

PESHAT RULES: TWO RECENT PUBLICATIONS BY MORDECHAI COHEN

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Cohen, Mordechai Z. *The Rule of Peshat: Jewish Constructions of the Plain Sense of Scripture and Their Christian and Muslim Contexts, 900-1270*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020.

Cohen, Mordechai. *Rashi, Biblical Interpretation, and Latin Learning in Medieval Europe: A New Perspective on an Exegetical Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.

With these two magnificent publications, Mordechai Cohen has firmly cemented himself into the firmament of illustrious scholars of medieval biblical exegesis. While already having established himself with numerous well-regarded publications in medieval biblical exegesis and Jewish thought, Cohen has managed with these to break new ground and, particularly with *The Rule of Peshat*, has neatly filled a long-sought desideratum in the field.

The “rule” that Cohen addresses in *The Rule of Peshat* is, of course, אין מקרא יוצא מידו פשוטו, a statement that is found in the Babylonian Talmud¹ but which is applied by the various exegetes whom the book investigates in a range of meanings the clarification of which is the heart and soul of the book. I have typically translated the statement along the lines of “a (Scriptural) verse never escapes from the hands of its plain meaning.”² The words “plain meaning” translate the elusive ancient rabbinic term פשוטו, which, like its medieval successor, פשט, were never defined either in antiquity or the medieval period.³

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¹ b. Shabb 63a; b. Yeb 11b; 24a.

² For a slightly different version but which nonetheless preserves the sentiment, see Robert A. Harris, “Concepts of Scripture in the School of Rashi,” in *Jewish Concepts of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction* (Benjamin D. Sommer, ed.; New York and London: New York University Press, 2012), 102–122 (110).

³ Raphael Loewe, “The ‘Plain’ Meaning of Scripture in Early Jewish Exegesis,” in *Papers of the Institute of Jewish Studies London* (Volume 1) (J. G. Weiss, ed.; Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1964), 140–85.

Many have chosen to render פשוטו as “its literal meaning,”⁴ but since *peshat* all too often indicates a figurative meaning,⁵ it seems more appropriate to translate with the words “plain meaning.”⁶ And while there is no question in my mind that certain mid-12th century practitioners such as R. Yosef Kara, Rashbam and R. Eliezer of Beaugency held a decidedly “contextual” understanding of the term, a translation of “plain” covers all the bases and we will therefore follow it in this review.

Cohen has written eight chapters in *The Rule of Peshat*, each chapter devoted to an individual exegete or school, and in each of them he analyzes the extent to which those commentators have incorporated the rule in their exegesis and/or have developed the rule in a direction different from those who have preceded them. Following an introduction in which he distinguishes *peshat* from its antecedents in classical rabbinic exegesis, most particularly rooting himself in the principles of ancient post-biblical exegesis James Kugel has called “the Four Assumptions”⁷ (and somewhat expanding them), Cohen moves on to chapters

⁴ See, e.g., Avraham Grossman, “The School of Literal Exegesis in Northern France,” in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation. Volume I: From the Beginnings to the Middle Ages (Until 1300). Part 2: The Middle Ages* (Magne Saebø, ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 321–71.

⁵ Among the parade examples I use to explain this is Rashi’s commentary on Exodus 19:17 (וַיִּתְצַבּוּ בַתְּחֵתִית הַהָר, “and [the Israelites] stood at the bottom of the mountain”). Considering that phrase, Rashi interprets לפי פשוטו: ברגלי ההר, “according to its plain meaning, at the feet of the mountain,” thus anticipating our idiom “foot of the mountain.” Of course, since mountains don’t actually have feet (!), Rashi’s *peshuto* is rooted in a figurative understanding. Whereas, the midrash that he brings (שנתלש ההר ממקומו ונכפה), “the mountain was plucked up from its place and was arched over them as a cask”), is itself a hyper literal reading. Rashi of course channels a well-known interpretation found in Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael 19:17:2; Shabbat 88a. Cohen discusses the Arabic contours of the distinction between literal and figurative interpretation on pp. 15–16.

⁶ Despite the prima facie attraction of translating with the word “simple,” particularly on account of the corresponding and contemporary Latin use of the word *simplicitas* to occasionally channel (Christian) understanding of the plain sense, I have always eschewed that translation. Reasoning that if modern scholarship has investigated the origin and practice of medieval *peshat* exegesis since the dawn of Wissenschaft without coming to decisive agreement, “it ain’t simple.” For Latin use contemporary with the great 12th century northern French rabbinic exegetes, see Frans Van Liere, *Andrew of St. Victor: Commentary on Samuel and Kings: Introduction, Translation and Notes* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 17.

