

How the Medieval Jew Understood the Bible

1105

THE first printed Hebrew book that is dated (Reggio, Italy, 1475) is a commentary to the Five Books of Moses by Rabbi Solomon bar Isaac (RaSHI) of Troyes, France, 1040-1105. This commentary, written in a simple, terse Hebrew style, leans heavily on the older rabbinic and Talmudic literature and emphasizes the ethical and the homiletical although it by no means neglects the simple literal meaning (*peshat*). It is this very emphasis on the ethical and the legendary (*derash*), however, that endeared this writer to the average reader. Any Jew who studied the Hebrew Bible, and practically all dipped into it at some time in their lives, began with Rashi, whose comments covered practically all the books of the Bible. He is certainly the most popular Jewish Bible commentator of all times and was known even to Christian scholars. Nicolas de Lyra (d. 1340), one of the most famous of medieval Christian exegetes, took many comments bodily from Rashi, and Luther, as we know, borrowed liberally from de Lyra. This dependance of Luther on de Lyra is reflected in the couplet: "If Lyra had not played, Luther would not have danced."

The following selections will give the reader some concept of how the average medieval Jew saw the Bible through the eyes of Rashi.

EXODUS 33:21: And the Lord said: "*Behold there is a place by Me, and thou shalt stand upon the rock.*"

¶*Behold there is a place by Me*: This phrase means that in the mountain where I am speaking with you I have a place always ready for your needs where I can hide you so that you will not be injured, and from that place you will see what you will see. This which I have just explained is the literal meaning of the verse. But there is a Midrashic interpretation which says that this refers to the place where God speaks. God says: "There is a place *by me*," but God does not say: "I, God, am *in* the place," which shows that God contains the world, but the world does not encompass God.

LEVITICUS 19:18: *Thou shalt not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself: I am the Lord.*

¶*Thou shalt not take vengeance*: A person says: "Lend me your sickle," and the other fellow answers, "No." On the following day the other fellow says: "Lend me your axe," and the person answers: "I won't lend you, just as you didn't lend me." This is vengeance. But how then would you define a grudge? A person says: "Lend me your axe." The other fellow answers, "No." But the very next day the other fellow says: "Lend me your sickle" and the man answers: "Surely, here it is. I'm not like you who wouldn't lend me your axe." Now this is a grudge, because this man was treasuring up hatred in his heart, even though he didn't take vengeance.

¶*Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself*: Rabbi Akiba [d. about 135] said this is a basic principle in the Torah.

LEVITICUS 24:20: And if a man maim his neighbor, as he hath done so shall it be done to him; fracture for fracture, eye for eye; tooth for tooth; as he hath put a blemish in a man, so shall it be put in him.

¶*So shall it be put in him*: Our rabbis have explained that this does not mean putting a real blemish in him, but that he should make good the injury with money. This is done by estimating the injury as one would with a slave who has been injured. The proof for all this is seen in the phrase *putting* [which means that something, money, is *put* from one hand into the other].

DEUTERONOMY 2:12: And in Scir dwelt the Horites aforetime, but the children of Esau *succeeded them*; and they destroyed them from before them, and dwelt in their stead.

¶*Succeeded them*: This phrase expresses present, continued action. It means that I, God, have given the children of Esau sufficient strength to keep on gradually driving out the Horites.

DEUTERONOMY 5:7: Thou shalt have no other Gods *before Me*.

¶*Before Me*: This phrase means in every place where I am, and that, of course, means the whole world. Another interpretation of "before me" is the following: All the time that I exist [that is, forever].

DEUTERONOMY 6:12: Beware lest thou forget the Lord, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slaves.

¶*Slaves*: The Aramaic translation which has "from the house of bondage" is correct. This phrase means God brought you out of a place where you were slaves [not from a house that belonged to slaves].

DEUTERONOMY 8:4: *Thy raiment waxed not old* upon thee, neither did thy foot swell these forty years.

¶*Thy raiment waxed not old*: Because clouds of glory were scouring and cleaning their clothes so that they looked like spick-and-span garments. Also, as their children grew their clothes would grow along with them, just like the shell of a snail that grows with it.

DEUTERONOMY 11:13-14: And it shall come to pass, if ye shall hearken diligently unto My commandments which I command you this day, *to love the Lord* your God, *and to serve Him with all your heart* and with all your soul, that I will give the rain of your land in its season, the former rain and the latter rain, that thou mayest gather in thy corn. . . .

¶*To love the Lord*: Do not say: "I am going to study the Torah in order to become a rich man," or "in order that I may be called Rabbi," or "that I may get paid," but whatever you do, do out of love, and the result will be that honor will come of itself.

¶*And to serve him with all your heart*: This means service which is in the heart and this, of course, means prayer.

DEUTERONOMY 32:11-12: *As an eagle that stirreth up her nest, Hovereth over her young, Spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, Beareth them on her pinions— The Lord alone did lead him.*

¶*As an eagle that stirreth up her nest*: God led the Israelites [through the wilderness] with mercy and kindness just like the eagle which is merciful to her young. She does not enter into her nest suddenly, but beats and makes a noise near her fledglings with her wings, as she goes from tree to tree and from bough to bough, in order to awaken the eaglets so that they should be prepared to receive her. . . .

¶*Hovereth over her young*: It does not put its full weight on them, but covers them without really touching them. . . .

¶*Spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them*: When the eagle comes to take its young from place to place she does not carry them with her claws like the rest of the birds, because the other birds are afraid of the eagle, which flies higher and may come down upon them. Therefore the other birds, for fear of the eagle, carry their young with their claws. But the eagle fears only the arrow; therefore she carries them on her pinions, saying: "It is better that the arrow enter into me and not into my young." Similarly God said [Exodus 19:4]: "I bore you on eagles' wings." Thus, when the Egyptians pursued and overtook the Israelites by the sea, the Egyptians began to shoot arrows and hurl rocks at them. Immediately [Exodus 14:19-20] "the angel of God who went before the camp of Israel removed and went behind them . . . and came between the camp of Egypt and the camp of Israel [that the angel might receive the arrows and stones]."

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Maimonides on Art and Charity

1180

THE following recommendations and prohibitions are taken from the *Mishneh Torah*, the famous law code published in Hebrew about 1180 by the great Maimonides.

The first selection deals with charity. The point of view expressed here is that of Maimonides, although it is based in large part on Talmudic precedents.

The second selection deals with the medieval attitude to the plastic arts. The second commandment states specifically (Exodus 20:4): "Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image, nor any manner of likeness, of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth." It seems to have been this injunction which prejudiced the medieval Jew against the plastic arts. Statues and figures in earlier times had been associated with Greek and Roman idolatry, and during the Middle Ages sculpture was linked in the mind of the average Jew with Christian worship. However, it should be borne in mind that Maimonides' pronouncements were not accepted unconditionally by all Jews. Some rabbis were more strict, others more lenient in their views.

I. GIFTS TO THE POOR

¶ There are eight degrees in the giving of charity, one higher than the other. The highest degree, than which there is nothing higher, is to take hold of a Jew who has been crushed and to give him a gift or a loan, or to enter into partnership with him, or to find work for him, and thus to put him on his feet so that he will not be dependent on his fellow-men. Concerning this it is said [Leviticus 25:35]: "Then shalt thou uphold him." Uphold him, so that he should not fall and become a dependant.

Lower in degree to this is the one who gives charity [in Hebrew, "righteousness"] to the poor, but does not know to whom he gives it, nor does the poor man know from whom he receives it. This is an unselfish meritorious act comparable to what was done in the