

BOOK REVIEW

YONATAN KOLATCH. *MASTERS OF THE WORD: VOL. II: TRADITIONAL JEWISH BIBLE COMMENTARY FROM THE ELEVENTH THROUGH THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY* (JERSEY CITY, NJ: KTAV, 2007). NP. REVIEWED BY DAN VOGEL.

The second volume of Yonatan Kolatch's *Masters of the Word* is a worthy successor to volume I. The same goals are apparent: First, to humanize the giants of Jewish exegesis of the Hebrew Bible by synopsizing the history of their epochs – in this case the Crusader period – and by looking into their personal life; second, to explain and discuss their methodology of explication, which means, as in volume I, extensive discussion of *pshat* and *drash*. The major difference between volumes I and II is the cast of individual commentators. In the first volume, Kolatch had to confront only one such; Saadia Gaon. Here, he must confront eternal luminaries whose comments are always or often printed together with the biblical text such as Rashi, Rashbam, and Ibn Ezra. (Apparently, Ramban is being saved for a later volume.)

What more can anyone say about Rashi, after more than 200 super-commentaries? Kolatch's contribution presents Rashi as a concerned Jew in perilous times, cognizant of the ravages of the Crusades and Christian polemical exegesis of the Hebrew Bible, and as a highly respected *posek*. I venture to say that very few who automatically repair to Rashi for explanations of the text think of him in either role. Yet it is Rashi who opined a liberal principle of deciding *halakha*: "In my opinion, just as it is prohibited to permit the forbidden, it is forbidden to forbid the permissible" (p. 11).

After an introduction about young Shlomo ben Yitzhak's studying in French and German yeshivot on his way to becoming the immortal Rashi, Kolatch plunges into the *pshat/drash* aspects of his methodology. This clearly is a knotty issue. He not only generalizes Rashi's principles of explication (everything must support the text), but he is also very generous in the number of examples he gives, both in the chapter on Rashi and in the Appendix, where he offers dozens of comparative examples of exegetical statements on specific *psukim* in *sedra Vayechi* by Rashi and other major as well as minor exegetes. What emerges from this technique is ironic: Though Rashi seems to think of himself as a *pshat* exegete, and he is that even when he gives a *pshat*

followed by a clearly-labeled *medrash*, we find him guilty now and again of crossing the thin line between *pshat* and *drash*. For example, on page 346, the author quotes Br. 48:8: "*V'yar Yisroel et bnei Yosef . . .*" then he translates the text, "And Israel saw Yosef's sons . . .," and then he translates Rashi's comment: "He [Yisrael] wishes to bless them, but the Shechinah departed from him" However, nowhere does the text of Br. 48: 8 say anything about blessing them nor about the Shechinah, nor does Rashi give a midrashic source.

The humanization of greatness becomes delicious when Kolatch tells us – both in the chapter on Rashi and the one on his grandson Rashbam – about their relationship. Rashbam, we infer, is a more stringent *pshat*-ist and has a more flinty personality than his grandfather. He was not loath to tell his grandfather, verbally (see page 38 and imagine the confrontation!) and in manuscript, that his distinguished forebear is wrong. In his own right, Rashbam keenly finds unnoticed ellipses in the biblical text to explain.

The wealth of information, definitions, examples, comparisons, and contrasts that Kolatch offers can be daunting. Yet a study of his work, especially when "looking into" the commentary of the three major exegetes, leads one to deeper understanding and appreciation. This, plus his representation of a number of minor exegetes, transforms this book into a veritable one-volume encyclopedia of medieval *parshanut*, especially useful because of a full index and wide bibliography. For this alone, it deserves a place on the Jewish bookshelf.