

Key concepts



Rashi was a prominent medieval Jewish scholar who is well known for his commentaries on the whole of the Hebrew Bible and Talmud. Most Jews who have studied biblical commentary will know the phrase ‘Chumash with Rashi’. Equally important is Rashi’s commentary on the Talmud, with it being said that he had the gift of anticipating reader’s questions and gave brief, clear explanations. Such was the success of this approach that his commentary on the Talmud continues to be acknowledged as the definitive explanation to the present day.

Rashi’s biblical commentaries rely on peshat. He writes in clear, concise, and readable Hebrew prose, drawing on a wide range of knowledge that includes even the seeming trivia of agricultural life. Two examples of Rashi’s approach can be found in his work on Exodus 23:19, ‘You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk’, and Leviticus 24:19-20, ‘eye for eye, tooth for tooth’.

Maimonides is a significant figure especially within the Orthodox tradition, where his ‘Thirteen Principles of Faith’ are widely held as obligatory beliefs. Furthermore, his Mishneh Torah is considered to be the ultimate manual of Jewish law, consisting of fourteen books, each one dealing with a separate subject in the Jewish legal system. ‘The Guide for the Perplexed’ was written by him as an attempt to help Jews who had become bewildered by the teachings of Greek philosophy and who did not know how they could be reconciled with Jewish belief (although it was not without its critics).

Rashi’s interpretation of Genesis 1:1 relies on peshat and focuses on traditional exegesis through language and grammar in order to analyse the text. Rashi proposes creation ‘de novo’ of ‘from the new’ or ‘anew’.

Maimonides’ interpretation of Genesis 1:1 presents two different explanations of the act of creation. On the one hand it is an act that constitutes the first instant of time, on the other an act in which God shapes the world from a pre-existent and formless matter.

Key quotes

‘His (Rashi’s) lips were the seat of wisdom, and thanks to him the Law, which he examined and interpreted, has come to life again.’ (ben Nathan)

‘(Maimonides) ... one of the giants of Jewish thought ... He wrote the definitive study of the 613 mitzvot ...’ (Robinson)

‘God’s bringing the world into existence does not have a temporal beginning, for time is one of the created things.’ (Maimonides)



Key words

chumash

peshat

de novo

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key questions, arguments, and debates

The relative importance of Rashi and Maimonides for understanding Hebrew scriptures.

Even though they had different approaches, they both aimed to make the Talmud coherent and approachable. Perhaps it is not possible to assess the relative importance of Rashi and Maimonides in an objective manner. It may be the best solution to acknowledge that they are both important in their own way.

The extent to which Maimonides is the most complete Jewish scholar.

His impact and influence upon Orthodox Judaism, and further afield, suggests that he could be considered to be the complete Jewish scholar. It is difficult to decide whether or not he is representative of the most complete Jewish scholar without a definitive list of characteristics to which we can compare his achievements. Is it possible to come to a common agreement as to what characterises a typical Jewish scholar? It should not be forgotten that there are other notable Jewish scholars who continue to have an impact upon Jewish beliefs and practices.