

BOOK REVIEW

Eric Lawee, *Rashi's Commentary on the Torah: Canonization and Resistance in the Reception of a Jewish Classic* (Oxford, 2019), 496 pages.

Reviewed by
David Berger

It is very unusual for a scholar to identify a subject of manifestly great importance that has barely been addressed, but Eric Lawee has succeeded in doing so. Almost all traditionally educated Jews have at some point consulted supercommentaries on Rashi, but the genre has never undergone serious scholarly investigation. Moreover, the centrality and status of Rashi's commentary is taken for granted to the point where one does not consider the process by which it achieved that status, let alone the possibility that it could have elicited vigorous criticism and resistance.

Lawee provides an analytical survey of reactions to the *Commentary* in both Ashkenaz and Sefarad in the Middle Ages, moves to little known works from the Eastern Mediterranean that subject it—and sometimes even the *midrashim* that it cites—to unsparing criticism from a rationalist perspective, and briefly moves through the late medieval and early modern developments that established its unrivaled standing throughout the Jewish world. The book ends with a seven-page afterword pointing to modern and contemporary developments that in some quarters decanonize the *Commentary* and in others elevate it almost to equality with Scripture itself.

After an introduction addressing the criteria by which a work can be deemed canonical, the book proceeds with a brief summary of the vigorous contemporary discussion of the text of the commentary. How confident can we be that Rashi, and not a later glossator, is the author of whatever passage we are studying? This will turn out to have little relevance to the body of the work, but it is clearly necessary and introduces us to a central quality of Lawee's scholarship, to wit, his comprehensive command of the vast literature on Rashi and the multiple Jewish cultures where he was studied. On many occasions, I reacted to an assertion in the text by asking myself if the author was familiar with a study that I thought relevant. Time after time, I would turn to the 115 pages of endnotes, and, with hardly an exception, the answer was yes.

The textual discussion also signals another virtue of this study that goes beyond its primary objective. Here and throughout the book, we find specific references to familiar passages in Rashi that we are made to see through fresh eyes. This alone makes the work valuable even to readers

who may not be greatly concerned with the overarching historical trajectory that renders it so significant. One example in the brief section on the text was one that I greeted with mixed feelings. Every child who attended a Jewish day school studied the famous line in Rashi (to Gen. 32:5) asserting, based on a midrash, that Jacob affirmed to Esau, “I resided (*garti*) with the wicked Laban, and yet I observed the 613 commandments (*ve-taryag mitzvot shamarti*)”—613 being the numerical equivalent of the Hebrew *garti*. Because of the pithy formulation as well as the rhyme, most of those children—I think—even remember this line. As Lawee points out, Rashi did use the tool of numerical equivalence, and he also generally affirmed that the patriarchs observed the Torah, but an article in a scholarly journal has demonstrated that this passage did not enter the commentary until the age of print. I suppose I should be grateful for this information, but I almost wish I did not know it.

A central characteristic of the commentary—and of the scholarship analyzing it—is its concern with the straightforward, contextual understanding of the biblical text (*peshat*) along with the regular incorporation of aggadic midrash. Legal midrash is a separate category, though it too plays a role, as we shall see, in Lawee’s analysis of the supercommentaries.

What sort of *midrashim* does Rashi cite? In his commentary on Genesis 3:8, he famously remarks that he has come only to present *peshat* along with “such *aggada* as settles [or: conforms to] the scriptural word and its sense in a fitting manner.” However, as Lawee notes, this assertion is problematic. Moreover, Rashi not only chooses particular *midrashim* out of a wide range of options but often formulates them in a way that leaves his own stamp on the material. The significance of this issue is evident in Lawee’s list of central concerns of supercommentators: the sources of midrashic citations, the meaning of *midrashim*, the reasons for the choice of specific *midrashim*, and the possible textual trigger that produced the need for a particular citation. Critical supercommentators would have much to say about the questionable relationship of Rashi’s *midrashim* to *peshat*.

