

In Praise of Esau: Between Rashi's Commentaries to the Torah and *Nakh*

Significant attention has been directed towards Rashi's Torah commentary: Scores of books and articles have been penned trying to understand Rashi's exegetical method and other facets of his commentary;¹ a plethora of super-commentaries have endeavored to edify every word and letter of this great work;² and as early as 1867, Berliner published a critical edition of this commentary thereupon presenting for the first time a reliable text of this composition.³ However, when it comes to Rashi's commentary to the Prophets and Hagiographa (henceforth *Nakh*), a different picture emerges. Isaac Maarsen, writing in 1930, notes only a handful of books which examine Rashi's later commentaries, and laments the paucity of scholarly study of these compositions.⁴ Personally seizing the mantle, Maarsen published critical editions of Rashi's commentaries to the Twelve Prophets, Isaiah, and Psalms,⁵ and subsequent

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- 1 In 1984 A. Van Der Heide listed approximately 100 studies, and the number has multiplied since then. See A. Van Der Heide, "Rashi's Biblical Exegesis," *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 41 (1984), 314–318. More recently, see the works cited by Avraham Grossman, "The School of Literal Jewish Exegesis in Northern France," in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament*, ed. M. Saebo, 1: 2, (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 321–322.
- 2 Aharon Freimann, "Manuscript Supercommentaries on Rashi's Commentary on the Pentateuch," in *Rashi Anniversary Volume* (American Academy for Jewish Research, 1941), 73–114; B. Barry Levy, "Rashi's Commentary on the Torah: A Survey of Recent Publications," *TRADITION* 23:4 (1988), 107–109.
- 3 Abraham Berliner, *Zekhor le-Avraham: Rashi al ha-Torah* (Berlin, 1866).
- 4 Isaac Maarsen (ed.), *Parshandata, Peirush Rashi al Nakh*, vol. 1: *Trei Assar* (Amsterdam, 1930), v–vi. Mayer Gruber notes that the number of super-commentaries on Rashi's commentary to the Torah outnumber those to the Hagiographa (excluding the five *megillot*) by a ratio of 50:4. See M.I. Gruber (trans. and notes), *Rashi's Commentary on Psalms* (Jewish Publication Society, 2007), 53.
- 5 Isaac Maarsen (ed.), *Parshandata*, op. cit; vol. 2: *Yeshayahu* (Jerusalem, 1933); vol. 3: *Tehillim* (Jerusalem, 1936).

scholars, following in his footsteps, largely completed this enterprise.⁶ These critical editions of Rashi's *Nakh* commentaries, on the one hand, invite in-depth examination of these compositions, and, on the other hand, enable their comparison with Rashi's Torah commentary because scholars, now equipped with reliable editions of Rashi's Bible commentaries, can chart possible progression and change within Rashi's biblical oeuvre.

One such pioneering study noting change, penned by Shaye J. D. Cohen, distinguished between Rashi's Torah commentary and his commentary to some books of the later Prophets and Hagiographa with regards to anti-Christian polemic, and demonstrated that whereas the Torah commentary does not respond to Christianity, the *Nakh* composition does.⁷ Not all agree with this distinction and detect anti-Christian polemic in Rashi's Torah commentary as well.⁸

This article, following Cohen's trajectory, will investigate the treatment of Esau's merits in Rashi's commentary to the Bible, yet challenge Cohen's conclusion. Although we will detect a marked contrast between Rashi's commentary to Genesis and his glosses to the later Prophets and Hagiographa regarding this treatment—in the former, Esau's merits are eliminated, in the latter, they are present—both the omission and the inclusion, are an outgrowth of the Jewish-Christian debate. The examples, cited below, were not discussed by Cohen.

Methodologically speaking, our search for anti-Christian polemic will begin with a quest for Rashi's sources. If no rabbinic antecedent can be located, we will comfortably conclude that the specific gloss is Rashi's own original comment, and that its content, therefore, discloses his worldview and values; if prior material is uncovered, we will closely compare Rashi's gloss with its source. Scholarship has shown that Rashi's glosses are not a random compendium of rabbinic thought, but rather a conscious selection with a clear editing process.⁹ As noted by Schoenfeld,

6 See, e.g., the sources cited in Grossman, "The School of Literal Jewish Exegesis in Northern France," 321; L. Fredman (ed.), *Peirush Rashi le-Mishlei* (World Union of Jewish Studies, 2019); M. Cohen (ed.), *Mikra'ot Gedolot ha-Keter*, 21 vols. (Bar-Ilan University Press, 1992–2019).

