

THE
CHAIN OF
TRADITION
SERIES

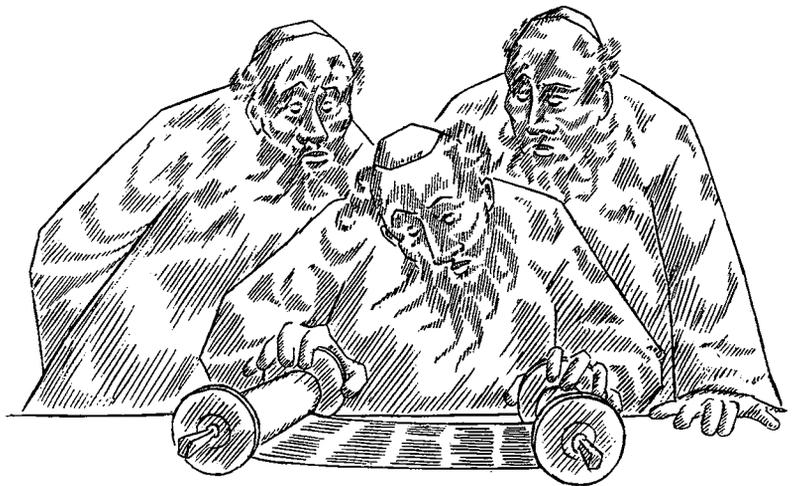
Volume IV

THE
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TRADITION
SERIES

Volume IV:
Jewish biblical exegesis

*Frontispiece by
Eleanor Schick*

THE
CHAIN OF
TRADITION
SERIES



Jewish biblical exegetis

BY LOUIS JACOBS

Behrman House, Inc.

PUBLISHERS NEW YORK

**In memory of my mother-in-law:
Jane Lisagorska**

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*Published by Behrman House, Inc.
1261 Broadway, New York, N.Y.*

*Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 73-1487
International Standard Book Number: 0-87441-225-0*

Manufactured in the United States of America

Introduction, ix

THE ELEVENTH CENTURY

- | | |
|------------------------------------|----------|
| 1 Rashi | 1 |
| <i>“The Lord is my shepherd”</i> | |
| <i>The judges and their duties</i> | |
| <i>“The Prayer of Moses”</i> | |

THE TWELFTH CENTURY

- | | |
|---|-----------|
| 2 Ibn Ezra | 8 |
| <i>How should the Bible be interpreted?</i> | |
| <i>Why was Moses adopted by Pharaoh’s daughter?</i> | |
| <i>“Thou shalt not covet.” How is this possible?</i> | |
| <i>Did Moses write the whole of the Pentateuch?</i> | |
| 3 Rashbam | 22 |
| <i>How should the Bible be interpreted?</i> | |
| <i>The meaning of Moses’ argument</i> | |
| <i>How are the Ten Commandments to be understood?</i> | |
| 4 Kimhi | 31 |
| <i>How is Isaiah’s Messianic vision to be understood?</i> | |

THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY

- 5 Nahmanides** 46
What is the image of God?
How should we interpret stories of angels?
What is implied in the command to be holy?
- 6 Daat Zekenim** 61
What lessons are to be derived from the Ark?
What is the true meaning of the Shema?
How did Moses die?
- 7 Hazzekuni** 69
What lessons can be derived from the story of Adam?
Why is it forbidden to plow with two different animals?

THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY

- 8 Bahya ibn Asher** 76
Why is sheepherding an ideal occupation?
Why is the slave's ear pierced?
Why is Moses called the servant of the Lord?
- 9 Gersonides** 89
What lessons are to be derived from the story of Hannah?
Did the sun really stop for Joshua?
- 10 Jacob ben Asher** 100
Hints at various truths in the words and letters of the Torah

THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

- 11 Isaac Arama** 108
What is the purpose of animal sacrifices?
- 12 Abravanel** 120
What is the meaning of the Tower of Babel?
Did Lot's wife really turn into a pillar of salt?
Why must a kid not be seethed in its mother's milk?

THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

- 13 Sforno** 134
*What is the meaning of the binding of Isaac?
How are the Ten Commandments to be understood?*
- 14 Alshech** 144
How did David fight Goliath?

THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

- 15 Ephraim Lunshitz** 153
*How is injustice to be avoided?
Why is there no reference in the Bible to the
immortality of the soul?*

THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

- 16 Hayim ibn Attar** 163
*Why should one help the poor?
What is the significance of the command against
idolatry?
How should a good man help sinners?*

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

- 17 Kalonymus Kalman Epstein** 171
*Which is higher, prayer or Torah study?
How can a man be a hermit and yet be social?
How can a man be pure?*
- 18 Malbim** 178
*Can a man love his neighbor as himself?
What is the secret of happiness?*

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

- 19 Baruch Epstein** 190
What are the various ways of misleading others?

Introduction

THIS book contains selections from the best-known Jewish Biblical commentators of the eleventh down to the twentieth century. Only commentators who wrote in Hebrew are studied and only the most popular, popularity being determined either by the fact that the commentary was printed together with the text in editions of the Bible or that it was frequently quoted in Jewish literature. There is no selection from Saadiah Gaon (882-942), for instance, although he can be considered in many ways the true father of Jewish Biblical exegesis. Saadiah wrote in Arabic, so that his work can only be appreciated against the Arabic background. Moreover, only fragments of his work have come down to us and he is not a popular commentator within our definition of the term. The whole area of Rabbinic legal interpretation has been excluded because this is really a separate field, but examples of Rabbinic exegesis will be found in the first volume in this series, *Jewish Law*, and also scattered through the comments in this volume.

The works studied here are all premodern in the sense that they rely on the Biblical text or on its interpretation by the Rabbis, without any of the considerations that are essential features of modern critical and historical Biblical scholarship. Thus there are very few investigations into the authorship of the Biblical books

(but see the section on Ibn Ezra) and very little treatment of the historical background (but see the section on Abravanel). The increase of knowledge about the Biblical period brought about by archeology, comparative Semitic philology and the application of scientific methods of investigation, was unobtainable by these writers. Even the *Biur*, the commentary produced by Mendelssohn's school at the end of the eighteenth century, has been excluded from consideration in this volume because, while hardly critical, it is indicative of the objectivity typical of modern scholarship, in which the Bible is studied as one would study any other work of literature. All the writers treated of in this book (even those belonging to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) would have vehemently repudiated the view that the Bible, as the word of God, can be studied like any other literature.

