

מקראות גדולות

The

COMMENTATORS'
BIBLE

THE JPS MIQRA'OT GEDOLOT

LEVITICUS ויקרא

*With the 1917 and 1985 English translations of
The Jewish Publication Society TANAKH, the questions of Abarbanel,
the commentaries of Rashi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, and Nahmanides,
and selections from the Masorah and from the commentaries of
Behor Shor, Kimhi, Hizkuni, Gersonides, Abarbanel, and Sforno*

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WHAT'S ON THE PAGE?

Text:

The **HEBREW TEXT** of the Bible, based on the Leningrad Codex, the oldest complete manuscript of the Hebrew Bible. This particular version of the Hebrew text can be found in the 1999 edition of the JPS Hebrew-English TANAKH. It meets only the traditional rabbinic standards (*halakhah*) for formatting a study Bible, which are less stringent than those for ritual purposes. For a fuller explanation of the difference between the Leningrad Codex and the 1999 JPS edition, see the preface to the latter.

Translations:

The **NJPS** translation of the Hebrew text, prepared in the 1960s by a committee of Jewish Bible scholars from the various movements, under the auspices of The Jewish Publication Society (JPS). This translation attempts to convey the meaning of the text without adhering slavishly to the literal Hebrew.

The **OJPS** translation of the Hebrew text, a revision of the American Standard Version (adapted from the King James Bible) prepared in the years before World War I by a committee of Jewish scholars, again under the auspices of JPS.

Questions:

ABARBANEL's questions. These questions, which serve as the basis for the commentary of Isaac Abarbanel (see below), will help the reader understand the *kinds* of questions that the commentators think need answering about the text. (The other commentators do not always make their questions explicit.)

Major commentators:

RASHI—R. Solomon b. Isaac (1040–1105), northern France. Universally known by the acronym of his name, Rashi is the quintessential commentator on both Bible and Talmud. Jewish translations of both works often silently follow Rashi's comments when deciding how to render a difficult passage. Rashi's method, as he himself described it, was to explain the biblical text according to its straightforward sense—what the words mean in plain Hebrew—adding only those midrashic comments that fit the context and explain a linguistic feature of the text. According to his grandson Rashbam, toward the end of his life he admitted that, if he had the time, he would completely rewrite his commentary to take account of the new discoveries about the straightforward sense of the Bible being made on a daily basis. (See also "*Peshat* and *Derash*" under "Special Topics.")

RASHBAM – R. Samuel b. Meir (ca. 1085–ca. 1174), northern France. Rashbam, Rashi's grandson, claimed that, though rabbinic interpretation of the Torah text was primary, the work of doing that kind of interpretation—the complicated linkage of every aspect of Jewish law to a letter, word, or phrase in the Torah—was finished. The neglected straightforward sense of the text, however, was only now in the process of being discovered. Rashbam, like his grandfather, was a skilled talmudist, but in his biblical commentary he felt free to interpret the text as it reads in plain Hebrew even when this contradicted rabbinic interpretation. (See also “*Peshat and Derash*” under “Special Topics.”)

IBN EZRA – R. Abraham ibn Ezra (1089–1164), b. Spain, d. England. Ibn Ezra was Rashbam's almost exact contemporary, though scholars continue to disagree on whether they ever met or even knew each other's work. Ibn Ezra lived the first half-century of his life in Muslim Spain and spent the rest of his days wandering through Christian Europe—first in Italy, then in France, and, in his last years, in England. The twofold basis of his comments, as he explains in the long introduction to his work, is that they must conform to the grammar of the text (a field in which the Jews of the Muslim world were far more advanced than their compatriots in Christian countries) and to the bounds of reason. His attitude toward rabbinic tradition is ambiguous—he was not secure enough to contradict it directly, as did Rashbam, but often hinted at his doubts about one or another aspect of it. (See also “Medieval Jewish Philosophy” under “Special Topics.”)

NAHMANIDES – R. Moses b. Nahman (1195–ca. 1270), b. Spain, d. Israel. Also known by the acronym “Ramban,” Nahmanides was advised to flee Spain after his victory in a “disputation” over the truth of Judaism and Christianity in which he was forced to participate. His careful analysis of the comments of his predecessors Rashi and Ibn Ezra makes him largely responsible for defining the contents of the standard Miqra'ot Gedolot page. (Rashbam is a 20th-century addition to the standard page.) In addition to his biblical and rabbinic scholarship, he was immersed in mystical learning. He sometimes explains the straightforward sense of the text and then adds an additional comment, often obscure, giving the meaning of the text “according to the way of Truth” or “the True interpretation”—a reference to mystical interpretation. (See also “Nahmanides' Mysticism” under “Special Topics.”)

