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## RASHI'S WOMEN: PROTOTYPES IN PROVERBS

The book of Proverbs is replete with text on the theme of women. It mentions many different types of women, and even abstract concepts such as Madame Wisdom and Madame Folly (chap. 8). If we attempt to group these women, we can discern two general categories: evil women and virtuous women.<sup>1</sup>

How are these two prototypical women, the evil and the virtuous, treated by Rashi in his commentary to Proverbs? Is each one considered individually, or can an overall order or pattern be detected regarding their treatment?

Rashi's commentary to Proverbs is a two-tiered one, similar to his commentary on the other biblical books. In his other scriptural commentaries, however, Rashi generally uses the term *midrasho* to put forth the non-literal meaning and the word *pesbuto* to introduce the literal explanation; here he presents new exegetical terms to explain the two levels of understanding.<sup>2</sup> The word *masbal* denotes the allegorical meaning, and

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<sup>1</sup> In each category they are called by numerous names. For example, the evil woman is titled *isha zara* (Prov. 2:16–19, 5:1–14, 6:24–35, 7:5–27), *eshet midyanim* (21:9, 19, 25:24, 27:15), *zona* (6:26, 7:10, 23:27), *nokbriya* (5:20, 6:24, 20:16, 23:27, 27:13), *eshet ra* (6:24), *isha mena'afet* (30:20). The virtuous woman is called: *eshet hayil* (12:4, 31:10), *eshet neurekha* (5:18), *eshet hen* (11:16), *isha yafa* (11:22), *isha maskhalet* (19:14). Another good woman mentioned many times in Proverbs is the mother; two terms are used in the text to describe her: *em* (1:8, 4:3, 6:20, 10:1, 15:20, 19:26, 20:20, 23:22, 23:25, 28:24, 29:15, 30:11, 30:17, 31:1), and *yoledet* (17:25, 23:25).

<sup>2</sup> More precisely, Kamin defines *Peshat* as an explanation “in accordance with the text’s vocabulary, syntax, context, literary form and structure in their mutual relationships,” in contrast to the *Derash* explanation which interprets letters, words, and phrases not only in their context but as independent elements; see Sarah Kamin, “Rashi’s Exegetical

the term *melitza* introduces the straightforward meaning.<sup>3</sup> Rashi's choice of these terms is based upon their appearance in an introductory verse to Proverbs (1:6): "For understanding allegory/*mashal* and figure/*melitza*, the words of the wise and their riddles."<sup>4</sup> Our examination of Rashi's treatment of women will focus on the glosses found in his allegorical/*mashal* commentary.

## The Evil Woman

### *Isha Zara (The Strange Woman)*

Based upon the number of times she is mentioned in Proverbs, and the quality and length of the passages describing her, the primary "bad" woman in Proverbs is the *isha zara*. Scholarship divides the book into numerous collections based on superscriptions or headings in the text. The first collection, chapters 1–9, is distinct in its longer, more detailed discourses; in this collection the actions of the *isha zara* are recounted at length four times.<sup>5</sup> In collections two and three, which are typified by shorter proverbial statements, the terms *zara* and *zona* (prostitute) are each mentioned twice. In total, Rashi comments allegorically about the *isha zara* seven times in his Proverbs commentary.<sup>6</sup>

The term *isha zara* is not easily translated; among the renderings are "foreign woman," "strange woman," and "the woman who belongs to another."<sup>7</sup> In one gloss (to 2:16), Rashi calls the *isha zara* a *mena'afet* (adulteress), but in the majority of cases, Rashi deems her a *zona* (prostitute).<sup>8</sup>

The first time the strange woman is presented to the reader in Proverbs (2:16–19), Rashi makes three important statements that will reappear in his subsequent remarks on the strange woman in later chapters:

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Categorization with Respect to the Distinction Between Peshat and Derash," *Immanuel* 11 (1980), 16–17.

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Kamin, *Rashi* [Hebrew] (Magnes, 2006), 115–120; Kamin, "Rashi's Exegetical Categorization," 22–23. *Melitza* means "figurative language," and not necessarily *peshat*.

<sup>4</sup> English translations of the biblical text are taken from the *New Jewish Publication Society of America Tanakh* (Jewish Publication Society, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> 2:16–19, 5:1–14, 6:24–35, 7:5–27.

<sup>6</sup> 1:6, 2:16, 5:3–6, 6:24–26, 7:8–10, 22:14, 23:27–28.

<sup>7</sup> Roger N. Whybray, *The Book of Proverbs: A Survey of Modern Study* (Brill, 1995), 73; Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 134–141; Tova Forti, "The Isha Zara in Proverbs 1–9: Allegory and Allegorization," *Hebrew Studies* 48 (2007), 98–99.

<sup>8</sup> Rashi 1:6, 5:3–6 (twice), 6:24–26 (twice), 7:8–10.

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To save you from a strange woman — From the *knessiya* (assembly; congregation) of idolatry,<sup>9</sup> which is *minut* (idolatry). It cannot be said that he spoke only of the actual adulteress, for what is the praise of the Torah, that he says here, “to save you from a strange woman,” and not from any other sin? Rather, this is idolatry, the casting off of the yoke of all the commandments.

For her house sinks down to death — This refers back to “to save you, etc.” (v. 16), for whoever comes to her house will sink and slip as if down an incline that leads to death, and the Torah will guard you from this fall. Hence, it is a great thing for you. The dead — those who neglect the way of goodness and are forsaken without support until they fall into *gehenom*. None return — It is hard for them to part with it and to repent.<sup>10</sup>

Rashi’s opening point is that the *isha zara* is an allegory for idolatry or heresy. In five glosses on the strange woman Rashi mentions *minut* or *minim*, and in five glosses he mentions idolatry; in three of the aforementioned glosses both are used.<sup>11</sup> What do these terms actually mean? Is it possible to pinpoint the type of heresy or idolatry Rashi refers to?

The identification of the strange woman with *minut* is found in the Talmud’s account of Rabbi Eliezer’s seizure by the secular authorities and his subsequent release. Trying to understand why he had to undergo this unfortunate experience, Rabbi Akiva proposed that perhaps inappropriate thoughts were the cause:

And thou didst approve of it and because of that thou was arrested? He exclaimed: Akiva: thou hast reminded me. I was once walking in the upper market of Sepphoris when I came across one [of the disciples of Jesus the Nazarene,<sup>12</sup>] Jacob of Kefar-Sekaniah by name, who said to me: It is written

<sup>9</sup> Standard printed editions read *apikorsut* due to censorship; see my recently published critical edition of Rashi’s Proverbs commentary, *Rashi’s Commentary on the Book of Proverbs* (World Union of Jewish Studies, 2019), 96.

