

**POLEMICS OR EXEGESIS?  
RECONSIDERING THE AIMS AND NATURE OF  
RASHI'S BIBLE COMMENTARY  
REVIEW ESSAY ON  
AVRAHAM GROSSMAN, RASHI AND THE JEWISH-  
CHRISTIAN POLEMIC**

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מאמר זה מוקדש לזכר פרופ' אברהם גרוסמן ז"ל. צדיקים במיתתם קרויים חיים.

Rashi (Rabbi Solomon Yitzhaki; Troyes 1040–1105) was the most influential Jewish Bible commentator of all time and has been the focus of numerous studies in modern scholarship, following on the heels of centuries of supercommentaries. Increasingly, the study of Rashi as a Bible interpreter has become linked with an understanding of the sage of Troyes as a rabbinic scholar in his eleventh-century Franco-German world.<sup>1</sup> It is now becoming apparent that an appreciation of this milieu is essential for understanding his commentaries, and, as we shall argue, even for discerning what could have possibly motivated Rashi to revolutionize Ashkenazic Bible study with his

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<sup>1</sup> See Ezra Shereshevsky, *Rashi, The Man and His World* (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press 1982).

distinctive concept of *peshat*, as well as the role played by the midrashic material woven into his commentaries.<sup>2</sup>

### 1. Grossman's new study

Few scholars have done as much to illuminate Rashi within his Ashkenazic rabbinic milieu as Avraham Grossman, author of the two magisterial volumes, *The Early Sages of Ashkenaz* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1981), and *The Early Sages of France* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1988), as well as *Rashi: Religious Beliefs and Social Views* (Hebrew: Alon Shevut, 2007), translated to English by Joel Linsider, *Rashi* (Oxford, 2012). In the 1990s Grossman contributed to our understanding of the complex state of the text of Rashi's Bible commentary by demonstrating the importance of MS Leipzig 1 (Universitätsbibliothek B.H. 1. Ashkenaz, 13th century) for getting a clearer picture of its development, and for arriving at the most precise text.<sup>3</sup> Grossman's new volume,

<sup>2</sup> Much has been written on Rashi's exegetical methodology. Of particular importance are Sarah Kamin, *Rashi's Exegetical Categorization in Respect to the Distinction between Peshat and Derash* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1986) and Benjamin Gelles, *Peshat and Derash in the Exegesis of Rashi* (Leiden: Brill, 1981). The argument that Rashi's Bible commentary must be understood within the context of Latin learning in his time was made most forcefully a generation ago by Eleazar Touitou, followed by Kamin. See Eleazar Touitou, "Shit'ato ha-Parshanut shel Rashbam 'al Reqa' ha-Meši'ut ha-Historit shel Zeman" (Rashbam's Exegetical System within the Context of the Historical Reality of his Time), in *Studies in Rabbinic Literature, Bible and Jewish History [Dedicated to Professor Ezra Zion Melammed]*, ed. Y. D. Gilat, Ch. Levine, Z. M. Rabinowitz (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1982), 48–74; idem, "Rashi's Commentary on Genesis 1–6 in the Context of Judeo-Christian Controversy," *HUCA* 61 (1990): 159–183; Sarah Kamin, "Affinities Between Jewish and Christian Exegesis in 12th Century Northern France," *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies 9, Panel Sessions: Bible Studies and Ancient Near East* (1988) 141–155; reprinted in Sarah Kamin, *Jews and Christians Interpret the Bible*, 2d edition, ed. Sara Japhet (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2009), xxi–xxxv (English section). The argument was made anew in Mordechai Z. Cohen, *Rashi, Biblical Interpretation, and Latin Learning: A New Perspective on an Exegetical Revolution* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> "Marginal Notes and Addenda of R. Shemaiah and the Text of Rashi's Biblical Commentary" (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 60 (1990–1991): 67–98; "MS Leipzig 1 and Rashi's Commentary on the Pentateuch" (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 62 (1992–1993): 621–624. This is a critical issue since the textus receptus of Rashi in the *Miqra'ot Gedolot*, i.e., the biblical

*Rashi and the Jewish-Christian Polemic* (Hebrew; Ramat-Gan, 2021), builds upon all of those studies and opens new vistas in our understanding of Rashi's tension-fraught cultural context.

Rashi's anti-Christian polemics have attracted scholars' attention throughout the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> This trend increased dramatically in recent years, as part of a transformation of the perception of his Ashkenazic world itself. As David Berger notes, "the prevailing impression of Northern European Jewry in the High Middle Ages [had long been]... one of an insular community, hostile to and ignorant of the society that surrounded it." Over the last generation, however, scholars increasingly have come to suppose "that Northern European Jews discussed biblical texts with Christians in non-polemical contexts, that Jewish exegesis was profoundly influenced by both the Jewish-Christian confrontation and the intellectual atmosphere of the twelfth-century

text accompanied by Rashi and other traditional commentaries printed from the early sixteenth century to the present, has been shown to be plagued by textual corruptions. Rashi on the Pentateuch in particular was subject to some omissions—and surprisingly numerous additions. Throughout the twentieth century, scholars relied on Abraham Berliner's critical edition, *Raschi: der Kommentar des Salomo B. Isak über den Pentateuch* (2nd edition; Frankfurt A/M: J. Kauffmann, 1905), who addressed this problem by consulting early manuscripts and the first printed editions of Rashi's commentary. Over the last generation, however, scholars have come to realize the inadequacy of Berliner's text and the necessity of using a wider range of early Rashi manuscripts—now more readily available than in Berliner's time. See Eleazar Touitou, "Concerning the Presumed Original Version of Rashi's Commentary on the Pentateuch" (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 56 (1987): 211–242. The recently published *Keter* edition of the *Miqra'ot Gedolot*—which includes all of Rashi's Bible commentaries—is based on such manuscript research, but lacks a critical apparatus. See <https://www.mgketer.org/>. A critical edition of the Pentateuch commentary using a large number of carefully selected early Rashi manuscripts, with critical apparatus, is being composed by Hillel Novetsky. See <https://rashi.alhatorah.org/>. To date, the work has been completed on Genesis and Exodus 1–17. Rashi's commentary on the entire Pentateuch in MS Leipzig 1 is available there currently.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Yitzhak Baer, "Rashi and the Historical Reality of His Time" (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 20 (1950) 320–332; Judah Rosenthal, "Anti-Christian Polemic in Rashi on the Tanakh" (Hebrew), in *Rashi: His Teachings and Personality* ed. S. Federbush (Hebrew; New York: World Jewish Congress, 1958), 45–59. More recent studies, especially by Eleazar Touitou, are cited in the notes below.

Renaissance, that sharp polemical exchanges sometimes initiated by Jews took place on the streets and even in homes, [and] that Jews were sorely tempted by Christianity, and converted more often than we imagined.”<sup>5</sup>

It is important, of course, to differentiate between Rashi’s comprehensive Bible commentary and the dedicated anti-Christian polemical treatises penned in medieval Ashkenaz, such as *Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne* (France, thirteenth century) and *Sefer Nizzahon Yashan* (Germany, c. 1300). Closer to Rashi’s own time, though geographically and culturally more distant, is *Sefer ha-Berit* by Joseph Kimhi (c. 1105–c. 1170), a Sephardic author who settled in Provence. Furthermore, the polemical elements in Rashi’s commentary, indeed the characteristic expression *teshuvah la-minim* (lit. “answer to the heretics”), i.e., a rebuttal against the Christians, are not as prominent as they would become among later northern French commentators like Joseph Qara (c. 1055–c. 1130), Rashbam (Rashi’s grandson Samuel ben Meir; c. 1080–c. 1160), and Joseph Bekhor Shor (12<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>6</sup> The commentaries of Radak (David Kimhi; Narbonne, c. 1160–c. 1235) manifest an even more systematic effort to refute Christian proof-texts, often based on the work of his father, Joseph Kimhi.<sup>7</sup> In Rashi’s commentaries, by contrast, anti-Christian polemics tend to be less systematic, and less evident.<sup>8</sup> This has led some scholars to question the tendency of those who seek to ascribe a polemical motive to Rashi where he does not signal it explicitly. Shaye Cohen, for example, denies that clear anti-Christian polemics can be found in his Torah commentary, though he acknowledges their presence elsewhere, for example in Rashi’s Psalms commentary.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, Eleazar Touitou and Ivan Marcus have argued

<sup>5</sup> David Berger, “A Generation of Scholarship on Jewish-Christian Interaction in the Medieval World,” *Tradition* 38:2 (2004), 5. Reprinted in David Berger, *Persecution, Polemic, and Dialogue: Essays in Jewish-Christian Relations* (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2010), 41–42.

<sup>6</sup> See Avraham Grossman, *Early Sages of France* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988), 263–266, 481–495; Touitou, “Rashbam’s Exegetical System,” 66–67; Sarah Kamin, “The Polemic against Allegory in the Commentary of Rabbi Joseph Bekhor Shor,” in *Jews and Christians Interpret the Bible*, 89–112.

<sup>7</sup> See Frank Ephraim Talmage, *David Kimhi: the Man and the Commentaries* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1975), 87–91, 135–153.

<sup>8</sup> See Grossman, *Early Sages of France*, 207.

<sup>9</sup> Shaye J.D. Cohen, “Does Rashi’s Torah Commentary Respond to Christianity? A Comparison of Rashi with Rashbam and Bekhor Shor,” in Hindy Najman and Judith H.

that an implicit, more subtle polemic with Christianity can be detected even in Rashi's Pentateuch commentary.<sup>10</sup>

It would thus be fair to say that Grossman's *Rashi and the Jewish-Christian Polemic* is part of a broader wave of modern scholarship on this topic. Yet this new volume makes three contributions. To begin with, Grossman's treatment is comprehensive — aiming to address all of Rashi's Bible commentaries and not just samplings from particular books, as many earlier studies did.<sup>11</sup> Second, Grossman consistently uses early Rashi manuscripts overlooked by previous scholars, who (with some exceptions) tended to rely on the standard printed editions of the *Miqra'ot Gedolot*, i.e., the biblical text accompanied by Rashi and other traditional commentaries, published since the early sixteenth century. This difference is crucial, because Rashi's comments perceived as offensive to Christianity tended to be omitted, first by scribes, and later by printers, for fear of Christian censors, for example, Rashi's references to Jesus, to *minim* ("heretics"; i.e., Christians), or to "Rome"— his codeword for Christendom. Most of these polemical notes by Rashi are thus invisible in the standard printed texts, making his anti-Christian agenda seem marginal within his interpretive program, as it has indeed been perceived for centuries. But they emerge clearly, and in remarkable number, in the manuscripts, giving us a true picture of how central the struggle against Christianity was for Rashi. (As Grossman [44] notes, many, though not all, anti-Christian comments in Rashi omitted due to censorship have been restored in the newly published *Keter* edition of the *Miqra'ot Gedolot*.) Last, and to my mind, most important, this study goes beyond simply identifying anti-Christian polemical motifs in Rashi's writings: Grossman boldly argues that they shed light on Rashi's interpretive agenda at large, and even his very motives for composing a Bible

Newman, eds., *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 449–472.

<sup>10</sup> See Touitou, "Rashi's Commentary on Genesis 1–6"; Ivan Marcus, "Rashi's Choice: The Humash Commentary as Rewritten Midrash," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish Intellectual and Social History: Festschrift in Honor of Robert Chazan*, ed. David Engel, Lawrence H. Schiffman, and Elliot R. Wolfson (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 29–45.

<sup>11</sup> The chapter headings and sub-headings in this volume might suggest that Grossman's study is based on Rashi's commentaries on *Nevi'im* and *Ketuvim*; he actually discusses many passages from Rashi's Torah commentary throughout the volume, though he admits that the polemical aspect there is implicit rather than explicit.

commentary.<sup>12</sup> As we shall argue, his study impels us to reconsider the aims and the very nature of Rashi's commentary—matters sometimes taken for granted because “studying the Bible with Rashi” has been a constant, and seemingly unchanging, staple of traditional Jewish education.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. Overview and Outline of the Volume

Rashi studied in the Rhineland rabbinic academies of Mainz and Worms in his youth, c. 1060–1070, after which he began his own rabbinic career upon returning to his native Troyes, where he remained throughout his life. His teachers in the Rhineland were students of the great sage Rabbenu Gershom (c. 960–1028), who had pioneered a methodology of line-by-line Talmud commentary that was developed by his students, among whom were Rashi's teachers in the Rhineland. Scholars presume that Rashi began writing his own Talmud commentary even as a student in the Rhineland and essentially completed it by around 1080 (though it was revised throughout his lifetime). At that point, it is believed, he began to write his Bible commentary, which seems to have been mostly complete by the time of the first Crusade in 1096.<sup>14</sup> Whereas Rashi's Talmud commentary followed the path blazed by Rabbenu Gershom and his students, his Bible commentary was a ground-breaking work without precedent in Ashkenazic learning.<sup>15</sup> As a historian, Grossman (46) asks the important question: Why, in fact, did Rashi take this revolutionary step? The bold argument Grossman advances in *Rashi and the Jewish-Christian Polemic* is that the sage of Troyes penned his Bible commentary to fulfill the dire need of the beleaguered Jewish community of his time to combat Christian missionizing efforts, which posed a heightened threat in the second half of the eleventh century. In other words, Rashi perceived this spiritual danger to his

<sup>12</sup> This aspect of Grossman's scholarship follows a path blazed by Eleazar Touitou. See Touitou, “Rashi's Commentary on Genesis 1–6,” 160 (cited below at n. 71). Yet Touitou focuses on instances in which Rashi seems to be countering specific Christian interpretations or doctrines, whereas Grossman points to broad themes in Rashi's work to make a claim about the overall ideological motivation for his revolutionary biblical commentarial project.

<sup>13</sup> On the journey of Rashi's Bible commentary to canonicity, already established by the beginning of the early modern period (notwithstanding some vociferous critics), see Eric Lawee, *Rashi's Commentary on the Torah: Canonization and Resistance in the Reception of a Jewish Classic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> See Gelles, *Rashi*, 136–143.

<sup>15</sup> See Cohen, *Rashi*, 26–33.

community, which prompted him to compose what was in Ashkenaz a new type of literary work—a running Bible commentary—that would strengthen Jewish faith in the face of what Rashi referred to as “enticement” to convert to Christianity.<sup>16</sup>

Without an explicit statement of purpose from Rashi himself, it is notoriously difficult, perhaps impossible, to determine with certainty what actually motivated a medieval author like the great rabbinic sage of Troyes to pioneer a new genre like his Bible commentary. We know precious little about Rashi’s everyday life, much less all the influences to which he was exposed—except for those he mentions explicitly. Perhaps Rashi penned his Bible commentary out of intellectual curiosity? Perhaps he saw it as the next logical (though innovative) step after completing his Talmud commentary?<sup>17</sup> Perhaps he knew of earlier Jewish Bible commentaries composed in Muslim lands (though it is difficult to find clear references to them in his writings) and sought to emulate them?<sup>18</sup> Without any clear indication from Rashi himself, one must rely on sparse, indirect evidence gleaned from his writings, supplemented by relevant comments of his contemporaries and students—and a dose of conjecture, which is what Grossman does in this volume. His strong argument that Rashi’s primary motive for composing his Bible commentary was to bolster the faith of the Jewish community in the face of Christian “enticement” to convert is necessarily based on conjecture, supported by evidence, and attempts to explain away the counter-evidence. Yet, we can say that Grossman amply demonstrates a lesser, included argument: that the need to respond to the dangers posed to Jewish faith by Christian doctrines and interpretation was often on Rashi’s mind—more than previously assumed. This observation in and of itself, as explicated throughout the volume, contributes to our better understanding of Rashi, the man and his works.

