



Miller, Chaim, ed.

*The Gutnick Edition Chumash: With Rashi's Commentary, Targum Onkelos and Haftaros with a Commentary Anthologized from Classic Rabbinic Texts and the Works of the Lubavitcher Rebbe*

Brooklyn, N.Y.: Kol Menachem, 2006. Pp. lviii + 1562.  
Cloth. \$59.99. ISBN 1934152013.

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The volume reviewed here is a somewhat odd selection for an academic forum. In essence, it is a pew Bible designed for an Ultra-Orthodox Jewish community for study and ritual use in the synagogue. Although it contains much material anthologized from the rabbinic and medieval Jewish exegetical tradition, its primary purpose is the dissemination of the teachings of the seventh and last formal leader (Rebbe) of the Chabad Lubavitch sect of Hasidic Judaism, Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–94), who led the movement from 1950 until his death (although some of his followers continue to insist he has not departed this world.) However, the choice to review the volume is not quite as odd as the fact that it was sent to this forum for review. This has much to say about how the Rebbe's followers perceive him as biblical exegete and how little is known by them about the world of academic biblical scholarship, its modes of discourse, and the types of questions it tries to answer. In other words, the volume appears to have been sent by the publisher, which has published only this work, a Passover Haggadah with Schneerson's commentary, and a short commentary by him on two of Maimonides' thirteen principles of faith, because either they believe the volume demonstrates their late Rebbe's merit as a biblicalist or because they sent copies to every review venue. In either case, what insight does this volume provide into the Rebbe as biblical commentator?

This book brings together in one binding five previously published commentaries, one on each book of the Pentateuch, published between 2002 and 2006. The commentary is introduced with a short description of the editorial process: largely a matter of culling

commentary from transcriptions of hundreds of public talks. This is followed by an explanation of the origins of public Torah reading and its place in Hasidic life and thought. The roots of the practice are piously, if not historically accurately, attributed to Moses at Sinai, and it is described as offering the congregation a way of drawing “its spiritual motifs down into the world” (xxv). There then follows a long description of the synagogue ritual of reading the weekly pericope and a short summary of the content of each of the weekly liturgical portions.

The commentary itself is laid out with the Hebrew Text of the Torah, the Aramaic Targum of Onkelos, and the medieval Hebrew commentary of the Northern French biblical commentator Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (Rashi, 1040–1105) on the right page. English material is placed at the bottom of the page and covers the entirety of the facing page. The English content includes a translation of the biblical text, the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s commentary (called here, *Toras Menachem*), a section called “Classic Questions” consisting of an anthology of paraphrased, not translated, comments from rabbinic (e.g., the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, Midrash Rabbah) and medieval sages (e.g., Ramban, Abraham ibn Ezra) to whom the Rebbe referred or alluded in his comments, and a small section devoted to classic Hasidic teachings related to the Torah portion.

Beginning with the translation, it must first be recognized that it is not a translation in the regular sense. In contrast to most modern translations, the translators aimed here to have the English conform to the Hebrew text as it was understood by Rashi. The NRSV translates Gen 18:1–2 as: “The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him.” The *JPS Tanakh* translates them as: “The LORD appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre; he was sitting at the entrance of his tent as the day grew hot. Looking up, he saw three men standing near him.” Our volume translates: “God appeared to (Avraham) in the plains of Mamre (three days after his circumcision), while he was sitting in the entrance of the tent (where he had been looking for passerby [*sic*] to welcome), in the heat of the day. He looked around and saw—look!—three (angels, in the form of) men were standing in front of him.” Although the parentheses help distinguish between what is in the Hebrew text and what is imposed from Rashi, the reader in the synagogue setting who does not read and understand Hebrew (or who has not read the introduction to the volume) will almost certainly come away with a skewed sense of the meaning of the Hebrew text but with the appropriate religious message intended by the translators: Rashi’s understanding is the correct understanding.

Schneerson’s biblical exegesis consists primarily of explaining Rashi’s commentary on particular verses. He insisted that the Torah was to be studied using Rashi’s commentary, and Rashi was central to his regular public talks about the weekly Torah portion. Between

1964 and 1988 he gave some eight hundred of these lectures on the weekly Torah reading, devoting special attention to explaining the commentaries of Rashi that were essential to properly understanding the Torah. He asserted that this medieval commentary could be understood by a five-year-old child (xiv), and his approach to Rashi was, as might be imagined, somewhat idiosyncratic. Rashi's commentaries are usually studied by examining the rabbinic sources from which he drew, comparing his comment on one biblical verse to his comment on a related verse elsewhere in Scripture, and the like. Schneerson, like many of Rashi's interpreters, argued that Rashi's commentary was intended to explain the *peshat* of the biblical text. The *peshat*, he insisted, was the verses' "simple" meaning, although this contention has been much disputed by scholars. However, following from this view, according to Schneerson the simple meaning could be arrived at using only a knowledge of the Torah text and Rashi's commentary on the verses preceding the particular lemma being studied, that is, the equivalent of what a five-year-old might bring to his study. In other words, in order to decipher Gen 18:1, the student needs only to know Rashi's commentary on Gen 1:1–17:27. At the very least, this view ignores the redaction history of the commentary and even Rashi's editing and correction of his own work (see, e.g., Samuel ben Meir's [Rashbam] commentary to Gen 37:2, where he discusses his grandfather Rashi's commentary).

The material that makes up Schneerson's commentary in this volume has been anthologized and translated from his public talks, usually given in Yiddish, and most transcribed by attendees, since the Rebbe tended to speak extemporaneously (not unprepared but without notes). This volume is not the first time these talks have been excerpted, translated, and arranged according to the Torah-reading schedule, but certainly it contains the greatest quantity of material. Earlier collections (e.g., Jonathan Sacks, ed., *Torah Studies* [1986]; Gershon Gale and Eliyahu Touger, eds., *In the Garden of the Torah* [2 vols.; 1994–95]) include excerpts from one or two talks on each of the weekly portions, whereas a portion in the commentary here reviewed may include excerpts of fifteen talks or more. While the excerpting means that it is not always possible to see the entire argument of a particular talk, the commentary provides a useful reference for finding where particular issues are discussed in Schneerson's collected works. Unfortunately, although the citations indicate the source of each comment, the date of each talk is not noted. The reader interested in the development of Schneerson's thought on a particular exegetical issue can see what came first and what came later but with no precision.

Judged for what it is, a pew Bible, this volume is a success. It does precisely what should be expected from such a book. It provides the weekly readings in clear style in their original language and offers a translation and commentary that reinforces the group's ideology. It further reinforces the place of the Rebbe in the life of his followers. The Lubavitch movement has been particularly successful in bringing nonpracticing Jews

back to living a religiously and ritually committed life, and for the many who do not have Hebrew text skills, this volume is designed to ensure that when they access the Bible they do it through the teachings of the Rebbe.

By modern academic standards, this volume is not at all useful to the reader seeking to understand the biblical text in its ancient context. Schneerson saw the text as speaking to the people of his generation, and its contemporary meaning trumped any discussion of antiquity. Despite being a commentary on Rashi, Schneerson's idiosyncratic reading of him makes it difficult to use this volume to better understand the medieval commentator in his time and place. Other super-commentaries on Rashi will be far more helpful for this purpose. The volume, however, is particularly useful for understanding how a particular group of Ultra-Orthodox Jews understands and relates to the Bible in the twenty-first century. Although not an academic book, the academic reader concerned with the reception of biblical text will find in it many things of interest.