<sup>10</sup> The English translation of Rashi’s commentary is based primarily upon *Proverbs: A New English Translation*, trans. and notes A. J. Rosenberg (Judaica Press, 1993). Two types of changes have been made to this translation: the first type was implemented to match the English to the wording in Fredman, *Rashi on Proverbs*, and the second was applied to match the superscriptions/lemmas of the glosses with the New Jewish Publication Society’s translation of the Proverbs text.

<sup>11</sup> *Minut/minim*: 2:16, 5:3–6, 6:24–26, 7:8–10, 23:27–28; idolatry: 1:6, 2:16, 6:24–26, 7:8–10, 22:14; both terms: 2:16, 6: 24–26, 7:8–10.

<sup>12</sup> The editor of the Soncino edition notes that the words written in the square brackets are found in MS. Munich 95, and *Dikdukei Soferim*, ed. R. Rabinowitz, 11 (Ohr HaHakhma, 2001; originally printed in Munich, 1883), 38, lists in which

in your Torah, “You shalt not bring the hire of a harlot... into the house of the Lord thy God” (Deut. 23:19). May such money be applied to the erection of a retiring place for the High Priest? To which I made no reply. Said he to me: thus was I taught [by Jesus the Nazarene]: “For the hire of a harlot hath she gathered them and unto the hire of a harlot shall they return” (Mic. 1:7): they came from a place of filth; let them go to a place of filth. These words pleased me very much, and that is why I was arrested for apostasy, for thereby I transgressed the scriptural words: “Remove thy way far from her” (Prov. 5:8)—which [refers] to *minut*; “and come nigh to the door of her house”—which refers to the ruling power (*Avoda Zara* 17a).<sup>13</sup>

The talmudic discussion ends with clearly identifying the strange woman in Proverbs with heresy and specifically the teachings of Jesus.<sup>14</sup> The Talmud connects the mention of the harlot in two biblical verses, in Deuteronomy and Micah, with our strange woman in Proverbs. Note that both of the other biblical verses call the woman a harlot. Perhaps this is the reason for Rashi’s preference for this term when describing the *isha zara*.

The talmudic discourse rests upon the verse describing the *isha zara* in Proverbs, chapter 5. Rashi adopts the identification of the *isha zara* with heresy, specifically the teachings of Jesus, and applies it to all the sections describing her.<sup>15</sup> The identification of *minut* with Christianity, the teachings of Jesus, and *minim* with Christians, is prevalent in Rashi’s commentary to the Later Prophets and Hagiographa.<sup>16</sup> In Rashi’s uncensored gloss to Daniel 12:10, he unequivocally states: “for example, the heretics (*minim*), the students of Jesus.”<sup>17</sup>

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manuscripts and early printed editions these comments are present and are missing due to censorship.

<sup>13</sup> Translation follows the Soncino Press edition.

<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that although the Talmud explicates the *isha zara* in an allegorical fashion, many midrashic sources only explained her in a literal sense; see Nili Samet, “An Examination of Mishlei 7–8 in Light of the Stories of the Avshalom Revolt and the Reign of Shlomo” [Hebrew], *Megadim* 34 (2001), 120–121 and n. 3.

<sup>15</sup> However, while the Talmud understands the verse of the strange woman to be referring to two sources of power: *minut* and the secular authorities, Rashi notes only the former.

<sup>16</sup> Judah Rosenthal, “Anti-Christian Polemic in Rashi’s Bible Commentary” [Hebrew], in *Mehkarim u-Mekorot*, 1 (R. Mass, 1967), 105–108 and n. 24; Shaye J. D. Cohen, “Does Rashi’s Torah Commentary Respond to Christianity? A comparison of Rashi with Rashbam and Bekhor Shor,” in *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation—Essays in Honor of James Kugel*, ed. H. Najman and J. Newman (Brill, 2004), 458–472.

<sup>17</sup> See *Daniel, Ezra-Nehemia* [*Mikra’ot Gedolot ha-Keter*], ed. M. Cohen (Bar-Ilan University Press, 2019), 84.

Rashi's gloss to Proverbs 2:16 begins with an unusual phrase: "*knessiya* of idolatry"—*knessiya* meaning an assembly or congregation, i.e., of idolatry, which is then identified with *minut*. In Rashi's comments on the *isha zara*, idolatry has become synonymous with Christianity.<sup>18</sup>

The term *knessiya* is used thirteen times in Rashi's commentary to the Bible, and in all instances except one it refers to an assembly or gathering of the Jewish people.<sup>19</sup> Our gloss is the exception in that it signifies a gathering for the purpose of idolatry or Christianity. Baer believes that Rashi's use of this term was influenced by the Latin word *ecclesia*, employed widely in Christianity as an abstract word to describe the relationship between the Messiah and his church (*ecclesia*) as his mystic body.<sup>20</sup> Most scholars agree, however, that Rashi did not understand or read Latin.<sup>21</sup> If he was aware of this Latin term, it might have been through oral communication.<sup>22</sup>

A second characteristic, highlighted above in Rashi's commentary to the strange woman, is that idolatry is a more serious sin than others in the Bible. A person who draws near to idolatry or Christianity abandons the whole Torah. Rashi notes a similar idea (gloss to 6:24): "but concerning *minut*, which is equal in gravity to all [commandments], ... this is idolatry which is as stringent as all other [commandments]."

A third characteristic highlighted in Rashi's comments regarding the strange woman is that a person who becomes involved with the *isha zara* will fall into *gehinom* (the netherworld), a rabbinical motif introduced by Rashi to explain the biblical text. Three times Rashi repeats this warning about *gehinom* in the context of the strange woman (2:18, 5:9, 6:26) to strongly caution his reader.

The *isha zara* is so central to Rashi's commentary that in choosing one allegory to typify the nature of the whole book, Rashi highlights the strange woman:

<sup>18</sup> In Proverbs the term *min* is found not only in Rashi's glosses describing the *isha zara*, but an additional seven times, largely describing the enticement of Jews to Christianity/idolatry—see his glosses to 1:22, 2:12, 6:1, 13, 9:17, 17:12, 18. In most standard printed editions, the term *min* has been altered due to censorship.

<sup>19</sup> Jer. 9:1; Ezek. 23:2; Hosea 2:7; Mic. 1:11; Zeph. 3:10; Ps. 22:23, 45:14, 68:7, 14; Prov. 10:1–2; Song of Songs 1:8, 6:9.

<sup>20</sup> Yitzhak F. Baer, "Rashi and the World Around Him," in *Jewish Intellectual History in the Middle Ages*, ed. J. Dan (Praeger, 1994), 112–113.