7 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*, eds. H. Najman, J. Newman (Brill, 2004), 449–472.

8 Elazar Touitou, "Rashi's Commentary on Genesis 1–6 in the Context of Judeo-Christian Controversy," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 61 (1990), 159–181; Devorah Schoenfeld, *Isaac on Jewish and Christian Altars* (Fordham University Press, 2013).

9 Dov Rappel, *Rashi: Temunat Olamo ha-Yehudit* (Ministry of Education Jerusalem, 1995), 7–9; Yosefa Rachaman, *Agadat Rashi* (M. Mizrahi, 1991).

“Rashi is not a mere compiler, however; he adapts his sources to promote his own exegetical agenda.”¹⁰ Upon detecting change, an attempt will be made to understand why Rashi altered the language of his source and what it reveals about his ethics and ideals.

I. Rashi's Commentary to the Pentateuch

A straightforward reading of the biblical text detects that Esau desired to please his father and was sensitive to his needs. Isaac loved Esau, for his elder son would bring him choice game (Gen. 25:28). When Esau understood that the local Canaanite girls “were evil in the eyes of Isaac his father” (28:8), he married the daughter of Ishmael. Upon losing his coveted blessing to Jacob, Esau planned to kill Jacob following the death of his father (27:41). Let us see how Rashi portrays Esau's positive character traits.

A. Active Filial Devotion

Commenting upon the biblical text which states that Esau left his choicest clothing in his parent's house (27:15), Rashi writes:

Which were with her in the house: But he had several wives and yet he stored them with his mother? But he was acquainted with their practice and was suspicious of them.¹¹

Rashi, pondering why Esau deposits his garments in his mother's house and not with one of his wives, explains that Esau did not trust his wives, presumably because they were idolatrous,¹² and, therefore, he left his clothes with his mother. This explanation is culled from Genesis Rabba:

That were with her in the house: [It was] in these [that] he used to attend upon his father. Rabban Simon ben Gamliel said: All my lifetime I attended upon my father, yet I did not do for him a hundredth part of the service which Esau did for his father. I used to attend my father in soiled garments and go out in the street in clean ones; but when Esau attended on his father, he attended upon him in royal robes. “For,” he said “naught but royal

10 D. Schoenfeld, *Isaac on Jewish and Christian Altars*, 2.

11 All citations from Rashi's glosses on the Bible are brought from *Mikraot Gedolot ha-Keter*, ed. M. Cohen. English citations of the Biblical text are generally taken from *The Hebrew Bible*, translation with Commentary by Robert Alter (W. W. Norton & Company, 2019).

12 See Rashi's gloss to Gen. 26:35, 27:1.

robes befits my father's honor." *Which were with her in the house:* How many wives he had, yet you say, "That were with her!" The fact is, however, that he knew their ways (Gen. Rabba 65:16).¹³

Genesis Rabba cites these laudatory words about Esau from the mouth of Rabban Simon ben Gamliel, a notable rabbinic heavyweight. This glowing depiction of Esau's filial devotion is widespread in midrashic literature;¹⁴ Esau becomes the paragon of respecting one's parents. Alternatively, the second interpretation in Genesis Rabba explains that Esau did not trust his wives to leave the garments with them.

A comparison between Rashi's gloss and his source reveals that Rashi chose the second opinion thereby ignoring the first, which greatly extols the honor Esau bestowed on his father.¹⁵ The deletion of Esau's merit is not a one-time occurrence in Rashi's Torah commentary but an ongoing trend.

The biblical text states that, "Timna was a concubine of Eliphaz, son of Esau" (36:12) and also identifies her as "the sister of Lotan" (v. 22) who is obviously of royal descent because he is also titled "chief" (v. 29). Why would Timna, with her noble lineage, be relegated to the position of concubine in the house of Eliphaz? Rashi explains:

And Timna was a concubine (v. 12): This is stated to tell you in what importance Abraham was held, how eager [people] were to attach themselves to his descendants. This Timna was a daughter of chiefs, as it says, "and the sister of Lotan [was] Timna" (v. 22), and Lotan was among the chiefs of the inhabitants of Seir, of the Horites, who had dwelled there previously (vv. 20–29). She said [to Eliphaz], "If I am unworthy of becoming your wife, would that I might become your concubine."¹⁶