The significance of the writers we study lies, therefore, in the evidence they afford of how the Jewish spirit, nourished by the Bible, was constantly at work in explaining the Bible. For an accurate understanding of Biblical texts against their historical background we must turn to modern scholarship. But it is to our authors that we must go if we wish to discover how Biblical ideas became fruitful in Jewish life and thought. These men were far more engaged in trying to discover what the Bible means for them than to know what the Bible means in the abstract. This quest for relevance is an ongoing process, to be undertaken anew in each generation. But if we wish to undertake it we can learn much from the way in which our authors attacked a similar problem.

This leads us to a central theme discussed by practically all our commentators. Two terms are used by the Rabbis in connection with Scripture and its interpretation. These are: *Midrash* or *Derash* (from a root meaning "to inquire") and *Peshat* (from a root meaning "plain" or "simple"). The *Peshat* is the "plain meaning" of a verse, what it says on the surface. The *Derash* is the meaning read into the verse. The Rabbinic *Midrashim*, of which there are a large number, contain many thousands of examples of *Derash* (hence their name *Midrash*, plural *Midrashim*). Frequently *Derash* is far-fetched, at times consciously so, for the sake of dramatic effect. The main intention of *Derash* is generally to find a kind of peg in Scripture on which to hang an idea. For instance, we read in the book of Exodus chapter 13 verse 17 that when God led the people out of Egypt He did not lead them "by the way of the land of the Philistines." The *Peshat* of this verse is simply that God did not lead them by this route out of Egypt. But the *Midrash* disregards "of the Philistines" and reads: "God did not lead them the way of

the land," i.e., He did not lead them in a natural way but in a miraculous one. The "way of the land" is that bread comes from the ground and water from on high, whereas when God led the people in the wilderness He gave them manna from Heaven and water from the rock. He did not lead them "by the way of the land." Now obviously the Rabbi who put forward this novel interpretation must have known that it could not have been the real meaning of the verse. He knew this, yet he presented his *Derash* because he wished to read his idea into the verse. The problem is, however, complicated by the fact that laws of conduct are at times derived by the *Derash* method and since these are binding, the *Derash* cannot be ignored as harmless fancy or poetry. The Karaites, the anti-Rabbinic medieval literalist interpreters, in fact rejected many of the Rabbinic laws for this very reason. They could not find them directly stated in Scripture. Many of our authors, under the influence of the Karaites, acknowledged the legitimacy and urgency of the search for the *Peshat*. But since they were loyal to Rabbinic law they drew the line at a departure from the *Derash* and a return to the *Peshat*, where to remain with the *Peshat* would involve the rejection of a law based on the *Derash*. The whole problem will become clearer when the actual selections are studied. Here it may be said that the commentators can be divided into those who stress the *Peshat* and those whose fancy encourages them to turn to the sometimes implausible but poetic realms of *Derash*.

The names *pashtanim* and *darshanim* are used respectively for those who favor the *Peshat* method and those who favor the *Derash* method. Of the commentators studied in this book the division is roughly as follows: *Pashtanim*: Ibn Ezra, Rashbam, Kimḥi, Naḥmanides, Gersonides, Abravanel, Sforno, Malbim; *Darshanim*: Daat Zekenim, Ḥazzekuni, Jacob ben Asher, Arama, Alsech, Lunshitz, Ḥayim ibn Attar, Kalonymus Epstein. Combining the two methods are: Rashi, Baḥya ibn Asher and Baruch Epstein. However, there is considerable overlapping and one should speak of a general tendency rather than try to fit each of the writers into a neat category. Philosophical exegesis is favored especially by Gersonides, Arama, Abravanel, Sforno and Malbim. Mystical exegesis is favored by Naḥmanides, Baḥya, Ḥazzekuni, Ibn Attar and Kalonymus Epstein. Interest in philological detail is evinced especially by Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Rashbam, Kimḥi, Naḥmanides and Malbim.

Although it is advisable to study the book right through, the contents have been so arranged that any section can be studied on its own. Brief biographical notes are given at the beginning of each

section. For further information on the authors the articles in the standard Jewish encyclopedias should be consulted. The long article by W. Bacher, on Bible Exegesis, in the *Jewish Encyclopedia* is an excellent account of the history of Jewish Biblical interpretation. This book seems to be, however, the only attempt there is at providing the reader with actual texts from over 900 years of Jewish Biblical exegesis. The passages quoted have been chosen for their intrinsic interest and for the typical stance of each of the authors. It will help to have an English translation of the Bible at hand when studying a text. Moreover, since the commentators deal with words or phrases, it is a good idea to read through the Bible verses as a whole before going on to see how they were interpreted. It will be noticed that our authors often differ considerably from the standard English versions and where this happens the reason for it has been examined in the notes. It should be remarked that the King James version was greatly influenced in its renderings by some of our authors, particularly by Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Rashbam, Kimḥi and Naḥmanides.

Rashi

*“The Lord is my shepherd”
The judges and their duties
“The Prayer of Moses”*

Rashi (born Troyes in France in 1040; died there in 1105) is, many would hold, the greatest, and he is certainly the most popular, of all Biblical commentators. He is called Rashi after the initial letters of his name: Rabbi Shelomo ben Yitzhak (son of Isaac). Rashi wrote commentaries to most of the Biblical books, but best-known is his Commentary to the Pentateuch. This was first printed in Reggio in 1475 (incidentally, this seems to be the first Hebrew book ever printed). It has since been printed many times together with the text so that the term “Ḥumash and Rashi” has become part of the Jewish vocabulary. A later Derash playfully applied the curious name Parshandatha (Esther 9:7) to Rashi, taking it to mean parshan (“interpreter”) data (“of the Law”). Since Rashi’s Commentary to the Pentateuch has already been translated into English with helpful notes by M. Rosenbaum and A. M. Silbermann (London 1929), we offer here his comments on some of the Psalms.

