the living spirit of Rashi's school, which was characterized by live debates and a continual effort to revise and reconsider how best to apply the *pesbat* method. Indeed, this is a unique feature of the northern French *pesbat* school, which benefited from the face-to-face interaction of at least three great exegetical minds: Rashi, Kara, and Rashbam. By contrast, most of the great exegetes of the more chronologically and geographically diffuse Babylonian-Iberian school knew one another exclusively from their written work.

The alternative perspectives I have presented should not be taken to diminish the value of Elazar Touitou's book, but rather as a testimony of the ever-changing face of Rashbam scholarship—itsself also "in perpetual motion," inspired in large measure by Touitou's own valuable contributions over the years.⁵⁶ Indeed, few other authors today have single-

54. Avraham Grossman, "Marginal Notes and Addenda of R. Shemaiah and the Text of Rashi's Biblical Commentary" (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 60 (1991): 69–73. Touitou is certainly well aware of Grossman's views, which he debated vigorously in a number of articles appearing in *Tarbiz* in the early 1990s; see above, n. 22.

55. Primarily Joseph Kara and Shemaiah, but perhaps Rashbam as well; see Grossman, "Literal Exegesis," 342–43; Berliner, *Raschi*, ix–x, 37, 58.

56. Reflecting this continual development, a new debate has arisen since the appearance of Touitou's book over his emphasis of polemical motivations in the exegetical thought of Rashi and Rashbam. See Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Does Rashi's Torah Commentary Respond to Christianity?" in *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. H. Najman and J. Newman (Leiden, 2004), 449–72; Martin I. Lockshin, *Rashbam's Commentary on Deuteronomy* (Providence, R.I., 2004), 19–22.

handedly changed our perception of Rashbam and the French *pesbat* school to the extent that Touitou has. As such, *Exegesis in Perpetual Motion* is certainly one of the most important works on Jewish biblical interpretation to have been published recently. Readers familiar with Touitou's original studies will benefit from its integrated format and updated discussions. For new readers, this work is an excellent introduction to the northern French *pesbat* school in its cultural context. Bringing the author's earlier works into sharp focus, *Exegesis in Perpetual Motion* is a learned volume that combines a profound understanding of the sources and an ability to probe them with a fresh cultural perspective, according to the scholarly approaches that "appear anew each day."