THE COMMENTARY OF RASHI ON ISAIAH
AND THE JEWISH-CHRISTIAN DEBATE*

Avraham Grossman

Scholars have long debated whether it is possible to trace the escalating Jewish-Christian debate in Rashi’s biblical exegesis. In the past, many scholars posited a select number of scriptural loci that revealed an indirect polemical engagement with Christological scholarship.¹ Recently, there has been increased attention to the centrality of Jewish-Christian polemics in Rashi’s Torah commentary, specifically in his comments on the Latter Prophets and Writings (Ketuvim).² The shift in the academic approach stems mainly from the discovery of preferred versions, in extant manuscripts, of Rashi’s biblical commentary. Bearing the hand of the Christian censors, the printed editions are free of any derisive comments about Christianity, and thus they obscure the full picture.³ Current research maintains that the polemical debate is intrinsic to Rashi’s exegetical approach to the Bible, leaving numerous impressions far beyond those identified until now. I maintain this opinion in my own research.

The rare instances where Rashi explicitly acknowledged his polemical engagement with Christological scholarship occur in reference to Jesus and his disciples. Such comments are mostly found in his exegesis of Daniel, although the polemical references are concealed. The polemical references become overt only through knowledge of Rashi’s style, and the fact that he chose scriptural interpretations that did not employ the simplest sense (pshat). A survey of his comments

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* The article was translated from Hebrew by Dana Fishkin.
¹ Yitzhak Baer was of the exceptional opinion that Rashi paid much attention to the Jewish-Christian debate and that it informed his biblical commentary.
² There is an extensive bibliography on this subject that will not be cited here. Much of the relevant studies can be found in my book, A. Grossman, The Early Sages of France (Jerusalem, 1995), pp. 457–506.
³ For a detailed treatment of Christian censorship in the 16th century and its effects on Jewish printed books, see Amnon-Raz-Krakotzkin, Censorship, Editing and the Text, Catholic Censorship and Hebrew Literature in the Sixteenth Century (Jerusalem, 2005).
juxtaposed against the original midrashic sources and the use of the aforementioned preferred extant versions reveal this polemical layer. It is not surprising that Rashi engaged Christological scholarship in much of his Torah commentary. In his gloss, Rashi assumed three important tasks: 1) the interpretation of Bible and Talmud in order to impart Torah to the public. This enabled Jews to learn Torah locally, despite being distant from the established Babylonian (yeshivot) academies; 2) the mediation of feuds that developed in the Jewish communities of France and Germany due to conflicting cultural and economic interests caused by recently migrated peoples; 3) the protection of Judaism from Christian propaganda, which, increasingly, had an influential power on both Christian society and the Jews. The sources have preserved testimony of such propaganda and they provide examples of Jews who apostatized their faith at that time.

Henceforth, I will focus on the debate with Christological scholarship implicit in Rashi’s commentary on Isaiah. The Jewish-Christian debate occupies an important place in this book, as evidenced by the preferred extant manuscript editions of Rashi’s words that are based on uncensored manuscripts rather than on printed editions of his commentary that include many corrections by Christian censors.

The debate is embodied by four central topics: 1) The prophecy in chapters 11–12, known as the “shoot of Jesse;” 2) The prophecies to the world’s nations in chapters 17–27; Rashi interpreted the prophecies concerning the nations defeated by Sancherib as referring to Israel’s exiled state under centuries of Christian dominion; 3) The prophecies

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5 I. Maarsen, Parshandatha: The Commentary of Rashi on the Prophets and Hagiographers, Part II: Isajah (Jerusalem, 1933); Mikra‘ot Gedolot ‘Haketer, ed. Menachem Cohen (Jerusalem, 1996). All subsequent citations from Rashi’s gloss on Isaiah are found in these two works.
of God’s servant in chapters 52–54; and 4) The prophecies concerning Edom’s chastisement and Israel’s redemption in chapters 63–66.

Before we survey Rashi’s stance on these topics, it is important to review three assumptions fundamental to Rashi’s composition of his commentary on Isaiah. 1) It is a unified text written entirely by the prophet Isaiah. This article is not the appropriate place to dwell on the chronology of the prophecies, since my primary interest is to distill Rashi’s anti-Christian position; 2) Rashi believed that the author intentionally conflated prophecies about the Assyrian downfall at Jerusalem’s gates in the time of Hezekiah (701 BCE) with eschatological prophecies. Sanherib’s downfall paradigmatically represents Israel’s miraculous salvation, even at the height of anti-Jewish violence; 3) the eschatological prophecies that prophesy about the fall of Israel’s enemies at the end of days refer to the Christians whom Rashi designates: Esau, Edom, Amalek, Seir, and Rome. Deleted by the hands of a Christian censor, or as a preliminary measure, the absence of such words renders the printed editions deficient and, therefore, unreliable for a study of Rashi’s attitude toward Christianity.