A. “THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD”—PSALM 23

[1] “A Psalm of David.” Our Rabbis say that whenever it says “A Psalm of David,” it means that David first played on his harp and then the Divine Presence rested on him. A Psalm to bring the holy

spirit upon David. But wherever it says “Of David a Psalm,” it means that the Divine Presence rested on him first and then he sang. “The Lord is my shepherd.” I trust that I shall not want anything in this wilderness through which I journey. [2] “In green pastures.” In pastures where grass grows. Since he began by comparing his sustenance to that of an animal which feeds, as it is said: “The Lord is my shepherd,” he continues to play on the idea by speaking of “green pastures.” David sang this Psalm in the forest of Hereth (I Samuel 22:5). Why was it called “the forest of Hereth”? Because it was as dry as clay (*heres*) but God irrigated it from the good things of the world to come (Midrash to Psalms). [3] “He restoreth my soul.” My spirit dulled by misfortunes and flight he restores to its former state. “In straight paths.” In straight ways so that I do not fall into the hands of my enemies. [4] “The valley of *tzalmavet*.” A land of darkness. It refers to the wilderness of Ziph (I Samuel 23:14). Dunash ibn Labrat explains every instance of this word *tzalmavet* to mean “darkness.” “Thy rod and Thy staff.” The sufferings I have met with and the staff of trust in Thy mercy both afford me comfort. The sufferings will cause my sins to be forgiven and I have trust that Thou wilt prepare a table for me (verse 5), the table being that of kingship. [5] “Thou hast anointed my head with oil.” I have been anointed king at Thy command. “My cup runneth over.” This means the satisfaction of man’s needs.

Rashi first comments on the fact that sometimes in Psalms we find the heading Mizmor le-David (A Psalm of David) and sometimes le-David Mizmor (Of David a Psalm), as in Psalm 24. Now le-David can mean “to David.” The Rabbis observe that where the word mizmor is mentioned first, as here, David had to rouse himself before he could become inspired; he had to play on his harp before the holy spirit could be awakened. But when it says le-David first, this denotes that his inspiration came to him without effort. Rashi is very fond of quoting the Rabbinic Midrash although at the same time he pays proper attention to the Peshat, the “plain meaning” of the text on which he is commenting. Note how Rashi here understands the Psalm as referring to actual incidents in David’s life. In his comment to verse 2 Rashi quotes the Midrash to Psalms in which there is a play on the word Hereth as if it were written heres, which means dry clay. God made the desert fruitful by bringing down to us

some of the goodness of Paradise. In his comment to verse 4 Rashi understands the word *tzalmavet* (frequently rendered into English as “shadow of death”) as “darkness.” Most modern scholars accept this interpretation except that they point the word to read *tzalmut*. *Dunash ibn Labrat* was a tenth century grammarian and poet whom Rashi quotes frequently. Note Rashi’s clever interpretation of “rod” as the stick with which God had beaten David, referring to his sufferings, and the “staff” as David’s trust in God on whom he leans. In verse 5 anointing with oil is taken literally. David had been anointed with oil as the king of Israel (see *I Samuel 16:13*).

B. THE JUDGES AND THEIR DUTIES—PSALM 82

[1] “God standeth in the congregation of the judges.” To see if they render just decisions. Therefore, O ye judges. [2] “How long will ye judge unjustly?” [3] “Do justice.” If he (the afflicted) has right on his side, do not declare him to be in the wrong in order to “respect the persons of the wicked” (verse 2). [5] “They know not.” These judges who pervert justice. “Neither do they understand.” That because of their sin “They go about in darkness” and “all the foundations of the earth are moved.” [6] “Ye are godlike beings.” Angels. For when I gave you the Torah I made a condition that the angel of death would have no dominion over you. [7] “Nevertheless ye shall die like *adam*.” Like Adam, the first man, you too shall die since like him your ways have become corrupt. “And like one of the princes” of old, so shall you fall. But the Midrash understands it to mean “like one of the heavenly princes,” as it is said: “The Lord will punish the host of the high heaven on high” (*Isaiah 24:21*). [8] “Arise, O God.” Asaph (verse 1) began to pray that God should arise and cut off these corrupt judges from Israel. “For Thou shalt possess all the nations.” Therefore it is in Thy power to judge everyone.

Rashi translates verse 1 as “God standeth in the congregation of the judges” (el), hence the connection he draws between the verses. In verse 7 the Hebrew reads *ke-adam*, translated in English as “like men.” But Rashi takes it to mean “like Adam.” The reference is to a Rabbinic saying that although death had been decreed on Adam, yet God’s intention when He gave the Torah was for the decree to be cancelled for those who keep the Torah to live forever. But since

they had sinned, as did these corrupt judges, they are doomed to die as Adam did. Two explanations are given of "princes." One refers to the great princes of ancient times, the other to wicked angels. The idea of fallen angels is common in Jewish folklore and medieval thought. Milton makes use of it in his "Paradise Lost."

C. "THE PRAYER OF MOSES"—PSALM 90

[1] "A Prayer of Moses." The eleven Psalms from here to "A Psalm of David" (Psalm 101) were all composed by Moses and they correspond to the eleven blessings he gave to the eleven tribes as related in the portion beginning "And this is the blessing" (Deuteronomy 33:1). "Thou hast been our dwelling-place." A dwelling-place is a place where one can live and find refuge. "In all generations." and forever for Thou art before all else. [2] "Before the mountains were brought forth." Were created. And before "Thou hadst formed the earth and the world" and from the first world (*olam*) to the last world (*olam*) Thou art God. [3] "Thou turnest man to contrition." Thou bringest sufferings to a man until Thou makest him weak in power and near to death. "And sayest." To him through these sufferings, "Return, ye children of men." From your evil ways. [4] "For a thousand years in Thy sight." A thousand human years are equivalent to a day of the Holy One, blessed be He, together with a portion of the night ("and as a watch in the night"). For a day of the Holy One, blessed be He, together with a small portion of the night of the Holy One, blessed be He, is a thousand years. For Scripture does not say that a day of the Holy One, blessed be He, is a thousand years unless some of the night has been added to it and then there is a complete day and this is a thousand years. This is why Adam had to die before he had reached a thousand years (Genesis 5:5), for if he had lived a thousand years it would have been longer than a day of the Holy One, blessed be He (in which a thousand years is composed of a little of the night as well as the day). It is possible that the length of this "watch in the night" is that of the years which Adam lived (930) subtracted from a thousand years. We have no real information about the length of this "watch" but we can make a plausible guess. So have I found it written. "For a thousand years in Thy sight . . ." "When Thou didst at the beginning think of repentance Thou didst judge the matter correctly, creating repentance and the years proper to its effective-

