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Joseph Bekhor Shor of Orléans and Christian Polemic of the Middle Ages

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion

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## JOSEPH BEKHOR SHOR OF ORLÉANS AND CHRISTIAN POLEMIC OF THE MIDDLE AGES: DIGEST

This thesis examines the polemical dimension of the Torah commentary of the twelfth-century northern French Torah exegete Joseph ben Isaac Bekhor Shor of Orléans, and attempts to situate Rabbi Bekhor Shor in the ongoing Jewish-Christian debate. In addition to examining the arguments between Christians and Jews with regard to the purported meaning of Scriptural passages and the *content* of interpretation about them, this study will also consider the differences and similarities between Christian and Jewish *methods* of interpretation, with particular focus on the exegesis of Bekhor Shor and his Gentile counterparts in the School of Saint Victor.

In particular, I will analyze the polemical arguments surrounding the figures of the biblical Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Jewish-Christian debate of the High Middle Ages influenced interpreters of Scripture in northern France to devote scholarly attention to the actions of the Patriarchs, whom Jewish commentators—Bekhor Shor especially—sought to defend against slander, with Jews refuting (what they regarded as) inappropriate interpretations by Christian scholars.

Rabbi Joseph Bekhor Shor of Orléans, a highly original interpreter of Scripture, offers throughout his commentary many clues to the intellectual, religious, and social climate in which he wrote. Indeed, the content and methodology of his polemic link him to prominent Christian exegetes of his day and to the literary conventions that influenced

*their* exegesis.

In five chapters, this study will present an overview of the Jewish Christian debate up to and including Bekhor Shor's milieu. I will supply biographical information about Joseph Bekhor Shor and offer insight into his chief concerns with regard to interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. I will present previously untranslated passages of his commentary in English and subject them to analysis in order to demonstrate their polemical orientation. This study will demonstrate how the Patriarchs are interpreted by Bekhor Shor in a polemical manner; and, finally, it will argue for the importance of Joseph Bekhor Shor as a representative—and remarkable—Jewish exegete of his time and place.

וַיִּשְׁמַע אֶת־דִּבְרֵי בְנֵי־לֵבָן לֵאמֹר לְעָקֹב אֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר לְאָבִינוּ וּמֵאֲשֶׁר לְאָבִינוּ עָשָׂה אֶת־כָּל־הַכְּבוֹד הַזֶּה׃  
וַיֵּרָא לְעָקֹב אֶת־פָּנָיו לֵבָן וְהָיָה אִינֹכּוֹ עִמּוֹ כְּתִמְנוֹל שְׁלֹשׁוֹם׃

*Jacob heard the words of Laban's sons, who said, "Jacob has taken away everything that was our father's, and from that which was our father's he has produced all of this honor!" Then Jacob greeted Laban; but see, things with him were not as they had been before.*

*Genesis 31:1-2*

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION TO THE JEWISH-CHRISTIAN DEBATE IN TWELFTH-CENTURY NORTHERN FRANCE

### Introduction to this Study

By the twelfth century in the northern French diaspora, Christianity had already produced numerous works of polemical literature against the Jews. The basic genres were established as early as the second century.<sup>1</sup> The Middle Ages saw increased contact between Jews and Christians, giving shape to a long-standing debate between the two faiths, with each party seeking to assert the validity—or the supremacy—of its own doctrine and defend its honor against the assailing interpretations of the other party. Sometimes the polemic—which existed not only as a protracted oral interchange, but also in written testimonies, exegeses of Scripture, dialogues, sermons, exempla, fictional narratives, miracle plays, and the like—approached a relatively even-handed sort of intellectual sparring. Later, especially in the thirteenth century and after, one notices in polemical literature an increasingly vitriolic invective and, from the Christian side, a concerted effort at conversion of the Jews.<sup>2</sup> This thesis will examine polemical literature that uses Scripture and its exegesis (or eisegesis, as the case may be) as the raw material and focus of its argument, restricting its analytical scope to the literature of twelfth-

<sup>1</sup>Gilbert Dahan, trans. by Jody Gladding, *The Christian Polemic against the Jews in the Middle Ages*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998. p. 20.

<sup>2</sup>This claim paraphrases one of author Gilbert Dahan's primary arguments in *The Christian Polemic against the Jews in the Middle Ages*. Cf. also David Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages: A Critical Edition of the Nizzahon Vetus*. New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1996.



century northern France. The study will examine both Christian interpretations of Jewish Scripture and the Jewish counter-defenses, with special attention to the latter and what these Jewish responses imply about the former. It will be necessary to note Christian doctrinal arguments—Trinitarianism, for instance—and polemical Jewish responses to them, visible in Scriptural exegesis. In addition to the debate between Christians and Jews with regard to the “true meaning” of Scripture and the *content* of interpretive remarks about it, this study will also consider the significant differences and similarities between Christian and Jewish *methods* of interpretation.

The sprawling topic of the medieval Jewish-Christian debate requires a lens with which to focus the issues. This study will devote considerable analysis to the polemical arguments surrounding the figures of the biblical Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. According to Avraham Grossman, the Jewish-Christian polemical debate influenced the interpretation of Scripture in northern France to give special attention to study the actions of the Patriarchs; the Jews sought to “remove from them [the Patriarchs] any possibility for slander. This tendency runs like a crimson thread through the creations of Rashbam, R. Joseph Karo, R. Joseph Bekhor Shor, and R. Eliezer of Beaugency.”<sup>3</sup> The study will take into consideration the portrayal of other associated biblical figures, including (but not limited to) Esau, Laban, and the sons of Jacob. I will contend that Christians save their most heated polemic for attacks on the figure of Jacob, who after all *is* Israel; likewise, it comes as little surprise that the Jews strive to defend Jacob’s merit while

<sup>3</sup>Avraham Grossman, *Hachmei Tzarfat ha-Rishonim*. Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 1995. p. 488.

saving their harshest words for Esau, who comes to symbolize the Gentile oppressor in much of Rabbinic literature.

The twelfth-century Tosafist, Torah commentator, and poet, Rabbi Joseph Bekhor Shor of Orléans, was regarded as a masterful and ruggedly individualistic interpreter of Scripture. He is said to have read Latin, and some have concluded that he participated actively in the Christian-Jewish debate, proving instrumental in the return of a learned apostate through convincing exegesis of Scripture.<sup>4</sup> As Joseph in his role as biblical exegete remains little studied, yet highly esteemed in the eyes of his contemporaries, he makes the perfect figure for a study of the Jewish-Christian debate that transpired—and in which he participated—during his life. His commentary also reveals much about the intellectual and social climate in which he wrote. “He dwells at length on the biblical figures and investigates the motives for their actions but at times interprets these somewhat in terms of contemporary social conditions (Gen. 27:40).”<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Avraham Grossman alleges, Joseph sought to defend the actions of the Patriarchs and reject calumnies—possibly Christian polemics—against them.<sup>6</sup> This study will investigate Grossman’s claim, arguing that Bekhor Shor’s defense of the Patriarchs does indeed derive, at least in part, from his polemical agenda. His defensiveness also derives

<sup>4</sup>See Nathaniel Share, *Joseph Bekhor Shor as Bible Exegete, with Special Reference to His Commentary on Genesis*. Hebrew Union College Rabbinical Thesis. Cincinnati, 1932. pp. 31-32. He cites Poznanski, Samuel, *Kommentar zu Ezechiel und den XII kleinen Propheten von Eliezer aus Beaugency*. Warsaw, 1914. p. lxx. He also cites Graetz, Heinrich, *Gesichte der Juden*, Vol. VI. Leipzig, 1871. p. 407, n. 7.

<sup>5</sup>“Bekhor Shor, Joseph Ben Isaac,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica* Vol. 4. Jerusalem: The Macmillan Company, 1964.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid*, 4:410. *Op. cit.* Grossman, *Hachmei Tzarfat ha-Rishonim*, 488-489.

from a firm adherence to certain literary and exegetical conventions prevalent in his milieu, conventions Bekhor Shor may have helped to *make* prevalent. In exploring his polemical writings, it will be necessary to present in English numerous relevant sections of Bekhor Shor's commentary to the Torah—with emphasis on the Patriarch Narratives—as no published English translation from the Hebrew yet exists.

The work at hand will also delve into larger literary and exegetical developments of the twelfth-century French Renaissance, with particular attention to cross-cultural polemical methodologies. We will investigate Bekhor Shor's motivations for writing, his involvement in the larger Jewish-Christian debate, and the relationship of his commentary to developments among Christians and Jews in the northern France of his day, particularly in the circles of noted Jewish and Gentile intellectuals. Can we see in Bekhor Shor's portrayal of the Patriarchs a larger trend in the literature of his time to iconize or defend biblical figures? How does his work reflect and/or influence the literary conventions of his day, particularly within the genres of polemical literature and the ways in which they represent reality? This study will explore these questions.

In order to situate R. Joseph Bekhor Shor within the cultural framework of the Jewish-Christian debate, it is necessary to present an overview of that debate. After giving an overview of social and intellectual interaction between Jews and Gentiles, I will sketch of the ongoing Jewish-Christian polemical interchange in its twelfth-century northern French incarnation, with special attention to the arena of polemically oriented Scriptural exegesis. What theological, cultural, or literary concerns of Jews and

Christians does polemical literature of this time and place reveal? The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to exploring these questions as an introduction to the intellectual and religious climate in which Joseph Bekhor Shor lived and wrote.

### **Interaction Between Jews and Gentiles in Twelfth-Century Northern France**

Northern France of the twelfth century saw increased interaction between Jews and Gentiles. At this time, Jews' relationships with society were primarily of a mercantile nature, as many Jews were restricted from owning land and joining trade guilds. And while some Jews owned fields, granaries, winepresses, and the like, most Jews of this time began to turn away from agriculture and toward commercial occupations.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, although there existed no formal, comprehensive, legislated segregation of Jews in this milieu, Jews nevertheless did not possess the same status in society as did their Gentile neighbors. They remained "distinctive and separated" as opposed to "separate and distinct."<sup>8</sup> "The twelfth century, as Gavin Langmuir has demonstrated, saw the formulation of a theory that being a Jew was a legal status in and of itself in feudal law; and increasingly the essence of that status for every Jew came to be his susceptibility to arbitrary taxation by the lord who exercised criminal justice over him."<sup>9</sup> The culture, imbued with old suspicions and superstitions, endorsed widespread popular animosity toward the Jews; at the same time, paradoxically, the Jews benefited

<sup>7</sup>William Jordan, *The French Monarchy and the Jews*, 23ff.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid*, 23.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid*, 29, citing Langmuir 1980:24-54.

from feudal and ecclesiastical protection.

Robert Chazan portrays this Jewish community as one well protected by the political authorities of twelfth century northern France, taking in part as his evidence the lower incident of property damage and persecution during the second Crusade (as opposed to the first).<sup>10</sup> Chazan notes that Christian chronicles of the second Crusade situate the bulk of the Jewish suffering in Germany.<sup>11</sup> There, protection of Jews by the Church is best demonstrated in the intervention of Bernard, Abbot of Clairvaux, to save the Jews from a repeat of the slaughter of the first Crusade. Bernard responded to reports of anti-Jewish agitation forwarded by the archbishop of Mayence, and journeyed in person to curb the instigating activities of the Cistercian monk Radulph.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, however, one should not make the mistake of ascribing altruistic motives to the Church. To the contrary, the Church wished to contain the Jews within their own semi-autonomous sphere and limit Jewish influence in French Christian society, a perceived threat in the twelfth century as the developing commercial and intellectual marketplaces began to invite increased contact between these heretofore isolated groups. Chazan enumerates many reasons that account for the ecclesiastical program of limitation and confinement of the Jews.<sup>13</sup> These concerns fall into three broad

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<sup>10</sup>Though in *France*, there was almost no First Crusade violence. The higher incident of damage may simply be attributable to the higher Jewish population there.

<sup>11</sup>Robert Chazan, *Medieval Jewry in Northern France: A Political and Social History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1973. pp. 36-37.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid*, 42f. Again, it is important to note that this incident took place in Ashkenaz and not in northern France proper.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. also Dahan, *The Christian Polemic*, 16f.

categories: (1) *Commercial factors*, as seen in the notorious mistrust born in response to the Jews' allegedly nefarious business practices.<sup>14</sup> (2) *Social factors*, best described as a fear of "Jewish influence" on their Christian neighbors, which prompted the Church to restrict, for instance, the Jewish use of Christian domestic help<sup>15</sup>; and (3) *Intellectual factors*, which are expressed in Christian polemical writings against the Jews. In short, the Church ensured that the Jews would remain protected, but they must also remain a humble—or humiliated—and isolated group. The official policy of the Church, with only one or two exceptions, did not favor expulsion. The reasons for this are intertwined with ecclesiastical ideology. Christian thought traditionally has required the continual existence of the Jews who, by their very existence in a protracted state of degradation, bear witness to the truth of Christianity, the faith which has superseded Judaism. "Jews existed in Christian society to persist until the end of time and bear witness to Christian truth."<sup>16</sup> The Church used its power and policies to ensure this ideology. But it had to exercise this power increasingly as Jews began to modernize with the rest of society; the belief in perpetual Jewish witness to the glory of the Church required that the Jews suffer interminably in a realm of degradation and isolation.

The apparent modernization and progress of the Jewish community correlates

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 43. Animosity generated by allegations of usurious money-lending, for instance, prompted the Church to fear its vessels and valuables falling into Jewish hands as a result of mounting debts (*Ibid.*). Cf. also Dahan, *The Christian Polemic*, 16-17.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup>Jordan, 33. Cf. Solomon Grayzel, *The Church and the Jews in the Thirteenth Century*, Vol. I. Philadelphia: Dropsie College, 1933. pp. 77-78, 293. On this subject, see also Robert Chazan, *Church, State, and Jew in the Middle Ages*. New York: Behrman House, Inc., 1980. pp. 4-5.

with intellectual developments of the age. "Amos Funkenstein has shown convincingly... a growing rationalism, which could potentially have led to greater tolerance but which in fact led to enhanced impatience with the Jews. Increasingly it was assumed that the Jewish failure to acknowledge the truth of Christianity, now further buttressed by the new rationalism, reflected satanic perversity."<sup>17</sup> This is important for us to keep in mind as we encounter the emphasis on rationalism and logic in the polemical debates considered in the following pages of this study. One way of handling the accused "perverters" of Christian truth was to make them outcasts in society<sup>18</sup>. One also notices Christians and Jews alike appealing to rationalism and logic as they polemicize against the allegedly perverse interpretations of the other. From the Christian side, however, the former approach—social and political ostracism—seems to have been the easier and more-advocated option. In fact, certain influential Christians expressed fear that Jews, whom the Church regarded as skilled and subtle dialecticians, could "seduce" the "simple" Christians, who were ignorant and ill-prepared for such oratorical matches.<sup>19</sup> The

<sup>17</sup>Chazan, *Medieval Jewry*, 45-46, citing Amos Funkenstein, "Basic Types of Christian Anti-Jewish Polemics in the Later Middle Ages." *Viator* 2 (1971): 373-382.

<sup>18</sup>Cf. also Anna Sapir Abulafia, *Christians and Jews in the Twelfth Century Renaissance*. New York: Routledge, 1995. p. 2, citing R.I. Moore, who labels "the twelfth century as the period in which European society began to brand its deviants as outcasts. His central thesis is that the changes which took place in the twelfth century generated the creation of in- and out-groups. He asserted that the literati, the new administrators who owed their position of power to their education, initiated persecution in order to consolidate their own social standing" (citing R.I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society. Power and Deliverance in Western Europe, 950-1250*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987; Moore, "Anti-Semitism and the Birth of Europe," in D. Wood, ed., *Christianity and Judaism*, Studies in Church History, Vol. 29. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992, pp. 33-57).

<sup>19</sup>Dahan, *The Christian Polemic*, 27-28. Cf. also David Berger, who cites Peter of Blois (d. 1200) as issuing a similar caveat to a Christian "who complained that he was... unequipped to answer the tricky arguments raised by the Jews in their disputations" ("Mission to the Jews and Jewish-Christian Contacts in the Polemical Literature of the High Middle Ages," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 91. (New York: Macmillan, 1986): 580).

Christian fear of seduction and conversion by erudite and wily Jews also helps to explain the generally high level of education among the participants in the polemical debate and among the authors of polemical literature: the ignorant were discouraged from participating. Christian polemical authors were inevitably clergy and held more or less elevated positions in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. On the Jewish side, many laypeople were well educated; their participation in the polemical debates was consequently widespread among rabbis and lay Jews.<sup>20</sup> In the polemical interchange between educated Jews and Christians, one can see the religious and cultural concerns of early-Renaissance northern French society exposed for further scrutiny.

### **Background of Polemical Literature**

Christian anti-Jewish polemical literature is as old as Christianity itself. "The reasons for this are built into the essence of the Christian faith, for a religion that was born out of Judaism had to justify the rejection of its parent."<sup>21</sup> As the earliest Rabbis used Hebrew Scriptures—for them, the word of the Living God—to justify and "prove" the claims of their own Rabbinic writings, so too did the earliest Christian authors explain Christian doctrine through prooftexts in the Hebrew Bible. Much of Christianity, of

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid*, 24-26. As an interesting side note, Esra Shereshevsky observes in RaSHI a similar warning to his students against entering into discussion with Christians, which in Shereshevsky's view, implies Church theologians, "for fear they may influence the discussant to weaken his adherence to Judaism" ("Rashi and Christian Interpretations," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 61 (1970/1971):76, citing Urban T. Holmes Jr. and Sister M. Amelie Klenke O.P., *Chrétien, Troyes, and the Grail*, 12).

<sup>21</sup>David Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages*, 4. Cf. also James Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue: A Study in the Origins of Antisemitism*, New York: Atheneum, 1974. p. ix.



course, arose out of the Hebrew Bible and Jewish theology. But many doctrines did not grow out of Hebrew Scripture. "Nevertheless, Christian acceptance of the divine origin of those Scriptures, together with an espousal of central beliefs that did not seem to be there, generated a need to explain this omission."<sup>22</sup> The marshalling of Hebrew Scriptures in support of Christian doctrine, often against the original intent of the Bible, and more often against an already centuries-old tradition of Jewish exegesis, led to wide variances between Christian and Jewish interpretation of identical biblical passages. The passages most often cited in explanation of this phenomenon come from the biblical Prophets, and especially those passages which have been understood by Christians as pertaining to the advent of the messiahship of Jesus.

The reason for vastly different interpretations of identical passages lies in the different interpretive approaches of Jews and Christians. Ironically, it was the Jew Philo of Alexandria who popularized the approach that would become dominant in Christian exegesis. He developed an allegorical mode of exegesis, an approach especially evident in his interpretation of biblical anthropomorphism. The allegorical approach, as I shall note below, becomes the favored exegetical method of the Church Fathers and, thereby, of normative Christianity for centuries. It became more than a mere technique of exegesis. "It lay at the very core of the Christian life and lived in the liturgy.... Apart from its liturgical function, allegory became a weapon in polemic with the antagonists of Christianity and in controversy among Christians at a time when the Church was still

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.* Cf. also Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson, "Disputations and Polemics," *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 6.

persecuted and her dogma still fluid."<sup>23</sup> Not until the twelfth century did the allegorical method face a serious challenge; it became a central matter of dispute in Jewish-Christian polemical discourse, and suffered internal Christian challenges as new modes of exegesis arose in the wake of late eleventh- and early twelfth-century intellectual developments. Nevertheless, allegory enjoyed a long duration at the forefront of Christian exegesis, inasmuch as it enabled Christian exegetes to understand the Hebrew Bible in terms radically different from apparent literal sense of the Bible, and radically different from the interpretations of their Jewish counterparts.<sup>24</sup> Through allegorical interpretation, much of the Hebrew Bible could be viewed as giving explicit testimony to the life and divinity of Jesus Christ, as well as proving specific points of Catholic dogma.

Of the basic genres of early polemical literature<sup>25</sup>, the collection of testimonies, or "*testimonia*," were the most influential. The original *testimonia* were compilations of thematic files, consisting of citations from the Old Testament, intended to demonstrate that the different phases of Jesus's life and the essential doctrines of Christianity were foretold in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>26</sup> The claims of these *testimonia* recur throughout the

<sup>23</sup>Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*. Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964. p. 9.

<sup>24</sup>It is true that much of Rabbinic midrash also employs allegorical exegesis of Scripture; but allegory by nature enables the author to utilize his own symbolic system to determine meaning. Jewish allegory therefore differs from Christian allegory more in its content than its methodology; the Rabbinic allegorization of Scripture used as its symbols structures of meaning derived from within a Jewish frame-of-reference, whereas Christian allegorists used symbols whose meaning derives from a Christian context.

<sup>25</sup>Which had been established by the second century.

<sup>26</sup>Dahan, *The Christian Polemic*, 20, citing Jean Danielou, *Les Origines du christianisme latin* (Paris, 1978), pp. 217-39. The first Latin text of this kind is by Tertullian from North Africa, in his work *Adversus Iudaeos*, composed ca. 200. From the same area we find similar writings, like Cyprian's *Collection of Testimonies* and the *Divinae Institutiones* of Lactantius. See Bernard Blumenkranz, "Anti-

history of Christian polemical literature. Well into the Middle Ages, the bulk of polemical discussions and writings continued to focus on christological passages in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>27</sup>

The Church Fathers, some of whom will be discussed more specifically in subsequent chapters, write predominantly in an allegorical mode.<sup>28</sup> St. Ambrose made Philo the basis of his own commentary on Genesis, "his only criticism being that Philo as a Jew could only understand the moral and not the allegorical sense; a Christian exegete must supplement him by finding types<sup>29</sup> of Christ and his Church."<sup>30</sup> While some of the Patristic writings, to varying degrees, disclose an attempt to incorporate literal exposition, the basic frame remained allegorical, and no Christian author before the twelfth century would have sacrificed the allegorical interpretation in favor of the literal. The writings of the Church Fathers often take a sermonic form, where the exegesis of Scripture is wedded to a homiletical goal with a moral, a message intended to edify the mind and lift the spirit of the Christian reader. These homilies, however, did not reflect direct polemical interchange.

In most cases they were not spoken *to* Jews, and in general it is not to be presumed that Jews were present at their delivery. They were warnings to Christians of the danger of intercourse with the Jews.... It is significant Jewish Polemics and Legislation in the Middle Ages," in *Journal of Jewish Studies* 15 (1964): 126.

<sup>27</sup>Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate*, 9.

<sup>28</sup>Cf. Smalley's comprehensive overview, *The Study of the Bible*, 10-25.

<sup>29</sup>I.e., symbols contained in Hebrew Scriptures.

<sup>30</sup>St. Ambrose, *De Cain et Abel*, i. 4-5, quoted in Smalley, *The Study of the Bible*, 20.

that without exception none of them are primarily, or in most cases at all,

interested in the doings of contemporary Jews.<sup>31</sup>

To be sure, the Jews remain at the center of the Church Fathers' concerns; but they are not addressed as a participant in an ongoing polemical debate. Rather, the early Christian polemics "approach the Jewish religion as a theological artifact, a faith that had long become obsolete, and not as a living and dynamic tradition."<sup>32</sup> The Jews of concern to the Church Fathers were not contemporary Jews, but the paradigmatic, legendary Jews of the Hebrew Bible and Christian Scriptures. Genuine polemical interchange requires the participation of both parties; but anti-Christian works by Jews remain virtually non-existent until the twelfth century.<sup>33</sup> Thus while *testimonia* and Patristic sermons provide us with excellent insight into Christian methods of exegesis and the basic concerns which surface in all Christian polemic, they do not best represent the polemical interaction between Christians and Jews.

"Obviously, the genre best adapted to controversy is the dialogue."<sup>34</sup> Dialogues were Christian writings, ostensibly presenting a dialogue between a Christian and a Jew about theological issues. The first example of this class of literature, Justin's "Dialogue

<sup>31</sup>Parkes, *Conflict*, 71-72.

<sup>32</sup>Jeremy Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews: The Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982. p. 22, citing B. Blumenkranz, "Augustin," pp. 230-231; *SRH*, 5:108-17.

<sup>33</sup>Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate*, 7. Berger offers two reasons: (1) "Jews had no internal motivation for writing polemics against Christians; in times or places where Christianity was not a threat, we cannot expect Jews to be concerned with a refutation of its claims" (*Ibid*); and (2) "...during much of the so-called Dark Ages, Jews in Christian lands produced no literature that has survived" (*Ibid*).

<sup>34</sup>Dahan, *The Christian Polemic*, 20.

with Trypho," becomes the model on which this genre is based.<sup>35</sup> While there exists much convincing evidence in support of actual dialogues carried on periodically throughout the history of Jewish-Gentile interaction in medieval Europe, it is now thought that the vast majority of literary "Dialogues" do not record actual "dialogue."<sup>36</sup> The literary conceit of Justin's "Dialogue with Trypho," for instance, posits the dialogue as a record of an actual conversation held with Rabbi Tarfon, a claim now rejected by Christian and Jewish scholars alike.<sup>37</sup> Most of the time, the Jew-figure in a Dialogue remains a passive foil for the Christian's exposition of Christian argument. In the greatest likelihood, Church Fathers composed "Dialogues" primarily for the sake of wavering Christians whose faith would have benefited—so the argument goes—from textual "evidence" in which the Christian argument eventually but inevitably wins over the recalcitrant Jew.<sup>38</sup> Ironically, the doctrinal argument itself does not always appear to convince the Jew in this genre of literature. Rather, the Christian often must resort to miracle to win over his adversary!<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup>Cf. Parkes, *Conflict*, 71f. For an extensive discussion of this and other early Christian "Dialogues," see Amos B. Hulen, "The Dialogue with the Jews as Source for the Early Jewish Argument against Christianity." In *Journal of Biblical Literature* 51 (1932): 58-70.

<sup>36</sup>Hulen, 63.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid*, 62-63.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid*, 63-64.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid*, 64. In one noted instance, the conversion of the Jewish character—having successfully countered the Christian argument—is effected by the Jew's miraculous vision of "the Prophet Moses standing before the Crucified Jesus and worshipping him as Lord. He [Herbanus, the Jew] rebuked Moses, and was rebuked in turn, with the promise that he too should soon adore Jesus as Lord. This much he confided to the other Jews; but he continued to stand his ground, until at length he challenged the Archbishop to prove to him that Jesus was still alive. Gregentius [the Christian figure in this Dialogue] thereupon entreated the Lord to appear to him out of heaven, and he came out of the East.... As this marvel could not be gainsaid, Herbanus and all the other Jews were baptized" (*Ibid*, 69-70).

In the three basic genres of the polemical literature of the Church Fathers—testimonies, sermons, and dialogues—and most conspicuously in the last of these, one sees the basic exegetical concerns and methodologies used by Christian writers in responding to the Jews and the Judaism they tenaciously retained against the hopes and expectations of the early Church. Perhaps recognizing that widespread conversion of the Jews by verbal argument was an increasingly distant and implausible goal, Christian exegetes instead oriented their polemical literature to a Christian audience, and in particular to those Christians of unsteady faith. But Christians and Jews would not remain mutually sequestered forever; increased contact in the eleventh and especially twelfth centuries brought a new orientation to Christian polemic, and witnessed the first comprehensive endeavor at polemical writing undertaken by Jews. As ever, their shared exegetical focal point remained the Hebrew Bible and its interpretation.

### **The Shape of the Jewish-Christian Debate in Twelfth-Century Northern France**

The great preponderance of studies in the last half-century, having surveyed Christian and Jewish polemical literature of the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, point to evidence of increasing occurrences of actual dialogue between individual Jews and Christians during this time, as compared to earlier periods.<sup>40</sup> A closer look at one small but significant arena of interaction—that between scholars of the School of St. Victor and the twelfth-century School of RaSHI—will be undertaken in chapter five of this study;

<sup>40</sup>Cf. Berger, "Mission," 579, citing Aryeh Grabois, "The *Hebraica Veritas* and Jewish-Christian Intellectual Relations in the Twelfth Century," *Speculum*, Vol. 50, No. 4 (1975): 613-634.

but in a more general sense, the trend merits cursory examination here. Some evidence in support of personal interaction comes from signifiers in polemical texts. For instance, some have noted the frequent usage, in Jewish sources, of introducing anti-christological arguments with phrases like: "'if somebody were to object you must answer' or 'the Christians interpret this psalm [as referring] to Jesus' (or 'to that man' or 'to their faith'), but you must answer them...'",<sup>41</sup> suggesting that these utterances constitute more than just figures of speech, but rather point to actual dialogue and the nature of the controversy as "a real life issue, a common daily life feature."<sup>42</sup> The controversy, the remnants of which are visible today in the written polemical works, took place originally, and throughout this period, in public oral interchange. These debates most likely concentrated on the different interpretations of key biblical passages, texts which had for centuries generated controversy over religious doctrine.

