JEWISH SOURCES FOR EXEGESIS

A variety of Jewish sources were available to the medieval exegete. These included grammar and lexicography, rabbinic literature (in the case of Esther, primarily *midreshei 'aggadah*), *kabbalah* and the tenth-century *Book of Josippon*.

GRAMMAR AND LEXICOGRAPHY: THE TOOLS OF THE *PASHṬAN*

A major concern of exegesis is the study of the meanings of difficult words in the text and the clarification of the grammatical forms of unusual words. Such study forms the foundation upon which further clarification of the meaning and significance of the text must be based. A great deal of attention is placed on these matters in the earlier commentaries of our corpus, especially those of the northern French school and of Abraham Ibn Ezra. This interest is sustained up to the fourteenth century. The commentaries of both Joseph ibn Kaspi and Shemariah ben Elijah stress the importance of the study of grammar and logic as a propaedeutic to the thorough knowledge and under-standing of the biblical text.[1] In subsequent generations, however, interest in grammar and lexicography waned.[2]

The Book of Esther, as one of the latest books of the Bible and as

a book written under Persian influence, contains many difficult and unusual words that puzzled its readers and demanded clarification. Thanks to the newly developed tools of grammar and lexicography (both Hebrew and comparative Semitic) much headway was made in the Middle Ages toward a proper understanding of the meaning of the biblical text in its context. This type of exegesis is called *peshaṭ* and marked a significant break with the midrashic methods of interpretation characteristic of rabbinic literature. *Peshaṭ* exegesis first developed in Spain and North Africa in conjunction with the study of Hebrew grammar which reached an advanced level in these communities. But the concern with the contextual meaning became the hallmark of a school of exegetes in northern France in the twelfth century, and it is to this fascinating group of scholars that we now turn.

The Northern French School

Among the northern French exegetes several methods are used to elucidate the meaning of these difficult words:

1. The most common is to give a synonym for a word, either alone or in the context of a longer comment.[3]
2. A word may be compared to another word of the same root but of a more familiar form.[4]
3. A word may be elucidated by focusing on its grammatical form and comparing it with other words of the same form.[5]
4. A word's connotation may be given, usually preceded by the word *'inyan* or *lashon*.[6]
5. A difficult word may be defined briefly, or at great length.[7]
6. A word may be compared with a similar form in another biblical verse. Usually, this is done in addition to giving a meaning for the word,[8] but sometimes this is the only comment given.[9]
7. For certain words, a translation may be given in the vernacular. For Rashi and his school, this was Old French.[10]

In Table 2, the word comments of the four northern French commentaries are categorized. This table is also referred to during the

Table 2.

TYPE OF COMMENT		RASHI	KARA	"A"	RASHBAM
1.	Synonyms	18	18	9	16
2.	Comparison with another form of same root	3	2	2	1
3.	Grammatical form	1	—	—	12
4.	Connotation	—	1	5	2
5.	Definitions	7	2	11	—
6.	Use of biblical verses	4	4	11	9
7.	Vernacular	3–5	1	—	—
8.	Aramaic translation	1	—	2	1
Total		29	21	28	31

discussion of the individual exegetes. The total number of words dealt with is less than the sum of the individual comments because for some words more than one type of comment was given.

Rashi

Rashi is a very careful reader of the text and often depends on the context in which a difficult word appears to aid him in elucidating its meaning. For example, he explains the problematic word *'aḥuz* (1:6) as embroidered, apparently on the basis of its context alone.[11] He provides three different meanings for the word *davar* depending on the context of each occurrence:

1. *ki khen devar ha-melekh* (1:13). For this was the king's custom in every case to put the *matter* before all those versed in law and judgment.
2. *ki yeṣe' devar ha-malkah* (1:17). Her *act* of scorning the king.
3. *devar ha-malkhut* (1:18). A royal *decree* of revenge. [emphasis added]

Rashi's treatment of the word *shoveh*, which is the participial form of the root *ShVH* and appears three times in the Book of Esther (3:8, 5:13, 7:4), is somewhat problematic. In each case Rashi explains *shoveh* by a form of the root *ḤShSh* ("to worry or be concerned about"):

1. *ve-la-melekh 'ein shoveh le-hanniham* (3:8). There is no
    concern, that is, there is no gain (*'ein hashash, ke-lomar,
    'ein besa'*).
2. *ve-khol zeh 'einenu shoveh li* (5:13). I am not *concerned*
    (*hash*) about all the honor that I have.
3. *ki 'ein ha-sar shoveh be-nezeq ha-melekh* (7:4). He is not
    concerned (*hoshesh*) about the damage to the king.
    [emphasis added]

Esther is the only book in the Bible in which the root *ShVH*
appears in this form. Although the root appears elsewhere in the Bible,
Rashi quotes no relevant parallels.[12] He seems to have taken 7:4 as his
starting point, explaining *shoveh* according to its context and then
explained the other two occurrences of the word in a similar fashion. At
3:8 he does not seem satisfied with the meaning *hashash* and adds a
more suitable word, *besa'* ("gain"), although the connection between
the two words is difficult to discern.[13]

In explaining the word *ginnat* (1:5) as a vegetable garden (*meqom
zer'onei yeraqot*) Rashi may have been influenced by Mishnah Shabbat
9:7 where the term *zer'onei ginnah* appears. Aside from its three occur-
rences in Esther (1:5, 7:7, 7:8), where it is always associated with the
word *bitan*, the word appears only in Song of Songs 6:11, *'el ginnat
'egoz*, where the meaning is quite clear and requires no elucidation.