⁷ See James L. Kugel, *The Bible as it Was* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997), 17–23. The “assumptions” may be summarized as: 1) Biblical texts are cryptic; 2) Biblical texts are prophetic and are primarily intended to instruct (that is, while biblical texts may appear to be concerned with the past, they are eternally relevant and, as

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on: Geonim and Karaites: Appropriating Methods of Qur'an Interpretation; The Andalusian School: Linguistic and Literary Advances in the Muslim Orbit; Rashi: *Peshat* Revolution in Northern France; Qara and Rashbam: Refining the Northern French *Peshat* Model; The Byzantine Tradition: A Newly Discovered Exegetical School; Abraham Ibn Ezra: Transplanted Andalusian *Peshat* Model; Maimonides: *Peshat* as the Basis of Halakhah; Nahmanides: A New Model of Scriptural Multivalence.

In the period of Cohen's study, the rabbinic world divided itself between those exegetes who were primarily *darshanim*, that is, rabbis who were steeped in and committed to what were already by then considered to be the tried-and-true foundations of classical midrash, and those devotees of the newer and developing *peshat* rule, whom we may consider to be by analogy, *pashtanim*. However, early on in *The Rule of Peshat*, Cohen distances himself from the older scholarly view that finds a "continuous *peshat-derash* dichotomy from antiquity to the modern era" (7); instead, he argues for a view of *peshat* "in dynamic terms, as a developing mode of interpretation shaped by the *pashtanim* themselves" (8). Casting his understanding of the rule's dynamism in the mold of modern critical literary theory (particularly reader response), Cohen wishes to

...trace multiple trajectories by which the *peshat* maxim that was originally quite marginal in the Talmud came to be construed variously as a justification for plain-sense exegesis... it was... a medium through which readers in diverse cultural contexts encountered and made sense of Scripture intellectually and religiously (14).

One of the most clever rubrics through which Cohen details the application of the *peshat* maxim by the various interpreters whose work he interrogates is whether a given exegete considered *peshat* in what Cohen terms a "firm" or "strong" application (but not exclusively determinative), or one "stronger," and finally as "absolutely strong." For example, Cohen points out that for early *pashtanim* such as Saadia, the rule was firm — but that the ultimate determinant of meaning, at least with respect to biblical verses whose content still played a role in contemporary halacha, was the rabbinic devotion to Oral Torah. However, for later exegetes as disparate geographically and linguistically as Ibn Janah and Rashbam, the rule was stronger, and led to *peshat* being considered of coequal value with midrash, even with respect to biblical verses that nominally addressed

such, are addressed to the readers' own present, saying "Understand this" or "Do this"; 3) Biblical texts are completely harmonious; 4) Biblical texts are divinely inspired/given. Cohen discusses and elaborates these; see *The Rule of Peshat*, 3–4.

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miss the boat when they try to pigeonhole Rashi into either the category “*pashtan*” (i.e., “Rashi’s midrash really is a kind of *peshat*”) or “failed *pashtan*” (i.e., most critical scholars from Ibn Ezra through to our contemporary world). Such scholars would do/have done well to pay closer attention to Rashi’s own famous methodological dictum (at Genesis 3:8):

ואני לא באתי אלא לפשוטו של מקרא, ולאגדה המיישבת דברי המקרא...

I have not come for (anything) other than the plain sense of Scripture and¹² for the aggadah that settles the words of Scripture...¹³

As one can plainly see here, if one does not come to the statement from a priorly-conceived understanding, Rashi states clearly that he is not interested in only one type of reading. Rather, he explicitly states that he will incorporate both *peshuto* (his intuitive grasp of Scripture’s meaning) and “aggadah that settles...” (i.e., his application of selected midrashim that he thinks speak to the broader understanding of the language of Scripture). Once one takes this step, one can clearly see that it is not an either/or proposition. Moreover, even if one prefers the admittedly more difficult version of the statement preserved in Leipzig 1, without the prefixed-*vav* (לפשוטו של מקרא, ולאגדה המיישבת דברי המקרא), the fact that Rashi is pointing towards two types of reading Scripture, and not one, ought to be clear. As Edward L. Greenstein pithily summarized, Rashi’s intent was to offer both plain sense readings and reworked midrashim in the effort to provide the “fullest possible accounting” of the language of

¹² This key prefixed-*vav* (“and”) is not found in Leipzig 1. See below.

