

Abraham Ibn Ezra's Non-Literal Interpretations

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Ibn Ezra is regarded as one of the great champions of the literal interpretation of Scripture. In the introduction to his commentary on the Pentateuch, he examines five approaches to Biblical exegesis. The first four, which he rejects, are: (a) long comments that seem never to end and are interwoven with elements unrelated to the text, (b) anti-halakhic interpretations offered by heretics, (c) allegorical interpretations of the commandments, and (d) midrashic interpretations. The fifth method, the one chosen by Ibn Ezra, is to grammatically and philologically analyze a verse, to place it in context and explain it according to its plain meaning.

Furthermore, Ibn Ezra argued that logic should play a role in interpreting a text. Hence he rejected any explanation that flies in the face of reason. Among the interpretations that he rejected is the notion that Isaac was 37 at the *akedah*;¹ that Isaac died and was resurrected;² that Jacob did not lie when he said to Isaac: "It is I, Esau, your first-born";³ that Yocheved was one hundred and thirty years old when she give birth to Moses;⁴ that Yocheved outlived Moses;⁵

¹ Ibn Ezra on Gen. 22:3.

² Ibid. v. 19.

³ Ibid. 27:13.

⁴ Ibid. 46:23.

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that the words *shamor* and *zakhor* were uttered simultaneously;⁶ and that Moses wrote the final twelve verses of Deuteronomy.⁷

Ibn Ezra often differed with the Rabbis of the Talmud regarding the plain meaning of the text in instances when it did not have halakhic implications. His motto was, if an interpretation offered by the Rabbis was based on tradition, then he would accept it. If not, then he had his own opinion.⁸ Whenever Ibn Ezra stated the latter, one can be certain he believed the interpretation with which he disagreed was not based on tradition and that his own opinion was preferred to that of the Talmudic or midrashic sage.

In cases that had halakhic import but were not in keeping with the plain meaning of the text, Ibn Ezra still maintained that the law transmitted by the Rabbis was true in and of itself, but that the Sages had used the biblical verse under discussion as a means of transmitting the halakhah.

For example: The Rabbis rule that the verse “Be fertile and become many” (Gen. 1:28) is a command to have children.⁹ According to Ibn Ezra, the rabbinic interpretation of the above verse is not in keeping with its plain meaning. He believes that “Be fertile and become many” is a blessing and not a command. Ibn Ezra goes on to say that there is indeed a command to have children. However, it is not derived from Gen. 1:28 but is a law known from tradition. The Rabbis merely used Gen. 1:28 as a means to transmit their tradition.¹⁰

Scripture prohibits boiling a kid in its mother’s milk (Ex. 23:19). According to the Talmud the aforementioned verse prohibits boiling any kosher meat in milk. However, according to Ibn Ezra Scripture prohibits only boiling a kid in its mother’s milk. All other prohibitions of boiling and eating meat and milk are of rabbinic origin.¹¹

Scripture states: *ולא תענה על רב לנטות אחרי רבים להטות* (Exodus 23:2). The Rabbis interpret *לחרי רבים להטות* to mean, legal disputes are to be resolved in accordance with the majority opinion of a legally

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibn Ezra on Ex. 20:1

⁷ Ibn Ezra on Deut. 14:1.

⁸ Ibn Ezra on Gen. 22:4.

⁹ *Yevamot* 65b.

¹⁰ Ibid. 1:26.

¹¹ Ibn Ezra on Ex. 23:19.

constituted court of law.¹² Ibn Ezra argues that this ruling is not based on the plain meaning of the verse. He argues that the word *le-battot* always means to pervert, and thus *אחרי רבים להטות* means following a majority to pervert justice. He implies that the Sages merely used this text as a sign by which to remember the above-noted halakhah.¹³

In Leviticus it states:

כי כל אכל חלב מן הבהמה אשר יקריב ממנה אשה ליי ונכרתה הנפש האכלת מעמיה (ויקרא ז:כה).

