

WHAT SHOULD A COMMENTARY COMMENT ON?

Richard Elliott Friedman

Note: Professor Friedman gave the keynote address, which looked at what biblical commentary needs to address in this age. The following is the Introduction to his new *Commentary on the Torah*. It appears here with the permission of the publisher, Harper San Francisco, a division of HarperCollins -- <http://www.harpercollins.com>.

Richard Elliott Friedman is Professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature, and Katzin Professor of Jewish Civilization at the University of California, San Diego. Dr. Friedman received his doctorate from Harvard University in Hebrew Bible and Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations and holds Masters degrees from Harvard and the Jewish Theological Seminary. He was a Visiting Fellow at the University of Cambridge, England; a Visiting Scholar at Oxford; and a Senior Fellow of the American Schools of Oriental Research in Jerusalem. He participated in the City of David Project archaeological excavations of biblical Jerusalem. Dr. Friedman is the author of many well respected books. *Who Wrote the Bible?* was the subject of a television special in 1995. *The Hidden Face of God* (originally published as *The Disappearance of God*) and *The Hidden Book in the Bible* were named "Best Books" by *Publishers Weekly*. He is also the author of *The Exile and Biblical Narrative* and editor of *The Creation of Sacred Literature, The Poet and the Historian, and The Future of Biblical Studies*. Dr. Friedman has consulted on the film *Prince of Egypt*, on NBC's "The Eternal Light," and on A&E's "Mysteries of the Bible" and "Who Wrote the Bible?" He has been interviewed on CNN's Larry King program and NPR's "All Things Considered" and "Morning Edition" and on "Radio Times." Articles and citations of his work have appeared in many newspapers and magazines. His new book, *Commentary on the Torah*, with a new translation of the Torah, was published in January, 2001.

The first book to be printed on the printing press in Hebrew was not the Bible. It was the Torah with the commentary of Rashi. Why? Because the Torah is not to be read. It is to be studied. And at various times during one's studies, one needs a teacher. Studying the Torah with Rashi's commentary is a joy because he shows one what questions one can ask of a text. Look here! Is this a contradiction? Look here! This can have two opposite meanings. Which is right? Why does the Torah not tell us this piece of information that we need to understand the text? Why does it give us this fact that seems to be of no significance at first glance?

Rashi wrote his commentary nine hundred years ago. Commentaries for laypersons in recent times have changed. They have been written as introductory notes to help explain the text. They often collect comments from scholars of the past and from current biblical scholars. This is different from what Commentary meant classically. The purpose of Rashi's commentary and of Ibn Ezra's and Ramban's was to show the readers new things in the text, problems that they had not seen, or to address old problems that had not been solved-and then to offer the commentator's solutions to those problems. In this commentary, I mean to return to the classical purpose. I shall have some basic explanatory comments to be helpful to the new student.; but, above all, I mean to make new contributions to the understanding of the Torah. I mean to try to offer explanations for old problems and to address new ones.

I aim to shed new light on the Torah and, more important, to open windows through which it sheds its light on us.

The idea is to address the kinds of things that we treat in academic scholarship but in a manner that is accessible and interesting to laypersons as well. I still cling to the belief that has governed my last several books: that serious biblical scholarship is not over the heads of non-scholars. It is

possible to discuss our findings in a way that normal, intelligent people understand-and that shows them how interesting and valuable this learning is.

In this purpose, my fellow biblical scholars and I have new sources that were not available to the great medieval commentators. Through the archaeological revolution of the last two centuries, we have new knowledge of the biblical world, both of Israel and its neighbors. We know the languages that they spoke and wrote in addition to Hebrew and Aramaic: Akkadian, Canaanite (Ugaritic, Phoenician, Moabite) Egyptian, and Sumerian. We have hundreds of sites and tens of thousands of ancient texts. We have manuscripts of the Torah and of the entire Hebrew Bible, the *Tanak*, from Qumran (the Dead Sea Scrolls) that are a thousand years older than those that Rashi had. We have the use of the Greek version (the Septuagint), which together with the Qumran texts (and Samaritan and Aramaic and Latin texts) gives us a more precise knowledge of the original text. And we have the great commentators themselves. Their thinking and their conclusions are our starting-point, already at our fingertips, enabling us to learn from them and then to go farther. And we have the work of great scholars of more recent times as well.

There has developed a kind of Rashi fundamentalism in recent years. Especially in orthodox communities, it is practically heresy to question whether Rashi was ever wrong. I think that Rashi himself might have been disappointed that it would come to that. The commentators who immediately followed him-Ibn Ezra and Ramban and Rashi's grandson Rashbam-knew better. They expressed respect for Rashi, but they disagreed and offered alternatives to his comments. Rashi's commentary served for nearly a millennium. There is still much that is useful in it, and it can be valuable for millennia to come. But we also need new commentary for the coming generations, in the light of a world of new knowledge and new questions and new needs.

What Rashi and the other commentators taught us to do was to look at a text critically. They were teaching us to do philology: the art of reading well. Reading with care. Thinking about what the words mean. It is thus ironic that some people have become Rashi fundamentalists. They have learned not to read the Torah critically but to parrot the critical reading of Rashi. And they do not read Rashi critically. Though Ibn Ezra and Ramban questioned Rashi and pointed out where they thought he was wrong, more recent generations of teachers have lost faith in their own knowledge and judgment, and so they risk failing to relate the Torah to the lives of their people. But something has happened in the present generation. There have been great scholars, and they have acquired new sources of information: archaeology, knowledge of the ancient Near East, literary sensitivity, and knowledge of the social sciences. And so it is time for new commentaries-not to replace the classical commentators, but to join them.

