

The King and the Commentator:
Rashi's Holistic Readings of
Solomon's Song, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes



Lisa Fredman

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*The King and the Commentator: Rashi's Holistic Readings
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*and their tireless efforts to strengthen women's
Torah scholarship worldwide .*

*To the incredible individuals & community
who have lifted me during this challenging time.*

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*Thank you for your kindness, encouragement,
and for being there when I needed it most.*

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journey, reminding me that I am not alone.*

*With deep gratitude,
Sheila Klein*

*In loving memory of my parents,
Israel and Yetra Goldberg
Janice Bitansky and family*

In the 1980s, Rabbanit Malke Bina began teaching a groundbreaking Talmud *shiur* for women, held around the dining room table of Lili Weil z"l. Inspired by this pioneering learning, Rabbanit Bina and her students envisioned an advanced Beit Midrash for women. This became a reality in 1988 with the establishment of Matan: The Sadie Rennert Women's Institute for Torah Studies. From its inception, Matan has been dedicated to cultivating high-level scholars, educators, and leaders, revolutionizing opportunities for women to engage deeply with Torah study.

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The second Matan Kitvuni publication in English is *The King and the Commentator: Rashi's Holistic Readings of Solomon's Song, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* by Dr. Lisa Fredman. It explores how Rashi crafts exegetical frameworks that knit together Solomon's writings and infuse them with deep spiritual and religious resonance that speaks powerfully to the modern reader. Upcoming Kitvuni publications will feature works on Bible, Talmud, Halakha, *Hasidut*, and Kabbala, further enhancing contemporary Torah scholarship.

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The King and the Commentator

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Introduction

Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (1040–1105), commonly referred to as Rashi, is surely the most illustrious of Jewish commentators. He was the first to write comprehensive commentaries on both the Talmud and the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh), and his commentaries are still the gateway to the study of these fundamental texts. This work examines Rashi’s commentaries on the three books attributed to his namesake, King Solomon – the Song of Songs, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. In character and method, Rashi’s approach to these books differs from his approach to other books of Tanakh.

INTERPRETIVE APPROACH

First, a word about Rashi’s approach generally. Rashi’s commentaries are two-layered. There is the *peshat*, or “simple” meaning. This has also been called the “contextual” meaning: A word is interpreted in a way that is consistent with the other words in the sentence and with the overall narrative. Kamin explains that *peshat* is an interpretation aligned

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“with the text’s vocabulary, syntax, context, literary form, and structure in their mutual relationships.”¹

Along with *peshat*, there is the level of *derash*, the “homiletical” meaning. Within the realm of *derash*, all components – letters, words, verses, and sections – can be interpreted as independent units capable of forming countless combinations.²

Rashi’s innovativeness actually lay in the systematic use of the *peshat* method. His development of this method, anchored in linguistic analysis, grammar, and syntax, represented an exegetical breakthrough within the Ashkenazic region. Although Spanish scholars preceding Rashi had engaged in meticulous examination of the biblical text’s language and grammar as early as the geonic period, such an interpretative methodology did not permeate the Ashkenazic milieu until the eleventh century. It is pertinent to note that the majority of these Spanish biblical exegeses were composed in Arabic, a language unfamiliar to Rashi.

The *derash* method of exegesis was prevalent in the writings of the Sages, such as the Midrash and the Talmud. Although Rashi draws heavily from this corpus of rabbinic literature, his explications are not merely a potpourri of earlier thought but rather the result of a careful selection process. As articulated in the opening programmatic statement in his Torah commentary:

I have come for the simple meaning of Scripture and for Aggada which settles (*meyashevet*) the words of Scripture... each word in its proper place. (Commentary on Gen. 3:8)

Rashi selects Aggada – rabbinic sources that “settle,” i.e., conform to, the language and sequence of Scripture. He then reformulates them to create a seamless transition between explanation and verse, thus achieving a fluid integration between the two.

1. S. Kamin, “Rashi’s Exegetical Categorization with Respect to the Distinction Between *Peshat* and *Derash*,” *Immanuel* 11 (1980): 16.
2. Kamin, “Rashi’s Exegetical Categorization,” 16–17, citing I.J. Heinemann, *Darkhei HaAggada* [in Hebrew] (Magnes, 1970), 96.

