

Meet and Greet the Exegete Ibn Ezra – Does What the Rabbis Say *Ever* Matter?

R. Abraham ben Meir ibn Ezra was born in Islamic Spain, in Tudela (1089), and he died circa 1164 (apparently in London) . A versatile scholar, his influence was felt widely both during his lifetime and after his death. He was a poet, grammarian, Biblical commentator, philosopher, translator, astronomer and physician. He spent the first fifty years of his life in Spain and North Africa, and the rest of his life, from 1140 onwards, he wandered throughout Europe, mainly in Italy, but also in France, England, and other places. His biblical commentary explains the text according to its plain meaning. This commentary is famous for its concise style and its linguistic orientation. It includes the views of leading scholars who were contemporaries of the author, though Ibn Ezra frequently disputes them. He also polemicized against various heretics.

1. Iggeret Hashabbat

It was mid Friday night, the fourteenth day of the month of Tevet, in the year 4919. I, Abraham the Spaniard, known as “Ibn Ezra,” was in one of the cities of the island that is called “Edge of the Earth,” which is in the seventh zone of the inhabited zones of the earth. I was asleep and my sleep was sweet to me. I dreamt that what appeared to be a man stood before me with a sealed letter in his hand. He spoke up and said to me: “Take this letter that the Sabbath sends you.” I prostrated myself and bowed before God and I blessed the God who gave us the Sabbath for honoring me so. I took hold of the letter with both my hands and my hands dripped with myrrh. I read the letter and it was sweet as honey to my mouth. However, as I read the last lines my heart became agitated and my soul almost failed me. I asked the one who stood before me: “What is my iniquity and what is my sin? From the day that I knew the revered God who created me, and I learned his commandments, I have always loved the Sabbath. I would go out to greet her with a full heart even before she arrived, and I would send her forth when she departed with joy and song. Who among her servants is as faithful as I? Why did she send me this letter?” It read as follows:

“I am Sabbath, the crowned law for the dear ones, fourth of the Decalogue. I am a sign of an eternal covenant between God and his children. With me the Lord concluded all of his tasks, as it is written in the first of the books. Manna did not fall on the Sabbath day in order that I serve as a sign for forebearers. I am a joy for those living on earth and tranquility for those who dwell in graves. I am a pleasure for both male and female; old and young rejoice in me. Mourners do not mourn in me nor eulogize the death of the righteous. Male-servant and maid-servant find quiet in me, and the strangers who are within the gates. All domesticated animals rest, as horses, donkeys and oxen. Every intelligent person sanctifies me over wine, the lowly perform the Havdala service as do Nazarites. Gates of understanding exist on any day, but on my day a hundred gates are opened. My day is honored by not traveling, seeking one’s needs, nor speaking words. I protected you all the days so that you would carefully observe me from the days of your youth. In your old age a fault has been found in you, for books were brought into your house in which is written to profane the seventh night. How do you remain silent and not vow to compile letters of truth and send them in all directions.”

The messenger of the Sabbath responded and said to me: “She was told that yesterday your students brought books of Biblical exegesis into your house in which is written to violate

the Sabbath. Therefore, gird yourself on behalf of the Sabbath's honor to fight the Torah's battle with Sabbath's enemies. Do not favor any person." I awoke with my spirit pounding within me and my soul very troubled. I arose and my anger burned within me. I dressed, washed my hands, and took the books outside to the moonlight. There was written the following interpretation for the verse "there was evening and there was morning" (Genesis 1:5): "With dawn of the second day one full day ended, for nighttime follows daytime."

I almost tore my garment and also that commentary, saying: "It is better to violate one Sabbath so that Israel will not violate many Sabbaths, if they should see this evil interpretation. We would also all be a mockery and a scorn in the eyes of the uncircumcised." However, due to the honor of the Sabbath I restrained myself.

I vowed that I would not allow sleep for my eyes after the conclusion of the holy day until I wrote a lengthy letter explaining when the Torah's day begins, thereby removing a stumbling block, a snare and a trap. For all of Israel, both the Pharisees and the Sadducees (Karites), know that the only reason for writing the portion of Creation relating God's actions each day is so that adherents of the Torah will know how to observe the Sabbath. They should rest as revered God rested, counting the days of the week. Now, if the sixth day ended with the morning of the seventh day, we should observe the following night. This interpretation will mislead all of Israel, those in the east and those in the west, those near and those far, both the living and the dead. God should avenge the Sabbath from one who believes this disturbing interpretation. The tongue of one who reads it aloud should cleave to his palate. Also, the arm of the scribe who writes this commentary to Scripture should wither and his right eye weaken.