According to the Rabbis, *אשר יקריב ממנה* refers to the fat of any kind of beast that men may present as an offering. In other words, the fat of any animal that is permitted to be offered as a sacrifice is prohibited.¹⁴ According to Ibn Ezra, however, the verse prohibits only the fat of an animal that was actually brought as a sacrifice. In other words, the Torah permits the fat of animals slaughtered for meat.¹⁵ Ibn Ezra makes his point in a controversy he had with a Karaite.

According to the Rabbis the fat tail of a sheep is permitted. However, the Karaites prohibited the fat tail. They accused the Rabbis of violating the Biblical injunction against eating fat. Ibn Ezra countered that if we follow the plain reading of Scripture, then we may eat not only the fat tail but all fat, for the Torah prohibits only the fat of an animal that was actually sacrificed to God. Now the prohibition of eating fat was so inbred into Karaite practice that no "orthodox" Karaite would eat it. The Karaite had no choice but to admit that the rabbinic tradition must be followed if the law concerning the prohibition to eat fat was to be maintained. Ibn Ezra's encounter with the Karaite is recorded in his commentary to Lev. 7: 20:

A Sadducee once came to me and asked me if the Torah prohibits the fat tail. I answered and said, it is true that the fat tail is called "fat" (*chelev*), for the Torah states, *חלבו האליה תמימה* (Lev. 3:9).

¹² *Sanbedrin* 2a.

¹³ Ibn Ezra on Ex. 23:2.

¹⁴ *Torat Kobanim* 141.

¹⁵ Ibn Ezra on Lev. 7:20.

Our ancients, however, prohibited all fat but permitted the fat tail.¹⁶

The Sadducee then answered: Does not the Torah prohibit all fat? It is written, “you are not to eat fat or blood” (Lev. 3: 17), which is preceded by “it shall be an eternal law for all your generations” (ibid.). I once again responded to him: This verse relates to the peace offering. The clause “it shall be an eternal law for all your generations” does not provide complete proof, for observe Scripture states, “Until the day that you bring this sacrifice to your God, you may not eat bread, roasted grain or fresh grain” (Lev. 23:14). Now Scripture there writes, “This shall be an eternal law for all generations” (ibid.). Shall we then not eat bread in the Diaspora for we have not brought the *omer* offering?

He on his part replied: “Any fat of ox, sheep, or goat you shall not eat” (Lev. 7:23). I too responded and told him that this verse too refers to a peace-offering. “But anyone who eats the hard fat of any animal of which is offered to God” (Lev. 7:25) excludes the fat of all flesh that is not offered as a peace-offering, i.e., all non-sacred flesh. Scripture therefore states in our chapter, “But the fat of that which died of itself, and the fat of that which is torn of beasts, may be used for any service; but ye shall not eat of it” (Lev. 7:24). It is known that the flesh of that which died of itself, and of that which is torn of beasts are prohibited. It is the flesh that is prohibited. Now since the fat is not offered on the altar, one might think that it is permitted. Hence Scripture warns that you shall not eat of it. It is for this reason that Scripture does not mention the blood. This chapter was written to explain the punishment incurred by one who eats the fat of holy flesh. The verse relating to “any blood” (Lev. 7:27) was similarly written to add that the blood of fowl is prohibited. The fat of fowl is therefore permitted. Scripture’s statement in Deuteronomy with regard to meat eaten out of desire that is non-sacred meat (Deut. 12: 15-25) is total proof to what I say, for Scripture states that non-sacred meat may be completely eaten. Only its blood is excluded in three places. Fat is totally unmentioned.

The Sadducee then opened his eyes and uttered an oath with his lips to the effect that he will never rely on his opinion when it comes to explaining the commandments. He will rely only on the tradition transmitted by the Pharisees.

¹⁶. Ibn Ezra on Lev. 7:20.