<sup>21</sup> Sarah Kamin, "Rashi to the Song of Songs" [Hebrew], in *Ben Yehudim le-Notzrim be-Farshanut ha-Mikra* (Magnes, 2008), 55–56, n. 121; David Berger, "Mission to the Jews and Jewish-Christian Contacts in the Polemical Literature of the High Middle Ages," *The American Historical Review* 91:3 (1986), 590, n. 68.

<sup>22</sup> Esra Shereshevsky, "Rashi's and Christian Interpretations," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 61 (1970), 76–86; Kamin, "Rashi to the Song of Songs," 55, n. 121.

To understand an allegory and the straightforward meaning (1:6) — That they should direct their attention to the verses through two methods: the allegory and the straightforward meaning. They should understand what he compares to the straightforward meaning, but they should not neglect the straightforward meaning itself, for that too requires understanding. When he states “to save you from a strange woman and an alien one” (2:16), idolatry is meant; this is the allegory, and also the figure—for he expressed his allegory in terms of a woman—you shall be aware of a harlot.<sup>23</sup>

In Rashi’s commentary to Proverbs, the *isha zara*, who is repeatedly identified with Christianity, has become a central polemical figure.

*Eshet Midyanim and Isha Mena’afet (Contentious and Adulterous Woman)*

The *eshet midyanim*,<sup>24</sup> contentious woman, is mentioned four times in Proverbs collections 2 and 5 (21:9, 19, 25:24, 27:15);<sup>25</sup> these collections are generally known for their short, terse descriptions. Three times Rashi glosses the verses allegorically and twice (on almost identical biblical verses) identifies the contentious wife with *Kneset Yisrael*, the Congregation of Israel, who has sinned. This identification is gender sensitive in that the term *Kneset Yisrael* is feminine, as is the contentious woman. Proverbs 21:9 reads: “Dwelling in the corner of a roof is better than a contentious woman and the house of a friend,” and Rashi writes:

And the house of a friend — ... And the *Midrash Aggada* prophesized that the *Shekhina* would ultimately leave from the Congregation of Israel, who are like a contentious woman. And the house of a friend — A house in which they associate friends with the Holy One, blessed be He, for example, the image that Manasseh erected in the Temple.

<sup>23</sup> It is important to note that many subsequent Jewish commentators view the *isha zara* on two exegetical levels: literal and allegorical, similar to Rashi—yet her allegorical meaning differs from that of Rashi and represents dangers such as: lust (Ralbag 2:16), lust and temptation (Meiri, Introduction), temporal pleasures (Meiri 2:19), the evil inclination (Alshikh 5:4) and foreign wisdom/philosophical speculation (Malbim 5: 3, 5). Other commentaries, however, explicate only the literal meaning, such as Ibn Ezra (2:16–19), Yosef Kimhi (8:1), Moshe Kimhi (chapters 2, 5, 7), Radak (5:3, 20) and Ibn Kaspi (introduction).

<sup>24</sup> The term *madon*, conventionally translated as strife, quarrelsome, scolding, is prevalent in Proverbs (17:14, 22:10, 26:20, 28:25, 29:22, etc.).

<sup>25</sup> Excluding Prov. 19:13, which mentions “the nagging of the wife.”

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On an almost identical verse (25:24), Rashi glosses:

Dwelling in the corner of a roof is better — This is stated concerning the withdrawal of the *Shekhina*. Than a contentious woman — The Congregation of Israel, who dealt wickedly and provoked the Holy One, blessed be He, with their actions.

Rashi's former gloss (21:9) focuses primarily on the second stich of the verse. The contentious woman has been identified with the Congregation of Israel, who has sinned through idolatry. "The house of a friend" is explained as the Temple, into which a "friend" has been added, an idol erected by King Manasseh (see II Kings 21). As a result of this action, God's presence will leave the Temple.

His latter gloss (25:24) clearly links the first stich of the verse with the withdrawal of the Divine Presence. "Dwelling in the corner of a roof" describes one of the ten stages of the removal of the Divine Presence from the Temple. He then explains that the Congregation of Israel is contentious for acting wickedly, without specifying the sin of idolatry. Rashi has linked both glosses pertaining to the contentious woman to the period of the First Temple.<sup>26</sup>

Rashi notes in his first gloss that his source is the *Midrash Aggada*. And indeed, the identification of our Proverbs verse with the withdrawal of the Divine Presence is found in numerous rabbinic sources, including *Rosh Hashana* 31a.<sup>27</sup>

R. Judah b. Idi said in the name of R. Johanan: The Divine Presence left Israel by ten stages—this we know from references in Scripture:... And from the altar to the roof, as it is written, "It is better to dwell in a corner of the housetop" (Prov. 21:9).

It is important to note that the Talmud discusses only the first stich of the verse—the identification of "the contentious woman" with the Congregation of Israel. The equating of the second stich, "the house of a friend," with idolatry, seems original to Rashi.

<sup>26</sup> Similar to the aforementioned verses is Prov. 21:19: "It is better to live in the desert than with a contentious, vexatious wife." On this verse, Rashi writes only about the withdrawal of the Divine Presence and does not mention the contentious wife. This verse is therefore also linked to the same time period.

<sup>27</sup> See also *Lamentations Rabba*, proem 25; *Avot de-Rabi Natan*, chap. 34; *Shir ha-Shirim Zuta* 5:6. Regarding the number of stops, see Menahem Ben-Yashar, Isaac Gottlieb, Jordan S. Penkower, *Ha-Mikra ke-Farshanut Hazal: Sefer Hoshea*, 1 (Bar-Ilan University Press, 2003), 275 and n. 3.

The *isha mena'afet* (adulteress woman) is mentioned only once in Proverbs, in a section delineating four matters which are wondrous, or difficult to comprehend (30:18–20). The section concludes by stating: “Such is the way of an adulteress: she eats, wipes her mouth, and says, ‘I have committed no sin’” (v. 20). Eating here is a euphemism for sexual intercourse;<sup>28</sup> just as she cleans her mouth after eating, so too she covers up her carnal activities.

On the above verse Rashi states:

Such is the way of the adulteress — The Congregation of Israel brought evil upon herself, because she played the adulteress with idolatry, and deserved that the retribution should befall her. And says, “I have committed no sin” — As it is said, “Behold, I contend with you because you say, ‘I have not sinned’” (Jer. 2:35).<sup>29</sup>

This gloss is original to Rashi.<sup>30</sup> The adulteress is identified with the Congregation of Israel, and the act of adultery is metaphorically explained as the betrayal of her marriage with God through idol worship. Her treachery will bring punishment, yet she will have the audacity to claim that she hasn’t sinned. Rashi, through the discernment of similar language, links our description to a verse in Jeremiah: “I have committed no sin” (Prov. 30:20) equated with “I have not sinned” (Jer. 2:35), thereby pinpointing the historical period of our verse.

