

RBL 01/2006



Carasik, Michael, ed. and trans.

The Commentators' Bible: The JPS Miqra'ot Gedolot: Exodus

Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2005. Pp. xix + 349. Hardcover. \$75.00. ISBN 0827608128.

Adele Berlin
University of Maryland
College Park, MD 20742

Accessibility is the by-word of *The Commentators' Bible (CB)* as it makes available in intelligible English most of the contents in *Miqra'ot Gedolot*, the Rabbinic Bible. More than that, by retaining elements of the *Miqra'ot Gedolot* format, the biblical text surrounded by medieval commentaries, the volume (*Exodus* is the first volume of the series to be published) offers more than just a translation; it aims to convey the experience of reading the medieval work. At the same time, the experience is a quintessentially modern one, thanks to Michael Carasik's judicious selection, explanatory additions, and transparent English rendering. The juxtaposition of the medieval and modern is immediately evident as one moves from the book's cover, an imitation of an old European-looking brown leather binding with gold-embossed border decorations characteristic of the Jewish publication of holy books for several hundred years, to the list of Frequently Asked Questions on page xi. The effect is one that I would liken to traversing a medieval labyrinth holding a global positioning device. My own set of FAQs will structure this review.

1. What's in this volume?

The biblical text in Hebrew (based on the Leningrad Codex) lies in the center of the page, surrounded by translation and commentary. The Targums, *Onqelos* and *Yonatan ben*

Uziel, have been replaced by the old JPS and the NJPS translations. The exegetes most fully represented are Rashi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, and Nahmanides. Abarbanel's questions are also presented but not his answers. Some of those answers, along with excerpts from the Masorah and other exegetes from *Miqra'ot Gedolot* (Bekhor Shor, Kimhi, Hizkuni, Gersonides, and Sforno), are presented in "Additional Comments" at the bottom of the page.

2. Is this really the same as *Miqra'ot Gedolot*?

Not exactly. It is both less and more. First, the format is certainly easier to read than the traditional format, with its hard-to-read fonts, so-called Rashi script, and minimal punctuation. *CB* gives us readable fonts, good spacing, and clear markings, making it easy to follow. Some readers may be confused by the right-to-left order of the pages, following Hebrew practice, but that has become standard in JPS commentaries. Some traditionalists may be put off by the fact that, while the page format imitates *Miqra'ot Gedolot*, it does not reproduce it exactly. Every page in *CB* is in the same format, with Rashi always on the left side, while in more traditional publications facing pages are in mirror-format, with Rashi always along the center seam of the binding. But the exigencies of modern publication make keeping that older page pattern impractical, and it has already been abandoned in more recent printings of *Miqra'ot Gedolot*, most notably in the new Hebrew critical edition, *Miqra'ot Gedolot Haketer*.

As for the contents, we have already noted above how that differs from standard *Miqra'ot Gedolot* editions, if one can speak of a standard, since the inclusion and placement of various commentators is not uniform. Certainly the "big four" in all editions are those included here. Other commentaries often found in *Miqra'ot Gedolot* are either relegated to brief notes or not mentioned at all. But that does not diminish from the project, since it is not aiming to be complete. Omitted from the main commentaries are explanations already evident from the Bible translations, comments of one exegete cited by another, uncontroversial grammatical points, and Hebrew synonyms. Some long discussions are condensed or rearranged. Ibn Ezra's commentary has been revised, combining parts of his long commentary with his short commentary. Carasik adds his own explanations as needed. For more about the contents, see FAQ 4.

3. Who should read *CB*?

CB is not intended to be a critical edition or a primary source for scholarship. References are made to a few resources for further study and to other English translations of the four included commentaries. *CB*'s purpose is to provide a non-Hebrew-reading audience with easy access to the world of medieval Jewish commentary—and in this it succeeds

marvelously. The primary audience would seem to be synagogue study groups and the like, but my guess is that students and even scholars will use *CB* as a convenient entrée into the study of medieval *parshanut*, an area of growing interest in biblical studies. University and seminary libraries should acquire it, as should synagogues, rabbis, and interested non-Jewish clergy.