Joseph Kara

Joseph Kara is less concerned with the meanings of individual words
than are his northern French colleagues. He deals with only twenty-one
words altogether and for most of these provides synonyms either in
isolation or in the course of a comment on an entire verse.[14] For
example, for the word *navokhah* (3:15), Kara provides an interpretation
which, though perhaps not linguistically accurate, gives the reader a
vivid image of the scene:

> *and the king and Haman sat down to drink.* Out of joy at having
> carried out their plans; and the Jews in the city were wandering
> aimlessly [*nevukhim*] out of distress, as in *navokhu 'edrei ha-son* [*sic*]
> ("The herds of sheep [*sic*] are perplexed," Joel 1:18), because
> there is no pasture for them. They wander aimlessly for lack of
> pasture.[15]

"A"

The anonymous northern French exegete ("A") is more concerned with the meanings of words per se than are either Rashi or Joseph Kara.[16] He defines more words than either and uses biblical material to better advantage for exegetical purposes. Two examples illustrate this point:

> *To the wise men who know the times* (1:13). Who knew to give advice when it was necessary, as "Of Issachar, men who had understanding of the times to know what Israel ought to do" (1 Chr 12:33), to let Israel know what to do.[17]

> *Into the hands of those who have charge of the king's business* (3:9). Any man who is diligent and clever and who takes care of the king's affairs is called by Scripture '*oseh ha-melakhah*. Related to this is "when Solomon saw that the young man was industrious (*'oseh melakhah*) he gave him charge over all the forced labor of the house of Joseph" (1 Kgs 11:28). Because if you would say that *melakhah* here refers to actual labor what then is the meaning of "into the king's treasuries" (Est 3:9)? Rather, this is what he says: "I will weigh out [the silver] into the hands of the treasurers who look after the king's affairs so that they might deposit it into his treasuries."[18]

In both of these cases, "A" is the only exegete to point out these relevant parallels.

Rashbam

A major part of Samuel b. Meir's (Rashbam) commentary is devoted to word meanings and grammatical notes. Although his commentary, or at least what we have of it, is much shorter than the other three northern French commentaries under discussion, he deals with more individual words than any of the other three exegetes.[19] He devotes particular attention to the forms of verbs and the declensions (*mishqal*) of nouns.

He points out that *naton* (2:3), *gadol* (9:4), and '*amod* (9:16) are infinitive absolute forms (*leshon pa'ol*).[20] He discusses the noun forms of *manoteha* (2:9), *yeqar* (6:3) and *mishloah* (9:19) and brings biblical parallels of words of the same declension. He suggests that *yusa'* (4:3) is a *pu'al* form, although it is more likely *hof'al*.[21] He considered

navokhah (3:15) to derive from a biliteral root, *BKh*,[22] and perhaps considered *va-tithalhal* to derive from one as well, since he calls it a doubled word (*tevah kefulah*), i.e., the root is repeated twice. Another group of biliteral roots that he identifies is the group of weak verbs with *vav* or *yod* as the second letter, e.g., *yasuf* (9:8). He takes the root of this word to be *SF*. Of course, Rashbam was influenced here by Dunash ben Labrat and Menahem ben Saruk, his principal sources for grammatical matters, and had not yet been exposed to the work of Judah Hayyuj who established on a firm basis the triliteral structure of all Hebrew roots.[23]

The foregoing brief survey confirms D. Rosin's assertion that Rashbam was the most sophisticated grammarian among the northern French exegetes.[24] It also demonstrates how inferior to the Spanish school the best of the northern French exegetes was. A comparison with his contemporary, Abraham Ibn Ezra, will make this very clear.

Abraham Ibn Ezra

The exegetical methods and aims of Abraham Ibn Ezra were similar to those of the northern French School, although Ibn Ezra, who was able to draw upon the highly sophisticated body of grammatical and linguistic knowledge created by his predecessors in Spain and Babylonia, most of which was unavailable to his northern French brethren, displays a much higher degree of technical sophistication and refinement in his exegesis.

In both of his Esther commentaries, he cites many biblical parallels to clarify word meanings or grammatical points. He does this to a much greater extent than his northern French colleagues, even though they use similar methods and were no less familiar with the biblical text.[25] Ibn Ezra was very much aware that the vocabulary of the Bible represented only a small part of the Hebrew vocabulary in use at the time.[26] Nevertheless, he tried to use the Bible's internal resources to best advantage.