¹³ This key statement is famously difficult, and has been transmitted in the best manuscripts and early editions in a variety of versions. For a transcription, mostly of Leipzig 1, and extensive notes on the variants, see: <https://rashi.alhatorah.org/Full/Bereshit/3.8#eOnf>. Leipzig’s rendering of the end of Rashi’s statement is: ופשוטו ושמעותו דבור על אופניו, “and its *peshuto*/plain sense and its *shemu’ato*/hearing/report/tradition, a statement according to its character.” This reading is itself elusive and extremely difficult. Noting Rashi’s use elsewhere of the word משמע as a synonym for פשט, I have long conjecturally emended the various iterations of morphemes such as שמעו and שמעותו to ומשמעו, and read “I have not come for (anything) other than the plain sense of Scripture and for the aggadah that settles a matter of Scripture and its sense, i.e., a matter stated according to its character.” See Robert A. Harris, “Rashi’s Introductions to His Biblical Commentaries,” in *Shai Le-Sara Japhet: Studies in the Bible, Its Exegesis and Its Language* (Moshe Bar-Asher, Dalit Rom-Shiloni, Emanuel Tov, and Nili Wazana, ed.; Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 2007), 289-310 (294, n. 17); see also Robert A. Harris, “What’s in a Blessing? Rashi and the Priestly Benediction of Numbers 6:22–27,” in *Birkat Kohanim: The Priestly Benediction in Jewish Tradition* (Martin Cohen and David Birnbaum, ed.; New York: New Paradigm Matrix Publishing, 2016), 231–58.

Scripture.¹⁴ Thus conceived, it is his understanding of Scripture's language that is Rashi's focus, and not dedication to one or another methodological principles. Rather, it is Rashi's incipient and developing awareness of two categories of interpretation that enables him to fully account for the language of Scripture and to settle its meaning (ליישב את לשון המקרא).¹⁵

For his part, Cohen seeks to demonstrate ways in which Rashi sought to make use of the rule in an effort "to account for the sequence and arrangement of the biblical text" (96).¹⁶ Cohen states that "Rashi's distinctive *peshat* agenda is best understood as a distinct interpretive outcome that reflects intellectual trends and tensions within his Franco-German cultural milieu" (97).¹⁷ This statement can be

¹⁴ See Edward L. Greenstein, "Sensitivity to Language in Rashi's Commentary on the Torah," in Mayer I. Gruber, ed.; *The Solomon Goldman Lectures (VI)* (Chicago: The Spertus College of Judaica Press, 1993), 51–71. This article is not often cited but it offers arguably the finest analysis of Rashi's methodology in the English language, and the author provides a sufficient variety of examples to make his case. For a fuller discussion, see Sarah Kamin, *Rashi's Exegetical Categorization in Respect to the Distinction Between Peshat and Derash* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1986).

¹⁵ Rashi's use of the rare *piel* form of the verb כ-ש-י deserves its own study, a subject on which I am currently working. Put plainly, the verb occurs once in the Bible and only rarely in post-biblical and/or rabbinic literature, and never in the sense in which Rashi uses it. The late, great Menahem Banitt proposed to me (private communication, c2003) that Rashi was thinking in French and cleverly used the verb to express his innovative interpretive approach.

¹⁶ In considering Rashi's interest in the "sequence and arrangement" of biblical composition, a fruitful avenue to consider would have been the relationship of this concern to contemporary Christian efforts to interpret the *series litterae* of biblical narrative; see Frans Van Liere, *Andrew of St. Victor: Commentary on Samuel and Kings: Introduction, Translation and Notes* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 17. See also Michael Signer, "Peshat, Sensus Litteralis, and Sequential Narrative: Jewish Exegesis and the School of St. Victor in the Twelfth Century," in *The Frank Talmage Memorial Volume* (Barry Walfish, ed.; Haifa: Haifa University Press; University Press of New England in association with Brandeis University Press, 1993), 203–216; Robert A. Harris, "Structure and Composition in Isaiah 1-12: A Twelfth-Century Northern French Rabbinic Perspective," in *As Those Who Are Taught": The Interpretation of Isaiah From the LXX to the SBL* (Claire Mathews McGinnis and Patricia K. Tull, ed.; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 171–87.

¹⁷ To be sure, I have written on the subject with the same over all approach that Cohen advocates, i.e., to seek the origin of Rashi's exegetical program within the context of his contemporary Christian intellectual, social and cultural world. For example, "it seems natural to me to seek the origins of Rashi's exegetical approach as well as the subsequent and more refined expressions of northern French rabbinic interpretive methodologies, within the cultural and intellectual context of Christian Europe. The Christian analogue to Rashi's commentary is, of course, the *Glossa Ordinaria*." Robert A. Harris, "From "Religious Truth-Seeking" to Reading: The Twelfth Century Renaissance and the

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misleading, unfortunately, as it may lead to a mischaracterization of Rashi's "agenda" as primarily one of *peshat* and not, as we have seen, one that is overwhelmingly midrashic. Cohen is well-aware that characterizing Rashi as a *pashtan* is "fraught with challenges" (97), but nevertheless returns to this characterization despite his awareness how replete Rashi's commentary is with midrashic interpretations. At length he seems, curiously, to agree with Moshe Ahrend's negative assessment of Sarah Kamin's characterization of Rashi as one who "resembles a craftsman who perfected a new and original technique, but set it aside to display to his audience a haphazard collection of works by his predecessors (106)."¹⁸ I prefer the observations of Kamin and Greenstein, and would conclude that Rashi deliberately follows a dual agenda of *peshuto* and *midrasho*, the both of which help him to account for the language of Scripture.