*The Miraculous Child*

Isaiah 9:5–6 describes a miraculous child who will bring salvation to Jerusalem and, perhaps, to Israel. The verse states, “For a child has been born to us, a son has been given us, and authority has settled on his shoulders. He has been named ‘the Mighty God is planning grace, the Eternal Father, a peaceable ruler. In token of abundant authority and of peace without limit upon David’s throne and kingdom, that it may be firmly established in justice and in equity now and evermore.” It is well known that Christianity identified the miraculous child as Jesus, and viewed these verses as a prophecy about Jesus’s birth/arrival. Some traditional Jewish exegetes interpreted these verses as referring to the Messiah, especially in light of the phrase “now and evermore” in

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the verse. Others posited that the prophecy referred to King Hezekiah, whose reign would see Jerusalem’s salvation from Sancherib. Usually, Rashi would tend to support the opinion that the prophecy referred to the Messiah. However, there are multiple versions of his commentary on these verses, and the unilateral establishment of an authentic version is difficult. Rashi interpreted the verses as referring to King Hezekiah, and he ended the comment with: “this is in response to the apostates (the Christians),” indicating that this was not Rashi’s preferred interpretation. In a self-professed admission, Rashi proposed it in service of the polemical debate with Christians, in order to reject their basic interpretation of this verse as a messianic prophecy. Glossing “now and evermore,” Rashi explained: “all the days of Hezekiah’s life,” but he added a charge against Christian scholars who posit Jesus as the referent of the verse. According to him, the word “now” is problematic for Christians, since Jesus was not born for another several hundred years.

Were we positive that this is the authentic version, this would have been an explicit proof of Rashi’s polemical exegesis against Christianity in the book of Isaiah, characterized by Rashi’s intentional selection of far-fetched interpretations to undercut Christian propaganda, a tactic that Rashi explicitly takes in his commentary on Psalms. This version, however, that explicitly engages polemically with Christianity, is found only in a small number of manuscripts, leading one to question/doubt its authenticity. Even if Rashi did not directly engage in polemics with Christianity in this text, it underlies his exegesis.

_The Shoot of Jesse_

Rashi’s treatment of the “shoot of Jesse” prophecy is especially sensitive in light of its Christological interpretation as a prefiguration of Jesus’s arrival. It is revealing that the authors of both the _Sefer Yosef Ha-Meqane_ and _the Sefer Nizzahon Vetus_—two classic medieval Jewish polemical tracts—rebut Christian claims that this prophecy refers

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7 See my article “Perush Rashi le-Tehillim,” pp. 59–74 [full reference in note 5 above]. On the variant manuscript editions, see Maarsen, _Parshandatha_, pp. 30–32 and relevant notes.
8 See Romans 15:12.
to Jesus. The author of the *Sefer Nizzahon Vetus* (p. 96) omitted the messianic interpretations of this verse proposed by the sages, of blessed memory, and opted to gloss the prophecies of comfort allegorically, or as references to King Hezekiah. This attests to the deep fear of Christian propaganda, and it reveals the author’s resolute intent not to furnish Christian propaganda with any messianic Jewish interpretation.

Despite his fear of Christian propaganda, Rashi interpreted “in that day, my Lord will apply His hand again to redeeming the other part of His people” (Isaiah 11:11) as an eschatological prophecy about the messianic age, a gloss that could potentially bolster the Christian argument. However, Rashi’s motivation stemmed from his reading of the verse as a basis for eschatological prophecies about the Redemption, and specifically Israel’s redemption from exile in Christendom. In his comment, Rashi confronts Christian contentions in two ways. He claims that one of the fundamental messages of “the shoot of Jesse” is the obliteration of Christianity and the safeguarding of exiled Diaspora Jews beyond Christian reach. Furthermore, Rashi claims that the prophecy blatantly refers to Jews living in Christian lands. The word “again” (shenit) connotes the final redemption, and Isaiah calls it “the second one” to distinguish it from the first redemption from Egypt. One cannot read this vision as the return to Zion for the Israelite redemption from Egypt was complete, “clearly without slavery, but the Redemption of the Second Temple is not counted, because they were enslaved to Cyrus.” Therefore, this verse must refer to the future Redemption in the Messianic era.