Why did Rashi gloss the adulteress in an allegorical fashion and not simply state the literal meaning? The answer lies in the structure of Rashi’s two-tiered commentary. Rashi has already glossed this section delineating the four wondrous acts culminating with the adulteress according to the straightforward meaning; he now returns and explicates it according to its allegorical message.

Both the contentious woman and the adulteress are identified with the Congregation of Israel; both have sinned through engaging in

<sup>28</sup> See *Yoma* 75a. Rashi states so explicitly in his literal gloss to this verse: “She eats (30:20) — Scripture speaks euphemistically.” And similarly, regarding Genesis 39:6, when Joseph tells the wife of Potiphar that he cannot sleep with her because her husband has given him custody of everything “except for the bread he ate,” Rashi glosses: “Except for the bread — This is his wife, but Scripture speaks with a chaste expression.”

<sup>29</sup> This gloss is found near the end of the chapter after Rashi explicated the verses according to their straightforward meaning. See Fredman, *Rashi on Proverbs*, 240.

<sup>30</sup> It is important to note that the metaphorical expression of both the marital relationship as the relationship between God and the Jewish people and adultery as the violation of this relationship by the taking of other gods are recurring themes in the Bible; see, for example, Hosea, chaps. 1–2.

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idolatry and are associated with the historical period preceding the destruction of the First Temple. Rashi's commentary has turned both figures into one. Despite the fact that they sin grievously and anger God, Rashi's glosses to these terms, in contrast to those on the *isha zara*, contain no polemical overtones; neither are identified with heresy or Christianity. What could be the reason for this difference in treatment? It would seem that the brevity of their descriptions (their lack of sensuality and allure) resulted in a simpler, literal approach and not more than that. After all, the very detailed sensual depiction of the *isha zara* so bothered the Sages that they temporarily removed Proverbs from the biblical canon because of it, as is recounted in *Avot de-Rabi Natan* 1:4:<sup>31</sup>

“Be deliberate in judgement.” What is that? This teaches that a man should take time in rendering judgement; for whoever takes time in rendering judgement is unruffled in judgement. As it is said, “These also are the proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah, king of Judah, copied out” (Prov. 25:1): It is not that they copied them out but they took their time. Abba Shaul says: It does not mean that they took their time, but they interpreted. Originally, it is said, Proverbs, Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes were suppressed; for since they were held to be mere parables and not part of the Holy Writings, [the religious authorities] arose and suppressed them; [and so they remained] until the men of Hezekiah came and interpreted them. For (in Proverbs) it is said: “And I beheld among the thoughtless ones; I discerned among the youths, a young man void of understanding.... And, behold, there met him a woman with the attire of a harlot, and wily of heart. She is riotous and rebellious; her feet abide not in her house; now she is in the streets, now in the broad places, and lieth in wait at every corner. So she caught him and kissed him” (Prov. 7:7–20).

### The Virtuous Woman

Proverbs refers to the good woman by a variety of titles. As indicated by the length of her description (31:10–31), the most significant of these women is the *eshet hayil* (She is also the most well-known thanks to the

<sup>31</sup> It is unclear whether the precise meaning of the Hebrew term *ganaz* is to remove from the biblical canon or to withdraw it from public circulation. See Sid Z. Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence* (Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1991), 85–86; Menahem Haran, *Ha-Asufa ha-Mikra'it*, 1 (Bialik Institute, 1996), 276–303. In *Shabbat* 30b it is noted that the Sages wanted to remove Proverbs from the canon but did not actually do so: “And the book of Proverbs the Sages also sought to conceal, for its statements contradicted one another.”

widespread custom of singing this chapter at the Friday evening Sabbath meal.) While the other women merit a terse depiction (mostly one line long), the characterization of the *eshet hayil* is spread over 22 verses.<sup>32</sup>

Rashi does not gloss all of the good women with either a literal or an allegorical comment, but in the majority of cases where he does bring an allegorical comment, she is compared to the Torah.<sup>33</sup>

We will first examine Rashi's glosses to the women who merit a brief description and then examine his gloss to the *eshet hayil*. Basing himself on *Midrash Proverbs* (5:18), Rashi identifies the *eshet ne'urekha* (the woman of your youth) of chapter 5 with Torah learned during one's youth.<sup>34</sup>

Proverbs 18:22 states: "He who finds a wife has found happiness and has won the favor of the Lord." Although the Proverbs text does not use any adjectives to describe the wife, immediate mention of the word "happiness" in the verse indicates that she is good. And, indeed, Rashi, citing *Berakhot* 8a, notes: "He who finds a wife — Torah, and according to its apparent meaning: a good wife."

Rashi expands the identification to include Torah scholars, as we see in his gloss to the following verse (Prov. 11: 22): "Like a gold ring in the snout of a pig is a beautiful woman bereft of sense." Rashi, citing *Midrash Proverbs* (11:22), states:

A gold ring in the snout of the pig — That bemires it in the dung heap, so is a Torah scholar who turns away from the way and speaks disloyally [of God].<sup>35</sup> Bereft of sense — Who has departed from the Torah.

In only one allegorical comment of Rashi's is the good woman not directly identified with the Torah. Proverbs (11:16) reads: "A graceful woman (*eshet hen*) obtains honor; ruthless men obtain wealth," and Rashi comments:

<sup>32</sup> *Eshet hayil* is mentioned also in 12:4; there, it is a one-line description.

<sup>33</sup> Rashi does not comment at all on the following two verses that describe "good women": 12:4, 19:14.

<sup>34</sup> Rashi never mentions this source by name, but as Melammed has noted, it was not Rashi's method to quote the name of the midrashic source of the particular biblical book he was glossing. See Ezra Z. Melammed, *Mefarshai ba-Mikra*, 1 (Magnes, 1975), 374. For an analysis of Rashi's use of this source, see Fredman, *Rashi on Proverbs*, 24–25.: "Find joy in the woman of your youth — She is the Torah that you learned in your youth."

<sup>35</sup> The last phrase, "and speaks disloyally," is absent from the printed editions of Rashi and has been replaced by the word: "the good"; thus, they read: "who turns away from the good way."

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A graceful woman — The Congregation of Israel constantly draws near to the honor of the Holy One, blessed be He, and His Torah. Ruthless men obtain wealth — But the sons of Esau draw near to money collection and robbery.

