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Textbooks and Theses: The Differences Between Rashi and Luther

Among the great historical theologians, few have had as much impact on understanding and implementing the words of the Bible as did Rashi and Martin Luther. Within their respective time periods, they revolutionized the methodology of biblical interpretation and acted as catalysts for social change. Despite their chronological gap in existence, they approached the Bible in remarkably similar ways. Both scholars helped shift the paradigm of religious thought from figural to literal by translating ancient texts into the respective vernacular and by rejecting allegory within Biblical interpretation. However, they were both raised within the conventional ethos of their era and received a formal education before assuming reformist status. As transitional figures, Rashi and Luther shared a fundamental loyalty to cultural tradition and social order, and used the old-age methods of interpretation when suitable. Therefore, the differences between Rashi and Luther arise not from exegetical methodology but from intent. While Rashi's goal was to aid the diffusion of knowledge to students and citizens by modernizing the Midrashic tradition, Luther was motivated by a deep moral imperative to challenge the Catholic hierarchy and ideology. These fundamental distinctions illustrate how Rashi helped start the reformist movement that eventually peaked with Luther.

This essay will attempt to analyze the similarities and differences between Rashi and Luther within the paradigm shift between figural and literal Biblical thought. I start by providing a historical background to each theologian, illuminating their most relevant exegetical methods

and assumptions. Then I evaluate their similarities, assessing how and why they utilized parallel mechanisms to reform the old-age traditions present in their respective cultures. Finally I discuss the fundamental differences that exist within their progressive goals and how these dissimilarities are contextually based on the scholars' time period. I end with the argument that while Rashi and Luther employed similar techniques of Biblical interpretation in response to the traditional ideology, Luther's goals were more aggressive as a result of the incremental paradigm shift to which Rashi contributed.

Born in 1040 in Troyes, France, Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki) has long been recognized as one of the most influential commentators on the Talmud and the Bible. He attended the "schools of Worms and Mainz, the old Rhenish centres of Jewish learning, where he absorbed the methods, teachings, and traditions associated with Rabbi Gershom ben Judah… the first great scholar of northern European Judaism."[1] He also studied under Rabbi Yaakov ben Yakar, Rabbi Yitzchak HaLevi and Rabbi Yitzchak ben Yehudah, who were the students and disciples of the renowned Talmudist, Rabbi Eliezer Hagagol.[2] This formalized, traditional education grounded Rashi within the interpretational methodology and ideology of the era. However, his education also marked the beginning of his reformist nature. Afraid that he would forget his learning, "Rashi took the radical step of writing notes even though Talmud study was supposed to be done orally."[3] This action eventually allowed him to more effectively disseminate knowledge to students and citizens. After completing his studies, Rashi returned to Troyes and answered Halakhic questions as the leader of the rabbinical court. In doing so, he began to

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[1] Isadore Twersky, "Rashi." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2009. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 10 May 2009 <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/491673/Rashi>.

[2] "Great Leaders of Our People: Rabbeinu Gershom." *Orthodox Union*. 10 May 2009 <http://www.ou.org/about/judaism/rabbis/default.htm>.

[3] Maggie Anton, "Rashi and his daughters." *Judaism*. 2005. FindArticles.com. 10 May 2009 <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0411/is_1-2_54/ai_n15966530/>.

solidify his method of providing short, concise, literal answers to interpretative questions about the Bible. Rashi eventually founded his own yeshiva in 1070, and spent the remainder of his life teaching and writing commentaries on the Bible and Talmud.[4]

Though it does not surface in his writings, the First Crusades had a profound impact on Rashi's life, interpretational methodology and philosophical perspective. By the time the massacres ended, "twelve thousand Jews were either murdered or had committed suicide rather than converting to Christianity. Hundreds of scholars were martyred and their books destroyed. A generation of Jewish learning was lost."[5] As a member of the Jewish minority within Christian Spain, Rashi obviously recognized the desperate need for preserving and distributing the knowledge of past theologians. His contextual style of interpretation represents his attempt to save the ancient Midrashic tradition by making it more accessible to the population.