Ibn Ezra shows great concern for detail and scientific accuracy in his commentary. For example, he is not content to dismiss *hur, karpas,* and *tekhelet* (1:6) as different colors, as do Rashi and Joseph Kara, but tells us what colors they are. (*Hur* is white, *karpas* is the color of celery,[27] and *tekhelet* is found amidst royalty (*VA*).)[28] *Bus* (1:6) is not just flax,[29] but a fine flax found only in Egypt (*VA*). Ibn Ezra seems to apologize for not identifying the stones mentioned at the end of 1:6,

because none of them is known to him except for *shesh* which is marble (*VA*). He struggles with the identification of *oil of myrrh* (2:12) rejecting the opinion that it is musk[30] or an oil containing musk and suggests that it might be the oil of the Jericho tree (*VA*).[31]

In explaining the word "royal stud" (*ramakhim*) (8:10), Ibn Ezra displays a knowledge of Arabic and contemporary science.

> *ha-'aḥashteranim.* These are mules. *Benei ha-ramakhim.* These are mares because every mule whose father was an ass and whose mother was a mare is better than one born of a stallion and a she-ass. And the author of the *Natural History* already mentioned this.[32] We know that *ramakhim* are mares from Arabic because the Holy Tongue is similar to it.[33]

Ibn Ezra's knowledge of Arabic and use of comparative philology on rare occasions actually led him astray. Relying on the fact that the Arabic word for city is *madina*, he interprets *medinah* in Esther as a walled city (1:1, *VA*) and follows this interpretation consistently throughout the book. To distinguish between *'ir* and *medinah*, he determines that the former is a general term for a settlement which includes *medinot* ("cities") and *kefarim* ("villages") (8:11, *VA*) but then must contradict himself at 9:2 where the text clearly states that the cities (*'arim*) are included in the *medinot*.[34]

Other Exegetes

The commentaries of Isaiah of Trani and Immanuel of Rome contain many word definitions but very few comments of a grammatical nature.[35] Gersonides in his comment to 1:6 does display familiarity with grammatical principles,[36] but shows little interest in grammar elsewhere. Joseph ibn Kaspi was very grammatically oriented and even composed a grammatical work, *Sharshot kesef.*[37] His commentary contains several remarks of a grammatical nature,[38] as does the commentary of his contemporary Shemariah b. Elijah.[39]

Use of Grammatical Treatises

The works of the great Spanish and Provençal grammarians such as Jonah Ibn Janaḥ[40] and the Kimḥi family[41] contain rich stores of important exegetical material which was utilized by several thirteenth-

century Esther exegetes. One of the most popular interpretations
derived from a grammatical work was the explanation of the three
words of Persian origin beginning with *'aḥash-*: *'Aḥashverosh* (1:1),
'aḥashdarpanim (3:12), and *'aḥashteranim* (8:10). Apparently, Saadiah
Gaon was the first to suggest that these three words were compound
words sharing the element *'aḥash-* which means "great." According to
Saadiah, *'Aḥashverosh* means "great and a head," *'aḥashdarpanim* means
"great one living inside" (*gadol dar panim*), i.e., someone close to the
king, and *'aḥashteranim* means "great one of two species" (*gadol mi-terei
minim*). This opinion was quoted in Saadiah's name by Joseph Kimḥi in
his *Sefer ha-galui*,[42] and through Kimḥi it seems to have reached other
medieval exegetes.[43]

   David Kimḥi's interpretations of the three occurrences of the
word *shoveh* were used by Isaiah of Trani, although without
acknowledgement.

   The fact that there are virtually no quotations of these gram-
matical works in commentaries written after the thirteenth century
is another indication of the decline in interest in grammar after this
period.

Est 7:4: A Crux Interpretum

Probably the most widely commented upon verse in the entire book of
Esther is 7:4, especially the clause *'ein ha-ṣar shoveh be-nezeq ha-melekh*.[44]
The main problem is the meaning of the two words *ha-ṣar* and
shoveh. The majority interpreted *ṣar* as meaning enemy and referring
to Haman. But many explained it as trouble or harm, damage or
misfortune, referring to the calamity that was destined to befall the
Jews. The greatest difficulty was presented by the word *shoveh*. This
was usually interpreted as "equal to" (*shaveh*) or "worth," but several
other connotations are provided as well. When it came to putting all
this together, however, the variety of interpretations that emerged was
almost as great as the number of exegetes.