Such debates no doubt predated the High Middle Ages, but they may well have intensified as a result of the growing intellectual sophistication engendered by the cultural revolution that transformed both Jewish and Christian society in this period. The renaissance of the High Middle Ages surely facilitated the literary expression of these confrontations by both sides.<sup>43</sup>

The cultural transformations which influence polemical literature of this period extend

<sup>41</sup>Sampled from the writings of Joseph Kimhi, quoted in Erwin Rosenthal, "Anti-Christian Polemics in Medieval Bible Commentaries," *Journal of Jewish Studies* (1960): 120.

<sup>42</sup>E. Rosenthal, *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup>Berger, "Mission," 579.

beyond intellectual developments. The study of the Bible in the twelfth century "was correlated with the progress of urban society and was one of its results."<sup>44</sup> In particular, the growth of urban schools, which unlike monasteries were open to a larger number of students, generated increased academic competition and stimulated the development of new intellectual approaches to Bible-study; and the presence of Jews and Christians in concentrated urban areas promoted increased contact between scholars of both faiths.<sup>45</sup>

With this increased contact came, in each of the two groups, an increased desire to understand the other's interpretations of key biblical passages, if only to refute them. For the Christians, this desire necessarily led to a renewed desire to understand Hebrew, as it was not only the original language of the text<sup>46</sup>, but also the language of the ongoing tradition of rabbinic exegesis. Moreover, Hebrew was highly regarded by scholars of Hebrew and Latin alike for a number of traditional reasons: It was considered to have been the original language spoken in Eden, the language spoken by the angels, the language reserved for God after the Tower of Babel catastrophe, and the preferred speech of those who went to heaven.<sup>47</sup> Jews of the eleventh and twelfth centuries developed an interest in Latin, the language of the Church; but Latin lacked the holy mystique of Hebrew. Latin remained "just another language to educated Jews, no more, no less. Or

<sup>44</sup>Grabois, "The *Hebraica Veritas*," 619.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup>And the growing rationalism of the twelfth century correlated with a growing trend toward understanding the "literal sense" of Scripture; see my chapter five for more on this subject. Cf. also Grabois, 616f.

<sup>47</sup>Jordan, 15.



maybe less: because it had been the language of the oppressor...."<sup>48</sup> The desire of both groups to learn the other's language (though expressed more from the Christian side) also promoted relations among their scholars, resulting in the presence of Rabbinic explanations of Scripture in some Christian polemical works, and Christian interpretations in Jewish polemics.

The purpose of this study is not primarily to evaluate Christian polemical literature, but rather to look at the polemical writings of one representative Jewish scholar of this milieu. Nevertheless, it would be remiss not to mention important Christian polemicists of the era and some of their most conspicuous concerns, as revealed in their polemical/exegetical writings, virtually all of which are classified as Dialogues. The first and foremost of these exegetes was RaSHI's contemporary, Gilbert Crispin, the abbot of Westminster, England. Gilbert Crispin's exegetical endeavor included an examination of the precise words of the Vulgate text, reflecting his generation's interest in the meaning and usage of individual words.<sup>49</sup> His polemical work *Disputatio Iudei* grew out of debates or conversations between himself and a Jewish scholar from Mainz, conducted "in a friendly spirit [*amico animo*] about the Holy Scriptures and our faith."<sup>50</sup> Gilbert's argument, in general, relies both on the so-called "literal sense" of the text and on

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.* Chapter five will speculate as to the knowledge of Latin among Jewish scholars of the School of RaSHI.

<sup>49</sup>Anna Sapir Abulafia, *Christians and Jews in the Twelfth Century Renaissance*. New York: Routledge, 1995, pp. 97f.

<sup>50</sup>Quoted in Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson, "Disputations and Polemics." In *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 6 (Jerusalem, 1971):cols. 79-103. (From CD-ROM edition, Israel: Judaica Multimedia Ltd.) "Even scholars who consider this dialogue a literary fiction would have to concede that in tone and content it expresses the spirit of arguments exchanged between Jews and Christians..." (*Ibid.*)

allegorical or figurative explanations in order to elucidate, in his view, a proper understanding of Scripture.<sup>51</sup>

Peter Alfonsi, an apostate Jew,<sup>52</sup> writing less than twenty years after Gilbert Crispin, openly critiqued what he regarded as the Jewish way of reading Scripture.

The fact that he himself had abandoned Judaism for Christianity and was writing his *Dialogi* to justify his conversion must have influenced his approach.... After all, he was out to prove that he understood Jewish authoritative texts better than generations of rabbis had ever done. ... [H]e asserted that Jewish biblical literalism too opposed what reason taught us about the natural world.<sup>53</sup>

This last concern of his polemic will surface often—with impassioned arguments from both sides—throughout polemical exegeses of Scripture of twelfth-century France.

Numerous Christian scholars reveal, in their polemical writings, an interest in understanding the interaction of Jews and Gentiles, the theological doctrine of divine election of one people, the nature of faith, and the covenantal relationship between God and humanity. In particular, much Christian exegetical literature challenges the historic Jewish contention of an exclusive covenantal relationship between God and Israel. In the written polemical debates over these issues, the rituals of circumcision and baptism figure prominently, as they encapsulate and symbolize these theological conflicts. Circumcision

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<sup>51</sup> Abulafia, 98.

<sup>52</sup> Certain apostate Jews became, in twelfth-century northern France, among the most outspoken advocates of their new Christian faith and critics of their rejected Judaism.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

and its relation to a broad array of cultural, theological, and exegetical concerns will be examined more specifically, and with regard to the writings of Joseph Bekhor Shor, in the following chapters; but three Christian writers deserve note on this subject. Their views, which should be kept in mind as we encounter the writings of Bekhor Shor, further demonstrate the rising tension between allegorical and non-allegorical understandings of the Bible, and in particular of biblical Law. Pseudo-William's *Dialogue* (written 1123-48) owes much to Gilbert Crispin's *Disputatio Iudei* and his *Disputatio cum Gentili*, but like his contemporary, Peter Alfonsi, goes farther in critiquing Jewish interpretations and practices: "The rite of circumcision prefigured the sacrament of baptism. Continued carnal observance of the letter of the old Law thus destroys its proper, spiritual, observance."<sup>54</sup> One encounters similar views in the writings of his contemporaries Pseudo-Anselm and Rupert of Deutz, the latter of whom declares circumcision as "tantamount to negating Christ."<sup>55</sup> Even more relevant to this study will be the exegetical writings of the School of St. Victor, which will be considered here in the last chapter. The points emphasized and elaborated by all of these eleventh and twelfth century scholars bear witness to the fundamental tensions that undergird the Jewish-Christian debate, tensions which cannot be lost, even in the seemingly more tangential arguments presented in polemical discourse and literature. Christian writers wanted to promote their

<sup>54</sup>Pseudo-William of Champeaux, *Dialogus inter Christianum et Iudaeum de fide Catholica* [*Dialogus*]; PL 165, cols. 1045-6, quoted in Abulafia, 102.

<sup>55</sup>Rupert of Deutz, *Anulus sive dialogus inter Christianum et Iudaeum*, I, ll. 236-55; ed. R. Haacke in M. L. Arduini, *Ruperto di Deutz e la controversia tra Christiani ed Ebrei nel secolo XII*, Rome, Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medio Evo, 1979, p. 191. Cited in Abulafia, 102.

faith and defend it from doubt and attrition among their adherents. This program entailed continual assertions against competing interpretations offered by perceived heretics from within the Christian fold, and more importantly, by the parent tradition, Judaism. After centuries of relative silence, the Jews responded as the debate headed into the twelfth century.

The number of active Jewish polemicists from this era in northern France is unknown, a fact that reflects general uncertainty about the scope of the Jewish-Christian debate there. Were a majority of exegetes on both sides involved in the discourse, or was the debate limited to a handful of scholars on either side? Indeed, one encounters polemical currents in northern French Jewish exegesis from RaSHI on; however, it must be emphasized that there existed more wide and active polemical engagement between Jews and Christians in Spain, Provence, and even Sicily.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, few Jews, even among the known polemicists of northern France, knew Latin; still fewer Christian exegetes knew Hebrew, despite the resurgence of interest in the language.<sup>57</sup>

These uncertainties aside, however, it remains undeniable that the twelfth century saw the active engagement of some of the most prominent northern French Jewish exegetes in the ongoing Jewish-Christian debate. Joseph Kimhi, R. David Kimhi (RaDaK), R. Samuel ben Meir (RaSHBaM), Eliezer of Beaugency, Joseph Kara, and Joseph Bekhor Shor of Orléans were all leading scholars of their respective generations, many of them the torchbearers of an exegetical tradition begun with RaSHI in the

<sup>56</sup>Jordan, 15.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*

previous century. And from all of their exegetical writings one can adduce evidence, in varying degrees, of an anti-Christian polemical agenda.<sup>58</sup> This study does not attempt to compare the polemical statements of these scholars, each one representative of the Jewish community of his generation, each one a gauge and advocate of his community's cultural and theological concerns. Rather, I shall focus on the last and perhaps most polemically oriented of them, Joseph Bekhor Shor, with the goals of presenting relevant, previously untranslated passages of his commentary in English, critically examining these remarks for polemical themes, and situating him in his cultural, religious, and literary milieu.

In the vigorous style, carefully crafted argument, and passionate religious, social, and literary concerns of Bekhor Shor's commentary to the Torah, we face an inviting window onto his time and place. Over time, Bekhor Shor's window has been shuttered and neglected in favor of other Jewish commentators. He is cited today far less frequently than other commentators still probed to elucidate the biblical text. In presenting Bekhor Shor's commentary in translation and examining a range of passages, interrelated by their polemical dimension, perhaps readers will begin to brush away some of the dust of obscurity that has settled upon him, and in so doing, bring to his name the recognition and honor it so richly deserves.

<sup>58</sup>E. Rosenthal, 126f.

## CHAPTER II: JOSEPH BEN ISAAC BEKHOR SHOR OF ORLÉANS

### Who Was Joseph Bekhor Shor?

The information we possess about the life of Rabbi Joseph of Orléans remains sparse to this day. Nor do we know much of his ancestors or descendants: he mentions his father once, in his remark on Lev. 23:16, and not by name. Even his full appellation—Rabbi Joseph ben Isaac Bekhor Shor, of Orléans—attests to the difficulty of fleshing out his identity. His designation Bekhor Shor (“First-born Ox”) refers to the same expression applied to the biblical Joseph,<sup>59</sup> and it is likely that this appellation, in addition to the honor it conferred on its bearer, functioned at a practical level to distinguish Joseph of Orléans from other Josephs of his time and place. Most scholars now link the man called Joseph Bekhor Shor to R. Joseph ben Isaac, of Orléans, the latter a noted Tosafist and Torah exegete of the twelfth century, whose comments to the Torah text are occasionally followed immediately by a remark attributed to one “Bekhor Shor.”<sup>60</sup> Some scholars have taken this closely proximate differentiation of the two names to signify the existence of two different exegetes.<sup>61</sup> Prevailing opinion, however, regards R. Joseph of Orléans and R. Bekhor Shor as one and the same. H. Gross bases this opinion in a number of examples, such as the remark in the *Tosafot to Shabbat* 12a,

<sup>59</sup>Deut. 33:17: “בכור שורו חדר לו.”

<sup>60</sup>Nebo, Yehoshafat, ed. *Perushei Rabbi Yosef Bekhor Shor al Ha-Torah*. Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1994. p. 1. Cf. Gen. 24:7, brought in the name “R. Joseph of Orléans,” followed by a comment in the name “Bekhor Shor,” or so too in the commentary to Gen. 33:7.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.

there attributed to R. Joseph of Orléans, which we find reproduced in the commentary of Bekhor Shor to Exodus 8:12.<sup>62</sup> Scholars Shmuel Poznanski<sup>63</sup> and Ephraim Urbach<sup>64</sup> concur in their respective scholarly works about Bekhor Shor and his contemporaries. In short, current scholarship accepts that Joseph Bekhor Shor and R. Joseph of Orléans are one man.

This information, of course, does little good in assessing *who* he was or how he was perceived in his day. We know that he belongs to the twelfth-century incarnation of the so-called School of RaSHI; and his literary output consists of at least three genres: *Tosafot*, Exegetical commentary to the Torah, and Poetry, the last in a collection of *piyyutim* and in pithy poetic *envois* at the conclusion of each *parasha* of the Torah, which playfully use the title of the *parasha* to determine rhyme and poetic structure. He appears in the *Tosafot* to Tractates *Shabbat*, *Yevamot*, *Bava Batra*, *Zevachim*, and *Hullin*. He studied with Rabbeinu Tam, grandson of RaSHI and a leading sage of the generation prior to Bekhor Shor's. Rabbeinu Tam evidently esteemed Bekhor Shor highly; in this regard R. Tam resembles other commentators of his day and after who recognized Bekhor Shor as a great scholar among great scholars. His reputation and esteem are preserved in an old saying: "Throw all the commentaries of northern France into the trash, except for the Interpreter of the Law (RaSHI) and the Son of the Ox (Bekhor

<sup>62</sup>H. Gross, *Gallia Judaica*. Paris, 1897, p. 34, cited in Nebo 2.

<sup>63</sup>Shmuel Avraham Poznanski, *Hachmei Tzarfat Mefarshei Ha-Mikra: Perush Yehezkel v'Trei-Asar l'Rabbi Eliezer Me'Balgency—Mavo*. Warsaw, 1913. Reprint: Jerusalem, 1965, pp. LVII-LVI.

<sup>64</sup>Ephraim E. Urbach, *Ba'alei Ha-Tosafot: Toldoteihem, Hibureihem, v'Shitatam*. Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1980. pp. 115, 134.

Shor).<sup>65</sup> Indeed, encountering Bekhor Shor's commentary for the first time, one may note with regret and surprise his present-day obscurity.

We do not know the extent of Bekhor Shor's study with Rabbeinu Tam.

Nathaniel Share believes that his tutelage remained confined to the discipline of Talmud, as the only explicit connections between Bekhor Shor and Rabbeinu Tam occur in the *Tosafot*<sup>66</sup>; moreover, Bekhor Shor's rugged self-reliance and individuality within his commentary to the Torah suggests at best a limited influence of any hypothetical instructor. In fact, Bekhor Shor's Torah commentary most closely resembles the work of his colleague RaSHBaM (R. Samuel b. Meir), whose use of literal interpretation (what Jews call *peshat* and Christian scholars call *sensus literalis*)—a method begun with RaSHI, and passed down through RaSHI's successors (for example: Joseph Kara, RaSHBaM)—he adopts and uses skilfully as a tool not only in explicating the text, but also in defending the Jewish reading of the text from calumny or challenges. These challenges—brought against the text both from the external, Gentile world and from within the Jewish domain—will serve as the focus of our discussion of Bekhor Shor's commentary to the Bible, and, in particular, to the Patriarch narratives (Genesis 12-50).

His literal-minded interpretations and rationalistic tendencies have led some scholars tentatively to suggest a link between Bekhor Shor and Spanish Jewish exegesis,

<sup>65</sup>Nathaniel S. Share, *Joseph Bekhor Shor as Bible Exegete*, 10, citing a quotation from Hayyim David Azulai, *Shem Ha-Gedolim*, Vienna 1864, s.v. *Rashi*, p. 74a. "He, however, erroneously identifies בן פורתא (Son of the Ox) with Joseph Tob Elem" (fn., Share, 10). Re-translated from the Aramaic by J. E. Blake.

<sup>66</sup>As well as in four halakhic questions of R. Joseph addressed to R. Tam preserved in *Sefer Ha-Yashar* (Avraham Grossman, "Bekhor Shor, Joseph Ben Isaac" in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 4).



which in general shares thematic and stylistic elements<sup>67</sup> with Bekhor Shor's exegesis, but none has done so conclusively. Abraham Geiger speculated that his Bible teacher was one R. Obadiah Ha-Sephardi, whose name Bekhor Shor recalls in a number of *perushim*.<sup>68</sup> Certainly Obadiah's name, Ha-Sephardi, hints tantalizingly at a means by which Bekhor Shor could have acquired knowledge of Spanish exegetical traditions and methodology, a notion that Share, following Geiger, entertains while recognizing that Bekhor Shor's methodology exhibits strong affinity with the trend toward rationalism "exhibited by his [French] predecessors, of which he represents in large degree the culmination."<sup>69</sup> It is tempting, nevertheless, to attempt to connect the Spanish school to the School of Rashi in Bekhor Shor's day, and we can bring some evidence in favor of this argument. The writing of Bekhor Shor's commentary to the Torah may have shortly postdated the sojourn at Chartres and Paris of the celebrated Spanish exegete Abraham Ibn Ezra, a visit "generally considered as the beginning of the acquaintance of the Jewish sages in France and the Empire with the works of the scholarly center of Spanish Jewry."<sup>70</sup> By the 1160's, Parisian Jews had begun to acquire familiarity with Spanish exegesis.<sup>71</sup> Such cross-pollination may have found its way to a leading sage in the nearby

<sup>67</sup>For instance, Bekhor Shor uses Spanish meter in his *piyyutim*.

<sup>68</sup>See, for instance, Gen. 2:2, Ex. 10:2, Ex. 22:9; A. Geiger also believes that remarks quoted in Obadiah's name in the exegetical compendia *Da'at Zekenim* and *Hadar Zekenim* are drawn from the commentary of Bekhor Shor. Cf. Share, 3, fn. 1, 2. *Da'at Zekenim* is a late thirteenth-century work.

<sup>69</sup>Share, 5.

<sup>70</sup>Grabois, 628, fn. 69. Cf. M. Friedlander, *Essays on the Writings of Abraham Ibn-Ezra* (London, 1877): 4:199.

<sup>71</sup>*Ibid.*

northern French community of Orléans. Others have asserted such a connection outright, suggesting that Bekhor Shor knew Ibn Ezra's works,<sup>72</sup> a conjecture that Poznanski finds plausible, given that we know of Bekhor Shor's familiarity with the works of Ibn Parhon, Ibn Ezra's pupil; however, he also acknowledges that the reverse could have occurred: what if Ibn Ezra encountered the exegesis of Bekhor Shor, or one of his colleagues, during his trip to France, and later incorporated it into his own commentary?<sup>73</sup> Alternatively, "the similar motives which actuated both Joseph Bechor Shor and Ibn Ezra and the similar method which they pursued could have led them often to the same interpretations independently of each other."<sup>74</sup> In the end, we duly note the occasional and uncanny similarity between the *perushim* of these two exegetes and let the question stand.

### Joseph Bekhor Shor's Exegetical Method and Style

Perhaps the most striking feature of Bekhor Shor's commentary is not its undeniable and inevitable likeness to that of his predecessors, especially RaSHI's, but its points of divergence and originality from the commentaries of earlier (and, to a lesser but significant extent, contemporaneous) Northern French exegetes. He remains distinct in that he went further than the rest of them in distancing his interpretations from

<sup>72</sup>Gotthilf Walter, *Joseph Bechor Shor, der letzte nordfranzösische Bibelexeget*, Bresslau, 1890. pp. 18-19, cited in Share, 52.

<sup>73</sup>Poznanski, LIX, cited in Share, 52. There is no conclusive evidence of such a meeting with Bekhor Shor or, for example, R. Tam or RaSHBaM, except for the parallels among their commentaries.

<sup>74</sup>J. Neumann, Introduction to his edition of *Der Pentateuch-Commentar des Joseph Bechor Shor*, zum Buche Numeri, Cap. 1-15, Frankfurt A/M, 1900. p. vii, quoted in Share, 52.

anthropomorphic portrayals of the Deity, in teaching about the merits of the patriarchs and in expunging, defending, or counter-arguing perceived slander about them, in relating alleged miracles to phenomena of Nature (or, in certain cases, astrology or other natural "science"), and in offering rational explanations for the often seemingly inexplicable *mitzvot* of the Torah.<sup>75</sup> In many of these regards, he evinces a possible influence of (or on?) the Spanish commentators; but equally as important, he operates of his own desire to refute the claims of heretics, apostates, and Christians, with whom many of Bekhor Shor's day debated vigorously<sup>76</sup>—possibly including, we might conjecture, Joseph of Orléans himself. This last claim remains impossible to prove or disprove; though given the currently accepted scholarly view that the twelfth century saw a widespread trend of public debates between learned Jews and Christians on the subject of Bible interpretation, it stands to reason that Bekhor Shor's repudiation of Christian readings of the Hebrew Bible may not have been limited to his written works<sup>77</sup>, but in fact also took shape in public discourse.

It is worth pointing out that R. Joseph Bekhor Shor himself was positioned on the point of contact between these heretics and the method of Christian allegorical exegesis. He knew Latin, and was familiar with, it seems, the Christian interpretation, such as that of the Christian exegetes of his generation, such as Master Hugo. Victor and his pupil Andrew [of the

<sup>75</sup>Urbach, 115.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid*, 116.

<sup>77</sup>Nebo goes so far as to conclude, "Bekhor Shor debated with the Christians and negated their interpretations" (9).

School of St. Victor] were familiar with the interpretations of RaSHI,

RaSHBaM, R. Joseph Karo, and even those of Bekhor Shor.<sup>78</sup>

On the other hand, as we will observe when we examine his commentary, one must wonder how much of his interpretation would have resonated with, or even made sense to, a Christian audience. Recall that even in the twelfth century, knowledge of Hebrew and Rabbinic exegesis remained meager even among the most educated Christian Scholars, the Victorines and a handful of others notably excepted. Even if we imagine a scenario in which rabbis met with Christian exegetes and paraphrased or translated their respective interpretations into the vernacular, one must still ask: in its final, *written form*, for whom is this literature written?<sup>79</sup> In general, R. Joseph's commentary reveals an author more determined to shore up the support of Jews for an authentically Jewish reading of the text than one determined to impugn or abrogate Christian readings. Moreover, occasionally Bekhor Shor's invective against Christian interpretation waxes sufficiently vehement to prompt one to wonder if he ever intended it to reach a Christian audience, who might have taken offense to his remarks. We will return to these concerns as we encounter the selected texts.

To arrive at a clearer understanding of Bekhor Shor's method and motives remains the central challenge of this examination of his commentary to the Patriarch

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.* Cf. Smalley, 103ff. As for Bekhor Shor's knowledge of Latin, Urbach bases this claim in part of Bekhor Shor's professed familiarity with the translation of Hieronimus. "In one place in his commentary to Psalms, of which we have received only fragments, R. Joseph comments that "Hieronimus, who translated the text, erred" (Urbach, 116).

<sup>79</sup>That is to say, Hebrew on the Jewish side, and Latin on the Christian, are merely the languages in which the debate is recorded and not necessarily the language in which it was *conducted*. Therefore the language of the written document is not sufficient proof of the polemic's purpose or intended audience.

narratives. We will, time and again, ask questions that arise from our reading of his commentary: For whom was this commentary intended? Jews? Christians? both? the laity or the scholars of either population? Does his far-reaching defensiveness of the Patriarchs attest to commonly known or well-publicized calumnies about these mythical figures? Or does he hope to ease Jewish doubts, misgivings, or questions about the often all-too-human subjects of Genesis? Does Bekhor Shor's methodology borrow from the growing trend toward *sensus literalis* in Christian scholarly circles, or does his innovative use of *peshat* influence Gentiles? We ask the same question of Bekhor Shor's use of sequential narrative—of viewing the text not as a collection of individual verses, but reading with an eye toward the interconnectedness of the verses and the development of story line and character across the narrative.<sup>80</sup> What motivates Bekhor Shor to argue from natural phenomena and historical events, and to explain the behavior of the Patriarchs in “natural” or “logical” ways?<sup>81</sup> Finally, does Bekhor Shor rely on *peshat*-interpretation over *aggadah* with polemical intent, that is to say, with the intent of counter-arguing against Christian allegorical interpretation of the text?<sup>82</sup> Or does *peshat*

<sup>80</sup>A. Grossman observes “the manner in which he relates passages to one another,” and finds these comments particularly “strange and pilpulistic” (“Bekhor Shor, Joseph Ben Isaac” *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 4). I will, in the course of this study, refer to the scholarship of Michael Signer on the subject of the 12th-century use of *peshat* and sequential narrative, which will aid us in mitigating the perceived “strangeness” of Bekhor Shor's approach to the text as a unified narrative. I will suggest that Bekhor Shor's interconnecting of seemingly disparate themes and events follows from his objective to present a consistent narrative in his commentary, and not simply a discrete verse-by-verse exegesis.

<sup>81</sup>Cf. Nebo, 9.

<sup>82</sup>In many places, Bekhor Shor does utilize the aggadic interpretation of a given passage, understanding the common midrashic meaning as the literal sense of the word, verse, or passage. “He does not distance [his reading] entirely from the *aggadah*, and even uses *gematriot*” (Urbach, 117. Cf. Poznanski LXXIff).

simply reflect a fondness for logic or rationalism given validity in RaSHI (and earlier literature) and seen by commentators of Bekhor Shor's day as the appropriate or fashionable way to read the biblical text? We will provide few absolute, definitive answers to these questions. But as we proceed through his commentary, these questions will focus our reading on the issues of method and motive—the issues not explicitly on the page, but that inform and shape his commentary from the inside out.

### **The Polemical Dimension of Bekhor Shor's Commentary**

Of particular note in this study is the relationship between Bekhor Shor's commentary and the shape of the Jewish-Christian debate. "According to Poznanski, J. Bekhor Shor commented on almost all the passages which the Christians claim as foundations for their faith; in particular he polemicized against their concept of the trinity, images, Jesus' birth without a father, etc."<sup>83</sup> I will examine a number of those passages with explicitly anti-Christological polemical intent, in depth, in the coming pages. As an introduction to the subject, however, Bekhor Shor gives us a representative taste of his style and method in his commentary to Numbers 12:8. We survey this passage not only to introduce us to his style and method, but also to frame the polemical features of his exegesis. The following is an excerpt<sup>84</sup>:

**Num. 12:8. [With him (Moses) I speak] face to face ... [clearly, and**

<sup>83</sup>E. Rosenthal, 127, fn. 31.

<sup>84</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Joseph Bekhor Shor's commentary (and the biblical passages he cites) are mine. Where deemed appropriate, paragraph indentations have been designated. Added emphases will be noted per instance.

**not in riddles].** Clearly [Heb. במראה]: I show [מראה] him the actual matter as it is, and not by way of a riddle or parable; so everyone understands what he says in My name. And everything comes from Me, for I reveal to him every secret, just as a person does [with] his agent who is faithful [Heb. נאמן] to him: he reveals to him every secret, and tells [him]: Say to so-and-so the following: that such-and-such is a secret between you and me. And if the agent is not faithful to him, he tells him: "Tell So-and-so that he should do that thing about which he and I have spoken," and the agent does not know what task he is performing. And thus all who come into the world believe him in good faith.

And so it is written of Samuel: "So all Israel knew... that Samuel was faithful as a prophet of the Lord,"<sup>85</sup> for his words were believed. And in this<sup>86</sup> the arms of the [Gentile] nations of the world are broken<sup>87</sup>, who say: Whatever Moses spoke about were allegories, which is to say: riddles and parables, and not what he was actually saying. And so they turn the prophecy into something else, and displace the word from its meaning entirely. And with regard to them<sup>88</sup>, David said: "He tells his words to Jacob/His statutes and ordinances to Israel./He does not do so unto every

<sup>85</sup>I Sam. 3:20.

<sup>86</sup>I.e., concerning this matter.

<sup>87</sup>I.e., this epitomizes the weakness or fatal flaw of Christian reasoning.

<sup>88</sup>I.e., the Gentiles.

nation/And the ordinances, they do not know."<sup>89</sup> For even though they have translated the Torah from the Holy Tongue to their language, the Holy One, Blessed be He, has not given them a discerning mind nor eyes to see, nor ears to hear; but instead they have turned the words into something that they are not, for [the Holy One, Blessed be He] does not wish nor desire for them to cling to His Torah.

We have already established that the Christian preference for allegorical interpretation of the Bible began to flourish at a relatively early stage in the development of Christianity. As presented in the last chapter's overview, it was, ironically, the Hellenized Jew Philo of Alexandria who, in the first century, popularized the allegorical approach to the Septuagint; his approach became the dominant one in Christian scholarly circles, particularly evident in the work of the Church Fathers.<sup>90</sup> And though we have seen how Christian exegesis—in a dramatic development in Bible scholarship spearheaded by the Victorines—began, in the twelfth century, to branch out from allegorical interpretation to the more literal and rational readings popularized by RaSHI and his successors, the verse at hand nevertheless provides us with evidence that allegory still remained a powerful and popular tool of Christian exegesis. Here Bekhor Shor takes issue with the allegorical reading, and in so doing reveals not only his attitude toward this exegetical approach, but justifies and bolsters his own preferred mode of *peshat*. But any reader can see that his commentary to Numbers 12:8 goes far beyond a critique of Christian method; by the end

<sup>89</sup>Ps. 147:19-20.