Let us compare Rashi with his source:

And Timna was concubine to Eliphaz Esau's son: Rabbi Simon ben Yohai taught: What purpose is served by the verse, "and Timna was concubine to Eliphaz"? It is to inform us of the greatness of the house of our father Abraham. . . . She [Timna] said: "Since I am not worthy of being his wife, let me be his handmaid." Now may we not here draw a conclusion *a fortiori*: If kings ran to cleave

13 *Midrash Rabba: Genesis*, vol. 2, trans. H. Freedman (Soncino, 1983), 592. This translation, as well as subsequent ones, have been compared to the Hebrew text found in *Bereschit Rabba mit kritischem Apparat und Kommentar*, vol. 2, ed. Ch. Albeck (Jerusalem 1965²). Similarly, see *Deuteronomy Rabba* 1:15; *Pesikta Rabbati* 23.

14 *Genesis Rabba*, *Deuteronomy Rabba* 1:15, 17, *Tanhuma Buber* addition to Deuteronomy 4.

15 Rappel was the first to note this omission, see *Rashi: Temunat Olamo ha-Yehudit*, 8, 33.

16 Similarly see *Sanhedrin* 99b; *Sifrei Haazinu* 336.

to wicked Esau, who had to his credit but the one pious deed of honoring his father, how much more will they run to cleave to Jacob, who fulfilled the whole Torah (Genesis Rabba 82:14).

According to the Midrash, Timna was willing to forgo her noble lineage in order to become part of Abraham's family because of the greatness of his household. It is striking that although Rashi's commentary comes directly from Genesis Rabba, the end of the Midrash, which praises Esau, is deleted from his commentary even though its purpose is not to praise Esau but rather to praise Jacob!

Leibowitz and Ahrend have noted that Rashi often omits homiletical material found in his sources because he viewed himself as a Bible commentator (*parshan*) and not a preacher (*darshan*);¹⁷ yet the terminology "*a fortiori; al ahat kamma ve-khamma*," (drawing a conclusion from the stronger argument), does appear eleven times in his Bible commentary.¹⁸ Alternatively, one can posit that the material was omitted because it commends Esau.

The deletion of complimentary material occurs a third time in Rashi's Genesis commentary. Upon Jacob's return to the Land of Israel and in preparation for his confrontation with Esau, the biblical text states: "And Jacob was greatly afraid, and he was distressed" (32:8). Commenting upon this compound reaction, Rashi explains: "*Was greatly afraid*: lest he be killed; *and he was distressed*: that he might have to kill."

Let us compare Rashi to his source:

That is the meaning of *He was afraid*: lest he should be slain; *and was distressed*: lest he should slay. During all these years, thought he, he has dwelt in *Eretz Yisrael*; then perhaps he will attack me in virtue of his having dwelt in *Eretz Yisrael*. Again, during all these years he has duly honored his parents; then perhaps he will attack me in virtue of having honored his parents (Genesis Rabba 76:2).

Genesis Rabba delineates two of Esau's virtues: the credit of residing in the Land of Israel and the merit of honoring his parents, thus explaining the rationale for Jacob's double reaction.¹⁹ As we have seen, Esau's filial devotion is well documented, but his merit of dwelling in Israel is truly novel. For approximately twenty years, while Jacob resided in the house of Laban in Padan Aram, Esau accrued the merit of living in the Land of Israel.

As noted by Aminoff, what is striking about the aforementioned homily is that Esau's merits are not placed in the mouths of Talmudic

17 Nehama Leibowitz and Moshe Ahrend, *Peirush Rashi le-Torah: Iyyunim le-Shitato*, vol. 2 (Open University, 1990), 483.

18 And the term *kal va-homer* appears 42 times.

19 Interesting to note that *Genesis Rabba* states parents and not father.

Sages, but, rather, in the mouth of Jacob himself.²⁰ Jacob, who lived in close proximity to Esau for so many years, is voicing his brother's superiority in these two realms, and as a result of these virtues, Jacob fears he may be at a disadvantage in their tense encounter. Rashi has eliminated Esau's double merit from his commentary.

