

Eran Viezel, *The Commentary on Chronicles Attributed to Rashi* (in Hebrew). Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 2019. viii, 457 pp. \$35.00. ISBN 978 9 65493 512 8.

Paradoxical as it may seem, the Jews who gave the world the Hebrew Bible, and indeed its first translations and interpretations, were not always, throughout their national and religious history, enthusiastically committed to the close study of its texts and its literal interpretation. There were groups, places and periods that took that educational task more seriously than others and thereby provided the inspiration for their co-religionists to do likewise, but there were also leaders in various generations who still felt driven to complain, as for instance was Naṭronai Gaon in ninth-century Babylonia, about the degree of neglect that Jewish scriptures were suffering at the hands of those more interested in rabbinic traditions and their transmission. That said, there were nevertheless schools of Jewish biblical exegetes that appeared on the historical and theological scene in numerous centres and ages and whose compositions were impressive, even by modern standards. The problem for the scholar who wishes to access and analyse such material from the medieval period is that, often, only remnants of the corpus have survived. The repetitive lapse into literary and linguistic indifference, or the active preference for other topics of theological and spiritual interest, meant that teachers and copyists occupied themselves with alternative literature, thus ensuring that many worthy tracts suffered dark and dusty incarceration, or even descent into cultural oblivion.

Happily, assiduous collectors and erudite scholars, armed with precious manuscripts and early printed editions, have ridden to the rescue in the course of more recent centuries and have succeeded in releasing numerous items from their tragic interment. For his part, and to his credit, Eran Viezel, who teaches at Ben-Gurion University in Beersheba, has left no stone unturned and no crevice unexplored in his efforts to excavate at least one section of the overgrown paths of a group of Jewish biblical exegetes in twelfth-century Germany. Although their work falls between the stools of the marginally earlier Northern French commentators, who stressed the literal meaning of the texts, and the slightly later Ashkenazi enthusiasts of mysticism, these interpreters of Hebrew Scripture, as Viezel convincingly argues, made their own multipurpose contribution to the subject and deserve attention even if they demonstrate less intense a knowledge of grammatical and linguistic matters. Having had the benefit of sound training in biblical studies with Baruch Schwartz and Sara Japhet at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Viezel was able successfully to complete a doctoral dissertation under the latter's supervision, and the volume under review represents the published version of that study, now being issued in paperback format. Given Japhet's major contributions to the study of the book of Chronicles, on the one hand, and to the careful analysis of the French and German

Jewish exegetes of the high Middle Ages, on the other, it is hardly surprising that Viezel's topic was the commentary (henceforth: C) on that biblical book that is attributed to Solomon ben Isaac (Rashi).

Chronicles was not among those books that attracted much attention from the medieval Jewish exegetes, nor indeed from their newly scientific and historical successors in the nineteenth century. This makes it even more important to assess the significance of what little was done, or, perhaps more accurately, what little has survived of the commentaries that were composed. Determined at least to make good the lacunae, Viezel sets about his task with gusto and offers us seven detailed chapters on C, together with an introduction, his conclusions, a postscript and detailed indexes. The introduction explains his philological-historical methodology, critically assesses the various manuscripts and editions of C and how they relate to each other, and summarizes the major contributions to its study made by, among others, Viktor Aptowitz, J.N. Epstein and Jordan Penkower. Here, Viezel already makes it clear that the attribution to Rashi is highly questionable even if the content often follows the renowned sage from Troyes, points out the importance of the *le'azim* mainly in French and German, and indicates how he will compare C to other such work of the Franco-German world in the overall period. In the first chapter, Viezel details the sources of C, reports on the author's knowledge of the Talmudic, Midrashic and Targumic literature,

as well as the poetry of Eleazar Qalir, explaining when he was quoting those from texts in front of him and when he was citing by heart. He also lists those scholars with whom C was in one way or another rather close, especially Eleazar b. Meshullam of Speyer, who was probably his teacher, and Qalonymos b. Judah, who was his mother's brother. Unlike many other medieval writers, C often cited his sources, and his work has interesting affinities with the work of Joseph Qara or his school, and to a commentary attributed to a pupil of Sa'adya Gaon.