<sup>90</sup>Smalley, 2ff.



of this excerpt he has turned his argument into a polemic for the chosenness of the Jewish people and God's rejection of Christianity's (self-ordained, in his view) election. The reader is compelled to view the rest of Bekhor Shor's commentary through the lens of this polemical orientation at which he often hints, but only occasionally states so explicitly. Moreover, a single verse of Torah becomes, in Bekhor Shor's exegesis, emblematic of his entire method and purpose. The sharp critique of allegory is not only articulated explicitly, but is, more importantly, implicitly employed throughout his commentary, as Bekhor Shor puts into practice what he preaches at Numbers 12:8.

Also noteworthy in this passage is Bekhor Shor's portrayal of Moses as a "faithful servant" of God. This depiction mirrors the typography that Bekhor Shor often uses for the Patriarchs, whose "faithfulness" [*ne'emanut*] to God and other people alike he emphasizes and, at times, strenuously defends. We take note of this feature of his commentary here, and will return to it in greater detail.

Finally, we see in the above comment a brief hint at what Bekhor Shor regards as the ultimate test of a prophet's words: his believability among the masses. Hence his remark: "And so it is written of Samuel: 'So all Israel knew... that Samuel was faithful as a prophet of the Lord,'<sup>91</sup> *for his words were believed.*"<sup>92</sup> In the end, the believability of a prophet attests to the most important of his prophetic credentials, his standing vis-à-vis God. In this line, Bekhor Shor cleverly shadows a double-meaning: understanding this verse self-referentially, Bekhor Shor, playing the "prophet," implicitly argues for the

<sup>91</sup>I Sam. 3:20.

<sup>92</sup>Emphasis added.

acceptance of his own enterprise as a mark of his faithfulness to God. The final evaluation of his interpretation of the Divine Word—that is, the Torah and Bekhor Shor's commentary on it—belongs to *Israel*, who will determine its believability. This stance, as much as the anti-Christian theme of this passage, suggests a predominantly Jewish target audience for Bekhor Shor's commentary.<sup>93</sup>

### Dating Bekhor Shor's Commentary

Given the general uncertainty surrounding the life of Joseph Bekhor Shor—even the approximate date of his birth<sup>94</sup> or death—makes pinpointing his commentary to a specific time a difficult task. He could have written as early as 1161, and Abraham Geiger conjectures that he wrote his work no later than 1170,<sup>95</sup> but others have made a case for his commentary's appearance after 1180, and perhaps even after 1191. These later figures are based “on the supposition that the author's bitterness against the Christians was occasioned by the increased sufferings of the Jews due to the expulsion of 1181 and the massacre of the Jews of Bray of 1191....”<sup>96</sup> If we theorize that the anti-Christian stance of the commentary reflects specific historical events in France of Bekhor Shor's day, we might imagine that the commentary dates from after the oppression of the

<sup>93</sup>This claim is supported by the rest of his commentary to Num. 12:8, which is explicitly directed at *Jews* who fail to distinguish between symbolic and literal directives in the Torah.

<sup>94</sup>Y. Nebo cites Walter's date of ca. 1140 (G. Walter, *Joseph Bekhor Shor, der Letzte Nordfranzösischer Bibelexeget*, Breslau, 1890. p. 8).

<sup>95</sup>Share, 9, citing Geiger.

<sup>96</sup>Share, 9, citing Poznanski.

Jews begun by Phillip Augustus (1182, date of the first expulsion), or perhaps following the massacre of the Jewish community of Blois (1171), a response to which we find in a *piyyut* of R. Joseph's.<sup>97</sup> But Poznanski states that these are merely guesses, for the atrocities against the Jews were not confined to the last quarter of the twelfth century. Moreover, "in his commentary on Genesis, at least, there are no specific allusions to these events, and the passages referring to the Christians could well have been inspired by the oppression of Jews prior to 1181."<sup>98</sup>

Share takes a middle path through this evidence and guesses a date between 1170 and 1180.<sup>99</sup> Assessing the significance or insignificance of Bekhor Shor's silence about specific twelfth-century atrocities against the Jews remains an elusive enterprise. Given Bekhor Shor's occasional propensity to read the biblical text in light of his contemporary society and Jewish history (as we will explore in the next chapters), we could reasonably conclude any of the following. (1) Bekhor Shor knew of specific atrocities, and wrote his commentary in part as a response to them, but does not mention them because either he engaged in self-censorship, or because he wanted to universalize the commentary. Alternatively, his work was censored by others. Or (2) Bekhor Shor's work predates some or all of the aforementioned atrocities; or (3) Bekhor Shor's commentary postdates

<sup>97</sup>Share, 8, citing Poznanski LVIII. One sees evidence of an anti-Christian stance in Bekhor Shor's poetry, especially in the poetic *envois* at the conclusion of each *parasha* of his commentary. In these, he frequently addresses his concerns regarding his "enemies," and pleads for Divine retribution for their often unspecified crimes. "[J]ust as in his commentaries we hear an echo of the debate with apostates and Christians, so too upon examining his *piyyutim* the troubles that afflicted the people of his generation.... Great was his hatred for the oppressors of his people, for the villains who tormented and tortured like wild animals" (Urbach, 120, citing *Sefer Ha-Yashar*, 126).

<sup>98</sup>Share, 9.

<sup>99</sup>*Ibid.*

some or all of the atrocities but responds to them only via its generally anti-Christian orientation. Or (4) He does mention them, but we no longer catch his allusions; or, lastly, (5) he subsumes specific incidents into a general frame.

I am of the opinion that Bekhor Shor wrote his commentary with knowledge of certain late twelfth-century atrocities against the Jews (his *piyyut* in response to Blois, for instance, as well as other poetic hints at his "enemies," argue for this view). Perhaps the commentary even postdates the first expulsion under Phillip Augustus. However, his commentary does not so much respond to specific anti-Jewish encounters as it reflects occasionally hostile feelings towards the perpetrators. This important distinction suggests that Bekhor Shor may have viewed the purpose of his commentary as transcending the specifics of contemporaneous history in favor of a "bigger picture," one that would pit not only Christians against Jews, but *Christianity against Judaism* in their ongoing competition: their increasingly feverish pursuit of religious truth and a legitimate claim to Divine election. For Christians and Jews alike of this era, the Bible—if only interpreted "correctly"—would proffer the necessary evidence for one's claims. And so the commentary of Joseph Bekhor Shor of Orléans—to which we now turn—teaches us more about his story, and the story of his fellow Jews and Christians, than any concrete dates of his birth or death ever could.

### CHAPTER III: THE POLEMICAL DIMENSION OF JOSEPH BEKHOR SHOR'S COMMENTARY TO THE TORAH

#### Overview

This project began as a response to Avraham Grossman's claim that R. Joseph Bekhor Shor sought to defend the actions of the Patriarchs and reject calumnies—possibly Christian polemics—against them.<sup>100</sup> The course of study undertaken in order to respond to this claim necessitated translation of R. Joseph's commentary to the Patriarch Narratives—Genesis chapters twelve through fifty—and analysis of them for polemical currents in his remarks. In so doing, I have uncovered much material germane to Bekhor's perception of the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. Sometimes his exegesis takes the shape of an explicit polemic against Christian doctrine (for instance, of the Trinity or the Incarnation). More often, however, the specifically polemical focus of a given remark is less sharp, more subtle. One would, of course, expect a Jewish commentator to defend the character of the biblical Patriarchs; but Bekhor Shor appears to have exceeded such expectations and precedents in his extensive elaboration of the defense. Bekhor Shor never states explicitly why he defends the biblical Patriarchs (most forcefully, Jacob) to this unprecedented extent; I will attempt in this study, however, to argue for a polemical (or counter-polemical) motive which in part shapes Bekhor Shor's interpretation. I will suggest that Bekhor Shor amplifies the

<sup>100</sup> *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 4:410. Op. cit. Grossman, *Hachmei Tzarfat ha-Rishonim*, 488-489.

Patriarchs' merits, de-emphasizes their shortcomings, and zealously defends their characters out of considerations that are, at least in part, polemical. Establishing the basic concerns of the Jewish-Christian debate as they pertain to the Patriarchs will constitute the foremost task of this chapter.<sup>101</sup> Thus the first part of this study of Bekhor Shor's commentary—this chapter and the next—will focus on the polemical dimension as manifested in the *actual content of his exegesis*.

Through the lens of Bekhor Shor's remarks to Numbers 12:8, as noted in the previous chapter, one sees his profound concern with the methodology of explication. In that instance, he polemicizes against the allegorical approach to the Bible which had been favored in Christian exegetical circles since the days of the Church Fathers. Through the figure of Moses, to whom God spoke "face-to-face," Bekhor Shor defends his own use of direct, literal interpretation of the text: *peshat*. Much of our study will note not only the polemical *content* of Bekhor Shor's commentary, but also the polemical *methodology* that undergirds his entire exegetical effort, making it possible to see an implicitly polemical dimension to comments that, upon first glance, might seem far removed from the standard concerns of the Jewish-Christian debate. In the second part of this textual study—the final chapter—we will endeavor to present the more subtle polemical dimension of Bekhor Shor's writing: the methodology itself as polemically oriented.

This chapter will investigate specific polemical strands within Bekhor Shor's

<sup>101</sup>Our study will extend beyond the three Patriarchs of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Bekhor Shor's exegetical patterns of characterization and defensiveness pertain also to Joseph and his brothers (particularly Reuben). And while Bekhor Shor from time to time writes so as to defend the Matriarchs, their place in his commentary is relatively small, commensurate with their role in the biblical narrative. The Matriarchs seldom come up in our analysis.

commentary, with emphasis on his commentary to Genesis. The first part of the chapter will present an overview of those passages that reveal a concern with exploring the relationship between Jews and Gentiles as it appears in the Bible, and with application to Bekhor Shor's day. In so doing, it is hoped that the analysis of relevant passages will shed light on the following questions: How did Bekhor Shor understand the continual Jewish historical dilemmas of Diaspora? of oppression by a Gentile governing class? of social, commercial, and intellectual interaction among Jews and Christians? of universalistic concerns versus particularistic ones? For Bekhor Shor the insightful and original exegete, the biblical text speaks volumes about each of these problems, and his commentary reveals a number of his positions.

The second part of this chapter will present passages pertinent to problems raised by conflict between Christian and Jewish religious doctrine. How does Bekhor Shor respond to those passages which Christians interpreted in light of their own theology and specifically Christian doctrines—especially the ones most incompatible with the Jewish interpretation (e.g., any passages understood by Christians as pertaining to the life, death, or resurrection of Jesus; passages interpreted as prefiguring or alluding to doctrines like the Trinity, the Incarnation, Transubstantiation, and the like)? In his commentary to these passages, as we would expect, we encounter some of Bekhor Shor's most vigorously polemical writing. Insight into these basic issues—fundamental to any understanding of the Jewish-Christian debate—and the responses offered by Bekhor Shor will lay a foundation for exploration of Bekhor Shor's commentary to the Patriarch narratives and

its polemical dimension, the subject of the ensuing chapter.

### Jews in a Gentile World

Rabbi Joseph Bekhor Shor's commentary from time to time evinces his attentiveness to the cultural milieu of twelfth-century Northern France.<sup>102</sup> Prominent among his aims as viewed through his commentary to the Torah is an assessment of relations between Jews and Gentiles as collective entities (and, by extension, among individual Jews and Gentiles). At different points, his commentary addresses the historical and contemporary status of Jews in relation to the Gentiles, the latter of whom are identified either as the *אומות העולם*, "the nations of the world," or, depending on the specific intent and force of the polemical remark, as *מינים*, a term used in Tannaitic times to designate "heretics"—specifically the early Jewish-Christians, or perhaps Jews who subscribed to a dualist heresy such as Gnosticism—but in the later Middle Ages coming to signify not only Jewish apostates and heretics, but all Christians as well, defining *מינים* broadly as "slanderers."<sup>103</sup> Less frequently Bekhor Shor refers to them without employing euphemism: *נוצרים*. In translation, I render both *מינים* and *נוצרים* as "Christians."

Bekhor Shor's commentary suggests an author who views contemporary life

<sup>102</sup>I will devote the last chapter of this study to a closer examination of the evidence in Bekhor Shor's commentary for literary and cultural trends of the twelfth-century French Renaissance.

<sup>103</sup>Cf. Parkes, *Conflict*, 78, 110. "Slanderers" is Parkes' translation; the point is the gradually increasing inclusivity and generality of the word *מינים*, coming eventually to signify all who make claims against Jews or Judaism.



through the lens of Scripture, observing in the particular features of the relationship between Jews and Gentiles of his own day and place echoes of circumstances detailed in the Bible. Indeed, I hope to show in this chapter that the Bible's presentation of its recurring concern for "Israel in exile among the Nations"—the phenomenon of diaspora—becomes for Bekhor Shor a metaphor for the diaspora Jewry of his own existential reality.<sup>104</sup> Bekhor Shor's writing encourages wariness of the Gentiles. Sometimes he expresses this sentiment vehemently and directly; elsewhere he drops a hint. He tends to write most explicitly when commenting on legal or cultic material in the text. Nowhere is his disdain for the governance of the Gentiles more evident than in his commentary to Leviticus 18:5. In this passage, Bekhor Shor contrasts Gentile laws with Jewish laws, arguing that "the statutes of the Gentiles" lead to wickedness and death, whereas Jewish rulings promote goodness and life.

**Lev. 18:5. [You shall keep My statutes and My ordinances] that by doing them, one shall live.** In order that one's lifespan not be cut short, so that he would in fact die a self-inflicted death. However, the statutes of the Gentiles—who rob, and perpetrate violence, and steal, and murder, and go to the wives of their friends—cut short their days. For the wealthy ones come to kill them; and so a woman's husband will not show mercy

<sup>104</sup>One should note, however, that Bekhor Shor is careful not to confuse using the Bible as a metaphor for his own day with a consistent reading of his own circumstances into the text of the Bible. At times he reads the text anachronistically in light of his culture and historical frame-of-reference; but occasionally he rejects these sorts of interpretations outright. We will examine one such case in which he rejects an anachronistic reading by RaSHBaM to Genesis 25:34. See also Smalley, 152.

on the day of vengeance<sup>105</sup>; and moreover, the relatives then kill the murderer, which is why it is written: "[Fear of the Lord prolongs life,/ but] the years of the wicked will be short."<sup>106</sup>

Perhaps most striking about this comment is the fact that the text itself does not explicitly solicit a polemical remark; rather, Bekhor Shor uses the text to initiate a critique. That is to say, the text at hand says nothing about the content of Gentile statutes; but Bekhor Shor uses the text's claim of the efficacy of Torah-law as an opportunity to malign, in contradistinction, the inferior laws of the Gentiles. He appears to draw conclusions about Gentile laws based on what he claims to observe in Gentile practice; then he argues that lawlessness and blood-feuds have their root in Gentile statutes.<sup>107</sup> Equally as likely, however, Bekhor Shor uses this text to respond to one of the most common subjects of Christian polemical exegesis of the Hebrew Bible: the alleged abrogation of Mosaic Law with the coming of Christ and the establishment of the Church. Undoubtedly, Bekhor Shor, who responded to practically every kind of Christian polemical comment on the Hebrew Bible, knew of their stance toward the Torah's laws and used this text to initiate a first strike, as it were. In this light, R. Joseph's commentary to Leviticus 18:5 argues not only for the validity of the Mosaic Law, but for its inherent *superiority*.<sup>108</sup>

<sup>105</sup>Cf. Prov. 6:34, whose subject is a jealous husband.

<sup>106</sup>Prov. 10:27.

<sup>107</sup>It is uncertain as to whether Bekhor Shor is referring to actual law or local custom. The latter seems probable.

<sup>108</sup>This is not to argue, however, that Bekhor Shor argued that Jewish law should govern non-Jews; he simply opposes the Christian position that Jewish law is outmoded. To the contrary, he argues that Jewish law is morally superior to Christian law.

Throughout his commentary to the Patriarchs, Bekhor Shor occasionally takes note of the separateness of Jews and Christians even as the two inhabit the same land and, especially beginning in the twelfth century, were drawn into regular interaction in the urban centers of Northern France. This proximity simultaneously bred cultural cross-pollination and exacerbated existing tensions between Jews and Christians. The effect of the former phenomenon is observable in Jewish and Christian biblical exegesis of twelfth-century Northern France, most keenly in the tendency toward *peshat*-exegesis (or what the Christians call *sensus literalis*). In Jewish circles, the trend is visible after Sa'adia and finds its first systematic advocates in RaSHI and his successors; in Christian circles, this new style of interpretation is best observed in the work of the Victorines.

If one asks the question, how did this come about? one can reply that the "school of Rashi," led by his sons-in-law and grandsons, established contacts with Christian scholars and Christian literature. (It is to be remembered always that Rashi was implicit in all of his successors, and explicit in many of them.) This was not a movement of Christian scholars toward Hebrew learning only, for we know that Jewish scholars also reckoned with the Latin Bible and its exegetical materials. . . . Rashi knew Christian interpretations, and. . . he endeavored to refute them. In this he paved the way for his successors who, in the time long before the formal, public disputations, reckoned with the christological interpretations.<sup>109</sup> R.

<sup>109</sup>Herman Hailperin, *Rashi and the Christian Scholars*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1963. p. 113. Cf. also p. 59. *Op cit.* Poznanski, xx.

Joseph Kara (*cir.* 1050), disciple of Rashi, directed several of his exegetical comments against Christian interpretation.<sup>110</sup> R. Samuel ben Meir, Rashi's grandson, is perhaps the first who explicitly makes reference to his refutations of Christian interpretations—especially to those bearing on the question of the commandments in the Torah and their *rationale*. He evidently knew Latin and the Latin Bible.<sup>111</sup>

The effect of the latter phenomenon—the aggravation of tension between Jews and Christians during the twelfth century—is easily observed in Jewish and Christian exegetical works of the age. Arguably, nowhere is it more visible than in the commentary of Bekhor Shor. “R. Joseph Bekor Shor, a younger contemporary of Andrew of St. Victor and a disciple of R. Tam (d. 1171), was well acquainted with the Vulgate and Christian biblical exegesis.”<sup>112</sup> Often, though, Bekhor Shor expresses the accelerating culture clash with considerable subtlety, as in his commentary to Genesis 13:10, where Lot is beguiled by the fertile Jordan plain and decides to migrate to the vicinity of Sodom and Gomorrah. Succinctly put: “One who goes to reside in a place needs to check the land *and* its inhabitants.”<sup>113</sup> In all likelihood, this remark does not function merely as general advice for nomadic home-shoppers; rather, Bekhor Shor here playfully and poignantly hints at the unfortunate circumstances of diaspora Jewry: no

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.* Cf. Poznanski, xxxvi.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.* Cf. Poznanski, pp. xlviii.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.* See also Poznanski, lxi.

<sup>113</sup> Emphasis added. Lot, of course, by failing to “check the inhabitants,” paid dearly.

matter how rich and bountiful the land, the real determining factor of the Jews' peace and happiness has always pivoted on the native inhabitants and their attitude toward the resident Jews.

In his depiction of non-Jews within his commentary, Bekhor Shor provides us with a sense of the stigma that Jews bore as they resided among the Gentile nations. In general, he tends further to demonize the antagonists of the Bible while vindicating the protagonists, often above and beyond the levels of piety or villainy that the characters warrant. In so doing, he uses his pro-Jewish bias to determine his characterization; thus the archetypal Gentiles of the Bible (Laban, Esau, Pharaoh—not exactly the heroes of the narrative!) are vilified, in Bekhor Shor's commentary, above and beyond their villainy in the biblical text. Meanwhile the Patriarchs, and Jacob in particular (no saint he), come out squeaky-clean. In one striking remark, Bekhor Shor has Potiphar's wife condemn her husband for choosing Joseph, a Hebrew slave. The remark, while true to the *peshat*-sense of the verse, in which Potiphar's wife impugns her husband even as she accentuates Joseph's "Hebrew" identity, also rings true as a statement about suspicion and mistrust between Gentiles and Jews in Bekhor Shor's day and throughout history.

**39:14. See, he had to bring us [a Hebrew to dally with us]...! I am** complaining about my husband, because he could have taken a Gentile slave from this land, but he took a Hebrew slave from a foreign land, [and] he [i.e., Potiphar] does not care about what he [Joseph] might do—tomorrow he could escape! . . .

This mistrust of Jews which Bekhor Shor emphasizes here turns up again, even more prominently, in his presentation of the Pharaoh and his court during the Joseph narrative. Genesis 45:16 notes that when Joseph reveals his identity to his benighted brothers, the news "... was pleasing to Pharaoh and his courtiers." In his commentary to this verse, Bekhor depicts the Egyptians as having assumed the worst about Joseph's heretofore unknown background.

**45:16. And it was pleasing to Pharaoh and his courtiers.** For it was difficult for them that Joseph had not told [them] of his people nor his origin, for his brothers had made him swear at the time of the sale that he would not tell—as I have explained above—so that word would not reach his father, so that he [Jacob] would [not] know of their [the brothers'] immorality, and that they had sold him.<sup>114</sup>

So they assumed that he was from a scorned family, and thus he had not told [them the truth]. Or perhaps he had escaped amid a revolt, or because of some matter of impropriety [or immorality], and did not want [them] to know where he was [from]. And it was hard for them [to accept] that an inappropriate person was ruling over them.

What finally sways the opinion of the Egyptians is, remarkably, Joseph's esteemed ancestry. Perhaps Bekhor Shor uses his commentary not only to portray the widespread

<sup>114</sup>"In the opinion of the author, the Egyptians did not feel at ease because they did not know Joseph's origin, for he had not told them because of the oath. But in the opinion of the RaMBaN, Joseph told the Egyptians about his origin and about his esteemed family in the land of Canaan, and so the Egyptians were glad when his family came (RaMBaN to v. 16)" (Nebo, footnote to 45:16).

mistrust between Jews and Gentiles—mistrust which extended to the highest nobles and governmental officials in the kingdom—but also to express his hope for a remedy. True to Bekhor Shor's view of the saintliness of the Patriarchs—and the favor that their exemplary lives extends to generation of Jews after them—their merits bolster Joseph's reputation. Joseph's familial heritage restores him to the favor of the Pharaoh and his court:

[But] after they heard that his brothers had come, and that he was of [an] esteemed [family]—of Abraham, who was a “Prince of God,” and who had defeated four kings with the children of his household; and of Isaac, with whom kings made a covenant on account of his importance, such as did Avimelech, King of the Philistines; and Jacob, unto whom all of the ministers of Esau, and the chieftains of Ishmael, and the descendants of Keturah were in servitude; and his brothers, [who were] distinguished men and powerful warriors [Heb. גבורי עולם]—they rejoiced, and gave additional honor atop his own honor, and glory atop his own glory.<sup>115</sup>

There does exist in Bekhor Shor's commentary, however, a counterpoint to his observation of Gentile-Jewish mistrust. Drawing on midrashic passages from Talmud, Bekhor Shor comments that Pharaoh's favorable treatment of Joseph not only elevated Joseph's status, but also benefited Egypt. Again, we may, without stretching the point,

<sup>115</sup>These claims of the Patriarchal family's esteem do not exist here in isolation; we will devote many of the following pages to an examination of the approach that enables Bekhor Shor, by the end of his commentary to the Patriarch narratives, to write of Joseph's lineage with such confident and laudatory language.

read in Bekhor Shor's words an expression of his relation to the medieval world he knew. When, in the following text, Bekhor Shor quotes the Talmud, "...every nation that acts ethically [מִסֵּר] toward Israel, raises themselves up high, so that they [the nations of the world] cannot say: "Into the hand of a low people the Holy One, blessed be he, delivered [מִסֵּר] His children,"<sup>116</sup> he refers not only to the story of Israel in Egypt, but also to the plight of the diaspora Jewry of which he was an esteemed figure. Here follows a lengthy excerpt from the commentary to the verse at hand, relating Pharaoh's dream:

**Gen. 41:1, midverse. And there, standing on the banks of the Nile....**

Since all creatures in Egypt come from the Nile, which waters the land, it seemed to him that the surplus and the famine occurred by means of the Nile. And because of this dream Pharaoh was made greater than all other kings, for all of the people of his land became slaves acquired by him, as it says at the end of the passage: "We shall be slaves to Pharaoh."<sup>117</sup> Furthermore, the entire land acknowledged that they had been saved because of what the Holy One, Blessed be He, had shown him: that the produce was to be stored up during the surplus for the years of famine. For if this had not been known, there would not have been storehouses, and they would have died during the years of famine. So it says that everyone was saved because of Pharaoh.

<sup>116</sup>B. Hag. 13b.

<sup>117</sup>Cf. 47:25. The people respond to Joseph's rationing of the food in exchange for land by guaranteeing their servitude to Pharaoh.



And this is the nature of God's mercy, that every nation that acts ethically [מוסר] toward Israel, raises themselves up high, so that they [the nations of the world] cannot say: "Into the hand of a low people the Holy One, blessed be he, delivered [מסר] His children."<sup>118</sup> Thus was Pharaoh made great, as I have explained. Also, Joseph amassed large storehouses, until he had collected all of the money found in the lands of Egypt and Canaan; and even their animals, possessions, land, and their bodies were his, as slaves. Thus we find that when Nebuchadnezzar exiled Israel, he destroyed the entire world<sup>119</sup>, as it is written: "The nation and the kingdom that [does not serve him—King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon—and that] does not put its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon... [that nation will I visit—declares the Lord—with sword, famine, and pestilence, until I have destroyed it by his hands"<sup>120</sup>]. So too we find that the Romans, who destroyed the Second Temple, [thereby] became world-famous. As it is written: "It shall devour every nation and trample it, and break it into pieces."<sup>121</sup>

Ultimately, the fate of the Jews and the Gentiles remains intertwined. Bekhor Shor seems keenly aware of the disproportionate influence that a relatively small

<sup>118</sup> *B. Hag.* 13b.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> *Jer.* 27:8.

<sup>121</sup> *Dan.* 7:23. The Talmud here depicts Rome as the "fourth beast" of Daniel's vision.

population of Jews had on the affairs of the Diaspora nations; indeed, he argues that the fame or infamy of empires has, historically, depended in part on their stance toward the Jews.

Ironically, even as the Jews inadvertently exalt their Gentile host-nations, they themselves risk degradation in exile. Indeed, their fates are counterpointed: that is to say, Israel *must* exist in a condition of exile in order to benefit her Gentile hosts. Again, Bekhor Shor uses the "exile" theme of the Joseph narrative to illustrate this perceived danger, and implicitly, to make a remark that smacks of ill will between Jews and Gentiles. In what appears to be a clever adaptation of "The Parable of the Sheep" from Christian Scriptures<sup>122</sup>, Bekhor Shor relates Joseph's plight allegorically:

**39:2. The Lord was with Joseph.** So that he would not be tainted (Heb. יטמא) among the nations, for he travelled among them. There is the parable of a certain animal-herder who used to goad twelve camels loaded with casks of wine, and one of them entered the store of a Gentile. The herder left eleven alone and entered the Gentile's place. He said to them: Why have you left eleven and gone after one? He replied to them: Those on the road do not need to be watched too closely, for no one would molest<sup>123</sup> them. But this one needs to be watched so that the Gentiles will not molest him. Thus: "The Lord was with Joseph," for he had entered

<sup>122</sup>Cf. Matthew 18:12f., Luke 15:3f.

<sup>123</sup>Heb. יין נסך. This seems to be a key word, in that it evokes (for instance) the term "יין נסך," meaning wine handled by Gentiles and therefore unfit (not *kasher*) for Jews.

among the Gentiles.

Assuming that Bekhor Shor had an exclusively Jewish readership in mind, especially for remarks like this, we must ask what compelled the suspicion of Gentiles evident here. Did all Jews of his day fear being "tainted" by the surrounding Gentile population? In all likelihood, yes, and even in the sense of actual (ritual) impurity.