B. Passive Filial Devotion

Only once does Rashi directly address Esau's sensitivity towards his father. The Genesis text states that when Jacob "stole" Esau's blessing, Esau desired to kill his brother only after his father's death (27:41). The fact that Esau planned to wait until Isaac's death to fulfill his fiendish plan is clearly, according to the simple meaning, to his credit. The Midrash, however, twists Esau's intention into something much more sinister:

R. Levi observed: Woe unto the wicked who are constantly forming designs against Israel, each one saying, My plan is better than yours! Esau said: Cain was a fool for he killed his brother during his father's lifetime, not knowing that his father would be fruitful and multiply. I will not do so, but "let the days of mourning for my father be at hand [and then I will slay my brother]" (Gen. 27:41) (Leviticus Rabba 27:11).

The Midrash views Esau's intention of waiting for Isaac's death as cunning; Esau is not waiting to spare his father pain, but, rather, to ensure that he will have no other brothers. On this verse, Rashi writes: "*The time for mourning my father comes around (27:41): In its plain sense so as not to aggrieve his father, but the homiletic explanations are various.*"

Upon expounding this gloss, Leibowitz notes:

Rashi is concerned with Esau the man. Like all human beings he has good and bad sides. His good side was the respect for his parents which is emphasized in the text. Rashi, who was concerned with the plain meaning of the text, cannot overlook this credible side of his, even when Esau was breathing Cain-like vengeance and calling for his brother's blood. Even when he was saying, "then I will slay Jacob my brother" the words "just wait for the days of mourning from my father" must be registered to his credit.²¹

Leibowitz is correct in stating that Rashi does not ignore the simple meaning of the text and sees Esau's behavior for what it is; yet the passive respect hinted to here by Rashi is a far cry from the wealth of active filial devotion that he eliminated from his Torah commentary. This elimination has robbed Esau of all "active" virtue.

20 Aminoff, *Eisav Ahi, Avi Edom ve-Romi*, 150–151.

21 Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Genesis* (World Zionist Organization, 1976), 283–284.

And yet, to our surprise, if we examine Rashi's commentary to *Nakh*, a different picture emerges.

II. Rashi's Commentary to Later Prophets

A. Isaiah 27:11

In Isaiah, Israel is metaphorically compared to a vineyard. The prophet delineates Israel's punishment for idolatry, followed by promise of future redemption:

Therefore in this shall Jacob's crime be atoned . . . when he turns all the stones of the altar into shattered stones of chalk—no cultic poles or incense altars shall stand. For the fortified town is solitary, an abode deserted and abandoned, like the desert. There the calf grazes and there it lies down and gnaws away its boughs. When its branches are dry, they are broken (Isaiah 27:9–11).

While the text clearly states that the redemption of Israel and the retribution upon her enemies will occur with the obliteration of idolatry, Rashi introduces an additional consideration; the depletion of Edom's merit: "*When its branches are dry*: . . . when the little merit that Edom has for honoring his father is depleted, then her branches shall be broken."

The biblical text presents Esau as the progenitor of the Edomite nation; thus, the two names, Esau and Edom, are interchangeable in Rashi's Bible commentary. Edom's merit, mentioned here, is clearly the fastidious manner in which Esau honored his father. Yet note that although the midrashic sources cited earlier (on Genesis) extoll Esau's filial devotion, Rashi has minimized this service through the addition of the word "little": "when the *little* merit . . . has been depleted."

Interestingly enough, the Talmud (*Bava Batra* 10b) connects our phrase to the merit of charity done by the nations, and ad locum Rashi states: "*When its branches are dry, they are broken*: When the merit in their hands is dissipated and the moisture of their acts of charity is depleted, then they will be broken."

Note the difference between Rashi's Talmudic and Bible commentaries. Whereas the former, keeping in context with the Talmudic discussion, expounds our Isaiah verse in a general sense as referring to the charity of the nations, the latter connects our verse to Edom and his filial devotion.²² This specification is original to Rashi.

Esau's meritorious service, which was eliminated from Rashi's Pentateuch commentary, has reared its head in Rashi's commentary to Isaiah.

22 I am unaware of any secondary source which discusses this contradiction.

B. Zechariah 2:10

Zechariah recounts a call to the Jewish people to leave their land of exile, Babylon, and return to the Promised Land:

Away away, flee from the land of the north, said the Lord, for like the four corners of the heaven did I spread you out. Away, Zion, escape, you who dwell with the Daughter of Babylon. For thus said the Lord of armies, after glory He sent me to the nations that despoil you (2:10–12).