On a number of occasions, Lawee makes a point of considerable importance regarding Rashi’s role in the wider impact of *midrashim*. He provides examples throughout the book of *midrashim* that garnered considerable attention from commentators and thinkers without explicit reference to Rashi that might very well have remained beneath their radar had Rashi not cited them. Though it is difficult to demonstrate this decisively in specific cases, and I am sometimes more doubtful than Lawee about particular examples, it is overwhelmingly likely that the overall observation is correct. It is correct beyond a shadow of a doubt regarding

awareness of midrash by the Jewish laity through the ages. Thus, what Jews know about a major genre of rabbinic literature has been largely determined by a selection made by one man in the eleventh century.

The book now turns to the reception history of the commentary. In Rashi's home territory of Ashkenaz, broadly defined, we find no supercommentaries in the heart of the Middle Ages but a great deal of reaction in the major biblical commentaries. Beginning in the thirteenth century, we also find a striking halakhic proposal that had deep resonance, as Lawee shows, to our own day. There is a rabbinic requirement that one review the weekly Torah reading by reciting the text twice and the Targum once. Many decisors ruled that Rashi can substitute for Targum, and some considered his commentary preferable. The fact that a significant number of Jews chose Rashi and only Rashi is eloquent testimony to the unique standing of the commentary. Still, it is not until the fifteenth century that we find an Ashkenazic work that can be seen as a quasi-supercommentary: R. Israel Isserlein's *Be'urim le-Rashi*.

In Spain, the reaction was complex and evolving. Ibn Ezra, a Spanish Jew who composed his commentaries only after leaving his homeland and traveling to Italy and Ashkenaz, wrote one strongly negative assessment of Rashi's understanding of *peshat*, but he makes few explicit references to Rashi while nonetheless subjecting his interpretations to frequent criticism. Nahmanides attributes primacy to Rashi in the introduction to his own commentary, but as the work progresses we find careful, respectful analysis that is nevertheless replete with disagreement. As Lawee notes, Nahmanides' approach set the agenda for much of the discussion in later supercommentaries. In late medieval Spain, Moses ibn Gabbai reports sharp criticism of Rashi for overuse of *derashot* and *aggada*, ignorance of *peshat* and possibly philosophy, and lack of familiarity with proper principles of grammar. Significantly, we have no texts corroborating these criticisms—and Ibn Gabbai vigorously rejects them—but they foreshadow the works to be analyzed later. Still, it is clear that the dominant reaction was admiration, with one kabbalist attributing some degree of divine inspiration to Rashi and others applying to the commentary an exegetical method that assigned near-omniscience to his formulations.

One means by which Spanish scholars of rationalist bent could retain an admiring stance toward Rashi and even his apparently problematic midrashic citations was by reinterpreting the midrash through a philosophical lens. Thus, Samuel Almosnino (late fourteenth century) comments on Rashi's citation of a midrash that the donkey (*hamor*) that Moses rode on his way back to Egypt was the same as the one that Abraham saddled on his way to sacrifice Isaac and the one that will be ridden by the

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Messianic king. *Hamor*, we are told, refers to matter (*homer*), over which form, or the intellect, must prevail. Thus, in Lawee's characteristically felicitous formulation, Almosnino performs an act of "supercommentarial ventriloquism that has Rashi speak in a Maimonidean tongue" (101).

We are now prepared to encounter the most original section of an already original study. We are introduced to a series of works that Lawee locates, with some caution, in the Eastern Mediterranean, that subject the commentary to withering criticism, though the intensity of that criticism is not uniform. Lawee entitles this section, which occupies more than 40% of the book's text, "Resisting Readers."

Tzafenat Pa'neah by Elazar Ashkenazi (Byzantium [perhaps Crete] late fourteenth century), the first exemplar of this vigorous criticism, is a commentary on the Torah reflecting substantial engagement with Rashi. The author, writing from a rationalist perspective, generally takes Rashi to task for implausible midrashic interpretations and on one occasion goes so far as to call his position risible in a clear play on Rashi's name Shlomo Yitzhaki: "anyone who hears this will laugh (*yitzhak*) at him" (cf. Gen. 21:6). We are provided with a series of illuminating examples demonstrating both Maimonidean-style interpretations of midrash (and Scripture) and, more frequently, rejection of Rashi's non-*peshat* interpretations along with the *midrashim* that underlie them.