Whereas northern French application of the Rule of *Peshat* reached its apex in the commentaries of R. Yosef Kara and Rashbam, whom Cohen treats in a substantial chapter (127–165) and R. Eliezer of Beaugency, whom Cohen, curiously, barely mentions,¹⁹ the lion's share of the book is devoted to how the

Emergence of *Peshat* and *Ad Litteram* as Methods of Accessing the Bible," in *The Oral and the Textual in Jewish Tradition and Jewish Education* (Jonathan Cohen, Matt Goldish, and Barry Holtz, ed.; Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, Magnes Press, 2019), 54–89 (64). Moreover, the essential adoption of Christian hermeneutic by Rashi — innovating approximately 25% of the commentary with literary and/or grammatical comments while incorporating and abbreviating classical sources in approximately 75% of the commentary (Rashi, of course, channels rabbinic exegesis whereas the Gloss references Patristic literature) — is only part of the story. As I have written, the adoption of the gloss to express meaning is itself an innovation in Rabbinic Hebrew: "A point that is often overlooked or misunderstood is that the means through which both Jewish and Christian 12 century exegetes expressed this shift in "encountering Scripture" — that is, the transition "from *derash* to *peshat*" and "from *allegoria* to *ad litteram*" — was the commentary, or *ad locum* gloss. This may seem obvious but it ought not be so. At least for Jewish writers, the adoption of the commentary mode for exposition is a distinctly medieval genre of discourse" (58); see p. 62 where I more fully describe this technological revolution as "two-fingered reading." For a more popular version, see my essay at: <https://www.thetorah.com/article/on-the-origins-of-peshat-commentary>.

¹⁸ To say that Ahrend misrepresents Kamin would be an understatement, but that is an argument best pursued in another venue. See Moshe M. Ahrend, "The Concept 'Peshuto Shellamiqra' in the Making," [Hebrew] in *The Bible in the Light of Its Interpreters: Sarah Kamin Memorial Volume* (Sara Japhet ed.; Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1994), 237–61 (246).

¹⁹ Indeed, there have been few studies of R. Eliezer's exegesis. For now, see: Robert A. Harris, *Rabbi Eliezer of Beaugency: Commentaries on Amos and Jonah (With Selections From Isaiah and Ezekiel)* (Kalamazoo: TEAMS: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 2018), and studies cited therein; and Yitzhak Berger, "The Contextual Exegesis of Rabbi Eliezer of Beaugency and the Climax of the Northern

rule functioned according to exegetes who operated in the Mediterranean world, from Byzantium to Spain, and mostly in an Arabic-speaking environment.

If what Cohen considers the “super-strongest” position to be that of Maimonides, he nonetheless follows the arc he has set and closes his volume with an examination of the rule in the exegesis of Nahmanides. It is at once a surprising yet in the end completely logical choice: if one simply considers the profound influence of the printed rabbinic Bible, Nahmanides has long been considered the third of the three most influential exegetes, after Rashi and Ibn Ezra.²⁰ And yet to consider him purely as a *pashtan* would require a double take. For, if anything, Nahmanides’ exegesis must be considered a synthesis of methodologies; in fact, he arguably represents the first rabbinic iteration of a four-fold hermeneutic²¹ that post-16th century exegetes would term “*pardes*.”²² Nahmanides opens his Torah commentary not with a dedicatory to his sole devotion to the rule of *peshat*; rather, he embraces a multiform approach that encompasses a variety of approaches (לכתוב בהם פשטים בכתובים) ובמדרשים במצות והאגדה ערוכה בכל ושמורה “[I intend] to write like them [prior

French Peshat Tradition,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 15:2 (2008), 115–29. Cohen also chooses not to consider the exegesis of R. Yosef Bekhor Shor, a kind of transitional figure who, while primarily a *pashtan*, also incorporated a type of return to Rashi-style incorporation of midrash and rabbinics as biblical commentary. See Jonathan Jacobs, *Bekhor Shoro Hadar Lo: R. Joseph Bekhor Shor Between Continuity and Innovation* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2017). Finally, among significant *pashtanim* who might have merited a chapter, R. David Kimhi (Radak) is likewise not treated; see Frank Talmage, *David Kimhi: The Man and His Commentaries* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1975); Ayelet Seidler, “The Exegetical Method of Rabbi David Kimhi (Radak), Based Mainly on His Commentary on Samuel and Isaiah,” diss., Bar Ilan University, 2004; and Naomi Grunhaus, *The Challenge of Received Tradition: Dilemmas of Interpretation in Radak’s Biblical Commentaries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²⁰ There are at least two incunabula of Nahmanides’s Torah commentary (Lisbon, 1489 and Naples, 1490; a third may be Rome, pre-1489), and since the 1521 (Salonika) edition, his commentary has been regularly featured in most every published rabbinic Bible.