My commentary is meant to do that: to be in the tradition of the classical commentaries but to use this new learning. There are many volumes of such new commentary, but they are mainly on single books of the Bible, sometimes gathered into collections of volumes on the Torah or on the whole Bible. There have been few that follow the tradition of being a single scholar's commentary on the Torah as a whole. Some take the form of introductory footnotes on a translation. I mean to do the opposite: precisely to show how united and connected the whole Torah is, and to try, like the commentators who are our starting-point, to relate it to life. In this respect the most useful part of my preparation for writing this commentary was to attend study groups for laypersons on the weekly reading of the Torah. Every week I attended one such

group led by an orthodox rabbi and another led by a reform rabbi. And I had grown up studying with a conservative rabbi. Various commentaries were on the table when we studied. What I found was that none of those commentaries was answering the kinds of questions that the people at the tables were asking.

I have been attracted to synthesis. That is what I did in *Who Wrote the Bible?* and in *The Hidden Face of God*. A commentary, however, seems to be the opposite sort of human enterprise and thinking: a focus on the small, the individual insight, shedding light on the meaning of a single word, relating two adjacent passages. What I mean to do in this commentary is both: to interpret and shed light on individual words and passages-to try to find new solutions for classic problems, show cases of beauty of wording and profundity of thought-but also to show how intricately, how *essentially* connected all of it is, how logical its progression is, how essential the early stories are to what follows them, and how essential the *later* stories are to what precedes them!

The classical commentaries were a product of Europe, written before the discovery of the New World. My commentary is a product of that New World, coming at the end of the century in which that New World stepped into a prominent place in world history. And, extraordinarily, it was also the century in which Israel was reborn in its location on the tip of Asia. The classical commentaries came at the midpoint between the end of old Israel and the rebirth of new Israel. Rashi came about nine hundred years after the destruction of Israel, and we have seen the rebirth of Israel about nine hundred years after Rashi.

I shall make my comments in terms of the text itself, not in terms of the history of scholarship. That is, there is no apparatus of footnotes and citations of recent scholarly articles and books. I trust that I have done enough of that in my past books and articles to establish that I know and respect the scholarship of my field. But the purpose of this book is different. It is to make comments that reflect the conclusions I have reached in the light of the state of the field of biblical studies and in light of my own research. The exceptions will be the references to my teachers and to my colleagues (and visiting colleagues) here at my own institution, whose direct, personal communications must be acknowledged. I shall sometimes cite the classical commentators, mainly to set the work into the context that they formulated.

I stand between two poles of other kinds of commentary: midrash and critical scholarship. For example, in the case of the near-sacrifice of Isaac, at the end of the story it says "And Abraham returned to his servants." It does not mention Isaac. Some midrashim suggested that Isaac was in fact sacrificed (and later returned to life). Critical scholarship, too, has raised the startling possibility that in the original version of the text Isaac was actually sacrificed and that this story was changed by someone who found such an ending inconceivable. I am familiar with both of these interpretations. They are intriguing and worthy of study and analysis, acceptance or rejection. But they are simply not the kind of commentary that I am doing in this book. Here I am doing my best to understand and to help others to understand the meaning of the text that we have called the Torah for two and a half thousand years. Like Rashi, I am trying to do what is known as *pesat*-pursuing the straightforward meaning of the text.

I shall comment on the usual textual, literary, historical, and linguistic matters that biblical scholars pursue, including meanings of terms, and differences in the surviving versions of the text. But, in making comments in these areas I shall try to show why they matter. They are not arcane points, of interest only to scholars. They make a difference in what the Torah says and what it means. In any case, the matters I raise are not just about the text's literary and historical qualities but also about its moral messages.

Some readers will be surprised to find that I shall *not* comment on the Torah's authors and sources. I have already written two books on this subject (*Who Wrote the Bible?* and *The Hidden Book in the Bible*) and a number of articles. For those who are interested in those questions, I refer them to those works and to other works of scholarship of the last century that deal with those questions of how the Torah came to be written. But, the question for this commentary is: now that it has been written, what does it mean to us?

On my Bar Mitzvah my rabbi's gift to me was a copy of the Torah with a commentary. On the first page he inscribed a classic line: "Turn it over, and turn it over, because everything is in it." I do not know if everything is in fact in it, but I do know after spending a large part of my life turning it over and over that I am still finding something new all the time.

This commentary includes a new English translation of the Torah. I never had any desire to be a translator. I have done a new translation for the sole reason that none of the existing translations was adequate for my purpose. One of the recent translations uses English idioms and paraphrases a great deal, so that it reflects the translators' judgments of what the original Hebrew says. That is fine for some purposes, but, even when I agree with their judgments, I think that a translation that goes with a commentary should reflect more closely the words of the Hebrew. The commentator can explain any unusual Hebrew idioms in the comments when necessary. Another recent translation has as its stated aim to give an English reader the *feeling* of the original Hebrew. Whatever my judgment of how well it succeeds in giving the feeling of Hebrew to a reader who does not know that language, such a project is still not the point of a translation that goes with a commentary. The purpose of a commentary's translation, rather, is the same as the purpose of the commentary itself: to make clear what the Torah says-and what it means-so one can learn from it for one's life today.

In addition to the divisions by chapter and verse, the translation and commentary are divided according to the traditional portions designated for weekly reading in synagogues. Each weekly portion-the *parashah*-is identified by its title at the appropriate place in the text. I hope that this will make this commentary useful to study groups who follow the weekly readings, and to individuals who wish to study the text with these comments on a weekly basis. I mean it to be useful to everyone who wants to study-and not just read-the Torah.

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