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11 The Talmud preserved a lone opinion of a sage who interpreted this prophecy as a reference to Hezekiah and Sanherib’s downfall during his reign (TB Sanhedrin 98b, 99a).
The coastlands are one of the places from which God will redeem the Jews, and Rashi interprets their residents as “Romans, descendants of Esau.” “Rome” and “Esau” are quintessential symbols of Christianity, both in rabbinical literature and in Rashi’s commentary. His intention is even more explicit in his comment on Isaiah’s praise of redemption. Rashi interprets the verse “For the Lord is my strength and might” (Isaiah 12:2) as: “until this point, God’s name had been divided, but upon Esau’s downfall, God’s name is complete.” His interpretation is founded on a rabbinical midrash on Exodus 17:16 containing a description of Amalek’s victory and the order to destroy him. Explicating this verse, Rashi claims that the directive to obliterate all memory of Amalek applies to Christianity as well (Esau). It is no coincidence that he uses the epithet Amalek to refer to Christianity.

From a methodological perspective, Rashi’s words contain an important foundational principle. He advanced an interpretation that is far from the simplest (pshat) sense, and one assumes that he was aware of this. His interpretation has, at least, two essential flaws. The assumption that the second redemption—whenever it will be—must resemble the first in intensity is not necessary. Additionally, the identification of “the coastlands” with Christian dominions is tenuous. Isaiah 11:11 mentions eight locations, “my Lord will apply his hand again to redeeming the other part of His people from Assyria, as also from Egypt, Pathros, Nubia, Elam, Shinar, Hamath, and the coastlands.” Rashi correctly explains that the verse includes southern locales like Egypt and Pathros as well as the northern locales of Assyria and Elam. What, then, are “the coastlands?” Rashi identified the residents of the coastlands as “Romans, descendants of Esau,” namely, Christians. Later, Rashi adds: “It is not on the same side.” This means that the coastlands are not adjacent to the other seven locales, nor are they in the same region. Rashi could be referring to Christian Europe when he says “it is not on the same side” or he could be referring to Tyre and Zidon, a reading that emerges from Rashi’s gloss on Isaiah 23, as will be examined below. The first opinion is preferable because Tyre

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and Zidon are still “on the same side.” One cannot argue that the identification of “the coastlands” with Christianity is not indicated. Most contemporary scholars understand “the coastlands” as islands in the Mediterranean Sea.\(^\text{13}\)

What impelled Rashi to specify that “the coastlands” are under the dominion of Esau’s descendants, namely Christians, and to specify that they are not located near the other seven locations? Most certainly, Rashi’s motive is to describe the future downfall of Christianity and his association of the Romans with Esau’s descendants serves this end.

Exemplary proof is Rashi’s explication of “for the Lord is my strength and might” (Isaiah 12:2) as an allusion to Esau’s (Christianity’s) downfall as a precursor to the unity of God’s throne. Since the text enumerates eight nations whom God will thwart in order to redeem the Israelites, why is Esau’s downfall specified as cause for divine praise? The message is not specific to “the coastlands.”

Generally, Rashi’s reading of the “shoot of Jesse” prophecy is tendentious, meant to fortify the Jewish spirit in exile under Christian dominion in Europe by assuring the Jews that their redemption is foretold.\(^\text{14}\)

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\(^\text{13}\) Scholars are divided over the identification of “the coastlands.” Some claim that the term signifies a portion of the Persian Empire or islands and beaches in general, such as settlements near the Mediterranean, the Aegean, and the Greek islands, especially those locales frequented by the sailors of Zidon. The plural form of the name appears a few times in texts of Ramses III, texts narrating Pharoah’s victories over the northern nations who tried to penetrate Egypt.

\(^\text{14}\) This tendency in Rashi’s treatment of this expression is also found in the introduction to the book *Sefer Joseph Hamekane* (see notes 6 and 9), p. 4: “in the consolation [prophecies] it is written that The Israelites will be gathered in the days of redemption from the coastlands…During the first exile no Israelite exiled from Eretz Yisrael to the coastlands, let alone that they will be gathered there.” The writer means that this prophecy cannot refer to the early Second Temple Period, since it is unknown whether the Jews were exiled to the coastlands during that time, therefore they must refer to the exile of the Jews in medieval Europe.
to Sanherib’s downfall at the gates of Jerusalem in 701 BCE, after the Assyrian kings defeated Aram in 732 BCE and Samaria in 722 BCE.