What is the meaning of the phrase “after glory He sent me” (v. 12)? Rashi brings two explanations to edify this enigmatic phrase: “*After glory*: after your glory; I am sent to magnify your glory. And the Midrash Aggada states: *After the glory*: After I pay Esau for the honor that he bestowed upon his father.” While the former explanation explains the glory as referring to the glory of the Jewish people, the latter connects the phrase to the honor Esau bestowed upon his father. After being rewarded for this honor, Esau will be punished.

As Rashi clearly states, his second explanation is culled from the Midrash; let us view both his source and the biblical verses to which it is anchored. Deuteronomy 2:1–8 describes God’s command to traverse the territory of Seir yet not provoke its inhabitants, Esau’s descendants; regarding this directive, the Midrash states:

You have had enough of going out (Deut. 2:3; root: s.b.b.) *this hill country (ha-har)*. These words can and should mean: He had his father (*ha-har*, the hill, understood as *horeh*, parent) sit down to eat (s.b.b.). Esau greatly honored his father Isaac. Rabban Simon ben Gamliel said: Esau honored him as I have been unable to honor my father. When I came to my father to serve him, I did not wear fine clothes, but Esau did not perform in the clothes which he wore outside, when he served his father. What did he do? He took off the garments in which he served and put on fine clothes. Thus, it is stated *Then Rebekah took the best garments of her older son Esau, which were with her in the house* (Gen. 27:15). Ergo, he honored his father greatly. After I (i.e., the Holy One) repay (*pore*) him for honoring his parents, I will exact vengeance (*pore*) from him. Thus, it is stated “Thus says the Lord of Hosts after his glory sent me unto the nations that plundered you” (Zech. 2:12). But now: “You have had enough” (Deut. 2:3) [*Tanhuma Buber*, Addition to Deut. 4].²³

23 Cf. *Deuteronomy Rabba* 1:15, 17; these sources link the verse in Deuteronomy to Esau’s filial devotion but make no connection to the verse in Zechariah.

The biblical phrase “You have encircled this mountain” is creatively reinterpreted as: “you have fed your father,” through the explication of the verb *s.b.b.* (to encircle) to mean: sit and eat (see I Samuel 16:11), and the noun *ha-har* (the hill or mountain) as *horeh* parent or specifically father.

The homilist first links the anchor phrase from Deuteronomy with Esau’s filial devotion, then buttresses Esau’s meritorious service by quoting Rabban Simon ben Gamliel’s familiar, laudatory words, and concludes with mention of the Zechariah verse, thus depicting a clear contrast between the desert period in which the Israelites are commanded not to provoke the inhabitants of Seir, and the future days, as described by Zechariah, when divine vengeance will be exacted on them.

This explanation, adopted by Rashi, clearly violates the contextual meaning of the text because Zechariah’s prophecy is distinctly grounded in the landscape of the Babylonian exile (“Away, escape O Zion, you who dwell in fair Babylon,” 2:11), yet the homilist leaps hundreds of years forward connecting this prophecy to the Edomite exile, which began with the destruction of the Second Temple and extended through Rashi’s lifetime. Only after Edom (Esau’s progeny) reaps the entire reward for Esau’s exemplary filial piety, will they be punished and Israel redeemed. Although Rashi’s source describes “great” filial devotion,²⁴ Rashi deletes this complementary adjective.

III. Rashi’s Commentary to the Hagiographa

Four things are the smallest on earth, yet they are the very wisest: the ants, a people not strong, who prepare their bread in the summer; the badgers a people not mighty, who make their home in the cleft; the locusts who have no king, and march out all in a row; the spider,²⁵ grasps with its hands, yet is in the palace of kings (Proverbs 30:24–28).

Rashi, glossing this section twice, first presents the contextual meaning of the text followed by the allegorical message. His allegorical explanation systematically identifies the Proverb’s verses (30:15–31), with the four empires who will subjugate the world.²⁶ Below is Rashi’s allegorical gloss to the *semamit*, the last of the tiny creatures:

24 The adjective great (*harbeh*) is derived from the Hebrew root *rav* meaning: numerous, and provides a subtle textual link to the biblical text “*rav lahem*” (Deut. 2:3).