“The graceful woman” is identified with the Congregation of Israel and not the Torah, yet the word “Torah” is mentioned at the end of the phrase. Why is “the graceful woman” not directly identified with the Torah?

Perhaps the answer lies in the structure of the verse. The proverb is a couplet, composed of two contrasting stiches. The second stich of the verse describes ruthless men who obtain wealth and riches. He identifies the ruthless men with the “sons of Esau”; Esau and his descendants are a code name in Rashi’s commentary for the Christians of his time.<sup>36</sup> Christian financial extortion and robbery is a prevalent motif in Rashi’s commentary on the Bible and on the book of Proverbs.<sup>37</sup>

Once he connects the second part of the verse to the Christians, Rashi needs to find the appropriate contrast for the first part of the verse. Who is the graceful (and not ruthless) woman who draws near to honor (and not riches)? The Congregation of Israel. The Congregation of Israel is a collective noun; it is singular, as is “the graceful woman,” yet it represents all of Israel (the plural) which clearly contrasts with the “ruthless men” (plural) in the second part of the verse. There is no known source for Rashi’s comment. This gloss demonstrates Rashi’s sensitivity to the language of the text and his desire to incorporate midrashic material that fits the grammar and syntax of the verse.<sup>38</sup>

The term *eshet hayil* (the “capable wife”) is mentioned twice in Proverbs (12:4, 31:10), and Rashi comments about her only on her second appearance.<sup>39</sup> The *eshet hayil* of chapter 31 is a self-contained poem, an acrostic encompassing the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Rashi’s gloss to this poem is extensive, explicating the majority of the

<sup>36</sup> Gerson Cohen, “Esau as Symbol in Early Medieval Thought,” in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. A. Altman (Harvard University Press, 1967), 18–48; Fredman, *Rashi on Proverbs*, 59–61.

<sup>37</sup> Avraham Grossman, *Emunot ve-De’ot be-Olam Shel Rashi* (Tevunot, 2007), 160–161; Fredman, *Rashi on Proverbs*, 56–57.

<sup>38</sup> Kamin, “Rashi’s Exegetical Categorization,” 28–32; Avraham Grossman, “The School of Literal Jewish Exegesis in Northern France,” in *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament*, vol. 1, ed. M. Saebo (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 335.

<sup>39</sup> The term *eshet hayil* has been translated in a variety of ways: the woman of strength; the valiant wife; a woman of valor; the capable wife. The word *eshet* (the construct of *isha*) is sometimes translated as “woman” and sometimes as “wife.”

verses.<sup>40</sup> It is a two-tiered explanation, first presenting the *melitza*, or literal explanation, followed by the allegorical one. He begins the second tier of his commentary, the *mashal*, with the following comment:

And let her works praise her in the gates (31:31) — ... this is the straightforward meaning, which I explained, but according to the allegory—it is explained as referring to the Torah and those who study her.

In his allegorical commentary, Rashi applies the verses to the Torah and to those who study it. These include the Sages and the teachers, and their students:

She makes cloth (31:24) — Glorious garments she gives to the Sages.<sup>41</sup>

And supplies provisions for her household (31:15) — The teacher teaches the pupils their chapter and the lesson allotted to them.<sup>42</sup>

She looks for wool and flax (31:13) — ... and the allegory is as follows: The Torah seeks Scripture and Mishnah, and searches for them, as they are the requirements of the students.<sup>43</sup>

How is Torah knowledge attained? Through many hours of study and self-sacrifice:

She rises while it is still night (31:15) — They rise early in the [morning] watch.<sup>44</sup>

She gives generously to the poor (31:20) — Whoever makes himself like a poor man on her account, in him she [the Torah] endures.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Rashi's literal explanation is shorter than his allegorical one. In the former he briefly explains twelve verses (55 percent) and in the latter he expounds in greater depth sixteen verses (73 percent).

<sup>41</sup> No midrashic source was found for this comment.

<sup>42</sup> The term "their chapter" (*pirkan*) is missing from the printed editions. *Midrash Proverbs* (31:15) connects our verse with the learning of Torah but does not specify the teacher instructing his student.

<sup>43</sup> No midrashic source was found for this comment. Standard printed editions read: "Scripture and Mishna, Midrash..." But the word "Midrash" is an interpolation to Rashi's commentary; see Fredman, *Rashi on Proverbs*, 248, apparatus of variants. Rashi mentions only two holy texts (Scripture and Mishna) and not three, to correspond to the two materials mentioned in the verse: "wool and flax."

<sup>44</sup> Whereas midrashic sources connect our verse to a scholar studying until late at night, Rashi notes a teacher teaching his student early in the morning. See *Midrash Proverbs* 31:15; *Leviticus Rabba* 19:1; *Song of Songs Rabba* 5:11.

<sup>45</sup> No midrashic source was found which connects the self-sacrifice and difficulties of Torah scholars with our verse. This theme is a known one in Rashi's commentary to the Bible; see Avraham Grossman, *Rashi* (Littman Library, 2012), 255–258.

## TRADITION

What rewards are accrued through the study of Torah? An individual gains material benefits, as well as spiritual ones:

She is like a merchant fleet (31:14) — She brings them, to those who study her, blessing and sustenance.

And lacks no good thing (31:11) — He eats the fruit in this world and the principal remains for the world to come.<sup>46</sup>

The Torah Sage is girded with spiritual strength:

She makes cloth (31:24) — A glorious garment she gives to the Sages. To the merchant — To the one who deals in her trade, she gives a belt for their loins.

Study and performance afford protection from the day of judgment:

She looks to the future cheerfully (31:25) — They need not grieve over the day of judgment because in their righteousness they will be saved from it....

And protection from *gehinom*:

Dressed in crimson (31:21) — ... Another explanation: They are dressed with those [commandments] expressed in double language: “You shall surely give”/נתן תתן (Deut. 15: 10); “You shall surely open” (v. 14); ... All these save her from the snow of *gehenom*, as is expounded in the *Tanbuma*.<sup>47</sup>

According to Rashi’s glosses to the *esbet hayil*, not only the individual but also the nation will attain benefits; Christianity will be vanquished:

She sets her mind on a field (31:16) — [The Torah] muzzles with a muzzle and a bridle Esau, “the man of the field” (Gen. 25:27). And takes him — From the world, to destroy him.

This gloss is original to Rashi; it is based upon the hermeneutical principle of *gezeira shava* (analog). The word *sadeh* (field) appears in our verse and

<sup>46</sup> This idea is found in *Pe’ah* 1:1; Rashi applies it to our verse and similarly to 12:14, 13:2.