It is likely that remarks like this one reflect a general Jewish insistence on their own distinctiveness, a salient theme of the Judaism of this time and place.<sup>124</sup> We shall return to this concern momentarily as we explore more specifically how this notion manifests itself in Bekhor Shor's commentary. The paucity of biographical information about R. Joseph Bekhor Shor makes it difficult to assess the extent to which social circumstances and historical events influenced his thinking and his commentary. Does the suspicion of Gentiles so prominent in these remarks reflect Bekhor Shor's existential reality? The first expulsion of Jews from France, for instance, took place under Phillip II Augustus, king of the Franks, in 1182.<sup>125</sup> The expulsion edict applied only to those Jews living in the so-called "royal domain," a narrow strip of land in Northern France. King Phillip's order neither applied to nor was enforced against very many Jews. Most Jews at the time lived far away from the limits of the royal domain, concentrated in the East and South.<sup>126</sup> Nevertheless, Paris and Orléans did fall within the limits of the royal domain,

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<sup>124</sup>Jordan, 10.

<sup>125</sup>Phillip readmitted the Jews in 1198, but few actually returned because the Duke of Normandy (at first, Richard the Lionhearted of England, and then his successor John, forbade the immigration of Jews back to the royal domain of Phillip Augustus (*Ibid*, 43-45).

<sup>126</sup>*Ibid*, 4.

and it is entirely possible that Bekhor Shor could have been among those forced to leave. Whatever the extent, Bekhor Shor undoubtedly witnessed oppression and expulsion at the hands of the government.<sup>127</sup> We do not know, however, when he wrote his commentary in relationship to these events.

Perhaps the work's periodic references to the unease of Jews living in Gentile lands, as well as the suspicion of Gentiles, their attitude towards Jews, and their allegedly inferior (more at corrupt)<sup>128</sup> laws, reflect Bekhor Shor's own experience not only of Diaspora in general, but of expulsion from his adoptive home of France: Exile within Exile. Like other commentators before and after him, Bekhor Shor takes a keen interest in the biblical theme of Israel-in-Exile; he might have understood it better than many.

Bekhor Shor remains hard-headed about the reality of life in diaspora, and through this clear perception he reads and comments on Genesis. He understands the end of the book for exactly what it is: even as he notes the joy of the reunion of Joseph and his brothers, he recognizes, more ominously, that through the Joseph narrative, Israel has ended up in Exile. And so, at the end of the story, he interprets the Hebrew word נ as signifying permanent residence—not a mere sojourn:

**47:4. We have come to dwell in the land.** According to the *peshat*: To dwell and settle permanently. But our Rabbis have interpreted that [Our Father] Jacob did not go down to settle permanently [in Egypt], but only to

<sup>127</sup> Grayzel, 1933. Appendix F, pp. 357-358. Cf. Jordan, 32.

<sup>128</sup> This attitude is reflected as well in *piyyutim* of Bekhor Shor's day, as in a remark of Ephraim of Bonn in a poetic response to the 1171 Blois massacre. With regard to Christian laws, he opines: "It is impossible to live by them."

reside there.<sup>129</sup>

Even as he acknowledges the *aggadic*, and more optimistic, interpretation of Jacob's intention (he never meant to stay!), Bekhor Shor tells us, quite matter-of-factly, that Jacob never intended to go home. It is on this theme that Bekhor Shor concludes his commentary to Genesis, as he reflects once again the unease generated by Diaspora and the fear of its permanence, this time with the biblical Joseph:

**50:25. You shall carry up my bones from there.** ... [Joseph] was afraid for himself: that since he was a great man, Egyptians would bury him with the honor of a great man. And he was afraid that they might leave him be, saying: "But he's already buried with honor!"

Bekhor Shor has the second-most-powerful man in Egypt—a man favored by the host nation's ruler—announce his fear of remaining in Exile in perpetuity. And so Joseph of Orléans finds spiritual kin in his biblical namesake.

### Anti-Christian Interpretations

Included in the long list of factors contributing to mistrust and hatred toward the Jews in late twelfth-century Northern France was the "Jews' insistence on their own distinctiveness, especially in an age when Christians were emphasizing the universality of their faith through their 'missionizing' efforts"—prominent among them, the Crusades.<sup>130</sup> In the polemical literature, the physical manifestation of the distinctiveness of the Jews

<sup>129</sup> According to Nebo: cf. *Lekach Tov* to *Parashat Ki Tavo* (Deut 26); and *Seder Ha-Haggadah*.

<sup>130</sup> Jordan, 10.

*par excellence*—the mark of circumcision—becomes emblematic of the entire conflict.

The following *peirush* comes from Bekhor Shor's analysis of the story of the Rape of Dinah, in which Jacob's vengeful sons Simeon and Levi trick the Shechemites into circumcising themselves as a precondition of marrying into Dinah's family. At this point in the narrative, Simeon and Levi propose that through circumcision, the Israelites and the Shechemites will "become as one people."

**34:16. And we shall be as one people.** *You* can be like us, for you can get circumcised; but *we* cannot be like you. The uncircumcised can be circumcised; but the circumcised not become of uncircumcised flesh. So if you wish that we become one people, *you* get circumcised.<sup>131</sup>

We take note of this passage in particular for its emphasis on the distinctiveness of Jews from Gentiles and its implications for forced conversion of Jews; however, elsewhere in polemical literature, circumcision is used to signify not only ethnic but also *theological* differences between the two faiths. Bekhor Shor comments on Genesis 17:24 in such a fashion, using the rite of circumcision as support in his argument against the Christian doctrine of original sin.

**17:24. Abraham was ninety-nine years old [when he was circumcised]**

<sup>131</sup>Emphasis added. From Y. Nebo's footnote: "Circumcise yourselves." In *Hadar Z'kenim* it is introduced in the name of Bekhor Shor: "... and the sons of Jacob answered deceitfully." R. Bekhor Shor explains: "In what was the deceit? From this word that he said to them we can make a great deduction: 'Since we are not one people, how can we be married together? Therefore, do this: be circumcised like us, for we cannot become like you; for who can restore the foreskin to our flesh as it was originally? Surely this is impossible!' But Hamor did not understand how the words were intended." Circumcision as the mark of distinctiveness, and as point of Jewish-Gentile contention, also achieves a certain frequency in polemical *piyyutim*. There the motif of circumcision often appears as a description of what Christians say to the Jews they are pressuring to convert.

in the flesh of his foreskin].... His years are counted to teach that if one is not circumcised at eight days, he may be circumcised even at 100 [years] of age, as were Abraham and Ishmael. And from what is written—“Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised [in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people]”—[we learn] that a man is punished on his own account; so too this teaches that one of eight days of age is not accountable for punishment [Heb. בן עונש]. And the Omnipresent will circumcise our hearts of those who fear Him.

It seems likely that this verse may have had particular resonance in the context of the Jewish-Christian debate. *Nizzahon Vetus*, an Ashkenazi polemical work dating from the thirteenth century, presents an alternative rebuttal to Christian claims about this verse that evidently were in circulation during the High Middle Ages.

“And Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised” [Gen. 17:24]. One may ask why God did not command him to be circumcised at an earlier age. The answer is that he waited so that the people of the world would see and learn from Abraham who, although an old man, did not balk at circumcision.<sup>132</sup>

The “people of the world,” in this characteristic Rabbinic idiom, refers to the Gentile nations who deny the authority of the Mosaic Law, and in particular its emphasis on ritual.

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<sup>132</sup>David Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1979. pp. 47-48.

In Christian writings, circumcision is regarded as barbaric and, more to the point, *unwanted* by God. From early in Christian history, circumcision is rejected on many grounds, including the argument that it derives from a hyper-literal reading of the Bible. The anti-circumcision strand in Christian thought remains in force throughout the Middle Ages; in twelfth-century author Pseudo William's *Dialogue* (1123-1148), which owes much to the disputational works of Gilbert Crispin, the following claim is put forward: "The rite of circumcision prefigured the sacred sacrament of baptism. Continued carnal observance of the letter of the old Law thus destroys its proper, spiritual, observance."<sup>133</sup> Rupert of Deutz, writing in 1126, went so far as to declare that maintaining circumcision was tantamount to negating Christ.<sup>134</sup> The Christian rejection of circumcision is, as we would expect, tantamount to a rejection of the Divine election, or chosenness, of the Jews,<sup>135</sup> and Bekhor Shor would, in all probability, have encountered these arguments or ones like them. His counter-polemical argument offered above does not engage these theological points, instead implying that the real aversion to circumcision stems from basic unease about the procedure itself. The reading presented in *Nizzahon Vetus* is consistent with midrashic exegesis that presents the so-called "trials of Abraham" (most

<sup>133</sup>Pseudo-William of Champeaux, *Dialogus inter Christianum et Judaeum de fide Catholica* [*Dialogus*]; PL 165, cols. 1045-6, quoted in Abulafia, 102.

<sup>134</sup>Abulafia, 102, citing Rupert of Deutz, *Anulus sive dialogus inter Christianum et Iudaeum*, I, II. 236-55; ed. R. Haacke in M. L. Arduini, *Ruperto di Deutz e la controversia tra Christiani ed Ebrei nel secolo XII*, Rome, Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medio Evo, 1979. p. 191.

<sup>135</sup>In Paul, for instance, "...there is no distinction between the basis on which Jews and Gentile participate in God's grace, namely, faith. 'If indeed God, who will justify the circumcised on the basis of faith, is one, he will also justify the uncircumcised through faith' ([Romans] 3:30)" (Jeffrey S. Siker, *Disinheriting the Jews: Abraham in Early Christian Controversy*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991).



notably, the binding of Isaac) as demonstrating his faith not to God, but to the nations of the world. However, elsewhere in his commentary, Bekhor Shor polemicizes in explanation of circumcision against what he presents as a Gentile misinterpretation. In his commentary to Genesis 17:11, he notes the placement of the mark of circumcision in

a modest place, so that the nations of the world will not say of Israel:

"They are blemished; and since the Holy One, Blessed be He, commanded the males and not the females, we conclude that the Holy One, Blessed be He, gave the commandment to seal the covenant in a male's place [alone].

And as for the blood of menstruation that the women observe, and inform their husbands of their open [flow]<sup>136</sup>: that represents the blood of the covenant for them."

Even as Bekhor Shor wrote his explanation for the anatomical placement of circumcision, twelfth-century Christian writers offered explanations of the same. Pseudo-Anselm, who, like Pseudo William, argues that circumcision prefigures (and is superseded by) baptism, posits that "the most fitting member was chosen in that it was the part of the body in which man seemed to be most damned."<sup>137</sup>

When Bekhor Shor comments on the ritual institution of circumcision, he writes defensively, bolstering the legitimacy of the ancient Jewish practice. When it comes to Christian rituals and practices, Bekhor Shor takes a more actively antagonistic stance. Christian exegetes used the Hebrew Bible as evidence not only for the messiahship of

<sup>136</sup> As according to the *halakha* of *niddah*.

<sup>137</sup> Cf. Abulafia, 105.

Jesus, but also to substantiate explicitly Christian beliefs and practices whose origin and existence developed independently of Hebrew Scriptures. "Unlike the New Testament, the Old Testament possessed validity (if not the same significance) for both Jews and Christians. Thus, any decisive victory or defeat in the battle of polemics could only be achieved on the battlefield of the Old Testament."<sup>138</sup> In the verses of the Torah, Christians found justification or prefiguration of the doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation<sup>139</sup>, and Transubstantiation. Joseph Bekhor Shor responds directly to every such interpretation, and refutes each handily. As it turns out, Bekhor Shor's polemical approach fits neatly with his emphasis on *peshat*-exegesis; we will explore in the next chapter how the methodology of *peshat* contributes to anti-Christological readings of the Hebrew Bible.

Since Trinitarian proof-texts were formulated in verses which usually presented difficulties to anyone seeking *peshuto shel mikra*, it is to be expected that the Northern French exegetes would attempt to resolve the *peshat* problems and therefore make a contribution to the handbooks of polemical responses as well.<sup>140</sup>

<sup>138</sup>Ephraim Kanarfogel, "Trinitarian and Multiplicity Polemics in the Biblical Commentaries of Rashi, Rashbam, and Bekhor Shor," *Gesher* 7 (1979):16, citing *Sefer Yosef HaMekane*, Y. Rosenthal, ed., J'lem 1970. pp. 125-38, which presents a collection of medieval Jewish polemics on the New Testament. Cf. *Sefer Milhamot HaShem*, Y. Rosenthal, ed., (Jerusalem 1963), Ch. 11.

<sup>139</sup>The idea of God embodied in a man had long troubled Jews. "To Jews the idea of a mangled body on a cross was totally and utterly incompatible with their views about God.... Worshipping a cross with a suffering Christ depicted on it was not only distasteful to Jews; it was idolatrous" (Abulafia, 118).

<sup>140</sup>Kanarfogel, "Trinitarian and Multiplicity Polemics," 32. See, for instance, Bekhor Shor's commentary to Genesis 1:26, on which Kanarfogel comments (*Ibid*, 23-24): "'And to their (the Christians') foolishness that the verse (1:26) refers to the Trinity, and therefore 'Let us' is written, answer them the following...' According to the doctrine of the Trinity, all the Persons are equal. Each one is God. If so,

Within the Patriarch narratives, Bekhor Shor finds a few opportunities to address the allegations that Trinitarian doctrine has its root in the Hebrew Bible.

**18:2. And suddenly three men appeared.** According to the *peshat*, they were actual men<sup>141</sup>, for we do not find angels (Heb. מלאכים) eating or drinking or lodging in a man's house, as they lodged in Lot's house. "However, the מלאך said to Manoah, 'If you detain me, I will not eat of your food....'"<sup>142</sup>

Yet there is no reason to respond to the words of our Rabbis, for even they [the three men] were *like* angels, in [their] knowledge of what was in the land.

More provocative is the continuation of this comment found in the Munich manuscript of Bekhor Shor's comment (which, we speculate, may have been censored or edited out of the "standard" Bekhor Shor manuscript):

Why is it forbidden to teach in the presence of the Christians (Heb. מניינם) that they were angels? Because it would be evidence for them of their abomination who ate [i.e., the Christ incarnate as Jesus].<sup>143</sup> Here is an

answer for the Christians who say that the three who appeared to him are why does one (the Father) have to direct the other (the Son) and call them (all three Persons) together? All the Persons should have had the same thought and action in mind! Here Bekhor Shor has borrowed a tactic of the Jewish polemicists. A good way to disprove the Christian interpretation of a verse is to show how that interpretation is at odds with known Christian doctrine. In order to conform to the doctrine of the Trinity, the verse should have read: 'And they said, Let us make man...' In its present singular form, the verb shows that one God was summoning the others" (cf. *Sefer Nizzahon Yashan* (reprinted Jerusalem, 1965), p. 4, col. 5).

<sup>141</sup> *Contra* RaSHI, *Ber. Rabbah* 48:9.

<sup>142</sup> Judges 13:16.

the three elements of the Deity. If so, why did the first [element, i.e., Jesus, the Son] need to enter into a woman [i.e., Mary] in order to receive nourishment? Was there not meat for the three of them, and then they ate and drank—without entering the womb of a woman?!<sup>144</sup>

*Nizzahon Vetus* records a lengthy argument in a similarly polemical vein against the christological interpretation of this verse, charging that “Abraham saw three, but he did not pay attention to them and prayed instead to one, for God is one and his name is one.”<sup>145</sup> Manoah’s *mal’ach* is referenced there as well. Not surprisingly, the emphasis in *Nizzahon Vetus* on God’s unity is present in Bekhor Shor’s thinking as well, as evidenced by Bekhor Shor’s interpretation of “*Shema Yisrael...*” (Deut. 6:4), which he believes “specifically denies the doctrine of the Trinity.”<sup>146</sup> Noteworthy as well in Bekhor Shor’s remarks to Genesis 18:2 is the tone of ridicule which colors his interpretation, most perceptibly in the final rhetorical question: “Was there not meat for the three of them, and then they ate and drank—without entering the womb of a woman?!” It is a ridiculous question in its hyperbolic logic; but its ridiculousness is, in Bekhor Shor’s view, matched by the ridiculousness of the Christian doctrine. While this tendency to mock the Christian interpretation “is a deviation for a number of the Northern French *pashtanim*,

<sup>143</sup>Interestingly, “[i]n the *Disputatio cum Gentili* Gilbert [Crispin] reiterated that the Trinity should only be debated between Christians” (*Disputatio* 54, WGC, p. 74, cited in Abulafia, 79).

<sup>144</sup>Following Kanarfogel’s reading of this comment (“Trinitarian and Multiplicity Polemics,” 31). For similar remarks, see Bekhor Shor to Gen. 18:3, 19:1, and 20:3, the last of which Kanarfogel cites as an example of an anti-Trinitarian polemic. “The plural nature of the word *elohim* and its use as a name of God is also the subject of exegetical polemics. Of course, Christians point to this word as a clear sign of multiplicity within God, particularly when God is called by this name and a plural verse is used.... R. Yosef Bekhor Shor explains that *elohim* in Genesis 20:13 refers not to the unique God of Israel, but to the many heathen gods” (*Ibid.*, 27-28).

the deviation is not uncharacteristic for Bekhor Shor."<sup>147</sup>

The method of Bekhor Shor's argumentation in the above passage also prevails in many of his anti-christological remarks: that is to say, he argues against Christian readings of the Bible by finding logical flaws in the Christian reading or doctrine itself. His remarks to Genesis 24:2—in which Abraham has his servant Eliezer take an oath by placing his hand under Abraham's thigh, as is characteristic of certain biblical oaths—clearly present this method.

**24:2, midverse. ...Please place your hand under my thigh.** Now the

Christians [Heb. מניין] say: [this oath by placing the hand under the thigh]

is [done so] because Jesus, their abomination, came from there. But one

may respond: [According to them,] he was not parented by a man!

According to their words, they should take oaths on the womb of a

woman!

We find in Bekhor Shor's commentary many other such comments; it appears as if he systematically set out to refute the Christian interpretations of every verse which, by his day, had generated controversial understandings based on Christian doctrine.

Occasionally, he even uses a verse of Torah as the jumping-off point for a polemical remark, even when the verse does not, at least to our sensibilities, warrant one. Such would apply to Bekhor Shor's comments on the episode of the Golden Calf (Ex. 32f.), specifically to Moses' punishment of the Israelites, in which he reduces the calf to ashes and makes the Israelites drink the remnants of their idol. Bekhor uses this episode to

and makes the Israelites drink the remnants of their idol. Bekhor uses this episode to polemicize against the doctrine of Transubstantiation; but the connection to the verse is tenuous at best.

According to the *peshat*, Moses never intended to make them drink, but rather to scatter and destroy [the calf]; but once it was cast into the water, perforce they drank it<sup>147</sup>, for it was impossible for them *not* to drink from the water; and because of this, it necessarily appears as if they were drinking it.... However, our Sages have said that he intended to test them as with unfaithful wives (Heb. *sotot*).<sup>148</sup> As an answer to the Christians (*minim*) who mock this drinking, he said to them: [This contains a hint that a "god whom one can eat and drink has nothing real about him; yet they eat the flesh of their abomination<sup>149</sup> and they drink his blood<sup>150</sup> all the time."]<sup>151</sup>

This remark contains many of the hallmarks of Bekhor Shor's style: the ostensible use of *peshat*-exegesis to defend Moses and his apparently dubious action, the inclusion of Rabbinic interpretation as an alternative (which clearly Bekhor Shor does not prefer over "*peshat*"), and the "answer to the *minim*." Occasionally in his commentary, R. Joseph

<sup>147</sup>I.e., the pulverized calf.

<sup>148</sup>I.e., analogous to their unfaithfulness to their master, God.

<sup>149</sup>I.e., the transubstantiated wafer.

<sup>150</sup>I.e., the transubstantiated wine.

<sup>151</sup>Bekhor Shor quoted (in Hebrew) in Avraham Grossman, "הפולמוס היהודי הנוצרי והפרשנות היהודי", למקרא, 51. The brackets used in Grossman's article are not explained; perhaps they indicate that his source for the polemical passage is an alternative manuscript.

reader to wonder if the remark possesses an anti-Christian intention nonetheless.<sup>152</sup>

The passages examined above should provide the reader with an overview of the breadth and depth of polemical exegesis present in the commentary of Joseph Bekhor Shor, and with a deeper understanding of how the general concerns of the ongoing Jewish-Christian debate made their way into the representative Jewish polemical literature of twelfth-century northern France, a locus of the debate. Polemic most often surfaces in commentaries to the Bible at those passages which evoke similarities between Jewish-Gentile relations as depicted in the Bible and as manifested at the time of the given polemicist's writing. Undeniably the Bible evokes many such similarities in the mind of Bekhor Shor; they lie at the heart of his understanding of Scripture as a whole. Furthermore, one observes explicit polemical currents in those passages which, over the

<sup>152</sup> As in his commentary to Genesis 48:14, wherein Jacob crosses his hands to bless Ephraim and Manasseh, an act Christians interpreted as making the sign of the cross. **"48:14. He crossed his hands, because Manasseh was the first-born.** Because Manasseh was the first-born, and Jacob knew that Joseph had brought him and placed him on his right, with Ephraim to his left; so he crossed his hands. With wisdom and knowledge did he do this, placing his right hand on Ephraim's head, for he understood that he was on his left, because Manasseh was the first-born, and Joseph had placed him on his right." Bekhor Shor's emphasis on the intentionality behind Jacob's action likely signifies Bekhor Shor's familiarity with the christological interpretation, even though this *peirush* does not explicitly cite it. One may also regard in a similar light Bekhor Shor's commentary to Genesis 49:10, Jacob's final blessing to Judah. The polemical force of the comment comes in Bekhor Shor's interpretation of "Shiloh," which in Christian exegetical tradition is associated with Jesus' messiahship. In the Christian view, the Jews' "permanent humiliation is a libing testimony for the Christians that the scepter had departed from Judah when *shiloh* came, and that the election has been transferred from Israel 'in the flesh' to the spiritual Israel, that is, the gentiles" (Amos Funkenstein, "Basic Types of Christian Anti-Jewish Polemics in the Later Middle Ages," *Viator* Vol. 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971): 375). Bekhor Shor provides an alternative (and traditionally Jewish) understanding to Jacob's prophetic blessing: **"49:10. The scepter shall not depart from Judah.** He came to explain when the kingdom would come to him, and told him not to think that he would be abject until the time of his kingship would come. For the scepter and the kingdom will not depart from you, for you will always be regarded as the senior, and the staff and the cord shall be in your hand. **Nor the ruler's staff....** That wrote and inscribed decrees commanding others, so as to say: Until Shiloh (i.e., the messiah's arrival), you will be a chief and a ruler, but when Shiloh comes, you will be king." For another example, see his commentary to Deut. 31:16, in which he argues against a Toraitic derivation of the doctrine of resurrection of the dead.

course of the divergent exegetical traditions of Jews and Christians, have come to signify divergent religious tenets or doctrines. At these points in the text, the polemicist argues forcefully either for the view of his own faith, or against the assertions of the other faith.

The basic concerns of polemical exegesis of Scripture never fully disappear, even in commentary to passages seemingly unrelated, or indirectly related, to the aforementioned Scriptural "triggers" of polemical exegesis. As I intend to show in the next chapter, a skilled and concerned polemicist never loses sight of his endeavor's polemical orientation. Thus even in Bekhor Shor's commentary to narrative portions of the Bible—not intuitively the stuff of polemic (as contrasted against legal, cultic, or prophetic passages)—we frequently encounter polemically motivated interpretations. Such interpretations are manifest throughout Bekhor Shor's commentary to the Patriarch narratives, and lie at the heart of Bekhor Shor's portrayal of the leading characters in Genesis. Indeed, they are crucial, if relatively unexplored, subjects of the Jewish-Christian debate. With the basic issues of polemical exegesis still fresh in mind, let us turn now to specific applications and manifestations of these issues in Bekhor Shor's commentary on the Patriarchs.



## CHAPTER IV: POLEMIC AND PATRIARCHS IN BEKHOR SHOR

Thus far this study of polemic in Bekhor Shor's commentary to the Torah has offered an overview of passages that reflect tension either between Jews and Gentiles or between Jewish and Gentile doctrine. The study now must become more speculative as we present Joseph Bekhor Shor's commentary on the Patriarch narratives and pay special attention to his defensive characterization of the Patriarchs (and their immediate descendants). Key passages from Bekhor Shor's commentary argue for an anti-Christian, polemical undercurrent that runs through his entire exegetical effort and colors the way in which he regards and presents the "heroes" of Genesis.

In order to present this material, it is necessary first to ground our study in an understanding of the importance of the Patriarchs in the Jewish-Christian debate. In other words: what do the Patriarchs have to do with polemics? Using Bekhor Shor as a representative Jewish exegete and polemicist, this study will offer a number of explanations that link polemical concerns to the Patriarchs. First and foremost of these is the centrality of God's *covenant* to the Patriarchs and their lives. The Patriarchs are of fundamental concern to Jews and Christians alike, because the relationship between the Patriarchs and God foreshadows (and, to the religious mind, *determines*) the relationship between God and the Patriarchs' descendants: Jews and Gentiles both claim descent from the Patriarchs, though in different ways. Secondly, this study will examine the historical role of the Patriarch narrative and traditions of exegesis associated with them, within the

framework of the Jewish-Christian debate. How does the historical role of these Scriptural passages in the long tradition of polemical discourse influence the interpretation of Bekhor Shor? Finally, the *merits* of the Patriarchs are seen in the Jewish-Christian debate as reflective of the merits of, once again, their descendants—the future generations of believers who turn to the Hebrew Bible, and the actions of the Patriarchs in particular, for guidance. This becomes increasingly evident as one notes Bekhor Shor's striking defensiveness of the Patriarchs, beginning with Abraham and culminating in his commentary to the sagas of Jacob and his sons. This study will present representative passages of Joseph Bekhor Shor's commentary on each of the relevant figures from the Patriarch narratives, with an eye toward how his anti-Christian stance influences his interpretation of the Patriarchs' traits, behaviors, interactions with others, and relationship with the Almighty.

### ***Zocher Ha-Brit: God's Covenants with the Patriarchs***

In his book *Disinheriting the Jews*, Jeffrey Siker makes the case that from an early point in Christian history, Christian authors sought systematically to transfer the mantle of chosenness to the Christians. The earliest writers with such a program—most notably, Paul—still regarded Jews as the children of Abraham. "They had not stumbled so as to fall, so as to be disinherited of God's promises to Abraham and his children."<sup>153</sup> By the middle of the second century, however, normative Christian thought on this

<sup>153</sup>Siker, 13.

subject had developed so as to delete the Jews from their own covenant with God, relegating them to spiritual degradation, subservience, and irrelevance—unless or until they would place their faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>154</sup> Many of the biblical themes which catch the attention of these early Christian writers continue to do so throughout the Middle Ages. Abraham is a focal figure in articulating these exegetical concerns.

The reason for Abraham's importance is that a variety of issues central to both early Judaism and Christianity converged around the figure of Abraham: God's covenant promises, what it means to be heirs of these promises, the eschatological realization of the promises, law, circumcision, God's relation to non-Jewish peoples, and the character of faith and righteousness. That so many concerns inherent to early Jewish and Christian identity involved the understanding of this one figure is due to the fact that both early Judaism and Christianity claimed the covenant God initiated with Abraham as their special heritage.<sup>155</sup>

Each of these concerns figures prominently in Bekhor Shor's commentary. I have already begun to explore some of these themes in a general sense; now I will raise them as they arise in Bekhor Shor's presentation of Abraham and his descendants. We will argue that Bekhor Shor writes so as to counteract the Christian exegetical program "to antedate the rejection of the Jews and the emergence of the Church to the beginning of

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<sup>154</sup> Johannine Christianity redefines Abraham's religious significance so as to exclude Jews-by-birth from God's covenant; but faith in Jesus Christ restores them as "children of Abraham" (*Ibid*, 142-143).

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

revealed history, by emphasizing the position of Abraham as the father of many nations, of whom only one, and that themselves [i.e., Christians], was chosen."<sup>156</sup> It comes as no surprise, then, that Bekhor Shor comments forcefully on passages in Genesis pertaining to God's covenantal promises. In so doing, he emphasizes the legitimacy of the covenant, its hereditary nature,<sup>157</sup> its (partial) fulfillment in the occupation of Israel in its ancestral land. By omission, he *de-emphasizes* the eschatological element of the covenant, whose fulfillment comes with the arrival of the Messiah.<sup>158</sup> It is therefore necessary to turn to the theme of *covenant* in Bekhor Shor's commentary to Genesis as an introduction and way of framing his treatment of the Patriarchs.

In a comment that follows other Rabbinic interpretive traditions, Bekhor Shor clarifies the covenantal relationship between God and Abraham from its inception in Genesis 12.

**12:3. I shall bless those who bless you.** That is to say: I love those who love you, and hate those who hate you. That is to say: do not let it occur

<sup>156</sup>Parkes, *Conflict*, 97.