Ibn Ezra's response to the Karaite incensed Nahmanides, for it contradicted rabbinic tradition. According to Rabbinic law, eating fat entails the punishment of *karet*.¹⁷ Furthermore, if it was done inadvertently one is obligated to offer a sin offering. It is thus clearly a Biblical law. However, according to Ibn Ezra, eating fat from a non-sanctified beast is only a rabbinic prohibition. Nahmanides believed that in asserting that ordinary fat is biblically permitted, Ibn Ezra was straying further from tradition than the Karaites, for the latter at least admitted that fat was Biblically prohibited.¹⁸ Nahmanides argued that the Rabbinic interpretation of Lev. 7:25 is in reality the plain meaning of the verse.

Ibn Ezra similarly argues that if we pursue the plain meaning of Scripture without the tradition of the Rabbis, then fish that are found in ponds (*agammim*) are prohibited, for Scripture specifies that only fish that are found in "the seas and the rivers" may be eaten.¹⁹

According to Ibn Ezra's reading of Scripture, a non-Jew residing in the land of Israel is prohibited from working on the Sabbath²⁰ and Yom Kippur.²¹ He must similarly fast on Yom Kippur.²² A non-Jew residing in the land of Israel is also enjoined from eating the flesh of an animal that dies of itself. According to the Talmud all of the above are permitted to a non-Jew living in the land of Israel.

Ibn Ezra took the Talmudic adage *en mikra yotze mi-peshuto* to its logical conclusion. Though respected and quoted by all the major commentators who came after him, he was often vehemently criticized for his independent approach to the plain meaning of the text.

We have already seen that Ramban accuses Ibn Ezra of straying further from tradition than the Karaites with regard to the prohibition of eating "*chelev*." Similarly, Rabbi Jacob Baal Ha-Turim claimed that Ibn Ezra's pursuit of the plain meaning of the text "caused him to argue with the Talmudic sages."

Rabbi Shelomo Luria charged that Ibn Ezra was not conversant with the Talmud and out of ignorance ascribed Torah laws to the

¹⁷ Mishnah *Keritot* 1:1.

¹⁸ Nahmanides on Lev. 3:4.

¹⁹ Ibid. 11:19.

²⁰ Ibn Ezra on Ex. 20:8.

²¹ Ibn Lev. 16:23.

²² Ibid. 17:14.

Talmud and Rabbinic laws to the Torah. He condemned him for overruling the opinion of the Rabbinic sages. He charged that Ibn Ezra's interpretations gave comfort to the Karaites and other heretics.²³

In view of the above, it is startling to discover that Ibn Ezra's commentaries contain much more than a literal interpretation of Scripture. His comments are often based on astrology, numerology, magic, and philosophy. They are often far from the plain meaning of the text.

Ibn Ezra claims that the ephod worn by the high priest was an astrological instrument.²⁴ He similarly explains the *terafim*. He hints that the flood resulted from an evil convergence of the heavenly bodies, and that Noah waited seven days each time he sent out the dove, because Noah observed the "watches."²⁵

Ibn Ezra claims that the Tetragrammaton has numerical significance. *Yod* equals ten. Ten is a variant of one, which is the foundation of all numbers. He further argues that *heh* and *vav*, which are equivalent to 5 and 6, are important numbers because they are intermediary between 1 and 10.²⁶

Ibn Ezra quotes an opinion with apparent approval that nine of the statements of the Decalogue correspond to the celestial spheres. He writes:

One of the wise men of this generation said: We know that nine spheres correspond to the nine numbers that are the basis of all numbers. It is the same with these nine statements.

The first statement, which corresponds to the glory of God the Revered who speaks, is not included among the nine statements, for it is the first of the ten in number.

The second statement, which is "Do not have any other gods before me..." (Ex. 20:3), corresponds to the highest sphere, which moves from west to east and propels the other spheres to make a twenty-four hour east-to-west circuit in contrast to its own motion. It is in reference to this sphere that Scripture states, "other gods." It says this to let us know that the spheres are run by the power of

²³ *Yam Shel Shelomo*, Introduction to *Chullin*.