<sup>16</sup> See Lisa Fredman, “The motif of enticement to Christianity in Rashi’s commentary to Proverbs,” *Megadim: Journal of Biblical Studies* 61 (2021) 29–47.

<sup>17</sup> Indeed, in the mid-twentieth some scholars argued that it was Rashi’s intensive activity as a Talmud commentator that prompted him to pioneer his philological-contextual analysis of the Bible, as a sort of natural extension of his analysis of the Talmud line-by-line. See Grossman, *Sages of France*, 458–459. Yet, as Grossman there notes, this factor, by itself, seems insufficient to explain Rashi’s motivation for engaging in Bible exegesis, since at least two generations of intensive Talmud commentary preceded Rashi in the Rhineland academies, without producing any substantial commentaries on the Bible, as far as we know. See also Cohen, *Rashi*, 10.

<sup>18</sup> See Cohen, *Rashi*, 102–133.

*Rashi and the Jewish-Christian Polemic* consists of ten chapters, preceded by a substantive introduction, which lays the historical foundations of the study. Following a survey of the Jewish-Christian debate from its origins in the second century (13–21), Grossman addresses new developments in Rashi's time. Most dramatic among them is the Crusade of 1096, with the massacres it sparked in the Rhineland, which called for new theological responses from Jewish thinkers (21–22). This need was compounded by Crusader conquests in the Holy Land, which, to many, demonstrated the supremacy of Christianity (22–27). Admittedly, the Crusade occurred only late in Rashi's lifetime, almost certainly after he had completed his Bible commentary, or at least the majority thereof. And so, this cannot be regarded as a factor that motivated Rashi's decision to compose the commentary in the first place. Yet Grossman cites the view of earlier scholars—for which he offers new evidence from an unpublished *piyyut* commentary by Rashi's close student Shemaiah—that at least some of Rashi's Bible commentaries were written, or least were being revised, in the last decade of his life, until his death in 1105, which would have given him ample opportunity to react there to events surrounding the Crusade (87, 110–112).

Grossman also considers the possible impact of developments in Latin learning on Rashi's thought (27–30), a subject to which will return below to discuss in greater detail. He goes on to survey Jewish-Christian polemics during and after Rashi's time (30–41), and the special attention Christian inquisitors and censors paid to Rashi from the thirteenth century onward (41–44). Grossman argues that his Bible commentary was singled out because it served as a bulwark against Christian missionizing efforts. Alternatively, of course, one could argue, that Rashi's commentary was a target because of its unparalleled popularity and the authority it commanded in the Jewish community, and even among some learned Christians, which, by itself, would have made ecclesiastical authorities especially sensitive about Rashi's anti-Christian barbs.<sup>19</sup>

Chapter 1, “Rashi's Sense of Mission,”<sup>20</sup> places his commentaries in the context of his leadership role in the Jewish community, and the spiritual danger posed by Christian “enticement” to convert. As Grossman (48) notes, this was not merely a theoretical issue, as many Ashkenazic Jews did, in fact, convert to Christianity,

<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., Marcus, “Rashi's Choice,” 41–43. Generally speaking, however, Marcus agrees with Grossman's assessment of Rashi's unstated polemical motives.

<sup>20</sup> Except where noted, we follow the translations of Grossman's chapter headings as given in the English table of contents at the end of the volume.

including the son of Rabbenu Gershom, as well as of other communal leaders.<sup>21</sup> In Grossman's view, Rashi's commentaries were not simply an academic exercise to explicate the biblical text. Rather, they were intended to strengthen the faith of the Jewish community by (1) emphasizing the importance of learning, to equip every Jew with a firm understanding of the essentials of the Torah and rabbinic tradition; (2) inculcating respect for the authority of the community and the family unit; (3) and providing answers to Christian arguments against the Jewish faith (49–67). It is important at this point to note that Grossman here reveals that he defines Rashi's "polemical" agenda broadly: it is not simply a matter of refuting Christian biblical proof-texts, as the overtly polemical *Sefer ha-Berit*, *Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne*, and *Sefer Nizzahon Yashan* did, a matter to which we return below.

Chapter 2, "Seven Books of the Bible and Rashi's Commentary," the longest chapter in the volume (68–154), identifies the biblical books in which Rashi's anti-Christian polemical motives are most evident: Isaiah, Zachariah, Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Songs, Lamentations, and Daniel. The remaining eight chapters are arranged thematically—but draw upon discussions in this chapter, resulting in repetitions, which is perhaps unavoidable. In any case, in this chapter Grossman first lays out the polemical themes characteristic of each biblical book according to Rashi. For example, the admonitions against cavorting with a "foreign" woman (a prostitute or adulteress) in Proverbs are rendered by Rashi as a warning not to be "enticed" by Christianity (116–121, 257–258).<sup>22</sup> Song of Songs is read by Rashi as a dialogue between God and the Jewish people in exile expressing their mutual eternal love, which, as earlier scholars have argued, is evidently intended as an implicit rebuttal of the Christian reading of the Song as an expression of the love between Christ and his "bride," who is the Church (121–135, 263–269).<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> See Grossman, *Early Sages of France*, 502–504.

<sup>22</sup> See Fredman, "Motif of Enticement." As Grossman (115–116) notes, many references to Christianity in Rashi on Proverbs were omitted in the printed editions of the *Miqra'ot Gedolot*. He therefore based his study on the critical edition, *Perush Rashi le-Sefer Mishlei*, ed. Lisa Fredman (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 2019).

<sup>23</sup> See Sarah Kamin, "Rashi's commentary on the Song of Songs and Jewish-Christian Polemic" (Hebrew), in: *Jews and Christians Interpret the Bible*, 22–57; "דגמא" in Rashi's Commentary on Song of Songs" (Hebrew), in: *Jews and Christians Interpret the Bible*, 69–88. Kamin essentially makes two distinct arguments, a stronger, specific argument of influence, and a weaker, more general argument that we may term "response." She argues that Rashi was influenced by, and responded polemically

Of special importance is Grossman's exposition of Rashi on Daniel 11, a vision about the campaigns of the evil "king of the north," usually identified as the Seleucid Greek Emperor Antiochus IV Epiphanes (215–164 BCE), who oppressed Judea, spurring the Maccabean revolt. Rashi, however, introduces other themes into this

specifically to, the Song of Songs commentary of the third-century Alexandrian Greek Church Father Origen, who set the course of medieval Latin interpretation of this book (despite the fact that Origen himself was condemned for heresy). Kamin based this conclusion on rather specific exegetical and terminological parallels between the two commentators that, as she reasons, are unlikely to be coincidental. Origen's commentary, translated into Latin by Rufinus in the fourth century, along with Jerome's translation of two of Origen's Homilies on the Song of Songs, are attested in numerous twelfth-century manuscripts, when there was a dramatic revival of interest in this controversial Alexandrian Father. See Jean Leclercq, "Origène au XIIe siècle," *Irenikon* 24 (1951): 425–439. However, there is ample evidence to suggest that Origen's works on the Song of Songs were studied widely even in the eleventh century, making it reasonable to suppose that Rashi could have learned of his distinctive exegetical methodology through conversations with learned Christians. See Rossana Guglielmetti, "Origenes: Osculetur me osculo oris sui": Le père (difficile) du Cantique des Cantiques du Moyen Age Latin," in *Transmission Et Réception Des Pères Grecs Dans L'occident De L'antiquité Tardive À La Renaissance : Entre Philologie Herméneutique Et Théologie : Actes Du Colloque International Organisé Du 26 Au 28 Novembre 2014 À L'université De Strasbourg*, ed. Emanuela Prinzivalli et al. (Paris: Institut D'études Augustiniennes, 2016), 135–157. Origen's overall allegorical approach to the Song of Songs was adopted by a number of important medieval Latin interpreters, including Gregory the Great (sixth century) and Haimo of Auxerre (d. 855), whose commentaries on the Song of Songs circulated widely in the tenth and eleventh centuries. See E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 34–41. Kamin ("Rashi on Song of Songs," 35; אגמ"ד, 84, n. 58) acknowledges that the extant Latin commentaries that follow Origen's basic approach do not preserve the specific exegetical characteristics of his commentary for which she identified parallels in Rashi. However, this does not preclude the possibility that Rashi was responding, in general, to the (Origen-influenced) Christian reading of the Song of Songs as a dialogue between Christ and the Church—which undoubtedly would have been well-known by learned Christians in his time and place.

chapter, which, according to Grossman, reveal his polemical motives.<sup>24</sup> On Daniel 11:14, “And the lawless sons of your people will assert themselves to confirm the vision,” Rashi comments: “I saw that this was interpreted in the name of Rabbi Saadia, that he said: ‘This is Jesus the Nazarene and his followers.’”<sup>25</sup> This gloss is cited by Grossman (150, 163) from MS Vienna 23 (=Vienna, Nationalbibliothek 23, Hebr. 220; 13th or 14th century), a manuscript he considers especially accurate.<sup>26</sup> Not surprisingly, it is absent in the printed editions. While this explicit reference to Jesus is notable, it seems to me that Grossman should have mentioned that Rashi himself, regarding the identity of the “king of the north” and his malicious campaign, comments on Daniel 11:17, “Now I say that this is Antiochus the wicked, the Greek King, who declared evil decrees upon Israel... as written in *Sefer Yosipon*.”

<sup>24</sup> On Rashi’s possible polemical motives in his commentary on Daniel, see Robert Chazan, “Rashi’s Commentary on the Book of Daniel: Messianic Speculation and Polemical Argumentation,” in *Rashi et la culture juive en France du Nord au moyen âge*, ed. Gilbert Dahan, Gérard Nahon, and Elie Nicolas (Paris: E. Peeters, 1997), 111–121. Chazan argues that Rashi’s commentary includes implicit rebuttals of Christian messianic calculations based on the book of Daniel. But he admits that it is impossible to prove beyond doubt that Rashi’s motive was actually polemical.

<sup>25</sup> While the persona of Saadia Gaon naturally comes to mind, the identity of the “Rabbi Saadia” to whom Rashi refers here is far from clear and may actually have been an Ashkenazic scholar in his time by that name. See Eliezer Schlossberg, “Le-gilgulo shel perush Rasag ‘al Daniel 3:10” (The development of R. Saadia Gaon’s commentary on Daniel 10:3), in: *Studies in Hebrew Literature and Yemenite Culture: Jubilee Volume Presented to Yehuda Ratzaby*, ed. Judith Dishon and Ephraim Hazan (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1991), 81–87. In any case, the interpretation Rashi cites in the name of “Rabbi Saadia” is not found in Saadia Gaon’s commentary on Daniel—which is admittedly fragmentary and published from a unique manuscript. See *Daniel with the Translation and Commentary of Rabbenu Saadia ben Joseph Fayyumi*, ed. and trans. Joseph Kafih (Hebrew; Jerusalem, Ha-va’ad le-hotsa’at sifre Rasag, 1981), 199. On Rashi’s reliance on Saadia’s opinions regarding the book of Daniel and its messianic calculations, see Chazan, “Rashi’s Commentary,” 114, n. 9. See also Grossman 150, n. 181; 163.

<sup>26</sup> On the accuracy and importance of this manuscript, see Mayer I. Gruber, ed., *Rashi’s Commentary on Psalms* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 158–164. Gruber used the text of Rashi’s Psalms commentary found in this manuscript as the basis for his edition and translation.

Yet, Grossman is correct that Rashi otherwise introduces events from later time-periods into his reading of Daniel 11, beginning with the Roman occupation of Judea and its aftermath that led to the exile of the Jewish people (164–165). Also citing *Yosipon*, Rashi construes Daniel 11:30–31 as a reference to the Roman desecration of the Temple and destruction of Jerusalem. In the next verse, Daniel 11:32, Rashi takes Daniel’s words “those who deal wickedly against the covenant” as a reference to Jews who converted to Christianity (*meshummadim*).<sup>27</sup> By contrast, Daniel speaks of “the people that knows its God” (Daniel 11:32), which Rashi glosses: “but the devout of Israel, who adhere to the fear of their God will hold on it and not abandon it.” In Grossman’s opinion, Rashi understands these prophecies as a depiction of events that began in the Roman period, but recur throughout Jewish history until his own time. Hence, Daniel 11:33, “The knowledgeable among the people will make the many understand,” is glossed by Rashi: “*The knowledgeable among the people*—The scholars (or: wise ones, sages; חכמים) among them, such as Rabbi [Judah the Prince] and scholars of all generations (חכמי הדורות); *will make the many understand*—they will teach the common people the Torah, and will strengthen their resolve to maintain (or: observe; להחזיק) it.” In specifying that this refers to “the scholars of all generations,” Grossman argues, “Rashi reveals his innermost thoughts... that he himself is one of ‘the knowledgeable among the people,’” and “depicts the sense of mission that inspired him... to dedicate his life to exegetical creativity in order to strengthen the faith [of the Jewish community] in the face of the missionizing efforts of the Church” (165–166). In other words, in Grossman’s opinion, this gloss is a self-reflection by Rashi about his responsibility as a rabbinic leader, which he fulfilled in his Bible commentary. One could, of course, take issue with Grossman and say that Rashi was simply offering what he considered to be the plain sense of the biblical text and not speaking autobiographically. To me it seems that when Rashi adds the detail that the “the scholars of all generations” are included among “the knowledgeable among the people” he must have had some sense—at least subconsciously—that this prophecy refers to him as well, and indicates his responsibility as a rabbinic leader.

Chapter 3, “Explicit Polemics with Christianity” (155–169), addresses the relatively few—but dramatic—cases in which Rashi engages directly with Christian interpretation. For example, Daniel 12 (148–153; 163–164), was understood in the Middle Ages as a calculation of the date of the Messianic coming. Daniel speaks of

<sup>27</sup> Grossman cites the text from MS Vienna 23. The text in *Miqra’ot Gedolot ha-Keter* reads *mumarim*, another term for converts to Christianity. Neither term appears in the printed text.

“the wicked... who act wickedly” (Daniel 12:10), on which Rashi remarks: “This refers to the *minim* (lit. heretics; i.e., Christians), the students of Jesus,” who “calculate [the date] incorrectly, and when the time is up, they say: ‘there will be no further salvation,’” thereby undermining Jewish faith in the Messiah. This comment, not surprisingly, is absent in the printed editions; it is cited by Grossman from MS Vienna 23, and is actually illustrated on the cover of the book. As Grossman explains, Rashi countered this Christian effort to weaken Jewish faith in two ways: not only did he offer his own corrective calculation (in veiled terms, to be sure); he also argued that the prophet Daniel himself foresaw this Christian trickery.