Modern scholarship has identified an additional methodological innovation: the application of certain homilies to the context of eleventh-century northern France, where a small Jewish minority coexisted with a dominant Christian society. This strategy aimed to strengthen internal Jewish values while countering external Christian influences and threats. Rashi's anti-Christian polemic becomes more explicit in his commentaries on the Later Prophets and Hagiographa.

WHY PESHAT?

What can explain Rashi's systematic introduction of the *peshat* hermeneutic? Scholars grapple with this question and raise a number of possible factors.

Grossman posits the impact of the rich Spanish Jewish exegetical tradition, with its strong emphasis on philology and lexicology. Rashi accessed this tradition through the Hebrew writings of Spanish linguists such as Menahem ben Saruq and Dunash ben Labrat.³ Touitou notes the influence of the "twelfth-century renaissance," which actually began in the previous century. This intellectual rebirth in Christian Europe emphasized the power of human reason and intellect, challenging tradition and promoting a more literal reading of the Bible.⁴ This "new" reading also proved effective in refuting Christian allegorical and typological interpretations, becoming a crucial element in Rashi's anti-Christian exegetical toolbox. More recently, M.Z. Cohen points to the parallels between Latin learning – specifically the hermeneutical model developed in the late-eleventh-century Cathedral school of Rheims – and Rashi's methodological approach.⁵

3. A. Grossman, "The School of Literal Jewish Exegesis in Northern France," in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*, vol. 1: *From the Beginnings to the Middle Ages*, part 2: *The Middle Ages*, ed. Magne Sæbø (2000), 327–28.
4. E. Touitou, "Rashi's Commentary on Genesis 1–6 in the Context of the Judeo-Christian Controversy," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 61 (1990): 159–63.
5. M.Z. Cohen, *Rashi, Biblical Interpretation, and Latin Learning in Medieval Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 17–25; M.Z. Cohen, "Rashi's Revolutionary Commentary Deviates from Midrash, Why?" *TheTorah.com*: www.thetorah.com/article/rashis-revolutionary-commentary-deviates-from-midrash-why.

DUAL COMMENTARY

Regardless of the stimulus, Rashi juxtaposes the two senses of Scripture – *peshat* and *derash* – hundreds of times in his Bible commentary. He often distinguishes between them through the use of clear methodological labels, such as “that is *peshat*” (*zehu peshuto*), “that is *derash*” (*zehu midrasho*), or more general phrases like “another explanation” (*davar aher*). It is very rare indeed for him to privilege one explanation over the other.⁶ Underlying the dual hermeneutic is the belief that the text is divine, thus allowing for explication on multiple methodological levels. Although this “dual commentary” approach becomes Rashi’s distinctive exegetical trademark, sometimes he does content himself with a single comment, primarily of the *derash* nature.

FORMAT

We now turn our attention to the question of form, examining the manner in which Rashi presents his exegesis to the reader.

Rashi’s commentary adopts a verse-by-verse structure, prioritizing the elucidation of each individual passage. His commentary on the verse may contain one interpretive point, or it may be composed of multiple interpretive units, with each unit initiated by the guiding words of the text (*dibbur hamathil*) requiring clarification. This format enables a systematic and comprehensive exploration of the text, allowing every component of the text to receive due attention. It is crucial to note, however, that while Rashi offers exacting verse-level analysis, he never explicitly constructs a cohesive narrative connecting these discrete interpretive units across large expanses of text.

The independent nature of each interpretive unit did not escape the eyes of Christian scholars, as noted by Touitou:

Christian authors were aware of this particular characteristic of Jewish exegesis, and they regarded it as a weak point that could be exploited; they therefore instructed the Christian polemicists

6. For example, see his commentary on Proverbs 29:25, where he expresses preference for the first answer.

not to lead the controversy towards narrow exegetical points, but rather to steer the discussion to the broad domains of theological thought, a field in which the Jews seemed to be inferior.⁷

The “broad domains” are not explicitly addressed by Rashi nor by many other medieval Jewish exegetes living in Christian Europe.⁸