²⁴ Ibn Ezra on Gen. 7:4

²⁵ Ibid. 8:5.

²⁶ Ibid. Ex. 3:15.

God. Many considered this sphere to be the Creator because it is incorporeal.

The third statement, namely, "Do not take the name of God your Lord in vain" (Ex. 20:7), corresponds to the sphere of the constellations wherein are all the hosts of heaven, with the exception of the seven moving stars. Now this important sphere encompasses all the forty-eight bodies and their forms. God's power is there revealed to the eye. There are places in this sphere that contain many stars. There are other places in it that have no stars. It is impossible for a man to know this secret. Many of those deficient in wisdom think that these forms in their arrangement were created in vain. The astrologers tell us that each one of the moving stars has a certain day in the week when its power is manifest.

The fourth statement, the statement about the Sabbath, corresponds to the sphere of Saturn. The astrologers tell us that each one of the moving stars has a certain day in the week in which its power is manifest. The star is the dominant power the first hour of the day. The same is true concerning the star that is the dominant power in the first hour of the night. They say that Saturn and Mars are harmful stars. Hence harm befalls anyone who begins any work or sets out on a journey when one or the other dominates. The sages therefore said that permission was given for harming on Wednesday night and on the eve of the Sabbath. Now we do not find these two "demons" ruling night and day, back to back, on any other day of the week except for Saturday. It is therefore unfit for one to occupy himself on Saturday with everyday matters. On the contrary, one should devote himself on this day to the fear of God.

The fifth statement, namely, "Honor your father and mother," corresponds to the sphere of Jupiter, which indicates peace, righteousness, mercy, and the obligation to reward and honor those to whom we owe a debt of gratitude.

The sixth statement, "Do not commit murder," corresponds to the sphere of Mars, which points to bloodshed and wounding.

The seventh statement, namely, "Do not commit adultery," corresponds to the sphere of Venus, the nature of which points to all acts of intercourse and harlotry...

The eighth statement, namely, "Do not steal," corresponds to the sphere of the sun and indicates force. It removes the power of any planet that is in conjunction with it so that its light is not seen.

The ninth statement, namely, “Do not testify as a false witness...” corresponds to the sphere of Mercury, which indicates language.

The tenth statement, namely, “Do not be envious...” clearly corresponds to the sphere of the moon, which is the lowest of the spheres. It indicates desire.²⁷

Ibn Ezra’s commentary contains many philosophic comments that, while interesting and important in and of themselves, stray far from offering a plain meaning of the text.

Thus Ibn Ezra explains that there are three worlds: an upper world of the intelligences, an intermediate world of the heavenly spheres, and a lower sub-lunar world of creation and decay.²⁸ He discusses the makeup of the human soul and notes that there are three souls in man: vegetative, animal and rational.²⁹

Not only do some of his commentaries not explain the plain meaning of the text, but they themselves are cryptic and have been a source of controversy among students of Ibn Ezra. Thus in commenting on Gen. 1:26 Ibn Ezra notes, “God is the One. He is the creator of all. He is all. He fills the universe.” Some have taken this to mean that Ibn Ezra was a pantheist.³⁰ Others maintain that Ibn Ezra merely believed that God is immanent in the world. Be the latter as it may, this comment has nothing to do with the literal meaning of Gen. 1:26.

Psalms 1:6 reads: “For the Lord knows the way of the righteous; but the way of the wicked shall perish.”

In his comments on Psalms, Ibn Ezra writes:

“There is no doubt that the revered God knows the whole and the particulars. The whole is the soul of all life that animates all created beings. The particulars refer to each one of the species. The particulars also refer to each and every individual creature of the species, for they are all the work of His hands. However, the knowl-

²⁷ Ibid. 20:12.