2. Ibn Ezra's introduction to the Torah

נאום אברהם הספרדי הנזכר מפרשי התורה הולכים על חמשה דרכים:

Five ways that people understand the Torah.

הדרך האחת ארוכה ורחבה, ומנפשות אנשי דורנו נשגבה, ואם האמת כנקודה בתוך העגולה, זאת הדרך כקו הרחב, הוא החוט הסובב בתחלה. ובה דרכו גדולים, והמה חכמי הישיבות במלכות ישמעאלים, כרב יצחק שחבר שני ספרים מבראשית (ברא' א) עד ויכלו (ברא' ב), ועוד לא כלה מרוב דברים... ובמסלה הזאת עלה רב סעדיה גאון הגולה, ובפי' יהי מאורות (ברא' א, יד) הכניס דעות אחרות לדעת המדות הנזכרות על פי חכמי הספירות... והרוצה לעמוד על חכמות חיצונות, ילמד מספרי אנשי תבונות...

The first way is long and wide, used by many of our generation. And if the truth is like a dot in a circle, this is a wide line that goes around the dot. This is the way that many great ones went, they are the sages of the schools in among the Ishmaelites, like Rav Yitzchak who wrote two books on the first chapter of Genesis, and still didn't finish... On this path is Rabbi Saadia Gaon who on his explanation of Genesis 1:14 brought in external ideas... One who wants to learn external wisdom, should read the books of the men of understanding.

הדרך הב' בחרוה פתלתולים, ואם הם ישראלים, אשר חשבו כי עמדו על הנקודה בעצמה, והם לא ידעו את מקומה, וזאת דרך הצדוקים... וכל איש כרצונו יפרש הפסוקים, גם במצות ובחקים... בעבור שלא תמצא בתורה מצוה אחת בכל צרכיה מבוארה. ואחת מהנה אזכיר, והיא גדולה למכיר, כי תחתיה כרת על אכילת יום הכפורים, וחמץ בפסח שלא עשוהו טהורים, ושבייתת ימים שבעה, וקרבנות וסכה ותרועה. כי אין בתורה חקי השנה מפורשים, ואיך נחשוב החדישים?... וכל אלה המצות צריכות לקבלה ומסורת...

The second way is chosen by the twisted ones, some of them Jews, that believe they are standing on the point itself, but they don't even know where it is. This is the method of the Sadducees... Everyone says whatever they want about the verses, and even when it comes to laws. ... For you will not find a single law explicated completely in the Torah. I can mention one obvious one, such as eating on Yom Kippur, or Chametz on Pesach, or resting on the 7th day, sacrifices, sukkah, shofar – there is nowhere in the Torah the laws of the calendar and how months are established... All of these laws require traditional understanding.

הדרך הג' דרך חשך ואפלה, והיא מחוץ לקו העגולה... ואמונתם כי התורות והמשפטים חידות, ולא אאריך להשיב עליהם, כי עם תועי לבב הם, כי הדברים על צדק לא חלקו, בלתי בדבר אחד צדקו, אשר כל דבר מצוה קטנה או גדולה, בכף מאזני הלב תהיה שקולה, כי יש בלב דעה מחכמת יושב קדם נטועה. ואם הדעת לא תסבול הדבר, או ישחית אשר בהרגשות יתבר, אז יבקש לו סוד, כי שקול הדעת הוא היסוד, כי לא נתנה התורה לאשר אין דעת לו... וכל דבר שהדעת לא תכחישנו, כפשוטו ומשפטו נפרשנו, ונעמידנו על מתכונתו, ונאמין כי ככה אמתו... כמלת בשר וערלת לבות.

The third way is darkness, and that is outside of the circle... they believe that the Torah and laws are all metaphoric. I will not address them at length, for they are mistaken of heart. The one thing that they have correct is that anything, a big mitzva or a small one, is weighed in the heart, for a person has wisdom in his heart. And if reason cannot support a matter, or it is contradictory, then one should seek out what is hidden, for the Torah was not given to one without understanding... But anything that reason does not contradict, we will understand it as it is written... for example, circumcising flesh and the foreskin of the heart.