Rashi also explained these prophecies as references to the Aramean and Israelite downfall and, in his opinion, they are concentrated in chapter 17. Chapter 18 treats the punishment of the Samarian kingdom, Israel’s redemption from the hands of Esau, and the return or ingathering of the exiles. Rashi explains “for thus the Lord said to me: I rest calm and confident in My habitation” (Isaiah 18:4) as an allusion to Israel’s redemption after the punishment of the Christian kingdoms (“The payment of Esau’s reward”). The following verse describes the downfall of Esau’s descendants before they can execute their plans and destroy Israel, “that he plans to destroy his brethren (Israel) . . . he shall kill (God) the kings and officers of Gog, Esau’s forces and auxiliary armies.” Knowing Rashi’s association of the Christians as allies of Gog and Magog, they will all be thwarted as punishment for their planned obliteration of the Israelites. It is clear that Rashi’s identification of the Christians as allies of Gog and Magog attests to the intensity of his hatred of Christian dominion in medieval Europe.

Chapter 19 returns to a discussion of Egypt’s fate, and how Sanherib’s army will demolish it, a prophecy that Rashi links to the ultimate demise of Christianity. For Rashi, Sanherib’s downfall symbolizes the future demise of all of Israel’s enemies, chiefly the Christians. Consequently, all mention of Esau is neither explicit nor implicit in the verses. Rashi’s agenda to encourage his downtrodden nation, to fortify their spirits, impelled him to gloss the text in such a way. Although rabbinical midrash could have aided him, in limited cases, Rashi specifically chose other midrashic statements about Esau.

The end of chapter 19 narrates Sanherib’s downfall at Jerusalem’s gates, and the deep impressions of this defeat that brought new converts to Judaism in Egypt, as the text states: “In that day, Israel shall be a third partner with Egypt and Assyria as a blessing on Earth; for the Lord of Hosts will bless them saying, ‘Blessed be My people Egypt, My handiwork Assyria, and My very own Israel’ ” (Isaiah 25:24). The nation of Israel is described as God’s inheritance alongside Egypt and Assyria, after these two defeated kingdoms have acknowledged the Israelite deity. Rashi has difficulty accepting these words of praise for Assyria and Egypt, and he follows the Targum and interprets the following expressions as solely referring to Israel. He equates “blessed be my nation Egypt” with “blessed is my nation Israel whom I chose to
be my nation, while they dwell in Egypt.” He glossed “handiwork of Assyria” as “I displayed greatness by... Assyria.”

Rashi’s interpretation of chapter 23, treating Sanherib’s defeat of Tyre, offers two possible meanings. First, as was previously seen, Rashi identified the “land of Kithim” in the verse as “Romans,” namely Christians. Second, he proposed a literal reading of the biblical Tyre that was to be defeated by Sanherib. Rashi preferred the second interpretation because “Zidon” appears alongside “Zor,” but at the end of the chapter, he reinterpreted the verses as referring to Christian Rome, which the righteous will sack upon the Messiah’s arrival.

If Rashi glossed Christianity’s dominion over Jews and its ultimate demise in chapters 17–23, how much more should he gloss the prophecies in chapters 24–27, prophecies of a clear eschatological nature. Rashi describes the difficult afflictions that various nations such as Babylonia, Media, Persia, Greece, and Edom (Christianity) will inflict on the Jews. He notes, “that they will be enslaved in Israel before their redemption.” Subsequently, salvation will arrive hand in hand with a difficult blow on “Esau, the man of Mount Seir.” There is no scriptural mention of Esau or Mount Seir, and Rashi’s interpretation stems from his polemical agenda, as previously demonstrated. Rashi bases his gloss on the words, “‘resident of the land,’ that is a strong, centralized leader, that aptly characterizes Christianity.” Christianity is Israel’s final enemy before the Redemption, and, sturdiest among Israel’s enemies, it was called “resident of the land.”

Chapter 25 describes a cruel enemy seeking to destroy Jerusalem, whose plans fail and result in his demise. The enemy is Esau and his fate is obliteration. “The mountain of Esau’ is destined for destruction and the bustling city will be transformed into a mound of desolation” (Isaiah 25:2). Glossing other verses in this chapter, Rashi explains that “this is all in the time of the war of Gog and Magog.” It has already been demonstrated that Rashi depicts Christianity as an ally of Gog.