TEXT ARRANGEMENT

Rashi does, however, demonstrate a sensitivity toward textual arrangement. Occasionally, he queries the juxtaposition of biblical sections with inquiries such as “Why is this section juxtaposed?” (*lama nismekha parasha*),⁹ often providing a midrashic explanation for the thematic shift. Upon the text’s return to its original trajectory, Rashi employs terms like “Scripture returns to the original topic” (*hozer la’inyan harishon*) to reorient the reader.¹⁰ In other instances, his observations pertain to chronological inconsistencies, marked by statements such as “There is no chronological order” (*ein mukdam umeuḥar*).¹¹ Nonetheless, Rashi does not engage in a comprehensive analysis of extended textual units to elucidate their thematic interconnections. A holistic examination of

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7. E. Touitou, “Rashi and His School: The Exegesis on the Halakic Part of the Pentateuch in the Context of the Judeo-Christian Controversy,” in *Medieval Studies: In Honour of Avrom Saltman, Bar-Ilan Studies in History IV* (Bar-Ilan University Press, 1995), 241.
 8. In contrast to Jewish exegetes living in southern France and Spain, see Avraham Grossman, *Rashi*, trans. J. Linsider (The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012), 81–82. An exception in the Ashkenazic zone was Rabbi Eliezer of Beaugency (twelfth century), whose exegesis is marked by the commitment to explicate the broader context; see Yitzhak Berger, “The Contextual Exegesis of Rabbi Eliezer of Beaugency and the Climax of the Northern French *Peshat* Tradition,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, vol. 15 (2008): 115–29. For a comprehensive analysis of Rabbi Eliezer’s exegesis, see *Rabbi Eliezer of Beaugency Commentaries on Amos and Jonah*, introduction, translation and commentary by Robert A. Harris (Western Michigan University, 2018): web.archive.org/web/20201106103509id_/https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=mip_teams.
 9. E.g., Rashi’s commentary on Genesis 38:1.
 10. E.g., Rashi’s commentary on Genesis 39:1.
 11. E.g., Rashi’s commentary on Genesis 6:3.

how individual components contribute to the overarching message is conspicuously absent from his commentary.

CONTRADICTIONS

The lack of cohesion is compounded by internal contradictions. It is not uncommon for Rashi to cite a midrash on one verse that contradicts a midrash brought on a different verse. This phenomenon, termed *aggadot ḥalukot* (contradictory homilies) is prevalent in his commentary.¹² While Touitou suggested these discrepancies were later interpolations, manuscript analysis refutes this claim.¹³ Many contradictions appear in the most reliable manuscripts of Rashi's commentary. Alternatively, it may be proposed that Rashi, while culling from different midrashic compendiums, was not concerned with creating one overall harmonious commentary. Rather, more important were the pertinent ideas that could be gleaned from each individual verse. This phenomenon of inconsistency is a feature not exclusive to Rashi but characteristic of the broader midrashic corpus from which his commentary derives. As noted by Kugel, midrashic exegesis is fundamentally verse-centric. The midrashist addresses himself not to the chapter or the book as a whole, but rather to the single verse "isolated in suspended animation."¹⁴ The sole desire to resolve the difficulty surrounding a single word or phrase created a situation wherein solutions to individual phrases contradicted one another. Consistency was not an overriding consideration either for midrashic literature or for Rashi himself.

SOLOMON'S WRITINGS

The upcoming pages will demonstrate a stark contrast between Rashi's commentary on the majority of biblical texts and his commentary on

12. This term already appears in the supercommentary of Rabbi Eliyahu Mizrahi on Genesis 1:1. For a thorough analysis of this topic, see Y. Maori, "Aggadot Ḥalukot: Rashi's Commentary on Scripture," in *Shnaton: An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near East Studies* xix, ed. S. Japhet [in Hebrew] (Magnes, 2009), 138–54.
13. Maori, "Aggadot Ḥalukot," 190–95.
14. J. Kugel, "Two Introductions to Midrash," *Prooftexts*, vol. 3 (1983), 146, n. 2.

the Solomonic corpus. While maintaining his characteristic verse-by-verse format, Rashi's commentaries on Song of Songs, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes deviate from his typical approach by constructing overarching thematic frameworks. These frameworks or schemas enable Rashi to synthesize the disparate textual elements into a unified whole, thus exhibiting a holistic interpretive approach.