²¹ That the “four-fold method” of exegesis has deep roots in Christian biblical interpretation is well-known. For now, see A. J. Minnis, “Quadruplex Sensus, Multiplex Modus: Scriptural Sense and Mode in Medieval Scholarly Exegesis,” in *Interpretation and Allegory: Antiquity to the Modern Period* (Jon Whitman, ed.; Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill, 2000), 231–231; and, of course, Henri De Lubac, *Exegese Medievale: Les Quatre Sens De L’Ecriture* (Aubier: Editions Montaigne, 1961).

²² For discussion of *pardes* as a Jewish four-fold interpretive hermeneutic, see Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 429–437; an earlier discussion may be found in Wilhelm Bacher, “L’Exégèse Biblique Dans Le Zohar.” *Revue des Études Juives* 22 (1891), 33–46. I am grateful to Alan Cooper for the references, and for a detailed correspondence about the date in which the term *pardes* may have been used for the first time to describe such a methodology.

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exegetes] plain-sense interpretations of the writings and aggadah with respect to the commandments, and the aggadah, ordered and secured”),²³ and stakes out a position ostensibly subservient to Rashi and Ibn Ezra. Moreover, he explicitly roots himself in a mystically-oriented midrashic approach that points the way towards his most esoteric, kabbalistic interpretations (עוד בידינו) קבלה של אמת, כי כל התורה כולה שמותיו של הקב"ה... ונראה שהתורה הכתובה באש שחורה על גבי אש לבנה, “Moreover, we have in our hands a tradition of ‘truth’ that the entire Torah, all of it is names of the Holy One, Blessed be God... and it is as though the Torah was written in a black fire on the backs of white fire”).²⁴ In addition, Nahmanides also espouses an approach that incorporates a Christian-type typological approach, spun out of ancient midrashic statements (מעשה אבות) סימן לבנים, “that which happened to the ancestors is a sign of that which will happen to the descendants”), and while it might be argued that this may be considered as part of plain sense exegesis, Nahmanides typically employs it in the service of theological interpretation.²⁵

All this aside, Cohen carefully explores the role of *peshat* in Nahmanides’ exegesis. To be clear, Cohen likewise argues that for Nahmanides, *peshat* is only part of a fully multivalent approach to the meaning of Scripture. Citing a passage from Nahmanides’ *Hassagot*, Cohen focused on what is essential for understanding the validity of both *peshat* and *derash* in his exegesis:

According to Nahmanides, the *peshat* maxim teaches that “a biblical verse... has its midrash and its *peshat* and does not leave the realm of either one of them, since Scripture can bear all meanings, both being true.”²⁶

Cohen weaves his way through the chapter on Nahmanides and offers his assessment on the relationship between *peshat* and the other interpretive methods. In particular, Cohen explores the relationship of Nahmanides’ approach

²³ Nahmanides evokes the language of 2 Samuel 23:5.

²⁴ Nahmanides seems to be channeling *y. Sheqalim* 6:1:1-2:7 and *y. Sotah* 8:3:12.

²⁵ On Nahmanides and typological exegesis, see Amos Funkenstein, “Typological Exegesis of Nahmanides” [Hebrew], *Zion* 45 (1979-80), 35-49; *idem*, “Nahmanides’ Symbolical Reading of History,” in *Studies in Jewish Mysticism* (Joseph Dan and Frank Talmage, ed.; Cambridge: Association for Jewish Studies, 1982), 129-50; *idem*, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1993), 98-121; see also Frank Talmage, “Apples of Gold: The Inner Meaning of Sacred Texts in Medieval Judaism,” in *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible Through the Middle Ages* (Arthur Green, ed.; New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1986), 313-55.

²⁶ Cohen, *The Rule of Peshat*, 278; citing Chaim Dov Chavel, *Sefer Hamitzvot Im Hassagot Ha-Ramban* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1981), 45.

to the often-fraught interrelationship between *peshat* and *halacha*, and how this corresponds and/or contrasts with other exegetes (Rashbam, Ibn Ezra and Maimonides) who were aware of the tension. In a different vein, Cohen carefully considers the ways in which Nahmanides' typological exegesis is redolent of Christian methods, and insightfully concludes, "rather than regarding this 'borrowing' simply as 'Christian influence', we might say, instead, that Nahmanides drew upon tools made available by his Christian intellectual surroundings to perfect his Jewish reading of the Bible" (285).