4. How good is the translation?

This is not the place to discuss translation theory at length. I would only note that, while much has been written about Bible translation, little has been said about the translation of biblical commentary. Carasik articulates his position in a short section on “Principles of the Translation” (xvii–xviii). His main assumption is that “the commentators are rewriting their original comments today, in contemporary English, for readers who do not know Hebrew” (xvii). Carasik did not want to produce a translation that was as obscure as the original, like, for example, the Soncino translation of the Talmud, which leaves the modern reader grasping for the meaning of terms and the significance of references, since it offers no explanation of rabbinic lingo and thought processes. Carasik’s translation lets the reader make the cultural leap into the world of medieval Jewish exegesis, as filtered through Carasik and the two JPS translations.

The result is that the medieval commentators appear to be commenting not on the Hebrew text but on the JPS translations. Usually it is the NJPS, unless it makes more sense to use the JPS, which tends to be, in Carasik’s words, “closer to the Hebrew.” A related point, a bit disconcerting, is that, in addition to the commentator’s voice and, as Carasik warns us (xiii), the commentator’s appropriation of the voice of God or Moses in the biblical text, we also hear Carasik’s voice explaining the commentator and/or the translation.

For example, Exod 3:2 says that in the burning bush episode an angel appeared to Moses **אש בלבת אש**, rendered as “in a blazing fire” (NJPS) and “in a flame of fire” (JPS). The lemma used for Rashi’s comment is NJPS, the default for lemmas. Carasik cites Rashi as saying: “Literally, in the heart of the fire.” This is a slightly abbreviated form of Rashi’s comment, in which he gives the meaning of the phrase as “flame” but explains the phrase literally as “in the heart of the fire.” A typographical error has Ibn Ezra’s comment on the same phrase preceded by a lemma from JPS, “a flame of fire.” Ibn Ezra’s position is essentially the same as Rashi’s; he rejects the interpretation that the phrase is an elided form of **אש בלהבת אש**, “in a flame of fire,” in favor of construing it as it is written, “in the heart of a fire.” Carasik presents Ibn Ezra’s comment as follows (15–16; it is abbreviated and combines the long and short commentaries of Ibn Ezra, as Carasik stated in his introduction):

Rather, “in the heart of the fire.” Following the standard interpretation, NJPS translates as if a ה has dropped out of the word, and *labbah* is simply *lahabah* (“flame”). But this cannot be. For ה is never a vowel letter except at the end of a word, and it cannot simply “drop out” of the middle of a word. What I think is that it is a form of the word “heart.” There is a comparable form, *libbah*, in Ezek. 16:30.

Whose voice are we hearing in this comment? I hear Carasik, not Ibn Ezra, explaining the NJPS, and that prompts me to puzzle over where Carasik’s voice ends and Ibn Ezra’s continues. But Carasik intends for us to hear Ibn Ezra explaining the NJPS. That is what it means to say that “the commentators are rewriting their original comments today, in contemporary English.” The question is: How should the modern translator represent his commentators, given that they are here basing their comments on a translated text, a text that needs sometimes to be explained because it obscures a problem in the Hebrew? (A second criticism of this example: Why single out NJPS when both JPS translations interpret the Hebrew exactly the same way, albeit in different words. They both read להבת for לבת.)

This is but one example of how difficult Carasik’s enterprise is and how many pitfalls may be encountered along the way. Despite my critique of this example, there is some benefit in Carasik’s stance as a translator who acts rather like a medium, letting the voice of the dead speak through his own voice. The benefit is that the voice becomes a living voice, intelligible to the modern listener/reader, rather than a dead Hebrew voice speaking in a dead English voice. This being Carasik’s goal, I judge his effort eminently successful. He has achieved it through a combination of literal translation, paraphrase, and insertion of editorial comments. He has become a tour guide, leading his readers on a journey through the foreign land of *Miqra’ot Gedolot*. Those unfamiliar with this land, or unequipped to travel in it alone, should take the Carasik tour into a classical Jewish text. Even with this guide there are some steep hills to climb and some rough roads to follow, for the terrain is not easy to navigate. But the scenery is magnificent and the people are charming. Enjoy the trip!

A final observation: *CB* is not only a scholarly phenomenon; it is part of a social phenomenon called “traditionalizing.” This is the term used by sociologists of the American Jewish community to refer to the adoption and adaptation of traditional practices by nontraditional Jews (and sometimes non-Jews as well). Thanks to *CB*, not only can nonbelieving and nonlearned persons read traditional medieval Jewish exegesis; they can now reenact in a modern mode the experience of reading the commentaries in the manner in which traditional Judaism has read them.