Rashi’s most explicit rebuttals of Christian interpretations are found in the Psalms. On the opening of Psalm 2, which refers to the “rage” of “nations” against “the Lord” and “His anointed one” (Heb. *meshiḥo*), Rashi, as cited by Grossman from MS Vienna 23, comments:

Our Rabbis interpreted this matter about the King Messiah. But according to its literal sense (*mashma’*) and as a rebuttal of (“answer to”; *teshuvah*) the *minim* (heretics, i.e., Christians) it is [more] accurate to interpret it about David himself. As it is said, “the Philistines heard that Israel anointed David as King” (2 Samuel 5:17) and the Philistines gathered their armies... And about them he says “why do the nations rage” and gather.<sup>28</sup>

Grossman (156–157) explains Rashi’s thought-process here: since the Rabbis had interpreted this verse about the future King Messiah, Rashi could have done so as well. But he was aware that “his anointed one” in this psalm was identified as Jesus Christ (lit. “the anointed one”) in Christian tradition. Indeed, already in the Acts of the Apostles 4:25–27, this verse was taken as a prophecy that Herod and Pontius Pilate, together with the Jews and Gentiles of Jerusalem, would plot against Jesus, God’s “anointed one.” Rashi sought to undercut that interpretive approach entirely, bringing evidence from the narrative in 2 Samuel that “His anointed one” is best interpreted according to the “literal sense,” i.e., within its historical context about David himself, rather than prophetically about some other “anointed one” in the future.

A similar comment is found in Rashi on Psalms 21:2, “O Lord! The King rejoices in Your strength, how greatly he exults in Your salvation!” As cited by Grossman (158) from MS Vienna 23, Rashi remarks, “Our Rabbis interpreted it as a reference to King

<sup>28</sup> Compare Gruber, *Rashi on Psalms*, 177 (English), 811 (Hebrew). Like Grossman, Gruber based his edition on the text of MS Vienna 23.

Messiah, but it is [more] accurate to interpret it as a reference to David himself, as a rebuttal (answer) to the *minim* (i.e., Christians) who used it for their heresy.”<sup>29</sup> Such a Christian interpretation is evident, for example, in the Psalms commentary of St. Bruno the Carthusian (1030–1101), Rashi’s older contemporary and influential Cathedral Master at Rheims (66 miles away from Troyes), whose importance for understanding Rashi is discussed below. According to Bruno, in Psalms 21:2, King David addresses God prophetically: “*O Lord* [i.e., the Father]! *The King*, i.e. Jesus, your Son, will rejoice in your strength, i.e., You will give him the strength of constancy in the Passion... he will attain the joy of victory by rising again... *He will exult greatly over your salvation*, i.e., over yours who are to be saved by him.”<sup>30</sup> Though the Rabbis had interpreted this psalm about the King Messiah, Rashi argued that it should be interpreted about King David himself, in order to undercut the Christological reading entirely. As Robert Harris has shown, this seems to have become a strategy used by Rashi throughout his Psalms commentary. In a marked departure from the rabbinic identification of the term *mashiah* (lit. “anointed one”) as the future King Messiah, Rashi usually (though not always) construes it historically, in reference to King David himself, or another Davidic monarch (Solomon, Zedekiah), evidently in order to preclude the possibility of interpreting the term Christologically.<sup>31</sup>

In both Psalms 2 and 21, the expression *teshuvah la-minim*, “a rebuttal (lit. answer) to the *minim*,” i.e., the Christians, signals Rashi’s explicit polemical intentions. This expression indicates that Rashi knew of the Christian interpretation and how it was used to support claims about the divinity of Jesus Christ—and that his interpretation was designed to undercut it, thereby establishing the Jewish reading as the correct one. The expression *teshuvah la-minim*, however, is missing in the standard editions of the *Miqra’ot Gedolot*, making Rashi’s polemical intentions invisible. As mentioned, Grossman cites from Rashi’s commentary as it appears in MS Vienna 23. Yet even more explicit is the text of Rashi’s gloss on Psalm 2 as it appears in a Moscow manuscript first published by Solomon Zeitlin, who dated it to the twelfth century, making it one of the oldest extant Rashi manuscripts:

<sup>29</sup> Compare Gruber, *Rashi on Psalms*, 253 (English), 819 (Hebrew).

<sup>30</sup> Translated from *Commentaire des Psaumes attribué à saint Bruno*, trans. André Aniorté (Le Barroux: Sainte Madeleine, 2017), 171.

<sup>31</sup> Robert 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*, ed. Chaim Cohen (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 2: 845–862.

Many of the students of Jesus (רבים מתלמידי ישו) interpreted this matter about the king Messiah. But according to its literal sense (*mashma'ot*) and as a rebuttal of the *minim* it is more fitting to interpret it about David himself.<sup>32</sup>

Here, there is actually no mention of “our Rabbis”! The original words רבים מתלמידי ישו, as Hayyim Gevaryahu argued, were replaced by the word רבותנו, an alteration to escape the notice of Christian censors. In the text Grossman used, Rashi merely hints at the Christian reading. But from the Moscow manuscript it would appear that, in his original commentary, Rashi directly referred to the interpretation in the Acts of the Apostles, i.e., “the students of Jesus.”

Chapter 4, “Unspecified Prophecies Against Christianity,” addresses the more prevalent case, in which Rashi does not announce his polemical aim, though Grossman argues that it is implicitly woven into his commentary. Biblical prophets foretold the destruction of Israel’s ancient enemies, at times unspecified ones, presumably because their original audiences knew the target of their wrath. Yet Rashi often interprets such prophecies about “Rome,” i.e., European inheritors of the Roman empire, the medieval kingdoms of Christendom (171–172). For example, Isaiah foresaw in his prophetic vision that “[God] has brought low those who dwelt high up, has humbled the secure city, humbled it to the ground, leveled it with the dust” (Isaiah 26:5). Rashi’s commentary in the standard editions of the *Miqra’ot Gedolot* reads, “Tyre and the other kingdoms,” which is eminently sensible, since Tyre, an ancient enemy of Israel, was the explicit subject the prophecy of doom in Isaiah 23. But the *Keter* edition has a different text of Rashi’s gloss: “Tyre, Rome, and Italy” (Grossman, 174). Evidently, “Rome and Italy” were later omitted, as Christian censors knew they are codewords for Christendom. Even where a prophet was explicit about the target of his prophecy of doom, Rashi at times would re-interpret it to make it relevant for his time. Thus, on Obadiah’s prophecy that God will bring judgment upon “Mount Esau” (Obadiah 21), Rashi cites the Targum’s rendering, “the great metropolis of Esau,” but then adds: “this is Rome” (172–173). Not surprisingly, that addition is also missing in the standard

<sup>32</sup> Hayyim Gevaryahu, “*Nuṣḥa’ot Rashi le-Tehillim we-ha-ṣenzurah*,” in *Haim M.I. Gevaryahu Memorial Volume* (Hebrew section; Jerusalem: World Jewish Bible Center, 1989), 252–253. See also Gruber, *Rashi on Psalms*, 180.

printed text. It should be noted that while Rashi's association of Tyre with Rome seems innovative, the equation of Esau and Rome had long been in place in Jewish tradition.<sup>33</sup>

Chapter 5, "Recoil from Close Relations with Non-Jews" (183–206),<sup>34</sup> addresses Rashi's complex attitude toward social interaction with Christians. Such interaction was a necessity for the Ashkenazic community, recognized already by Rabbenu Gershom; and Rashi himself worked closely with individual Christians (183–205). Evidently, he also discussed Bible interpretation with learned Christians. A remarkable anonymous note that Grossman conjectures was written by his student Shemaiah, records an interpretation of Ezekiel 2:1 that "a Christian offered to our Master [Rashi] and it pleased him" (186). Rashi could conceivably have had cordial, if not friendly, exchanges with some Christian scholars, with whom he shared intellectual interests, despite their significant religious differences. But with respect to the Christian community as a whole, Rashi normally expresses suspicion and fear. Christian oppression of the Jewish people is a theme that Rashi often reads into the biblical text. For example, King David's complaint about oppressive enemies in Psalms 9–10 is interpreted by Rashi as referring to "Esau the wicked," a codeword for Christians (200):

Rise, O Lord! Let not men have power (Ps 9:20) – Let not Esau have power forever.

The wicked in his arrogance hounds the lowly (Ps 10:3) – Esau the wicked lauds himself, for he achieves his unbridled lusts.

His eyes spy out the hapless (10:8) – the eyes of Esau lie in wait for Israel.

O Lord! Break the power of the wicked and evil man (10:15) – of Esau the wicked.

This is just one among many examples of what Grossman refers to as "actualization," Rashi's endeavor to make the ancient biblical text "actual" for his generation.

<sup>33</sup> See Gerson D. Cohen, "Esau as Symbol in Early Medieval Thought," in Alexander Altmann, ed., *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 19–30.

<sup>34</sup> Here I have modified the translation in the English table of contents "Recoil from Close Relations with Foreigners," which obviously does not reflect Grossman's usage of Hebrew word *nokhrim*, i.e. non-Jews.

This is, in fact, the theme of Chapter 6, “Actualization and Heartening the [Jews in] Exile” (207–236).<sup>35</sup> As Grossman shows, Rashi transforms the Psalms, for example, from a book about King David’s personal supplications into a guide to comfort the Jewish community in his own dark time. In Rashi’s opinion, King David actually wrote the psalms prophetically. On the verse, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? My God, I cry by day, but You answer not; by night, and I have no respite” (Ps 22:2–3), Rashi comments: “She [the nation of Israel] will go into exile; and so, David uttered this prayer for the future... [when the Jewish people will say:] ‘I cry out to You every day, but you do not answer!’” As Grossman notes, the Rabbis had interpreted this psalm about the crisis of the Persian Jewish community in Queen Esther’s time specifically; but Rashi places it instead in the mouth of his coreligionists “in exile” (*bagolah*), in other words, the long state of exile experienced by the Jewish people (211). One may add that this verse would have been well-known in Rashi’s Christian environment, since, according to Matthew 27:46, it was said by Jesus on the Cross (in Aramaic): *Eloi Eloi Lama Sabahtani*.<sup>36</sup>

For Rashi, the Psalms provided the Jews of his time with the religious-literary means to express their despair and even their doubts about God’s eternal commitment to them. On Psalm 77:5–7, Rashi paraphrases the psalmist’s laments: “In this night of exile I close my eyes, fainting from a weakened heart from calamities I witness.... [and] I wonder: Has His kindness ended?... Will He never forget His anger toward me?” (212). In light of their impoverishment and incessant persecution, it is understandable that some Jews succumbed to the temptation to convert to Christianity, a crisis Rashi felt compelled to address in his commentaries, as Grossman demonstrates.<sup>37</sup> For example, Rashi interprets Psalm 84 as a reflection of this very situation (104–105). On

<sup>35</sup> Here, too, I do not find the translation in the English table of contents satisfactory: “Historical Concretization of Biblical Prophecies and Heartening the Refugees.” The Hebrew chapter title is: אקטואליזציה ועידוד הגולים. “Historical Concretization” captures Grossman’s intention; but “Actualization” does so as well, and is the term he actually uses. I think “Jews in Exile” captures Grossman’s intention of the term הגולים better than “the refugees.”

<sup>36</sup> The entire Psalm was interpreted in the NT in reference to the Passion of Christ. See Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Bible with and Without Jesus : How Jews and Christians Read the Same Stories Differently* (New York: Harper Collins, 2020), 347–353.

<sup>37</sup> For Rashi’s approach to this crisis in his halakhic decisions and other writings, see Grossman, *Sages of France*, 151–154.

the one hand, he discerns the voice of those Jews who converted to Christianity, “those who violated Your law, and they are in the depths of Gehenna, crying and wailing,” as they will eventually recognize the errors of their way and confess, “He punished us appropriately and His judgement was correct... [as] we failed to listen to the one who instructed us to walk in the path of goodness” (comm. on v. 7). By contrast, the psalmist himself—speaking for those who refused to abandon Judaism—remains steadfast, saying, “I would rather stand at the threshold of God’s house than dwell in the tents of the wicked” (v. 11), which Rashi paraphrases “...rather than dwell in peace in the tents of the wicked Esau, to assimilate among [lit. to stick to] them.” Rashi’s Jewish readers would have immediately understood his references to the temptation to convert, to rescue themselves from their predicament among a hated minority and “dwell in peace.”

Chapter 7, “Selection of Midrashim and Alterations of their Language” (237–255),<sup>38</sup> addresses a key methodological issue. Given that Rashi generally drew his commentaries from midrashic sources, perhaps we cannot ascribe to him any original intentions? As Grossman shows, however, Rashi is original in his selection and reworking of midrashic material. For example, the lover in the Song of Songs compares the eyes of his beloved to doves (Song 4:1), which prompts midrashic investigations into how Israel (the beloved according to the midrash) is comparable to a dove in the eyes of God (the lover). Fifteen similarities are noted in *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah*, from among which Rashi selects and combines two that are presented separately in the midrash: “You are like the dove, who is ever faithful to her mate, and when she is slaughtered, she does not flinch, but simply extends her neck. Thus you (i.e., the people of Israel) accept the yoke of suffering of fear of God.” Rashi used the palette provided by the Midrash to paint a tragic but heroic portrait of the Jewish community of his time (243).

A yet more creative aspect of Rashi’s interpretive enterprise is discussed in Chapter 8, “Original Homilies by Rashi” (256–281). Earlier scholars have noted that in some cases no rabbinic source can be found for Rashi’s midrashic commentaries. Two explanations have been raised for this: either Rashi used a source text that has since been lost, or he actually created new “midrash.”<sup>39</sup> Grossman brings evidence for the latter and argues that this reveals the strength of Rashi’s sense of mission, which, in his view, endowed him with authority of the ancient Rabbis to engage in midrashic

<sup>38</sup> The translation in the English table of contents “Midrashim and Rashi’s Own Formulations” does not reflect Grossman’s Hebrew title exactly: בחירת המדרשים ושינוי נוסחם.

<sup>39</sup> See, e.g., Kamin, “Rashi on Song of Songs,” 24, n. 9.

interpretation independently (122). A prime example is Rashi's commentary on Song 7:9, "May your breasts be like clusters of grapes." The "breasts" of the beloved are taken in *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* to refer to Moses and Aaron, who taught the people Torah, thereby "nourishing" them spiritually. But Rashi takes these words—which he construes as an exhortation by God to Israel—as a reference to Jewish spiritual leaders of all generations, including his own: "The good and wise among you must stand firm in their faith to rebut those who entice you, so that the uneducated among the people should learn from them" (129–130, 209).<sup>40</sup> According to Grossman, Rashi's commentary on this verse is self-reflective, and encapsulates what the sage of Troyes regarded as the central mission of rabbinic leadership in his day: to equip the Jewish people with an education that would enable them to "stand firm" in their Jewish faith in the face of Christian missionizing efforts ("those who entice you").<sup>41</sup> Rashi did not find this "midrashic" reading in rabbinic sources; rather, as Grossman argues, he devised it himself to express, through the text of the Song of Songs, the divine message to the Jewish community and rabbinic leaders of his day (122).

In Chapter 9, "Love of Jacob and Hatred for Esau" (282–303), Grossman shows that Rashi was driven by his agenda to select midrashic readings that favored Jacob, while ignoring those that were critical of him. Conversely, Rashi typically deploys midrashic readings that portray Esau in a negative light. For Rashi, Jacob and Esau were prototypes, respectively, of the Jewish people and their hateful Christian neighbors. This typological approach has a precedent—albeit an inverted one—in Christian tradition, as noted by Yisrael Yuval, cited by Grossman (289).<sup>42</sup> In Romans 6, Paul interpreted Jacob as the spiritual father of Christian people, "children of the promise," whereas Jacob's "children of the flesh," i.e., the Jewish people, are Esau. Hence, the prophecy to Rebecca, "The elder will serve the younger" (Genesis 25:23) means that the Jews will be subjugated to the Christians.

