



Read the following and identify and develop the final conclusion as well as considering any intermediate conclusions.

Whether or not the covenant with Abraham is universal?

It can be argued that the idea of a covenant in Judaism is universal because there are two early versions of a covenant relationship that demonstrate this, namely, those made between God and Adam, and between God and Noah. It is important to note that the Torah recounts two earlier covenants that God had made prior to Abram: one was with Adam, and the other was with Noah, and both had been universal covenants with humankind, rather than just the Jewish people. God made an agreement with Noah that the world would never be destroyed by water again, and the rainbow was a sign of this particular covenant. Although some may suggest that, in both cases, they failed because the people of the world turned from God and sinned, the point is that they demonstrate the opportunity for all to take part. Therefore, it could be suggested that the covenant in its original forms were intended to be universal; in addition, we can argue that these can be seen as the 'ideal' for any later models of covenant, even if they were not initially made universally.

Despite this, the covenant with Abraham is unique, as, for the first time, there was to be a covenant with a particular group of people; whilst this can be argued to be a continuation of the covenant theme by some, it can be suggested that the terms of the covenant can be interpreted in such a way, that the covenant with Abraham was not universal, but was created for the nation of Israel alone. The strongest argument in support of this is the 'sign' expected of the covenant, that is, circumcision. Although the ritual of circumcision was widely practised at the time, Abraham was given a specific reason for circumcision – it was to be an outward, physical sign in the flesh of the eternal covenant between God and the Jewish people. In fact, it was the first commandment specific to the Jews. Indeed, it is still practised by Jews today and such is its importance that not being circumcised would signify, in some forms of Judaism, that the un-circumcised would no longer be considered to be part of the covenant community.

However, the alternative to this, and a sound counter-argument, would be to state that despite the Abrahamic covenant being exclusive to the Jewish tradition, there is a way in which it can be extended to all through conversion. This line of reasoning supports the view that just because it began with Abraham



and his descendants, does not mean that it has to remain exclusively so.

Overall, whilst it could be argued that the covenant is universal in its outlook when considering agreements made between Adam and Noah, this is doubtful in light of the covenant between God and Abraham.

However, at a closer look, we can argue that it is not determined simply by this one understanding of a covenant agreement alone, and this is the crucial aspect of the argument. There are other ways of seeing the covenant between God and Abraham; indeed, could we not interpret the reference to Abraham's promise from God to 'all peoples on earth', as referring to mankind in general rather than solely to the Jewish community?

Identify any intermediate conclusions and final conclusion in the following evaluative answer.

The importance of Rashi in understanding Jewish scriptures

Rashi was one of the most important commentators in Jewish history. He began his work at a time when commentaries on Jewish scriptures were beginning to thrive, during the 11th century AD. Ben Nathan states, 'His lips were the seat of wisdom, and thanks to him the law, which he examined and interpreted, has come to life again.' Undoubtedly, one can only argue that his importance in understanding Jewish scriptures underlies such an accolade.

Indeed, the secret of Rashi's importance, one could argue, is in the method of interpretation that he established that has been used and is used to this day. His commentaries on the whole of the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud, are the ones upon which his fame rests. Today, it is generally accepted that anyone who studies the Torah or Talmud does so without consulting Rashi's works. Jacobs writes, 'Few books can surpass those of Rashi. His writings circulated with great rapidity, and his commentary on the Talmud greatly extended the knowledge of the subject, thus increasing the number of Talmudic schools in France.' His importance is second to none in understanding Jewish scriptures.

Rashi's main principle of interpretation was to seek out the peshat, the 'plain' or 'literal' sense meaning of a passage. It was this attention to forensic detail that has made a lasting impact on Jewish midrashic studies. Rashi's interpretation of scripture was clear, concise, in readable Hebrew prose, drawing on a wide range of knowledge; however, in addition to this it could be argued that his considerable knowledge



of Hebrew grammar and grammatical explanations, that are to be found interspersed in his commentary, were his greatest strength. This meant that the Hebrew scriptures were accessible beyond established scholars and open to the people. Gwynne-Kinsey writes, 'Without Rashi's commentary on the Talmud, it is likely that it would have remained inaccessible to any but the most experienced Jewish scholars. Yet, any student who has been introduced to its study by a teacher is able to continue learning on their own, deciphering its language and meaning with the aid of Rashi.' Such importance, therefore, cannot be overlooked. Indeed, Robinson confirms this when he states that Rashi is 'a Torah scholar unequalled in the thoughtfulness of his commentaries, fluent in many languages, an accomplished poet, and a skilled philologist.'

However, some have indicated that his method was 'unscientific', especially his tendency to move beyond peshat into analogy, homilies and misdrashic folklore. Therefore, it could be argued that Rashi offers a specific type of understanding to the Jewish scriptures and not a complete one.

In addition, it could be argued that his work is mainly exegetical and not always theologically or philosophically coherent, unlike, say for example, Maimonides, who is seen as the complete Jewish scholar.

Overall, Rashi is vitally important to understanding Jewish scriptures, as can be seen from his influence both past and present; however, this does not mean that he is the most important scholar overall.