Of course, the aspect of Nahmanides' hermeneutic that ostensibly represented the most intractable obstacle for *peshat* exegesis was kabbalah, for it in effect held that the deep truth of Scripture's contents lay not with the saga of ancient Israel, its law and lore, but rather in a dynamic, supernal interplay within the Godhead. And where earlier *peshat* exegetes (especially Rashbam and the Karaite Yefet ben Ali, but also in all likelihood Abraham Ibn Ezra) could consider an authorial role for Moses in composing the Torah, Nahmanides insisted that Moses did nothing other than copy out the complete Primordial Torah that had existed with God since before Creation.²⁷ This understanding was, of course, required by Nahmanides' belief that this Torah was the repository of all potential wisdom, and that the Creation story itself was none other than a narrative of how God made God's own Self manifest in the Universe. Thus, where a *pashtan* would explicate the meaning of Scripture according to its words, its syntax and its narrative exposition, Nahmanides ultimately held that this was not its true meaning, but rather, as Cohen explicates, these "correspond on a metaphysical level to the divine reality composed of dynamic potencies or emanations" (191). So what, one might ask, was the need for *peshat* at all for such an exegete? The answer, as Cohen explains, is that Nahmanides is heir to both the Andalusian and northern French *peshat* heritage and could not do otherwise than incorporate into his own version of a multivalent hermeneutic:

To a large extent, Nahmanides shared the scientific and theological sensibilities of his... predecessors, and could not return to the uncritical attitudes reflected in midrashic literature and in Rashi. But he likewise rejected the radical philosophical reinterpretations advanced within the

²⁷ Ramban writes this explicitly in his Introduction: משה רבינו כתב הספר הזה עם התורה כולה מפיו של הקב"ה... והטעם לכתובת התורה בלשון הזה, מפני שקדמה לבריאת העולם... והנה משה כסופר המעתיק מספר קדמון וכותב "Moses wrote this book [Genesis] with the entire Torah, from the mouth of God... and the reason for the writing of the Torah in this language is that it pre-existed the creation of the world... And thus, Moses wrote as a scribe who copies [precisely] from a primordial book, and writes..." See at <https://mg.alhatorah.org/Full/Bereshit/0#e0n6>.

Geonic-Andalusian tradition. Kabbalah provided him with the tools to arrive at a more satisfactory *peshat* interpretation, while also retaining theological propriety.²⁸

This was, of course, primary for Nahmanides. And, as Cohen explains, whereas his 11th–12th century rabbinic predecessors were “seeking to carve a niche for *peshuto shel miqra* within a tradition dominated by rabbinic exegesis... Nahmanides was beginning his exegetical road with *peshuto shel miqra* as his point of departure” (299).

Regrettably, *The Rule of Peshat* ends somewhat abruptly with the chapter on Nahmanides. The only thing lacking in this otherwise brilliant volume is a concluding chapter in which Cohen might have offered his perspective on the significance of the whole journey on which he has taken his readers, and why he thinks the rule of *peshat* declined as the focal point of Jewish exegesis in the way it did. Otherwise, my judgment on the book stands: all future researchers of the history of medieval biblical exegesis must carefully incorporate the findings of this most important study.

As we turn to Cohen’s *Rashi, Biblical Interpretation, and Latin Learning*, let us note that there are obvious overlaps between this fine work and *The Rule of Peshat*. Whereas *The Rule of Peshat* ranges wide and far and over the course of hundreds of years of exegetical history, Cohen’s book on Rashi focuses mainly on one formidable exegete, alone, and seeks to understand Rashi’s exegetical program within the context of 11th Century northern France.²⁹ The book contains nine chapters: A New Program of *Peshat* (“Plain Sense” Exegesis); “Settling” the Words of Scripture Using Midrash; St. Bruno on Psalms: Precedent for Rashi?; Comparison to the Andalusian Exegetical School; Comparison to the Byzantine Exegetical School;³⁰ Rashi’s Literary Sensibilities and Latin Grammatica; Rashi’s Notion of “the Poet” (*ha-Meshorer*) in the Latin Context; Joseph Qara and Rashbam: *Peshat* Legacy in Northern France; Literary Sensibilities of *Peshat* within a Latin Context.

The book’s subtitle, *A New Perspective on an Exegetical Revolution* points to the overlap to which I referred above. When considering the origin of Rashi’s exegetical program, Cohen wishes to situate this within the intellectual and cultural history of contemporary Latin learning. So far, so good: I am in complete

²⁸ Cohen, *The Rule of Peshat*, 299.

²⁹ Somewhat surprisingly, Cohen devotes the final two chapters (207–271) of the book to the exegesis of R. Yosef Qara and Rashbam. See below.

³⁰ The two chapters on Andalusian and Byzantine exegesis largely rehearse Cohen’s arguments from *The Rule of Peshat*.

agreement with this sentiment, and have been writing and speaking about this for the past twenty years.³¹ However, the proverbial “smoking gun” of origins has thus far eluded scholars; Cohen, on the other hand, wishes to point to one, and his most innovative proposal is to suggest a possible relationship between Rashi and Bruno the Carthusian.