הדרך הרביעית, קרובה אל הנקודה, ורדפו אחריה אגודה. זאת דרך החכמים, בארצות יונים ואדומים, שלא יביטו אל משקל מאזנים, רק יסמכו על דרך דרש כלקח טוב ואור עינים. ואחר שימצאו המדרשים בספרי הקדמונים, למה יגיעו לכתבם שנית אלה האחרונים? ... וסוף דבר אין לדרש סוף:

The fourth way is close to the point, and many chase after it. This is the way of the Sages in the Greek and Edomite lands. They don't look to weigh the ideas, they just rely on the collections of Midrashim like Lekach Tov and Or Eynayim. And, now that these books have been written, why should we write them again? ... Ultimately, there is no end to the amount of drash one can give.

הדרך החמישית, מוסד פירושי עליה אשית, והיא הישרה בעיני, נכח פני ד', אשר ממנה לבדו אירא, ולא אשא פנים בתורה, ואחפש היטיב דקדוק כל מלה בכל מאדי, ואחר כן אפרשנה כפי אשר תשיג ידי, וכל מלה שתבקשנה בפירוש המלה הראשונה תמצאנה, כפירוש שמים תמצאנו בפ' הראשון, ועל זה המשפט כל הלשון, ולא אזכיר טעמי אנשי המסורת, למה זאת מלאה, ולמה זאת נחסרת, כי כל טעמיהם כדרך הדרש הם, כי הכתוב פעם יכתוב המלה מלאה מבוארה, ופעם יחסר אות נעלם לאחזו דרך קצרה... ובעבור הדרש דרך הפשט איננה סרה, כי שבעים פנים לתורה, רק בתורות ובמשפטים ובחקים, אם מצאנו שני טעמים לפסוקים, והטעם האחד כדברי המעתיקים, שהיו כולם צדיקים, נשען על אמתם בלי ספק בידי חזקים. וחלילה חלילה מלהתערב עם הצדוקים, האומרים כי העתקתם מכחשת הכתוב, והקדוקים. רק קדמונינו ה' אמת, וכל דבריהם אמת וד' אלהים אמת ינחה את עבדו בדרך אמת:

The fifth way, this is the basis on which I write before God, only Him I will fear and I won't favor anyone in Torah. I will search well the explanation of very word with all my strength, and I will explain to my best ability every word in the first place you find it. Like the word "heavens" will be found on verse 2. I will not give explanations for the *mesoret*, why one word is written with a letter or without it, for all those explanations are drash. Because the truth is that sometimes it is written in long form and sometimes in short form... and the drash never pushes away the peshat, for there are 70 faces to the Torah. Just when it comes to the laws, if we find two explanations for the first, one is like the Sages who were all righteous, we will rely on the,

without concern. God forbid that we mix with the Sadducees, who say that the Sages contradict the text and its explanation. Rather, our predecessors were true, and all their words were true, and the true Lord God should guide his servant on the way of truth.

Example of Halacha

3. Ibn Ezra to Exodus 13:9

והיה לך. יש חולקין על אבותינו הקדושים שאמר כי לאות ולזכרון... ואין זה דרך נכונה כי בתחלת הספר כתוב משלי שלמה. והנה כל מה שהזכיר הוא דרך משל. ואין כתוב בתורה שהוא דרך משל חלילה. רק הוא כמשמעו. על כן לא נוציאנו מידי פשוטו. כי בהיותו כמשמעו איננו מכחיש שקול הדעת. כמו ומלתם את ערלת לבבכם. שנצטרך לתקנו לפי הדעת. וא"ר משה הכהן כי יד ברוב המקרא היד השמאלית. אף ידי יסדה ארץ וימיני טפחה שמים. ידה ליתד תשלחנה. ודברי הקבלה חזקים ואין צריכין חזוק

There are those who dispute our holy ancestors, and say that it means to be a sign and a reminder... However, this is an incorrect approach. For at the beginning of the book of Proverbs it states "The Proverbs of Solomon." Behold everything mentioned in the book is a proverb. But, the doesn't say that it is a proverb, God forbid. It is as it is and we will not remove it from its peshat. For its literal meaning doesn't contradict any logical principle, as is the case for "and you shall circumcise the foreskin of your hearts" the understanding of which needs to be adjusted. And, Rabbi Moshe HaKohen writes that "hand" in the Torah is the left hand, as it says "My hand established the land, my right hand creaed the heavens." And "her hand reached for a peg [her right hand for a workman's hammer]." The traditions are strong and they don't need fortification.