TEXT OF RASHI'S COMMENTARIES

The present study relies on authoritative editions of Rashi's commentaries: the *HaKeter* edition for Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes,¹⁵ and the World Union of Jewish Studies edition on Proverbs.¹⁶ These editions are grounded in manuscript analysis, providing the most reliable textual foundation. The prevalence of interpolations within Rashi's commentary is well documented. While some additions can be attributed to Rashi's own revisions, others originate from his close disciples, such as Rabbi Shemaiah, Rabbi Josef Kara, and Rashbam. Furthermore, later scholars introduced marginal notes that were subsequently incorporated into the main text by copyists.¹⁷ Thus, to ensure textual integrity and to uncover Rashi's original anti-Christian polemic – which was subsequently altered or eliminated by medieval censorship – reliance on these authoritative editions is imperative. Passages from these editions are translated into English in order to present this research.¹⁸ We were assisted in this endeavor by the translations at alhatorah.org.

15. *Mikraot Gedolot HaKeter: The Five Scrolls*, ed. M. Cohen [in Hebrew] (Bar-Ilan University Press, 2012). The *HaKeter* edition is accessible online and can be viewed via the following link: www.mgketer.org/mikra/1/1/1/mg/o.

16. *Rashi's Commentary on the Book of Proverbs*, ed. L. Fredman [in Hebrew] (World Union of Jewish Studies, 2019).

17. For more detailed information, see Grossman, "The School of Literal Jewish Exegesis in Northern France," 333–34.

18. These translations have been occasionally modified to facilitate smoother reading or to more accurately reflect Rashi's original language, as it existed before being altered by medieval censors.

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Specific Rashi passages throughout this work are indicated by the use of the letter *R* followed by the chapter and verse, enclosed in parentheses, such as (R 1:11).

METHODOLOGY

By documenting Rashi's sources for his midrashic tier, identifying his deviations from source material, and noting his original interpretive contributions, this study will illuminate his exegetical methodology. This analysis focuses upon Rashi's midrashic layer, as it is precisely this tier that offers the latitude for adaptation to his exegetical requirements.

This adaptation includes the creation of frameworks through which Rashi unifies Solomon's writings. While the framework Rashi applies to the Song of Songs is time-sensitive – arranging the verses in chronological sequence – the frameworks applied to both Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are theme-centric, establishing overarching motifs. The specific frameworks chosen are a direct consequence of the inherent nature of the compositions themselves; thus Rashi's selection of frameworks demonstrates his sensitivity to the distinct character of the biblical texts.

Ultimately, this analysis reveals the holistic nature of Rashi's approach to Solomon's writings.

Rashi's Commentary on Song of Songs

Chapter One

Introduction

S*hir HaShirim*, Song of Songs (henceforth the Song), is a series of poems describing the romance between the Shulamite and her unnamed lover.¹ The reader is swept away by vivid descriptions of lush fruits, fragrant flora, and pulsating wildlife in the land of Zion, in tandem with rich accounts of the protagonists' beauty – her hair is likened to a flock of goats and her teeth glisten like a freshly washed flock of ewes (6:5–6);² his eyes are like doves, evenly set and bathed in milk, and his lips similar to lilies, dripping with flowing myrrh (5:12–13).

Why are such tantalizing descriptions included in the biblical canon? After all, didn't Solomon, the wisest of all men, warn that "grace is deceptive and beauty is illusory" (Prov. 31:30)?³ More surprising, however, is the provocative language invoked to describe the woman's intimate body parts:

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1. According to Rashi, the word Shulamite (7:1) does not describe the woman but rather the nation of Israel, who is complete in her faith; see Rashi ad loc.
 2. For additional detailed descriptions of the female, see 4:1–7, 7:2–8.
 3. English translations of the biblical text are taken from the *New Jewish Publication Society of America Tanakh* (Jewish Publication Society, 2003). These translations have been occasionally modified to better reflect Rashi's understanding of the text.

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Your rounded thighs are like jewels, the work of a master's hand.
Your navel is like a round goblet – let mixed wine not be lacking! – your belly like a heap of wheat, hedged about with lilies.
Your breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle. (7:2–4)

And most shocking are expressions of physical contact, such as embracing (2:6, 3:6, 8:3), lodging between her breasts (1:13), grasping them (7:9), and even allusions to consummating their love (1:16, 3:4, 7:13).