25 Others translate “lizard.” See, e.g., Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 3, 1338, s.v. עממית: “a type of lizard: gecko.” However, based on Rashi’s Old French gloss *ireinie*, it is clear that he understood the *semamit* to be a spider.

26 Regarding the four kingdoms, see Rivka Raviv, *Hamudot Ata* (HaKibbutz HaMeuhad, 2019), 116–138.

The spider grasps with her hands: There is none hated among the detestable things like the *semamit*, this is Esau, “And I hate Esau” (Malachi 1:3).²⁷ *It grasps with its hands:* “But the hands are the hands of Esau” (Gen. 27:22), the hands allowed him. *In a king’s palace:* he entered the Temple and destroyed it.

The connection between the Proverb’s verse and Esau rests upon the hands imagery, just as the *semamit* grasps with his hands, so too Esau’s hands were his identifying feature. This connection was first noted in Genesis Rabba:

And he also made savory food (Gen. 27:31): Thus it is written “the spider thou canst take with the hands” (Prov. 30:28). Rabbi Hama b. R. Hanina explained it: In virtue of what merit does the spider grasp? In the merit of those hands, whereof it is written, “and he also made savory food” (Genesis Rabba 66:7).²⁸

Upon comparing Rashi to his source, one notices a change in proof-text. Where Genesis Rabba quotes the verse which states that Esau prepared delicacies for his father (27:31), Rashi replaces it with a biblical phrase that specifies the word hands: “But the hands are the hands of Esau” (27:22).²⁹ This linkage can be inferred from Rashi’s source but is not stated overtly.

What do the hands enable him to do? Rashi gleans this information from his second source: “*In a king’s palace:* Edom that destroyed the Temple (Midrash on Proverbs 30:28).” This explanation is predicated upon Rabbinic thought, which viewed Esau not only as the biological son of Isaac and Rebekah but also as the progenitor of the Roman Empire and the Christian Church;³⁰ thus, the Roman legion which destroyed the Second Temple is identified with Esau-Edom. Just as “the spider grasps with its hands in the king’s palace,” so too, Esau destroyed the Temple by the merit garnered through food preparation done with his hands: “the hands allowed him.”

In sum, Esau’s filial devotion is mentioned three times in Rashi’s Commentary to *Nakh*.³¹

27 Due to censorship, this opening phrase has been deleted from the earliest printed editions of Rashi’s commentary – see Lisa Fredman (ed.), *Peirush Rashi le-Mishlei*, 65, 242.

28 *Midrash Rabba, Genesis* 605.

29 *Deuteronomy Rabba* 1:15 quotes this verse in conjunction with Esau’s filial devotion.

30 See Gerson D. Cohen, “Esau as Symbol in Early Medieval Thought,” in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. A. Altman (Harvard University Press, 1967), 19–48; Aminoff, *Eisav Ahi, Avi Edom ve-Romi*, 257–274.

31 Perusal of Rashi’s Commentary to Psalm 80 introduces two additional virtues of Esau: he is imbued with merit of the fathers (v. 14), and will be rewarded for the three tears that he shed upon hearing that he had forfeited to Jacob the coveted blessing (v. 6).

IV. Distinction

Why did Rashi systematically eliminate praise of Esau from his Pentateuch commentary yet incorporate Esau's merits in his commentaries to the Later Prophets and Hagiographa? Two factors can be raised to explain this discrepancy: First, the diverse nature of the biblical books as well as Rashi's concomitant aims.

A. Genesis/Pentateuch

In the Pentateuch, the Esau story is part of the larger Esau-Jacob narrative. Rashi's treatment of Esau, therefore cannot be analyzed in a vacuum, but, rather, as intricately linked to the treatment of Jacob. Jacob's behavior in Genesis is highly problematic; deceiving both his brother and his elderly, ailing father, he claims the birthright for himself. The question of patriarchal morality was a sensitive issue to Medieval Jewry; the Jews were often put on the defensive in the face of a Christian attack. For example, in *Sefer Yosef ha-Mekanne*, a Dominican friar informed Joseph Official states:

Your father Jacob was a thief; there has been no consumer of usury to equal him, for he purchased the birthright, which was worth a thousand coins, for a single plate [of lentils] worth half a coin.³²

Although these types of attacks were absent from major Christian works, they were present on the medieval street.³³ It was inconceivable to Rashi and other traditional Jewish thinkers that Jacob, the progenitor of the Jewish people, was involved in falsehood and trickery, for that would taint the moral fiber of the Jewish people. Rashi, therefore, felt it necessary to defend and exonerate Jacob's behavior.³⁴ Simultaneously, Rashi highlights the wickedness of Esau and minimizes his redeeming qualities.³⁵ The greater Esau's depravity, the less problematic is Jacob's behavior. Vilifying Esau deflects attention and criticism from Jacob.

