

# HISTORICAL BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP – INTER-DISCIPLINARY

**The Conference “From Theodulf to Rashi” – Heidelberg, 4th – 7th September 2011.**

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The only grey cloud cast over the conference was when it rained on the visit to the Jewish cemetery in Worms on the first day of the conference. Apart from that, the conference “From Theodulf to Rashi – Uncovering the Origins of European Biblical Scholarship” exceeded the expectations of both the organisers (Johannes Heil and Hanna Liss, both of the Center for Jewish Studies, Heidelberg as well as Sumi Shimahara, from the Sorbonne) and of those participating.

At the same time, the results of this coming together of Hebraists and Classicists, look, at first glance to have been modest: Questions were raised, differences noted and observations were made. No radical theses were proposed, no great discoveries were made, nor had any been announced in the run-up to the conference. This notwithstanding, why did this working conference of 26 experts from the field of the historical study of the bible and biblical exegesis meet with such a positive response?

Naturally, it lay initially in the fact that Classicists and Hebraists from Europe, Israel and the USA came together directly with one another to discuss their work for the first time. Looking back, this is something which they would all have gladly done much sooner, as topics were discussed in Heidelberg, which had always remained unresolved, and it was demonstrated that everybody had the same questions. However, topics came up which are possibly better addressed in inter-disciplinary discussion.

The choice of topics naturally guaranteed that the conference would be a success.

“From Theodulf to Rashi” must, however, have appeared absurd, if classic disciplinary boundaries were adhered to, but the topic was perfectly obvious, as long as it was understood in terms of a specific time and place. With their concerns about the accuracy of the biblical text and commentaries on the biblical books with the aim of a suitable understanding of the text within their own intellectual spheres, both Jewish and Christian scholars have been

involved in what was specifically characteristic to Western Europe. The biblical text and interpretation of it were the starting point in European scholarship. The importance of biblical revision and the establishing of schools of biblical study during the reign of Charlemagne (d.814) and his successors - long termed the Carolingian Renaissance - has for some time been unanimously recognised.

That this was soon joined by the Jewish side, in the heartland of this educational movement, the area between the Loire, Burgundy and Champagne with centres in Orleans, Auxerre and Troyes, and reached its first concrete high point with R. Shelomo ben Jitschaqi (Rashi) of Troyes, has until now been overlooked. Jewish 'contributions' to the school of St Victor (12th century) or to the work of Nicholas of Lyra (d. 1349 in Paris) have simply been noted.

In contrast to this, the conference started by discussing the case of the assistant of Theodulf of Orlèans (d. 821) who had a good knowledge of Hebrew and was possibly Jewish and who recorded reading variations between the Latin and Hebrew texts with the aim of revising the biblical text. Likewise, the conference participants discussed the case of the anonymous commentary in Latin on Kings and Chronicles, (*Quaestiones in libris regum et paralipomenon*), that Hrabanus Maurus (d.856) made use of, and of which a 9th century manuscript from Rheims clearly states that its author was Jewish and that, "in many ways deviates from the Catholic doctrine". Who were these 9th century Jews who knew Latin and who left occasional traces in the bible commentaries of the school of Auxerre behind them?

What can be concluded from their contribution about the developing Latin-speaking culture of Western Europe and about Jewish scholasticism in a still developing Ashkenaz before the time of Rashi?

Was there, however, common ground between rabbinic Jews, Karaites and Latin-speakers in terms of their grasp of the biblical text and its commentated understanding, beyond the common interest in the provision of an indisputable biblical text? When compared to the historical and often excessively typologically orientated writings of Latin exegetes, Rashi's philological commentaries and those of his successors, which were focussed on the tightening of certain rabbinical traditions, might suggest a negative answer, the negative stereotyping of Jews in Christian commentaries being disregarded for once.

Furthermore, modern scholars on Latin exegetical literature came to recognise, almost painfully so, that the *hebraica veritas*, had only existed in their heads as a fiction. Hebrew philology at the latest from the 11th century onwards, and the period of philological-lexicographical textual stabilisation which started at this point have caused their idea on Latin

reception of the Hebrew biblical text a serious setback. The recognition, that the Jewish side also struggled to establish a standard text of the Bible, and that textual fluctuation caused problems also to the Jewish side, has until now, still not made it onto the agenda of Modern Latin scholarship. On the other hand, the fact that French was the common language for all contact between Christian scholars and Jews, which bound both groups either side of the religious divide together culturally, has been acknowledged to an insufficient extent.

However, there was common ground above at the conference, where both medieval scholarly circles were considered in regard to their grasp of dealing with traditional heritage. A formal comparison of Rashi with the compilers of the 10th/11th centuries appears to be forced as it were. Rashi's so-called locus classicus of his commentary technique (on Gen 3,8) has until now above all been read against the background of interpretation according to the simple meaning of a word (*peshat*). With Rashi, however, it is not a case of a new method of biblical interpretation, rather of the literary re-formation of the classical rabbinic sources. He saw his task as being to reorganize the programme of teaching, in that a selection of Midrash literature is presented in a way which enables the student to determine the relatedness of the Bible and the Midrashic material. It also has to do with the question of interpretation on the basis of rabbinic *auctoritas* and its relation to its own *ratio*. What was new was therefore a new way of dealing with the old. The order of priority is still clear: the *auctoritas* of rabbinic literature was still completely unchallenged. With this, at least Rashi moved throughout the methodical framework of medieval Christian *magistri*.

The means and techniques Jews and Christians read the Bible did not, therefore, correspond to one another but rather complemented each other, with the aim of delineating opposing sides and providing internal reassurance. In this, Western European biblical scholarship expressed itself contrapunctually, not with similarities but with dialectical correspondence. During the conference, the current state of prospective research networks which could be expanded in the future was referred to or put forward for discussion.:

Without question: the conference's success was not in the findings it produced but rather in the seriousness of the questions asked. Further meetings will take place but in the meantime, there is also a network of contacts, which continues exchange between participants and other interested parties. At the same time, every classicist now has a personal *hebraeus meus* / *hebraea mea* whom they can fall back on, while the Hebraeists, for their part, found their appropriate *magister meus* / *magistra mea*.

The first step has been taken and above all, the presence of young up-and-coming scholars at the meeting in Heidelberg may be taken as a good sign.

*Next year in . . .*