ness. For at first the years of man's life were long (giving him time to repent) and Thou didst decide that a thousand years would be in Thy sight only as a day that has passed together with a small portion of the night. For Thou didst say to Adam: "In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Genesis 2:17), yet he lived for 930 years. It follows that a thousand years equal a whole day together with a small portion of the night. "Are but as yesterday when it is past." When it has gone by. [5] "Thou carriest them away as with a flood." But now Thou hast seized hold of these years and reduced them to a few days so that they seem only like a short nap. For the years of the generations are only seventy years, as it is stated later on: "The days of our years are three-score years and ten," and they are treated as if they formed one act of sleeping. As it is said: "When the Lord brought back those that returned to Zion, we were like unto them that dream" (Psalm 126:1). This refers to the seventy years of the Babylonian exile for they were in exile in Babylon for seventy years. *Zeramtam* (carried away) means "swept away" as in the expression: "The tempest (*zerem*) of waters floweth over" (Habakkuk 3:10). "In the morning it passeth away." One born during the night dies in the morning when his sleep is ended. But if [6] "In the morning it flourisheth," then it immediately begins to fade so that "in the evening it is cut down, and withereth." Why? [7] "For we are consumed in Thine anger." As if to say: Yet [8] "Thou has set our iniquities before Thee" and *alumenu*, that is, "the sins of our youth in the light of Thy countenance." *Alumenu* means "our youth" as in the verse (I Samuel 17:55) "Whose son is this youth (*elem*),?" "In the light of Thy countenance." Before Thine eyes to gaze at them. [9] "Are passed away in Thy wrath." They have become emptied and have passed away and have gone in Thy wrath. "As a *hegeh*." As a word that is soon spoken and done with. [10] "The days of our years are threescore years and ten." These days of our years and these sins of ours and these youthful sins of ours all total seventy years. "Or even by reason of strength." If by reason of great strength a man lives longer, yet his days are only "four-score years." "Yet is their pride but travail and vanity." All the greatness and power that a man has during these years are but travail and vanity. Why? Because "It is speedily gone (*gaz*), and we fly away." In anger we hasten to fly away and die. The word *gaz* means to pass away, as in the verse: "they shall be cut down (*nagozu*)

and he shall pass away” (Nahum 1:12), and as in the verse: “And brought across (*va-yagoz*) quails” (Numbers 11:31). [11] “Who knoweth the power of Thine anger?” In the few days he has who can acquire the heart to know the power of Thine anger and to fear Thee? “And Thy wrath is as Thy fear.” Just as Thou art feared, so is Thy wrath fierce to punish sinners. [12] “So teach us to number our days.” As at the beginning Thou didst make known that the number of our days would be long. If we knew that we would live long we would be able to acquire a heart and to “get us a heart of wisdom.” *Ve navi* (get us) means “to bring.” [13] “Return, O Lord.” From Thy fierce anger. “And let it repent Thee.” Think well of Thy servants. [14] “O satisfy us in the morning with Thy mercy.” On the day of the redemption and the salvation, which is the morning after all the misfortunes, the groaning and the darkness. “That we may rejoice and be glad all our days.” This means in all the misfortunes which happened to us in those days. [15] “Make us glad according to the days wherein Thou hast afflicted us.” In the days of our Messiah let us rejoice for as many days as the days in which we have been afflicted in exile and as the days in which we have seen evil. [17] “And let the graciousness of the Lord our God be upon us.” His Divine Presence and His consolations. “Establish Thou also upon us the work of our hands.” *Konamah* (Establish Thou) is in the verbal form used to suggest prayer, as in the forms *shamerah*, *shafetah*. The words “Establish Thou upon us” are repeated because one is a reference to the work of the Sanctuary, when he (Moses) blessed them that the Divine Presence should rest on the work of their hands in the building of the Sanctuary, and the other that there should be blessing on the work of their hands in general.

Note Rashi’s interesting interpretation of this Psalm as a plea to God to give us a longer span of years. Our life is too short. If only we could live longer, as man did at the beginning, we could acquire wisdom and we would not sin. The rest of our comments here follow Rashi verse by verse. 1. A skillful Midrashic note. There are eleven Psalms from here to Psalm 101, the next ten of which are not ascribed to any author, they are anonymous. So the Midrash ascribes them to Moses, the author of this Psalm. 2. Olam can mean “everlasting” (its original meaning) but also “world,” hence Rashi’s comment. 3. Note Rashi’s fine interpretation. Where does God say: “Return?” He “says” it when He brings sufferings to men. The

noble man sees in the sufferings God brings to him a "call" from God to him to lead a better life. 4. Rashi understands "and as a watch in the night" to mean that this portion of the night is counted together with the day the Psalmist has mentioned. The idea of a "day of God" is, of course, Midrashic. 5-6 Rashi translates: "In the morning it passeth away" (yaḥalof). 9. The usual English translation of hegeh as "a tale that is told" is not too different from what Rashi says. 10. Rashi's point here is that the Hebrew says: "The days of our years are with them (bahem) three-score years." Rashi understands this to mean the years together with the sins. 13. God cannot "repent," hence Rashi's paraphrase. 14. Note Rashi's fine comment on "be glad all our days" to mean that if we know that at the end of it all we shall find God's mercy, then even in our sufferings we shall rejoice. 17. The verbal form to which Rashi calls attention is known as the cohortative.

Ibn Ezra

How should the Bible be interpreted?

Why was Moses adopted by Pharaoh's daughter?

"Thou shalt not covet." How is this possible?

Did Moses write the whole of the Pentateuch?

Abraham ibn Ezra (died 1167), Spanish thinker and Biblical commentator, wrote one of the greatest of all commentaries to the Pentateuch, the Sefer Ha-Yashar, "Book of the Upright," as well as commentaries on the other books of the Bible. The Sefer Ha-Yashar was first printed in Naples in 1488 and has since been reprinted many times together with the text in various editions of the Pentateuch. The work has as its aim the understanding of the plain meaning of the text. Ibn Ezra has a cryptic style, often conveying elaborate ideas in two or three words, and this frequently makes it difficult to know exactly what it is that he is trying to say. A number of super-commentaries have therefore been written to explain his meaning.

A. HOW SHOULD THE BIBLE BE INTERPRETED?

The following is Abraham ibn Ezra's introduction to the Sefer Ha-Yashar. This is a most important document for the history of Biblical exegesis because in it Ibn Ezra describes four methods of interpretation which were used in his day and which he rejects and a fifth which he accepts. This introduction is written in rhyme but, of course, it is impossible to reproduce this in translation.

In the name of God, Great and Tremendous, I begin to expound the Torah. I pray Thee, O God of my father Abraham, do kindness to Thy servant Abraham. And let Thy words be a light to Thy servant,

son of Thy servant Meir (meaning "light"). And from the salvation of Thy face let help come to the son of Thy handmaiden who is called Ben Ezra (the family name). This is the *Sefer Ha-Yashar* of Abraham the poet. It is bound with the cords of grammar and improved by the eye of knowledge. Whoever lends it his support will be made happy.