Editor's annotations:

I have added notes to the text of the major commentators whenever I thought their comments needed some elucidation, or when there is a difficulty that might not be apparent to the reader. I have not generally supplied the rabbinic sources for their comments unless they do so themselves. Nor have I pointed out the reasons for their comments, unless I think the reader would find the comment puzzling without this information. I have generally left it to the reader to discover when the commentators are disputing with each other.

Additional commentators:

The **MASORAH** (ca. 1000) – The comments labeled Masorah (“tradition”), dating from the second half of the first millennium C.E., generally catalogue unusual spellings or

word choices in the text, to give scribes assistance in recreating it exactly. Occasional comments were added to the Masorah at the time of the “Second Rabbinic Bible” (1525) by its editor, **Jacob b. Hayyim**, a kabbalist; these comments are not identified as coming from the Masorah, but from him personally.

BEKHOR SHOR – Joseph b. Isaac Bekhor Shor (12th c.), northern France. As a younger contemporary and student of Rashbam, his comments, like those of his teacher, focus on the straightforward sense of the text.

KIMHI – R. David Kimhi (1160?–1235?), Provence. Known by the acronym “Radak,” he belonged to a family of illustrious scholars. Particularly known as a Hebrew grammarian, he is a major commentator to Genesis. (In our Genesis volume, he will be promoted to the main part of the page.) His comments on the rest of the Torah, however, are relatively sparse, since they are abstracted from his works on language.

HIZKUNI – R. Hezekiah b. Manoah (mid-13th c.), France. He wrote a commentary that is largely an anthology of earlier comments (many now otherwise lost) as well as an analysis of Rashi’s commentary.

GERSONIDES – R. Levi b. Gershom (1288–1344), Provence. Known also by the acronym “Ralbag,” he viewed the biblical text largely through the lens of philosophy.

ABARBANEL – Don Isaac Abarbanel (1437–1508), b. Portugal, fled Spain, d. Italy. He was a prominent politician and financier in the Iberian Peninsula until the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. His writings mostly date from his Italian period.

SFORNO – Obadiah b. Jacob Sforno (1470–1550), Italy. Trained in Jewish learning, humanistic studies, and medicine, he was both literally and metaphorically a Renaissance man.

PRINCIPLES OF THE TRANSLATION

A basic assumption of the translation is that **the commentators are rewriting their original comments today, in contemporary English, for readers who do not know Hebrew.** This solves a number of the difficulties inherent in turning a Hebrew commentary on a Hebrew text into an English commentary without making the translator look as if he is constantly elbowing his way in between the reader and the commentator. So: **When an added word, phrase, or clause will make the commentator's meaning clear, I add it as if it had been written by the commentator.** When this technique does not suffice, I add a note in my own voice.

The following kinds of comments are regularly omitted from the translation:

- 1 The commentator gives a straightforward explanation of the sense of the text when the translation already follows it or makes it unnecessary.
- 2 The commentator gives another Hebrew word synonymous with the one used in the verse.
- 3 The commentator identifies a form grammatically (when there is no disagreement about it).
- 4 Rashbam or Ibn Ezra offers essentially the same comment as Rashi.
- 5 Rashbam offers a different verse than Rashi that explains the same phenomenon in the same way.
- 6 Nahmanides cites an explanation of Rashi or Ibn Ezra in full.
- 7 In his explanation, a commentator uses another biblical example, or a rabbinic citation, that would require more explanation than the biblical verse itself.
- 8 A commentator quotes a biblical verse in full when that verse is close enough to the verse being explicated for the reader to find it easily.

In addition, certain extended discussions in the commentaries of Ibn Ezra and Nahmanides have been condensed, summarized in a note, or (in some cases) omitted entirely.

The following kinds of comments are nonetheless retained in the translation:

- 1 The comment includes a straightforward explanation of the sense of the text when the translation already follows it or makes it unnecessary, if one of the other commentators disagrees with it.

- 2 The comment includes grammatical remarks that can be easily explained, that give some of the commentator's flavor, or that other commentators disagree with.
- 3 Nahmanides for stylistic reasons includes citations from other biblical books, which are not themselves necessarily relevant but can be integrated smoothly into the translation.

The following kinds of comments are regularly *changed*:

- 1 Discursive comments explaining more than one verse at a time are changed to fit the citation-comment pattern, when this is possible.
- 2 When the comment to one verse adds an explanation of a verse elsewhere in the text, I move that comment to the appropriate place.
- 3 When the English translation changes the order of the Hebrew text for clarity, I rearrange the comments to follow the English order and rephrase them if necessary.
- 4 When Nahmanides apparently had a different version of the commentary of Rashi or Ibn Ezra than we do, I reconcile the difference and/or explain it in a note.