<sup>157</sup>A crucial point against early Christian writings, which changed the hereditary covenant to a faith-based covenant. At this time, the rite of circumcision is derided and cancelled in Christian thought, even at times going so far as to claim that the state of uncircumcision is superior. Baptism becomes the replacement rite, and is regarded as a "spiritual circumcision." See Siker, 59, 165-169.

<sup>158</sup>It is this latter aspect of the covenant that early Christianity seems to have emphasized. James Parkes comments on the Jewish tendency to counter-polemicize against the Christian interpretation of biblical prophecies (which include, as I shall examine further on, the prophetic "Blessings" of Isaac and Jacob in the Book of Genesis.) Parkes writes: "... [A] prophecy could not be fulfilled twice, and Jacob of Serug, a writer of the fifth century, rubs in the implication of this by stating, after he has proved that Christ fulfilled all prophecies, that even if the Jews did obtain a Messiah, he could not claim any of the Old Testament prophecies on his behalf, for 'Our Lord, when He came, fulfilled the totality of prophecy. And he gave no opportunity for another to come'" (*First Homily Against the Jews*, line 283. Cf. Ch. VIII, Section III, quoted in Parkes, *Conflict*, 99).

to you to say, "I have no relative or redeemer in the land"<sup>159</sup>, and if one hates me, and wishes me harm, who will stand up against him? And if one loves me, who will repay him his kindness?" For when a person has relatives, all of them love and respect him, and provide him benefit. I shall be to you as a friend and a redeemer....

Additionally, Bekhor Shor makes it clear that outsiders to Abraham's family—even righteous and faithful ones—had no place in God's covenant.

**15:2. What could You give me...?** That is to say: What good would anything that You could give me do for me if others inherit it?! And even though the Holy One, Blessed be He, had told him numerous times: "I shall give this land to your offspring,"<sup>160</sup> Abraham was thinking that the members of his family were designated "his seed," *along with* Eliezer, who came from Aram (Damesek, from the land of Aram); perhaps *he* was his relative? [Abraham wondered.] Thus did God explain to him here:

"Rather, the one who issues from your loins—*he* shall inherit it."<sup>161</sup>

Bekhor Shor reiterates this view with greater specificity when he comments on the Abraham's genealogical line as presented in Genesis 25; he explicitly denies the children of Hagar or Keturah membership in the covenant.

**25:19. ... Abraham begat Isaac.** So as to say: Isaac is his descendant

<sup>159</sup> According to Nebo: cf. Hizkuni.

<sup>160</sup> Gen. 12:7.

<sup>161</sup> II Sam 17:27. Emphases added.

and his offspring and the fulfillment of his place, as it is written: "For through Isaac will descendants be called for you."<sup>162</sup> But the children of the concubines do not warrant [to be called] his "*toledot*."

Indeed, just as the Bible has God reiterate the covenantal promises to each successive generation of Patriarchs, so too does Bekhor Shor uses these points in the text to reiterate the lasting validity and continual renewal of the covenant.<sup>163</sup> When we discuss R. Joseph's defensiveness of the Patriarchs further on in this chapter, we shall note the zealotry with which Bekhor Shor defends Jacob's right to the birthright and blessing which he wrests from Esau. It is important to point out this defensive strand in the context of Bekhor Shor's view of God's covenant to Jacob as well. Bekhor Shor reiterates the legitimacy of both covenantal promises given to Jacob: that of the land and that of offspring. As for the land, in Bekhor Shor's view, even *Esau* acknowledges that Jacob is the rightful heir:

**36:6. And he [Esau] went to [another] land because of<sup>164</sup> Jacob.** For he knew that the blessing of Abraham was given to Jacob and his descendants, to inherit the land of Canaan. So he [Esau] went off there [to Se'ir]. Also, the land could not support [both of] them, so he went and

<sup>162</sup> Gen. 21:12.

<sup>163</sup> See, for instance, Bekhor Shor to Gen. 35:11, of which the following is an excerpt: "The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to him [Jacob]: Do not think that I would leave you, for it is I who will bless you, and multiply your offspring; and a nation and an assembly of nations will issue forth from you, and from those who issue forth from your loins, for kings will issue from your children...."

<sup>164</sup> In most translations, the force of the verse is more at "away from," Heb. מִפְּנֵי.

settled in Se'ir....

When we recognize that Jews had for centuries identified Esau with Christianity<sup>165</sup>, the force of this verse becomes all the more evident: Bekhor Shor argues his point by making the "Christian" figure of Genesis *par excellence* attest to the legitimacy of Jacob's inheritance and God-given blessing. The fullest statement of Bekhor Shor's view of the Genesis covenants comes in response to Jacob's blessings to his sons (Gen. 49:26f). This passage, whose commentary masquerades as Jacob's own presentation of the "history" of the covenant thus far, allows Bekhor Shor to reiterate his opposition to outsider participation in the covenant and his emphasis on the fulfillment of the covenant in the tribal occupation of the land, a theme I will explore further in Chapter Five.

**49:26. The blessings of your father exceed....** For the Holy One, blessed be He, gave me many more children than my fathers; and all of them are included in the blessing of Abraham—to inherit the land of Israel. He gave Abraham children by Hagar and Keturah, but said: "... through *Isaac* shall offspring be called for you"<sup>166</sup>; and took out others from inclusion in the blessing, and from inclusion in the inheritance of the land. He gave Esau and me unto Isaac, and said to him: "For to you and to your seed do I give all of these lands...."<sup>167</sup> And he took Esau out of the blessing and out of the inheritance of the land. But as for my children, all of them are

<sup>165</sup>Esau represents the nation of "Edom," which in Rabbinic literature becomes an idiom for Rome, which later stands for all Christian-nation oppressors of the Jews.

<sup>166</sup>Gen. 21:12. Emphasis added.

<sup>167</sup>Gen. 26:3.

included in the blessing.

Furthermore, Jacob was given an inheritance excluding Egypt, as our Rabbis have explained: **To the utmost bounds of the eternal hills....** [That is to say,] until the great ones of the world desire blessings, and they shall be on Joseph's head<sup>168</sup>; so that all of his children will be included in the blessing, and included in the inheritance of the land.

**[On the brow of] the elect of his brothers....** That is, Joseph, who [is] separated and distinguished from his brothers, as in "They elected sanctified ones of the Israelites..."<sup>169</sup> And even though all of his brothers were similarly included along with their offspring in the blessing of the land, in any case, he [Joseph] merited it more than they, for he got two portions [i.e., Ephraim and Manasseh].

The emphasis in R. Joseph's commentary on the exclusivity of the covenant runs counter to prevailing Christian thought on the subject. Emblematic of this exclusivity is the sign of the covenant in each male Jew, the mark of circumcision. We have already seen the unease between Jews and Gentiles that surfaces in Bekhor Shor's discussion of circumcision, particularly concerning the exclusivity of the rite. But the argument surrounding circumcision goes much deeper than ethnic differences; it comes to represent the entire argument of Divine election of one religion over the other. Suggesting his familiarity with Christian derision of circumcision, Bekhor Shor remarks:

<sup>168</sup>Cf. Gen. 49:26.

<sup>169</sup>Cf. RaSHI *ad loc.* and Lev. 22:2.



**17:2. I will give my covenant between Me and you....** For I will place a seal in your flesh to be a sign that you are my servant, and such is my covenant: like the manner of slaves who have a seal in their clothing, to show that they are slaves and lower than their masters, as is demonstrated in [Tractate] *Shabbat*: "That slave shall not leave with either the seal on his neck nor the seal on his clothing, etc."<sup>170</sup> But here the Holy One, Blessed be He, has made a seal in our flesh—for we are His servants—in a place where no one may stretch it out or remove it from him.

And after reiterating the importance of the physical manifestation of the covenant in circumcision, thereby rejecting the Christian argument for "spiritual circumcision" or some other replacement of the covenantal rite, Bekhor Shor goes on to reject the arguments against circumcision on alleged medical grounds:

**...And I will multiply you very greatly.** So that you will not say:

"Perhaps He is preventing me from bearing offspring." Not only will He not detain [you]; He will instead assist you! For sometimes the foreskin disrupts the flow of semen so that it does not shoot forth like an arrow; but now there will be no disruption, and that is how "I will increase your seed greatly."

The scientific-rational trend in Bekhor Shor combines here with the polemical to shape a two-pronged argument in favor of circumcision. It seems entirely possible that his

<sup>170</sup>B. *Shabbat* 58a.

motive, while unstated, is similarly twofold: (1) to reject Christian objections to circumcision on religious or "scientific" grounds; (2) to bolster Jewish support for traditional Jewish understandings of the text while reminding his readers—the Jews of Northern France—of their enduring covenantal relationship with God, even in a time and place that too often appeared to confirm the degradation of which their Christian neighbors spoke.

### **The Patriarch Narratives in the Jewish-Christian Debate**

God's covenant with Israel is, of course, a two-way street: God upholds half of the deal—His promise to protect an eternal people and to guarantee a secure holding in *Eretz Yisrael*—while the Jews uphold their end: to remain steadfast in their faith in God and in their faithfulness to God's Torah. I have explored how Bekhor Shor reinforces the biblical claims to God's covenantal promises; now I turn to explore the ways in which Bekhor Shor reinforces the Bible's portrayal of the patriarchs and their commensurate faith and faithfulness in response to God.

His commentary on the Patriarchs (and Jacob's sons) reveals two tactics which he employs to accomplish this task. Bekhor Shor simultaneously emphasizes the faith, faithfulness, and general merits of the Patriarchs while attempting to polish their occasionally tarnished images by defending them from any potential claim of flaw or misdeed. The following texts demonstrate these exegetical tendencies according to this two-part program: first examining how Bekhor Shor stresses the Patriarchs' faith, then

demonstrating how he defends their character and actions. In so doing, we hope to show that Bekhor Shor's exegetical program is, to a significant degree, intended to bolster the faith of the Jewish community and counteract Christian interpretations of the Bible and, in particular, of the merits (or, more to the point, the shortcomings) of the Patriarchs.

The tendency to teach about the merits of the deeds associated with the Patriarchs and to distance them from any possibility of slander... immediately touches on the Jewish-Christian polemic. Directly connected to this is the tendency to diminish the sins of Israel that are described in Scripture and to weaken their force....<sup>171</sup>

Throughout the history of the two faiths, Jews and Christians alike have interpreted and redrawn the Patriarchs in their own image; that is to say, the Patriarchs (and the biblical figures with whom they associate) become either exemplars or villains for the readers charged with the task of understanding and teaching about them in each post-biblical generation. Biblical commentators of both religions abrogated many of the Patriarchs' subtleties of character, as well as their moral ambiguities, tending either to lionize or vilify them. This eisegesis, or reading into the text one's own extra-textual program, began at a very early stage in Jewish interpretive tradition (midrash), and is echoed in contemporaneous early Church literature, especially the Patristic writings. For early Rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity alike, the Patriarchs are used in homiletical exegeses of the Bible as role models for the respective religions. Contrary to what we

<sup>171</sup> Grossman, "הפולמוס היהודי הנוצרי והפרשנות היהודי למקרא," 50.

might expect after examining the Jewish-Christian Debate of the Middle Ages, the Patriarchs were not universally maligned in early Church writings; in fact, the contrary is usually true.<sup>172</sup>

Certainly the character of Abraham for Jews and Christians alike represented the virtuous parent of both faiths; moreover, both traditions stressed the faith of Abraham that enabled him to endure numerous trials. Of the three Patriarchs, Abraham remains the least controversial in the Jewish-Christian debate; and his evident shortcomings—such as the passing off of his wife as his sister—are not a focal point of polemical discourse. We shall see that Bekhor Shor's primary defensive tactic in this episode of Abraham's life is to avoid confronting Abraham's disconcerting behavior altogether, save for a defense of Sarah's purity. In the literature of the Church Fathers, Abraham comes out squeaky clean—even in the wife-sister incident. The noted preacher and exegete of Antioch and Constantinople of the late fourth century, St. John Chrysostom, for instance, praises Abraham (with no small degree of rationalizing!):

Consider, I ask you, the extent of the panic the just man's mind had probably fallen into when he urged this course on his wife. I mean, you know perfectly well how there is nothing more depressing for husbands than having their wives fall under suspicion of this kind. Yet the good

<sup>172</sup>Especially interesting with regard to this tendency in the literature of the Church Fathers is their frequent (though not universal) depiction of Jacob as a paragon of virtue. This is found in St. Ambrose's homily, "Jacob and the Happy life" in his *Seven Exegetical Works*. Cf. Michael P. McHugh, translator, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, Vol. 65: *Saint Ambrose: Seven Exegetical Works*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1972. pp. 119-184.

man shows all anxiety and takes every step to ensure the adultery is put into effect. Don't, however, dearly beloved, rashly condemn the good man; rather, gain from this a particular insight into his great sagacity and courage—yes, his courage in nobly withstanding and overcoming turmoil of mind to the extent of planning such stratagems.... Do you see the just man's sagacity, how despite being in their clutches he could still find some way to plan how he might manage to prove superior to the Egyptians' plot?...

Do you see the bond of love between husband and wife? Do you see... what trust the husband had in imposing such an extent on his wife, and the degree of cooperation he received from his wife?... Let husbands and wives take note and imitate their harmony, the bond of love, the depth of their devotion, and let them emulate Sarah's self-control.<sup>173</sup>

Bekhor Shor, on the other hand, does not go nearly so far as to defend Abraham as does John Chrysostom; rather, he avoids a discussion of Abraham's action and focuses instead on exculpating him of wrongdoing by noting that in no way was Sarah defiled by the encounter.<sup>174</sup>

Both Christians and Jews have a vested interest in defending Abraham's faith, because for each group Abraham represented the parent chosen by God on account of his

<sup>173</sup>Robert C. Hill, translator, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, Vol. 82: *St. John Chrysostom: Homilies on Genesis 18-45*, Homily 32. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1990. pp. 264-266.

<sup>174</sup>Cf. Bekhor Shor to Gen. 12:15

faith. In Genesis 15, God offers a covenantal promise of the land to Abraham, to which Abraham responds: "By what shall I know that I shall inherit it?"<sup>175</sup> Both Christian and Jewish exegetes provided commentary to Abraham's query. Notice how the Church Fathers' remarks, here represented again by St. John Chrysostom, resemble the perpetual concerns of Joseph Bekhor Shor, though the writings of the former come centuries before the latter. John Chrysostom writes:

"He [Abraham] said," remember, "'My lord and master, how shall know that I am to inherit it?'" Even if Sacred Scripture had previously testified to his having faith in the words of God, for which reason it was reckoned as righteousness in him, nevertheless when he heard that the reason why "I have brought you from the land of Chaldea is to give you this land for your inheritance," he said, While it is not possible for me to have no faith in the words you have spoken, still **I would like to know as well the way I would come to inherit it....** So it is not out of unbelief that I am asking this; but since you mentioned once again the inheritance, I was wanting to receive as well some more concrete and visible sign, something capable of shoring up the limitations of my thinking.<sup>176</sup>

And Bekhor Shor:

**15:8. "By what shall I know that I shall inherit...?"** This is not to say that he asked the Holy One, Blessed be He, for a sign; for he already

<sup>175</sup>Bekhor Shor to Gen. 15:8.

<sup>176</sup>Hill, *The Fathers of The Church*, Vol. 82., Homily 37, p. 343. Emphasis added.

believed (in God), so what other sign could He have given him? At the beginning He had told him; and in the end He had told him the same thing! Rather, "With what shall I know that I will inherit" is to say: **"I know that I will inherit; however, how will I inherit? at what time? In which generation? When will it be? And how much will I inherit? From whom?"** ....<sup>177</sup>

Now if we are to assume that Bekhor Shor's characteristic defensiveness of the Patriarch comes, in part, as a response to Christian interpretation of the verse, then how do we reconcile this comment against the markedly similar interpretation of the Church literature we have just seen? The simple answer is that Christian interpretation had changed dramatically by Bekhor Shor's day; and this verse, moreover, appears to have attained significance in Christian-Jewish polemical arguments, having evolved into a polemical touchstone. "The fact that the Church Fathers themselves defended some of the actions of the Patriarchs did not prevent their descendants in the Middle Ages from appropriating them for their own purposes, especially in the polemic that was employed in the characterization of peoples."<sup>178</sup> And so medieval Christians came to use Genesis 15:8 in order to accuse Abraham of precisely the thing St. John and R. Joseph of Orléans appear to fear most: insufficient faith in God.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>177</sup>Emphasis added.

<sup>178</sup>Grossman, "הפולמוס היהודי הנוצרי והפרשנות היהודי למקרא," 50.

<sup>179</sup>Evidence for this position comes from the counterargument in *Nizzahon Vetus*. See Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate*, 47 (No. 11).

## ***Zechut Avot: The Faith, Faithfulness, and Merits of the Patriarchs***

Joseph Bekhor Shor, throughout his commentary on the Patriarch narratives, implicitly documents the Patriarchs' faith in God, their obedience to God's will, their upstanding moral character, and their upright conduct toward others. This trend is, of course, nothing new to the reader familiar with Rabbinic literature; the Patriarchs' heroism and uprightness emerge in Rabbinic literature far more prominently than in the original text. I propose that Bekhor Shor's interest in maintaining this program derives, at least partially, from his knowledge of Christian exegesis and his desire to refute it. Emblematic of this interest is Bekhor Shor's frequent use of the term נאמן, "faithful," which he regularly uses to describe the Patriarchs. נאמן is what we would call a "loaded word," one with connotations beside the word's literal sense. In Jewish anti-Christian polemical tracts, נאמן (often in its nominal form נאמני, literally the "faithful one," or, more to the point, the "Jew who has the right belief") is contrasted against the assonant word מניין, that is, Christians.<sup>180</sup> In addition to its significance in a religious context, the virtue of faith figures prominently in medieval courtly culture. Faith is a salient, chivalric quality in twelfth century northern France, one which Bekhor Shor retrojects into the biblical narratives and the "values" governing the Patriarchs' attitudes and actions. The following passages demonstrate Bekhor Shor's emphasis on the Patriarchs' faith, and, where applicable, his use of the word "faith" (אמונה, נאמנות) in its various permutations. A characteristic example comes in Bekhor Shor's commentary to Genesis 15:6, which

<sup>180</sup>Erwin Rosenthal, "Anti-Christian Polemic in Medieval Bible Commentaries," 119.



recounts the *b'rit ben ha-b'tarim*, or the Covenant of the Pieces. After the text relates that Abraham "believed in God," the text states: "and it was accounted to him as meritorious." This phrase is cryptic and ambiguous because it does not specify who is the subject and who the object—Abraham or God? The Rabbis provide a conventional reading, naming God as the One who does the "accounting" and Abraham as the recipient of God's favorable appraisal. But Bekhor Shor inverts it, and in so doing, makes a strong statement about Abraham's incontrovertible faith:

**15:6. He believed in (Heb. האמין ב-) God, and it was accounted by Abraham to the Holy One, Blessed be He, as meritorious (Heb. צדקה)....**  
 For He [God] had dealt righteously with him by promising him that He would bring forth heirs to the land from his loins. Now there are some who explain that the Holy One, blessed be He, accounted *Abraham* as meritorious because he [Abraham] believed in Him. But it doesn't appear that way to me; for who would *not* believe in the Faithful God (Heb. אל הנאמן)?!<sup>181</sup>

In Bekhor Shor's view, Abraham's faith is so obvious as hardly to deserve mention; nevertheless, Bekhor Shor mentions his faith again and again. In one noted instance, Abraham's faith earns him, in Bekhor Shor's commentary, the status of "prophet."

**18:19 (excerpt from the end of the verse). "For I have known him"...**

For I know that he ... will instruct his descendants and his household to

<sup>181</sup>Emphasis added.

do righteousness, etc. ...Abraham commanded his children to do  
**righteousness and justice** so that the goodness that the Holy One, Blessed  
be He, had promised, would come to pass. And because of this, Abraham  
was entrusted [Heb. נאמן] as a prophet of the Lord, and to have My  
secret[s] revealed to him.

Both of these representative comments about Abraham reveal Bekhor Shor's emphasis on  
the *mutuality* of faith between God and Abraham. As for the other virtues present in  
Abraham, Bekhor Shor takes his cue from the earlier Rabbis. He portrays Abraham as a  
*mitzvah*-observing Jew<sup>182</sup>, a model of humility<sup>183</sup>, and an obedient servant to God whose  
faith remains steadfast even in the harrowing binding of Isaac.<sup>184</sup>

Bekhor Shor's insistence on the Patriarchs' "נאמנות" is put to fullest expression in  
defense of Jacob. Jacob's trust in God becomes the subject of commentary only in a few  
instances<sup>185</sup>; but his "faithful" conduct vis-à-vis Laban surfaces frequently.<sup>186</sup> In three  
separate instances, Bekhor Shor remarks that Jacob acted toward his father-in-law

<sup>182</sup>Bekhor Shor to Gen. 18:8: "Curds and milk and after that, a calf.... So as not to eat  
the milk after the meat, for Our Father Abraham observed the *mitzvot*." In this case, Abraham  
observed *kashrut*.

<sup>183</sup>Bekhor Shor to Gen. 18:5, 18:27.

<sup>184</sup>Bekhor Shor to Gen. 22:1, 3, 8.

<sup>185</sup>For instance, Bekhor Shor to Gen. 32:9.... [If Esau comes to the one camp and  
attacks it], the other camp may still escape. ... (Jacob) knew that he (Esau) could not kill them  
all, for the Holy One, Blessed be He, had already promised him; nevertheless, he was afraid that  
he (Esau) might come and smite a portion (of them).

<sup>186</sup>It seems that once God's covenant is in place with Abraham, Bekhor Shor does not  
need to stress the faith-relationship between Isaac and God or between Jacob and God. Bekhor  
Shor's sentiment, one we have just read, makes it clear: "...who would *not* believe in the Faithful  
God?" Rather, the next use of the faith/faithfulness motif applies to Jacob, whose faith of God  
remains evident in the text but whose allegedly faithful conduct is a far more dubious matter.

בנאמנות, in good faith. Quite possibly his emphasis of this point directly counteracts a Christian exegetical tendency to emphasize the deceitfulness and "bad faith" of Jacob, not only in his conduct toward Esau, but also in his business dealings with Laban. We will examine in greater detail Bekhor Shor's lengthy defense of these business practices; at this moment, note the rapid iterations of Jacob's good faith:

**30:26. For you know well.** That is to say: It is the law that you fulfill my wish and not detain me, for you know well that I have served you in faithfulness (Heb. בנאמנות).

**31:40. During the day, the heat consumed me....** I was so zealous in my guarding [of the flock] that I did not swerve, neither from the cold nor the heat; and my sleep fled, so that I could not sleep like other people do; and since you knew that I did my work in such good faith (Heb. כל כך באמנה), how can you suspect me of theft, and pursue me? Rather, *you* are *my* oppressor and a thief, for you switched my wages oppressively!<sup>187</sup>

**31:42. ...by now you would have sent me away empty-handed.** And you took my work by force, according to your whim. **And rebuked you last night.** Because He [God] knew that I had walked with you in good faith (Heb. הלך באמנה); but you [acted] deceitfully with me. So [God] rebuked you for my sake.

The term נאמן/אמנה functions as the hinge around which Bekhor Shor switches the

<sup>187</sup>Emphasis added.

characterization of the two opponents: Laban replaces Jacob as the arch-deceiver. This is not to say that Bekhor Shor's reading is out-of-step with the *peshat* sense of the text; clearly Jacob is supposed come out as the "good guy"; however, Bekhor Shor's terminology (faithfulness for Jacob, deceit for Laban) is carefully chosen to invert the customary associations with each of these flawed characters, and to demonize one while exculpating the other. In the pages to come, we will examine how Bekhor Shor uses an even heavier hand to polish Jacob's tarnished character.

### ***Magen Avot: Defending the Patriarchs***

#### **Abraham**

At times frustrating in its tenacity, at times amusing, and always impassioned, Bekhor Shor's determination to bolster and improve the reputation of the Patriarchs remains a constant throughout his commentary to Genesis. His defensive interpretations attain their pinnacle of emotional force and baroque intricacy in his defense of Jacob—who, frankly, needs the best press agent—but are also evident in his approach to Jacob's sons, particularly in their less impressive moments. Occasionally, when the apparent wrongdoing seems too large to rectify through rationalization and alternative explanations—when the transgression seems too large to ignore—Bekhor Shor does just that. Hence we see him carefully sidestep the problems of Abraham presenting Sarah as his sister and Reuben taking his father's concubine Bilhah to bed. On the other hand, he meets other glaring moral lapses, like Jacob's deceitfulness, with clever and carefully

crafted interpretations. Isaac, who occupies the least prominent Patriarchal position, receives little mention for good or ill in Bekhor Shor's commentary.<sup>188</sup> And aside from the passages we have explored with regard to Abraham, we have only the following defense of his character to add. Bekhor Shor, writing as if to shield Abraham from a potential accusation, defends his taking of the ram as the substitute sacrifice for Isaac, at the end of Genesis 22:

**22:13. Then he looked, and saw a ram!** But in no case would he have taken it, for he was concerned that someone had lost it; and he would not have laid his hand on someone else's belongings. But after it got caught by its horns in a thicket, he knew that it was a sign for him to take it—that it had been detained there for his need—so he went and took it.

Still today, evidence is lacking of an actual calumny (Christian or otherwise) alleging Abraham's thievery or unethical treatment of animals; nor does the text make Abraham's motives for taking the ram anything but honorable and a welcome alternative to killing his son. So we can only guess that Bekhor Shor comments in this fashion because it suits his overall program: when given the opportunity, defend the Patriarchs—even if unwarranted by the text or by heretical exegesis.

### **Isaac, Jacob**

There remains, however, much to justify in the conduct of Jacob. Though Jacob

<sup>188</sup>Except in the context of his sons and the birthright/blessing debacle, which we will examine.

goes on to become Israel, and, in midrash, the archetypal Jew-hero (while his brother Esau becomes the archetypal Gentile-villain), the Bible does not paint a wholly heroic picture of this Patriarch. Jacob accomplishes much in his lifetime. Some accomplishments come from his trust in the Almighty, some from his care for his family; but many he achieves through deceit and guile. Throughout the Jacob narratives, Bekhor Shor forcefully rejects the possible implications of Jacob's behavior: sometimes he does so with subtle argumentation; elsewhere, his rejection is heavy-handed and does not work so well. The way in which Bekhor Shor understands Jacob's appropriation of Esau's birthright provides us with a good example of how Bekhor Shor changes his apparent deceit into, if not heroism, excusable behavior, within the limits of acceptable morality. The Bible would have the reader believe that Jacob convinces a doltish (and famished) Esau to trade a bowl of stew for the birthright. In Bekhor Shor's commentary, however, Esau is *actually starving to death*, and Jacob's proposed trade is not only fair and legal; it is a life-saving gesture.

**25:30. Please feed me...!** So as to say: Pour [the stew] right into my mouth and I will eat, because I can't even put it in my mouth, and I can't make it to my father's house.<sup>189</sup> But Jacob had discovered, behind the flock, in a cave far from the city, that if the food had been late in getting to him, he [Esau] would die right then, and so Jacob told him: If you die on your own account, then everything that is my father's will be mine, and

<sup>189</sup>I.e., I, Esau, am exhausted, on the verge of death.

everything of Keturah's children, and Ishmael, and Lot who had escaped in his old age from captivity and death, would be in thrall to me. But if I feed you and you live, then I will lose a lot of power and much authority, for you are the firstborn and will take everything. However, if you sell me your birthright, then I will feed you, and you will live and not die, and I will not lose out by feeding you. But if you will not have mercy on *yourself* by [persisting in] not wanting me to come into power, in return I will not show mercy to you! For just as you are concerned for yourself, I love myself, and I don't love you more than me....

Bekhor Shor does not portray Jacob as selfless; no one would call his behavior altruistic. At the same time, however, Bekhor Shor presents a version of the story where we sympathize with the second-born's short-end-of-the-stick fate. And so he would have us believe that Esau's birthright is, in the grand scheme of things, a small price to pay for the gift of his life.

The reader of the Jacob saga cannot help but feel the tragedy of Esau's plight: once Jacob has transacted the sale of the birthright, he prompts Esau's bitterness; and when Jacob steals Esau's blessing from Isaac as well, he seals Esau's resentment. In all of this, blind old Isaac appears utterly helpless to undo Jacob's usurpation of the first-born's privileges; rather, he sits by idly and is duped by his younger son. Bekhor Shor, as he defended Jacob's conduct in the birthright exchange, now defends Isaac as having tried to do everything in his limited power to counteract Esau's bartering away of his

birthright. Before Jacob thwarts him, Isaac prepares to bless Esau:

**27:4. So that my soul might bless you before I die.** For with the gift that I will give you, one cannot undermine [you] at all. For the legal nature of a birthright is that it does not belong in conjunction with a gift. And I will give you all the control: Just as he said, "Peoples will serve you/And nations bow down to you."<sup>190</sup> For the legal nature of a birthright is that it pertains only to the inheritance. And our Sages have also said: "As for the one who distributes property to his children by way of giving more to one and less to the other, but equalizes the birthright between them: his words are valid."<sup>191</sup> And because of this, he [Isaac] told him [Esau] that he [would] bless him before his death, so that he would not lose out by having sold his birthright.