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15 Rashi claims that Isaiah 21:11–12 treats “the gloom brought by the kingdom of Seir (Christians) to the nation of Israel, that will be reversed in the eschaton.” In his gloss on Isaiah 23:5, Rashi wrote, “Zor is Edom, Rome.”

16 Rashi based his reading on a midrash in Genesis, Rabbah, in the edition of J. Theodor-Ch. Albeck (Jerusalem, 1996), chapter 61, p. 669, even though he did not mention this midrash: R. Eliezer said, “Every Zor, written fully, in the Bible refers to the city of Tyre. When it is written lacking a vav, the text refers to Rome, stemming from the language of ‘an oppressor and an enemy (zar ve-’oyev).’” In our case, Zor is written without a vav. See the editor’s notes.
and Magog, and he sometimes conflates the two. Rashi tends toward this interpretation in chapter 26 as well. There is great significance in Rashi’s explication of the verse that God will subjugate “the residents of Marom” (Isaiah 26:5). He reads the verse as a reference to three urban centers: Tyre, Rome, and Italy, and he mentions God’s vengeance upon “the evil Esau.” The identification of “residents of Marom” with Tyre possibly stems from Crusader control over the environs of Muslim Tyre, which was besieged during the Crusader conquest of The Land of Israel in 1099. This detail is essential for an understanding of Rashi’s exegesis of Isaiah, as he sought proof of prophecies concerning Christianity’s triumph followed by its final demise.17

Rashi repeatedly returns to the description of Esau’s downfall in chapter 26. Though they conquered the land, and populated it, Rashi spoke of the Redemption that would emerge from the devastation. Referring to the righteous Jewish martyrs, Rashi assures his readers that they will rise again during the Resurrection. Intended to assuage Rashi’s audience, his description of the martyrs conveys the sense that he wrote these comments following the First Crusade.18

Chapter 26 serves as the pinnacle of Rashi’s scriptural search for proof of the downfall of Christianity and Israel’s redemption. Among several examples, he addressed “new troubles as signs of Redemption and salvation, for we were promised redemption amidst travails and suffering” (26:17). The motif of dire travails as a clear indicator of the coming Redemption is also emphasized in Rashi’s commentary on Psalms, and all such descriptions serve to fortify contemporary Jews overtaken by despair. Rashi’s sense of purpose reached its apex in these words.

Rashi continues to search for allusions to the ultimate demise of Christian governments in chapter 27. I shall focus on two telling examples. The first verse reveals that God will strike two types of Leviathans “with his sword,” and kill “the crocodile.” Initially, Rashi quotes the Targum and adds: “And I say: due to the importance of

17 I believe that Rashi’s gloss of Psalms was written after the First Crusade in 1099. See my article mentioned in note 5. The Crusaders besieged the city of Tyre in June 1099 and it was conquered by the Fatimids in 1124. Had we have tangible evidence that Rashi wrote his gloss of Isaiah after the First Crusade, Tyre’s inclusion with Rome and Italy would be better understood. Tyre is depicted negatively in midrashic literature.

18 See Rashi’s comment on Isaiah 26:17–21.
the three nations of Egypt, Assyria, and Edom...since the nations were compared to biting snakes...and he killed the crocodile in the water—this is Zor (Tyre), the leader of Esau’s descendants who sits at the heart of the seas,” later identifying them as Romans. The reference to Tyre was deleted from the printed editions by the censor, indicating that the censors suspected Rashi’s polemical agenda in his comment on Tyre. There is no explicit mention of these nations in the scriptural text, and Edom should not be included with the other two superpowers, Egypt and Assyria. However, Rashi viewed Edom as a symbol of Christianity and thus, in light of his agenda, he added Edom to the “important nations.”

The second example is found in verse 10 in the image of a “fortified city” destined to be emptied. Rashi interpreted the verse as “a fortified city of Esau will be empty.” This image recalls the city of Tyre that was besieged by Crusaders in 1099; we lack evidence, however, that Rashi’s gloss was written after the Crusader conquest in that year.

Chapter 30 mentions a covenant between Judah (according to Rashi: Israel) and Egypt against Assyria. Vehemently opposed to this covenant, Isaiah includes general prophecies about Israel’s redemption and Assyria’s downfall. In horrifying visions, Scripture tells about “the toppling of buildings,” a day of great slaughter, and the moon’s light resembling the sunlight. Rashi explicates the “death of multitudes” as a reference to “great slaughter in the land of Edom,” yet Edom is never mentioned in the scriptural verse. Thus, Edom clearly represents Christianity in Rashi’s exegesis. In various comments, Rashi couples Assyria’s downfall with Christianity’s demise so that the wondrous downfall of Assyria represents and prefigures the fall of Christianity at the end of days. Rashi’s intended conclusion is that one should trust in the redemption and words of comfort promised by God through the prophets, for they will be fully realized in the future (30:18).