Both in *The Rule of Peshat* (111–126) and in *Rashi, Biblical Interpretation, and Latin Learning* (79–101), Cohen makes the bold claim that the Psalms commentary of Bruno the Carthusian serves as a precedent for Rashi’s own exegetical program.³² Cohen rightly begins his investigation in the turn towards ancient Latin rhetoric during the Carolingian period, and references Quintilian as an important precedent to medieval Latin poetics (79).³³ Drawing on the excellent work of Andrew Kraebel,³⁴ Cohen aptly describes the important precedent of Remigius of Auxerre in assessing the rhetorical elements in Bruno’s Psalms commentary. Via Kraebel, Cohen also notes the attention Remigius pays to *ordo verborum* (“the order of the words”) in his commentary on Psalms 17:42, and points to an analogue in Rashi’s occasional reference to *מקרא מסורס* (lit. “a mutilated Scripture,” i.e., the words are out of order), as in his comment on 2

³¹ I referred to the “elusive smoking gun” of the origins of Rashi’s exegetical program in a Zoom lecture at Bar Ilan University on November 12, 2020 (מפשיטה דקרא לפשוטו של מקרא: גלגולי משמעותם של המונח והמתודולוגיה של פשט מן התלמוד הבבלי אל פירוש רש"י; this essay is not yet published). For an earlier proposal with respect to origins, though without the “smoking gun” analogy, again see my essay “From ‘Religious Truth-Seeking to Reading: The Twelfth Century Renaissance and the Emergence of Peshat and Ad Litteram as Methods of Accessing the Bible.”

³² Cohen had previously published this idea in an article; see Mordechai Z. Cohen, “A New Perspective of Rashi of Troyes in Light of Bruno the Carthusian: Exploring Jewish and Christian Bible Interpretation in Eleventh Century Northern France,” *Viator* 48:1 (2017), 39–86. I responded to this article, in part, in Robert A. Harris, “Genres of Prophetic Rhetoric in Rabbinic Exegesis,” in *Ve-‘Ed Yaaleh (Gen 2:6): Essays in Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies Presented to Edward L. Greenstein* (Peter Machinist, Robert A. Harris, Joshua A. Berman, Nili Samet, and Noga Ayali-Darshan, ed.; vol. 2. Atlanta: SBL Press, 2021), 1023–1045.

³³ Of course, a crucial question is to determine which medieval Churchmen knew Quintilian, and to how much of his Institutes did they have access? This is not an easily answered question, as a complete copy of Quintilian was not rediscovered until the Italian Renaissance, and one must sift through the *mutuli* and their provenance in order to determine to fully assess his precedence. I have been engaged in this project for some time, along with a corresponding investigation into Cicero’s *De inventione* and the pseudo-Ciceronian *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, which was regarded as authentic until the pre-modern period, and my research is as yet inconclusive.

³⁴ See Cohen’s *Rashi* bibliography, 287.

Samuel 22:42.³⁵ Cohen presents Bruno’s attention to rhetoric in his Psalms commentary (81–90), and then assesses its potential as a precedent to and possible influence on Rashi (90–101). He observes that “the methodological parallels between Bruno and Rashi, each exegete in his own tradition, are striking” (91). For example, Bruno expounds what he considers to be “the deeper sense of Scripture” through recourse to patristic allegory and mysticism in a way that seems to anticipate Rashi’s culling of ancient rabbinic midrashim to do somewhat the same thing in a Jewish context, and yet each likewise incorporates more literary considerations that reflect concern more typically associated with the tradition of classical rhetoric. To be sure, Cohen pays close attention to the increasing contemporary rabbinic attention to philology and literary understanding in the Talmud as a possible antecedent for understanding Rashi’s presumably subsequent, similar attention to these dimensions in the Bible. But he is rightly intrigued as well by the potential for seeing in Jewish-Christian dialogue (conducted, of course, in Old French) as a source for exchanging knowledge about biblical interpretation.³⁶ For example, Cohen cites a gloss on Rashi’s comment on Ezekiel 2:1, “this was told to our master [Rashi] by a Christian and it pleased him.”³⁷ To a certain degree, Cohen confuses his

³⁵ We might add Rashi’s and other rabbinic exegetes’ observations with respect to סדר בקראות, “the order/structure of Scripture”; see, e.g., Rashi’s comments on Exodus 33:13; 1 Samuel 24:5–6; Isaiah 26:11, etc. With respect to Rashi’s observation about “the order of Scripture” in his introduction to the Song of Songs, see n. 11, above, and Robert A. Harris, “The Voice of the Woman: Narrating the Song of Songs in 12th Century Rabbinic Exegesis,” in *The Jewish Middle Ages* (Carol Bakhos and Gerhard Langer, ed.; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2023) 103–31. With respect to Victorine attention to *series litterae*, see n. 16, above.

³⁶ See Cohen’s reference to Stephen Langton’s description of such a contemporary dialogue, in French (97); of course, this interaction took place either in the late 12th century or early in the 13th, and one ought to be cautious to infer from this to anything similar occurring a century or more earlier.