These problematic passages are compounded by the absence of any spiritual dimension in this composition – devoid of prayer, sacrifice, and even the name of God. Therefore, it is not surprising that concern regarding its abuse emerges in the words of the second-century Sage R. Akiva:

One who raises his voice in the Song of Songs in the banquet house and makes it into a kind of song, has no portion in the World to Come. (Tosefta, Sanhedrin 12:10)

His warning seeks to obviate the trivialization of the Song through its recitation at secular gatherings or drinking halls; but why not? What could warrant the inclusion of this secular, provocative poetry in the Holy Scripture?

Turning again to R. Akiva to offer a solution, elsewhere he states: “For all the Hagiographa are holy, but the Song of Songs is Holy of Holies” (Mishna Yadayim 3:5),⁴ thereby redeeming this composition by emphasizing its holy status. But how can a composition devoid of spirituality be considered “Holy of Holies”? What can possibly propel it from the secular to the spiritual realm? Apparently, R. Akiva's intent is relatively simple – the employment of allegory.⁵

Thus, Song of Songs is sacred because of its applied meaning. But what exactly is the nature of this meaning? Whom or what do the lovers represent?

4. *Mishnah, Seder Tohorot*, trans. and notes P. Kehati, vol. 5 (1996), 29.

5. “Allegory is a literary work in which the various details in the text have a transferred meaning” (“Book of Song of Songs,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D.N. Freedman, vol. 6 [Doubleday Books, 1992], 154).

TWO FUNDAMENTAL APPROACHES

Perusal of rabbinic literature uncovers two fundamental approaches. The first views the love story as the yearning of the human soul to cleave to God; as illustrated in the following source:

R. Akiva entered in peace and left in peace; of him Scripture declares: “Draw me after you, let us run!” (Song. 1:4; Tosefta, Ḥagiga 2:2)⁶

Tractate Ḥagiga describes four great Sages who entered the *Pardes* (the “garden” or “orchard” of esoteric teachings) in order to draw near to God, yet only Akiva exits intact. The proof text employed to describe Akiva’s successful spiritual quest is drawn from the Song and is one that describes the maiden’s intense desire to be embraced by her beloved (1:4), thus hinting to a mystical understanding of our composition.⁷

The other, more dominant approach identifies the female protagonist (the bride) with the Congregation of Israel and her partner (the groom) with the Divine Presence, thus transforming the composition into a description of the historical relationship between God and His nation, a spiritual, national love story. Viewing the relationship of Israel with the Divine as that of a bride and groom is well documented in Scripture; after all, the prophet Hosea poignantly declares:

6. An alternative mystical approach found in the book entitled *Shiur Koma*, literally, “The Measurement of the Body,” explicates the description of the male’s physique (5:10–16) as descriptive of the divine body. See David Stern, “Ancient Jewish Interpretation of the Song of Songs in a Comparative Context,” in *Jewish Biblical Interpretation and Cultural Exchange*, ed. N. Dohrmann and D. Stern (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 95–96.
7. Similarly, the prohibition against teaching the secrets of the Divine Chariot is connected to a verse in Song of Songs: “We have learned concerning it, ‘Honey and milk are under your tongue’ (Song. 4:11). The things that are sweeter than honey and milk should be under your tongue” (Ḥagiga 13a). For additional examples, see Ephraim E. Urbach, “The Homiletical Interpretation of the Sages and the Expositions of Origen on Canticles and the Jewish-Christian Disputation,” in *Scripta Hierosolymitana* (Magness, 1971), 249–51.

And I will espouse you forever: I will espouse you with righteousness and justice, and with goodness and mercy . . . then you shall be devoted to the Lord. (Hos. 2:21–22)

And, similarly, Jeremiah reminisces, “I accounted to your favor the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride – how you followed Me in the wilderness, in a land not sown” (Jer. 2:2). Yet the flip side also holds true: Breach of the sacred marriage covenant through the act of idolatry is deemed infidelity, “whoring/*zanu* with other gods” (Judges 2:17).

The allegorization of our text, at first blush, is not surprising, for, after all, we are familiar with this exegetical technique from other sections of the Tanakh.⁸ Yet, in truth, its application here is somewhat revolutionary, because our text contains no textual hint indicating that our story represents another. Let us elaborate on this point through comparison.

