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

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What is the role of midrash in interpreting the *peshat* (literal or contextual) sense of scripture? Many medieval Jewish exegeters 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 exegeters, 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 exegetics?

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 Former 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—i.e., 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-
frent ways of interpreting the text without judging one
as superior to the other but set the "uncomplicated ele-
gance" 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 bib-
lical evidence. In chapter 5 Grunhaus examines the con-
verse case, in which Kimhi rejects a rabbinic interpre-
tation as inconsistent with the peshat meaning of script-
ure, 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 re-
jection 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 unre-
asonable, irrational, or "remote from rational thinking"
(p. 107). Kimhi has various strategies to keep his chal-
lenges to rabbinic tradition from undermining their au-
thority. 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 intel-
lect. In other cases he attempts to defend their opinion
against his argument, or follows his criticism immedi-
ately with another rabbinic interpretation that he prefers.
Grunhaus argues that in all of these cases Kimhi’s cita-
tion of midrash was not simply for "devotees of homilet-
ical 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 interpr-
etations 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 ex-
getes who practiced a radically peshat-only approach,
such as Rashbam and possibly ibn Janah. Kimhi’s willing-
ness to override rabbinic halakhic interpretations in the
context of a commentary that quotes rabbinic interpreta-
tions extensively is a distinctive and quite striking feature
of his commentary, even though he does this compara-
atively rarely. Grunhaus concludes that Radak’s method
is consistently to evaluate rabbinic statements in light
of both the biblical text and rationality. If they contra-
dict facts mentioned in the biblical text, or are implau-
sible, then he will reject them. But his inclusion of so
many midrashic comments alongside his peshat exege-
sis made his commentary a dual commentary, in which
"derash could comfortably and successfully reassert its
importance, alongside and in tandem with peshat inter-
pretation" (p. 147).

Grunhaus’s work is impressive for its thorough en-
gagement 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. Grun-
haus’s main point of comparison for Kimhi is the com-
mentary of Rashi, which allows her to draw on the ex-
tensive 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 com-
mentary 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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