<sup>47</sup> Rashi’s explanation is taken from *Tanbuma Re’eh* 13 and is based upon reading the Hebrew word with a different vocalization: *shenayim* (two) instead of *shanim* (crimson); the reference is to commandments that are expressed in double language.

in Gen. 25:27; in the latter verse it refers to Esau.<sup>48</sup> Rashi therefore deduces that our verse also refers to him.<sup>49</sup> Additionally, Rashi views the verb *zamema* as derived from the word *zimam* (muzzle). Consequently, he homiletically explains our verse as referring to muzzling Esau, the man of the field, in order to destroy him. This gloss emphasizes the downfall of Esau, i.e., the Christians.<sup>50</sup>

Concomitant with the destruction of Esau will be the protection of Israel: “From the fruit (31:16) — Of her deeds. She plants a vineyard — Israel, to keep them alive for eternal life.”<sup>51</sup>

The identification of the vineyard with the nation of Israel is found in the *Tanhuma*, but the conclusion of the comment, “to keep them alive for eternal life,” seems original to Rashi.<sup>52</sup> Rashi’s glosses create a clear linguistic contrast between Esau’s destruction and Israel’s redemption through the use of the Hebrew word *olam* (alternatively world and forever). Whereas Esau will be taken “from the world” to be destroyed, Israel, though her deeds, will be kept alive “for eternal life.” By juxtaposing the destruction of Esau/Christianity with the salvation of Israel, Rashi injected into the hearts of his medieval Jews readers, and subsequent generations, hope for a better future.

Rashi’s promise of national protection and deliverance is buttressed by historical precedent:

<sup>48</sup> Whereas the inference is found in midrashic sources (see *Midrash Tanhuma, Re’eh* 4:17), it is original to Rashi to apply it to our verse in *eshet hayil*.

<sup>49</sup> In Rashi’s allegorical gloss to 14:12, he employs an additional *gezeira shava* using the same verse from Gen. 25:27 to denigrate Esau. There the shared word is *ish* (man):

There is a way that seems right to a man — The way of idolatry seemed right to Esau, “a man of the field” (Gen. 25:27), but its end, etc. Even with laughter — That the Holy One, blessed be He, laughs with them in this world. Their hearts will ache — In the future....

Standard printed editions read “the way of laziness” instead of “the way of idolatry.” See Fredman, *Rashi on Proverbs*, 151.

<sup>50</sup> See Rashi 14:14, 21:12, Amalek (Gen. 36:12), Esau’s descendant, is another codename for the Christians.

<sup>51</sup> It is interesting to note that this comment is also based on a *gezeira shava*; see Rashi’s source in the next comment. Perhaps because the inference is clearly seen in Rashi’s source, he felt no need to state it, whereas regarding the former inference, “Esau, man of the field,” because it is an original Rashi gloss to this verse, it needed to be stated directly.

<sup>52</sup> *Tanhuma-Yelammedenu*, “And the Life of Sarah,” para. 4, trans. and notes S. Berman (Ktav Publishing, 1996), 158: “From the fruit of her hand she planted a vineyard (Prov. 31:16). This refers to Israel, as it is said: For a vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel (Isa. 5:7).”

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Her lamp never goes out at night (31:18) — [The word] night [is written] without the [final letter] *heh*: on “the night of watching” (Ex. 12:42), when the Egyptians were plagued, she shone for Israel and protected them.

Just as God watched over Israel on the night prior to their leaving Egyptian bondage when the firstborn were smitten, so, too, will He safeguard Israel in the future. The connection of our verse with the “night of watching” is found in midrashic sources, but there it is referring to the protection it afforded an individual, Bitiah, Pharaoh’s daughter.<sup>53</sup> Rashi’s gloss expands the protection to include the nation of Israel; this extension is original to Rashi.

Some of the benefits delineated in Rashi’s commentary regarding the *eshet hayil* clearly counteract the dangers posed by the *isha zara*. The capable wife brings blessing, prosperity, and life, whereas the strange woman brings poverty and death.<sup>54</sup> Whereas the strange woman causes her prey to forfeit the yoke of the commandments and fall into *gehinom*,<sup>55</sup> the capable wife (allegorized as the Torah itself) protects those who adhere to her commandments from this misfortune. In his allegorical commentary on the capable wife, Rashi comments on sixteen of the twenty-two verses. I was able to identify sources for only six of Rashi’s comments, and three of the six connections are only general in nature. It appears that Rashi’s *mashal* commentary on the capable wife is overwhelmingly original.<sup>56</sup> The glosses connecting the capable wife with the individual student of Torah is not surprising; after all, the kernel of this connection is found in traditional sources. What is unexpected are the glosses that extend the poem to the national level and make mention of Esau/Christianity. By mentioning the downfall of Esau/Christianity and eternal life for Israel, Rashi introduces polemical material into his gloss to the *eshet hayil*.

Rashi has purposely molded some of his commentary on the *eshet hayil* to counterbalance the description of the *isha zara*. Study of and adherence to the Torah is the antidote to the dangers of Christianity. Their placement in the biblical text strengthens the contrast between these two women. The detailing of the *eshet hayil* is located in the closing

<sup>53</sup> Rashi’s source is *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*, “And it came to pass at midnight,” *piska* 7. See also *Pesikta Rabbati*, *piska* 17.

<sup>54</sup> Rashi 6:26.

<sup>55</sup> Rashi 2:16–19.

<sup>56</sup> Rosenberg, *Proverbs: A New English Translation*, 206, draws a similar conclusion.

chapter of Proverbs, whereas the extensive descriptions of the *isha zara* are found in the opening collection to Proverbs.<sup>57</sup>

### *The Mother*

The last virtuous woman analyzed here is the mother. The mother differs from the other women subsumed under the general category of good women in that she is not called by the Proverbs text *eshet*/wife or *isha*/woman (although, of course, she must have been both), but is designated by one of two terms: *em*/mother and *yoledet*/the one who bore you.<sup>58</sup> She is mentioned a total of sixteen times,<sup>59</sup> six times in Rashi's allegorical glosses, he identifies her with the nation of Israel.<sup>60</sup> He draws this identification from *Berakhot* 35b:

R. Hanina ben Papa said: To enjoy this world without a benediction is like robbing the Holy One, blessed be He, and the Community of Israel (*Knesset Yisrael*), as it says: *Whoso robbeth his father or his mother and saith, It is no transgression, the same is the companion of a destroyer* (Prov. 28:24), and *father* is none other but the Holy One, blessed be He, as it says, *Is it not He, thy Father that hath gotten thee* (Deut. 32:6); and *mother* is none other than the Community of Israel, as it is says, *Hear my son, the instruction of thy father, forsake not the teaching of your mother* (Prov. 1:8).