The aforementioned Abraham the Sephardi declares that commentators to the Torah adopt one of five methods.

The first method is lengthy and diffuse, remote from the souls of the men of our generation. If we use the illustration of a circle and place the truth at its center point, then this method can only be compared to the periphery of the circle, which goes round and round only to return to the place where it began. Great men have adopted this method, among them the sages of the academies in the Arabic kingdom like Rabbi Isaac who compiled two whole books on the first section of Genesis up to "were finished" (Genesis 2:1) and he had still not finished, so diffuse was he. On the verse: "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3) he mentions those who believe in two gods, one of light, the other of darkness, but he himself walked in darkness without knowing it. When he came to comment on the verse: "The earth brought forth vegetation" (Genesis 1:12) he quoted foreign sciences. Rabbi Saadiah, Gaon of the Exile, trod this path. On the verse: "Let there be lights" (Genesis 1:14) he introduced the opinions of others, describing the movements of the heavenly bodies according to the views of the astronomers. The same applies to Rabbi Samuel ben Hofni who gathered wind in his fists when he came to comment on the verse: "Jacob left Beer-sheba" (Genesis 28:10). Here he mentioned at length each prophet by name and how many times each had gone into exile. Whatever value there is in knowing the travels of the prophets, the only value of this commentary is in its length. On the verse: "He had a dream" (Genesis 28:12), he wrote a treatise on dream interpretation and on what people see when they are asleep. If one wishes to study external sciences let him study them from the works of the experts in these matters and let him examine the proofs they offer and test if they are valid. The Geonim only quote from these works without recording any of the proofs offered. Some of them had no knowledge of the ancient sages and of their deductive methods.

It is not too clear to which Rabbi Isaac he alludes here. The "sages of the academies in the Arabic kingdom" are the Geonim (Excellences), the heads of the great academies at Sura and Pumbedita in what is now Iraq (and was then Babylon). Such a Gaon was Saadiah (882-942); another was Samuel ben Hofni (died 1034). Ibn Ezra puns on the latter's name which can mean a "fist." "Gathering the wind in his fists" is a verse in the Book of Proverbs (30:4). Note Ibn Ezra's strongly developed critical sense. For all the respect he has for these famous teachers, he derides their approach to Biblical exegesis. They are too diffuse. Instead of getting to the truth and coming to the point they go on about it and around it. A good commentator, says Ibn Ezra in so many words, should confine himself to the matter in hand and not introduce all kinds of interesting but irrelevant material. A comment on Jacob's dream is not the place for a detailed examination of dreams, nor is a comment on the verse dealing with the creation of sun, moon and stars the appropriate occasion for a lecture on astronomy. If someone wishes to study astronomy let him do so by reading the books the experts on the subject have written and not rely on ill-digested material quoted from astronomical works by Biblical commentators. So the first method, of which Ibn Ezra strongly disapproves, is that of cumbersome, irrelevant exposition. He now turns to the second method of which his disapproval is far more severe.

The second method is that chosen by the distorters, albeit they are Jews. They imagine that they have reached the very point of the circle but in reality they have not the faintest idea where it is to be found. This is the way of the Sadducees such as Anan and Benjamin and Ben Mashiah and Joshua and the way of whoever does not believe in the words of the bearers of religious tradition, turning from it either to the right or to the left. Each of these men interprets the Bible as he sees fit and this applies even to the commandments and the laws. Such persons are ignorant of the forms of the Hebrew language so that they are even guilty of grammatical errors. How can anyone rely on their opinions in connection with the precepts since at every moment they change their minds, going from one extreme to the other, because you will not find a single precept explained fully in the Torah itself. I shall give you only one example but it is of great significance, involving the penalty of *karet* with regard to eating on the Day of Atonement, eating leaven on Pass-

over and bringing the paschal lamb to the Temple when one is unclean. It involves, too, the seven rest days of the festivals, the festival sacrifices, the *sukkah* and blowing of the shofar. Nowhere in the Torah do we find rules governing the calendar, so how do we know the method of calculating the months? These castaways, poor in learning, rely on the verse: "they shall serve for signs and for the set times" (Genesis 1:14), but they are evidently unaware that "they shall serve" is in the plural and refers to both the luminaries and the stars. Furthermore, they argue that the "and" in the verse is superfluous, so that "for signs" is connected with "for the set times." But anyone who argues thus will only be defended by one biased by friendship. Even though we do find a superfluous "and" in two or three places in Scripture, how do we know that this is one of them since the number of necessary "ands" runs into thousands? The meaning of "Who appointedst the moon for seasons" (Psalms 104:19) is not as these whose loins totter (Psalms 69:24) would have it. Even if Scripture had said: "And the moon shall be for a sign for the set times" (which it does not), who will give us the sign that the reference is to the sacred set seasons of the Lord? For there are numerous references to set times in the Pentateuch, the Prophets and the Hagiographa (i.e., not to sacred set times) and if the reference were to the set seasons of the Lord, Scripture would have stated this explicitly.

The most powerful challenge to Rabbinic Judaism in the Middle Ages came from the sect of the Karaites (from the root kara, "to read," i.e., those who read Scripture as it stands while rejecting all the Rabbinic interpretations). Ibn Ezra calls them here Sadducees, but this is the name of a much older sect which flourished in the period of the Second Temple, though many of the ideas of the Sadducees reappear later in the writings of the Karaites. Ibn Ezra as a staunch Rabbinic Jew takes the strongest exception to the second method of Biblical interpretation, that of the Karaites. This ignores entirely all that the Rabbis had taught by tradition and tried to discover unaided the meaning of the Biblical verses. Thus the Karaites believed that they were right at the center of the circle since they tried to discover the meaning of the Biblical texts without any pre-conceived notions. Ibn Ezra retorts that without traditions many of the Biblical verses are obscure. It is impossible to know what they mean unless we rely on the tradition of the Rabbis, which, Ibn