<sup>40</sup> Grossman (130, 209) cites the text of Rashi in Rosenthal's edition: עומדים ביופים ("will remain beautiful"). We follow the text in the *Keter* edition of the *Miqra'ot Gedolot*, which reads עומדים באמונתם ("stand firm in their faith"), also cited by Grossman, 209, n. 3.

<sup>41</sup> The importance of this comment by Rashi for understanding how he perceived his own responsibility as a defender of Jewish faith was noted in earlier studies. See Kamin, "Rashi on Song of Songs," 22; Touitou, "Rashi's Commentary on Genesis 1–6," 163.

<sup>42</sup> See also Cohen, "Esau as Symbol," 31–38.

Rashi's ideological response to that Christian attitude is outlined in Chapter 10, "Preeminence of the People of Israel and their Eternal Superiority" (304–336). Rashi thus glosses the very first word of Torah:

*Be-reishit* ("in the beginning") – the world was created for the sake of the Torah, which is called *reishit* [as in the verse], "the beginning (*reishit*) of His path" (Proverbs 8:22), and for the sake of Israel, who are called *reishit*, "the first (*reishit*) of his fruits" (Jeremiah 2:3). (304)

As Grossman shows, Rashi takes every opportunity throughout his commentary to emphasize God's eternal love for the Jewish people (311, 321–325). In Grossman's opinion, Rashi emphasized this point because it was under attack in the surrounding Christian milieu and required strengthening within the Jewish community to uphold the faith.

Within Christian tradition, the Law as given literally at Mount Sinai, was superseded by Christ, and the Jewish people replaced by the Christians who are *Verus Israel*. Rashi countered this argument by emphasizing the cosmic importance of Israel's acceptance of the Law, until which point the very existence of the world was "conditional" (305–306). Throughout his commentary, Rashi highlights the wisdom of the law ("mitzvot") and praises the Jewish people for adhering to it (308–310). On the everlasting "covenant" with which Moses bound the people of Israel, Rashi remarks: "[God] binds you with oaths because he swore to your forefathers that he would not exchange their progeny for any other nation" (commentary on Deuteronomy 29:12, cited by Grossman, 325).

Here again, Grossman raises a key methodological question: Is it reasonable to ascribe a distinctive, innovative agenda to Rashi when he speaks of God's eternal love for the Jewish people, centrality of the Law, etc.? After all, these ideas are already prominent in rabbinic tradition, even in Scripture itself. Grossman argues, nonetheless, that Rashi's Bible commentary was a new vehicle to convey them in a more powerful way:

Anyone who reads Rashi's commentary... senses how personally he was invested in these themes, both intellectually and emotionally. He made every effort to convince his readers about the potency of the promises of Israel's eternal superiority and found the most fitting midrashic comments for this purpose... He connected these midrashim to the scriptures even where distant from the *peshat*. His commentaries contain consolation and encouragement as

much as exegesis.... Rashi knew how relevant this was for the Jews in exile in general, and in his time in particular. (335)

To me it seems possible to strengthen this point when we consider Rashi's new exegetical program, anchored in "the *peshat* of Scripture," as we shall discuss below.

Having outlined the key arguments in Grossman's volume, we would like to offer additional—and, in some cases, alternative—perspectives that shed new light on his study and its importance for understanding Rashi's revolutionary exegetical program.

### 3. "Answers" to Christianity?

We should begin by assessing Grossman's overall thesis. His strong argument that Rashi's primary motive in composing his Bible commentary was to enable the Jewish community to "stand firm" in the face of Christian missionizing efforts remains an unproven hypothesis. Yes, as Grossman observes, Rashi cites and refutes specific Christian interpretations; but those cases are quite rare. Most often, Rashi's anti-Christian "polemics"—as identified by Grossman—are merely implicit. In that case, one can, at most, suggest a polemical motivation, but proving it decisively seems impossible.<sup>43</sup> One could also raise the following counter-argument to Grossman's theory: if Rashi's primary goal in his Bible commentary was to inoculate the Jewish community from Christian missionizing efforts, why did he not explicitly rebut the biblical proof-texts that would seem to have been adduced most commonly by medieval Christians seeking Jewish converts, as evident from the attention they received in Jewish polemical manuals like *Sefer ha-Berit*, *Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne*, and *Sefer Nizzahon Yashan*. Most famous, perhaps, is Isaiah 7:14, "Behold, the young woman (Heb. *'almah*); is with child and about to give birth to a son," taken as a prophecy of the virgin birth in Matthew 1:23, based on the translation of Hebrew *'almah* as "virgin" in the Septuagint, followed by the Vulgate. Grossman notes the explicit and detailed refutation of this interpretation in Radak's commentary, and acknowledges that "Rashi [merely] hinted at this Christian interpretation, but did not mention explicitly that he was polemicizing against it" (32). Likewise, Rashi makes no mention of the well-known Christological interpretation of the "suffering servant" prophecy in Isaiah 53, which Radak also refutes in detail (comm. on 52:14, 53:12). Grossman argues that Rashi's interpretation of this passage about the people of Israel collectively was intended to undercut the Christian interpretation implicitly, though he

<sup>43</sup> This point is often noted in the scholarship on this subject. See Chazan, "Rashi's Commentary," 118; Kamin, "Rashi on Song of Songs," 23.

acknowledges that this is a far cry from the explicit refutation found, for example, in *Sefer Nizzahon Yashan* (319).

In the epilogue to this volume, Grossman acknowledges that Rashi's silence in those and similar examples calls his thesis into question.<sup>44</sup> The question is heightened, Grossman admits, when we consider the fact that those purportedly Christological biblical passages are treated explicitly in the polemical works penned expressly to refute Christian missionizing arguments, not to mention Radak's commentaries. If Rashi's primary goal truly was to shield Jews from Christian missionizing efforts, shouldn't he, too, have identified for his co-religionists the most common biblical "proofs" for Christianity and clarified how they should be refuted? Grossman's response is that Rashi preferred to take a subtle approach by offering alternative Jewish readings to the Christian ones, rather than engage in open polemics (337). In other words, Rashi did, in fact, aim to provide ammunition for Jews to repel Christian missionizing efforts from the Hebrew Bible. But he didn't make this explicit. The problem is that Rashi did engage in open polemics with "the students of Jesus" and *minim* (i.e., Christians) in his commentaries on Psalms 2 and 21, and on Daniel 11. If so, why didn't he do so to rebut what would seem to have been the most commonly adduced Christian biblical proofs for their faith?

While Grossman's argument regarding Rashi's polemical motive for composing his Bible commentary is weakened by these questions, I don't think it should be dismissed—at least as a reasonable possibility. After all, it's conceivable that Rashi altered his polemical tactics when writing his commentaries on different biblical books. Perhaps he engaged with learned Christians specifically in connection with the Psalms?<sup>45</sup> More important, Grossman amply demonstrates a more general thesis: that

<sup>44</sup> Grossman does not mention Rashi's silence about what would seem to have been the well-known Christological interpretation of Genesis 49:10—as evident from its explicit refutation by Rashbam. See Shaye Cohen, "Rashi's Torah Commentary." In Cohen's view, Rashi's silence about the Christological interpretation of that verse—by comparison with Rashbam *ad loc*—suggests that his motives were not, in fact, polemical. Indeed, Cohen draws a similar conclusion by comparison with Rashi's own rebuttal of the Christological interpretations of Psalms 2:1 and 21:2, stating: "The anti-Christian polemic in the Psalms commentary is unmistakable and unambiguous; not so the Torah commentary, where, if it be found at all, it is mistakable and ambiguous" (459).

<sup>45</sup> As discussed below, the parallels to Rashi in the Psalms commentary of St. Bruno the Carthusian may suggest that this work came to his attention. Precisely in Rashi's time—in the 1070s—Bruno was renowned at Rheims and the surrounding area as a teacher of

Rashi formulated his Bible commentary as a vehicle to bolster Jewish faith at a time that it was under threat, not specifically by refuting Christological biblical prooftexts, but rather by formulating a robust alternative Jewish reading of the Bible and its message for the Jewish people of his day. Whereas the surrounding Christian culture broadcast a message to the Jews, both explicitly and implicitly, that God had abandoned them and that the Christians now were the “true Israel,” Rashi sought to emphasize, on the contrary, that God’s very presence is continually amongst the Jewish people even in their suffering, that their tormentors will pay for their misdeeds, and that Jews who converted to Christianity will ultimately recognize the error of their ways.<sup>46</sup> In the words of Ivan Marcus, Rashi presented “a positive portrait of a community that appears to be rejected and insignificant but that is actually the central part of God’s plan for humanity... [thereby] provid[ing]... positive traditional Jewish readings of Jewish history and experience that replaced any putative Christian worldview.”<sup>47</sup> This, according to Grossman, was Rashi’s way of protecting the Jewish people of his day from “enticement” to convert to Christianity. Reflecting a perspective that emerges from Grossman’s study, Marcus remarks that Rashi “created a midrashic barrier between Jews and the attractiveness of Christianity.”<sup>48</sup>

What we are suggesting, then, is that Rashi’s Bible commentary is not essentially polemical but rather a work that aims to sustain Jewish faith at a time of crisis. This is not trivial. One might assume that distinguishing between polemical and ideologically

the Psalms, which was the most commented-on biblical book in medieval Christian culture, akin to the Torah for Jews. See Marcia Colish, “*Psalterium Scholasticorum*: Peter Lombard and the Emergence of Scholastic Psalms Exegesis,” *Speculum* 67 (1992): 531–548. It has been argued that some of Rashi’s interpretations of the Psalms were directed specifically against Jerome’s influential Psalms commentary. See Ezra Shereshevsky, “Rashi’s and Christian Interpretations,” *JQR* 61 (1970): 76–86. Admittedly, though, I am not entirely convinced by Sherevsky’s argument. See Cohen, *Rashi*, 100.

<sup>46</sup> Some of these themes were expressed prior to Rashi’s time in the *piyyutim*, i.e., liturgical poetry, which was an important genre in the medieval Ashkenazic community. See Avraham Grossman, *The Early Sages of Ashkenaz* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, Magnes Press, 1981), 95–102, 160–165, 294–295. Rashi’s innovation was to express them in his Bible commentary, i.e., to read them into Scripture itself. However, unlike the midrash, he does so systematically, in a running commentary designed to fit the language and context.

<sup>47</sup> Marcus, “Rashi’s Choice,” 37, 44.

<sup>48</sup> Marcus, “Rashi’s Choice,” 45.

motivated commentaries is merely a matter of semantics or of little practical significance. Yet this distinction profoundly affects how we understand Rashi's exegetical project and its place in medieval Jewish intellectual life. A polemical work, like Joseph Kimhi's *Sefer ha-Berit*, selectively addresses biblical passages to counter Christian claims. A purely exegetical work, like Rashi's Talmud commentary, focuses on elucidating the text without engaging external theological concerns. Rashi's Bible commentary, as Grossman demonstrates, falls between these poles: it is ideologically motivated but not overtly polemical. While Grossman often employs the term "polemic," what he actually illustrates is that Rashi sought to fortify Jewish belief by offering a compelling alternative reading of Scripture rather than engaging in direct refutation. This distinction matters because, unlike polemical works, Rashi's commentary remains methodologically rigorous, rooted in a genuine exegetical approach rather than in a mere reaction to external challenges. This, however, raises a crucial question that Grossman does not fully address—how Rashi reconciled his ideological aims with his commitment to sound textual analysis, a balance that defines his unique contribution to biblical interpretation.

#### 4. *Pashtan*-Exegete or *Darshan*-Educator?

In his gloss on Genesis 3:8, Rashi formulates a now famous programmatic statement announcing his intention to focus on *peshuto shel miqra* ("the plain sense of Scripture"), differentiating his commentary from the rabbinic midrashic tradition:

There are many midrashic *aggadot*, and our Sages have already arranged them in their appropriate place in Genesis Rabbah and in other Midrashim. But I have come only to convey *peshuto shel miqra* and the *aggadah* that "settles" (*meyashevet*)<sup>49</sup> the words of Scripture and its literal sense (*shemu'o*), "each word in its place" (Proverbs 25:11).<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Our translation of this word, used frequently by Rashi, as discussed below, is based primarily on the detailed linguistic analysis in Gelles, *Rashi*, 14–19 and Kamin *Rashi's Categorization*, 72–77.

<sup>50</sup> ואני לא באתי אלא לפשוטו של מקרא ולאגדה המיישבת דברי המקרא ושמועו דבור על אפניו. This text appears in eight early Rashi manuscripts (see <https://rashi.alhatorah.org/Full/Bereshit/3.8#e0nf>) and in *Miqra'ot Gedolot ha-Keter*. (Elijah Mizrahi, the best-known super-commentator on Rashi, evidently had this text as well. See Mizrahi on Genesis 1:14, 48:5; Numbers 29:39.) The standard printed editions and Berliner's critical text (2nd edition, 1905) read ואני לא באתי אלא לפשוטו של מקרא

The importance of this programmatic statement is confirmed by similar remarks throughout Rashi's commentaries.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, at key points, Rashi invokes the talmudic maxim that "a biblical verse does not leave the realm (lit. hands) of its *peshat*."<sup>52</sup> In the Talmud, this maxim is actually marginal, appearing only three times, and basically ignored everywhere else, as talmudic exegesis is midrashic as a rule.<sup>53</sup> Rashi transforms it into an exegetical touchstone, indicating the centrality of *peshat* within his interpretive system, one might even say his self-perception as a *pashtan* (practitioner of *peshat*).

Volumes, quite literally, are written about Rashi's programmatic statements, as Grossman himself noted—and discussed at length—in an earlier study.<sup>54</sup> It is therefore somewhat disappointing that in this volume the matter receives only the briefest

דבר ושמועו with דבר דברי המקרא דבר דבור על אפניו (‘‘But I have come only to convey the peshat of Scripture, and the sort of aggadah that settles the words of Scripture, each word in its place’’). Kamin and Leibowitz (both discussed below) analyzed Rashi based on that version of Rashi's gloss. MS Leipzig 1 reads, ואני לא באתי אלא לפשוטו של מקרא ולאגדה המיישבת דברי המקרא ופשוטו ושמועתו דבור על אפניו (‘‘But I have come only to convey the peshat of Scripture, and the sort of aggadah that settles the text and its *peshat* and literal sense, each word in its place.’’) The combination *peshuto u-shemu'o* also appears in Rashi on Genesis 33:20 (in MS Leipzig 1, Novetsky's edition in [alhatorah.org](http://alhatorah.org), and the *Keter* edition; the printed text reads *peshuto* only). Though the complexities of the precise formulation of Rashi's gloss on Genesis 3:8 are important, a clear understanding of his methodological intentions must take into account all of his programmatic statements, both complete and partial—as well as his exegetical practice—throughout his commentaries, as discussed below. On Rashi's use of the biblical expression דבור דבור על אפניו, sometimes shortened to דבור על אפניו, see the discussion and the notes below.

<sup>51</sup> For a lengthy list of examples, see Gelles, *Rashi*, 10–14, 144–150.

<sup>52</sup> On Rashi's use of the *peshat* maxim, see Kamin, *Rashi's Exegetical Categorization*, 122–130. On the translation of the maxim used here, see Mordechai Z. Cohen, *Opening the Gates of Interpretation: Maimonides' Biblical Hermeneutics in Light of His Geonic-Andalusian Heritage and Muslim Milieu* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 495–499.

<sup>53</sup> See David Weiss Halivni, *Peshat & Derash* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 53–79.