²⁸ Ibid. Long Commentary 3:15.

²⁹ Ibid. *Kobelet* 7:3.

³⁰ See Isaac Barzilay, *Yoseph Shlomo Delmedigo, Yashar of Candia*, p. 276, “[Ibn Ezra believed that] He is the world... there is nothing besides Him... Everything is He Himself”; Stephen Wylen, *The Seventy Faces of Torah*, p. 174.

edge of each individual, be he righteous or wicked, is by way of the whole.”

This comment seems to limit Divine Providence for the individual. This is the way Rabbi Hasdai Crescas³¹ and Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook understood the above.³² Others have tried to reconcile Ibn Ezra's comment with normative views on God's providence. Here too, as important as the comment is for the study of Jewish philosophy, it is far from being an interpretation of the plain meaning of the text.

A plain reading of 1 Samuel indicates that David committed adultery with Bath-Sheba and saw to it that her husband died in battle.

Late one afternoon, David rose from his couch and strolled on the roof of the royal palace; and from the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, and the king sent someone to make inquiries about the woman. He reported, “She is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam [and] wife of Uriah the Hittite.” David sent messengers to fetch her; she came to him and he lay with her—she had just purified herself after her period—and she went back home (2 Samuel 11:2-4).

Ibn Ezra argues that David did not commit adultery with Bathsheba. He claims that Bathsheba “was not really a married woman” when David had intercourse with her.³³

The Prophet Nathan accused David of murdering Uriah: “You have put Uriah the Hittite to the sword; you took his wife and made her your wife and had him killed by the sword of the Ammonites.” Despite this Ibn Ezra claims that David “was not a murderer... for David did not order that Uriah be put to death.”³⁴

Another example: It would appear from Numbers 12:1 that Miriam and Aaron were angry at Moses for marrying a Cushite woman. After confirming this reading, Ibn Ezra suggests that Moses' siblings were angry with him not because he married a Cushite woman, but because he refrained from having sexual relations with

³¹ *Or Adonai*, 2.

³² *Orot Ha-Kodesh; Musar Ha-Kodesh*. See also I. Husik, *A History of Mediaeval Jewish Philosophy*, Jewish Publication Society: Philadelphia, 1940, p. 193; Ibn Ezra's comments on Gen. 18:21 and Nahmanides' ad loc.

³³ Ibn Ezra on Ps. 51:2.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 16.

his wife, Zipporah. He writes that Miriam and Aaron suspected that Moses refrained from being intimate with Zipporah because she was not beautiful. The reality, according to Ibn Ezra, was that Moses refrained because he was in constant relation with God. Ibn Ezra approvingly quotes the Talmudic Rabbis who, with regard to the sages, said: “Happy are they, but woe to their wives.”³⁵

The question arises, how did Ibn Ezra reconcile his commitment to the plain meaning of the text with his clearly non-literal interpretations?

One might argue that Ibn Ezra was inconsistent. However, this argument does not hold. A person is inconsistent once, twice, three times. There are simply too many non-literal interpretations in Ibn Ezra’s commentaries to explain his inconsistencies.

It seems that Ibn Ezra differentiated between the plain meaning of the text and taking the text literally. In other words, a text is to be explained according to rules of Hebrew grammar, philology and context. After this is done the verse can, if necessary, be explained philosophically, scientifically³⁶ or midrashically. However, one must distinguish between the plain meaning and the other modes of interpretation. One is never to mistake *aggadat midrash* for *pesbat*, philosophy for *pesbat* or halakhah for *pesbat*.

The aforementioned can clearly be demonstrated by a difference in opinion between Ibn Ezra and Saadia Gaon regarding the interpretation of Psalm 2:4.

Psalm 2:4 pictures God as sitting in heaven and laughing at those who take counsel against Him and His anointed. Scripture states:

He who is enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord mocks at them.