Rashi, in his gloss to Proverbs 1:8, strengthens the association between the mother and the nation by highlighting the phonic similarity between these Hebrew words: “Your mother/*imekha* (1:8) — Your nation/*ummatekha*, *Knesset Yisrael*...” We will return to this gloss below. And likewise, in his

<sup>57</sup> Whybray and Camp expand the external framework to include not just the *isha zara* but all the poems in chapters 1–9 personifying wisdom; see Whybray, *The Book of Proverbs*, 145; Claudia Camp, “Woman Wisdom as Root Metaphor,” in *The Listening Heart, JSOT Supplement Series* 58, ed. K. Hoglund, E. Huwiler, J. Glass, and R. Lee (JSOT Press, 1987), 65.

<sup>58</sup> The term *em*, fourteen times; *yoledet*, twice. In 23:25 both terms are used.  
<sup>59</sup> 1:8, 4:3, 6:20, 10:1, 15:20, 17:25, 19:26, 20:20, 23:22, 25 (twice), 28:24, 29:15, 30:11, 17, 31:1. Thirteen times she is mentioned together with the father; the exceptions are 29:15, 31:1.

<sup>60</sup> 1:8, 4:3, 10:1, 17:25, 23:25, 28:24. Regarding the other glosses to the mother, in six comments Rashi understands her according to the literal explanation: 10:1, 15:20, 19:26, 29:15, 30:17, 31:1, and in three of the aforementioned comments, she is identified with specific biblical mothers: Hagar/Sarah: 19:26, 29:15; Solomon's mother: 31:1. On four verses, Rashi makes no comment at all: 6:20, 20:20, 23:22, 30:11.

commentary to 4:3: “Before my mother — Before my nation. This assonance is drawn from midrashic sources.”<sup>61</sup>

In a similar vein, Rashi identifies the term *yoledet*/she who bore you (Prov. 23: 25) with the nation, although in this case there is no word play. Rashi’s source for this identification is the Jerusalem Talmud.<sup>62</sup>

With regard to Rashi’s allegorical comments on the mother, twice he uses the term *um* to describe the nation and four times he employs the word *knesset*.<sup>63</sup> *Knesset Yisrael* refers to the collective of Israel, which has been incited to do evil:

He who robs his father and his mother, his father (28:24) — The Holy One, blessed be He. His mother — The Congregation of Israel/*Knesset Yisrael*; he who causes the people to sin by robbing the Holy One, blessed be He, estranges His children from Him, and robs them of goodness. To a destroyer — Jeroboam.

Rashi’s source is *Berakhot* 35b, quoted above, from which he gleans three associations: father = the Holy One, blessed be He; mother = *Knesset Yisrael*; a destroyer = Jeroboam. Rashi applies this three-pronged association to a verse in Proverbs that mentions the mother, father, and foolish son (10:1):

A wise son brings joy to his father (10:1) — The Holy One, blessed be He; another explanation: his actual father.... And according to the allegory, a foolish son — Like Jeroboam the son of Nebat, is the grief [of his mother] — *Knessiyato*/his nation.

<sup>61</sup> *Midrash Tanhuma*, Re’eh 12; *Tanhuma Re’eh* 14; *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*, *Aser Te’aser*.

<sup>62</sup> *Yerushalmi Ta’anit*, chap. 3, 19a: “What is [the verse] teaching by saying *the one who bore you* (Prov. 23:25)? [This phrase would seem to be superfluous, since the verse has already mentioned *your mother*.] R. Mana says: This refers to your nation....” This comment of Rashi’s is missing in the standard rabbinic Bibles; it has an interesting textual history. In the most reliable Rashi manuscript to the Hagiographa, MS Lutzki 778, the gloss reads: “And may she who bore you have joy (23:25) — I saw in the Jerusalem Talmud.” The scribe then left the rest of the line blank in the manuscript to indicate that the quote from the Jerusalem Talmud was missing from the manuscript from which he copied it. Other reliable manuscripts include the reference to the Jerusalem Talmud but do not leave the blank space, and beginning with the earliest printed editions, the whole comment is omitted. Because the reference to the Jerusalem Talmud is found in MS Lutzki 778 and other reliable manuscripts, it would seem to be authentic to Rashi and not an interpolation. For more details regarding the textual history, see Fredman, *Rashi on Proverbs*, 196.

<sup>63</sup> *Um* — *umatekha*: 1:8, *umati*: 4:3; *Knesset* — *Knesset Yisrael*: 1:8, 17:25, 28:24, *Knessiyato*: 10:1.

Note that whereas the original verse (28:24) mentions “a destroyer,” here Rashi’s gloss extends the third category to include “a foolish son.”

This triad is mentioned a third time in Rashi’s Proverbs commentary, but in his third gloss, he extends the association of the mother with *Knesset Yisrael* to the synonym for the mother, “she who bore you” (17: 25):

A stupid son is a vexation for his father (17:25) — Like Jeroboam, vexation he is to the Holy One, blessed be He. And a headache for the woman who bore him — To all *Knesset Yisrael*, that he sinned and caused them to sin.

There is no known source for this explanation; Rashi has applied the association anchored to Proverbs 28:24 to this verse.

In all three of the above glosses, *Knesset Yisrael* represents the collective of Israel, similar to Rashi’s use of this term in his opening gloss to the Song of Songs. Surprisingly, in Rashi’s first gloss to the mother (the beginning of which we saw above), *Knesset Yisrael* refers to the elite:

Your mother (1:8) — Your nation, *Knesset Yisrael*, as in “What a lioness was your mother” (Ezek. 19: 2). These are the words of the Scribes, who innovated and added and made safeguards for the Torah.

Rashi’s gloss can be divided into three parts. The first part presents the identification of the mother with the nation and highlights the assonance between the terms, and then adds the phrase *Knesset Yisrael*, a synonym for the nation. The second part strengthens this identification by drawing the reader’s attention to Ezekiel, chapter 19; in that chapter the prophet describes an allegory in which the mother lioness represents the people of Judah, the nation. The last part of the gloss clarifies how this identification links back to the language of the verse being explained: “the instruction of your mother.” What is “the instruction of your mother”? The words of the Sages, who add rabbinical decrees designed to protect the Torah; they are the rabbinic legislators of the nation.

What motivated Rashi to constrict the meaning of *Knesset Yisrael* to a select group? The answer lies in the language and structure of verse 1:8: “My son, heed the discipline of your father, and do not forsake the instruction of your mother.” The verse mentions the teachings of both the father and the mother. Rashi identifies the father’s teachings with the laws God gave to Moses:

The discipline of your father — The Holy One, blessed be He; that which He gave at Sinai to Moses in writing and orally.