Ezra believed, goes back ultimately, as the Rabbis say, to Moses himself who received the Torah from God. (There are still a few Karaites left, some of them in the State of Israel, and these still follow the Karaite interpretations of the laws). Ibn Ezra mentions here four prominent Karaite teachers: Anan ben David (middle of Eighth Century); Benjamin ben Moses Nahawendi (Eighth-Ninth Centuries); Hassan ben Mashiah (Ninth or Tenth Century); Joshua ben Judah Abu Al-Faraj Furkan (middle of the Eleventh Century). Ibn Ezra proceeds to show how the Bible is unintelligible without the traditional interpretation. Karet means to be “cut off,” understood by the Rabbis as a kind of decree of death by God. This is the penalty stated in the Pentateuch for a number of offenses which have to do with the festivals, e.g., eating on the Day of Atonement, eating leaven on Passover, bringing the paschal lamb, in Temple times, in a state of impurity, i.e., when one had been in contact with a corpse. There are moreover seven restdays of the festivals in the Pentateuch, i.e., the first and last days of Passover and Tabernacles, the day of Pentecost, the day of the New Year (Rosh Hashanah) and the Day of Atonement, and there is the duty of eating in the sukkah (the tabernacle) on the festival of Tabernacles and of blowing the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. All these, of significance also to the Karaites since they are all mentioned explicitly in Scripture, depend on a knowledge of the Jewish calendar—for if we do not know how to work out the calendar we do not know when any of the festivals fall. Now, argues Ibn Ezra, we know the calendar by Rabbinic tradition, but what do the Karaites do in the absence of any such tradition? They must perforce rely on the Scriptural verses themselves, but there are no detailed descriptions of the calendar in the Bible. Ibn Ezra knows that the Karaite reply to this is the verse in Genesis which means, as they understand it, that one calculates the calendar according to the movements of the moon. The Karaites read the verse: “They (the moon) shall be for signs (for a sign) for the set-times.” Ibn Ezra objects that, first, the plural is used so that the verse must refer to sun, moon (the “luminaries”) and stars and not to the moon alone. Secondly, the verse does not say “for signs for the set times” but “for signs and for the set times” (the Hebrew letter vav is used for “and”). The Karaites reply that the vav is superfluous. Now Ibn Ezra does admit that here and there in Scripture one does find a superfluous vav, but such a thing is very unusual and unless there is clear evidence to the contrary one must interpret every vav as necessary since the necessary vav occurs in thousands of instances, while the superfluous vav is exceedingly

rare. A further point Ibn Ezra makes is that in the absence of tradition the Karaites have no evidence that "set times" means the festivals, since this term is used frequently in Scripture for all manner of purely secular occasions. Ibn Ezra now embarks on a lengthy but brilliant astronomical refutation of Karaite views on the calendar. We have omitted this as too technical and beyond the scope of this book. Ibn Ezra concludes this part of his introduction by repeating that we must rely on tradition and that therefore any exposition of the Bible which claims to be authentic must take the Rabbinic tradition into account. We take up the argument with Ibn Ezra's refutation of the third method.

The third method is a way of darkness and obscurity. It lies entirely beyond the circle. This is the method of those who invent mysterious interpretations for all the passages in Scripture. It is their belief that the Torah and the precepts are riddles. I shall not spend much time in refuting this thoroughly confused method. The words of the Torah are never less than straightforward. In one thing only are these people right. This is that every precept of the Torah, whether great or small, must be measured in the balance of the heart into which God has implanted some of His wisdom. Therefore if there appears something in the Torah which seems to contradict reason or to refute the evidence of our senses then here one should seek for the solution in a figurative interpretation. For reason is the foundation of everything. The Torah was not given to men who cannot reason and man's reason is the angel which mediates between him and his God. It follows that wherever we find something in the Torah that is not contrary to reason we must understand it in accordance with its plain meaning and accept it as saying what it seems to say, believing that this is its true meaning. We should not grope about as the blind in the dark grope for the wall. Why should we understand as mysteries things which are perfectly clear as they stand? Even though there are instances where a verse has two meanings, both of which are clear, one referring to the body and the other to the mind, such as "circumcision of the flesh" and "uncircumcised of heart," and even though the narrative of the tree of knowledge, for instance, can only be understood in a figurative sense, yet in these instances the figurative meaning is evident on the surface. It may be that the meaning

is not too evident but will become clear when the wise man opens his eyes to see more deeply into the text. For even certain organs of a man's body have more than one function such as the nostrils, the tongue and the two legs.

The third method with which Ibn Ezra takes issue is that of the allegorists. These refuse to understand the Torah literally, but argue that beneath the surface there are mysteries and secrets which they try to uncover. For instance, the story of Abraham sending away his maidservant Hagar is interpreted by Philo to mean not what it says but to be a figurative way of stating that the perfect man must send away his desire for worldly things. Ibn Ezra considers such a method to be unreasonable. It has nothing to do with the text and is way out beyond the circle. If nothing is what it seems in Scripture, then the human reason has no part to play in the interpretation of Scripture. Note Ibn Ezra's remarkable definition of the human intellect as the angel which mediates between him and his God. In one thing only are the allegorists correct, continues Ibn Ezra. This is that there are some Scriptural passages which cannot possibly be taken literally. Here the figurative interpretation is certainly called for. For instance, the story of the tree of knowledge seems to cry out for a figurative interpretation since one does not "eat" knowledge. Also the Biblical references to "circumcising the heart" can hardly have been intended literally. But in these instances the figurative interpretation is the plain meaning of the verse and can clearly be seen as such. But, argues Ibn Ezra, we have no right at all to take verses which are perfectly clear in the literal meaning and interpret them allegorically.

The fourth method is near to the point. A whole group of commentators have followed it. This is the method pursued by the sages in the lands of the Greeks and Romans who are not overmuch concerned with a balanced view but rely on the homiletical method such as is found in the works *Lekah Tov* and *Or Enayim*. But if we already have Midrashim in the works of the ancients, what purpose can the later authors have in simply repeating them? Actually we find that frequently one Midrash contradicts another. Other Midrashim have to be understood figuratively, not literally, such as the Midrashim saying that the Torah existed two thousand years before the world was created. This is perfectly true, but only if understood figuratively. Many do not understand it in this way, but

it can hardly be taken literally. This is because a year is composed of days and the measurement of days and minutes depends on the sphere—so how could there have been a day, to say nothing of two days or a year or two thousand years, before the creation of the sphere?