The book of Samuel recounts David’s sin with Bathsheba and the prophet’s subsequent reprimand, couched in the form of a parable in which a rich man appropriates the sole ewe of a poor man (II Sam. 12:1–4). Immediately upon hearing of this injustice, David decrees that the rogue should be sentenced to death and charged fourfold for the damages he caused, whereupon Nathan the prophet accuses the king of similar behavior: “That man is you!” Nathan’s indictment serves as the textual bridge linking the parable – the story of the magnate and the ewe – with its implied meaning – the king and Bathsheba. The Song, by contrast, contains no such explicit textual signpost pointing to a meaning beyond itself.

Additional Challenges

The Song poses additional questions of form: What is the poem’s narrative structure? How many voices can be discerned within this composition? To whom are they speaking, and in what context? How can the swift transitions from singular to plural and from third-person to second-person address be explained?

8. Such as the book of Proverbs, Jotham’s Parable (Judges 9:6–21), Parable of the Vineyard (Is. 5:1–7).

Let us now turn our attention to Rashi's commentary, asking: How does our premier exegete meet the multiple challenges presented above? What exegetical key does he provide to unlock this very challenging text?

RASHI'S PROLOGUE

Rashi's commentary on the Song commences with a formal prologue, which is an unusual phenomenon within his exegetical oeuvre;⁹ although introductions to biblical commentaries were standard in other historical periods and provenances, such was not the case in eleventh-century northern France.¹⁰ The mere penning of introductory words, therefore, hints to the complexity of the composition at hand and the author's desire to clarify central points with regard to its explication. Let us take a closer look.

Prologue: Part One

“One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard” (Ps. 62:12) – One verse can be interpreted in many ways, but in the end a biblical verse does not leave the realm of its plain sense (*mashmao*).¹¹ And even though the prophets uttered their words figuratively (*dugma*), one must reconcile the allegory on its basis and its sequence, just as the verses are arranged one after the other. I have seen many aggadic midrashim on this book. Some arrange this entire book in one homily; in others, we find isolated verses scattered in many aggadic works, not reconcilable with the language of Scripture or the sequence of the verses. I decided to be attentive to the literal meaning of the verses, to

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9. Similarly, see his introduction to the book of Zechariah.
 10. See Eric Lawee, “Introducing Scripture: The ‘Accessus Ad Auctores’ in Medieval Hebrew Exegetical Literature from the 13th to 15th Centuries,” in Jane Dammen McAuliffe et al., eds., *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 159–79.
 11. Regarding the relationship between *mashmao* and *peshuto*, see Benjamin J. Gelles, *Peshat and Derash in the Exegesis of Rashi* (Brill, 1981), 119–20. In our composition, they seem interchangeable.

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reconcile their interpretations according to their sequence, and as for the midrashic interpretations of our Rabbis, I shall set each one in its place.

Rashi opens with a quotation from Psalms that serves as the justification for his exegetical approach:¹² Because Scripture is divine, God's word can be explicated on multiple methodological levels; yet notwithstanding the plurality of meanings embedded in the Holy Writ, one cannot ignore the contextual meaning (*mashmao*). He then notes that even in cases such as ours, wherein the biblical text is to be understood as figurative language (*dugma*, a unique term which will be discussed below), the commentator is still required to be attentive to the language and sequence of the verses, because they form the foundation for the text's applied meaning. Recognition of the text's literal, contextual meaning constitutes Rashi's first exegetical innovation in this commentary; because prior to him, rabbinic literature largely ignored this interpretive tier.

He then criticizes the extant homiletical material on the Song for violating the aforementioned criteria of language and sequence, thus arguing that the literal meaning (*mashmao*) and applied meaning (*dugma*) share some common ground rules.¹³ This recognition of correspondence between the two tiers, as noted by Kamin, constitutes an additional exegetical breakthrough.¹⁴ Rashi concludes his methodological manifesto with a pledge to present a dual commentary, one that addresses the literal meaning¹⁵ and also gives a midrashic explication in which each homily sits in its appropriate place.

12. Rashi is following Sanhedrin 34a.

13. But, of course, not all. Most importantly, midrashic explications generally incorporate extra-biblical data which is untenable in the realm of *peshuto*.