³⁷ This, of course, is a much stronger example; see Cohen, *Rashi*, 97–98, and 98, n. 82. Nonetheless, even here we must be wary: I recently cited this same example in a paper (“Speaking to and About the Other: Terms for Christians and Christianity Among 12th Century Rabbinic Exegetes”) I delivered at Boston College’s Corcoran Conference, “Shared Scripture/Divided Faiths” (March 19–20, 2023). A colleague in attendance, Benjamin Kamine, corresponded with me following the conference and called my attention to the somewhat suspicious use of the verb **הגיד** here: most of the occurrences of this verb in this conjugation in rabbinic literature are found in versions of the rabbinic narratives of R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus and his heretical leanings. Kamine writes that if Rashi’s student glossator had this story in mind, “then I wonder if it is a euphemistically pejorative comment – i.e., my teacher Rashi heard this from a Christian and liked it, falling into the same error as R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus.” It is an intriguing idea, for which I am most grateful, but it deserves a more thorough investigation than what I can offer here.

argument by referring to, e.g., Rashbam's knowledge of Latin and/or exchanges between Rashi's grandchildren and their contemporary Christian contacts (97); such observations may pertain, of course, to the middle of the 12th century but have a questionable place in considerations of 11th century influences. Likewise, Cohen considers as evidence Rashi's anti-Christian polemics, especially in his Psalms commentary.³⁸ However, such polemics are likely as much rooted in Rashi's general experience of Christianity as they are any specific prior literary source.

Among contemporary scholars of medieval biblical exegesis, it was Elazar Touitou who most forcefully considered the important role of European Christian scholarship and culture as a source for the development of northern French *peshat*.³⁹ Cohen himself astutely continues that approach, and considers that "the parallels we have noted between Bruno and Rashi suggest a particularly fitting responses" (100) to the questions Touitou's scholarship had raised. Nonetheless, it is at the particular juncture of assessing the specific influence that Bruno may have had on Rashi that Cohen, like all interested parties investigating the antecedents of northern French *peshat*, must revert to the subjunctive mood:

If Rashi became aware of Bruno's Psalms commentary, it would have posed a special danger... this sort of commentary would have called for a particularly sophisticated response. For the purpose of this argument, it is not necessary to presume that Rashi had a detailed knowledge of Bruno's commentary... it would have been sufficient for Rashi to have grasped the gist of Bruno's exegetical project... This could certainly

³⁸ Cohen cites a number of texts (see 99–100, and nn. 90–91), although he appears to be unaware of my earlier analysis of much of this same material. See Robert A. Harris, "Rashi and the "Messianic" Psalms," in *Birkat Shalom: Studies in the Bible, Ancient Near Eastern Literature, and Postbiblical Judaism Presented to Shalom M. Paul on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday* (Chaim Cohen, Victor Avigdor Hurowitz, Avi Hurvitz, Yochanan Muffs, Baruch J. Schwartz, and Jeffrey H. Tigay, ed.; Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 845–62.

³⁹ See, e.g., Elazar Touitou, *Exegesis in Perpetual Motion: Studies in the Pentateuchal Commentary of Rabbi Samuel Ben Meir* [Hebrew] (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2003), especially 11–46; see also his earlier studies, "La Renaissance Du 12 Siecle Et L'Exegese Biblique De Rashbam," *Archives Juives* 20, no. 1–2 (1984): 3–12; "Exégèse Et Polémique En France Médiévale," *Archives Juives* 22:4 (1986): 51–54.; and "Courants Et Contre-Courants Dans L'Exegese Biblique Juive En France Au Moyen-Age," in *Creative Biblical Exegesis: Christian and Jewish Hermeneutics Through the Centuries* (Benjamin Uffenheimer and Henning Graf Reventlow, ed.; Worcester: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), 131–47. See also Elazar Touitou, "The Historical Background of Rashi's Commentary on Genesis 1–5," in *Rashi Studies* (Zvi Arie Steinfeld, ed.; Jerusalem: Bar -Ilan University Press, 1993), 97–105.

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have caused Rashi to regard the traditional midrashic commentaries... as inadequate and impelled him to devise a commentary of his own that draws upon midrashic interpretation selectively in order to demonstrate the cogency of the traditional Jewish readings, and not the Christian ones.⁴⁰

Thus, at the present time, the best that Cohen (and I!) can argue is for *zeitgeist*, and the plausibility of considering Rashi and the rise of the later northern French *peshat* school within the context of Christian scholarship, and the increased influence of ancient Latin rhetoric and literary considerations in Christian exegesis.

Any researcher in medieval biblical exegesis is indebted to Mordechai Cohen for his industrious and comprehensive scholarship, and will be fully rewarded by close study of both of the volumes I have reviewed here. Indeed, both books are indispensable, and are essential for all future studies of this subject.

⁴⁰ Cohen, *Rashi*, 100–101 and n. 93.