According to Bekhor Shor, Isaac intended for his blessing to cancel the sale of the birthright, since the legal nature of a birthright is that it does not come due during the heir's lifetime, and cannot therefore be given away by one who does not yet possess it. The author relies on rabbinic allowances for the distribution of property during a man's lifetime without having consideration of the status or merits of the firstborn. Isaac intended to give Esau his inheritance of property by means of the gift (or blessing), and in so doing, to cancel Esau's sale of his birthright.<sup>192</sup> Isaac, in Bekhor Shor's interpretation,

<sup>190</sup>In the blessing that follows (unwittingly, to Jacob), Gen. 27:29.

<sup>191</sup>*M. Bava Bathra* 8:5.

<sup>192</sup>After Nebo's footnote *ad loc.*



appears more savvy than the Bible portrays him. More remarkable is the way in which Bekhor Shor proceeds to defend Jacob's perfidy in stealing Esau's blessing as well. The following verse begins with Rebecca speaking to Jacob of her plan to obtain the blessing.

**27:10. That he may bless you before he dies.** Even though it wasn't necessary, for the birthright was already his [Jacob's]. In any case, it was necessary to take it away from Esau, and Jacob was like a person who chases something he has lost, for Esau had sold him the birthright and had sworn to him that he would not requisition [it] from him. But now he was going against/undermining his oath, and wanted to deceive him, and Jacob rescued that which was [rightfully] his from him.

In an audacious role-reversal, Esau becomes the arch-deceiver; Bekhor Shor associates with Esau the verb "לרמותו"—"to deceive him"—which so often comes to describe Jacob's actions. Thus, by this point in the commentary, Jacob has acquired the birthright through a lawful sale, in exchange for *saving Esau's life*; Isaac has done *everything in his power* to help poor Esau; and Jacob's plans to take the blessing amount to rescuing *something that was rightfully his* from the outset. But the most arresting reinterpretation of this episode occurs when Jacob baldly lies to Isaac, masquerading to the blind man as Esau. In Bekhor Shor's explanatory remark, which operates by altering the intended syntax of the verse, Jacob did not lie.<sup>193</sup>

**27:19. I am your first-born, Esau** (Heb. אנכי עשו בכר). He did not lie to

<sup>193</sup>Cf. RaSHI *ad loc* for a similar interpretation of which Bekhor Shor's is a likely derivative.

his father, but rather, when he asked him "Who are you," he said to him:

"It is I (אני)!" This is the normal way to answer. And then he

additionally said to him: "Esau is your firstborn" (עשו בכרד)! And that too is true....

And a few verses later:

**27:24. And he said, "It is I."** He did not say, "Yes, I am he," for he was not Esau.<sup>194</sup>

Without a doubt, these interpretations function—if not primarily, then significantly—to refute slander about Jacob's unworthiness for his inheritance on account of his dishonesty and deceitfulness. These comments most likely had their root in Christian interpretations of Jacob, the archetypal Jew, even as the Rabbis' demonized portrayal of Esau became for them the archetypal Gentile. Doubts about Jacob's uprightness may also have been promulgated within the Jewish community; in any case, Bekhor Shor handily refutes any such negative claim.

As he progresses through the narrative, Bekhor Shor remains consistent in his interpretation of Jacob's character.<sup>195</sup> The man, for all of the apparent dubiousness of his character, always acted lawfully—sometimes even altruistically—and richly deserved the earthly rewards and Divine favor he obtained. The next lengthy and intricate defense of

<sup>194</sup>Both of these interpretations—which may have been popular Jewish interpretations of the verse, and not original to RaSHI or Bekhor Shor—appear in *Nizzahon Vetus*. Cf. Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate*, 56.

<sup>195</sup>Noting along the way, for instance, that he did *not* love Rachel more than Leah—the latter of whom was, incidentally, no less beautiful than her younger sister. Cf. Bekhor Shor to Gen. 29:30-31.

Jacob's actions comes in commentary to Jacob's business dealings with Laban. Here, Jacob negotiates his wages with his father-in-law; note the fervor with which Bekhor Shor insists on Jacob's honesty and forthrightness.

**30:33. Then my righteousness (or "honesty") will answer for me in the future.** After a while, in your presence<sup>196</sup>, **when you investigate my wages** to see what I have taken as my wage, **everything** you find that is **not speckled or spotted, etc. I have stolen for myself.** I have stolen it, and since you are strict, I want you to take it, so that you will not quarrel with me next year when the offspring are grown.<sup>197</sup> For you would say: "These come from among the ones that I [Laban] left over formerly. You stole them from me, and they were not born under your authority!" Now it seems that Jacob was going to lose out because of Laban's strictness. For if he were not strict, they would have remained in the flock with the spotted and speckled, and even the [plain] sheep would have mated with them; but now they were being removed, and only the white ones remained; or all of them were of a single variety. And since he could not [afford to] lose through Laban's strictness, he [Jacob] made poles, *for he*

<sup>196</sup>I.e., Bekhor Shor has Jacob willing personally to stand witness for his own honest conduct.

<sup>197</sup>That is to say: "I will remove it from there and transfer to you all the sheep that match these descriptions; and all the offspring from here and henceforth, fitting these descriptions, shall be my wage. In this way you shall not have an opportunity to suspect me when you left nothing for me from these stolen ones" (Nebo, footnote *ad loc*).

*did not act in deceit.*<sup>198</sup>

Rather, [Jacob acted] lawfully, for it is the way of women and of animals to give birth to the variety that they see during the time of heat. Thus we say that the Chaldeans [i.e., the Babylonians] would bring the young men of Israel when they saw their wives, and would bear [children] like them<sup>199</sup>.... After he [Laban] removed the speckled ones, it became worthless—for they could not see them and could not mate with them; so he [Jacob] made the poles lawfully.

It also seems, with regard to this matter, that he made them with Laban's permission, and that it was a condition from the beginning, for Laban had said as follows: that he [Laban] could remove the he-goats while he [Jacob] could erect the poles, so that they could mate with the he-goats and bear offspring like them, from [the influence of] the poles. You should know that this condition was in place, for Jacob did not do this in secret, but rather while watering [the flock], in a place where the shepherds came to water,<sup>200</sup> and it is impossible that Laban was not

<sup>198</sup>Emphasis added. "This question was asked in the explanation of *Hadar Z'kenim*: 'Now if you ask, "If so, then how was Jacob being deceitful?" [One could answer]: There are some who say that Laban had begun to practice deceit, for there was a condition between them that Laban would remove only every spotted and speckled kid, and every brown kid among the sheep, and the spotted and speckled from among the goats; but he did not do this, but rather removed the he-goats and even the spotted and speckled goats. So afterwards, nothing remained of all of the flock —neither spotted nor speckled —so how could they bear spotted and speckled [offspring]? Thus Jacob made the poles'" (Nebo, footnote *ad loc*).

<sup>199</sup>*B. Gittin* 58a.

<sup>200</sup>I.e., in public view.

informed for six years that he had done this, if he were committing theft;

rather it is certain that the condition existed [from the start].

And not only is Jacob honest, he is, in Bekhor Shor's commentary, merciful, even to his oppressors:

**30:42. But the feeble ones of the flock he did not place (by the poles).**

...[Jacob] did not want to take everything, so that it would not be too hard on Laban.

It remains open to speculation exactly why Bekhor Shor insists so forcefully on Jacob's honesty and openness in devising the poles so as to breed selectively the best flock. However, we do know of charges leveled against Jacob by Christians, recorded in polemical works of the Middle Ages. One such charge reads: "Jacob committed heresy in speaking deceitfully in his conditions to Laban."<sup>201</sup> It is reasonable, given the forcefulness of his commentary, to posit Bekhor Shor's familiarity with charges like this one. This theory becomes more compelling when we consider other Christian polemical remarks directed at Jacob, each of which Bekhor Shor's commentary explicitly refutes. For instance: "Your Father Jacob was a thief, and there has been no perpetrator of usury like him, for with a single bowl that was equal to a half-[shekel?] he bought the birthright that was equal to a thousand *zekukim* [a Rabbinic coin]."<sup>202</sup> We have already seen Bekhor

<sup>201</sup>Quoted in Grossman, "הפולמוס היהודי הנוצרי והפרשנות היהודי למקרא," 50-51.

<sup>202</sup>In the polemical work *Sefer Joseph Ha-Mekane*, p. 41, sec. 17:2, cited in Grossman, "הפולמוס היהודי הנוצרי והפרשנות," 50. See also Grossman's footnote *ad loc*: "It is possible that the claim of usury is emphasized because of its connotation of an accusation that was widespread at the time, concerning the Jews: that they would collect high interest to finance their loans." Compare also *Sefer J. Ha-Mekane*, sec. 49, "They reprove us concerning the interest...."

Shor's meticulous refutation of this claim. Moreover, Bekhor Shor opposes the following accusation: "'Jacob went down to *Gehenna*.'" <sup>203</sup> Christians derived this claim from a theologically anachronistic reading of Genesis 37:35, <sup>204</sup> wherein Jacob laments that his grief will send him down "in mourning to Sheol." Bekhor Shor makes it clear that by this Jacob means, simply, the grave. <sup>205</sup> Below, I shall claim that Joseph Bekhor Shor's defense of the extended Patriarchal family cannot be dissociated from the demonstrably polemical mode of exegesis which undergirds his entire Torah commentary.

As we have seen, when Bekhor Shor sets out to defend a biblical character, he repeats his defense at every possible instance. Such occurs with Jacob upon his reunion with Esau. The Bible portrays Jacob as cautious; Bekhor Shor must rationalize this timidity while simultaneously upholding Jacob's innocence and uprightness in his prior treatment of Esau. In other words, if Jacob is innocent vis-à-vis Esau, then what has he to fear? Above and beyond this defense, Bekhor Shor identifies Jacob as overflowing with love and goodwill toward his estranged brother.

**32:6. I send this message to my lord....** For it is my choice to serve and give honor to my beloved and my relative, in order to **find favor in his eyes**, for with this does one find favor in the eyes of his loved ones: when he engages in the populating of the world by earning (a livelihood) and does not chase after worthless things. Now all of this is to say: I (Jacob)

<sup>203</sup>Quoted in Grossman, „הפולמוס היהודי הנוצרי והפרשנות היהודי למקרא,” 51.

<sup>204</sup>That is to say, the Hebrew Bible nowhere posits a “hell.”

<sup>205</sup>Bekhor Shor to Gen. 37:35.

have not gone away because of any ill-will; and I have felt between us only love and friendship. So from the way he speaks from his heart, you can discern what he is thinking.

**32:19.... And in fact even he , Jacob, is behind us,** coming to his brother; so he will not suspect that there is any fear in his heart; and I have not considered any ill-will.

**33:15. Why this [kindness]...?** That is to say: Why should you leave them [the people behind]? I wish only to find favor with my lord.

In commentary to one verse among this episode, Bekhor Shor explains Jacob's "real" fear of the encounter. Uncharacteristically, he accepts at face-value a midrashic interpretation, most likely because it suits his defensive purposes:

**32:12. For I fear him.** ... our Rabbis said that above all, he feared that he [Esau] would cause him [Jacob] to sin,<sup>206</sup> and this is the main point, for it is certain that he knew that the Holy One, Blessed be He, would promise something good only so that people not do evil; [and would promise something] bad only if He were going to stand up against one who rebels against Him. However, repentance tempers the severity of the decree.

Only in midrash could brazen Jacob's worst fear be the fear of sin; but that portrayal, offered by Rabbinic tradition and legitimated in a commentary purporting to present the *peshat* sense of the text, helped Jews defend themselves—and their Patriarchs—from

<sup>206</sup>Cf. *B. Ber.* 4a.

hostile interpretations and, perhaps most importantly, from their own persistent doubts.

## Joseph

The Bible leaves little room for doubts about the righteousness of Joseph; what Bekhor Shor defends in Joseph's behavior, he usually derives directly from the *peshat* sense of the verse, with little rationalization required. To be sure, he magnifies a pro-Joseph bias already present in the text, as in this remark to Joseph's refusal of the overtures of Potiphar's wife and his protestations of innocence against her trumped-up accusation:

**39:14.... Came to me to lie with me.** To rape me; however, I cried out loudly and he ran away. After she saw that she was not able to overpower him, she slandered him so as to drive him from the house, for she was unable to see him, since from the time that she beheld him, her lust burned within her. Furthermore, he was afraid that he, himself, might impugn her.<sup>207</sup>

But there is little need for him to restore Joseph's character or defend his principles, which, for the most part, remain unassailable.<sup>208</sup> The one feature of Joseph's conduct which Bekhor Shor finds necessary to defend is Joseph's failure to communicate his own

<sup>207</sup> See also Bekhor Shor to Gen. 39:20, wherein he notes again that Joseph in no way molested Potiphar's wife—"and even according to *her* words, he had *attempted* to do it, but had not done it" (Emphasis added).

<sup>208</sup> Some modern readers have taken issue with Joseph's food-rationing program which effectively enslaves the people to Pharaoh, though the offense in this governmental program may not have registered with a medieval commentator living in feudal Europe.



safety and well-being to his grieving father. Bekhor Shor notes that Joseph had numerous opportunities to send word to Jacob of his security and prosperity and Egypt, but instead left his father to languish in anguish and despair. So as to respond to this apparent shortcoming, Bekhor Shor works into his commentary an oath of secrecy, sworn by Joseph to his brothers, which accounts for his silence. In his commentary to Genesis 37:26 he writes:

...Now it [the text] appears to suggest that when they sold him, they made him take an oath<sup>209</sup> that he would never again go to his father's house, and would not reveal himself to his father, and would not make known to his father that he was alive, or that he had been sold, and that he would not say there that he was of the sons of Jacob, giving no visible sign nor any evidence. And that is what he did, for it was better for him to do so than to die by their hands. For if he had not done so, then when he became prominent in his master's house, or even during the nine years that he was king in Egypt—the seven years of plenty plus two of famine—why did he never say to his father: "Look! I'm over here in Egypt!" Surely he knew that his father was grieving over him; but it is certain that he had sworn to them [his brothers].

In the following chapter I will explore how Bekhor Shor employs this oath-motif to comment on the Joseph narrative in a consistent or sequential fashion, a key feature of his

<sup>209</sup>Cf. *Tanhuma Vayeshev* 2.

commentary in general. Another answer to Joseph's apparent insensitivity to his suffering father is offered in the compendium *Hadar Z'kenim*, which postdates Bekhor Shor by at least a century. It quotes in his name, abbreviated as an acronym:

R. J. B. S, a *tzadik* like [the biblical] Joseph, asks: "How could he aggrieve his father for so long, and then require Jacob to send Benjamin?" And he answers: "He did not intend to aggrieve his father; he intended only for Jacob to come to Egypt on Benjamin's behalf, for Joseph knew that his father was still alive. So Joseph thought: 'If I tell them that I am Joseph, and that I am ruler over all of the land of Egypt, before Benjamin comes, they will not tell my father, because of the burning hate with which they despise me. I will make them bring Benjamin to me, and after that I will tell them that I am Joseph. And then my father shall come here.'"<sup>210</sup>

In the end, Joseph's character requires little bolstering, especially when compared with his father. Nevertheless, Bekhor Shor "improves upon" the text's already favorable assessment of Joseph, and strives to eliminate any lingering doubts that may arise from his occasional insensitivity to his suffering father. Joseph's brothers, however, having sullied themselves by selling him into slavery, require a good press agent/spin doctor to defend their actions. Bekhor Shor proves himself up to the task, particularly in his defense of Reuben, who almost saved Joseph—but did not.

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<sup>210</sup> Cited in Nebo's footnote to Bekhor Shor's commentary on Gen. 42:7.

## Reuben

The character of Reuben is associated with two shortcomings: his tryst with Jacob's concubine Bilhah, and his failure to rescue Joseph from slavery, despite his well-intentioned intervention that prevents Joseph from dying at his brothers' hands. Of the first shortcoming, Bekhor Shor has little to say, even when directly presented with an opportunity to exculpate Reuben. Instead, he speaks only of Bilhah's diminished status.

**35:22. And Israel heard** [about Reuben and Bilhah].... And realized that he had lost two of his wives: Rachel, who died; and Bilhah, with whom Reuben lay; so that from that day forth Jacob did not lie with her. As is written in connection to the concubine(s) of David with whom Absalom lay: "They were secluded in widowhood until the day of their death"<sup>211</sup>—[i.e.,] all of their days. And despite this, he [Jacob] lost nothing through this, for the twelve tribes had already been born. Accordingly, upon counting them, there were now a complete twelve tribes, for Benjamin had been born; so he counted them.

Bekhor Shor's circumvention of the real problem here (Reuben's transgression against his father), which Bekhor Shor accomplishes by focusing exclusively on Jacob, represents a glaring omission.<sup>212</sup> Perhaps he figured that he could not rationalize the episode and maintain the integrity of *peshat*; though this seems odd, given Bekhor Shor's

<sup>211</sup> II Sam. 20:3.

<sup>212</sup> In so doing, Bekhor Shor defends Jacob against the possible accusation that he slept with Bilhah after Reuben did.

willingness to stretch the ostensibly “literal” sense of the text in numerous other instances. For example, when Jacob mentions the unpleasant incident in his blessings to each of his sons, Bekhor Shor begins his commentary by twisting the *peshat* intent of Jacob’s “blessing” to Reuben.

**49:4. Unstable [חז] as water, you shall no longer excel....** That is to say: The superiority rushes [נחפז] to be conducted and to be poured out from you, like water that spills over and flows away. The term [is like] “David was in a hurry [נחפז] to go.”<sup>213</sup> And the word is rearranged<sup>214</sup>, as in “שלמה”/”שמלה.”

**You shall no longer excel....** You shall not take superiority<sup>215</sup> over your brothers.... Here he was warned that he would not take authority over his brothers.

**For you ascended your father’s bed.... When—when you** ascended my bed—**you defiled:** you made a defilement, and defiled **my couch, you ascended**—the same ascent onto my couch, that is, your own [ascent]; for at the same time you descended from your stature, your holiness, and were profaned, and you lost the birthright and the rulership. And because he [Jacob] spoke in the terminology of degradation, he veiled his words a little bit, and did not say explicitly, “you defiled yourself,” but

<sup>213</sup>I Sam. 23:26.

<sup>214</sup>I.e., the letters are inverted.

<sup>215</sup>Cf. RaSHI, Ibn Ezra.

rather, [he spoke] of "him who went up on my couch," which is what [he was in fact talking about]. Rather, he spoke to him respectfully, so that he would not explicitly call him "defiled." And there are some who explain: "Then you defiled [it]; "he" ascended my couch" [means]: He for whom it was customary to mount my couch; that is to say: him.

As the editor of this Bekhor Shor manuscript, Yehoshafat Nebo, puts it: "The author's language is not so clear as is necessary" to understand the passage.<sup>216</sup> The first part of the comment makes sense: Bekhor Shor tries to interpret וָכַס, used by Jacob in a pejorative sense, in a positive light. But when directly faced with reconciling this favorable assessment of Reuben against his "mounting of Jacob's couch," Bekhor Shor's remarks do not make much sense. They stammer and dawdle in circuitous grammatical analyses<sup>217</sup> and desperate attempts to switch the focus to Jacob's manner of addressing Reuben, instead of considering the *content* of his address. It appears that Bekhor Shor's defensive strategies have reached their limit.

He handles the matter of Reuben's interaction with Joseph more deftly<sup>218</sup>, even

<sup>216</sup>In his footnote *ad loc.*

<sup>217</sup>Some of which are omitted *supra*. These places are marked by ellipses.

<sup>218</sup>In his commentary to Gen. 37:21, Bekhor Shor forcefully and repeatedly emphasizes that Reuben had every intention of saving Joseph, and that even after compromising with his brothers by permitting them to sell him into slavery, he had planned to return to the pit and save Joseph. As Bekhor Shor writes *ad loc.*: **Let us not take his life.** When he saw that they were not listening to him, he joined with them and did not say "Do not smite him," but rather, "Let *us* not smite..." so as to say: Even I wish this; and they did not pay attention that he wanted to save him, and they did not listen to him. And because Reuben was the oldest of them all, and so the sin hangs on his neck, he was going to return and save him. Thus he spoke to them cunningly, and said to them: Since you do not want to leave him be, whatever you can do to mitigate the sin, the better it is. Better that he die of his own accord than you shed his blood with your hands; so his intention was to save him (Emphasis added).

inserting into a seemingly unrelated episode a remark, drawn from *midrash*, about Reuben's remorse over having slept with Bilhah. The comment comes in response to the brothers' disposal of Joseph, followed by a heartlessly casual meal. Bekhor Shor uses this episode as a means of exculpating Reuben from the sale of Joseph.

**37:25. They sat to eat a meal.** This is the way of shepherds: some of them eat while some of them watch over the animals; and after some of them eat, those who ate go out to the animals while the others eat. But it is not their custom for all of them to eat together. So Judah was eating with some of his brothers, while Reuben, with some of his brothers, was guarding the flock. Therefore Reuben did not know about the sale. Now there are some who say that Reuben was tormented over having slept with Bilhah.<sup>219</sup> And there are some who say that everyone ministers to his father at some time, and Reuben's time had come.<sup>220</sup> But you might be surprised<sup>221</sup>, since they were too far from their father. So Reuben returned to the pit....

When viewed across the entire Jacob-Joseph narrative, Reuben, though often neglected or de-emphasized in the commentaries and in our collective consciousness, becomes a tragic figure whose lingering faults overshadow his honor. Bekhor Shor exerts considerable effort in restoring his tarnished reputation by de-emphasizing his weaknesses, which,

<sup>219</sup>Cf. *Bereshit Rabbah* 84:18.

<sup>220</sup>*Ibid*, 84:14.

<sup>221</sup>I.e., to learn of Reuben's intention to return home to Jacob.

through Jacob's blessing, get the last word, as it were; in addition, he underscores (or, more to the point, exaggerates) his righteous conduct in the sale of Joseph.

### Other Brothers of Joseph

Given this characteristically defensive stance, one may find Bekhor Shor's relative lack of emphasis on the figure of Judah surprising, especially because Judah in many ways mirrors Reuben. The Bible records a tradition in which the plan to save Joseph is Judah's from the outset. Whereas Reuben, in the end, fails to shoulder this responsibility, however, Judah proves worthy of the task by volunteering to stand in for Benjamin. Perhaps Bekhor Shor devotes relatively less effort to defending Judah<sup>222</sup> because in the end, his actions serve as his best defense and effectively restore honor to his name.

One might also expect Bekhor Shor to defend the actions of Simeon and Levi in their slaying of the citizens of Shechem; but this he does only implicitly, by neither condemning nor condoning the act. The matter, even at the *peshat* level is complex: though Jacob openly disapproves of their violence, going so far as to curse them in his deathbed blessing<sup>223</sup>, the text also supplies them with a compelling motive, which also, in the course of the episode itself, "gets the last word": "Should our sister be treated like a

<sup>222</sup>Even in the matter of Tamar, where Judah's dubious conduct remains unremarkable for Bekhor Shor, save his repeated insistence that Judah did not recognize the veiled woman (Bekhor Shor to Gen. 38:14-15).

<sup>223</sup>Gen. 49:6.

where?"<sup>224</sup> Bekhor Shor's commentary to Jacob's curse/blessing of Simeon and Levi displays Bekhor Shor's reluctance to bring up the episode at Shechem, even though Jacob's reference is far from oblique: **"49:6, midverse. ...For in their wrath they would slay a man....** It was common for them to kill people in their anger and wrath." The deliberate ambiguity, engendered in part by the terseness of the poetic verse—what wrath? which man?—enables Bekhor Shor to comment only in the most generic sense. In so doing he breaks from RaSHI, who interprets this verse as pertaining directly to the killing of the Shechemites and, elsewhere in the verse, to their role in the sale of Joseph. Once again Bekhor Shor defends best by saying least.

### **Preliminary Conclusions**

Having reviewed and analyzed Bekhor Shor's commentary to the entire Patriarch Narratives, what conclusions can we draw? We have seen that Bekhor Shor's interest in the Patriarchs frequently reveals a polemical undercurrent. When he comments on the faith of Abraham, the eternal validity of God's covenant with him, and the importance of his circumcision as a token of the covenant, we sense a refutation of Christian claims to spiritual lineage from Abraham alongside, paradoxically, Christian accusations of Abraham's faithlessness. In Bekhor Shor's spirited defense of Jacob, we note not only the demonstrably explicit refutations of Christian calumnies against Jacob, but also the entire exegetical stance with regard to Jacob: even when his conduct appears perfectly

<sup>224</sup> Gen. 34:31.



upright, Bekhor Shor writes in order to polish Jacob's reputation. And when Jacob's conduct might invite criticism, Bekhor Shor vigorously reasons and rationalizes on Jacob's behalf, as if the biblical Patriarch were a living, breathing being—one, it should be added, in need of a good attorney.

His approach does not miss the mark or exaggerate the need for such defensiveness, given the importance of the Hebrew Bible to medieval readers, Jews and Christians alike. The characters of the Bible represented more than legends of literature or religious icons; they represented their readers who identified strongly with them, their triumphs and travails. To the medieval reader, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Esau, Joseph, and the rest of Joseph's brothers, were no less living and enduring than God. More importantly, Jews saw themselves in the Patriarchs, especially in Jacob/Israel, the archetypal Jew who, not coincidentally, became the focal point in polemical commentary to the Patriarch Narratives. Consequently, any insult or accusation directed against the Patriarchs became an insult to *Am Yisrael*—a people who prayed three times a day for Divine mercy not on their own behalf, but for the sake of *zechut avot*: the merits of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Written defense against such insults and accusations, in the form of Bible commentary, was in fact a form of intellectual and religious *self*-defense for the Jews.

Joseph Bekhor Shor's defensiveness with regard to the extended Patriarchal family must be understood in the context of a demonstrably polemical mode of exegesis which remains in force throughout his Torah commentary. As we shall see in the

following pages, the polemical dimension of Joseph Bekhor Shor's exegesis exists not only in the content of the commentary, but also in his deliberate and consistent methodology. In examining the polemical function of his exegetical method, we will discover the ways in which Bekhor Shor's writing reflects his place in the literary and cultural milieu of the early French Renaissance. In particular, we will see his own exegetical, literary, and cultural concerns reflected in the writings and methodology of contemporary Jews and Christians. And in so doing, I wish to make a case for increased recognition of R. Joseph Bekhor Shor of Orléans as an influential scholar of the High Middle Ages and a passionate defender of Judaism and the Jews.

## CHAPTER V: METHODOLOGY AND MILIEU—JOSEPH BEKHOR SHOR'S POLEMICAL METHODOLOGY AND HIS PLACE IN THE EARLY FRENCH RENAISSANCE

### Introduction

To understand Rabbinic midrash is to understand its hermeneutics, the methodological logic that enables its authors to extract meaning from Scripture in a systematic manner organized by rigid principles. More often than not, the conclusions derived through midrashic hermeneutics reflect eisegesis—creative reading *into* the text—as much as they reflect bona fide exegesis by the Rabbis. But the creation of midrash must follow the preordained principles—the hermeneutics. By understanding not only the content of a given midrash, but also its internal logic, one can process and analyze this genre. For centuries midrash represented the primary way in which traditional Jews read and understood their Bible. Midrash represents one example of an interpretive tradition whose meaning is bound up in its internal logic, its rules of interpretation.

The methodology of interpretation—be it aggadic, halakhic, or other—reveals as much about authorial intent as does the content of the interpretation. This chapter will examine the ways in which Bekhor Shor's exegetical methodology serves his polemical purposes and, in the process, links him to other significant figures (both Jewish and Christian) and trends of the twelfth-century literary and cultural Renaissance in northern

France. In particular, this study focuses on three technical features visible in Bekhor Shor's commentary to Genesis: (1) his reliance on *peshat*; (2) in particular, his *peshat* approach to prophecy; and (3) his attention to sequential narrative.