Lawee then turns to an intriguing work to which he devotes 46 pages of detailed analysis, a larger share of attention than he grants any other text. The pseudepigraphic *Book of Strictures* (*Sefer Hassagot*) attributed by its unknown author to R. Abraham ben David of Posquieres had been the subject of a solitary, brief article by Ephraim Urbach;¹ thus, Lawee's chapter on the critic whom he calls Pseudo-Rabad is a pioneering study. Preserved as a tiny part of a single, vast manuscript copied in Crete in 1410, *The Book of Strictures* is "an undeniably obscure work" utilized by only one later author (Aaron Aboulrabi) whom we can identify. Nonetheless, we are told, it is important for the reception history of Rashi's commentary, "especially when viewed in terms of the hermeneutics of canonicity" (151). If I understand him correctly, Lawee means that this sort of work illustrates the possibilities that could have been pursued by readers of Rashi but were for the most part rejected. This was "the road not taken."

Some readers may nonetheless feel that a work so obscure is not worthy of close scrutiny, but I am grateful for the careful study of Pseudo-Rabad

¹ Ephraim E. Urbach, "*Hassagot ha-Rabad 'al Peirush Rashi la-Torah?*" *Kiryat Sefer* 34 (1958), 101–108.

and similar resisting readers. And if Lawee is right in placing the composition in the Eastern Mediterranean, it does point when combined with those other works to at least a mini-trend of vigorous rationalist, *peshat*-oriented critiques. A recurring irony in this discussion is that some of these rationalists are defenders of *peshat* (more or less) in the Bible, but when they approach rabbinic midrash, as we have already seen with respect to the long-lived donkey, they sometimes interpret it in ways far removed from *peshat*. On other occasions, however, they do not shrink from vigorous rejection of the *midrashim* themselves.

For Pseudo-Rabad, linguistic conventions and simple realia explain many biblical formulations or narratives to which Rashi gives fanciful explanations. One wry comment cannot but elicit amusement, and it may well have been intended to elicit such a reaction. Abraham's servant gave Rebecca two gold bands not because, as Rashi's midrash would have it, he was hinting at the two tablets to be revealed to Moses (Rashi to Gen. 24:22). Rather, "She had two arms, so he gave her two bands."

Even some halakhic *midrashim* do not escape Pseudo-Rabad's criticism when he believes that they violate *peshat*, and in one particularly interesting case, he rejects a midrash that conflicts with his ethical sense requiring that one help a non-Jew unload his animal.

In dealing with aggadic *midrashim*, he can use exceedingly sharp language even with respect to the rabbis themselves. *Derashot* that say that Moses saw God wrapped in a tallit "are fit to be burned like the books of the heretics." The midrashic interpretation in Rashi that the 318 men who fought for Abraham (Genesis 14) really designate the single individual Eliezer since that is the numerical value of his name, is an "absurdity." The authors of the midrash cited by Rashi that Satan showed the Israelites the bier of Moses so that they would seek to replace him "transpose the words of the living God, this being the written Torah, into words of absurdities and posterousness invented from their heart."

At this point, I need to level a criticism that emerges from one of the more striking passages that Lawee cites from Pseudo-Rabad and applies in more moderate fashion to other citations as well. On a few occasions, Lawee reports a position of an author that raises an obvious question in the mind of an informed reader, yet he leaves that reader hanging without even mentioning the difficulty. Let me illustrate this by reference to three passages in Pseudo-Rabad.

I turn to the most striking passage, but I must begin by providing some background. A calculation presented by Rashi based on Scriptural information about the ages of Jacob and Joseph at their first encounters with Pharaoh as well as other data requires the undesirable but unavoidable

conclusion that Jacob was 77 years old when he came to Laban's house. A different calculation, which is highly plausible but avoidable, convinced Rashi and the rabbis that he was 63 years old when he left his parents' home. Needing to explain the gap, they maintained that he spent fourteen years in the study hall of Shem and Eber.²

Lawee informs us that the rabbis had Jacob study there "in keeping with [their] propensity... to depict the forefathers as forerunners of their own most prized activity." This is true, but we are not told of the difficulty that impelled them to say this or even when Jacob was supposed to have engaged in such study. We are told only that Pseudo-Rabad ignored the anachronism and simply said that the Torah would have mentioned this "as it records other details not worthy of being recorded," a comment that Lawee rightly calls "a startling addendum" (161). This leaves the uninformed reader ignorant of a key point, and it leaves the informed reader wondering how or if Pseudo-Rabad dealt with the gap.