19 The printed editions changed this to read, “a fortified city of Ishmael,” but this emendation is the work of Christian censors. In verse 11, Rashi provides an allegorical reading against Edom and he described him as “one who honored his father.” This is based on a midrash in Genesis Rabbah, chapter 76:7. Called Edom, Esau is clearly the referent of this text. The comment is based on Hazal’s words in the Talmud and in the midrash Genesis Rabbah.
Chapter 32 describes Sanherib’s damaging campaign in the cities of Judah before his defeat at the gates of Jerusalem. The verses recount how the king’s palace was usurped and transformed into “a stomping ground for wild asses” (Isaiah 32:14). Who are these “wild asses?” Rashi posits that they are “the desired ones of Ishmael and the pasture of Edom and its forces” (Rashi loc cit). He glossed this verse as a reference to Jerusalem, but failed to explain its full significance, since Jerusalem was saved from Sanherib.

Apparently, Rashi was referring to Jerusalem’s fate as it began under Muslim hegemony and was conquered by “Edom and its forces” during the First Crusade. Rashi explained that the city would be governed by enemies of Israel until the Redemption, when God would shower destructive rain upon the wicked descendants of Seir, “since they are currently standing and filled with cities like a forest.” Instead of a subjugated Israel, “now Edom’s metropolis will be subjugated (32:19). The printed editions have the term “Persia” instead of Edom. Although Rashi based his gloss on the Targum, the Targum mentions the subject of nations, but they are anonymous. Rashi inserted the terms “Edom,” “Esau,” or “descendants of Seir” to refer to Christianity. Concerning the image of the anchorless ship, Rashi explains that they severed the ropes “that pull the ship, the guilty Rome” (23:23). This is an example of an arbitrary verse about a ship in peril, and Rashi interprets it as a reference to Christianity. In opposition to Rashi, Radak interpreted this verse as a reference to Assyria, and other exegetes followed suit.

Rashi saw a severe attack on Christianity in Isaiah 34, equating Christianity with God’s archenemy Amalek. This is no coincidence. The image of the divine sword in Isaiah 34:6 will cause “great slaughter in the land of Edom.” The scriptural reference to Edom served as Rashi’s point of departure to review rabbinical midrash concerning Edom’s destruction. Rashi describes God’s impending attack on Amalek, another quintessential symbol of Christianity, until “the Messiah’s generation.” Rashi connected the prophecy about the flowering of the desert and the wasteland in Isaiah 35 with Edom’s destruction, even though Edom is not mentioned in the text. He lashed out against impatient Jews, accusing them of “expediting the Redemption.” Glossing the language of Elam (Isaiah 35:6), Rashi explained: “the language of the Israelites who are dispersed amongst mute nations. They hear disgrace but they do not respond.” Rashi’s grievance about Israel’s mockery and disgrace in the Diaspora is a common motif in his exegesis as well as that of his peer, Rabbi Joseph Kara.
Chapters 40–66 (Including the “Divine Servant”)

In chapters 40–66, Rashi found suitable locations for the integration of derisive anti-Christian prophecies and prophecies about Christianity’s bitter historical destiny. Isaiah 41:8–9 describes Israel’s fine quality, as it was divinely chosen and not rejected by God. Rashi, who was aware of the Christian belief in Israel’s dejection in favor of Christianity’s election as the verus Israel, utilized this text. He claimed that the scriptural text praises Israel, and even describes Isaac as one who “sinned against the Lord” because “he loved my enemies,” namely Esau. In Isaiah 49:24, Rashi dwelt on a future when God would remove all that Esau had stolen from the Israelites.