The image of God sitting and belly laughing in heaven presented a problem to the medieval bible commentators. They could not take this verse at face value. Thus in commenting on this verse Ibn Ezra writes:

God created all bodies, that is, (all) matter and form... God whose name alone is exalted, is beyond being made of matter. He is certainly above all accidents.³⁷

³⁵ Ibid. Num. 12:1.

³⁶ In most cases it means astrologically.

³⁷ Ibn Ezra on Ps. 2:4.

In other words, God neither sits nor laughs. Saadia Gaon tried to diffuse the image of God as laughing by rendering “He who is enthroned in heaven laughs” as “He who is enthroned in heaven will make His enemies objects of scorn.”³⁸

Ibn Ezra could not accept Saadia’s translation, for it does violence to the grammatical construction of the text. *Yischaq* (laughed) can not be interpreted as “will make them objects of scorn.”

Ibn Ezra’s solution is to render this text according to its plain meaning. He does not distort the image that it paints. However, neither does he take it literally. He writes:

“It is only because the one who speaks is human, and likewise the one who hears, that the Torah spoke in the language of men so that the one who hears will understand. They thus attributed human form to the earth. Hence we read, “And the earth opened her mouth” (Num. 16:32); “from the thighs of the earth” (Jer. 25:32, 31:8, 50:41).”³⁹

In other words, Psalms 2:4 is to be read according to its plain meaning. However, it is not to be taken as a description of actual reality. It is a metaphor.

Chapter 1 of Genesis describes the world as resulting from God’s word: “And God said let there be light” (Gen.1:3).

The idea of God speaking, like that of God laughing, presented a problem for medieval Jewish thinkers.

Rabbi Saadia Gaon interpreted “And God said” to mean, and God wanted.⁴⁰

Ibn Ezra quotes Rabbi Saadia’s opinion but disagrees with the Gaon. He argues that Rabbi Saadia’s interpretation contradicts the rules of Hebrew grammar. He argues: if *va-yomer Elohim* means And God wanted, then Scripture would have read *va-yomer Elohim li-boyot or*, not *va-yomer Elohim yebi or*. He argues that *va-yomer Elohim* in *va-yomer Elohim yebi or* must be rendered, “and God said: Let there be light.”

Ibn Ezra then goes on to answer the philosophical problem presented by the verse by noting that “Scripture describes creation as coming about by God’s word because it wants to teach us that

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Gen. 1:3.

heaven and earth came into being without any labor on God's part. We may compare this to a king assigning certain tasks to his servants.⁴¹

Genesis 6:6 reads, "And it repented the Lord that he had made man, and it grieved Him at his heart." This verse is, of course, grossly anthropomorphic.

Ibn Ezra notes that there are those who argue that *va-yinnachem* should be rendered as "set a time." They also say that "His heart" refers not to the heart of God but to the heart of the prophet."⁴² Ibn Ezra rejects this interpretation. He argues:

"If this were the case, Scripture should not have read: and it grieved *at* (el) His heart. Secondly, where do we find a prophet called "a heart"?"⁴³

Ibn Ezra deals with the problem of anthropomorphism presented by this verse by noting that "The Torah spoke in the language of men... if a human being acted the way God did, destroying his creation, it would be said of him that he repented. God is similarly said to be happy when his creatures benefit from his acts of kindness."⁴⁴

Ibn Ezra's point of view should be contrasted with that of Maimonides. Maimonides, like all of the medieval Jewish thinkers, was faced with the problem of Scripture's use of anthropomorphisms.