<sup>54</sup> Grossman, *The Early Sages of France*, 193–200.

mention, in Chapter 2, as part of Grossman's discussion of the polemical themes in Rashi on the Song of Songs:

In his... introduction to the Song of Songs, Rashi described the principle that guided his use of rabbinic *midrashim*.... [that] he gives preference to the *derashot* that are close to the *peshat* of the language of the verses, and apologizes that he ignores the many aggadic *midrashim* that "do not fit the language of Scripture and the order of the verses." These words of his are similar to his pronouncement, in his Torah commentary, regarding his essential approach: "But I have come only to convey *peshuto shel miqra* and the *aggadah* that 'settles' the words of Scripture and its literal sense, each word in its place." As is well known, Rashi did not adhere to this rule in his Torah commentary. And he certainly did not do so in his Song of Songs commentary. The sense of urgency and the obligation to strengthen the spirit [of the Jewish community] overcame every other consideration. (124)

Grossman dispenses with these conceptually loaded programmatic statements by saying that Rashi simply didn't follow his own methodological guidelines. Even the footnotes give no references to any of the scholarship (including Grossman's!) on these important passages.

In Grossman's defense, one might argue that the subject of the current volume is Rashi's anti-Christian polemics, and not his exegetical methodology. But Grossman's study is actually much broader than that and touches directly on the overall exegetical motives and program of the sage of Troyes. As such, it is integrally linked with the question of Rashi's exegetical conceptions—including the relationship between *peshat* and *midrash*. As we shall see, the very points that Grossman makes can be better understood in light of what recent scholarship has to say about Rashi's exegetical methodology. Conversely, Grossman's findings in this volume offer new insights into Rashi's motives for revolutionizing Bible commentary in Ashkenaz.

To be sure, Rashi's exegetical practice does seem at odds with his stated *peshat* program, as most of his commentaries are drawn from rabbinic sources that are manifestly midrashic. In other words, he seems to be a *darshan* (*preacher*, practitioner of *derash*), rather than a *pashtan*. The well-known answer by the traditional supercommentaries on Rashi since the fifteenth century is that he perceived a weakness (a "difficulty") in the literal reading, which is rectified by the *midrash*. When Rashi says he will cite "the *aggadah* that 'settles' (*meyashevet*) the words of Scripture" he means to say that the words, taken literally, are not "settled" properly, i.e., something

is missing or remains perplexing. The midrash is thus needed to “settle,” or make sense of them. In the twentieth century, Nehama Leibowitz developed this approach with great sophistication by arguing that many of Rashi’s “midrashic” interpretations respond in the most cogent way to nuances of the biblical text and can thus be regarded as *peshat*.<sup>55</sup> Accordingly, she paraphrases his programmatic statement on Genesis 3:8, “I have come to remove obstacles, to solve difficulties, and not to adorn or beautify or add to Scripture.” On this view, Rashi is indeed a *pashtan*, whose only goal is to elucidate Scripture.<sup>56</sup>

Proponents of that traditional approach viewed Rashi in light of the more developed *peshat* tradition of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, in the commentaries of Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, Radak, and Nahmanides. From that perspective it seems natural to wonder why Rashi relied so heavily on midrash—as he elsewhere manifests a keen *peshat* sensitivity. Leibowitz’s answer is that Rashi, in fact, used midrash in service of his *peshat* goals. As Martin Lockshin notes, this would mean that Rashi never expressed an ideological agenda in his commentaries; he aimed only to interpret the text of Scripture, whereas Grossman’s study depends on the opposite assumption, namely, that Rashi’s commentary was not simply an explication of the biblical text, but rather a vehicle to provide religious education and inspiration to the Jewish community.<sup>57</sup>

What advocates of the traditional approach overlook, however, is that Rashi would have known a different hermeneutical hierarchy. In his eleventh-century Ashkenazic rabbinic milieu, Bible study was entirely midrashic. As Rashbam writes:

The early generations, due of their piety, tended to focus on the *derashot*... and therefore were not accustomed to delve into *peshuto shel miqra*... [By contrast], our master, Rabbi Solomon, the father of my mother, luminary of

<sup>55</sup> See Mordechai Z. Cohen, “Reproduction of the Text: Traditional Biblical Exegesis in Light of the Literary Theory of Ludwig Strauss,” *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 17 (2015/6): 1–33.

<sup>56</sup> See Nehama Leibowitz, “*Darko shel Rashi be-hava’at midrashim be-ferusho la-Torah*” (Rashi’s method in citing midrashim in his Commentary on the Torah), in: *Iyyunim Hadashim be-Sefer Shemot* (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1975), 495–524; translated in Moshe Sokolow, *Nehama Leibowitz on Teaching Tanakh: Three Essays* (New York: Torah Education Network, 1986), 31–70.

<sup>57</sup> Martin Lockshin, “Review of Grossman, Avraham. *Rashi*.” *H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews*, March, 2013:3. See also Marcus, “Rashi’s Choice,” 30–31.

the Diaspora, who interpreted Torah, Prophets and Writings, endeavored to interpret the *peshat* of Scripture.<sup>58</sup>

The attention Rashi paid to *peshuto shel miqra* was revolutionary in Ashkenazic learning, even if it was diluted within his largely midrashic commentary.

A fundamentally different, and in my opinion, historically more sensible, understanding of Rashi was advanced by Sarah Kamin, who argued that he never intended to compose a pure *peshat* commentary. When saying, “I have come only to convey *peshuto shel miqra*, and the aggadah that settles the words of Scripture,” Rashi expressed two distinct goals: (1) to explicate the *peshat*; and (2) go beyond the *peshat* to offer selected midrashic interpretations that “settle the words of Scripture.” The nature of this latter qualification can be gleaned from the occasional comments by Rashi throughout his commentaries when explaining why he excluded certain midrashic interpretations. For example, on Isaiah 26:11, he remarks:

I have seen a number of midrashic expositions of the verses of this entire biblical section (lit. “above and below”), but they are not “settled” (*meyushavim*) upon the precision of the language (*diquq ha-lashon*) or the sequence of the verses (*sefer ha-miqra’ot*). I, however, am compelled to interpret it according to its basis and sequence (*ofnei sidrah*).”

From this comment we can infer that Rashi incorporated into his commentary only those midrashic interpretations that are “settled (*meyushavim*) upon (a) the precision of the language (*diquq ha-lashon*)... [and] (b) the sequence of the verses (*sefer ha-miqra’ot*).”<sup>59</sup> To be sure, these two notions—linguistic precision and respect for the

<sup>58</sup> Rashbam on Genesis 37:2. Much has been written about this assessment of Rashi by Rashbam. See Cohen, *Rashi*, 9, 31, 241–243.

<sup>59</sup> The root *y-sh-b* appears in Rashi’s commentaries in *pi’el* (*meyyashev*), *pu’al* (*meyushav ‘al*), and *hitpa’el* (*mityashev ‘al*), generally with the words of Scripture as the direct or indirect object (depending whether the preposition *‘al* is used). Here Rashi writes אינם אגדה המיישבת, על דקדוק הלשון וסדר המקראות; on Genesis 3:8 (cited above), דברי המקרא ושמיעו מתיישבים על לשון המקרא וסדר המקראות. In all of these cases Rashi speaks of the interpretation “settling” the language of Scripture (and its literal sense) or being “settled upon” the language (and its sequence), in other words, that it coheres with the language, fits well with it, in its sequence.

literary context—are essential to *peshat* exegesis. In fact, in his Talmud commentary, Rashi uses the term *diqduq ha-lashon* (in connection with a legal document) to connote *only that which the language says explicitly, and nothing else*.<sup>60</sup> In his Bible commentaries, however, Rashi does not limit himself to *diqduq ha-lashon*. He created a new criterion for inclusion of midrashic interpretations: “settling” the words of Scripture and its sequence. This category is not as strict as *peshuto shel miqra*, as it allows for greater interpretive creativity, and, most importantly, midrashic interpolation of ideas not evident from the text. Yet Rashi introduced new rigor in using only midrashic readings that somehow conform to the literal sense of the language and sequence of the text.<sup>61</sup>

Grossman paraphrases Rashi’s criterion by speaking of his “preference for *derashot* that are close to the *peshat* of the language of the verses.”<sup>62</sup> As opposed to that vague standard, it seems preferable to investigate the terms Rashi actually used. In addition to the terminology of *yishuv ha-miqra*, Rashi often alludes to the biblical expression *דבר דבור על אפניו* (Proverbs 25:11), often rendered “words (or: a word) fitly spoken.” Rashi invokes that expression, usually in shortened form (*דבור על אפניו*, (על אפניו)), in describing his selection of midrash.<sup>63</sup> In his gloss on that verse itself, Rashi writes:

*Each word spoken on ofnaw—means on its basis (kano). Similar to “I bear your fear, settled afunah [in me]” (Psalms 88:16)—established (mevuset); affixed to its base) and settled (meyushevet) within me.*

And in his commentary on the proof-text from Psalms, Rashi writes:

*...your fear afunah—Your fear is settled (meyushevet) and established (mevuset) in my heart. Afunah is the same language as “Each word spoken on ofnaw” (Proverbs 25:11)—on its basis (kano).*

<sup>60</sup> Rashi on b.*Ketubbot* 83b, s.v., רב אשי אמר. The term *diqduq* in Rashi’s usage does not necessarily connote the discipline of grammar (which Rashbam termed *dayyaqut*), as the term was used, for example, by Abraham Ibn Ezra. See Cohen, *Rashi*, 52–54.

<sup>61</sup> See Kamin, *Rashi’s Categorization*, 71–75.

<sup>62</sup> See the citation above from Grossman, 114. This characterization of Rashi’s selection of *midrashim* was common among Rashi scholars prior to the detailed studies of Gelles and Kamin. It even appears in Rashbam’s epilogue to Exodus. See Cohen, *Rashi*, 244.

<sup>63</sup> See Gelles, *Rashi*, 16.

The root *y-sh-b* does not appear in that verse of the Psalms. Rashi imports it to explain the notion of something firmly settled upon its base. In this vein, Shemaiah cites Rashi's interpretation of the words **דָּבָר דָּבָר עַל אַפְנֵי** in Proverbs 25:11, "that is, an expression well-integrated, well-fitted upon its place and foundation."<sup>64</sup> These and similar passages in Rashi indicate that that the sage of Troyes was guided by a new exegetical sense of literary coherence, sensitivity to the sequence of the verses and their internal organization, all in opposition to the atomistic tendencies of midrash to interpret individual words and phrases in isolation. Not "closeness" to *peshat* in general, but rather, interpretation that is faithful to the sequence and organization of the text, and the flow of the verses.<sup>65</sup>

The nature of Rashi's dual exegetical agenda, including his concept of "settling the text," is particularly evident—and clarified further—in Rashi's introduction to the Song of Songs:

"One thing God has spoken; two things have I heard" (Psalms 62:12) – "One verse can have (lit. goes out to) a number of meanings" (BT *Sanhedrin* 34a), but in the end a biblical verse does not leave the realm of its literal sense (*mashma* ).<sup>66</sup>

As Kamin noted, Rashi here innovatively combines two statements that appear separately in the Talmud, correlating the notion of scriptural multivalence ("One verse can have a number of meanings") with the talmudic *peshat* maxim ("a biblical verse does not leave the realm of its *peshat*").<sup>67</sup> In so doing, Rashi modified the vague notion

<sup>64</sup> כלומר מלוכד הדבר ומיושב על מכוננו ועל בסיסו. Grossman, *Sages of France*, 197, citing Shemaiah's gloss in his *piyyut* commentary from MS Parma 655, 33b.

<sup>65</sup> Kamin *Rashi's Categorization*, 71–74.

<sup>66</sup> The basis for this translation is the text of Rashi's commentary appearing in *Miqra'ot Gedolot ha-Keter*, which agrees with the text in JTSA MS Lutzki 778 published in *Secundum Salomonem: A Thirteenth Century Latin Commentary on the Song of Songs*, ed. Sarah Kamin and Avrom Saltman (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1989), 81 (Hebrew section). Rashi here cites the *peshat* maxim with a slight modification, replacing the term *peshat* with the similar term *mashma* ' (literal sense), closely related in Rashi's usage. See Gelles, *Rashi*, 119–120.

<sup>67</sup> See Kamin, "Affinities Between Jewish and Christian Exegesis," xxxii–xxxiii.



and foundation.”<sup>70</sup> Accordingly, Rashi systematically interprets the Song of Songs on two levels: first, he explains the human love story that emerges from a literal reading, and upon that he builds his allegorical reading that depicts the mutual love expressed by God and the Jewish people, which, as noted above, would appear to be a Jewish alternative to the Christian reading of the Song as a depiction of the love between Christ and the Church.

### 5. Why did Rashi Introduce *Peshat* Exegesis?

For the traditional supercommentaries on Rashi, followed by Leibowitz, the natural question was: Why did Rashi use midrashic interpretation and stray from *peshat*? For them, Rashi used midrash to “settle” the language of Scripture, to resolve difficulties in the literal sense, and thereby arrive at the true *peshat*. The “difficulty” in the text justified the midrashic interpretation. For Kamin, on the other hand, the qualifier “...that settle the words of Scripture” is a *criterion* by which Rashi selects midrashim, not a *justification* for citing them. Indeed, historically speaking, it would seem most reasonable to assume that Rashi would have perceived no need to justify midrashic interpretation—the norm in Ashkenaz. Rashi would not have had to “apologize” for midrash. On the other hand, he would have had to justify his new focus on *peshat*, which he does by citing the talmudic maxim that “a biblical verse does not leave the realm of its *peshat*,” a maxim that is, in fact, mostly ignored in the Talmud.

Rashbam’s remarks cited above reveal how revolutionary Rashi was in his Ashkenazic milieu. If so, why, indeed, did Rashi pioneer his new exegetical program? As Eleazar Touitou put it:

What happened at the end of the 11th century which stimulated the change in the educational curriculum of Franco-German Jewry? What... new needs...

<sup>70</sup> This dual exegetical program, as actually carried out by Rashi in his commentary on the Song of Songs, is well-reflected in the last sentence of the first half of Rashi’s introduction (cited above), according to the text in standard the printed edition of the *Miqra’ot Gedolot*: *ואמרתי בלבי לתפוש משמעות המקרא ליישב ביאורם על סדרם והמדרשות* (“As for me, I decided to grasp the literal sense (*mashma’*) of the verses, in order to settle their interpretation according to their sequence (*seder*), and the rabbinic midrashim I shall set, one by one, each in its place”). See the previous note.

[did] Rashi's commentary... meet... that were not satisfied by the existing curriculum?<sup>71</sup>

Touitou argued that Rashi sought to counterbalance Christian interpretation, which itself was developing in new ways in what would emerge in the so-called “twelfth-century renaissance” of Latin learning. This, Touitou argues, took two forms: (1) anti-Christian polemics; (2) a more subtle “response” in a new exegetical genre that met the emerging Christian exegetical modes on their own terms. Touitou daringly suggests that Rashi's *peshat* program was inspired by the same intellectual forces that inspired the renewed medieval Christian interest in the historical-literal sense of the Bible, as delineated in Beryl Smalley's influential work, *Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1941; 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1983).<sup>72</sup>

Grossman devotes a section of the first chapter of his volume to the new trends of Latin learning, especially Bible interpretation, in the “twelfth-century renaissance” (27–32). Yet he rejects Touitou's theory that Christian interest in the literal sense can be regarded as a motivating factor in Rashi's revolutionary turn to *peshuto shel miqra*, because the most relevant Latin sources cited by Touitou are from the Parisian school of St. Victor, especially the exegetical works of Hugh of St. Victor (c. 1096–1141) and (probably his student) Andrew of St. Victor (d. 1175), who postdate Rashi. Touitou's theory would seem to be dependent on what Stephen Jaeger has termed “the logic of looking for something where there is light even when you have lost it in the dark.”<sup>73</sup>

New scholarship, however, has brought to light a more relevant advance in eleventh-century Latin Bible interpretation. Recent studies by Andrew Kraebel and Constant Mews have explored the innovative and influential exegetical work of St. Bruno the Carthusian (1030–1101).<sup>74</sup> Originally from Cologne, Bruno came to study

<sup>71</sup> Touitou, “Rashi's Commentary on Genesis 1–6,” 160.