The Rabbinic Midrashic method frequently uses the Scriptural text merely as a peg on which to hang certain ideas. The concern of the Midrash is not so much with the text itself as with the ideas that can be read into it. The word Midrash is from the root darash, “to investigate,” i.e., to uncover various layers of meaning in the text. But this method is homiletical; that is to say, it is the method of a preacher who uses his text with the primary object of teaching his listeners ideas valuable in themselves to be sure but not necessarily conveyed by the text. The “lands of the Greeks and Romans” are the countries of Christian Europe. Ibn Ezra traveled widely throughout his life and was familiar at first hand with Jewish life in different communities. Lekah Tov and Or Enayim are late collections of earlier Midrashim. Ibn Ezra feels that there is not much point in having such collections, since those who wish to read Midrash can avail themselves of the earlier Midrashic collections. Ibn Ezra is not opposed to the Midrashic-homiletical method as such. He remarks here that it is near to the point at the center of the circle. But he argues that this method should be seen as a rather fanciful attempt to read ideas out of the text, as a kind of poetry rather than a true exposition of the Bible. We find, for instance, that Midrashim frequently contradict one another so that they cannot all be true. Some Midrashic ideas cannot possibly be taken at their face value. For instance, there is a Midrashic saying that the Torah existed for two thousand years before the world was created. Ibn Ezra argues that this is a piece of poetry, it has to be understood figuratively, e.g., that the world is based on the truth of the Torah and so forth. But it is quite impossible to take literally the idea of two thousand years before the world came into being. Ibn Ezra speaks here in terms of the astronomical knowledge of his day in which the heavenly bodies were seen as attached to a great “sphere” which revolved around the earth. We have a different picture today, but his argument is not affected. Time, in the sense of days, years, hours and minutes, is measured by the movements of the sun and the earth so how can one possibly speak of “two thousand years” before there was a world at all? We omit the rest of Ibn Ezra’s consideration of the fourth method because it is highly technical.

Briefly, what he does is to quote further Midrashim which are fine as poetry but become absurd if taken too seriously. For example, the very first letter of the Torah is bet. The Midrash remarks that this is because the word for "blessing," berachah, begins with a bet. God created the world with His blessing. Quite a pleasant idea, but if taken literally it is ridiculous since, as Ibn Ezra points out, there are numerous Hebrew words which begin with a bet and yet express the exact opposite of any idea of blessing. Ibn Ezra concludes this section: "The end of the matter is that there is no end to the homiletical method." He has now described four methods: 1) That of lengthy exposition of irrelevant topics; 2) The literal exposition of the Karaites which rejects Rabbinic tradition; 3) The method of the allegorists which strays far from the plain meaning; 4) The Midrashic-homiletical method. Ibn Ezra finds all four inadequate and he now turns to the fifth method which he finds sound and which is the one he adopts in his Commentary.

My Commentary is based on the fifth method. This is the method that seems right to me in the presence of the Lord. Him alone do I fear and in matters concerning the Torah I shall show no favoritism. First I shall investigate with all the power at my command the grammatical form of each word and then I shall explain its meaning to the best of my ability. You must look for the explanation of each word in the place where that word first occurs. For instance, you will find my comment on "heaven" in the first verse of Genesis. This is the method I shall adopt. I shall not refer to the reasons given by the traditional scholars why a word is sometimes written in full and sometimes defectively, since all they have to say is merely homiletics. It simply happens to be the case that Scripture sometimes writes a word in full and sometimes omits an unpronounced letter for the sake of brevity. If they persist in giving a reason for full and defective spellings, perhaps they would be good enough to teach us how to rewrite the Scriptural books. Moses, for example, writes: *Yimloch* ("the Lord shall reign," Exodus 15:18) without a *vav* whereas the editors of the book of Proverbs write the same word with a *vav* in the verse: "For a servant when he reigneth" (Proverbs 30:22) and the lapse of time between Moses and the editors of Proverbs was of many years. The reasons given by the traditionalists are all right for children. Also a correct interpretation does

not involve any textual emendation. The Targum of the Torah in Aramaic is accurate. The author of this work explains every difficulty for us. Even though he is addicted to the Midrashim we recognize that even more was he devoted to the true sense of the Hebrew language. It is only that he wished to add further reasons since the plain meaning can be grasped even by the stupid. For instance, he does not render the word *iroh* (Genesis 49:11) as “foal” but in terms of “building the city” and he renders *atono* (ass’s colt) in the same verse in terms of “the gate of the entrance” to the Temple (Ezekiel 40:15). The plain meaning of a verse is not affected by its Midrashic interpretation for there are seventy faces to the Torah. But in connection with the laws, rules and regulations, where there are two differing interpretations of a verse and one of them is in accord with the views of the bearers of the tradition (the Rabbis), all of whom were righteous men, then with all the strength we have we must rely on the accuracy of what they say. God forbid that we should have anything to do with the Sadducean claim that the tradition contradicts Scripture and grammar. It is rather the case that our ancient teachers were true and all their words true. May the Lord God of truth lead His servant in the way of truth.

Ibn Ezra says that he will allow no favoritism, that is, he will be critical of other commentators when he feels that they do not do justice to the text. Ibn Ezra’s point about full and defective texts is this: In Hebrew the vowels are not written in the scrolls, only the consonants, but some consonants serve as vowel letters. The letter vav, for example, frequently serves as an indication that the “o” sound is to be pronounced. It sometimes happens that these vowel letters are omitted as not really necessary. When a word is written in “full” it contains the vowel letters. When it is written “defectively,” it is written without the vowel letters. Why is a word written now in one way and now in another? Ibn Ezra believes that this is not a legitimate question. It just happens to be the case that there is no consistency in spelling. Those who recorded Scripture simply did not concern themselves with this matter and their choice of whether a word is to be spelled full or defectively was purely arbitrary. Consequently, the efforts of the “traditionalists” to give in each instance a reason for that particular spelling is futile. Some of their “reasons” are pleasant homiletics and they provide an innocent amusement for children but, Ibn Ezra suggests, for the mature student it is all a waste of time. He proves this by referring to the

word yimloch, written one way by Moses and another way by the editors of Proverbs. Now here surely, he argues, the search for consistency is ridiculous since so much time had elapsed between Moses and the editors of Proverbs. It is as if someone today would try to discover a clever reason why Shakespeare spells "colour" with a "u" and in the United States it is spelled "color" without the "u." There is no "reason." It simply happens that the spelling has changed over the years. Moreover, the search for consistency will at times demand that a word spelled one way in the scrolls should be altered to another, whereas the "correct interpretation," i.e., Ibn Ezra's, does not involve any textual emendation. In Rabbinic times the Torah was translated into Aramaic so that people could understand it, Aramaic being their normal, everyday tongue. The Aramaic translation that has come down to us from those days is called the Targum (translation). Ibn Ezra is impressed by the translator's great accuracy and knowledge of Hebrew, even though he is very fond of the Midrashic tradition. For instance, he feels obliged at times to give a less obvious interpretation, as he does when he interprets a verse dealing with a "foal" and an "ass's colt" as referring, in fact, to the building of the Temple (taking iroh to mean "his city"—Jerusalem). There is no great harm in this since the Torah does have seventy "faces," i.e., each verse, say the Rabbis, can be interpreted in no fewer than seventy different ways. But the plain meaning must never be lost sight of except where to accept the plain meaning would contradict a law as handed down by the Rabbinic tradition. If we followed the plain meaning even here, we would be like the Karaites whose opinion Ibn Ezra has previously attacked. Thus Ibn Ezra's method involves a keen search for the plain meaning of Scripture, aided by a sound knowledge of Hebrew grammar and the Hebrew language.

