

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

*What does “Miqra’ot Gedolot” mean?*

“Miqra’ot Gedolot” is a Hebrew expression meaning something like “Large-Format Bible” or, more colloquially, “The Big Book of Bible.” The famous “Second Rabbinic Bible” of R. Jacob b. Hayyim (1525) was a Miqra’ot Gedolot.

*What do you mean “a” Miqra’ot Gedolot? Are there more than one?*

Absolutely. There are “Miqra’ot Gedolot” to the Torah or Pentateuch, to the *Megillot* (the Five Scrolls), and to the other biblical books as well. Moreover, the same biblical book can appear in different versions: “Miqra’ot Gedolot” refers to the format, not the contents.

*So what is the Miqra’ot Gedolot format?*

It consists of the Hebrew biblical text in large print; a “Targum” or translation of the text (in rare cases more than one); and commentaries on the text, often accompanied by explanatory notes. That’s why we have titled this English version *The Commentators’ Bible*.

*Which translation is included in this Miqra’ot Gedolot?*

We have included two translations: the old Jewish Publication Society translation of 1917 and the new JPS translation of 1985.

*Why include both?*

Both were translated by the preeminent Jewish biblical scholars of their day, but the OJPS is more literal and the NJPS freer and more readable. More importantly, the purpose of the Miqra’ot Gedolot is to help explain difficulties in the biblical text. Because translators are often forced to pick a single one of several possible explanations of what the Hebrew text means, comparing two different translations is the best way for someone who doesn’t know Hebrew to judge whether there is a difficulty in the original text. Having two translations should also remind you that it is the Hebrew text that is the “real” Bible, not any particular English version.

*Which commentaries are included?*

We have included the most prominent commentaries of the medieval period—those of Rashi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, and Nahmanides—with explanatory notes as well as selected additional comments from other commentators of that era. See “What’s on the Page?” below for biographical information about all the commentators.

*Is this the first time these commentators have been translated into English?*

The four main commentators have all been translated into English before.

*Then why are you translating them again?*

Previous translations were either made for scholars, assume a high level of Hebrew knowledge, or are literal and difficult to follow.

*So this is a free translation?*

Yes. First of all, remember that in their original work the commentators quote and comment on the Hebrew text. In this version, they quote instead the NJPS translation and, if they disagree with it, supplement it with the OJPS or with their own understanding of the meaning. Also, since most of us today do not have as thorough a grounding in Jewish sources as did the Hebrew readers of the original commentaries, the commentators must explain things a bit more fully when they “write” in English. For similar reasons, they omit grammatical comments and explanations that are both complicated and extraneous. For a more detailed look at this topic, see “Principles of the Translation” below.

*Before I get more involved... why should I care about what these medieval commentators think?*

About 900 years ago the commentator Rashi told his grandson that new insights into the Bible were being discovered daily. That’s still true, which means that if you want the latest biblical scholarship, a modern commentary will serve you better than the comments in this book. But there are some very good reasons to go back to the older commentators, even if you do not share the assumptions they make about the Bible.

The first reason is that the medieval commentators read the Bible very, very carefully. They will often note connections, contradictions, or difficulties that modern readers of the text, especially casual readers, have missed. It can be difficult to think carefully, or deeply, about stories or sayings that you’ve known since childhood. But the commentators here will help you look at them from a fresh perspective.

The second reason is that the Bible is not a chemical compound that gives the same result every time it is analyzed, but a book that tells a story and describes a way of life. Its stories and teachings call forth different responses in different ages. By reading the various commentaries on a single page, you can see how attitudes toward the Bible changed over the centuries.

The third reason is that the format and nature of this book are geared toward promoting your *active participation* in learning about the Bible, a process that can offer both intellectual and spiritual rewards. The page is set up as a conversation among the commentators, in which the reader is encouraged to join.

The fourth reason, and the most important, is that *The Commentators’ Bible* gives you the chance to spend “quality time” with four of the greatest of all Bible commentators, and with half a dozen of their colleagues. Shortly after I began working on the book, a friend asked,

“Which of the commentators do you like best?” What he really wanted was to tell me which of them *he* liked best. You too are likely to find, as you read through the book of Exodus, that the commentators will come alive for you, and that one or another of them will begin to seem less like a historical figure, and more like a companion you can learn with.