Rashi also linked most of the “divine servant” prophecies with Israel’s fate in Christian (Edom) lands. Summing up their experiences, Rashi says: “All these final, comforting words only refer to Edom’s dispersion [52:11]. Behold, in the end of days, my servant Jacob will thrive…as many nations wondered about them when they saw their subjugation, so will his hand triumph” (52:14). In chapter 53, Rashi discussed the severity of the attack on Israel during the persecutions in the Diaspora, and Jews’ readiness to die as martyrs: “Giving himself up to be buried in whatever cruel fashion imposed by the wicked of the nations who decreed death and a donkey’s internment in the guts of a dog…he sought burial instead of betraying the living God…he sacrificed himself to any form of death decreed upon him [by the leader], so that he would not accept apostasy to sin as all the Gentiles amongst whom he lives” (53:9). Yitzhak Baer has argued that these descriptions bear the imprint of the 1096 attacks during the First Crusade, and I concur.²⁰

In the following prophecies, founded on the notion of comfort, Rashi integrated derisive descriptions of Esau with comments about his awful destiny. Chapter 54 commences with a call to the land of Israel, represented by a barren woman, to rejoice because her children will outnumber those of the married woman. Rashi posited that Isaiah

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²⁰ See Yitzhak Baer, “Rashi ve-Hameziut Ha-Historit shel Zemano,” Tarbitz 20 (1949), p. 326. Nicholas de Lyra had a different version of Rashi’s gloss of the divine servant prophecies, but because it is absent from most extant manuscripts of Rashi’s commentary, I did not find it appropriate to cite his words here. For Nicholas de Lyra’s biblical exegesis, see Ph. D. W. Krey and L. Smith, eds., Nicholas of Lyra: The Senses of Scripture (Leiden, 2000). For his engagement with Jewish exegesis, see H. Heilperin, Rashi and the Christian Scholars (Pittsburgh, 1963).
commands Jerusalem to rejoice, and that the married woman is a “daughter of Edom.” In his gloss on that same chapter, Rashi addressed “wicked Esau and his friends” who shall endure “evil decrees” (54:14). In his gloss on Isaiah 61:8, Rashi returned to the recurrent theme of Israel’s mockery amongst the nations. In my opinion, Rashi was influenced by his historical realities and incited by Christian recourse to Israel’s dejection as a symbol of its own authenticity.

In chapter 63, Rashi’s task is alleviated by the scriptural mention of God’s vengeance on the nations, as well as specific mention of Edom in the opening verse. It is no coincidence that several of Rashi’s comments were extensively changed by the printers as a response to censorship. A better edition is preserved in manuscript, as exemplified in Rashi’s gloss on the opening verses. He writes: “Isaiah prophesied about God’s vengeance against Edom in the future by slaughtering their archangel first . . . afterward, his sword will fall upon Edom. It will be apparent by the anger in his visage that he executed great slaughter [in Edom].” According to Rashi, Isaiah speaks on behalf of God, expressing divine anger toward the nations for their harsh treatment of the Israeliite nation (63:5). Explicating “then he remembered the ancient days, Moses who pulled his people out” (63:11), Rashi states: “the prophet laments and beseeches: ‘today, in exile, his nation (Israel) remembers the ancient days.’” Rashi’s agenda, linking the content of the prophecies to his historical realities and suffering in exile, is tangibly felt in his commentary on these specific chapters and the Isaiah as a whole.

Rashi sought textual allusions to the punishment of the gentile nations in Isaiah’s final prophecies of redemption, as well as other citations describing conditions of peace, serenity, and the rebuilding of Jerusalem. Citing an Aggadic midrash in his comment on “the lion shall eat straw like the ox” (Isaiah 65:25), Rashi proposed that the verse referred to “tribes that were likened to a lion . . . [and] will consume Esau who is represented by straw.” An additional proof of Rashi’s polemical agenda in his gloss of Isaiah is found in his comment on the final verse of chapter 66. The chapter opens with the wicked Israelites mocking the devout “fearers of the Lord,” claiming that God is glorified through their (the wicked ones) merit.21 Isaiah proclaims

21 “Your kinsmen who hate you, who spurn you because of Me are saying, ‘Let the Lord manifest his Presence’” (Isaiah 66:5).
to his followers that “we will see your joy and their disgrace.” The antagonizers are simultaneously called “your brothers and enemies.” Who are these “brothers?” Rashi claims that Esau’s descendants mock and deride Israel, saying: “In our grandeur, God is glorified because we are closer to him than you.” The antagonizers’ claim of being closer to God is the classic Christian argument that they represent “verus Israel.” Rashi was prepared to characterize Christians as “brothers” so as to explicate the verse as a reference to the Jewish-Christian debate. Most traditional medieval Jewish commentators glossed these verses as referring to an internal Jewish debate, and referring neither to Christians nor other nations.