   One common reading of the phrase was "the enemy [i.e.,
Haman] was not concerned (*'ein shoveh*) about the loss or damage to
the king."[45] Others interpreted *shoveh* as "equal to." For example,
according to Immanuel of Rome (fol. 205r), Haman was not equal to
the king with respect to the losses suffered, meaning that the losses
were all the king's. David Kimḥi explains that the enemy, with all his

gold and silver will not be able to compensate for the damage that will be caused to the king as a result of Israel's destruction.[46] Still others interpret *shoveh* as "to gain" or "benefit." For example, according to Isaac Arama (fol. 158r) the phrase means that the enemy who buys the Jews (as slaves) is not gaining at the expense of the king, but this is not the case if the Jews are destroyed.

Zechariah ben Saruk (p. 16b), looking at the phrase from a different angle, comments that Esther tells the king that if her people had been sold into slavery she would have kept silent since the enemy would have benefited from the harm caused to the king. But in this case, when the Jews are destined to be destroyed, no one benefits, and she could not keep silent in the face of such senseless destruction. Joseph Ḥayyun (fol. 83r) gives a different twist to the verse, reading it as "the enemy is not worth anything compared to the harm caused to us by the king."[47] Two exegetes offer midrashic interpretations of the phrase. Baḥya ben Asher, connects the verse with Dt 28:36, explaining that the damage caused by the enemy cannot be compared to the punishment the Jews deserve for having crowned a king to rule over them.[48] Joseph Ḥayyun (fol. 83v) offers the comment that the harm destined for the Jews by Haman's decree is far greater than that prescribed by the King (i.e., God) in the Torah (and therefore is unjustified).

The other comments on the phrase interpret *ṣar* as trouble, damage or misfortune, as in the phrase *ṣor u-maṣoq meṣa'uni* (Ps 119: 143). Ibn Ezra is the first to interpret the verse this way, explaining that Esther pleaded before the king that, had her people been sold into slavery, she would have kept silent because that trouble would have been as nothing to them if it would have meant saving the king from aggravation. More plausibly, Immanuel of Rome (fol. 205r) interprets as follows: "The misfortune of our destruction is not as difficult for me to tolerate as the damage caused to the king because of Haman's plot, since the king benefits from the presence of the Jews in his kingdom." Similarly, both Shemariah of Crete (fol. 2r) and Gersonides (p. 42v) interpret the phrase to mean that the suffering caused to the Jews by Haman's plot does not compare to the damage done to the king.

The comments gathered here on this problematic verse give some indication of the variety of interpretations possible for some verses, even when there was basic agreement as to the meanings of the difficult words in the text. They also demonstrate the relative independence of the various exegetes. Although two or three followed one of Ibn Ezra's

interpretations, most developed their own interpretations that often differed radically from those of other exegetes.

The Lottery

The question of how Haman's lottery, referred to in 3:7, worked, is one of the cruxes of the Book of Esther. Only a few exegetes tried to elucidate the lottery's mechanism and their solutions are worth recording. According to some, Haman worked the lottery himself, while others were of the opinion that he sought professional help. Gersonides (p. 41a), for example, suggests that he consulted either an astrologer or someone versed in geomancy (*ḥokhmat he-'afar*).

The two exegetes to give the most detailed descriptions of the lottery mechanism were Jacob ben Reuben, a twelfth-century Karaite exegete, and Zechariah ben Saruḳ. According to Jacob ben Reuben, Haman brought in a magician to calculate the hours of the day. He then took slips of paper and wrote the name of a day on each one. He made thirty of these in all. He then put them all into a container, mixed them up, and said: "The day in my hand is the day on which to slaughter them." Then the sorcerer put his hand in the container and picked out a slip. The number on the slip was the day for the slaughter. Apparently, the month was chosen by a process of elimination.[49]

Zechariah ben Saruḳ's explanation is by far the most detailed and elaborate offered by any medieval exegete of Esther. According to R. Zechariah (p. 12b), Haman prepared 365 slips, one for each day of the solar year, or 354, one for each day of the lunar year. On each was written a day and a month, e.g., 1 Nisan, 2 Nisan, etc. On 354 other slips of paper were written the names of the months only, i.e., on thirty slips were written Nisan, on twenty-nine 'Iyyar, etc. He then put the 354 day slips in one box and the 354 month slips in another. He then picked a slip from each box until he got a match. Since unmatched slips were discarded, it was possible that he might go through all the slips of paper without getting a match. Therefore, when he did get a match— the thirteenth day of Adar—Haman was very pleased. Such an ingenious system would indeed work. Whether it fits the description of the lottery in the text is difficult to determine, especially since according to most modern commentaries, the text at this point is corrupt and needs to be amended according to the Septuagint.[50] Still, I have not encountered a more detailed or plausible explanation for the mechanism of the *pur*.[51]

Other Difficult Words

Several other words or phrases served as foci for spirited debate among the exegetes. For example, there was considerable controversy throughout the Middle Ages concerning the referent of the pronoun *hi'* in 1:20. The majority of exegetes explained it as referring to Ahasuerus' kingdom,[52] the immediate antecedent of the pronoun, but there were some who attributed it to Vashti,[53] or else, indecisively mentioned both alternatives.[54]