<sup>72</sup> For references in Touitou's publications, see n. 2 above.

<sup>73</sup> Stephen Jaeger, *The Envy of Angels* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 1.

<sup>74</sup> See A. B. Kraebel, “*Grammatica* and the Authenticity of the Psalms-commentary Attributed to Bruno the Carthusian.” *Mediaeval Studies* 71 (2009): 63–97; idem, “The place of Allegory in the Psalter-commentary of Bruno the Carthusian.” *Mediaeval Studies* 73 (2011): 207–216; Constant Mews, “Bruno of Reims and the Evolution of Scholastic Culture in Northern France, 1050–1100,” in: Beyer, Hartmut, Gabriela Signori, and Sita Steckel, eds. *Bruno the Carthusian and His Mortuary Roll* (Turnhout,

at the Cathedral School at Rheims (about 66 miles from Troyes) in his youth. From the mid-1050s till around 1080 he served as Master of the Rheims Cathedral School, where he achieved renown as a teacher of *grammatica* (i.e., reading and interpreting the classical poets) and the Psalms. After leaving Rheims, he would go on to found the Carthusian monastic order, and accordingly came to be known as St. Bruno the Carthusian. Bruno composed a substantial commentary on Psalms,<sup>75</sup> the most commented-on book of the Bible in medieval Latin Christendom (akin to the Torah for Jews), as it is believed to have been composed prophetically primarily about Christ and the Church.<sup>76</sup> Traditional patristic commentaries extracted this meaning of the Psalms exclusively through allegorical or “mystical” (“mysterious”) interpretation. Bruno, however, innovatively employed a “grammatical” method in his Psalms commentary that harnesses the language arts of Classical learning applied to secular poetry, in what was referred to as *enarratio poetarum* (“interpreting the poets”), to discover the intentions of the biblical authors.<sup>77</sup> Bruno at times takes note of the literal sense; but that is not his focus. Rather, he selected among the patristic commentaries those most suited to the language and sequence of the verses. Church Fathers like Augustine and Cassiodorus, in their influential Psalms commentaries, tended to gloss each verse of a given psalm in isolation “midrashically.” Bruno, by contrast, applied what Kraebel has called a “coherent, poetic hermeneutic” in which the consecutive verses of individual psalms fit together and are explained in light of each other, as one would interpret

Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2014), 49–81. On Bruno’s expertise in grammar and the Psalms, see the discussion below.

<sup>75</sup> *Expositio in Psalmos*, in: *Patrologia Latina (Patrologia Cursus Completus: Series Latina)*, ed. Jaques Paul Migne (Paris: Migne, 1844–1864) 152: 637–1420. French translation: *Commentaire des Psaumes attribué à saint Bruno*, trans. André Aniorté (Le Barroux: Sainte Madeleine, 2017). The commentary survives in a single manuscript, from La Grande Chartreuse, now Grenoble, Bibliothèque municipale, 341 (240), copied in the first third of the twelfth century. It was first published in 1611. Though its attribution to Bruno was questioned in the 1950s, his authorship has been reconfirmed by recent scholarship. See Kraebel, “*Grammatica*”; Mews, “Scholastic Culture,” 52.

<sup>76</sup> See above, n. 45.

<sup>77</sup> See A. B. Kraebel, “Prophecy and Poetry in the Psalms—commentaries of St. Bruno and the pre-scholastics,” *Sacris Erudiri* 50 (2011): 413–459; idem, “Poetry and Commentary in the Medieval School of Rheims: Reading Virgil, reading David,” in *Interpreting Scriptures in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, ed. Mordechai Cohen and Adele Berlin (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 227–248.

secular poetry according to the discipline of *grammatica*.<sup>78</sup> He incorporated traditional Christological interpretations selectively, occasionally noting those patristic readings that do not meet his exegetical standards, much as Rashi criticized midrashic interpretations that do not adhere to the language and sequence of Scripture.<sup>79</sup>

Bruno's impact is evident in Latin Psalms commentaries penned in northern France in the next generation, for example, by Roscellinus of Compiègne (d. c. 1125), John of Rheims (d. c. 1125), and Gilbertus Universalis (d. 1134).<sup>80</sup> Upon Bruno's death in 1101, a mortuary roll was composed with almost 180 entries by former students and other devotees.<sup>81</sup> Among them are praises of Bruno's virtues as "the teacher of many grammarians," "learned psalmist, most clear and sophistic" who "embodied the knowledge and prudence of the liberal arts... [and was the] supreme teacher of the Church of Rheims, most clear in the Psalter and in other sciences."<sup>82</sup> It is conceivable that Rashi would have known of Bruno, as three of those entries are from the environs of Troyes—one from Saint-Pierre Cathedral in Troyes itself, another from the nearby Benedictine monastery at Montier la-Celle, and a third from the nearby Benedictine monastery of Saint-Pierre at Montiéramey.<sup>83</sup> In light of Bruno and his sphere of influence, the case for understanding Rashi's exegetical program within its Christian context was made anew in my recently published study, *Rashi, Bible Commentary and Latin Learning in Medieval Europe: A New Perspective on an Exegetical Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

Touitou argued that the new medieval Christian interest in the literal sense was a catalyst for Rashi's *peshat* revolution. The parallels to Bruno indicate a more subtle development in Christian and Jewish interpretation in eleventh-century northern France. Neither Rashi nor Bruno aimed to interpret Scripture according to the literal sense / *peshat* exclusively. Rather, both assumed that Scripture conveys deeper prophetic

<sup>78</sup> Kraebel, "Prophecy and Poetry," 450.

<sup>79</sup> See Kraebel, "Place of Allegory."

<sup>80</sup> See A. B. Kraebel, "John of Rheims and the Psalter Commentary attributed to Ivo II of Chartres," *Revue bénédictine* 122 (2012): 252–293; Constant Mews, "Bruno of Reims and Roscelin of Compiègne on the Psalms," in: *Latin Culture in the Eleventh Century*, ed. Michael Herren et al. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002), 129–152.

<sup>81</sup> Beyer, Hartmut, Gabriela Signori, and Sita Steckel, eds. *Bruno the Carthusian and His Mortuary Roll* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2014).

<sup>82</sup> See Beyer, Signori, and Steckel, *Bruno and His Mortuary Roll*, 89–116; Mews, "Scholastic Culture," 50–51; Kraebel, "*Grammatica*," 66–68.

<sup>83</sup> See Beyer, Signori, and Steckel, *Bruno and His Mortuary Roll*, 171–172.

meanings relevant to their respective religious communities—as expounded by the Rabbis and the Church Fathers. But they both were innovative in using the tools of philological and literary analysis, which Bruno associated with Latin *grammatica* and Rashi termed *peshuto shel miqra* (using this talmudic concept in a new, more systematic way) to establish a rational yardstick by which to select the most fitting traditional interpretations—whether of the Rabbis or the Church Fathers.

Bruno’s exegetical criteria stemmed from his classical Latin grammatical training. His innovation was to apply these tools to the Bible, which had traditionally been viewed as *sui generis*, divinely inspired words that defy literary analysis.<sup>84</sup> Rashi obviously did not have exposure to the liberal arts and the Latin grammatical tradition. I have argued elsewhere that Rashi acquired the analogous grammatical-literary sensibilities through his extensive work in the detailed sort of line-by-line Talmud exegesis that had emerged earlier in the eleventh century in the Rhineland academies, where Rashi was trained by the disciples of Rabbenu Gershom.<sup>85</sup> Unlike the Bible, for which there had long been an authoritative midrashic interpretive tradition, the Talmud could only be interpreted philologically and contextually, based exclusively on what is evident from the text itself, just as pagan poetry was glossed by the classical grammarians. This Rhineland tradition of *enarratio talmudae*—corresponding to *enarratio poetarum* in the classical discipline of *grammatica*—was the foundation of Rashi’s education. His innovation, then, was to apply these very same philological skills to the Bible.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, Benjamin Gelles has observed a terminological link between the two projects: in his Talmud commentary Rashi also uses the term “to settle” the text in describing his exegetical goal, i.e., to interpret the language of the Talmud

<sup>84</sup> See Alastair Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 33–39.

<sup>85</sup> Cohen, *Rashi*, 91–95.

<sup>86</sup> The very idea that Rashi’s training as a Talmud commentator provided him with the skills necessary for developing his *peshat* method is implicit in the argument, first raised in the mid-twentieth century, that Rashi’s intensive involvement in Talmud commentary prompted him to apply his revolutionary philological method of Bible interpretation. That theory regarding Rashi’s motive for composing a *peshat* commentary, however, was rightly questioned. See above, n. 17. We, however, are suggesting that the parallel to Bruno and his grammatical exegetical approach helps to explain how Rashi (and not earlier Talmud commentators in the Rhineland, for example) came to transfer his skills of Talmud commentary to Scripture itself.

contextually and philologically.<sup>87</sup> Yet, the transfer of exegetical tools of analysis from Talmud to Bible commentary would not have been a natural one in Rashi's Ashkenazic milieu. The Talmud, a human literary composition, is not comparable to the Bible, which is divinely authored and therefore subject to a quite different interpretive mode, as embodied in midrashic interpretation, which had long been the sole focus of Bible study in Ashkenaz. Rashi's innovative move—analogueous to Bruno's in the Latin tradition—was to transfer the tools of Talmud commentary to Bible commentary. Rashi used the analytic “grammatical” skills he had perfected for interpreting a human literary composition—the Talmud (as Bruno did with classical literature)—to develop criteria for interpreting the Bible by critically selecting among the interpretations of the Rabbis (analogueous to patristic interpretation) those that are “settled upon” the language and sequence of the text.

#### 6. Christian Influence on Rashi's Interpretive Agenda?

Theoretically, then, Bruno might be regarded as a precedent for Rashi's innovative interpretive methodology. But how could Bruno, influential as he may have been among Rashi's ecclesiastical neighbors in Troyes, have actually made an impact on Rashi's interpretive thought? It is difficult to imagine the rabbinic master of Troyes reading Bruno's commentary, much less seeking to emulate it. There is no evidence that Rashi knew Latin.<sup>88</sup> More important, he would have utterly rejected the very essence of Christian Bible interpretation. The record by one of Rashi's students, perhaps Shemaiah, cited above about Rashi being “pleased” by a Christian who offered him a particular insight on Ezekiel 2:1 is remarkable—but exceptional. As Grossman points out (116, 257, 279–280), Rashi's opinion about the Christian reading of the Bible is expressed clearly in his commentary on Proverbs 2:11–16, “[Wisdom] will protect you... from a person who speaks perverse things (תהפוכות)... [and] from a foreign woman.” On these verses, Rashi comments:

The Torah *will protect you from a person who speaks perverse things* – those are the Christians, who entice the Jews to idolatry, and distort (or: pervert) the words of Torah into evil.

<sup>87</sup> See Gelles, *Rashi*, 17–19.

<sup>88</sup> See Touitou, “Rashi's Commentary on Genesis 1-6,” 166. Kamin, “Rashi on Song of Songs,” 55, n. 121; דוגמא, 87–88.

*from a foreign woman* – the assembly (or: Church; כְּנִסְיָא) of idolatry, i.e., heresy (*minut*, i.e., Christianity)... which entails casting off the yoke of all the commandments.<sup>89</sup>

Rashi regarded the Christian reading as a distortion or perversion of the Bible. It therefore seems highly unlikely that he would have turned to Bruno—or any other Christian exegete—as a source of interpretive inspiration.

And yet, in light of these and similar polemical comments by Rashi, there is a way to imagine Bruno's method having an impact on his interpretive thought. As Grossman argues, Rashi sensed that the Jewish community in his day was spiritually vulnerable to Christian missionizing efforts, which he took it upon himself to thwart in his commentaries. When paraphrasing Proverbs 2:11, "The Torah *will protect you from a person who speaks perverted things* – those are the Christians..." Rashi means to say: "The Torah" *with his commentary*. Rashi regarded himself as an addressee of God's command: "The good and wise among you must stand firm in their faith to rebut those who entice you, so that the uneducated among the people should learn from them" (Rashi on Song 7:9, cited above). In his commentary on the following verse, Song 7:10, Rashi says more about this mission:

*And may [the speech that emerges from] your mouth be like the choicest of wine—Be cautious with your answers that they should be like the best wine. Let it flow directly (לְמִישְׁרִים) to my beloved— [Israel replies,] saying: "I am careful to answer them, that I will stand firm in my faith, and [the speech that emerges from] my mouth will flow before my Lover [i.e., God] in sincere love (אהבת מישור) from the heart, without fraud or deceit."*

This interpretation is evidently original to Rashi and not found in earlier midrashic sources.<sup>90</sup> Following Grossman's line of thought, we might therefore suppose that the sage of Troyes here is weaving his own ideological conceptions into the biblical text when emphasizing the responsibility of rabbinic leaders to "be cautious" in their educational efforts, and to provide genuine responses ("answers") to Christianity, "from the heart, without fraud or deceit." Rashi understood that Christianity posed a

<sup>89</sup> These comments, altered in the printed editions, are cited from the Fredman edition of Rashi's Proverbs commentary, which Grossman utilized, as noted above. They also appear in *Miqra'ot Gedolot ha-Keter*.

<sup>90</sup> Kamin, "Rashi on Song of Songs," 22, n. 2.

serious intellectual threat to Jewish faith and believed that it could not be countered in a superficial or frivolous way; rather, it required carefully articulated, serious, and sincere responses.

Not all Jewish anti-Christian polemicists followed that approach. As Grossman notes, Jewish “responses” to Christianity in other polemical works were at times vulgar, sarcastic, and mocking, devoid of serious scholarly analysis (32–34). For example, in *Sefer Nizzahon Yashan*, which contains many serious, scholarly refutations of Christian missionary arguments, we also find the following response to the Christian reading of Genesis 47:31, “And Israel bowed at the head of his bed” as a depiction of Jacob bowing to the cross (based on a reading of the Hebrew word *מטה* as *his staff*, i.e., the cross, rather than *his bed*): “One may answer them according to their foolishness and say that Jacob was distraught as a result of his illness, and therefore bowed to the cross. But when he came to his senses, he changed his mind and regretted what he had done, as it is written, ‘and he sat up on the bed (or staff; Genesis 48:2),’ meaning that Jacob put it under his anus.”<sup>91</sup>

*Sefer Nizzahon Yashan* is a late thirteenth-century work, much after Rashi’s time. But sarcastic refutations of Christianity could have been known to Rashi, for example, from the satirical and rather scornful so-called *Toledot Yeshu*. In any case, Rashi, by contrast, took a more dignified approach, one that contended with Christianity seriously and intellectually. To be sure, some scholars have argued that Rashi was ignorant of all but the most basic aspects of Christianity.<sup>92</sup> But, in light of Grossman’s new study, we should perhaps give Rashi more credit and suppose that, in order to combat Christian efforts to convince the Jews of the superiority of their reading of Scripture, he took it upon himself to actually learn something about Christian Bible interpretation. Rashi cites—and offers a sophisticated rebuttal of—the Christian readings of Psalms 2 and 21 as referring to Jesus Christ, as discussed above. It is therefore not difficult to suppose that the rabbinic master of Troyes knew of the overall Christian effort to read the Hebrew Bible generally as a foreshadowing of the life of Christ. Bruno, for example, in his introduction to the Psalms, remarks that in “this book... [King David] intends

<sup>91</sup> Cited by Grossman, 33; translation here from David Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages: A Critical Edition of the Nizzahon Vetus with an Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America 1979), 59.