Conclusion

Rashi incorporated several polemical arguments against Christianity into his gloss of Isaiah. Due to Christian censorship, most of the polemical statements were expunged from the printed editions, but preserved in manuscripts. A small number of Rashi’s comments stem from rabbinical midrash, but they do not employ the simplest sense (pshat). The fact that Rashi chose these interpretations demonstrates his tendentiousness. The clearest example of Rashi’s tendentious anti-Christian exegesis remains his willingness to apply non-literal interpretations that stray far from the scriptural text. Well aware that his interpretations violated grammatical rules and scriptural content, Rashi seized the opportunity before him. Yitzhak Baer, in his previously cited article, wrote: “One can interpret entire chapters of Rashi’s commentary on Isaiah in an anti-Christian polemical way.” He did not clarify his statement, but the examples herein reveal that his assertion was correct.

Why did Rashi choose Isaiah as a vehicle to express his polemic with Christianity as well as his words of comfort and encouragement for the Jews, as he had done in a number of glosses on books of the Prophets and Writings? I see three main reasons: 1) The numerous eschatological prophecies in Isaiah; 2) the blending of such prophecies with those about Sanherib’s downfall at the gates of Jerusalem;

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22 Baer, “Rashi ve-Hameziut Ha-Historit shel Zemano,” p. 6 [full reference above in note 20].
and 3) the prophecies about the “divine servant” that retain a special character. The depictions of the servant’s current anguish tugged at Rashi’s heart; the drastic change in the servant’s future status when general stupor will befall the nations appealed to him. As previously stated, Rashi believed that the prophecies were spoken by Isaiah. The fusion of these elements led Rashi to gloss these prophecies as referring to Christianity, viewed as the greatest enemy of Israel and Judaism. One of Rashi’s assumed missions was the fortification of the Jewish spirit, which had been subdued and weakened by Christian prosperity. Christian propaganda gained strength at that time, as evidenced by several sources, and Rashi felt obligated to engage Christian claims. He was one of the earliest sages to deal with Jewish-Christian polemics in his literary oeuvre, and a great influence on later sages to assume the same task. The wondrous capture of Sanherib at the gates of Jerusalem and the demise of an enemy who had vowed to conquer Jerusalem at the height of his victory, served Rashi as a miniature model of his own historical reality. Christian conquests that were cast as proof of its authenticity and the mockery of the Jewish dejection were influential factors in Rashi’s employment of Isaiah as an anti-Christian tool. If Rashi did write the gloss after the first Crusade in 1099, as previously mentioned, one must add another cause for the palpable anti-Christian enmity in his commentary. Generally, the conquest of the Land of Israel and the specific conquest of Jerusalem resulted in sever Jewish oppression until 1187 when Saladin defeated Crusading armies. His victories were celebrated as a herald by Jewish sages, and they reverberated deeply amongst European Jews.

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Edited by
David Engel
Lawrence H. Schiffman
Elliot R. Wolfson

Managing Editor
Yechiel Y. Schur

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The Prophet Isaiah received a vision of God's great power, his glorious majesty, and his purifying holiness. Isaiah differs from Jeremiah and Ezekiel in that the character of his prophetic ministry blends foretelling (the seer seeing far into the future) in a greater measure with forthtelling (preaching the truth to a sinful people). While the book of Isaiah provides several historical touch points that anchor the prophet in a particular period of Judah's history, the book ranges in its visions from Isaiah's own times through to the end of time when God creates new heavens and a new earth (Is. 65:17).

Isaiah had seen the growth of a new empire, Assyria, and the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Judea alone remained, and it was the last bulwark of the true faith in One G‑d. Isaiah brought to king and people the message of the holiness of G‑d, the L‑rd of hosts, at a time when idolatry seemed to be taking hold in the land of Judah. He preached justice and charity at a time when the morals of the people had reached a new low. Of his Divine call Isaiah tells as follows; "In the year of King Uzziah's death (meaning, when he was stricken with leprosy and was isolated), I saw the L‑rd..." Thus the Jewish Scriptures became for Christian readers the Old Testament. This commentary on Exodus through Deuteronomy bears ample witness to this new way of reading these ancient texts. Among the earliest interpreters whose works remain extant is Origen, who virtually single-handedly assured the Old Testament a permanent place within the Christian church through his extensive commentary and reflection. Still, as interpreted by the church fathers, Isaiah presents a message that is far more soteriological than Christological, leading readers to a deeper understanding of God’s judgment and salvation. Isaiah 40–66 provides us with the closest thing the Old Testament has to offer regarding a systematic theology.