



3-2014

The Challenge of Received Tradition: Dilemmas in Radak's Biblical Commentaries

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Recommended Citation

Schoenfeld, Devorah. "Review of Naomi Grunhaus, The Challenge of Received Tradition: Dilemmas in Radak's Biblical Commentaries." H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. March, 2014. URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=38644>

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Naomi Grunhaus. *The Challenge of Received Tradition: Dilemmas in Radak's Biblical Commentaries*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. 274 pp. \$74.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-985840-8.

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Published on H-Judaic (March, 2014)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman

Tradition and Rationality in David Kimhi's Commentaries

What is the role of midrash in interpreting the *peshat* (literal or contextual) sense of scripture? Many medieval Jewish exegetes struggled with this question, and came to very different answers. In her book *The Challenge of Received Tradition*, Naomi Grunhaus examines David Kimhi's particular approach to using midrash in his commentaries and compares it to that of other eleventh- and twelfth-century Jewish exegetes, Rashi in particular. The question of Kimhi's use of midrash is, for Grunhaus, a microcosm of the question of how tradition and rationality work together. If the *peshat* sense of scripture is based on applying independent reason to understanding the biblical text, then what is the role of the midrashic tradition in this kind of exegesis?

This question, as Grunhaus observes, was not Kimhi's alone, nor was it an exclusively Jewish question. Kimhi was writing at a relatively peaceful time and place, where Jews and Christians could interact and have conversations about philosophy and exegesis and share their struggles around the relationship of tradition and rationality in both exegetical and philosophical thought. His position in this conversation was not only that of biblical scholar but also, as Grunhaus shows, that of a profoundly engaged community leader and rabbi who was heavily involved in local concerns and debates.

The book's first chapter analyzes Kimhi's methodological statements, in which he sets out how he intends to use midrash in his commentaries. These methodological statements are quite different from each other, and Grunhaus examines them in chronological order to show the development in Kimhi's thinking. So, in his introduction to his first commentary, on the book of Chronicles, he writes that his intention is to write a commentary, which he explicitly distinguishes from midrash. In the commentary itself he cites midrash on occasion, but makes clear that it is of secondary importance in his interpretation. In his later commentary on the For-

mer Prophets, he explicitly states that his intention is to use midrash only when it is necessary to explain the verse. He does add, though, that he will also bring some homiletical interpretations "for devotees of homiletical interpretation" (p. 22), explicitly stating that he uses midrashic exegesis simply because some people like it.

Grunhaus connects Kimhi's willingness to include midrash for its own sake to his stance on tradition as a form of rationality. In Kimhi's introduction to his commentary on Psalm 119 he argues for received tradition as one of the eight ways in which a rational person acquires knowledge. Although he was speaking here about the Torah, it is clear that he considered tradition a reliable form of knowledge.

The second chapter deals with cases where Kimhi accepts rabbinic interpretation as "necessary." Some of these are cases in which the midrash supplies a detail which answers a confounding question in the biblical text, such as the midrash which suggests that Amnon and Tamar were not technically brother and sister and therefore it could have been possible for them to marry, which explains why Amnon asks for it. In this case, as in many others, it seems that Kimhi's primary motivation is to reconcile inconsistencies between the behavior of biblical characters (especially when it is not explicitly condemned) and the normative halakhah. He also sees scribal dot marking—that is, the practice of adding dots over some letters in the written Torah scroll—as an indication that for those words the midrashic interpretation should be preferred.

The third and fourth chapter deal with Kimhi's use of midrashic exegesis alongside *peshat* exegesis, which is the typical way in which he incorporates midrash into his commentary. Typically when doing this he labels one or the other to make clear which is which. These polarized comments present the contrast between two dif-

ferent ways of interpreting the text without judging one as superior to the other but set the “uncomplicated elegance” of the *peshat* commentary in sharp relief (p. 67).

Chapter 4 examines comments where the midrashic interpretation is not sharply different from the *peshat*, but rather similar or related to it. These comments also show *peshat* and midrashic comments coexisting, at times in ways that seem to endorse a particular midrash as being both rationally plausible and conforming to biblical evidence. In chapter 5 Grunhaus examines the converse case, in which Kimhi rejects a rabbinic interpretation as inconsistent with the *peshat* meaning of scripture, often in the context of polarized comments. This is not inconsistent with the intellectual trends of his time, particularly for non-halakhic interpretations; still, his rejection of them can be particularly vehement, and is a rejection “of the rabbinic teachings *themselves*, not just their usefulness for biblical interpretation” (p. 103). At times he judges these teachings to be not consistent with the biblical text, or with the *peshat* but other midrashim, like the rabbinic idea that Serah daughter of Asher lived for many centuries and was the wise woman of 2 Samuel 20:16, he dismisses on the grounds that they are unreasonable, irrational, or “remote from rational thinking” (p. 107). Kimhi has various strategies to keep his challenges to rabbinic tradition from undermining their authority. In some cases he adds the disclaimer that “if it is a received tradition” (p. 112) it would be necessary to accept it. In others he praises their superior intellect. In other cases he attempts to defend their opinion against his argument, or follows his criticism immediately with another rabbinic interpretation that he prefers. Grunhaus argues that in all of these cases Kimhi’s citation of midrash was not simply for “devotees of homiletical interpretation” but to distinguish between midrashic method and *peshat* method, and “to clarify for his readers the parameters of his acceptance” of midrash in a *peshat* commentary” (p. 118). Many of the midrashic interpre-

tations that he quotes were previously quoted by Rashi, so it also clarifies the difference between Kimhi’s method in using midrash and that of Rashi.

Chapter 6 turns to the much more fraught question of Radak’s rejection of halakhic rabbinic interpretations. As accepted as it was in the twelfth century for commentators to challenge rabbinic interpretations, the interpretation of halakha was much more fraught, since challenging rabbinic interpretation could undermine the basis for Jewish practice. Typically it was only challenged by exegetes who practiced a radically *peshat*-only approach, such as Rashbam and possibly ibn Janah. Kimhi’s willingness to override rabbinic halakhic interpretations in the context of a commentary that quotes rabbinic interpretations extensively is a distinctive and quite striking feature of his commentary, even though he does this comparatively rarely. Grunhaus concludes that Radak’s method is consistently to evaluate rabbinic statements in light of both the biblical text and rationality. If they contradict facts mentioned in the biblical text, or are implausible, then he will reject them. But his inclusion of so many midrashic comments alongside his *peshat* exegesis made his commentary a dual commentary, in which “derash could comfortably and successfully reassert its importance, alongside and in tandem with *peshat* interpretation” (p. 147).

Grunhaus’s work is impressive for its thorough engagement with its textual sources and close reading of Kimhi’s commentary and is an excellent introduction to Kimhi’s work and concerns. Engagement with broader intellectual currents is minimal, though present. Grunhaus’s main point of comparison for Kimhi is the commentary of Rashi, which allows her to draw on the extensive body of secondary literature examining Rashi’s method in using midrash and to compare it to Kimhi’s. In the end the study hints at ways in which Kimhi’s commentary is a response to the question of the relationship between tradition and rationality, but it does not come to a definitive conclusion.

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