14. Sarah Kamin, *Rashi's Exegetical Categorization: In Respect to the Distinction Between Peshat and Derash* [in Hebrew] (Magnes, 2007), 82.

15. This tier, however, is less systematic and complete than the allegorical one. For a comparison between the two levels of interpretation, see Sara Japhet, "Rashi's Commentary on the Song of Songs: The Revolution of the *Peshat* and Its Aftermath," in *Mein Haus wird ein Bethaus für alle Völker genannt werden (Jes 56,7): Judentum seit der Zeit des Zweiten Tempels in Geschichte, Literatur und Kult; Festschrift für Thomas Willi*,

Then, homing in on the specifics of the composition, Rashi proceeds to tease out both the narrative's framework and central storyline.

Prologue: Part Two

I say that Solomon saw with divine inspiration that in the future, Israel will undergo exile after exile, destruction after destruction, and they will then mourn for their former glory in this present exile, remembering the initial love by which they were separated from all other peoples, and they will say, "I will go and return to my first husband, for then I fared better than now" (Hos. 2:9), and they will remember His kindnesses and their betrayal, and the rewards promised to them at the end of days. And he [Solomon] established this book with divine inspiration, in the language of a woman secluded in living widowhood (11 Sam. 20:3) who longs for her husband, "who clings to her beloved" (Song. 8:5), remembering how she loved him in her youth. And even her Beloved is pained by her pain, and remembers the kindness of her youth, the comeliness of her beauty, and the quality of her deeds, in which He was bound up with her in intense love, and He tells her that He does not willfully bring her grief, nor has she been sent away permanently, for she is still His wife, and He her husband.

Rashi tells us that Solomon, through divine inspiration, foresaw the future trajectory of Jewish history and penned this composition as an allegory, where the female and male lovers represent the Congregation of Israel and God, respectively. There would be a series of exiles, even to "this present exile," i.e., the Diaspora that commenced with the destruction of the Second Temple and extended through Rashi's lifetime. Throughout this history the Jewish people would lament their former glory and closeness with the Divine. Rashi emphasizes that despite the

ed. J. Männchen, T. Reiprich (Neukirchener Verlag, 2007), 199–219; and Barry D. Walfish, "Song of Songs: The Emergence of *Peshat* Interpretation," thetorah.com: Song of Songs: The Emergence of Peshat Interpretation – TheTorah.com.

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Jewish people's current exiled state, analogous to that of a living widow distanced from her beloved, her husband's love is still intact and their separation is transitory.

Rashi's narrative framework raises several questions. Why did he choose to detach this composition from its original historical setting – Solomon's lifetime – and reframe it within the context of his own era, thousands of years later? Beyond making the text relevant to his contemporary audience, what additional exegetical benefit did he seek? Moreover, why would a composition containing the passionate portrayal of youthful love be transformed into a narrative depicting a period of diminished ardor and passion – living widowhood and separation?

In order to find answers to these questions and others, let us now delve into Rashi's allegorical commentary.

DUGMA

As noted earlier, in his commentary on the Song, Rashi refers to the allegory – more than twenty times – by the term *dugma*.¹⁶ In his glosses to other biblical books, he uses more general terms, such as *midrasho*, to mark this interpretive tier. What is the exact meaning of the term *dugma*, and why coin new nomenclature?

Dugma is actually a Greek loanword meaning illustration;¹⁷ absent from the Tanakh, it first appears in rabbinic literature:

As in the case where Rabban Gamliel was sitting and he interpreted homiletically: In the future, a woman will give birth every day, as it says: "Those with child and those in labor" (Jer. 31:7). A certain student scoffed at him and said: "There is nothing new under the sun" (Eccl. 1:9). [Rabban Gamliel] said to him: Come and I will show you an example (*dugmatan*) in this world. He took him outside and showed him a chicken. (Shabbat 30b)

16. Introduction, 1:2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 14, 15, 2:3, 4:1, 2, 3, 4, 15, 16, 5:2, 7, 16, 6:5, 7:3, 5.