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What religious instruction emanates from the mother/nation? After all, both the written and oral law have been attributed to God/father. Rashi concludes that this refers to the enactments the Sages added to safeguard the Torah.

*Midrash Proverbs* (1: 8) views the definition of the “instruction of your mother” differently:

Another interpretation: *My son, heed the discipline of your father* — every matter in the Torah handed down to you on Mount Sinai directly from the mouth of the Almighty. *And do not forsake the instruction of your mother* — all that was made explicit in the Torah [so that you may rule] on the fitness of what is fit, and on the unfitness of what is unfit, and on the prohibition of what is forbidden, and on the permission of what is permitted.

*Midrash Proverbs* identifies “the instruction of your mother” with the oral law, whereas Rashi subsumes both the written and oral laws under the category of “the discipline of your father.” I was unable to find any source for Rashi’s gloss; it seems original to him. Why does Rashi forgo the explanation of the midrash, which evenly distributes the two law codes between the father and the mother? It seems that Rashi wants to emphasize that both law codes, written and oral, emanate from God and were given directly to Moses at Mount Sinai. His gloss clearly equates the stature of the oral law with that of the written one. If he would have relegated the oral law to “the instruction of your mother,” perhaps its status as equal to the written law would have been questioned.

We have seen that the mother in Rashi’s Proverbs commentary is identified with the nation of Israel, and more specifically with the nation’s positive characteristics. Even when she sins, blame is placed not on the nation but on her leader who incited her to do evil.

As has been aptly noted:

The cast of female characters in Proverbs is extremely diverse. The book presents many different types of women, both good and evil. Some are drawn from real life, while others are idealized or allegorized and meant to be understood metaphorically.<sup>64</sup>

With regard to this “cast of female characters,” Rashi’s allegorical explanation has created a clear structure by grouping them into two pairs of thematic contrasts. The primary pair is composed of the *isha zara* versus

<sup>64</sup> Zer-Kavod and Kil, *Proverbs*, lxxiv.

the virtuous woman, the former representing Christianity and the latter Torah. In Rashi's glosses on these women, he highlights the dangers of Christianity and extols the virtues of study of and adherence to the Torah. These interpretations become a vehicle through which he attempts to distance his readers from the allure and pressures of the dominant religion by strengthening their connection with their own God and the study of His divine texts. Within the "good woman" category, the *eshet hayil* is the primary representative. This elite status rests upon the fact that her extensive description in the biblical text affords Rashi the opportunity to flesh out her character and mold the content of her glosses to highlight important values and counteract the dangers posed by the strange woman.

We are introduced to Rashi's primary pair in his opening gloss to the book:

The Proverbs of [Solomon] — All his words are comparisons and allegories. He compared the Torah to a good woman, and he compared idolatry to a harlot, and so too the majority of his words.

Rashi had a choice of many allegories by which to exemplify the unique nature of his commentary to Proverbs. After all, this book is composed largely of contrasts: diligence versus laziness, pride versus humility, foolishness versus wisdom, wickedness versus righteousness, and so forth. Yet in his opening gloss he chose to highlight only one: the good woman versus the harlot (*isha zara*). Clearly, in Rashi's eyes, this pairing provides the primary contrast of the entire book.

The secondary pairing created by Rashi is a surprising one: the contentious woman or adulteress versus the mother; both are identified with *Knesset Yisrael*. At first blush, this sharing of the term seems to be predicated on necessity, based on the limited number of feminine collective nouns to choose from to represent the Jewish people. When identified with the contentious woman or adulteress, *Knesset Yisrael* is culpable and punished for her sin of idolatry, while when identified with the mother, she is exonerated for her bad deeds, and the blame is placed upon the king. The mother, who is the only one who shares with God the ability to create and sustain life, is completely positive, and so, too, is the nation identified with her.

Our secondary contrasting pair shares not only the term *Knesset Yisrael* but also the descriptive name of God: the Holy One, blessed be He. In six glosses both terms appear.<sup>65</sup> As Jacob Katz has noted, the use

<sup>65</sup> Rashi 1:8, 10:1, 17:25, 21:9, 25:24, 28:24. In two glosses, both of the names are found in Rashi's source (1:8, 28:24); in two others, very similar in content to the

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of both *Knesset Yisrael* and Holy One, blessed be He, connote mystical significance:

The Jewish Middle Ages conceived of the relationship between God and Israel as a most intimate mutual dependence approximating to a mystic union.... This same theme of mutual dependence and union is repeatedly expressed in the religious poetry of the Middle Ages—a sure sign that the conception owed its perpetuation, not merely to the strength of the tradition but also to the fact that it was a living force.<sup>66</sup>

The pairing of the terms *Knesset Yisrael* and Holy One, blessed be He, symbolizes the mutual dependence between the two parties and their everlasting bond.

In light of this new understanding, we can reevaluate the use of both the contentious woman/adulteress and the mother as metaphors for *Knesset Yisrael*. The sharing of the term *Knesset Yisrael* by both does not seem to be predicated on necessity, as we proposed above, but rather is a deliberate choice Rashi makes. It emphasizes that in both scenarios in which she sins—as a contentious woman/adulteress (culpable for her sin) and/or as a mother (exonerated for her misdeed)—her connection with the Holy One, blessed be He, is indissoluble. And, as Katz has noted, this mystical, symbiotic union deflects the Christian claim of the rejection of Israel: “By this conception Israel’s election ceases to be a problem, for the mutual dependence of God and Israel appears as a preordained fact.”<sup>67</sup>

While further study is required to determine whether Rashi’s treatment of the aforementioned women in his Proverbs commentary reflects his general approach to these women in his glosses to other biblical books, we can conclude that both thematic couplets Rashi created contain polemical material. Whereas the primary contrasting pair contains overt, unambiguous anti-Christian polemic, Rashi’s choice of terminology utilized in the secondary couplet embodies a message that, while subtle, is anti-Christian as well.

Rashi’s allegorical glosses to these two prototypes of women have become a vehicle through which he, as Torah exegete and responsible Jewish leader, endeavored to protect the Jewish people by strengthening internal Jewish values and refuting external foreign beliefs.

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original pair, Rashi naturally uses the same names found in his source (10:1, 17:25), and in the remaining glosses, the pairing is original to Rashi (21:9, 25:24).

<sup>66</sup> Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance: Studies in Jewish Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times* (Behrman House, 1961), 21–22.

<sup>67</sup> Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance*, 22.