32 David Berger, "On the Morality of the Patriarchs in Jewish Polemic and Exegesis," in *Understanding Scripture: Explorations of Jewish and Christian Traditions of Interpretation*, Clemens Thomas and Michael Wyschogrod, eds., (Paulist Press, 1987), 50.

33 Berger, "On the Morality of the Patriarchs," 50. This argument is absent from Christian works because in Christian typology Jacob equals the Christians. If the Christians accuse Jacob of being a thief and a liar, they are, in essence, incriminating themselves. See *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages: A Critical Edition of the Nizzahon Vetus*, trans. and comm. David Berger (Jason Aronson, 1979), 246.

34 Rashi exegetically minimized Jacob's trickery, see his commentary to Gen. 27:19, 35.

35 Rashi accuses Esau of violating the three cardinal sins and other heinous crimes, see: Grossman, *Rashi*, 101–102.

If Esau is portrayed as a murderer, swindler, and thief, with no redeeming qualities, then Jacob's offense is less severe, for defrauding a villain is less serious than defrauding an honest man.

B. Later Prophets and Hagiographa

These books no longer describe the personal story of Esau and Jacob as individuals, but rather the state of the Jewish people as a nation. The nation is rebuked with prophecies of doom and comforted with words of consolation. One of the burning questions confronting both Jew and non-Jew was the status of the "Chosen People" in exile. Purportedly, the trials and tribulations befalling the Jews in the Diaspora proved that they no longer possessed that special status. Church clergy for centuries had been preaching that the Jewish people had forfeited their chosen status. The coveted status had been transferred to the Christians; the Christians were now the *Verus Israel*.³⁶ As Grossman explains:

The most powerful argument with which Jewish scholars had to deal, and the most dangerous, was the question of the length of the exile and the lowly status of Jews among the nations. How could Judaism, which claimed to be the true, superior faith explain its wretched condition?³⁷

Rashi, well aware of this Christian doctrine and sensitive to the needs of his own people, molded the verses of the Later Prophets and Hagiographa to comfort and inject hope into the hearts of the nation.³⁸ As a reward for Esau's merits and in particular his exemplary filial devotion, Christianity conquers and subjugates the world. Yet once his merits have been depleted, Christianity will fall and Israel will be redeemed.

Yet even when mentioning Esau's filial devotion in his commentary to the Later Prophets and Hagiographa, Rashi minimizes this outstanding virtue. While midrashic sources describe "great" honor, Rashi omits this laudatory word (comm. to Zech. 2:12) and even describes Esau's filial devotion as "little" (comm. to Is. 27:11).

The second factor corresponds to the approximate dating of Rashi's Bible commentaries. Poznanski believed that Rashi began with his commentary to the Pentateuch, followed by his glosses to the Prophets and concluded with the Hagiographa.³⁹ Gelles buttresses this view and

36 "Dialogue with Trypho the Jew," *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, eds. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (W.D. Eerdmans, 1973), 261.

37 Grossman, "The School of Literal Jewish Exegesis in Northern France," 330.

38 Grossman, *Rashi*, 128–130, 189–192.

39 Samuel Poznanski, *Mavo al Hakhmei Tzarfat Mefarshei ha-Mikra* (Mikitze Nirdamim, 1913), xiv.

claims that Rashi completed his Talmudic commentary by the mid-1080s and then commenced writing his Bible commentary, with his commentaries to the Later Prophets and Hagiographa written at a later stage in his life.⁴⁰ More specifically, some scholars posit that his Proverbs commentary was composed in close proximity to the First Crusade,⁴¹ and allusions to this horrifying event are detected in his commentaries to Isaiah,⁴² Zechariah,⁴³ and Psalms.⁴⁴ It is logical that precisely in these commentaries Rashi mentions Esau's merits, for during times of persecution and death, theological questions arise, and answers must be proposed. The suffering Jew needs to hear in what merit wicked Christianity flourishes. Rashi's commentary provides the answer; Christianity's success is the reward for the virtues of Esau. When these merits are depleted, Christianity will fall.