B. WHY WAS MOSES ADOPTED BY PHARAOH'S DAUGHTER?

The thoughts of God are so deep, who can know the mysterious way in which He moves? By Him alone are all actions weighed. It is possible that God brought it about that Moses would be raised in the royal palace so that his soul would be able to attain to a high degree through education and study there provided and he would not have the base, ignoble soul of those raised among slaves. You see that Moses slew the Egyptian (Exodus 2:12) when the latter had been guilty of oppression and Moses also saved the daughters of Midian from the shepherds (Exodus 2:15-19) when the shepherds

aggressively used the water the girls had drawn from the well. There is a further possible reason. If Moses had been brought up among his own brethren, who would then have known him from his infancy, they would have had no respect for him, looking on him simply as one of themselves.

Ibn Ezra is fond of psychological observations. Moses, as the future leader of Israel, had to be given an aristocratic training to equip him to fight oppression and not to be servile to the aggressors. Furthermore, familiarity breeds contempt. The Israelites required a leader whom they could respect and so he had to be one of them and yet not one of them. What was required was a prince who was at the same time a brother.

C. "THOU SHALT NOT COVET" (EXODUS 20:14).
HOW IS THIS POSSIBLE?

Many people are puzzled by this commandment. How is it possible for a man not to desire in his heart whatever is pleasant to his eye? I shall now give you an illustration. Imagine a peasant of intelligence who sees a beautiful princess. His heart has no desire to live with her for he knows such a thing to be quite impossible. He is not a lunatic who, though he knows it to be impossible, longs to have wings to fly in the sky. No man has a desire to marry his mother, even if she is a beautiful woman, for she has trained him from his infancy to know that she is forbidden to him. In the same way every sensible person must know that a beautiful wife or wealth are not provided for a man by his wisdom and knowledge but are apportioned to him by God. As Ecclesiastes says: "shall leave it for his portion" (2:21) and as the Rabbis say: Children, life and sustenance do not depend on a man's merit but on his good fortune. Consequently, the wise man will not covet or desire something that belongs to his neighbor. Since he knows that God has forbidden to him his neighbor's wife, she becomes even more remote to him than the princess to the peasant. That is why such a man will rejoice in what he has and it will never enter his head to covet or desire something that does not belong to him. He appreciates that since God does not want him to have it, no matter how much he uses power or plans or schemes he will be unable to obtain it. So he will trust in his Creator to sustain him and will only do that which is good in His sight.

An interesting understanding of the tenth commandment. The problem is how can the desires of the heart be controlled, how can a man help himself from coveting the wife or the property of another man? Ibn Ezra replies that a man only desires that which he believes he can attain. The psychological motivation of coveting is that a man believes that if he tries hard enough he can get that which he wants so badly even though it does belong to his neighbor. But the man of faith, with complete trust in God, will lack the psychological motivation to covet. For such a man has come to see that no matter how much skill he exercises and how subtle his schemes, he can never get that which God has given to someone else. God in His wisdom gives to each person that which He wants to give. It is not a matter of "merit" but of each person having his God-given "portion." Thus the tenth commandment is, for Ibn Ezra, a command for a man to have trust in God, to be the kind of person who is so convinced that he can never have that which God has allotted to his neighbor, that he has no desire to attain it any more than a sane person has a desire to fly with wings or a peasant to marry a princess.

D. DID MOSES WRITE THE WHOLE OF THE PENTATEUCH?

Comment on the verse: "These are the words which Moses spoke unto all Israel beyond the Jordan" (Deuteronomy 1:1). The difficulty here is that if, as the tradition holds, Moses wrote the whole of the Pentateuch including this verse, why did he call the side of the Jordan on which he stood "beyond the Jordan"? This expression only makes sense to someone writing in Israel, which Moses never entered. This would appear to suggest that some parts of the Pentateuch were written after Moses. Ibn Ezra accepts this, but because it is a very radical departure from the tradition he remarks on it only by hint. This interpretation of Ibn Ezra is given in the fourteenth century commentary to Ibn Ezra written by Joseph Bonfils (Zaphnath-paaneah, Heidelberg, 1911) and, centuries later, by Spinoza. It was also understood by the Sixteenth Century historian Azariah de Rossi (Maor Enayim, Vol. 11 ed. Cassel, p. 324) who takes Ibn Ezra to task for daring to make such a suggestion. Some commentators have, however, given the passage a more orthodox interpretation, e.g., that Moses was transported across time when he wrote certain parts of the Pentateuch, so that he wrote as one observing the events at a later period, but it is unlikely that this is what Ibn Ezra meant.

Beyond the Jordan If you understand the secret of the twelve, and of “And Moses wrote,” and of “And the Canaanite was then in the land,” and of “In the mount where the Lord was seen,” and of “Behold his bedstead was a bedstead of iron,” you will discover the truth.

The secret of the twelve probably refers to the last twelve verses of the Pentateuch (Deuteronomy chapter 34). These describe how Moses went up to die on the mountain and he did not come down again so that he could not have written this chapter. The words “And Moses wrote” (Exodus 24:4; Numbers 33:2; Deuteronomy 31:9) suggest that someone other than Moses wrote the words “And Moses wrote.” “And the Canaanite was then in the land” (Genesis 12:6) suggests that they were no longer in the land when this was written, but in Moses’ day they were still there. “In the mount where the Lord is seen” (Genesis 22:14) is understood as referring to the Temple which had not yet been built in Moses’ day. “Behold, his bedstead was a bedstead of iron” (Deuteronomy 3:11) speaks of the bedstead of the giant Og, king of Bashan, who was slain by Moses toward the end of the latter’s life, while the words seem to imply that the bedstead was pointed out as an exhibit in the equivalent of the local museum long after Og had been dead. It is because of passages such as this scattered through his commentaries that Ibn Ezra is sometimes said to be the forerunner of modern Biblical criticism, that is the literary analysis of Scripture in order to determine who wrote what and when he wrote it.