*How do I read such a complicated book?*

This is not the kind of book you can pick up and read straight through, because too many things on each page are clamoring simultaneously for your attention. You will want to explore the page and learn what path through it works best for you. Ideally, you should study the text with others and together find your own method of making your way through the different commentaries. Here are some different approaches to try as you get started:

- ➔ Compare the two English translations (with the Hebrew, if you can). When the two translations disagree, check to see how the commentators resolve the question.
- ➔ Read a whole chapter at a time, in Hebrew or in either translation. Then read Abarbanel’s questions about the chapter and think about them. Read the chapter again—perhaps in the *other* translation—to see whether you can think of answers to his questions.
- ➔ Pick a particular commentator as your guide, and follow all of his comments to the text as you read along.
- ➔ Read until you find a word or a verse that raises a question in *your* mind. Then check to see what each of the commentators has to say about it. Be sure to check the Additional Comments to see whether there’s another comment on your question there.
- ➔ Follow any, or all, of the commentators through an entire subject, or a complete story. Think about the implications of a particular commentator’s approach for interpreting other biblical passages.
- ➔ Dip into each page as you like until you find a thread you want to pursue.

**Warning!** The commentator will sometimes continue in the voice that is speaking in the verse itself (God’s, or Moses’, for example). After a dash (—) the commentator continues in his own voice. A dash may also separate different voices if the commentator is reconstructing a conversation or working through the steps of an argument.

## WHAT'S ON THE PAGE?

### *Text:*

The **HEBREW TEXT** of the Bible, based on the Leningrad Codex, the oldest complete manuscript of the Hebrew Bible. This particular version of the Hebrew text can be found in the 1999 edition of the JPS Hebrew-English TANAKH. This edition is not meant for ritual use, and it thus omits some synagogue-related features. It meets only the traditional rabbinic standards (*halakhah*) for formatting a study Bible, which are less stringent than those for ritual purposes. For a fuller explanation of the difference between the Leningrad Codex and the 1999 JPS edition, see the preface to the latter.

### *Translations:*

The **NJPS** translation of the Hebrew text, prepared in the 1960s by a committee of Jewish Bible scholars from the various movements, under the auspices of The Jewish Publication Society (JPS). This translation attempts to convey the meaning of the text without adhering slavishly to the literal Hebrew.

The **OJPS** translation of the Hebrew text, a revision of the American Standard Version (adapted from the King James Bible) prepared in the years before World War I by a committee of Jewish scholars, again under the auspices of JPS.

### *Questions:*

**ABARBANEL's** questions. These questions, which serve as the basis for the commentary of Isaac Abarbanel (see below), will help the reader understand the *kinds* of questions that the commentators think need answering about the text. (The other commentators do not always make their questions explicit.)

### *Major commentators:*

**RASHI** – R. Solomon b. Isaac (1040–1105), northern France. Universally known by the acronym of his name, Rashi is the quintessential commentator on both Bible and Talmud. Jewish translations of both works often silently follow Rashi's comments when deciding how to render a difficult passage. Rashi's method, as he himself described it, was to explain the biblical text according to its straightforward sense—what the words mean in plain Hebrew—adding only those midrashic comments that fit the context and explain a linguistic feature of the text. According to his grandson Rashbam, toward the end of his life he admitted that, if he had the time, he would completely rewrite his commentary to take account of the new discoveries about the straightforward sense of the Bible being made on a daily basis. (See also “*Peshat* and *Derash*” under “Special Topics.”)

**RASHBAM** – R. Samuel b. Meir (ca. 1085–ca. 1174), northern France. Rashbam, Rashi's grandson, claimed that, though rabbinic interpretation of the Torah text was primary, the work of doing that kind of interpretation—the complicated linkage of every aspect of Jewish law to a letter, word, or phrase in the Torah—was finished. The neglected straightforward sense of the text, however, was only now in the process of being discovered. Rashbam, like his grandfather, was a skilled talmudist, but in his biblical commentary he felt free to interpret the text as it reads in plain Hebrew even when this contradicted rabbinic interpretation. (See also “*Peshat* and *Derash*” under “Special Topics.”)

