

JEWISH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY –  
UNIVERSITY OF JEWISH STUDIES  
DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF JEWISH RELIGIOUS STUDIES

## **Science and Tradition**

- **Rashi's Commentary to the Song of Songs in the Light of Revelation**

## **Abstract Booklet**

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## **Assumptions**

The dissertation is based on the work of researchers who have investigated Rashi's worldview, his "theology," not only in his original homilies, but in his unique choices among the Midrashim when he had more than one option. Several researchers point out that Rashi wrote many of his commentaries with rhetorical goals in mind. Among other things, in his commentary to the Song of Songs, he expressed his views on Jewish history. In their opinion, Rashi interpreted the Bible bearing in mind the needs and experiences of the community. According to them, Rashi accepted the assumption that "historical time and Scripture intersect." In my opinion, Rashi assumes that the Song of Songs is a historical narrative that can only come into being at this "intersection," only at the meeting point of the Bible and history. Rashi's "sacred narrative" about Israel's role in world history is based upon the so-called marriage metaphor, according to which God married the people of Israel. Rashi considers the marriage of Israel and the Eternal as a rippling but constant process in history.

My assumption is that in Rashi's commentary, he speaks of the fundamental importance of the Torah and Torah study, of their central role in the community, in the synagogues. He therefore has educational goals: he propagates the Torah, and the centrality of Torah study. I also assume that in his commentary we can see pedagogical ideals, that he wanted to

communicate to his target audience: teachers, students, “community members”. In the commentary examined, we can find references not only to his worldview but also to his “theology”.

In his commentary, Rashi presumably uses a specific midrashic topos, according to which the Torah, takes over the “place” of God. Based on this concept, revelation itself can also be interpreted in a broad sense. It can also refer to “discourse” with both God and the Torah, that is, to learning, to the spiritual life lived in the synagogues and study houses.

I assume also that Rashi also write some commentaries for apologetic, polemical purposes, and thus he may have been influenced by the second Eucharistic debate in the era. Thus, a kind of Judeo-Christian theological “cross-fertilization” can be demonstrated from the commentary.

## **Research Goals**

Rashi’s “holistic” view – that the oral and written Torah form a single corpus (“body”) can be verified in the commentary. In the spirit of this “textual unity”, I do not seek to break up the commentary into several sections, but rather consider it as a single “body”. For this reason, the central part of my dissertation is the full Hungarian translation of the Rashi commentary to the Song of Songs. In addition to the general research goals, the translation invites the reader to use the text in an ordinary, “congregational” context, in line with Rashi’s supposed pedagogical goal. Thus, the author at the center

of the research is not only the subject of the dissertation, but also a participant who shares our goals and actively “participates” in the research.

The primary purpose of the research is thus to identify and classify elements in the commentary mentioning the notion of revelation or a notion loosely connected to revelation and to verify the elements possessing an apologetic character. Accordingly, the study also draws on the work of researchers who have researched Rashi’s worldview, his “theology,” not only in his original homilies, but also in the way he chose from the Midrash (when he had several options). In my view, the educational purpose, the Torah, and the central role of his study are also part of Rashi’s worldview. Thus, I start from the broad interpretation of the concept of revelation that it can also refer to “discourse” with both God and the Torah, that is, to learning, to the spiritual life lived in the synagogues and study halls. In the present work, therefore, we examine not only the homilies to historical revelation in the narrow sense, but also commentaries referring to the study of the Torah.

My aim is also to show the Christian influence on the commentary, and also ideas indirectly attributable to Christianity. An idea may not be just a “direct” takeover, as is assumed, for example, on the genre of allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs. I would like to show that Rashi responds with his polemic-apologetic comments to the anti-Judaic teachings of his environment: to claims of rejectedness (that God had left the people of Israel), or the Augustinian idea of the “Jewish witness”. Rashi, before the era of the great religious debates (13<sup>th</sup> century), with the help of the commentary,

strengthened the faith of his contemporaries, encouraged participation in private religious disputes, and thus also in interfaith discourse.

## **Conclusions**

Rashi's commentary to the Song of Songs is characterized by a very strong theological tone in his placing the whole of the commentary in the framework of the marriage metaphor. He presents the Song of Songs as an allegory of marriage between God and Israel. The commentary can thus be seen as a brief summary of Jewish history, described with the help of the marriage metaphor. Through the images of "dating", "wedding", "marriage life", we learn about the Jewish history. In this way, all the stage of the history: the Exodus, the revelation at Mount Sinai, the wandering in the desert, the present and the eschatological future are all fit into a single narrative. This kind of editing is characteristic of the Targum on the Song of Songs, while the many elements of the commentary are selections from Midrashim. Rashi's unique exegetical style allows these two, the Targumic and the Midrashic content, to be combined.

Rashi's "anachronistic" view is reflected in the fact that he evokes the Midrashim describing the revelation in such a way that for the reader the act of revelation becomes continuous in Jewish history. In the wake of these homilies, it becomes clear that the revelation was not just a single event of the past, but it was repeatedly happened at all stages of Jewish history.

Rabbinic interpretation includes the “historification” of ahistorical biblical texts. Rashi fits into this tendency, that is, with his commentary, he essentially composes a “sacred narrative,” a story, and even history, with the help of the “ahistorical” poems of the Song of Songs and with the support of Midrashim. According to my opinion, one of the aims of this narrative is the demonstration of the existence of the “marriage” and thus showing revelation occurs at every stage of Jewish history.