It can be argued that other verses in these later-dated biblical books could have been utilized by Rashi for the same purpose; after all, there are additional phrases that describe the subjugation of Israel at the hands of the enemy. Yet one can answer that the verses mobilized by Rashi to describe Esau's merits were primarily those which the mid-rashic literature had already designated as applicable to the nations of the world and specifically to the nation of Esau-Edom.⁴⁵ Rashi capitalized upon this pre-existing rabbinic material, adapting and molding it to his needs.

OUR STUDY INDICATES A STARK CONTRAST between Rashi's commentary to the Pentateuch and his commentaries to the Later Prophets and Hagiographa with regards to Esau's virtue. Whereas in the former, they are omitted, in the latter they are present. This disparity rests upon the differing nature of the Biblical books and/or the dating of his commentaries.

40 Benjamin Gelles, *Peshat and Derash in the Exegesis of Rashi* (Brill, 1981), 137–143.

41 See Grossman, "The Version of Rashi's Commentary to *Nakh*" [Hebrew], *Sinai* 137 (2006), 57–58 and n. 50; Lisa Fredman (ed.), *Peirush Rashi le-Mishlei*, 66–67.

42 See Yitzhak F. Baer, "Rashi and the World Around him," in *Jewish Intellectual History in the Middle Ages*, ed. J. Dan (Praeger, 1994), 109–110, 113; I. Maarsen (ed.), *Parshandata*, vol. II, *Yeshayahu*, VIII; Avraham Grossman, *Rashi ve-ha-Pulmus ha-Yehudi ha-Notzri* (Bar-Ilan University Press, 2021), 87.

43 See Avraham Grossman, "The Jewish-Christian Polemic in Rashi's Commentary on the Book of Zechariah" [Hebrew], in *Ve-Rav Ya'avod Tza'ir: Mitusim ve-Semalim bein Yahadut ve-Natzrut—Shai le-Yisrael Yaakov Yuval*, R. Ben-Shalom, O. Limor, and O. Israeli, eds. (Carmel, 2022), 179.

44 See Grossman, *Rashi ve-ha-Pulmus ha-Yehudi ha-Notzri*, 107–112.

45 Rashi's commentary to Isaiah 27:11, source: *Bava Batra* 10b (charity of the nations); Rashi's commentary to Zech. 2:12, source: *Tanhuma Buber*, Addition to Deuteronomy 4; Rashi's commentary to Prov. 30:28, sources: *Genesis Rabba* 66:7 and *Midrash* on Proverbs 30:28.

Shaya J. D. Cohen wrote:

My thesis is that Rashi in his Torah commentary paid no attention to Christianity and its truth claims . . . Rashi's Torah commentary, however, contains not a single explicit and unambiguous attack on Christian truth claims and Christian exegesis. . . .⁴⁶

In any case, however it is explained, there is a disparity between Rashi on the Torah and Rashi on Psalms. Rashi on Psalms . . . refutes Christian exegesis and Christian truth claims, but Rashi on Torah does not. Does Rashi's Torah commentary respond to Christianity? In the absence of any evidence that it did, the answer must be that it did not.⁴⁷

Our study challenges this conclusion.⁴⁸ The systematic elimination of Esau's filial devotion in his Torah commentary is directly related to the issue of patriarchal morality, a sensitive topic within the medieval Jewish-Christian debate, and its inclusion in his later commentaries is an attempt to meet the needs of his generation. In what merit does Christianity flourish? Rashi's *Nakh* commentary provides the answer; in the merit of Esau's exemplary devotion: Christianity conquers the world, but upon its depletion, Christianity will be vanquished and Israel redeemed.

Esau's merit has thus become a pawn in Rashi's hand, appearing and disappearing at his behest, with the objective of protecting the image of the Jew and injecting hope for a brighter Jewish future. Hence, we conclude that while glossing both commentaries, anti-Christian polemic was utmost on his mind.

46 Shaya J. D. Cohen, "Does Rashi's Torah Commentary Respond to Christianity? A Comparison of Rashi with Rashbam and Bekhor Shor," 451.

47 Ibid., 472.

48 It is true, though, that there exists a disparity between Rashi's Commentary to the Torah and his commentaries to the Later Books of the Bible; the Torah polemic is not explicit.