Example against Midrash

4. Ibn Ezra to Genesis 46:23

יש אומר כי מספר שבעים בעבור שהוא סך חשבון כי ששים ותשע היו. וזה המפרש טעה בעבור שמצאנו כל נפש בניו ובנותיו שלשים ושלש והם שלשים ושתים.

There are those that say that the number 70 is a rounder number than 69. And, this is a mistake because it also counts 33 as the numbers of children of Leah, when it actually is 32.

ובדרש כי יוכבד נולדה בין החומות. גם זה תמה למה לא הזכיר הכתוב הפלא שנעשה עמה בהולדת משה והיא בת ק"ל שנה ולמה הזכיר דבר שרה שהיתה בת תשעים. ולא די לנו זה הצער עד שעשו פייטנים פיוטים ביום שמחת תורה. יוכבד אמי אחרי התנחמי והיא בת ר"נ שנה... והנכון בעיני שיעקב בחשבון וממנו יחל כאילו אמר כל נפש בניו ובנותיו עם נפשו שלשים ושלש. והראיה על זה שאמר בתחלה יעקב ובניו.

According to the midrash, Yocheved was born in between the walls. And this is wonderous, why doesn't the Torah mention this miraculous birth that she had Moses at the age of 130. Why would it mention Sarah giving birth at 90? And, it's bad enough that we have poets writings songs for Simchat Torah, "Yocheved my mother consoled me and she was 250 years old"... What is correct in my eyes is that Jacob is included in this count, it is as if it says the numbers of children of Leah, including Jacob, is 33. And the proof is that the Torah mentioned Jacob's name at the outset of the count.

Ibn Ezra's secrets

5. Deuteronomy 1:1

אלה הדברים אשר דבר משה אל-כל-ישראל בעבר הירדן במדבר בערבה מול סוף בין-פארן ובין-תפל ולכן נחצרת ודי
זָהָב:

These are the words that Moses addressed to all Israel **on the other side of the Jordan** through the wilderness, in the Arabah near Suph, between Paran and Tophel, Laban, Hazeroth, and Dishahab.

6. Rashbam there

בעבר הירדן - ובאיזה עבר הירדן

On the side of the Jordan – and on which side of the Jordan?

במדבר - באותו עבר הירדן שהוא לצד מדבר שהיו בו ישראל מ' שנה, שהוא קרוי עבר הירדן ליושבים בארץ ישראל ולא בעבר הירדן שהוא לצד ארץ ישראל, שגם הוא קרוי עבר הירדן להולכי מדבר שהיו בו ישראל.

In the desert, on the bank of the Jordan facing the desert in which the Israelites had spent the last 40 years, which is known as the “other side of the Jordan” to people in Israel, but not considered “the other side of the Jordan” to people who are next to Israel. For Israel is also called “The other side of the Jordan” for people in the desert, like where Israel was.

7. Ibn Ezra to Deuteronomy 1:2

ואם תבין סוד השנים עשר גם ויכתוב משה והכנעני אז בארץ בהר ה' יראה גם והנה ערשו ערש ברזל תכיר האמת:

If you understand the secret of the twelve, and also “and Moses wrote” (in 31:22) and “And the Canaanites were then in the land” (Genesis 12:6) and “The Mountain where God is seen” (Genesis 22:14) and “behold his bed is a bed of iron (Deuteronomy 3:11)

8. Ibn Ezra to Deuteronomy 34:1

ויעל משה. לפי דעתי כי מזה הפסוק כתב יהושע כי אחר שעלה משה לא כתב ובדרך נבואה כתבו והעד ויראהו ה' גם ויאמר ה' אליו גם ויקבור:

In my opinion, Joshua wrote from this verse on, because once Moshe ascended, he wrote nothing further. And Joshua wrote prophetically, and proof is “God showed Moses the land” and “God said to Moses” and “He buried him.”