Another example is the clause *u-fenei Haman ḥafu* in 7:8. Most exegetes understood *ḥafu* as a transitive verb with the subject "servants" understood. The clause therefore meant that the king's servants covered Haman's face as a sign of the king's displeasure with him, or as a sign of his being condemned to death.[55] Others, however understood the verb as an intransitive one, referring to a transformation that occurred in Haman's face, i.e., it changed color out of shame or embarrassment.[56]

A third example is 9:25. The antecedent of the participle *u-ve-vo'ah* in the clause *u-ve-vo'ah lifnei ha-melekh* is unclear. The majority of exegetes applied the verse to Esther, explaining that when Esther came before the king, he was persuaded to send out new letters that would save the Jews. Ibn Ezra, in his second commentary, is the first to offer an alternative interpretation, explaining it as referring to Haman's decree or his deed (*VA*, 34). Joseph ibn Kaspi[57] concurs. It is only at the end of our period, however, that we find several other exegetes offering different interpretations. Isaac ben Joseph ha–Kohen (fol. 74v), Isaac Arama (fol. 162v), and Abraham Saba (*EKE*, 94) all explain the verse as referring to Haman's evil plot. Abraham Hadidah (fol. 49r) offers an entirely different interpretation, referring it to Mordecai's warning to the king concerning Bigthan and Teresh's plot against him.

In the three examples just quoted, it is not possible to trace any lines of development or influence in the comments of the individual exegetes. Only in the third case is there a clear chronological division. Saba's comment was probably borrowed from Isaac Arama. It is not clear whether Ibn Ezra's comment had any influence on this point.[58] Again, the relative independence of the exegetes is noteworthy.

Creative Philology

Isaak Heinemann devotes a substantial portion of his book on the methods of interpretation of the sages, *Darkhei ha-'aggadah*, to a

discussion of what he calls "creative philology." This deals with the ways in which the sages handled individual words, sentences, or chapters according to their unique principles of exegesis.[59] In the medieval commentaries on Esther, there are several examples of a kind of creative philology different from that discussed by Heinemann. In these cases new connotations are given to difficult words often with very little linguistic support in order to suit an exegete's polemical or tendentious purposes. One could, using harsher language, call such comments "forced interpretations." For example, Joseph ibn Kaspi (*GK*, 35) offers a new interpretation of *le-hinnaqem*, "to avenge oneself" (8:13):

> Similarly, "to avenge themselves upon their enemies," to turn against their enemies who are besieging them, as in the phrase "for the people that fled to the wilderness turned back upon the pursuers" (Jos 8:20).[60] For someone who turns against an aggressor is called an avenger (*noqem*).

There seems to be no linguistic or midrashic basis for this interpretation, and the only plausible explanation for it is that it fits in well with the picture Kaspi is trying to give of the Jews acting purely in self-defense, only striking out after they had been attacked.[61]

Occasionally, however, exegetes would attempt to take a fresh look at a difficult verse solely out of a desire to come to a better understanding of a difficult passage. This seems to be the case in the following interpretations by Isaac ben Joseph ha-Kohen to 3:8, "*ve-la-melekh 'ein shoveh le-hanniham*". In contrast to all the other exegetes who comment on this verse, R. Isaac reads *shoveh* as a participle, rather than an adverb. Thus he explains:

> There is no one to place or put (*shoveh*) [the case] before the king that he should abandon them (*le-hanniham*) and that this people should not be protected by the crown. And *shoveh* and *mashveh* have the same meaning just like *poqed* and *mafqid*, both meaning placing or putting to rest, except that *shoveh* has a broader connotation of placing or settling down (*hannahah, hityashevut*).[62]

According to R. Isaac, therefore, Haman is saying that no one has ever tried to persuade the king to deprive of royal protection this wicked people, that he has just described, and surrender them to the mercy of their enemies.

R. Isaac (fol. 68r) also explains *shoveh* in 5:13 in a unique manner. *Ve-khol zeh 'einenu shoveh li* means, according to him, "all this does not calm him or bring him repose from his sadness and anguish as long as he sees Mordecai sitting at the king's gate." Again, he understands *shoveh* as a participle and not as an adjective, as it is usually taken. We see, then, that even in the late Middle Ages some exegetes still showed concern for grammatical and lexicographical matters.

MIDRASHIC LITERATURE

There exists a substantial body of midrashic literature pertaining to the Book of Esther,[63] and it is possible that even more was available in the Middle Ages.[64] Throughout the Middle Ages the exegetes of Esther drew upon the midrashic tradition as an authoritative source for their commentaries.

The Northern French School

The only exceptions to this rule might be those "pursuers of *peshaṭ*," Rashi's successors in the northern French School, but even their commentaries do not ignore rabbinic opinion entirely. At the very least, they display an awareness of the midrashic comments on the book and occasionally react to them.

