

BIBLE COMMENTATORS

by

Prof. Ezra Zion Melammed*

The glory of man is the Torah (*Derekh Eretz Zuta* 5). No greater gift has been bestowed by God than his precepts and teachings, as embodied in the Scriptures. The sages (b *Megillah* 15a) interpreted 'orah as quoted in Esther 8:16 to mean Torah.

From Mosaic times onward, the study and understanding of the Bible has been the focus of Jewish intellectual investigation. The loftiest attainment of generations was to be a *ben torah* – a scholar of the Bible. A vast corpus of traditional investigation and interpretation was amassed orally by the generations of students who succeeded Moses in transmitting the teachings of the Holy Writ. In due time, owing to the proliferation of material, a written version of the oral tradition was set down. Slowly, through the generations, schools of exegetic thought and view were crystallised and expanded by the medieval scholars and commentators.

In truth, except for works and research papers on a specific scholar or aspect of exegesis, no comprehensive study has been written on the field of traditional historical Bible commentaries. S. A. Posnansky's "Introduction to the Scholars of France, Interpreters of the Bible" was a noteworthy essay in a limited school of exegetes and was a detailed study of the north French school of *pashtanim* (those who attempted a simplistic literal approach to biblical understanding).

Professor Melammed has spent a lifetime in Bible study, and almost a score of years initiating Hebrew University students into the world of traditional investigations and commentaries, beginning with the talmudic sages and concluding with Ramban. This two-volume work is a distillation of a lifetime's dedication to establishing a compendium of a systematised comprehension of the classics of Jewish biblical commentary.

There first two of the seven sections deal respectively with: *Chazal* – i. e. the excursions of the sages, as found in the talmudic and midrashic literature, into the world of Bible; and with the methodology and purpose of the Aramaic translation of the Bible. The next five sections are in-depth studies of the range and modality of the commentaries of Rashi, Rashbam, Abraham ibn Ezra, Radak, and Ramban.

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The choice is an optimal one. Within the limitations and scope of two volumes it would have been impossible to do justice to any more topics, as the author would have been superficial in his efforts.

There is a minimum, at times albeit too brief, of bibliographical listings of works published on the various topics. However, it seems to have been the author's justifiable intention to be innovative and exercise his prerogative of analysis rather than overburden the reader with works not in harmony with his undertaking.

In analyzing the rabbinic schools of *peshat* (literal meaning) versus *derash* (the homiletic interpretative substance extrapolated from the text), Melammed cogently notes that the objectivity necessary to the *pashtan* (literalist) requires him to skip back over the generations and implant himself in the milieu of the period of the literary creation in order to clearly and correctly interpret the verse or comprehend the legal requirement of the commandment. His quotation from b *Nedarim* 22b that: "Had not Israel sinned, they would not be in possession of more than the Pentateuch and the Book of Joshua" echoes Hexateuchal thought. It is a pity he did not expand this theme to point out the antiquity of a "modern" research concept.

This section, as all others, is classified topically for quick reference and specific needs. A summary concludes each section enabling the reader to obtain a compact view of the author's schematic presentation.

A detailed study of *Targum Onqelos* is the focus of the second section. A brief survey of the background, history and evolution of the Aramaic translations prefaces the section. A topical classification of the literal and paraphrastic interpretation of *Onqelos* is the outline of this section. It is more than an extension of S. D. Luzzato's *Ohev Ger* for it expands beyond the brief groupings established by Luzzato, and Melammed is able to take advantage of decades of research subsequent to the publication of *Ohev Ger*. There is a skeletal analysis of *Targum Yonathan* to the prophets. It is regrettable that no mention and space is devoted to the Palestinian *targumim*, especially the Ms. of Neaphyti 1 which would expand the world of targumic understanding and would shed light on some novel and unknown approaches preferred in Palestine as compared to the limitation of a Babylonian school of thought – after the removal of the centre of scholarship from the traditional centre to its diasporic home.

The sections on R. Shlomo Yitzhaki (Rashi), R. Shmuel ben Meir (Rashbam – Rashi's grandson), R. Abraham ben Ezra (R'ab'a), R. David Kimchi (Radak) and R. Moses ben Nachman (Ramban) are well documented. The characteristics of their individualistic approaches, as well as their sources, are specifically spelled out. The details can be overwhelming if not digested carefully.

When the reader concludes any of the above sections, it will be incumbent upon him to review his reading, for he will constantly gain new

insights into the various areas. Take, for example, chapter 16 in the section dealing with the commentaries of Abraham ibn Ezra. The chapter is entitled "The completeness of faith of Abraham ibn Ezra". If one only peruses the statement of Ibn Ezra on Genesis 3:24 and 7:19 one would tend to substantiate S. D. Luzzato's fulminating categorial attack upon Spinoza's pretentiousness in *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* regarding Ibn Ezra's critical approach.

On completing this substantial work, replete with indices tailored to facilitate reference both by topic and verse, one concurs with Ben Bag Bag (*Avoth* 5:22): Scrutinise it (the Bible) and scrutinise it, for all is therein.

Description by Dr. Abraham Zimels

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