The second chapter explains that C does not explicitly detail his exegetical methodology, which simply has to be derived by the reader from his comments. The exegete incorporates both *peshaṭ* and *derash* but does not define them as separate systems, and he makes use of other words and passages from the Hebrew Bible to explain those that occur in Chronicles. He makes regular reference to mundane matters, includes examples of *gemaṭria* and *notarikon*, and espouses the view that the numbers of words or letters, as well as their defective or *plene* spelling, are exegetically significant. Chapter 3 is devoted to C's structure and style. What emerges from Viezel's detailed analysis is that one finds in the comments not only much of what is usual in medieval Jewish commentary, especially that of Northern France, but also some more interesting and even novel items. Comparisons are made with hypothetical texts ('why is it not written *x*, but rather *y*?'), a device borrowed from Midrashic precedents, and C sometimes places

himself in the role of the narrator or one of the characters, using the first person to clarify the sentence. Possible cases of polemic intent are identified and there is a thorough examination and listing of all the translations into French (p. 53), German (p. 26), Provençal (p. 3), Slavic (p. 1) and Italian (p. 1). The linguistic content and the literary aspects of C are tackled in the fourth chapter. The former field is not impressively or innovatively represented but the latter contain some types of comment that are distinctly more 'modern' in style. How do the genealogical and the narrative elements match up? If the glorification of David is the central theme, what role is played by other data? C betrays a literary sensitivity (as in his view that psalms and laments tend to be lengthy and therefore need to be split up) and demonstrates clear and maintained interests in style, formulation, structure and composition.

More innovation by C, to a degree inspired by the very nature of the book of Chronicles, is discussed in chapter 5. The book's authorship, sources and aims are addressed by C. Contrary to the Talmudic view (which involves Nehemiah), C's opinion is that Ezra wrote the whole book in the diaspora between the two resettlements of the Jews in Judah. C explains how Ezra made use of earlier material, including manuscripts of the Pentateuch and genealogical lists, and covering non-biblical as well as biblical items, and engaged in adding, omitting, editing and harmonizing traditions for his composition. The sixth chapter is devoted to a comparison of C with

the exegesis of those generations that closely followed him in time and type. A commentary attributed to Joseph Qara was probably composed by a student of C and the pupil not only cited his master but also expanded on his comments and sometimes even took issue with them. He includes in his comments on 1 Chron. 16:23 a fairly lengthy poem expatiating on his deep affection for his teacher. David Qimhi definitely knew C, and perhaps characterized it as not wholly Midrashic, while the 'Glossar' (*Sefer Ha-Pitronot*) of Leipzig made extensive use of it. All Viezel's data, assessments and conclusions are brought together in the final chapter. There he provides details of all the opinions and arguments of some outstanding figures in modern Jewish scholarship and identifies what he regards as the acceptable, and less acceptable, aspects of their views. He concludes that C was written in the middle of the twelfth century by an, as yet unidentifiable, Ashkenazi scholar who had been a broadly educated student of Eleazar b. Meshullam of Speyer, adopted some of the views of his uncle, Qalonymos b. Judah, was influenced by Rashi and the Northern French exegetes, and had spent some time in Narbonne. Viezel hopes that his study will inspire a greater interest in the Jewish biblical exegesis of France and Germany in all its breadth in and around the twelfth century.

If one word of criticism is in order, I think it a pity that Viezel did not reduce the size of his study by at least 25, if not 50, per cent, since he often repeats himself, sometimes offers us data that is widely known, and utilizes many

examples of what he is trying to prove when a few less would have adequately served the purpose. Such a reservation apart, Viezel is to be commended on a thorough, accurate, far-ranging and important contribution to scholarship. He has enriched the field with a vast range of material and has demonstrated an impressive degree of scholarly

caution, as well as sharp insight, in analysing the sources. He has provided not only an erudite assessment of C but also innumerable citations from its Hebrew text, many of which will be of value to Bible scholars who are interested in Chronicles and patient enough to read a very lengthy tract in modern Hebrew.

STEFAN C. REIF

ST JOHN'S COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE, UK