<sup>92</sup> See Daniel Lasker, “Rashi and Maimonides on Christianity,” in: *Between Rashi and Maimonides: Themes in Medieval Jewish Thought, Literature and Exegesis*, ed. Ephraim Kanarfogel and Moshe Sokolow (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2010), 5–14.

mysteriously to speak... about the Incarnation, Nativity, and the rest of the acts of Christ.”<sup>93</sup> Rashi would not have had to read Latin to learn this most basic and essential aspect of the Christian “mysterious” (i.e., allegorical, typological) reading of the Psalms. He could have gleaned such knowledge from conversations with learned Christians in Troyes, for example, in the three centers of Latin learning in and around the city, where Bruno’s influence is attested, as mentioned above.<sup>94</sup>

To me it seems that Rashi could well have been referring to such Christological readings when glossing on Proverbs 2:12, “...those are the Christians, who... pervert (מהפכים) the words of Torah into evil” (as cited above). This was not simply a haphazard remark by Rashi. Rather, it is a theme that runs through his writings and evidently was on his mind often. These words appear almost verbatim in his gloss on the word *minim* (“heretics”) in BT *Rosh ha-Shanah* 17a: “*minim* are the students of Jesus the Nazarene, who distorted (הפכו) the words of the living God into evil.” Yet more telling is a related comment by Rashi on the term *minut* (“heresy”) in BT *Berakhot* 12b, “Those students of Jesus the Nazarene who distort the meanings of the Torah into erroneous and useless midrash (מדרש טעות ואילול).”<sup>95</sup> It is not difficult to see how this could be a characterization of the Christological reading of the Bible. The

<sup>93</sup> *Patrologia Latina* 152:638B–639A ; French in Aniorté trans., 59. English translation from Kraebel, “Poetry and Commentary,” 242.

<sup>94</sup> One may ask the following question: If Rashi learned anything at all about Christian Bible interpretation, how could he have remained silent—as noted above—about famous Christological prooftexts like Isaiah 7:14 and chapter 53, or Genesis 49:10? To us as modern readers—accustomed to (or at least striving for) scholarly comprehensiveness and consistency—this may seem to be a fair question. But Rashi’s knowledge of Christian interpretation no doubt would have been uneven, likely dependent on which learned Christians he (or one of his students) spoke with and what their scope of knowledge was. In other words, he may have known something about Bruno’s grammatical approach to the Psalms (for which, after all, Bruno was renowned), without having gained a familiarity with Christian interpretation of Isaiah or the Pentateuch. Alternatively, it is conceivable that Rashi knew of those prooftexts but chose to take a more subtle approach by offering an alternative Jewish reading rather than explicitly registering it as a rebuttal, i.e., *teshuvah la-minim*, which is Grossman’s argument, as mentioned above.

<sup>95</sup> Both of these comments are taken from the text of Rashi’s Talmud commentary as it appears in the Bar-Ilan Responsa Project, which is based on manuscripts. The printed text of Rashi’s commentary omits the references to Jesus and his students.

Psalms, for example, would seem to be David's personal supplications, and reading them "mysteriously" as references to Jesus Christ might well be said to "distort" them, to yield "erroneous" interpretations.

In this vein, Abraham Ibn Ezra regarded the Christian reading of the Bible a "path of darkness and gloom" because "they say that the entire Torah is made up of riddles (*hiddot*) and allegories (*meshalim*)... for instance, that... the twelve tribes prefigure the twelve apostles." For Ibn Ezra, "all of these [interpretations] are absolute nonsense... Rather, the correct approach is to interpret every [biblical] precept, matter, and word literally."<sup>96</sup> Ibn Ezra evidently had some exposure to Christian interpretation—perhaps from conversations with the Italian Hebraist Nicholas Maniacoria, whom seems to have met him during his sojourn in Rome in the early 1140s, or with the Christian patrons of his astrological works penned in Latin.<sup>97</sup> It is not unreasonable to suppose that Rashi, likewise, reflects some familiarity with Christian interpretation when characterizing it as "erroneous and useless midrash."

Ibn Ezra's answer to the Christian threat was clear: adhering to "the way of *peshat*," he aimed to explicate the text itself, applying his motto, "we pursue Scripture," which precluded midrashic interpretation—and "mysterious" Christological readings.<sup>98</sup> It would be convenient to imagine that Rashi, likewise, could wield the sword of *peshat* in this battle. Indeed, as we have seen, Rashi insisted on interpreting Psalms 2 and 21 literally in order to undermine their Christological interpretation. Undoubtedly with such examples in mind, Grossman remarks that Rashi generally adhered to the *peshat* as a strategy for undermining the Christian allegorical approach (31). But Rashi is not the consistent *pashtan* Ibn Ezra was.<sup>99</sup> As Grossman himself demonstrates, Rashi often

<sup>96</sup> Ibn Ezra, Introduction to the Pentateuch (alternate commentary), "first approach." See Mordechai Cohen, *The Rule of Peshat* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 212.

<sup>97</sup> On Ibn Ezra's possible connection to Nicholas Maniacoria, see Cornelia J. Linde, "Basic Instruction and Hebrew Learning: Nicolaus Maniacoria's *Suffraganeus Bibliotheca*," *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie médiévales*, 80,1 (2013) 1–16. On his Latin astrological works, see Shlomo Sela, *Abraham Ibn Ezra and the Rise of Medieval Hebrew Science* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 22–36.

<sup>98</sup> See Cohen, *Rule of Peshat*, 210–225.

<sup>99</sup> Indeed, there are times when Rashi himself will interpret "messianic" passages in the Psalms as referring to the future Messiah, and not to a historically "anointed" ancient biblical figure such as King David, which is the strategy he advocated on Psalms 2 and

engaged in midrashic interpretation to apply the biblical text to the predicament of the Jewish community of his time. It thus would have been a greater challenge to establish that the Jewish reading is superior to the Christological one. One might say that Rashi reads the Psalms “mysteriously” as a prophecy about the Jewish community of his time. If so, why is Rashi’s interpretation accurate and the Christological one “erroneous and useless midrash”? This problem would have been made more acute by Bruno’s sophisticated reading of the Psalms, since he provided a grammatical foundation for his Christological readings, selecting only those that conform to the sequence of the biblical text.

We must recall Touitou’s key questions cited above: “What happened at the end of the 11th century which stimulated the change in the educational curriculum of Franco-German Jewry? What... new needs... [did] Rashi’s commentary... meet... that were not satisfied by the existing curriculum?” What would have given a rabbinic master like Rashi the temerity to question and even reject midrashic interpretations because they do not settle the language and sequence of the biblical text? These may seem like reasonable criteria to us; but we must not underestimate how revolutionary it was for Rashi, in his milieu, to apply them so forcefully and thereby undermine the authority of many midrashic interpretations. Yes, Rashi cites the talmudic *peshat* maxim to support his new agenda; but its use to create a methodological yardstick for evaluating midrashic interpretations independently was entirely new.

Given Bruno’s influence in Rashi’s time and place, we now have a plausible answer: the sophistication of Bruno’s Psalms commentary would have posed a new and unique threat to a Jewish community of learning armed only with the traditional midrashic readings of Scripture. Bruno’s mystical readings, given their respect for the sequence of the biblical text, would have been more difficult to dismiss simply as “erroneous and useless midrash.” After all, many of the Jewish midrashic readings of Scripture are also far-fetched—perhaps not less than the Christological reading of the Psalms about the life of Christ, and Song of Songs as the marriage of Christ and the Church. This would explain why Rashi insisted on a higher exegetical standard: he selected, and at times devised his own, midrashic interpretations that “settle” the language and the sequence of Scripture. In this way, Rashi sought to establish the unique cogency of the Jewish reading of the Bible.

Perhaps one may ask: For which Jews of Rashi’s time would Bruno’s sophisticated approach have posed a genuine alternative to midrashic interpretation? Even if Rashi

21 to undercut the Christological interpretation by pointing to the “literal” sense of the text. See Harris, “Rashi and the ‘Messianic’ Psalms,” 853–862.

learned of Bruno and his teachings, would this have been relevant to simple Jews, “the uneducated among the people,” to whom Rashi refers on Song 7:9? We can respond to this in two ways. First of all, Rashi could have asked himself the question: How can we demonstrate the superiority of the traditional midrashic Jewish reading, distant as it is from the plain sense of the text, over the Christological one? The sage of Troyes certainly possessed a keen exegetical sense, and it is conceivable that even when composing a Bible commentary for all Jews, both sophisticated and unsophisticated, he would have strived to produce an unassailable Jewish reading of Scripture. As Rashi remarks on Song 7:10, the “answers” to those who “entice” the Jews to convert “should be like the best wine... without fraud or deceit.” Rashi was undoubtedly not the only one who could have understood the challenges posed by Bruno’s novel grammatical approach. As Eleazar Touitou has argued, a cadre of new scholars emerged in Rashi’s time that would come to be known as *maskilim* (as referred to by Joseph Qara and Rashbam), distinct from talmudically-oriented scholars, who sought new ways to study the biblical text.<sup>100</sup> Touitou also points to a remarkable line of *piyyut* commentary believed to have been penned by Joseph Qara, “Although my mind absorbs their words and my heart is aflame to err after them, even so Your closeness is my good.”<sup>101</sup> In Touitou’s opinion, which seems reasonable to me, this gloss seems to reflect an attraction to Christian learning, which at least some faithful Jews struggled to overcome.<sup>102</sup> Furthermore, it is not difficult to imagine that Rashi composed his commentary with at least some sophisticated readers in mind, including those in his early circle of students like Joseph Qara, who probably arrived in Troyes in the 1080s.<sup>103</sup> Eran Viezel actually argues that Rashi composed his commentary primarily for well-educated readers, knowledgeable in rabbinic literature and Hebrew grammar and philology.<sup>104</sup> Even if one does not accept Viezel’s theory in its entirety and believes that Rashi intended his commentary for a wider readership, it is reasonable to suppose

<sup>100</sup> Eleazar Touitou, *Exegesis in Perpetual Motion: Studies in the Pentateuchal Commentary of Rabbi Samuel ben Meir* (Hebrew; Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2003), 11–15, 101–105.

<sup>101</sup> Efraim Elimelech Urbach, *Arugat ha-bosem* (Jerusalem: Mekitse Nirdamim, 1939) II:220.

<sup>102</sup> Touitou, “Rashi’s Commentary on Genesis 1–6,” 163.

<sup>103</sup> See Grossman, *Sages of France*, 255–261. Rashbam would join that circle, but only much later, after Rashi’s Bible commentaries had already been written.

<sup>104</sup> Eran Viezel, “Who did Rashi Address His Bible Commentary to?” (Hebrew), *Beit Mikra* 52 (2007): 139–168.

that highly educated readers were also among his target audience—and those could have included *maskilim* who would have understood the strength of Bruno’s sophisticated approach, which reveal the problems with an uncritical reliance on midrash.

### 7. Prophetic Intention

Comparison with Bruno may help us not only to understand Rashi’s motives, but also suggests a way of better understanding how Rashi himself might have conceptualized his midrashic readings of Scripture. As mentioned above, Grossman (124) asserts that Rashi “did not actually adhere to” the methodological criteria formulated in his two clearest programmatic statements—on Genesis 3:8 and the introduction to the Song of Songs. Grossman regularly remarks that Rashi’s religious motives simply overshadowed his exegetical project. “Rashi recognized,” he argues, “that the ancient prophecies, as applied to their time and place, were not adequate to uplift the people of his time. Therefore, he argued that the prophets spoke in the name of God about the future—the subjugation of the Jewish people by the Christians on the one hand, and on their ultimate salvation on the other. This is the way that he endeavored to comfort the [Jews in] exile and uplift their spirits.” And yet, Rashi “must have been aware that according to the *peshat* those prophecies speak only about events that occurred in the times of those prophets” (207–208).

In one place, however, Grossman offers a more sophisticated account to explain how Rashi, in fact, could have rationally justified applying his midrashic interpretations, knowing that they diverge from the *peshat*. Grossman suggests that Rashi relied on the rabbinic notion of scriptural multivalence based on Jeremiah 23:29, “Behold, my word is like fire, declares the Lord, and like a hammer that shatters rock.” The Talmud cites the following comment on this verse in the name of the first-century Tannaitic sage R. Ishmael: “Just as the hammer breaks a stone into several fragments, so, too, from one verse several meanings emerge” (BT *Sanhedrin* 34a). Rashi cites this verse and refers to that talmudic gloss twice in his Pentateuch commentary, on Genesis 33:20 and Exodus 6:9. Rashi, Grossman reasons, believed that, in addition to the *peshat*, Scripture conveys multiple other meanings, which allowed him the latitude to engage in midrashic interpretation to “actualize” biblical prophecies and thereby provide guidance for the Jewish community of his generation (258).

To me, however, it seems that these cases in Rashi are exceptional, and that he applied that particular talmudic notion of multivalence in a limited fashion—only when seeking to disqualify a given midrashic reading as legitimate exegesis. On Exodus 6:9,

after offering his own interpretation, Rashi records a midrashic reading, after which he remarks: “But this midrashic exposition is not ‘settled’ upon the verse for several reasons.” He notes, firstly, that it does not correspond to the language of the biblical text; furthermore, the midrashic reading is acontextual; as Rashi remarks: “How does the sequence follow (*ha-semikhah nismekhet*) in the words with which it continues?” Rashi concludes:

Let the verse be settled (*yityashev ha-miqra*) according to its *peshat*, though the midrashic reading can be expounded as such (*ha-derashah tiddaresh*), as it is said: “Behold, my word is like fire – declares the Lord – and like a hammer that shatters rock” (Jeremiah 23:29) – it splits into many sparks.

For Rashi, this verse can be “settled,” i.e., interpreted properly within its context, only “according to its *peshat*,” as he had done. Similarly, after explaining why Jacob named the altar he erected “El, the God of Israel” (Genesis 33:20), Rashi goes on to say:

Our rabbis, of blessed memory, expounded it thus: that the Holy One, blessed be He, called Jacob by the name El. Now the words of the Torah are like a hammer that splits the rock into many different pieces—and bear many different meanings. But I have come only to settle the *peshat* and literal sense.

In this case, as well, Rashi means to say that the midrash does not meet his criterion of “settling” the language of Scripture. In both cases, Rashi resorts to the talmudic idea of scriptural multivalence—using the metaphor of a hammer hitting the rock—to say that the midrashic “reading” has homiletic value, though he disqualifies it according to his own stricter exegetical standards.