For example, Joseph Kara, flying in the face of tradition, argues convincingly that the text never mentions Vashti being sentenced to death as the midrash claims.

> *That Vashti is to come no more before King Ahasuerus* (1:19). Just as she refused to come at the king's command conveyed by the eunuchs, similarly she may not come before him again and anyone who claims that she was sentenced to death misunderstands the text of Scripture (*shogeh hu' bi-feshuṭo shel Miqra'*),[65] for if they had killed her why was there any need to write this in the law books of Persia and Media as irrevocable? No reconciliation could bring her back from the dead. *But one does not argue with the words of the 'aggadah* [emphasis added].[66]

Kara's polite disclaimer, uttered at the end of his comment is a typical medieval expression of disagreement with the interpretation of the sages.[67]

Kara's second reference to a rabbinic tradition occurs in his com-

ment at the end of chapter 2 where he describes the relation between chapters 2 and 3 as that of a remedy being provided before an illness has struck:[68] "This teaches you that he provided two remedies for the blow of Haman, the first that Esther became queen and the second that Mordecai saved the king from death."[69] Here, Kara approves of the rabbinic viewpoint, probably for theological reasons, but expands on it to include Esther's becoming queen as another remedy. This point is not mentioned in the midrash.[70]

The anonymous northern French commentary ("A") uses midrashic sources sparingly and without acknowledgement. An example is the following: "*When the virgins were gathered the second time* so that she would make known her kindred, because 'a woman is jealous only of the thigh of another woman.' "[71]

Similarly, Rashbam never refers directly to a rabbinic statement in his commentary. However, in his comment to "from India to Ethiopia" (1:1) he seems to be expressing his opinion with regard to the debate in the Talmud on this point: "India and Ethiopia are distant from each other and there are one-hundred and twenty-seven provinces between them."[72]

Rashi

Rashi, of course, is much more closely connected to the midrashic tradition. He is in constant dialogue with the sages, at times accepting their comments (with or without editorial changes), other times rejecting them out of hand, and yet other times quoting them as additional, supposedly acceptable, opinions. The following table illustrates Rashi's use of rabbinic material in his Esther commentary:

Table 3.

TYPE OF COMMENT	NUMBER OF OCCURRENCES
Original comments	94[73]
Midrash quoted as only comment	12[74]
Comments based on midrash but not acknowledged	18[75]
Midrashic source given as an alternative	7[76]
Existence of midrashic source mentioned but not quoted	5[77]
Total	136

Much recent scholarly attention has been devoted to the problem of determining Rashi's criteria for quoting rabbinic sources in his commentaries.[78] One fact that emerges quite clearly from this study is that Rashi did not choose his sources at random but rather exercised great care in their selection, often adapting and combining sources in order to suit his exegetical requirements. Rashi, it must be stressed, was first and foremost an exegete, whose primary aim was to elucidate the text in its context. Midrashic sources often used methods that were foreign to a medieval exegete,[79] and which therefore were not that helpful to an exegete wishing to come close to the original intent of the text. Still, Rashi, whose attachment to the rabbinic tradition was strong, tried to exploit this tradition to the best advantage through carefully and judiciously selecting and editing midrashic sources to meet his own needs. A few examples from his Esther commentary will illustrate Rashi's method of adapting these sources.

Verse 9:26 reads:

> For that reason these days were named Purim, after *pur*. In view then, of all the instructions in the said letter and of what they had experienced in that matter (*mah ra'u 'al kakhah*) and what had befallen them (*mah higgia' 'aleihem*), (9:27) the Jews undertook . . .

The problem in the text concerns the referents of phrases *mah ra'u* etc. and *mah higgia'* etc. Rashi, like most premodern exegetes, did not see verses 26 and 27 as being part of one sentence and therefore had to search elsewhere for antecedents for the verbs *ra'u* and *higgia'*. His comment to the verse reads as follows:

> *What they saw* [or, what caused or possessed] the doers of these deeds to do them. What did Ahasuerus see [what possessed him] to use the holy vessels and what became of them? Satan came and danced among them and killed Vashti. What did Haman see [what possessed him] to become jealous of Mordecai, and what became of him? He and his sons were hanged. What did Mordecai see [what possessed him] not to bow down and what did Esther see [what possessed her] to invite Haman?

The source upon which Rashi based his comment is found in B. T. Megillah 19a and reads as follows:

From where must a man read the Megillah etc. . . . R. Huna said: They
derived it [their lesson] from here: "And what did they see? For
this reason. And what came upon them?" He who says that the
whole of it must be read [interprets thus]: What had Ahasuerus
seen to make him use the vessels of the Temple? It was for this
reason, that he reckoned seventy years and they had not yet been
redeemed; "And what came upon them?" that he put Vashti to
death. He who says that it should be read from "there was a Jew"
[interprets thus]: What had Mordecai seen that he picked a quarrel
with Haman? It was for this reason, that he made himself an
object of worship. "And what came upon them?" that a miracle
was performed [for him]. He who says that it is to be read from
"after these things" [interprets thus]: What did Haman see to
make him pick a quarrel with all the Jews? It was for this reason,
that Mordecai did not bow down or prostrate himself; "and what
came upon him?" They hung him and his sons on the tree. He
who says that it is to be read from "on that night" interprets thus:
What did Ahasuerus see to make him order the book of chronicles
to be brought? It was for this reason that Esther invited Haman
with him. "And what came upon them?" A miracle was performed
for them.