Just as Jews in the early Rabbinic period reformulated the ways in which Jews read and understood Scripture—through the development of midrash—so too did the Middle Ages bring about an important development in the history of interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. In the eleventh century, RaSHI helped recast the ways Jews read the Hebrew Bible by advocating throughout his systematic commentary to the Bible the primacy of *peshat*-interpretation, or “literal sense” of the text.<sup>225</sup> This is not to say that RaSHI avoided *aggadah* or non-literal understandings of the text; indeed, his commentary derives heavily from midrash. Nevertheless, he aims to present the *peshat* first and foremost, and this aim became associated with the school of exegesis that followed him and bore his name. The Jewish community of northern France witnessed the growing popularity of the *peshat*-approach in the generations after RaSHI—comprised in part of his grandchildren, the RaSHBaM (R. Samuel b. Meir) and Rabbeinu Tam—and came to its fullest expression the last of the Northern French

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<sup>225</sup>Michael Signer comments: “There is a scholarly consensus that significant developments occurred in the realm of biblical exegesis during the eleventh and twelfth centuries in both the Jewish and Christian communities. These developments relate to the new emphasis on *sensus literalis* or *peshuto shel Miqra*.... Despite this consensus it is not entirely clear whether the search for “plain meaning” in Scripture represents a continuity with previous methods of biblical study or a bold revolution which set traditional or received interpretation over against newly discovered interpretations. However, when one reads the commentaries themselves—composed either in Latin or in Hebrew in the eleventh or twelfth centuries—it is clear that there is a shift in emphasis. This change is marked by greater attention to the nature of language in Scripture, and greater effort to explain a single passage within the larger context of other passages in the Bible. (“*Peshat, Sensus Litteralis, and Sequential Narrative: Jewish Exegesis and the School of St. Victor in the Twelfth Century*,” *Frank Talmage Memorial Volume*, Vol. I. B. Walfish, ed. (Haifa: 1993): 203).

biblical exegetes, R. Tam's pupil R. Joseph Bekhor Shor. Even at its moment of fullest expression, however, "the search for *peshat* was undertaken systematically only by a handful of scholars in twelfth-century northern France"<sup>226</sup>—namely, Joseph Kara, the RaSHBaM, Joseph Bekhor Shor, and Eliezer of Beaugency. In its devotion to rationalism and *peshat*, the twelfth-century incarnation of the School of RaSHI resembles the interpretive program of Sephardic exegesis, best represented in the work of R. Avraham Ibn Ezra; earlier in this study I speculated (inconclusively) as to a link between the French and Spanish schools.

In the first part of this chapter I wish to posit that R. Bekhor Shor's use of *peshat* reflects three aspects of his literary milieu and his exegetical approach: (1) It derives from the increasing interest in and use of *peshat*-interpretation within Jewish circles, beginning with RaSHI; (2) *Peshat* methodology functions in tandem with Bekhor Shor's anti-Christian polemical exegesis of the Hebrew Bible; and (3) It mirrors a simultaneous twelfth-century interest in rationalism and, with regard to the Bible, *sensus literalis*—the Latin (i.e., Christian) equivalent term for *peshat*—in Christian scholarly circles. Bekhor Shor's unflagging *peshat*-orientation is an indispensable feature of his commentary,<sup>227</sup> and his motives for its use go beyond a scholarly desire to present the "true meaning" of the text—though this surely is a primary and pervasive concern.

<sup>226</sup>Ephraim Kanarfogel, "On the Role of Bible Study in Medieval Ashkenaz," in *Frank Talmage Memorial Volume*, Vol. I. Wayne State University, 1993. p. 154.

<sup>227</sup>Though it cannot be dismissed that Bekhor Shor's commentary contains numerous references to Talmud and midrash. Nevertheless, these sources most often are presented either as alternatives or as supplements to the *peshat* sense (which is most often Bekhor Shor's original reading); the midrashic passages seldom represent the only or the best sense of the text for Bekhor Shor.

There is, however, a difference between what "*peshat*" might signify to modern readers and Bekhor Shor's use of the word. What Bekhor Shor considers the *peshat* sense of a given term, phrase, or pericope might indeed match our conception of the literal sense of the text. For Bekhor Shor, rationalism is the primary tool required to elucidate the *peshat*. *Peshat* and rationalism go hand-in-hand. The reader will recall Bekhor Shor's clever commentary to Numbers 12:8, in which the method of communication between God and Moses becomes a metaphor for his own exegetical convictions. Similarly, in his commentary to Genesis 40:12, Bekhor Shor applies the biblical Joseph's method of dream-interpretation<sup>228</sup> to his own interpretive program.

**40:12. The three branches are three days.** Joseph understood that the vision was not really about branches, but rather, about the passage of time; for in a single branch he was able to see all this. And he did not say "three years," or "three months," because it is illogical that Pharaoh would extend the time of their sentence so much. And Joseph remembered that [Pharaoh's] birthday was in three days, and he was going to make a feast, where his ministers and servants would be present. It made sense that he would judge them then; therefore he gave the time as three days, because the vision and the interpretation are like a mystery; both the one who experiences the vision and the one who interprets [it] need to pay attention to state it so that it makes sense. For one can interpret many things thusly

<sup>228</sup>In the case at hand, Joseph interprets the dream of Pharaoh's cup-bearer.

with the heart [alone], just as here he could have said “3 years,” or “3 months,” or “3 weeks.” But he had to consider which would have been more logical, and on *that* he would rely. For any conclusion<sup>229</sup> without logical deduction<sup>230</sup> is worth nothing.

The last statement—“any conclusion without logical deduction is worth nothing”—is Bekhor Shor’s byword, and its influence can be felt throughout his commentary as he frequently uses his own rational deduction—his סברה—to arrive at what he calls the *peshat*. However, Bekhor Shor periodically insists on calling his reading a *peshat*-interpretation, when to our ears his reading sounds either allegorical, based in pseudo-science, or convoluted in its logic. Bekhor Shor—who would have called himself a staunch rationalist—occasionally, to our ears, mistakes *rationalizing* for *rationalism*.<sup>231</sup> But often this feature of his commentary is no accident; when it suits his polemical agenda, he does so consciously and deliberately. That is to say: Bekhor Shor presents himself as a rationalist, but equally central to his interpretation (for instance, of the Patriarch narratives) is his polemical—and thereby defensive—agenda. And sometimes, he must rationalize (as with the behavior of the Patriarchs), even against the literal sense of the text, while dressing up his clever but improbable explanations in the guise of rationalism and *peshat*. He skilfully manipulates *peshat* so as to serve his other exegetical interests, polemic foremost among them. Bekhor Shor’s keen acumen and

<sup>229</sup>Heb. גמרא, a technical Talmudic term usually referring to an accepted traditional teaching.

<sup>230</sup>Heb. סברה, the technical counterpart to גמרא. סברה refers to those conclusions derived through rational or logical deduction on the part of the rabbis engaged in the discussion.

<sup>231</sup>But perhaps the medieval distinction was different.

literary artistry—though occasionally yielding farfetched interpretations—argue for a noteworthy status in his literary and cultural milieu.

### ***Peshat* and Polemic**

If indeed Bekhor Shor's use of *peshat* does reflect his polemical stance, then for this reason alone we should regard him as a unique and important figure among the Sages of his age.

Recent research has examined the possible role that Christian polemics, as well as contemporary Christian biblical exegesis, had in the development of *peshat* exegesis.<sup>232</sup> Tosafist masters produced hardly any polemical literature. In addition to the issues outlined above, the cautious stance toward polemics taken by the Tosafists may partially explain the lack of significant interest on their part in developing and employing *peshat* methodology.<sup>233</sup>

Bekhor Shor broke with the Tosafist norm in this regard. Yet he seems to have preserved their methodical and rigidly logical approach (in the case of the Tosafists, to Talmud) in his systematic commentary to the Bible. He represented if not the only, then the most important, commentator of northern France to employ *peshat* for polemical purposes—and possibly the only Tosafist to undertake a systematic *peshat*-study of the

<sup>232</sup> Cf. works by Grossman, E. Touitou, Yitzhak Baer, Judah Rosenthal, Erwin Rosenthal, Ephraim Kanarfogel, "Trinitarian and Multiplicity Polemics...", Sarah Kamin, Morris Berger, "The Torah Commentary of R. Samuel b. Meir," 321-29.

<sup>233</sup> Kanarfogel, "On the Role of Bible Study," 156.



Bible. How might have Joseph of Orléans developed his interest in *peshat* and its power as a polemical tool?

*Peshat* had a centuries-old authenticity in Jewish interpretive tradition by the time of Bekhor Shor in the twelfth century. From Saadia Ga'on onward, the medieval commentators' growing emphasis on biblical grammar, syntax, and lexicography enabled them to present the *peshat*, or simple/literal sense of the text; simultaneously, one observes a relative withdrawal from the exegetical style of *d'rash*.<sup>234</sup> Though both Christians and Jews placed Bible study at the center of their intellectual enterprise, the emphasis on *peshat* begins and receives fullest expression in Jewish circles. "It is less often realized, however, that the retreat of the *derash*—it could not be given up since Judaism cannot ever dispense with it—and the consequent stress on *peshat* was directly caused and made inevitable by the Christians' attack and their attempt at converting the Jews. In turn, the application of this method reacted on the Christian exegetes who had to answer the challenge."<sup>235</sup> From an early time in the Jewish-Christian debate, literal interpretation and allegorical interpretation came to be associated with the different religious groups who, respectively, advocated and emphasized them. Hence Origen and other Church Fathers call the literal meaning *sensus Judaicus*, centuries before the renewed interest in *peshat* evident both in the School of RaSHI and in Sephardic commentaries of the High Middle Ages. "[T]he *sensus Judaicus* was the best, sharpest and most effective weapon that the Jews could wield in the positive defence of

<sup>234</sup> Cf. Erwin Rosenthal, "Anti-Christian Polemics in Medieval Bible Commentaries," 117.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*

Judaism.<sup>236</sup>

Bekhor Shor was not the first of the medieval exegetes to associate *peshat* with polemic, though he was the most forceful and thorough in this regard. His approach is simultaneously an outgrowth of the work begun by RaSHI and a departure from it.<sup>237</sup> Most scholars take for granted that RaSHI, though primarily concerned with elucidating the text, knew and occasionally wrote in opposition to Christian exegetical traditions about the Bible.<sup>238</sup> It seems that RaSHI's familiarity with Christian interpretation may have come through the influence of his successors, the scholarly cadre of the School of RaSHI, which included his own grandchildren. R. Joseph Kara (b. ca. 1050), a pupil of RaSHI, directed numerous remarks against Christian interpretation.<sup>239</sup> RaSHI's grandson the RaSHBaM evidently knew Latin and the Vulgate; today's scholars do not know the extent to which RaSHI knew Latin and thereby could read Christian commentaries, if at all.<sup>240</sup> Nevertheless, many statements in RaSHI's commentary to the Bible, and in particular to the Book of Psalms, attest to his familiarity with Latin Church

<sup>236</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>237</sup>The arguments supporting a polemical dimension to RaSHI's commentary will be summarized in the following paragraphs. At the same time it is important recognize in the writings of Bekhor Shor and his contemporaries a dramatic shift away from the midrashic explanation so prevalent in RaSHI. "The northern French exegetes who wrote in the generations after Rashi display a remarkable discontinuity with the writings of their founder" (Signer, "*Peshat*," 210).

<sup>238</sup>Esra Shereshevsky, "Rashi and Christian Interpretations," 76, citing S. Zeitlin, *American Jewish Yearbook*, New York, 1939, pp. 123-125; J. Rosenthal, מחקרים ומקורות, Vol. I, Jerusalem 1967, pp. 101-116; Izhak Baer, "Rashi and the Historical Reality of his Time," *Tarbiz* XX (1950):221f. Cf. also Herman Hailperin, *Rashi and the Christian Scholars*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1963.

<sup>239</sup>Herman Hailperin, *Rashi and the Christian Scholars*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1963. p. 113, citing Poznanski, xxxvi.

<sup>240</sup>Shereshevsky, 77.

commentaries. Indeed, many of these remarks are “of a rather general nature and do not necessarily bear out an actual literal acquaintance with the Latin text.”<sup>241</sup> But it is not unreasonable to suppose that, over the course of many years of close contact, RaSHI’s disciples would have shared their knowledge of the Christian biblical exegesis. The RaSHBaM, who may have been the first commentator to make explicit reference to Christian interpretations, declares: “I have debated with him [RaSHI] about it and he admitted to me, could he find more time he would have to write new explanations in accordance with the new literal interpretations which come to light daily.”<sup>242</sup>

Here I detect a possible connection between literal exegesis and refutation of Christian interpretation, a connection which is borne out by further investigation. RaSHI and other medieval commentators directly link the *peshat* to the “*teshuvah la-minim*,” the “answer to the Christians.” Following RaSHI, the *parshanim* of the Middle Ages became the leading *pashtanim*, employing *peshat*-interpretation because it provided their generation a logically sound response to the biblical passages which challenged Jewish readings. The *peshat* supplied an answer “at once satisfying and convincing for a Jew when hard pressed.”<sup>243</sup>

The RaSHBaM stressed the independence of the *peshat* sense as against the

<sup>241</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>242</sup>RaSHBaM to Gen. 37:2, quoted in Shereshevsky, 76-77. Shereshevsky understands this quote as pertaining specifically to anti-Christian exegesis, an argument from the context of RaSHBaM. On the surface, however, it could also apply to RaSHI’s ongoing discoveries in the biblical text.

<sup>243</sup>E. Rosenthal, “Anti-Christian Polemics,” 119.

non-literal, or allegorical, sense of the Bible.<sup>244</sup> This approach, which seems well suited to the Jewish defensive agenda against Christian interpretation of the Bible, suggests that the RaSHBaM viewed the *peshat* sense as fundamentally incompatible with non-literal interpretations of the Bible. If so, *peshat* could be used by the Jews to argue against the Christian position without adopting Christian exegetical methods in their quest for the true meaning of Scripture. This view of *peshat* as exclusive of other interpretive approaches is reflected as well in the writings of R. David Kimhi (RaDaK)<sup>245</sup>, who “is at pains to show that the method of *peshat* is the only correct one and that the Christian resort to a spiritual, allegorizing and typological interpretation is contrary to the text and meaning of Scripture.”<sup>246</sup> Bekhor Shor, too, appears to agree with the view of these *pashtanim* in favor of the independence of *peshat* from allegory.

Previously in this study I examined Joseph Bekhor Shor’s forceful rejection of the allegorical sense of the text in favor of the *peshat* in his commentary to Numbers 12:8. More succinctly, Bekhor Shor quotes Talmud in his commentary to Genesis 48:22: “Scripture cannot lose/go beyond its literal meaning” (אין מקרא יוצא מידי פשוטו),<sup>247</sup> a guiding principle for Bekhor Shor as well as his Rabbinic predecessors and

<sup>244</sup> Sarah Kamin, “Affinities Between Jewish and Christian Exegesis in Twelfth Century Northern France,” in *בין יהודים לנוצרים בפרשנות המקראת* (Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1984): 17.

<sup>245</sup> An exegete of the next generation, and in Narbonne.

<sup>246</sup> E. Rosenthal, “Anti-Christian Polemics,” 133.

<sup>247</sup> *B. Shabbat* 63a, *B. Yev.* 11b, 24a. From there he proceeds to refute a midrashic interpretation of Jacob’s reference to having conquered cities “with my sword and bow,” which the Rabbis understood in midrash as “with mitzvot and good deeds” (*Bereshit Rabbah* 97:9). Bekhor Shor counters: “...It is certain that he took [Shechem] through warfare; but it is not known how (or when). Perhaps when [his sons] slew Shechem, the surrounding nations waged war with him, but crumbled before him...” (Bekhor Shor to Gen. 48:22).

contemporaries who pursued the *peshat*.<sup>248</sup> For them, the maxim “does not only mean that every verse in the *Torah* must be explained in accordance with its literal, plain sense, but also that it can never lose its plain meaning whatever hidden or inner meaning is attributed to it.”<sup>249</sup> In this regard Bekhor Shor closely resembles his contemporary, R. Joseph Kara, who explains:

...Anyone who does not know the literal sense (*peshat*) of Scripture and inclines after the midrashic sense of the word is like one who, in the event of a flood, captures [wares] from the river—from the depths of the water—hoping to seize everything he can in order to rescue it. Now if he had directed his mind toward the word of the Lord, he would have investigated into the meaning of the word and its literal sense (*peshuto*).... Those who understand will understand with regard to the paths of reading that hold up the word to the truth.”<sup>250</sup>

The approach of Kara or Bekhor Shor does not have a close analogue in the interpretive traditions of Christianity, where the allegorical sense or, as Augustine called it, the *sensus mysticus*, held sway. The literal sense never had the same authority or authenticity in Christian exegetical traditions.<sup>251</sup> However, the School of St. Victor seems

<sup>248</sup> Sarah Kamin asserts that “there was no single, accepted understanding of the dictum” אין מקרא יוצא מדי פשוט. In its original (Talmudic) context, the dictum does not necessarily indicate a Rabbinic distinction between literal and non-literal meaning (Kamin, “Affinities,” 21-25).

<sup>249</sup> E. Rosenthal, “Anti-Christian Polemics in Medieval Bible Commentaries,” 119.

<sup>250</sup> Quoted in Grossman, הפולמוס היהודי הנוצרי והפרשנות היהודי למקרא, 54.

<sup>251</sup> Augustine and later the Victorines are notable exceptions. St. Augustine “tries to steer a middle course between literal and allegorical exposition. He gives the literal sense a wide meaning, taking it to include metaphor.... He very seldom sacrifices the literal sense to a subjective spiritual interpretation”

to have adopted an approach that reveals the influence of Rabbinic *peshat* methodology. Scholars have advanced this claim cautiously. Did twelfth-century Christian interest in Hebrew grammar and the *sensus literalis* derive from a pursuit of "the truth," as Kara puts it, in the text? Did the Christian scholars who engaged in these pursuits intend their findings to support their own interpretations of Scripture, or was their ultimate aim to refute Jewish interpretations? None of these questions is clear-cut; it appears that the School of St. Victor (to whom we will direct our attention shortly) developed and advocated a type of scholarship unprecedented in the Christian world, and one that did not survive into the thirteenth century. They, more than any single Christian approach to the interpretation of Bible, incorporated rabbinic interpretation and methodology, leading some to suggest that they had established direct, personal contact with rabbis of Northern France. Though this may sound implausible given old assumptions about the isolation of the Jewish community from the surrounding Gentile culture, those assumptions have been steadily crumbling. The theory of direct contact offers the best explanation for the presence of demonstrably Jewish interpretations in the writings of the Victorines. Unquestionably their exegetical efforts coincided with a renewed interest in Hebrew, which twelfth-century Victorines endeavored to learn. Part of this research seeks to determine the extent to which the contact between Victorines and Jewish scholars was

friendly and mutual, and, as importantly, the extent to which the intellectual enterprise of (Smalley, 23-24). The Victorines are a subject of study further on in this chapter. Beryl Smalley also points out a small group of proponents of Antiochene exegesis, which arose after Augustine and was best embodied in the work of St. John Chrysostom (fifth century). The Antiochene exegetes aimed to define the sense of Scripture more precisely; for them, the literal sense included the whole meaning, including metaphors and symbols (*Ibid*, 14ff). However, the Antiochene method was generally neglected and even in the twelfth century, when certain Christian exegetes' aims resembled those of the Antiochenes, was never

the Victorines represented the norm for Christian exegesis of its time and place. Today's scholars disagree on these issues.

### The School of Saint Victor

The Abbey of St. Victor, established in 1107 by William of Champeaux, signalled a significant development in medieval Bible scholarship. Throughout the eleventh century, and into the twelfth, the noted Christian scholars "were inclined to identify exegesis with theology. Their work appears to be brilliant but one-sided...."<sup>252</sup> By the early to middle twelfth century, Bible study<sup>253</sup> and true academic scholarship remained separate; biblical study was confined to the cloister and intellectual pursuits to the school. In Paris, the intellectual and religious center of northern France, the School of St. Victor arrived emerged at a time ripe for a religious approach devoted both to monastic Bible study and serious learning,<sup>254</sup> and its scholars accomplished just that, if only for a while. "It was a place of study which promoted neither the meditative harmony of the monastic *lectio divina* nor the analytic categories which were popular in the Cathedral schools. Instead, the Victorine canons sought a balance between both methods of study."<sup>255</sup> And in so doing, the School provided a center of contact between scholarly Jews and Christians, recovered (*Ibid*, 19-20).

<sup>252</sup>Smalley, 77.

<sup>253</sup>At this point referred to as *lectio divina*, a monasterial method of Bible study for religious/devotional purposes.

<sup>254</sup>Cf. Smalley, 77-83.

<sup>255</sup>Signer, "Peshat," 204, citing Jean Chatillon, "La Bible dans les écoles du XII<sup>e</sup> siècle," in Riché-Lobrichon, *Le Moyen Age et la Bible*, 163-197 (especially 178-186).

representing the culmination of increasing communication between Jews and Christians in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

During the twelfth century, the scholarly efforts of the School were epitomized and dominated by Master Hugh, from the time of his arrival in 1118 until his death in 1141. Hugh of St. Victor, whose contemporaries called him "a second Augustine,"<sup>256</sup> resembled the first Augustine in his holistic approach to Scripture, in the way he synthesized European scholarly traditions by integrating literal and allegorical methods of interpretation.<sup>257</sup> Like Augustine, Hugh suggested that the literal sense is not the word itself, but its entire meaning, *including* figurative meanings.<sup>258</sup> In this Hugh differs ideologically from the northern French Jewish exegetes of the subsequent generation, notably the RaSHBaM<sup>259</sup> and Bekhor Shor.<sup>260</sup> Equally important, however, are the similarities between the exegetical approach of Hugh (and his successors) and the twelfth century exegetes of the School of Rashi. Did one school or scholar influence the other? Did the schools influence each other mutually? Sarah Kamin has demonstrated "that the Christian notion of the co-existing distinctive senses of Scripture played a role in the formation of Rashbam's exegetical categorization."<sup>261</sup> Kamin uses this and other examples to posit Christian influence on Hebrew exegetical terminology and

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<sup>256</sup>Smalley, 85.

<sup>257</sup>Smalley, 86ff.

<sup>258</sup>Smalley, 93. Cf. also Sarah Kamin, "Affinities," 17ff.

<sup>259</sup>Kamin, "Affinities," 17ff.

<sup>260</sup>E.g., in his commentary to Num. 12:8 (*supra*, Chapter II), Bekhor Shor stresses the independence of *peshat* and allegory.

<sup>261</sup>"Affinities," 18.



methodology. On the other hand, Michael Signer, who accepts Kamin's claims, also finds in the *traditiones hebreorum* of the Victorines "a number of interpretations which derive from the commentaries of the school of Rashi."<sup>262</sup> And others have heard in Rashi<sup>263</sup> "the echo of the exegetical formulations of the School of St. Victor."<sup>264</sup> Combining these arguments with the overwhelming evidence in favor of pre-existing, ongoing, direct contact between Jews and Christians beginning in the eleventh century, one may safely assume a mutual influence between Jewish and Victorine scholars. Their common ground seems to have been not only the Bible, but also the scholarship of the northern French rabbis, beginning with RaSHI.

Undoubtedly the Victorine with the greatest affinity to any representative scholar from the contemporary northern French Jewish world was Hugh's pupil Andrew (d. 1175). Andrew's writings confirm that Hugh had "learned the literal sense of the Pentateuch from the Jews,"<sup>265</sup> a claim confirmed in Hugh's own *Notulae* (commentary/notes to the Bible).<sup>266</sup> Andrew of St. Victor continued Hugh's work, while going considerably farther than his instructor in his study of Hebrew and Rabbinic interpretation of the Bible, consulting rabbis to elucidate the meaning of the Hebrew text and the traditional Jewish understandings of it. Evidently instructed by Jews, Andrew

<sup>262</sup>Signer, "Peshat," 213.

<sup>263</sup>In his commentary to the Song of Songs.

<sup>264</sup>Frank Talmage, "*Ha-Parshanut ha-Notzrit bi-yemei ha-beinayim ve-ziqqat ha-gomlin beinah le-vain ha parshanut ha-Yehudit* (Christian Exegesis and its Mutual Relationship with Jewish Exegesis)," 111, cited in Signer, "Peshat," 213.

<sup>265</sup>Quoted in Smalley, 102.

<sup>266</sup>*Ibid.*

makes "constant use of Josephus, whom he quotes by name, and his pages are studded with expressions such as *asserit Hebreus*,"<sup>267</sup> while the *Hebraei* with whom Andrew consulted remain anonymous, leading one to conclude that the consultation was oral.<sup>268</sup> He systematically collated the Vulgate along with the Hebrew text of the Bible, so as to facilitate comparison; and his writings reveal an interest in contemporary Jewish practices, which he both compares and contrasts with those of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>269</sup> In his commentary, which he completed in 1147, Andrew concentrates on the historical element of the text; and like Bekhor Shor in the next generation, he resists allegorizations<sup>270</sup> and is noted for his originality.<sup>271</sup>

Andrew's *Hebraei*, whoever they may have been, quote or paraphrase RaSHI extensively. And "whereas Hugh has parallels with Joseph Kara and Rashbam, Andrew has some strikingly close parallels with the younger scholar, his own contemporary, Joseph Bekhor Shor."<sup>272</sup> However, it remains difficult to assess the quantity or quality of Bekhor Shor's influence on Andrew, or vice-versa. For one, Andrew's similarities to Bekhor Shor do not fully reflect the latter's hard-headed rationalism. Yet he resembles Bekhor Shor in his originality, his combativeness, his fondness for literal interpretation,

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid*, 126. *Op cit*. Abulafia, 94, citing Michael A. Signer, *Introduction to Andrew's Expositionem in Ezechielem*, CCCM, Vol. 53E, Turnhout, Brepols, 1991, pp. ix-xxxvii; Hailperin, 111-113.

<sup>268</sup> Smalley, 154.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid*, 126-127, 154.

<sup>270</sup> Signer, "Peshat," 209.

<sup>271</sup> Smalley, 121.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid*, 155-156.

his parallels from contemporary culture, and for inserting French words into his commentary, a common feature in late twelfth-century writings, but one rare among Andrew's Christian contemporaries.<sup>273</sup>

Andrew expressed mixed feelings about the Jews and their understanding of Scripture. Some of the rabbis' arguments impressed him deeply. The most celebrated example of such an argument is the Jewish interpretation of Isaiah's "Emanuel" prophecy<sup>274</sup>, which Christians read as signifying the advent of Jesus Christ through the Virgin birth. Andrew sympathizes with the Jewish refutation of the Christian reading, and incurred the ire of his colleague Richard of St. Victor, who accused him, in his lengthy polemic *De Emmanuele*<sup>275</sup>, of "judaizing." Elsewhere, Andrew presents only the Jewish interpretation of Isaiah's "Suffering Servant" (a prophecy applied by Christians to the figure of Jesus Christ), explaining the Servant as signifying the collective of Jews in captivity, who expiate their people's sins through their suffering. Alternatively, Andrew suggests (following another standard Jewish interpretation), the Suffering Servant is the prophet Isaiah himself.<sup>276</sup>

Andrew's acceptance of these rabbinic interpretations of Isaiah parallels an anecdote recounted in connection with Joseph Bekhor Shor. The echo of an actual

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<sup>273</sup>*Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>274</sup>Is. 7:14.

<sup>275</sup>Gilbert Dahan claims: "The *On Emmanuel* by Richard of Saint-Victor (who died in 1173) is often counted among the works of the polemic. In fact, it is a work of exegesis" (*The Christian Polemic*, 75). Nevertheless, the treatise includes Richard's accusation of his colleague Andrew's "judaizing."

<sup>276</sup>Smalley, 164.

controversy resonates in the following debate over the interpretation of Isaiah's Suffering Servant. Note also how Bekhor Shor, in his typical fashion, refutes the Christian argument by faulting it on its own internal, Christian logic:

A very learned apostate came once into the presence of the great R. Joseph Bekor Shor: How, he asked, canst thou meet the evidence of this Parashah? He replied, O fool, thine ears shall hear that which thou utterest from thy mouth: the prophet calls him his 'servant,' but if he is God, how could he be termed a servant? At once the apostate rent his clothes and rolled himself in ashes and repented [of his apostasy]....<sup>277</sup>

At least one other scholar, who also uses this text to support his claim, finds the commentaries of Bekhor Shor and Andrew of St. Victor reveal "such great similarity that it is impossible to attribute it to simple coincidence; it can only suggest close personal contacts."<sup>278</sup> Could Bekhor Shor have been the unattributed rabbi responsible for Andrew's familiarity with, and preference for, the Jewish interpretation? Perhaps; but the Christian clergyman Andrew was not always so easily won over as was the apostate in the above anecdote. At times the Victorine expresses ambivalence toward the Jewish explanation, and at times hostility. It seems likely that his stance derives from his inability fully to accept the Jewish interpretation without risk of, for instance, the accusation of "judaizing" by his closest colleagues.