Two pages later, we are told that Pseudo-Rabad maintained the following: "The computation of Jacob's life, which involves the notion that he left home at age 63, entails the consequence that he was still shepherding at 84, which is so much 'absurdity and senselessness.'" One wonders whether Pseudo-Rabad mentioned the fourteen years that are part of this computation and—far more important—how he dealt with the irrefutable calculation demonstrating that Jacob was 77 years old when he came to Laban.

² Rashi to Genesis 28:9. The evidence that Jacob was no older than 63 when he left home is that Esau at that point went to Ishmael and married his daughter, and Scriptural data prove that Ishmael died when Jacob was 63 years old. But this conclusion, as noted, is avoidable. R. Yosef Bekhor Shor (*ad loc.*) argues that according to the *peshat*, "Esau went to Ishmael" means that he went to the *clan* of Ishmael after Ishmael himself was deceased. Thus, Jacob could have been 77 years old when he left home.

I would add that this understanding may provide us with an explanation of why the full verse reads, "So Esau went to Ishmael, and took Mahalat daughter of Ishmael Abraham's son, the sister of Nevayot to be his wife" (Gen. 28:9). As Rashi notes, this is puzzling: "From the fact that it says *bat Yishma'el*, do I not know that she is *ahot Nevayot*?" I think the answer is that because "Esau went to Ishmael" means, as R. Yosef Bekhor Shor says, that he went to the *clan* of Ishmael, we could have easily assumed that *bat Yishma'el* means an Ishmaelite woman. Consequently, the Torah nudges us in the right direction by writing "Mahalat daughter of Ishmael Abraham's son," but even this could be taken to mean Mahalat of the clan of Ishmael the son of Abraham. So the verse has to make it clear that she is the daughter of Mr. Ishmael by identifying her as the sister of Nevayot.

The text of Pseudo-Rabad's *Sefer Hassagot* was co-edited by Lawee and published in 2018.³ Upon checking the text, one discovers that Pseudo-Rabad wrote, "As to all the calculations that he [Rashi] brought, it seems to me that he [Jacob] was not old but was rather a young fellow (*na'ar*) at the time when he was blessed." As Lawee and his co-editor point out in their note to that passage, Pseudo-Rabad "ignores" the fact that Jacob's age follows from Scriptural data. This is information that the reader of the book is entitled to know, especially since it raises an important question relevant to how we evaluate Pseudo-Rabad. His dismissive comment about Rashi's calculation indicates either that he had no patience to read it carefully or that he was prepared to reject biblical data when it came into conflict with the intuitive reading of a narrative. Either possibility tells us something highly significant about the author of *Sefer Hassagot*.

Here very briefly are two other passages where the informed reader is left with questions. We are told that Pseudo-Rabad rejected Rashi's assertion that when God told Moses in Numbers to send spies, he meant that he could do so if he wished. But Rashi tells us explicitly that he proposed this interpretation because a passage in Deuteronomy reports that it was the people who requested that spies be sent. How, then, did Pseudo-Rabad deal with this contradiction? In fact, he did not address it at all, which is an egregious dereliction of duty on his part, but the reader of the book will not know this. We are also told that, like other figures in the book, Pseudo-Rabad rejected the midrash that Jochebed was born as Jacob's family was passing through the walls leading to Egypt (Rashi to Gen. 46:15). Now, the reason for this midrash is that the descendants of Jacob at the time are said to have numbered 70 when only 69 are listed. How did Pseudo-Rabad deal with this? It turns out that like Ibn Ezra and others, he counted Jacob himself. This is mentioned in the book with respect to other figures, but here we are left hanging.

