

## Rashi, Biblical Interpretation, and Latin Learning in Medieval Europe

In this volume, Mordechai Cohen explores the interpretive methods of Rashi of Troyes (1040–1105), the most influential Jewish Bible commentator of all time. By elucidating the “plain sense” (*peshat*) of Scripture, together with critically selected midrashic interpretations, Rashi created an approach that was revolutionary in the talmudically oriented Ashkenazic milieu. Cohen contextualizes Rashi’s commentaries by examining influences from other centers of Jewish learning in Muslim Spain and Byzantine lands. He also opens new scholarly paths by comparing Rashi’s methods with trends in Latin learning reflected in the Psalms commentary of his older contemporary, Saint Bruno the Carthusian (1030–1101). Drawing upon the Latin tradition of *enarratio poetarum* (“interpreting the poets”), Bruno applied a grammatical interpretive method and incorporated patristic commentary selectively, a parallel that Cohen uses to illuminate Rashi’s exegetical values. Cohen thereby brings to light the novel literary conceptions manifested by Rashi and his key students, Joseph Kara and Rashbam.

Mordechai Z. Cohen is Professor of Bible and Associate Dean of the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Jewish Studies, Yeshiva University. He is the author of *Three Approaches to Biblical Metaphor* (2003), *Opening the Gates of Interpretation* (2011), and *The Rule of Peshat* (2020) and a recognized expert on Jewish Bible interpretation in its Muslim and Christian cultural contexts. He has taught at universities in the USA, Israel, Europe, and China.

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Mordechai Z. Cohen  
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# Rashi, Biblical Interpretation, and Latin Learning in Medieval Europe

*A New Perspective on an Exegetical Revolution*

MORDECHAI Z. COHEN

*Yeshiva University, New York*



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*In memory of Nehama Leibowitz (1905–1997)  
Who dedicated her life to the study and teaching of the Bible  
with Rashi's commentaries*

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Early in the project I discussed Rashi and his Latin intellectual context with Rita Copeland, Jon Whitman, and Alastair Minnis (who counts the renowned Beryl Smalley among his mentors). Our discussions in Jerusalem turned to the eleventh-century cathedral master Bruno the Carthusian, whose Psalms commentary has been the subject of groundbreaking studies by Andrew Kraebel, then completing his PhD with Alastair Minnis at Yale and who subsequently joined our group in Jerusalem. Andrew and I sat for weeks studying Rashi and Bruno side by side and were struck by the methodological parallels between them, notwithstanding everything that would naturally separate medieval Jewish and Christian readers of the Bible. The initial fruits of that discovery were published in an essay entitled “A New Perspective on Rashi of Troyes in Light of Bruno the Carthusian:

*Acknowledgments*

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Exploring Jewish and Christian Bible Interpretation in Eleventh-Century Northern France” that appeared in *Viator* 48:1 (2017): 39–86.

It soon became clear that the implications of that study for understanding the *peshat* revolution pioneered by Rashi in northern France required further treatment in a full-length monograph – a desideratum fulfilled by the current volume. In its preparation, I benefited from further discussions with learned colleagues. In particular, Rita Copeland continually provided invaluable expert advice on the Western Christian interpretive tradition within the larger context of medieval Latin learning – and the possible parallels within the commentaries of Rashi and his successors in the northern French *peshat* tradition. I am grateful to Lisa Fredman for sharing with me her wisdom regarding the text of Rashi’s commentaries in light of the medieval manuscripts and early printed editions.

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This volume is dedicated to the memory of Nehama Leibowitz (1905–1997), who devoted her life to teaching the Bible and its commentaries, with pride of place given to Rashi. Nehama, as she was affectionately known by thousands of students over the course of a teaching career that spanned nearly seven decades, applied her keen literary sensibilities and masterful pedagogic skills to illuminate the depth and complexity of Rashi's exegesis.

My wife, Suzanne, has provided essential emotional support as I devoted many hours, days, weeks, and months to this project. Herself an ardent student and teacher of the Bible, Suzanne values Rashi's commentaries, which we have discussed together at length over the years. It was an honor to introduce Suzanne to Nehama Leibowitz in 1990 when we were engaged to be married. Nehama's blessing to us – as two young Bible teachers – was that we never grow tired of learning and dedication to our students. In memory of Nahama Leibowitz our third daughter was named Gila Nehama when she was born in 2002. All of our children, Yaffa, Shai, Miri, Gila, and Elisha, deserve honorable mention for their patience with a mom and dad enamored with the study of old books. As they have matured, these magnificent kids offer important perspectives that enrich our scholarship – and our lives, of course.

## Abbreviations

AJS	Association for Jewish Studies
Ar.	Arabic
b.	Babylonian Talmud
HBOT	<i>Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of its Interpretation</i> , ed. Magne Sæbø, Menahem Haran, and Chris Brekelmans. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. Vol. I/1, <i>Antiquity</i> , 1996; vol. I/2, <i>The Middle Ages</i> , 2000.
Heb.	Hebrew
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
j.	Jerusalem Talmud
JJS	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
JQR	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
JSIJ	<i>Jewish Studies Internet Journal</i>
JSQ	<i>Jewish Studies Quarterly</i>
JTS	Jewish Theological Seminary of America
m.	Mishnah
MS	manuscript
MT	Masoretic Text
PEPP	Greene, Roland, and Stephen Cushman, eds. <i>The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics</i> . 4th ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012.

- PL* *Patrologia Latina* (*Patrologia Cursus Completus: Series Latina*), ed. Jaques Paul Migne, 221 vols. Paris: Migne, 1844–1864. (References given by volume and column.)
- REJ* *Revue des études juives*
- s.v.* *sub verbo*
- t. Tosefta