<sup>277</sup> Hailperin, 113, citing S. R. Driver and A. Neubauer, *The Fifty-Third Chapter of Isaiah according to the Jewish Interpreters* [Oxford, 1877], Vol. II, p. [71] (Translations).

<sup>278</sup> Grabois, 623.

By going to school with the Jews, Andrew set himself a difficult problem. He is proud of the learning they give him, and wants as much of it as possible; he plies them with questions. At the same time, he cannot accept their interpretation of important passages without abjuring his own faith. His Jews do not only 'state'; they 'fable', or even 'twist with their wonted shamelessness' ....

Andrew's interviews with his rabbis must have been a lively mixture of the tutorial and the *disputatio*.<sup>279</sup>

Andrew differs most saliently from his instructor Hugh in the younger scholar's apparent acceptance of the Jewish insistence upon the independence of the literal and allegorical senses. Hugh, it will be recalled, follows Augustine in understanding the literal and allegorical senses as interdependent. For Andrew, however, the literal sense is identical with the Jewish explanation.<sup>280</sup> Indeed, it seems that this identification compels him, in setting out to give the Western world's first purely literal interpretation of the Old Testament, to turn to the Jews for guidance. Andrew's insistence on this one-to-one relationship between the Jews and the *sensus literalis* both enlightened and frustrated him, as his work reveals an author struggling to incorporate interpretations that sometimes clarify and other times obfuscate his inevitably Christian point-of-view.

As much as any Christian and Jewish scholar could, Andrew of St. Victor and Joseph Bekhor Shor lived in the same world, the same intellectual and religious climate,

<sup>279</sup>Smalley, 156-157.

<sup>280</sup>Smalley, 163, 169.

the same social and cultural milieu. Their exegetical approaches appear to have rubbed off on one another. At times this produced concordant interpretation; at other times, interpretations that ran counter to either group's central tenets of faith appear to have produced something like cognitive dissonance in the respective author. The comments of their contemporary, Bartholomew, bishop of Exeter (d. 1184), are especially enlightening in their depiction of the Jewish approach (and the superiority of their own Christian readings).

"The chief cause of disagreement between ourselves and the Jews seems to me to be this: they take all the Old Testament literally, wherever they can find a literal sense, unless it gives manifest witness to Christ. Then they repudiate it, saying that it is not in the Hebrew Truth, that is in their books, or they refer it to some fable, as that they are still awaiting its fulfillment, or they escape by some other serpentine wile, when they feel themselves hard pressed. They will never accept allegory, except when they have no other way out. *We* interpret not only the words of Scripture, but the things done, and the deeds themselves, in a mystical sense, yet in such a way that the freedom of allegory may in no wise nullify, either history in the events, or proper understanding of the words, of Scripture."<sup>281</sup>

It is not hard to imagine Bishop Bartholomew having Bekhor Shor in mind as he wrote

<sup>281</sup>Smalley, 170, citing MS. Bodl. 482, fo. 1<sup>d</sup>. The treatise was written in Bartholomew's old age. See A. Morey, *Bartholomew of Exeter* (Cambridge, 1937), 109, 164.

these words. Undoubtedly, as demonstrated in his defensiveness of the Patriarchs, Bekhor Shor's "*peshat*" sometimes appears "serpentine." At the same time, it must be emphasized that for Bekhor Shor, open acceptance of any allegory ran tantamount to acceptance of the Christian interpretation. In his one-to-one identification of allegory with Christianity, Bekhor Shor becomes a mirror-image for Andrew, who identifies *sensus literalis* exclusively with *sensus Judaicus*.

How can one characterize the general tenor of the relationship between Jewish and Victorine intellectuals and biblical commentators in the twelfth century? Do we view their interaction as a form of spirited intellectual sparring, conducted in a generally friendly environment, albeit with heated passions on both sides? Or do we emphasize the combative—even missionizing?—element of polemical literature from this era? David Berger argues that

[d]espite the proliferation of Christian polemics in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, the evidence is overwhelming that these works were not rooted in a new or continuing missionary impulse. An examination of the reasons that polemicists gave for writing their tracts reveals a remarkable need to apologize for engaging in an activity considered improper on ideological grounds, and, even when there is no apology, hesitation, or refusal, the reasons given almost invariably do not include the idea that Christians should attempt to proselytize Jews.<sup>282</sup>

<sup>282</sup>"Mission to the Jews," 578.

Instead, Berger argues, the upsurge of polemic may have resulted "from the overall cultural renaissance of the late eleventh and twelfth centuries,"<sup>283</sup> or from personal interaction between Jewish and Christian scholars.<sup>284</sup> Berger sees these confrontations as "very serious indeed, but the atmosphere appears to have been one of a duel of wits—almost a form of intellectual entertainment."<sup>285</sup> At the same time, Anna Abulafia emphasizes the seriousness of the debate. She contends that

as far as these scholars were concerned, the Hebrew Bible was the Old Testament and for them God's Word was Jesus Christ. So for all their genuine fascination with the Hebrew Bible, Hebrew and even Rabbinics, their ultimate aim was to intensify their own and their community's Christian understanding of the text.<sup>286</sup> And because this understanding was Christological it could not but be incompatible with the Jewish reading of the Bible. It is in the arena of Jewish-Christian polemics that this incompatibility was expressed especially clearly and increasingly sharply. As such it became an additional element that separated Christian from Jew.<sup>287</sup>

Both she and Berger appear to be correct, each emphasizing the opposite point: yes, the

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, 579ff.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, 587.

<sup>286</sup> 94, citing H. de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale. Les quatre sens de l'Ecriture*, Paris, vol. 1.1 and 1.2, 1959; vol. 2.1, 1961; vol. 2.2, 1964, *passim*.

<sup>287</sup> 94.



debate was not, in the twelfth century, so unidirectional as to function primarily as part of the Christian missionary effort. At the same time, the debate revealed more differences than similarities between Jews and Christians; these differences come into sharp relief in the polemical literature of the day. Reading Bekhor Shor, one inevitably notices the vigor of his polemic; like the Christian scholars vis-à-vis their community, Bekhor Shor's ultimate aim was to intensify his own Jewish community's Jewish understanding of the text. Abulafia's ominous tone is not inappropriate or unwarranted. Though the debate did not (primarily) serve a missionary program in the twelfth century, the debate did just that in the following century—perhaps even in Bekhor Shor's lifetime. Whatever traces of “intellectual entertainment” had once been present quickly vanished when Christian critical attention—and particularly that of the mendicant orders—turned to the Talmud and Rabbinic literature.<sup>288</sup> But for a brief enlightened period—two generations or so—during the twelfth century, history witnesses the greatest degree of commonality between Jewish and Christian exegetes in the debate between a handful of scholars on either side: the Victorines and a few disciples of the School of RaSHI. And of these groups, no two figures are more alike, more representative of their unique literary milieu, and more likely to have studied and debated together than Andrew of St. Victor and R. Joseph Bekhor Shor.

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<sup>288</sup> Cf. Jeremy Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews: The Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982. pp. 13ff.

## ***Peshat* and Prophecy**

This study has endeavored to show a connection among *peshat*, rationalism, polemic, and the literary renaissance of France in the twelfth century for Christians and Jews alike. Focusing attention on Andrew of St. Victor and Joseph Bekhor Shor, I have argued for each scholar's appropriation of the methodology of *peshat*, or *sensus literalis*, in his presentation of the "true meaning" of Scripture. Both Bekhor Shor and Andrew of St. Victor maximized the twelfth-century interest in *peshat* and rationalism as part of their individual attempts to shore up faith among their own people. As a consequence of his dedication to the *peshat*, Bekhor Shor interprets biblical prophecy as applying specifically and directly to the national history and destiny of Israel. Most critics, even today, would agree that in a majority of cases, this represents an accurate view of biblical passages that appear to prognosticate. We witness this clearly in Bekhor Shor's interpretation of the Patriarchs' prophetic "blessings" in the Book of Genesis. His commentary in these instances, relying heavily on his *peshat*-approach, assists his polemical agenda while further securing his place as a representative exegete and literary figure of his time and place.

The best examples of this technique arise in the blessings of Jacob, and most obviously in Bekhor Shor's interpretation of the "Shiloh" blessing-prophecy of Genesis 49:10 ("The scepter shall not depart from Judah..."), examined above.<sup>289</sup> There we can

<sup>289</sup>*Supra*, fn. 152.

these blessings refer, at the *peshat* level, to the national destiny of Israel, a fate fulfilled in the days of the tribal federation and monarchy. We see it in his commentary to Jacob's blessing of Simeon and Levi (which in fact functions as a curse). Here Bekhor Shor understands Jacob's intention to "divide them and scatter them" as referring to the landless status of the future Levites and Simeonites:

**49:7. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce....** Let their severe and stubborn anger and sin be cursed. For their brothers will not be able to tolerate them being kings or rulers over them, and will not consent to his [Jacob's] will if he says that they should rule. Rather, **I will divide them and scatter them....** One from the other, to mix them up among the rest of their brothers, in Jacob and in Israel,<sup>290</sup> so that they will never take counsel together. And Levi will have no portion or inheritance, and will be scattered throughout the entire land of Israel, for everyone will give from his own cities to the Levites. And Simeon took a portion in Judah, so that the fear of the kingdom would be upon him, as it is said: "Judah said to Simeon (his brother)" who was with him, "Go up with me to the territory allotted to me."<sup>291</sup>

So goes the interpretation for each of Jacob's blessings, each one explained in terms of the "real-life" circumstances and experiences of the tribe in Israel's national history.

Bekhor Shor's interpretation of Jacob's blessing to Benjamin provides another good

<sup>290</sup>I.e., within the collective tribal federation of Israel.

<sup>291</sup>Judges 1:3.

example.

**49:27. Benjamin is a ravenous wolf....** Like a wolf that seizes prey and then flees, and does not linger over his prey. For the kingdom of Saul<sup>292</sup> did not last but two and a half years, and he plundered and tore up his enemies, as it is written: "Once Saul had captured the kingdom of Israel, he waged war with his enemies all about: with Moab, and with the Ammonites, Edom, and the kings of Zobah, and the Philistines; and wherever he turned, he inflicted harm."<sup>293</sup> But the kingdom of David is like a lion<sup>294</sup> that lingers over its prey and does not flee, since his kingdom is lasting. **In the morning he consumes the plunder....**<sup>295</sup> Saul's kingdom was like the morning, because it was [the first] kingdom of Israel, just as the morning is the first [part] of the day. „טע" means plunder: "עדאח" in the Aramaic language. **And in the evening....** after the sun sets on Israel—when they go into exile—he will divide the spoil: for he will apportion the spoil to others, and not take for themselves—[that is,] in the days of Mordechai and Esther, who were Benjaminites, and so it is written: "But they did not lay their hands on the spoil."<sup>296</sup>

<sup>292</sup> A Benjaminite.

<sup>293</sup> I Sam. 14:47.

<sup>294</sup> Using the traditional iconography for Judah, native home of David (in Bethlehem).

<sup>295</sup> "Plunder," Heb. טע, is translated according to Bekhor Shor's reading of the verse. Others read, "prey."

<sup>296</sup> Esther 9:10, 15.

Most scholars would concur that Bekhor Shor gets at the original sense of these verses; their *Sitz-im-Leben* was to have Jacob foretell—with remarkable acuity—the fate of his descendants.<sup>297</sup> Undoubtedly Bekhor Shor's interpretations of these prophecies function as polemic even when we possess no specific Christian interpretation. Bekhor Shor insists on *peshat* here<sup>298</sup> not only to refute specific Christian claims to the contrary, and not only to enlighten and embolden his Jewish audience, but also because the long established, *basic Christian approach* to prophecy in the Hebrew Bible was to assert the prefiguring of Christ and the supersession of the Church. For Christians, "... a prophecy could not be fulfilled twice, and Jacob of Serug, a writer of the fifth century, rubs in the implication of this by stating, after he has proved that Christ fulfilled all prophecies, that even if the Jews did obtain a Messiah, he could not claim any of the Old Testament prophecies on his behalf, for 'Our Lord, when He came, fulfilled the totality of prophecy.

And he gave no opportunity for another to come.'"<sup>299</sup> By demonstrating that the blessings

<sup>297</sup>The outcome of which was already well-known by the author or redactor, who retrojects it into Jacob's mouth and thereby turns him into an oracle.

<sup>298</sup>Certainly *he* would have seen these interpretations as *peshat*. But the text here is itself highly poetic and metonymic. Can one speak of the "literal meaning" of a metaphor? Benjamin was not, literally, a "ravenous wolf" any more than his brother Judah held an actual "scepter." Thus in these instances, *peshat* for Bekhor Shor means to unpack the metaphor as rationally as possible, and in accordance with the fate of the given tribe, as indicated and proof-texted elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Bekhor Shor places the metaphor in the light of recorded "history" as he sees it, and thus gives a "*peshat*" interpretation instead of resorting to further allegorization of the text. For another example of this technique, note in his commentary to Gen. 49:17 how Bekhor Shor explains the image of the snake used to depict Dan: **49:17. Let Dan be a snake along the road....** For Dan was last of the troops, and also in the land of Israel, he was situated along the border, as is written: "...all of Israel, from Dan to Beersheva" (I Sam. 3:20, II Sam. 17:11). And when enemies came upon Israel, they encountered him [i.e., the tribe of Dan] first, and he waged war with them, and prevented them from crossing, like a snake situated on the road, who is like a bolt (or a latch) that prevents passersby. And when they came near him, he was a snake who bites a horse on his heel, and who then falls on his heels, and the chariot collapses behind him. So too with Dan: when enemies encountered him, he would wage war with them and drive them back, so that they could not enter the land of Israel.

<sup>299</sup>Jacob of Serug, *First Homily Against the Jews*, line 283, quoted in James Parkes, *Conflict*, 99.

of Jacob have already come true (centuries ago!), Bekhor Shor, through the methodology of *peshat*, refutes the traditional Christian view.<sup>300</sup> Indeed, for Bekhor Shor too, "a prophecy could not be fulfilled twice," and consequently, by giving the authoritative Jewish interpretation, he denies Christians the opportunity to apply these prophetic verses to Christ, the Church, or themselves.

### Sequential Narrative

As the third and final aspect of his exegetical methodology analyzed in this study, let us look at Joseph Bekhor Shor's emphasis on the sequence of the biblical narrative and the internal consistency of his portrayal of the biblical characters throughout his commentary. An investigation of his depiction of the Patriarchs demonstrates that his attention to sequential narrative provides yet another key to Bekhor Shor's polemical thrust. Moreover, his understanding of the text in terms of sequential narrative links him to other important figures of the twelfth century literary renaissance.

"Jewish exegetes of the twelfth century develop polemical arguments against Christian interpreters based on the sequence of biblical narratives. One of the most common weapons in the Jewish arsenal was to refute a Christian claim by demonstrating that it failed to take the full biblical verse or chapter into account."<sup>301</sup> Bekhor Shor's

<sup>300</sup>It should come as little surprise, by the way, that Andrew of St. Victor adopts a similar stance. In his writing, "[p]rophetic metaphors, such as the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37, are explained within the context of the entire chapter, i.e., the restoration of the people of Israel" (Signer, "*Peshat*," 209).

<sup>301</sup>*Ibid.*, 210. Cf. also Berger, who writes of "the argument from context" as "the stock-in-trade of any medieval Jewish polemicist" (*The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages*, 12).

commentary, in particular, indicates the author's profound concern not only for the verse at hand, but for the entire pericope, the entire chapter, and indeed for any biblical material related to the episode or character described therein. For Bekhor Shor, no verse can be divorced from its context. Thus he reiterates, for instance, the internally consistent motives of a character at many different places in the text, at different times in the character's "life." Earlier, we observed this trend in his consistent and constant insistence on Abraham's faith in God and faithfulness to God's will. We also observed it in his oft-iterated defense of Jacob's upstanding moral character, his pure-hearted intentions toward Esau and Laban, and his honorable acquisition of birthright, blessing, and material wealth. And we observed attention to narrative sequence throughout the Joseph narrative, in which the assumed "oath of silence" taken to his brothers is referenced several times throughout the story in order to account for Joseph's failure to notify his bereaved father of his whereabouts and good fortune.

Again, it should come as no surprise that Bekhor Shor and his contemporaries share this interest in narrative sequence with their Victorine counterparts, beginning with Hugh and culminating in Andrew, the latter of whom emphasized narrative sequence by concentrating exclusively on the historical aspects of the text.<sup>302</sup> "Both communities focus their writings on whole books of the Bible rather than on select verses."<sup>303</sup> In order

<sup>302</sup>*Ibid*, 209. According to Signer, it is precisely his emphasis on narrative sequence that forced Andrew to accept the Jewish interpretation of Isaiah's "Emanuel" prophecy (7:14). "His commentary on Isaiah indicates that he accepted the Jewish understanding of chapters seven and eight of the book of Isaiah as constituting a sequence" (*Ibid*, 210).

<sup>303</sup>*Ibid*, 208.

to explicate the text in a manner consistent with the narrative sequence, commentators of both religious communities develop similar techniques, all of which are abundantly evident in Bekhor Shor. They tend to paraphrase in order to assist the reader in following the verse in its context. A given verse is supplied with commentary that, in the course of explaining the verse, leads without interruption to the next verse. This method surfaces often in Bekhor Shor, as in his connection of Gen. 25:29 to 25:30:

**25:29. And he [Esau] was tired.** It is the way of hunters to be tired, from chasing animals!<sup>304</sup> And sometimes they stray in the woods for three or four days, and they get hungry and thirsty. And this is what happened to Esau, until he approached the gates of death, and could not raise his hand to his mouth, just as he said:

**25:30. Please feed me...!** So as to say: Pour [the stew] right into my mouth and I will eat, because I can't even put it in my mouth, and I can't make it to my father's house....

Additionally, "[c]ommentaries often segment biblical verses in such a way that one is forced to read not only comments on a single verse, but also large sections of a biblical chapter in order to understand the sequence of narrative."<sup>305</sup> One will notice this, too, in Bekhor Shor; he does not comment on every verse of the Torah, but the verses on which he does comment, when viewed together, reveal his most pervasive concerns and demonstrate his attention to the larger themes and consistent characters that he sees in the

<sup>304</sup>Note the use of logical deduction—סברא—here.

<sup>305</sup>Signer, "Peshat," 209.



biblical text.<sup>306</sup> Moreover, his attention to sequential narrative functions in tandem with his acceptance of *peshat* and resistance to midrash, the latter of which operates more effectively at the level of the isolated word, phrase, or verse.<sup>307</sup> It is difficult to give a midrashic interpretation of an entire chapter or Book; to do so one must perforce allegorize the text. And allegory was anathema to Bekhor Shor.

## Conclusion

The emphasis on sequential narrative and *peshat/sensus literalis* adopted enthusiastically by noted twelfth-century northern French Jewish and Christian scholars reflects their common culture. "These new techniques permitted innovations which served the needs of each community as it accommodated to the developing urban civilization in France."<sup>308</sup> R. Joseph Bekhor Shor of Orléans, the last and greatest Jewish scholar to undertake this endeavor, personifies and epitomizes the high degree of interaction with the Christian world that characterized a medieval Jewish scholar's life. In that Christian world he influenced—and was influenced by—intellectual, religious, literary, and cultural trends. For all of his interest in solidifying the faith of his own Jewish community, he also reveals an interest in the social concerns and practices of his

<sup>306</sup> See, for instance, his commentary to selected verses in Gen. 25:29-34, and 27:1-29. He comments on those verses which best elucidate the narrative as a complete unit, and he maintains internal consistency throughout. Even his comment to 27:1, which introduces the subject of Isaac's mistaken blessing of Jacob, begins with a comment intended to direct the reader to the following verses: "27:1. And his eyes had dimmed from seeing. So that you could not wonder how he mixed up Jacob and Esau."

<sup>307</sup> See Signer, "Peshat," 210-11, with reference to the same in RaSHBaM, J. Kara, and Eliezer of Beaugency.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid*, 211.

France. Frequently this interest is betrayed by his use of Old French glosses. Less frequently, but no less significantly, this interest comes through as he strives to relate a biblical episode or practice to a practice of his own day.<sup>309</sup> For instance, as indicated previously in this study, his interest in Jewish-Gentile relations as depicted in the Bible mirrors his concern for Jewish-Gentile relations in medieval France and, indeed, throughout Jewish history in every place. Sometimes he uses what we would call anachronism, as in his interpretation of Isaac's blessing of Esau, which not only relates Isaac's gift to Rabbinic laws of property inheritance<sup>310</sup>, but also relates the episode to medieval practice in the Gentile world: "Furthermore, [Isaac had Esau prepare a meal] because it is the custom of rulers to make a meal when they obtain authority."<sup>311</sup> Evidently, though, this tendency of Bekhor Shor to relate the biblical account to practices of his own day is tempered by his conception of *peshat* and the limitations it imposes on interpretation, particularly on anachronistic interpretation. Thus when he encounters the RaSHBaM doing the same—seeing in the biblical text cultural paradigms from his own day—Bekhor Shor, in his own commentary to the disputed verse, rejects the other rabbi's explanation:

**25:34. And he [Esau] ate and drank. And his spirit returned to him. So**

<sup>309</sup>For instance, see his commentary to Gen. 49:13-15, in which he compares and contrasts Jacob's blessings of Zebulun and Issachar, indicating Bekhor Shor's preference for the agricultural life over the "trouble" of a life of commerce, a concern certainly influenced as much by his own culture as it was by his keen insight into the *peshat* sense of the passage. Also noteworthy is his commentary to Gen. 24:13, in which Bekhor Shor presents the reader with his view of the desirable qualities associated with a woman worthy of marriage, all of which can be related to his cultural milieu and the values of his day and place.

<sup>310</sup>Bekhor Shor to Gen. 27:4, citing M. Bava Bathra 8:5,

<sup>311</sup>Bekhor Shor to Gen. 27:4. He supports this claim with a reference to Adonijah's sacrificial feast in honor of his own alleged ascendancy as king, I Kings 1:9.

he spurned the birthright.... Now there are some who explain that Jacob purchased the birthright with money; and [they say that] this food was a meal-of-sale<sup>312</sup>, which we call "*beveria*,"<sup>313</sup> but this is, in my view, nonsense.

Whether or not Bekhor Shor accepts the specific analogies of the biblical accounts to customs of his own time and place, however, is not the most essential issue. Rather, the significance of remarks like these lies in their demonstration of the exegete's concern not only for the *peshat* of the text or for the most logical interpretation—which undoubtedly are profound and influential concerns—but also for an interpretation of the text that would resonate with a Jewish community in twelfth-century northern France, at a time and place in Jewish history that saw increased interaction between Jew and Gentile in the commercial and intellectual marketplace. The twelfth century brought an unprecedented degree of exchange of ideas between these two groups, and R. Joseph Bekhor Shor stands as a bellwether in that climate of exchange.

The content of Bekhor Shor's commentary reveals the concerns of a representative twelfth century northern French exegete and tells us much about that Jewish community. As examined in the previous chapters, his commentary presents many of the popular Christian arguments from the Hebrew Bible in support of their own doctrines of faith and a vigorous, meticulous, and authoritative Jewish response to each of them. It reveals a commentator determined to defend the Patriarchs—maligned by

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<sup>312</sup>Cf. RaSHBaM *ad loc.*

<sup>313</sup>Cf. Smalley, 152.

Christians and misunderstood, perhaps, even by his fellow Jews—from defamation and dishonor. For any attack on the Patriarchs represented an attack on their descendants, *B'nei Yisrael*.

Equally revealing of Bekhor Shor's concerns and world-view, however, is his methodology. To understand his commentary is to understand its hermeneutics. Thus we see in his diligent advocacy and employment of *peshat*-exegesis a strong polemical motivation; polemic and *peshat* go hand-in-hand. This is particularly evident in his "literal" or "rational" approach to prophecy—in Genesis, the Patriarchs' prophetic blessings—which Bekhor Shor explains in relation to the history and destiny of his people Israel. Lastly, his conceptual grasp of the sequential narrative of large units of text and his careful consideration of the larger narrative context of a given verse, episode, or characterization, further reveal the commentator's defensive and polemical agenda. By explaining any given verse in a manner consistent with and dependent upon its context, he protects the most sacred of Jewish literature from misappropriation by Christians. He also saves the text from internal Jewish confusion or doubt about its meaning, with particular emphasis on the integrity of the biblical characters the eternal validity of God's exclusive covenant with the chosen people of Israel.

By paying close attention to Bekhor Shor's methodology, one recognizes similarities between his literary endeavor and that of his Gentile contemporaries, particularly the Victorine exegetes, and of them, particularly Andrew of St. Victor. The profoundly similar approaches to text, combined with similar literary and theological

concerns—especially visible in each exegete's commentary to certain prophecies of Isaiah—argue strongly for personal contact between the two, or at the very least, among their closest associates in their respective academies. Their literary output is complex, and it remains difficult accurately to assess the degree to which their contact approximated “intellectual entertainment” on the one hand, or concerted polemic, ultimately as part of a missionary/counter-missionary effort, on the other. The vigor and directness of Bekhor Shor's more polemical passages, and the professed frustration with the Jewish approach expressed by Andrew, suggest something more toward the latter. But the glimpses of playfulness in Bekhor Shor and the purported acceptance of certain Jewish exegetical stances on the part of Andrew argue more toward the former. In either case, it seems fair to conclude once again that “Andrew's interviews with his rabbis must have been a lively mixture of the tutorial and the *disputatio*, ”<sup>314</sup> and Bekhor Shor (or his colleagues) probably provided him with plenty to dispute and refute along with those interpretations that he accepted more readily.

Lest we conclude from the hints of their interaction, however, that the exchange of ideas in twelfth century northern France resembled today's intellectual marketplace, it is important to note with regret the explicitly missionizing agenda undertaken by the Church, even during the lifetimes of Joseph Bekhor Shor and Andrew of St. Victor. By the thirteenth century, the Bible ceased to be the even “playing field” for the Jewish-Christian debate. Gentiles turned their attention to Rabbinic literature, in particular the

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<sup>314</sup>Smalley, 156-157.

Talmud, and their interest in keeping up a true intellectual debate dropped off dramatically. Public disputes increasingly became occasions not for mutual enlightenment or even for vigorous debate and refutation, but for public humiliation and critique directed against the Jews. It would not be long before Christian incineration of Jewish holy books, alongside the missionizing interpretation of them, superseded the sort of debate in which Bekhor Shor had participated.

While Bekhor Shor and his Jewish contemporaries might not have anticipated the vituperative nature that would come to characterize the Jewish-Christian debate, they are nonetheless well aware of the intellectual and religious seriousness of their ongoing disputation vis-à-vis this most essential work of literature in the Western world, the Hebrew Bible. And, armed with centuries of Rabbinic exegesis and a relatively recent endeavor in the methodologies of *peshat* and sequential narrative, they are well equipped to defend the ancient truths of Jewish interpretation. On this subject, Rabbi Joseph Bekhor Shor of Orléans deserves the last word, which comes in a cryptic remark to Genesis 49:18, part of the blessings of Jacob, in which the aged Patriarch, amid speaking to his sons for the last time, utters a brief and dramatic prayer to the Almighty:

מט"ח. לישועתך [קויתי ה']... אני מקוה, הקב"ה! ומצפה לו שיושיעך, שכל זמן שהקב"ה מושיע אותך, אין ישראל יראים כלום, שאתה עומד על הספר כברית

**49:18. For your deliverance...** I hope, O Holy One, Blessed be He! And

[I] wait for Him to deliver you.<sup>315</sup> For the entire duration that the Holy

One, Blessed be He, is delivering you, Israel will fear nothing, for you

<sup>315</sup>Jacob's sons, object of the address.

stand [guard] over the Book like a latch.<sup>316</sup>

Even today, we guard our most sacred written words—our diaries—with latches and bolts; the record contained in them is precious and private. The Torah is the eternal diary of the Jewish people, and its people are charged with protecting it from misappropriation and improper interpretation. For Bekhor Shor, there exists no more sacred duty, no better guarantee of Divine protection and deliverance for his people, than to stand guard over his people's Book. To defend the Book and its characters—to elucidate and advocate its "true sense"—is to be a latch, preventing the prying eyes and pens of non-Jews and willful apostates from accessing and perverting Israel's personal account of her age-old encounter with God. It is tempting to suggest that Rabbi Joseph Bekhor Shor sees himself as that essential latch, securing God's promise of deliverance to Israel in Exile even as he secures the faith of Israel in God's Word.

<sup>316</sup>Playing on the same term used by Bekhor Shor to describe the role of the tribe of Dan in the verse immediately prior (49:17).

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