**IBN EZRA** – R. Abraham ibn Ezra (1089–1164), b. Spain, d. England. Ibn Ezra was Rashbam's almost exact contemporary, though scholars continue to disagree on whether they ever met or even knew each other's work. Ibn Ezra lived the first half-century of his life in Muslim Spain and spent the rest of his days wandering through Christian Europe—first in Italy, then in France, and, in his last years, in England. The two-fold basis of his comments, as he explains in the long introduction to his work, is that they must conform to the grammar of the text (a field in which the Jews of the Muslim world were far more advanced than their compatriots in Christian countries) and to the bounds of reason. His attitude toward rabbinic tradition is ambiguous—he was not secure enough to contradict it directly, as did Rashbam, but often hinted at his doubts about one or another aspect of it. (See also “Ibn Ezra's Philosophy” under “Special Topics.”)

**NAHMANIDES** – R. Moses b. Nahman (1195–ca. 1270), b. Spain, d. Israel. Also known by the acronym “Ramban,” Nahmanides was advised to flee Spain after his victory in a “disputation” over the truth of Judaism and Christianity in which he was forced to participate. His careful analysis of the comments of his predecessors Rashi and Ibn Ezra makes him largely responsible for defining the contents of the standard Miqra'ot Gedolot page. (Rashbam is a 20<sup>th</sup>-century addition to the standard page.) In addition to his biblical and rabbinic scholarship, he was immersed in mystical learning. He sometimes explains the straightforward sense of the text and then adds an additional comment, often obscure, giving the meaning of the text “according to the way of Truth”—a reference to mystical interpretation. (See also “Nahmanides' Mysticism” under “Special Topics.”)

*Editor's annotations:*

I have added notes to the text of the major commentators whenever I thought their comments needed some elucidation, or when there is a difficulty that might not be apparent to the reader. I have not generally supplied the rabbinic sources for their comments unless they do so themselves. Nor have I pointed out the reasons for their comments, unless I think the reader would find the comment puzzling without this information. I have generally left it to the reader to discover when the commentators are disputing with each other.

*Additional commentators:*

The **MASORAH** – (ca. 1000) The comments labeled Masorah (“tradition”), dating from the second half of the first millennium C.E., generally catalogue unusual spellings or

word choices in the text, to give scribes assistance in re-creating it exactly. Occasional comments were added to the Masorah at the time of the “Second Rabbinic Bible” (1525) by its editor, **Jacob b. Hayyim**, a kabbalist; these comments are not identified as coming from the Masorah, but from him personally.

**BEKHOR SHOR** – Joseph b. Isaac Bekhor Shor (12th c.), northern France. As a younger contemporary and student of Rashbam, his comments, like those of his teacher, focus on the straightforward sense of the text.

**KIMHI** – R. David Kimhi (1160?–1235?), Provence. Known by the acronym “Radak,” he belonged to a family of illustrious scholars. Particularly known as a Hebrew grammarian, he is a major commentator to Genesis. (In our Genesis volume, he will be promoted to the main part of the page.) His comments on the rest of the Torah, however, are relatively sparse, since they are abstracted from his works on language.

**HIZKUNI** – R. Hezekiah b. Manoah (mid-13th c.), France. He wrote a commentary that is largely an anthology of earlier comments (many now otherwise lost) as well as an analysis of Rashi’s commentary.

**GERSONIDES** – R. Levi b. Gershom (1288–1344), Provence. Known also by the acronym “Ralbag,” he viewed the biblical text largely through the lens of philosophy.

**ABARBANEL** – Don Isaac Abarbanel (1437–1508), b. Portugal, fled Spain, d. Italy. He was a prominent politician and financier in the Iberian Peninsula until the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. His writings mostly date from his Italian period.

**SFORNO** – Obadiah b. Jacob Sforno (1470–1550), Italy. Trained in Jewish learning, humanistic studies, and medicine, he was both literally and metaphorically a Renaissance man.