



Mosaic Religion and the Religious Mosaic An Approach to the Jewish Community for Christian Seminarians

Script 7: How Jews Read the Bible 201

Jews don't simply read the Bible. They study the Bible. They learn the Hebrew Bible, especially the Torah, through the lens of commentaries that span two thousand years of Jewish exegesis. Each commentator adds their own unique perspective on the words of sacred Scripture. These commentaries uncover not just one layer of meaning or interpretation, but multiple layers of textual understanding and relevance.

One of the early debates that the rabbis had over interpreting the Torah is whether the Torah "speaks in regular human language." When words are repeated, is this just for emphasis, or does the Torah convey divine intention through every word and letter, in which case any superfluous word or idea must teach something new? For example, the Book of Numbers Chapter 15:31 says that if a person violates God's word they will "surely be cut off." The Hebrew uses two words from the same basic Hebrew root to convey the idea of being "cut off" – *hikaret tikaret*. One rabbi understands the repetition as a way of really driving home the point. Another rabbi suggests that each word must teach something separate. One of the words teaches that a person will be cut off in this world while the repetitive word teaches that they will be cut off in the world to come. Eventually this approach of "omni significance," which attaches significance and meaning to every single word, becomes dominant in rabbinic interpretation and the rabbis typically assume that every word and letter adds new layers of meaning.

The early rabbis also read the Hebrew Bible intertextually, drawing connections between similar words, ideas, and laws across various passages. Understanding the Torah as the word of God, they assumed the Torah would never include unnecessary information. This means that repetitive laws need to be explained in new ways. For example, while the Ten Commandments famously prohibit stealing, a prohibition against stealing also appears in Leviticus Chapter 19, verse 11. If God never includes superfluous information in the Torah, then one of these verses needs to be reinterpreted. Paying close attention to the context of stealing in the Ten Commandments, which follows after laws against murder and adultery, the rabbis understood this prohibition of stealing to refer to stealing people – that is, kidnapping. Hence, the prohibition against stealing in the Ten Commandments refers to not kidnapping, focusing on harm of people like murder and adultery, while the prohibition against stealing in Leviticus refers to the more expected case of stealing money. While this might not be the simple meaning of the text, it is a

coherent interpretation of the law in light of the rest of the Torah and rabbinic assumptions about how the Torah conveys laws.

The basic difference between the simple meaning of a text, *Peshat* in Hebrew, and a broader interpretative meaning, *Derash* in Hebrew, is one of the foundational distinctions that Jews make when reading the Bible. We also might characterize these two approaches as follows: The *Peshat* approach explains what a text originally meant in the immediate context in which it appears. The *Derash* approach reads new information into a text based on other parts of the Bible, assumptions about how the Bible operates, or stories created to fill in missing information.

Especially in the Middle Ages, rabbis who interpreted the Bible focused on identifying both *Peshat* and *Derash* interpretations, with both bearing religious significance. Later medieval Jewish tradition expands the interpretation of Biblical verses to at least four different layers of meaning. They are known by the acronym *PaRDeS*, the Hebrew word for orchard. Each Hebrew letter of *PaRDeS* represents a different layer of Biblical interpretation:

P, or the letter *pay*, stands for *Peshat*, the straightforward, explicit meaning of the text.

R, or the Hebrew letter *raysh*, stand for *Remez*, the “hinted” meaning of the text, often uncovered by reading between the lines.

D, the Hebrew letter *dalet*, stands for *Derash*, the homiletical or interpretative meaning of the verse, a level much beloved by rabbis and other preachers.

And finally, the letter S, or in Hebrew *samech*, stands for *Sod*, the hidden or secret meaning of the text, a layer of interpretation that is central to Jewish mystical thought, known as *kabbalah*.¹

The *PaRDeS* method of exegesis invites readers to glean multiple insights into the Biblical text. Jewish Bible study is, if you will, a literary orchard of delicious fruit waiting to be enjoyed by those who seek to “dig deeper” in their understanding and appreciation of Scripture. To that end, Jews reading the Bible with a Jewish lens turn to a body of commentaries and translations, dating back at least as far as the 2nd century BCE² to modern days, in order to gain a clear understanding of the meaning of the verses and their application today.

Let’s open a page of *Mikra’ot Gedolot* (literally “Great Scriptures”), a multi-volume collection of medieval commentaries on the Bible first published in 1516-17 in Venice. There you will find the Biblical text in the original Hebrew surrounded by a compendium of classic Jewish translations and commentaries. They include *Targum Onkelos*, an Aramaic translation of the Hebrew text that dates from the second century of the Common Era.³ Since Aramaic was the lingua franca of the Jewish people in ancient times (and the language spoken by Jesus), this translation was an essential tool that enabled Jews to understand their sacred scripture.

Scroll down the page of a volume of *Mikra’ot Gedolot* and you will see the beloved commentary of *Rashi*,⁴ a medieval French rabbi and author who explicated both the Bible and

¹ Literally “that which is received,” but most often used to denote Jewish mysticism.

² BCE: Before the Common Era, nomenclature used by Jews and many Christians instead of BC.

³ The Common Era, or CE, is nomenclature used by Jews and many Christians in place of AD.

⁴ *Rashi* is an acronym of this renowned scholar’s full name, *Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki* (Solomon son of Isaac).

the Talmud⁵ for generations of Jews young and old. His lucid and insightful interpretations uncover the text's *Peshat* and made him the foremost Jewish Bible and Talmud commentator of all time. Scholars and beginning students alike study these classic texts "with Rashi." His enduring import in the Jewish world is attested to by the more than three hundred "super commentaries" written by Jewish scholars who analyze Rashi's commentary with the goal of further elucidating the meaning of Scripture. Among them was *Rashbam*,⁶ a 12th century French scholar who was one of Rashi's grandsons.

Rashbam's commentary is found in *Mikra'ot Gedolot*, as are the commentaries of:

- *Abraham ibn Ezra*, a 12th century Spanish rabbi and grammarian;
- *Ba'al HaTurim*,⁷ the commentary of Rabbi Jacob ben Asher, an influential rabbinic authority who lived in the 13th and 14th centuries in Cologne, Germany;
- *Kli Yakar*,⁸ the work of the early 17th century rabbi Solomon Ephraim Lunshitz of Lemberg, Galicia (now called Lviv in modern-day Ukraine);
- and others.

Dig into a page of *Mikra'ot Gedolot* and you will be transported to multiple countries and two thousand years of Jewish scholarship. This reflects the classic Jewish approach to studying sacred texts—dozens of commentaries that agree and disagree with one another, with diverse opinions preserved on the same page. Later commentaries do not replace earlier ones; they stand next to them.

Visit any synagogue or Jewish library in the world, and you will see printed volumes of the Pentateuch with translations and commentaries, *Mikra'ot Gedolot* among them. You'll discover translations in the languages of the land—English, Spanish, Russian, French, German, and dozens of others. You'll find books of modern Biblical commentaries with their own unique take on Scripture—historical, archeological, linguistic, modern critical, secular, feminist, and hundreds of others. They are textual reminders that the study of the Bible in general, and the Torah in particular, is of singular importance in Jewish life. As a famous passage in rabbinic literature says:

"These are the things for which individuals enjoy the fruits in this world while the principal remains for them in the world to come: Honoring one's father and mother. Performing good deeds. Making peace between people. And the study of Torah is equal to them all."⁹

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⁵ The foremost compendium of rabbinic law and lore.

⁶ An acronym for Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir.

⁷ Literally "Master of the Columns."

⁸ Literally, "Precious Vessel."

⁹ Mishnah Tractate Pe'ah 1:1.

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