According to Rashi, this “marriage” also exists in the Galut. The love between God and Israel endured the centuries although not in an ideal way. The new sacred spaces of the “marriage” are the synagogues and the study houses, and the revelation takes place there. New venues require new interpretations. Rashi, in line with this need for reinterpretation, addressed his contemporaries in his explanations. His target audience was both a Jew who was “moving away” from religion or was becoming skeptical as a result of increasing pressure from Christianity, as well as Jews who faithfully studied the Torah in study houses. The exegesis of the Songs to the Song can thus be interpreted not only on a metaphysical level, but also as an instruction for the contemporary Jewish community to encourage Torah study, and to remain a faithful Jew. As a teacher, it may have been important for him to “repopulate” the declining synagogues and schools.

In order to improve the intensity of learning and prayer, the commentary includes explanations of rhetorical, apologetic and polemical nature. It can be rightly assumed that there were some low-intensity private, interfaith discourses, even before the great religious debates of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. This

is why it may have been important for Rashi to help the Jews in order to argue in a relevant, honest, enjoyable way on such occasions. He presumably knew the important Christian debates of the era. This may be indicated by the systematic interpretation of the “body” of God as the Torah (including the oral Torah), which eventually forms into a kind of “deincarnation theology”. The depiction of divine corporal reality as the Torah raises many questions. It may also refer to the existence of an esoteric doctrine, while its rhetorical elements, the text-centered discourses, may also have served to invigorate the intellectual life of the schoolhouse.

## **New results**

- A translation of Rashi's commentary on a complete biblical book is provided, becoming the first complete Hungarian translation of Rashi's commentary on the Song of Songs.
- A complete listing, classification, and analysis of the educational and apologetic-polemic explanations of Rashi's commentary on the Song of Songs is provided.
- I prove that, according to the commentary, revelation occurs at all stages of history.

- I identify the so-called “exoteric tradition” in the commentary. It provides the presentation and analysis of the homilies that replace God with the Torah, sages, oral doctrine in the commentary.
- I demonstrate how the commentary reacts to various Christian anti-Judaic doctrines: to the idea of rejection, or to the Augustinian idea of “Jewish witness”.
- The possible impact of contemporary Christian thought (like the impact of the Second Eucharistic Debate) and the demonstration of a specific “de-incarnation” theology in the commentary is discussed.



# Publications and Conferences

## Scientific Publications

- „Flames of Love and Pain – Reflections on the Fire of Song of Songs 8:6” (Közlésre elfogadott kézirat, Festschrift für Tamás Lichtmann).
- „A bor a rabbinikus zsidó hagyományban” Fiatal Kutatók és Doktoranduszok X. Nemzetközi Jubileumi Teológuskonferenciájának Tanulmánykötete (Budapest: Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége, 2020), 493-512.
- „Review - *Annotated Jewish New Testament – Second Edition New Revised Standard Edition*” (Közlésre elfogadott kézirat, Vallástudományi Szemle, 2021/1).

## Conferences

- Az Énekek Éneke aranyketrecben (2018 november 21 - A zsidóság tudománya és művészete, OR-ZSE).
- Az Énekek Éneke tudományos zsidó kommentárjai (2019 január 29 - Magyar Hebraisztikai Konferencia).

- A bor a rabbinikus zsidó hagyományban (2020 február 29 – Fiatal Kutatók és Doktoranduszok X. Nemzetközi Jubileumi Teológuskonferenciája, Eger).

## **Educational papers**

- 2019 december Szombat Magazin „Mit mond a zsidó hagyomány a globális vízválságról?”  
<https://www.szombat.org/hagyomany-tortenelem/a-nagyunnepek-es-az-edenkert-avagy-mit-mond-a-zsido-hagyomany-a-globalis-vizvalsagrol>
- 2020 április 8. Szombat online „A természet tönkretételéért... járvánnyal fizetünk?”  
<https://www.szombat.org/hagyomany-tortenelem/a-termeszet-tonkreteteleert-jarvannyal-fizetunk>

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Curriculum vitae

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## **Professional Experience**

**2015-present                      Rabbi**

Bét Sálom Synagogue (2015) – Magyarországi Zsidó Hitközségek Szövetsége (MAZSIHISZ)

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**2013-2014                      Rabbi**

Etz Chayim Minyan - Budapest, Hungary

**2013                                  Rabbi**

Beith GIL, Geneva, Switzerland

**2011-2012                      Professional Full-Time Rabbinical Internship**

AJLT, Toulouse, France

**2008 – 2011                      Rabbinical Internships in Jewish communities  
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**2018-2021                      Teacher – Jewish Studies**

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## **Education**

**2017- present                      Jewish Theological Seminary – University of  
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Doctoral Programme - Phd Student  
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**2008 – 2012**                      **Leo Baeck College**  
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**2010 – 2012**                      **King's College London**  
London, United Kingdom  
MA degree in Jewish Studies

**2007 – 2008**                      **Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies Jerusalem**  
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**1998 – 2004**                      **Budapest University of Technology and  
Economics**  
MSc degree in Electrical Engineering