The talmudic source centers around a halakhic discussion of the
question of how much of the Scroll of Esther must be read in order
to fulfill one's religious obligation. The deeper implications of the
discussion concern the theological significance of the book. According
to the first opinion, Ahasuerus's desecration of the Temple vessels is
primary and brought destruction in its wake. According to the second
opinion, the threat of idolatry was the key issue, and Mordecai's refusal
to bow down to Haman caused God to act on his behalf. According
to the third opinion, Haman's antisemitism was the issue, and the
outcome was death for him and his sons. According to the last opinion,
God's providence is the main theme of the story, and this can be seen
from the miracle of Ahasuerus's sleepless night. The midrash is skill-
fully built around the framework of Esther 9:26: "And what they had
faced (*u-mah ra'u*) . . . in this matter (*'al kakhah*) . . . and what befell
them (*u-mah higgia' 'aleihem*)."

But this midrash, while useful for homiletical purposes, is of
limited use for the exegete, since, in its tripartite structure, it ignores
the syntax of the verse. Rashi, in his comment, ignores the halakhic

context of the talmudic passage and employs a bipartite structure—that of an action and its consequences—which is more in keeping with the syntax of the verse. Yet he does this only for two of the four cases mentioned in the Talmud. He mentions both the deeds of Ahasuerus and Haman and their consequences, but only the deeds of Mordecai and Esther and not their consequences. The reason for this imbalance is that Rashi had a theological motive in making this comment—the desire to demonstrate God's providence and justice in guiding the events of the story. Therefore, he wished to stress that the deeds of Ahasuerus and Haman were met with the proper consequences and that they were punished for their actions. The deeds of Mordecai and Esther, on the other hand, do not fit this pattern of misdeed and punishment, and therefore, he did not need to mention their outcome in this context.[80] He still included them because they were found in his source. Thus Rashi has taken a talmudic source and adapted it to his exegetical needs, enabling him to convey a theological message while preserving the syntactical integrity of the text.

Another example is Rashi's comment on Est 9:29. The verse reads as follows: "Then Queen Esther, daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew wrote with full authority (*toqef*) to confirm this second letter of Purim."[81] The problem in the text is the word *toqef*. This word literally means "power" or "might," but this meaning does not fit well in this context. Rashi comments: "The power of the miracle of Ahasuerus and Haman and of Mordecai and Esther." This comment is based on the passage in B. T. Megillah immediately preceding the one just discussed and deals with the same issue of determining the proper place from which to begin reading the scroll in order to fulfill one's religious obligation:

> He who says that the whole *Megillah* must be read refers this to the power of Ahasuerus; he who says it must be read from "there was a Jew" (2:5), to the power of Mordecai; he who says from "after these things" (3:1), to the power of Haman; and he who says from "on that night" (6:1), to the power of the miracle.

The passage from the Talmud quotes four separate opinions giving them equal weight. Once again, Rashi ignores the halakhic context of the original passage and telescopes the four opinions into one, stressing the miraculous nature of the events of the story. This too is in keeping with his tendency to emphasize God's intervention on behalf of

the Jews and his guiding of the events of the story, which was one of his prime considerations in choosing rabbinic comments for use in his Esther commentary.

One final example is Rashi's comment to verse 4:1. The verse reads: "When Mordecai learned all that had happened, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes." The phrase "when Mordecai learned" translates literally as "and Mordecai knew." The question arises as to how Mordecai knew, since the verb *yada'* implies immediate unmediated knowledge. This invited exegetes who were so inclined to seek a supernatural explanation for Mordecai's knowledge. Thus, Rashi comments: The dream-master (*ba'al ha-ḥalom*)[82] told him that angels (*'elyonim*) had agreed to this because they [i.e., the Israelites] had bowed down to a graven image in the days of Nebuchadnezzar and they had partaken of the banquet of Ahasuerus. In other words, according to Rashi, Mordecai had dreamed that the powers that be had decreed that Israel should be punished because of two sins that they had committed. The sources for this comment are found in rabbinic literature. Apparently, the sages felt the need to justify the magnitude of the calamity facing Israel and the Book of Esther itself does not really provide a reason. Haman's hatred of one Jew, Mordecai, because of his refusal to bow down to him, is not sufficient cause. Since God was seen as a just God who did not punish arbitrarily, a reason had to be found to justify his wrath against his people. Two causes were provided: (1) that the Jews had bowed down to an image in the time of Nebuchadnezzar and (2) that they had partaken of Ahasuerus's banquet.