The next figure in the group that Lawee calls "resisting readers" is Aaron Aboulrabi of fifteenth-century Sicily whose work, published ca. 1525, was entirely ignored until the nineteenth century. Aboulrabi is prepared to call a midrash cited by Rashi "a *derash* of barbarians." In rejecting Rashi's understanding of a passage in the creation story, he employs the very strong biblical formulations, "I will show no regard for the elder" and "I will not acquit the evildoer." Once again demonstrating his mastery of the stylistic flourish, Lawee writes, "Though the epithet 'evildoer' may be more naughty than malign, one senses that Aboulrabi thinks

³ Eric Lawee and Doron Forte, "Sefer Hassagot' 'al Perush Rashi la-Torah ha-Meyubas le-Rabad," *Kobetz Al Yad* 26 (2018), 77–134.

the stakes very high in his dispute with this ‘elder’ statesman of Torah interpretation so lacking in scientific erudition” (226). Aboulrabi struggles with halakhic *midrashim* that disturb him, in one case providing detailed objections but finally submitting to rabbinic authority. He is fully prepared, against Rashi, to criticize the moral failings of biblical figures. At the same time, he is by no means an unalloyed critic and occasionally endorses Rashi’s interpretations.

Finally, there is the mid-fifteenth-century *‘Alilot Devarim*, whose authorship and provenance are highly uncertain, but which, according to one view, was composed in Crete or Southern Italy. Not a supercommentary, it is a strongly rationalist work that levels an overarching argument against Rashi, to wit, that his commentary has prevented Jews from understanding Scripture’s straightforward meaning to the point where if someone presents to them “a plain sense [explanation] without any strangeness, they would ridicule him and insist that his words are estranged with respect to the scriptural plain sense.”

After the careful and lengthy analysis of the resisting readers, we come to the early sixteenth-century work of R. Elijah Mizrahi of Constantinople, who wrote the most influential supercommentary of them all. Mizrahi is granted a heading that leads the reader to believe that his work will be analyzed, but it is not. Rather, what follows is a four-page discussion of the central position that the work assumed, as demonstrated by its standing in the most prominent supercommentaries of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries.

This means that the detailed analysis in the book ends before what Lawee calls “the early modern golden age of Rashi supercommentary” (29), and readers who expect to find substantial discussion of the classic supercommentaries with which they are familiar will be disappointed. This is certainly regrettable. At the same time, a full discussion of those supercommentaries on the scale commensurate with the rest of the book would require a second volume. One can only express the wistful hope that Lawee will yet turn his attention to this task.

Setting aside the brief afterword that surveys the status of the commentary today, the book concludes with an explanation of Rashi’s victory over his most distinguished rivals: Ibn Ezra and Nahmanides—and for that matter, the Maimonidean approach to the Bible. On the one hand, it is self-evident that Ibn Ezra’s commentary and Maimonidean interpretation could not have achieved the sweeping popularity of Rashi’s work, and to a slightly lesser degree the same is true of Nahmanides, whose work is almost certainly the most widely studied of the three rivals to Rashi. (Years ago, I was told that a highly influential Jewish educator said that if

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Rashi were to return to the world to present a class in *humash*, he would of course attend, but if Nahmanides were to do the same, he would walk barefoot to Alaska to participate.)

Nevertheless, Lawee's formulation is more than worth recording. All three of Rashi's rivals, he says, separated Scripture into esoteric and exoteric layers, with the former inaccessible to all but a small elite. In Rashi's case, both layers of Scriptural meaning, *peshat* and midrash, were exoteric and accessible in principle and for the most part in reality to the widest audience. I cannot improve on Lawee's summary statement, and so I simply reproduce it. "Not that the *Commentary* was a simple text. Scores of supercommentaries, many by leading rabbis, could hardly have come to grace it if it were so. But, as Raymond Aron said of Karl Marx, his teaching lent itself to 'simplification for the simple and to subtlety for the subtle.' So it was with the *Commentary*, and that, plus its protean and self-replenishing character was, and remains, a part of its greatness" (264).

We owe Lawee a debt of gratitude for his sweeping, learned, and original contribution to our understanding of how this classic text achieved its well-deserved renown.

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