17. M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (1903), vol. 1, s.v. דוגמא, p. 282.

Rabban Gamliel is teaching that just like a chicken lays eggs every day, so too will women give birth daily in time to come. The term *dugma* highlights the similarity between the two; the chicken's reproductive frequency serves as an illustration of that future capacity in women. Similar, posits Sarah Kamin, was Rashi's thought process when introducing the term *dugma* in his commentary on the Song; the passionate, carnal love story is illustrative of and serves as a model for the spiritual relationship between God and the Congregation of Israel.¹⁸

Yet Kamin believes that Rashi's specific choice of language, *dugma*, was influenced by an additional consideration – its occurrence at the beginning of the Midrash on the Song of Songs:

“And more so because Kohelet was wise, he also taught the people knowledge; yea, he pondered and sought and set in order many proverbs” (Eccl. 12:9). He pondered the words of the Torah and investigated the [meaning of] the words of the Torah. He made handles to the Torah. You will find that until Solomon came there was no *dugma*. (Song of Songs Rabba 1:8)¹⁹

Thus, Rashi adopts a term which appears in the corpus of rabbinic literature and masterfully molds it to signify the allegory, the applied meaning of this composition. But why specifically in his gloss to the Song, when in his commentaries on other books, which also require decoding, he employs other terms such as *mishalo* or *midrasho*? At this point Kamin turns to external factors to supply the answer.

FOREIGN INFLUENCE

The Christian Church had a longstanding tradition of interpreting the Old Testament in a figurative sense, as a prefiguration of important

18. Sarah Kamin, “‘Dugma’ in Rashi’s Commentary on Song of Songs,” in *Jews and Christians Interpret the Bible* [in Hebrew] (Magnes, 2008), 71.

19. *Midrash Rabbah, Song of Songs*, trans. M. Simon (Soncino, 1983), 10. The Midrash credits Solomon with implementing a new interpretive skill (*dugma*), which simplified the learning of Torah.

Christian personalities and events. Notably, their historical exposition of the Song was strikingly similar to the Jewish reading, with a significant twist – the female beloved, the bride, was identifiable with the Christian Church, and her lover, with Christ.²⁰ Christian exegetes employed specific language to signal this mode of reading, such as “exemplar,” *figura*, *forma*, etc.; and Rashi's use of *dugma*, according to Kamin, closely parallels these Latin terms, especially “exemplar.”²¹ To Rashi, the love story delineated in the Song serves as an exemplar for the relationship between God and His people, wherein almost every detail in the text is painstakingly matched with an important event in Jewish history. Thus Rashi's employment of the term *dugma* was deliberate – a conscious effort to introduce a Hebrew equivalent to the Latin terminology in order to strengthen the legitimacy of the Jewish reading.²²

Yet not all scholars posit foreign influence. I.M. Ta-Shma asserts that the meaning of *dugma*, as espoused by Rashi, can already be detected in a commentary on an Ashkenazic liturgical poem preceding Rashi's lifetime; therefore, Rashi's use of the term is neither his own innovation nor a reaction to external factors.²³

Scholars dismissing the idea of outside considerations are forced to turn inward to explain Rashi's exegetical choice, and some highlight the fact that Rashi's *dugma* has a close correspondence with the story in the text. On this basis, Gelles differentiates between Rashi's glosses to Proverbs and Song of Songs:

Whereas *marshal* in his commentary on Proverbs centres around the Torah, the subject of the individual metaphorical sense in

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20. One of the earlier exponents of this type of Christological reading was Origen, a third-century Christian exegete; see Urbach, “The Homiletical Interpretation,” 252–75.
 21. Kamin, “Dugma,” 75–77. Although Rashi did not know Latin (in contrast to his grandson, who did – see Rashbam's commentary on Exod. 20:12), the Christological mode of reading Scripture was known to him.
 22. Kamin, “Dugma,” 70–88.
 23. Israel M. Ta-Shma, *Studies in Medieval Rabbinic Literature*, vol. 1: Germany [in Hebrew] (Bialik Institute, 2004), 85–86. Kamin responds to his critique; see Kamin, *Rashi*, 83, n. 77.

Canticles [the Song], depends much more on an exact comparison in detail between the story as it reads and a fitting applied meaning.²⁴

Thus, *dugma* is more specific than the general term *mashal* and signifies an allegorical explanation composed of particulars that closely correspond to the details written in the text, making it especially suitable for Rashi's commentary on the Song, in which he toils to highlight the correspondence between the two tiers.

24. Gelles, *Peshat and Derash in the Exegesis of Rashi*, 82.