Rashi’s more prevalent agenda, by contrast, was to select midrashic readings that *do* “settle,” i.e., conform to, the language and the sequence of the text. This differentiation of midrashic readings—between those that “settle” the language and those that do not—is evident in Rashi’s commentary on Psalm 16. In his commentary on v. 7, he remarks:

Until this point, David prophesied about the Congregation of Israel [in the future], who will utter this [psalm of thanksgiving to God]. And now he says [about himself]: “As for me, I too shall praise God...” But our Rabbis interpreted it about our father Abraham... However, we must settle (*leyashev*) the verses according to their sequence (*seder*).

Although Rashi applied a midrashic mode of reading to the first part of this psalm, he does not accept the midrashic reading of its second part, which, in his view, does not “settle the verses according to their sequence.” He therefore assumes that David refers to his own circumstances, as a straightforward (“*peshat*”) reading of this psalm would suggest, rather than accepting the rabbinic interpretation uncritically.

I believe that a different, more powerful hermeneutical assumption was at work when Rashi offers midrashic readings that—in his view—meet his stricter criteria, as evident from his programmatic introduction to Song of Songs discussed above. There, Rashi cites a different talmudic derivation of the notion of biblical multivalence, ascribed to the fourth-century Amora Abaye—from Psalms 62:12, “One thing God has spoken; two things have I heard.” Although both derivations seem similar and are indeed juxtaposed on the same page of the Talmud (BT *Sanhedrin* 34a), there is an important difference between them. Unlike the image of the hammer breaking a stone into several fragments invoked by R. Ishmael, Rashi on the Song of Songs refers to Abaye’s derivation and speaks of “two things” one can “hear” from God’s word. Furthermore, he refines this notion with the talmudic *peshat* maxim to arrive at his two-level hierarchy: the allegorical sense that conforms to (“is settled upon”) the *peshat*.

Rashi goes on to outline the allegorical sense of the Song of Songs, relating to the situation of the Jewish people in exile:

Now I say that Solomon saw with the Holy Spirit that Israel will be exiled, exile after exile, destruction after destruction, and will mourn in this exile over their original glory, and will remember the first love [of God toward them], which made them His chosen among all nations... and they will recall His kindness and their transgression, and the good things that He promised to bestow upon them at the end of days.

This allegorical reading of the Song is, of course, drawn from midrashic sources. But Rashi shows how it is based on the human love story that emerges from his *peshat* reading:

And [Solomon] composed (*yissad*) this book with the Holy Spirit in the language of a woman stuck in living widowhood, longing for her husband, pining over her lover, recalling to him the love of their youth, and admitting her sin. Likewise, her lover suffers over her pain, and recalls the goodness of her youth and her beauty, and the excellence of her deeds, through which he

was tied to her in powerful love, to say to them that... she is still his wife and he is her husband, who will ultimately return to her.

The notion that King Solomon wrote the Song aided by the “Holy Spirit” is, of course, rabbinic. But Rashi uses this concept in a new way to rationalize his allegorical-midrashic interpretation and to coordinate it with his novel explication of *peshuto shel miqra*. As Kamin has shown, Rashi developed an innovative and sophisticated reading of the Song of Songs on the literal level, not as an expression of youthful love (as others had interpreted it), but rather as a depiction of a love relationship in crisis, told by a woman separated from her husband in “living widowhood,” recalling, with her now-distant husband, the days of their youthful love, looking forward to their reunification. Having established this literal reading, Rashi could assert that King Solomon’s intention was to foretell the dreadful situation of the Jewish people in exile in his own time, seemingly abandoned by God, recalling their ancient glory with the divine presence in their midst in the Holy Land, longing for salvation and reunification with God.<sup>105</sup>

Rashi invoked R. Ishmael’s conception of scriptural multivalence, as a hammer shattering the rock, to acknowledge that even midrashic readings that do not “settle the language of Scripture” have some value as one of the many meanings one can extract from the sacred text. But in the Song of Songs, Rashi presents a very different model of scriptural multivalence dependent on the essentially binary *peshat*-*derash* connection. According to Rashi, the verse “One thing God has spoken; two things have I heard” refers to (1) the *peshat* and (2) the closely linked midrash that is “settled” upon the language and sequence of the text. His allegorical reading of the Song of Songs is thus not simply one of many interpretations that emerge from the text. For Rashi, this is the single correct construal of King Solomon’s prophetic intention through the Holy Spirit. How could Rashi—even in his own mind—have been certain of that? Because his reading is based on the *peshat*, as he demonstrates. As Kamin writes: “Rashi found a way, anchored in ‘the *peshat* of Scripture’ as he conceived it, to express the distress of his generation and to address it. In this way, Rashi met the strict methodological demands he placed upon himself as an exegete, and fulfilled his obligations as the spiritual leader of his generation.”<sup>106</sup>

<sup>105</sup> Kamin, “Rashi on Song of Songs,” 24–25; *Rashi’s Exegetical Categorization*, 248–249. On the distinctiveness of Rashi’s exegetical approach, see Baruch Alster, “The ‘Forlorn Lady’ in the Interpretation of the Song of Songs (Hebrew),” *JSIJ* 5 (2006): 101–122.

<sup>106</sup> Kamin, “Rashi on Song of Songs,” 25.

Rashi opens his introduction to the Song of Songs with the general rule that “the prophets uttered their words through allegory (*dugma*).” Although Rashi articulates the hermeneutical implications of this rule—coordinated with the *peshat* maxim—most clearly in his introduction to the Song of Songs, it is evident that this way of thinking about Scripture underlies his overall exegetical approach. As cited above, Rashi regularly presumes that King David uttered the Psalms “for the future.” Likewise, Rashi remarks regarding the concluding chapters of the book of Isaiah: “All of these final prophecies of consolation are about nothing other than the exile of Edom”—in other words the exile experienced by the Jewish community of his day (Grossman 179, citing Rashi on Isaiah 52:11 from the *Keter* edition). For Rashi, the “actualized” midrashic reading of Scripture is its intended prophetic meaning, distinct from the *peshat*, though it must be anchored therein.

Comparison with Bruno can help illuminate Rashi’s hermeneutical conceptualization. In his general prologue, Bruno seeks to determine “intention” of the Psalms, using language and methodologies taken from Latin commentaries on secular poetry that aimed to reveal *intentio auctoris* (authorial intention). Just as those commentators employed grammatical analysis to this end, Bruno would apply similar methods to discover King David’s intentions:

The intention of this work is shown to be various through the diversity of its individual titles. For [David] sometimes intends to prophesy of the Incarnation, the Nativity, the Passion, the Resurrection, and the other acts of Christ, and at other times of the salvation of the good and the damnation of the wicked.<sup>107</sup>

For this purpose, Bruno would at times invoke the notion of the “Holy Spirit.” On Psalm 19, for example, he writes:

Foreseeing the preachers who will be sent by God for the instruction of the Church, and foreseeing too that, by their wondrous office, the Law will be expounded through the Holy Spirit for the instruction of their successors, making it immaculate and holy, the Prophet [David], in his joy, intends,

<sup>107</sup> *Patrologia Latina* 152:638A. Aniorté trans., 59. English translation from Kraebel, “Poetry and Commentary,” 242.

through the activity of the Holy Spirit, to prophesy all of these future events as though they were happening in the present.<sup>108</sup>

Accordingly, in his commentary on verse 2, for example, Bruno writes, “The heavens show forth [*enarrant*] the glory of God, i.e., the Apostles, who, according to the loftiness of their virtues, ought to be called heavens. They will tell out (*extra narrabunt*), i.e., in the open, the glorious essence of the Son of God.”<sup>109</sup> The Christological interpretation of “the heavens” as the Apostles is drawn from Augustine, followed by Cassiodorus.<sup>110</sup> But Bruno, both in his introduction to the psalm and in the commentary, makes a distinctive effort to demonstrate how this reading can be construed as David’s intention in the psalm. He thus emphasizes that David foresaw prophetically the preaching activity of the Apostles. Hence, although the psalm is written in the present tense (“the heavens show forth”) it can be construed to describe future events (“they will tell out”)—echoing a point Bruno had already made in his general prologue to the Psalms.<sup>111</sup>

As characterized by Kraebel, “In Bruno’s exegesis, allegorical meaning is part of the human author’s intention, inhering, as with any other literary device, in the words that David has written.”<sup>112</sup> As mentioned above, Bruno was lauded as a master of *grammatica*, skilled in interpreting the classical poets. And it was this exegetical skill that he applied in reading the Psalms. “Rather than representing a deviation from his preferred exegetical practice,” Kraebel writes, “the carefully articulated place of allegory in Bruno’s commentary on the text of the Psalms reinforces and is of a piece with his grammatical or poetic hermeneutic: the Psalmist was a prophetic poet who worked carefully to insinuate into his verse his knowledge of future salvation history.”<sup>113</sup>

<sup>108</sup> *Patrologia Latina* 152:708B–C, Aniorté trans., 160. English translation from Kraebel, “Poetry and Commentary,” 243.

<sup>109</sup> *Patrologia Latina* 152:708C, Aniorté trans., 160. English translation from Kraebel, “Poetry and Commentary,” 243.

<sup>110</sup> See *St. Augustine: Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, trans. A Cleveland Coxe (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1886), 121; *Cassiodorus: Explanation of the Psalms*, trans. P. G. Walsh (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1990), I:196.

<sup>111</sup> See *Patrologia Latina* 152:639B–C and Kraebel, “Poetry and Commentary,” 243.

<sup>112</sup> Kraebel, “Place of Allegory,” 216.

<sup>113</sup> Kraebel, “Place of Allegory,” 216.

This description of Bruno helps us put Rashi's exegetical innovations into context. Rashi was credited by Rashbam, as cited above, for advancing a *peshat* method revolutionary in Ashkenaz. But for Rashi, analysis of the literal sense was only the first step in ascertaining the true intentions of the words of the authors of Scripture, since "the prophets uttered their words through allegory." And so, beyond the *peshat*, their words conveyed deeper meanings, prophecies for the future. But to accurately discover their prophetic intentions, one must engage in a methodical analysis, respecting "precision of the language" (*diquduq ha-lashon*) and "the sequence of the verses" (*seder ha-miqra'ot*). As Rashi remarks in one instance,

There are midrashim on this verse; but they are not settled according to the matter about which this psalm speaks (אינן מתיישבין לפי ענין המדבר במזמור)  
(Commentary on Psalms 51:7).

By implication, the midrashic interpretations that Rashi does incorporate into his commentary do, in fact, accurately convey "the matter about which the psalm speaks." That was Rashi's innovative exegetical goal: to apply midrashic interpretation that respects the language and sequence of his words to discern the genuine prophetic intentions of King David, King Solomon, and other biblical authors, all of whom were guided by the Holy Spirit.

#### 8. Polemics or Exegesis?

For centuries, Jews studied the Bible with Rashi's commentary, which was taken as a given, almost a natural accompaniment of the biblical text. But Grossman, as a historian, asks the question: Why, in fact, did Rashi compose his Bible commentary? Theoretically, the sage of Troyes could have been satisfied with the existing midrashic works that had been used in Ashkenaz for generations. Grossman finds the answer in Rashi's self-reflective remarks, for example in his glosses on Song 7:9 and Daniel 11:33 (cited above), that reveal the sense of mission that powered "his decision to dedicate his life to exegetical creativity in order to strengthen the faith in the face of the missionizing efforts of the Church" (166). Grossman reinforces this conclusion through his meticulous manuscript research, which reveals the ubiquity of polemical themes throughout Rashi's Bible commentaries—refutations of Christian interpretations, warnings to be wary of Christian "enticement," and prophecies regarding the downfall of the Christian kingdoms of his day responsible for oppressing the Jews.

And yet, the term “Jewish-Christian polemic” in the title of this volume is perhaps not the right one to use. Nor does it adequately express how much Grossman’s study reveals about Rashi’s commentary. “Polemic” implies a focused, systematic endeavor to repudiate Christian anti-Jewish arguments, as found, for example, in *Sefer ha-Berit* or *Sefer Nizzahon Yashan*. It is true that some of Rashi’s comments are aimed directly against Christianity—and therefore were subject to censorship. But Rashi is silent about many famous biblical texts used by Christians to prove their faith. More fundamentally, his direct “answers” to Christianity are subsumed under a broader rubric in Rashi’s commentaries, which address a broad range of pressing concerns for the Jewish community in his time. As Grossman suggests throughout this study, even Rashi’s commentaries that are seemingly non-polemical, such as those extolling the virtues of the Torah, expressing God’s eternal love for the Jewish people, or promising their ultimate salvation, served as a bulwark against the “enticement” of Christianity, and thereby upheld the Jewish faith. After all, this was Rashi’s responsibility as a Jewish leader—according to his reading of Song 7:9, as mentioned above. In Grossman’s words, Rashi’s commentary was “a powerful tool in the Jewish people’s battle for their very survival in exile” (106). This might be termed “polemic” in a subtle sense; but it really is a Jewish reading of Scripture, biblical exegesis—albeit from a distinctive ideological perspective.

To this essential thesis advanced by Grossman, we have added two key points. First, we have suggested that Rashi’s novel exegetical method itself, including his valuation of *peshuto shel miqra*, revolutionary in Ashkenaz, should be seen as part of his effort to bolster the Jewish reading of Scripture in light of developments in Latin Bible commentary in eleventh-century northern France. Whereas earlier Christological readings of Scripture tended to be highly tenuous, and might easily be dismissed as “erroneous and useless midrash,” a new, and more compelling, Christian reading of Scripture emerged in the Psalms commentary of his older contemporary at Rheims, Bruno the Carthusian. Bruno was selective in his use of patristic commentaries, incorporating only those that fit the sequence of the biblical text, in order to ensure that his readings correctly reflect the (Christological) prophetic intentions of King David. To me it seems that the parallels to Rashi’s method suggest that the sage of Troyes was aware of this development (at least in general terms), recognized the conceptual threat it posed, and therefore devised his new form of commentary that highlights the *peshat*, in order to demonstrate that, in fact, only the Jewish reading of Scripture is actually rooted in the language and sequence of the biblical text.

Second, the comparison with Bruno may also give us a clearer insight into how Rashi conceived his exegetical program. Grossman often argues that Rashi allowed his

ideological agenda—as a rabbinic leader seeking to uplift the downtrodden Jewish community—to override his exegetical sensibilities. In other words, Rashi engaged in homiletics rather than exegesis. Grossman is correct from a modern perspective. But the comparison with Bruno enables us to appreciate Rashi’s sophistication as an exegete within his medieval milieu, in which it was universally assumed that the biblical prophets “uttered their words through allegory.” As Kamin has shown, Rashi anchored his readings in the language and the sequence of the text. From Kraebel we have learned that Bruno emphasized that a grammatical analysis of the language of Scripture enables one to discern the intentions of the Bible’s prophetic authors. I believe that this very outlook would have been shared by Rashi, only that he applied his exegetical skill to arrive at a Jewish reading of Scripture—the one he believed to reflect the true intentions of the Bible’s prophetic authors, guided through the Holy Spirit.

Above we mentioned the methodological question Grossman raised: virtually all of the religious-theological themes presented in Rashi’s commentaries are drawn from rabbinic sources. If so, was Rashi truly original in this respect? Grossman argued that Rashi’s innovation was in his novel presentation of these themes in a style that powerfully conveys “how invested he was in them... intellectually and emotionally” (335). In light of the comparison with Bruno’s notion of prophetic intention, however, we would suggest that Rashi’s greater innovation was to anchor those themes in the *peshat*, by devising a midrashic commentary that “settles” the language of Scripture. In doing so, Rashi aimed to demonstrate that these are not only rabbinic notions; they emerge from the voices of the ancient prophets themselves.