Several rabbinic sources mention these two reasons for Israel's distress, but most do not connect them with our verse.[83] Two sources that do are the First Targum to Esther and *Midrash Panim 'aḥerim B*. The Targum comments:

> And Mordecai knew through Elijah, the High Priest, everything that happened in the heavens and how the people of the House of Israel were sentenced to destruction . . because they had partaken of Ahasuerus's banquet.

Midrash Panim 'aḥerim B (p. 69) to our verse reads as follows:

> What is: "he knew all that had happened?" Mordecai said, "I know that destruction was decreed against them from the day that they bowed down to the image of Nebuchadnezzar, as it is

written, 'Whoever sacrifices to a god other than the Lord alone shall be proscribed' (Ex 23:19).'' Therefore it says "he knew.''

The Targum attributes Mordecai's knowledge to Elijah, the High Priest, i.e., Elijah, the Prophet,[84] while according to the midrash, Mordecai already knew that the Israelites were in danger because of what they had done. Rashi takes elements from both of these comments and adds a third—the source of Mordecai's knowledge being a dream rather than Elijah.[85] He is thus able to explain the source of Mordecai's knowledge and the content of it in a way that does justice to the magnitude of the calamity facing Israel and is exegetically acceptable as well.

We see, then, how Rashi freely borrows from his rabbinic sources and weaves disparate elements together in order to produce comments that are exegetically sound according to his criteria.

German Pietists

The commentaries of the German Pietists (*Ḥasidei 'Ashkenaz*) draw heavily upon rabbinic sources, both midrashim and targumim, and many could be called with some justification mere compilations of midrashic material. A brief survey of the notes in Lehmann's edition of the commentary of Eleazar of Worms would readily confirm this statement. The commentaries of Avigdor ben Elijah and Eleazar been Moses, the Preacher, are of a similar nature. A few original comments are interspersed among a plethora of midrashic and targumic sources.

Abraham Ibn Ezra and Other Exegetes

The commentary of Abraham Ibn Ezra demonstrates a much more selective approach to the midrashic tradition. Although he treats the sages with great respect and often quotes their opinions, Ibn Ezra does not hesitate to reject rabbinic statements that he considers unreasonable or to explain midrashic statements rationally.[86] The same can be said of Isaiah of Trani who makes heavy use of rabbinic material but also does not hesitate to react to statements that do violence to the *peshaṭ*.[87]

In general, the exegetes of the late thirteenth to late fifteenth centuries borrow freely from the wealth of midrashic material available to them while avoiding the comments of a more fanciful nature. Baḥya ben Asher, it will be recalled, devotes an entire third of his commentary

to midrash. Joseph Naḥmias, who incorporates a great deal of midrashic material in his commentary, does make some attempt to be selective and to distinguish between the terms *peshaṭ* and *derash*. At some points he quotes a rabbinic opinion and then offers an interpretation he feels is the contextual meaning (*peshaṭ*).[88] Concerning the rabbinic opinion that Mordecai's mother was from the tribe of Judah and his father from Benjamin, he comments that this is a *derash* which is close to the *peshaṭ*.[89] This would seem to suggest that for Naḥmias the distinction between *peshaṭ* and *derash* was a formal one only and had no bearing on the content of the material in question.

Reinterpretation of Rabbinic Sources

Aggadic statements in the Talmud were often a source of embarrassment for medieval Jewish scholars who were called upon to defend them against attacks by Karaites, Moslems, or Christians who were seeking either to ridicule the Jewish faith in its entirety or to undermine the authority of the sages.[90] Medieval scholars trained in philosophy often had difficulty in reconciling rabbinic statements with the philosophical doctrines they were convinced were true. Various tactics were used to defend the writings of the sages or to circumvent the problems raised by them. Scholars denied the authority of certain aggadic statements or of entire categories of problematic material, but for many, this approach was unacceptable. Instead, they sought to reinterpret the words of the sages in such a manner as to resolve the conflicts raised by polemicists or philosophical teachings, while at the same time maintaining the integrity of the teachings of the sages.[91]

Many aggadic statements on the Book of Esther must have troubled the medieval exegetes, but the most problematic ones were simply ignored. Still there were attempts on the part of several medievals to reinterpret certain aggadic statements rationally. The first to do this was Abraham Ibn Ezra. Ibn Ezra was engaged throughout his career in a polemic against the Karaites,[92] and it is likely that his defense of certain rabbinic statements by rational reinterpretation was part of that apologetic effort. For example, he explains the midrash that states Gabriel gave Vashti a tail to mean that he made her ugly in Ahasuerus's eyes. The sages identified Hathach with Daniel, explains Ibn Ezra, because he was as loyal to Esther as if he had been the righteous Daniel himself. Similarly, the identification of Harbona with Elijah merely