Maimonides claims that the anthropomorphic terms have one or more meanings. He classifies them as *shemot meshutafot* (homonyms) or *shemot mushalot* (hybrids). He catalogues these terms and shows that they have a non-physical as well as a physical meaning. He then applies the former to all Biblical verses that speak of God in human terms.⁴⁵ For example: According to Maimonides, the term "to descend" means both to go down and to manifest. He maintains that the term "*va-yered*" has this meaning in Scripture when it refers to God."⁴⁶

Hence, when Scripture states, "And the Lord came down upon Mount Sinai" (Ex. 19:19) it literally means, God's presence was mani-

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid. 6:6.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ *Guide for the Perplexed* 1:1.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 1:10.

fest on Mt. Sinai. Thus according to Maimonides, the metaphoric meaning of an anthropomorphic term becomes the literal meaning of the text. Not so according to Ibn Ezra. The verse has to be understood literally, that is, the Lord came down on Mount Sinai. After we explain the verse literally it can then be interpreted philosophically.

Ibn Ezra did not totally reject midrashic interpretations. He believed that there is a place for them. What he opposed was taking the midrashic interpretation for the literal meaning.

According to Ibn Ezra, some midrashim were composed for the unsophisticated. He offers the example of a bird that cannot fly during the day, for the sunlight is too bright for its eyes.⁴⁷ Ibn Ezra implies that there are people that are not ready for the unabashed truth.

For Example: Scripture tells us that following the death of the matriarch Rachel, "Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine (Gen. 35:22)." According to the Talmud, Reuben did not actually sleep with Bilhah. He merely removed Jacob's bed from Bilhah's tent and placed it in Leah's tent.⁴⁸ Rashi explains Reuben's actions as follows:

When Rachel died, Jacob took his bed, which up to now had been placed in Rachel's tent and not in the other tents, and put it in Bilhah's tent. Reuben came and demanded that his mother's humiliation come to an end. He said, "If my mother's sister was a rival to my mother, should my mother's sister's handmaid now also be a rival to my mother?"⁴⁹

Ibn Ezra comments as follows: "Our sages explained this verse beautifully; *for a prudent man concealeth shame* (Prov. 12:16)."⁵⁰ In other words according to Ibn Ezra, the Rabbis wanted to preserve Reuben's reputation. Hence they put a positive spin on Reuben's act.

Ibn Ezra's real opinion as to what Reuben did is given in his *Yesod Mora*, where Ibn Ezra explicitly says that after Bilhah was defiled, Jacob never again had intercourse with her.⁵¹ If Ibn Ezra really believed that Reuben had merely removed Jacob's bed from Bilhah's

⁴⁷ Ibn Ezra, introduction to his commentary on Pent.

⁴⁸ *Sabbath* 55b.

⁴⁹ Rashi on Gen. 35:22.

⁵⁰ Ibn Ezra on Gen. 35:22.

⁵¹ *Yesod Mora*, 7. Ibn Ezra seems to say the same thing in his comments on Gen. 49:4.

tent, then it makes no sense to speak of Bilhah as defiled and unfit to sleep with.

It is worthy of note that Ibn Ezra does not quote the midrash regarding Reuben's indiscretion with Bilhah. He only alludes to it. I would venture to opine that Ibn Ezra could not bring himself to quote an interpretation that does violence to the literal meaning of the text, for *and lay with* does not mean "and moved her bed."

It is quite possible that Ibn Ezra was playing the role of the *prudent man who concealeth shame* when he said that King David did not commit adultery with Bathsheba and did not murder Uriah. He may have felt that, if there was ever a case for a midrashic interpretation, this was the palace. If Ibn Ezra really believed that King David did not sin with Bathsheba and was not guilty of murdering Uriah, then he was contradicting himself, for in his commentary on the Decalogue Ibn Ezra explains *lo tinaf* (thou shalt not commit adultery) as referring to any prohibited sexual act⁵² and *lo tirtzach* (thou shalt not murder) as also referring to indirect murder.⁵³

In his introductory poem to his commentary on the Torah, Ibn Ezra wrote:

"This Book... composed by Abraham the poet is bound by ropes
of grammar. The eyes of the intelligent will find it fit."

"The eyes of the intelligent will find it fit" indicates that Ibn Ezra's commentary is aimed at the "intelligent." In other words, Ibn Ezra does not intend only to give the literal meaning of the text; he also intends to interpret the Torah in keeping with reason, for Ibn Ezra held that a person's mind is the angel that mediates between man and God. In other words Ibn Ezra's commentary aims at two things: a. to give the plain meaning of the text; and b. to explain the Torah in keeping with reason.

Ibn Ezra believed that all commandments of the Torah have a reason. He notes that in many cases the Torah gives a reason for the commandments. In other cases the reason is obvious. However, there are commandments that have no apparent reason.⁵⁴ Rabbi Saadia Gaon referred to the last as mitzvot *shimiyot*, traditional laws.

⁵² Ibn Ezra on Ex. 20:13.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 20:1.

Some Rabbis believed that the mitzvot *shimiyot* have no reason. They were given to Israel to observe and to be rewarded for, by God, for their observance.⁵⁵

Ibn Ezra believed that there is a reason for all the mitzvot of the Torah and if we search hard enough we can discover the reason for them.⁵⁶

Ibn Ezra believed that many things in the Torah require scientific interpretation.⁵⁷ Thus in his comments on Gen. 1:16 he writes: "One may ask, do not the astronomers teach that Jupiter and all the stars, with the exception of Mercury and Venus, are larger than the moon? Why then is it written "the great lights"?"⁵⁸

According to Ibn Ezra, the luminaries are not in the firmament, but in the spheres above it. Nevertheless Scripture says, "And God set them in the firmament of heaven" (Gen. 1:17), because they appear to be there.⁵⁹

Ibn Ezra believed that astrology was a valid science. He believed that it was the key to unraveling the ways of God. He held that "One who knows the ways of the spheres knows the mind of the Most High."⁶⁰

According to Ibn Ezra, many of the esoteric commandments of the Torah can be explained by astrology. He felt that he had an obligation to do so for the enlightened. Thus in his comments on Ps. 19:2 Ibn Ezra writes: "This is a very important Psalm. It deals with the heavenly apparatus. I will now briefly explain it. However, only one who has studied the science of the stars will understand my explanation."

The above explains the many astrological interpretations found in Ibn Ezra's commentary that to the modern mind seem extremely far-fetched. It also explains the many philosophical comments that, while interesting in themselves, have in reality nothing to do with explaining the plain meaning of the text.

⁵⁵ *Sefer Ha-Emunot Ve-Hade'ot*, 3.

⁵⁶ Ibn Ezra, Long Commentary on Ex. 20:1.

⁵⁷ *Yesod Mora* 1:6.

⁵⁸ Why does Scripture describe the moon as a great light?

⁵⁹ Ibn Ezra on Gen. 1:14.

⁶⁰ Ibn Ezra on Ps. 19:2.

In conclusion, Ibn Ezra's commentary on Scripture is far from being a mere literal interpretation thereof. It is a literal interpretation augmented when necessary by philosophy, astrology, and even midrashic interpretations. In fact Ibn Ezra's commentary on the Pentateuch was not only studied for its biblical exegesis, but it served as a textbook of Jewish philosophy.⁶¹ Though at first glance it might seem far-fetched to compare Ibn Ezra's commentary with Rashi's commentary, for they greatly differ in their interpretation of the plain meaning of the text, they do share a common ground. Rashi aimed to explain the plain meaning of the text and then to offer its midrashic meaning; Ibn Ezra aimed at giving the plain meaning of the text and then explaining it philosophically. What they have in common is that both did not limit themselves to the plain meaning of the text. For a commentary that more or less aims only at a literal interpretation of the text of Scripture, one must turn to Ibn Ezra's contemporary, Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir (Rashbam). ❧

⁶¹ Uriel Simon, "Interpreting the Interpreter" in *Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra: Studies in the Writings of a Twelfth-Century Jewish Polymath* (ed. Isadore Twersky and Jay M. Harris, 1993) p. 111.