Martin Luther was born into a very different era. Living within the Reformation, Luther was affected by a variety of social, political, and technological changes that aided his theological revolution against the Papacy. Variables like the printing press provided a medium for large-scale individualist expression to which older scholars like Rashi did not have access. Taking this into account, Luther's life can be divided into two separate periods: his aggressive moral attack of the Papal order, and his subsequent attempt to quell the social and political revolutions that consequentially followed. In 1488, Martin Luther began his formal education at a Latin school in Mansfeld, where he received a "thorough training in the Latin language and learned by rote the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed, and morning and evening

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[4] Werner S. Hirsch, "Rashi, Rabbi Solomon Itzchaki." *The Jewish Historical Society of Greater New Haven*. 2001. 10 May 2009 <http://pages.cthome.net/hirsch/rashi.htm>.
[5] Hirsch.

prayers."[6] After receiving a Masters degree at the University of Erfort, he began to study law. However, after surviving a violent thunderstorm, Luther decided to quit law and become a monk. This decision illustrates Luther's fundamental need for self-assurance through faith, an inner conflict that would give rise to many of his reformist ideals.

By the second half of the 15th century, "the Augustinian order had become divided into two factions, one seeking reform in the direction of the order's original strict rule, the other favouring modifications."[7] Luther enrolled in the strict faction, which introduced him to the Papal order that he would come to challenge. His eyes were first opened to the problems of the Papacy in 1510, when he traveled to Rome as part of a delegation to represent the observant German Augustinian monasteries.[8] The mission was unsuccessful, and from his later comments on the experience, it seems "he found in Rome a lack of spirituality at the very heart of Western Christendom."[9] Soon after his journey, he transferred to a monastery in Wittenberg where he eventually became a professor of biblical theology.

While Luther's reformist ideas are subliminal in his lectors on the Psalms, the first obvious critique on the theological world appeared in his lectures on Paul's Epistle to the Romans.

> "In Romans, Paul writes of the 'righteousness of God.' Luther had always understood that term to mean that God was a righteous judge that demanded human righteousness. Now, Luther understood righteousness as a gift of God's grace. He had discovered (or recovered) the doctrine of justification by grace alone."[10]

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[6] Hans J. Hillerbrand, "Martin Luther." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2009. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 10 May 2009 <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/351950/Martin-Luther>.

[7] Hillerbrand.

[8] David M. Whitford, "Martin Luther (1483-1546)." *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 2006. 10 May 2009 <http://www.iep.utm.edu/l/luther.htm>.

[9] Hillerbrand.

[10] Whitford.

Luther's conclusion that the righteousness of God is a gift to believers instead of a standard by which God judges them was "both an exegetical insight into the text of Rom. 1:17 and a correction of Luther's former view of God, which he [held] responsible for the anguish under which he labored."[11] He later described this revelation "as a kind of conversion. 'It was as if the very gates of heaven had opened before me,' he wrote."[12] The personal nature of his epitome provided him with the self-assurance that he been searching for, leading him to criticize the Church's use of indulgences in his Ninety-five Theses.

Luther's critique of the religious order resulted in his excommunication. After refusing to recant at the Diet of Worms, he was placed under Imperial Ban. While hiding in Wartburg, Luther translated the Bible from Latin to German, effectively eliminating the Church's interpretational power. However, by undermining the framework of figural interpretation, Luther created a certain degree of chaos through autonomy. He responded to the Peasants War and the new wave of political egalitarianism by eventually calling on the royalty to "swiftly take to the sword."[13] His firm belief in upholding the political and social structure represents his status as a transitional scholar, bridging the gap between tradition and reformation.

Despite the extreme difference in historical context, the exegetical similarities between Rashi and Luther are striking. These parallels are most obvious within their methods of interpretation. First, both Rashi and Luther can be considered literalists. Rashi severely intervened in the Midrashic interpretive style by arguing that the Bible works like human discourse and must be analyzed appropriately within its literal context. In his commentary he only addresses legitimate interpretative questions that can be answered with contextual, rational,

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[11] Scott H. Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy: Stages in a Reformation Conflict.* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 18.
[12] Hillerbrand.
[13] Martin Luther, *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*. 1525.

or scientific evidence. For example, in his analysis of Genesis 3:7, he answers why the tree that provided the fruit of original sin was not identified, saying "the Holy One, blessed be He, does not wish to grieve any creature, so that [others] should not put it to shame and say, 'this is the [the tree] because of which the world suffered' [from *Midrash Tanchuma Vayera* 14]."[14] In attempting to explain the existence of shirts of skin in Genesis 3:21, Rashi presented two extremely literal possibilities: "Some Aggadic works say that they were as smooth as fingernails, fastened over their skin [from *Gen. Rabbah* 20:12], and others say that they were a material that comes from the skin, like the wool of rabbits [from *Gen. Rabbah* ad loc., *Sotah* 14a]."[15] Rashi's pragmatic approach to analyzing the Bible reflects the beginning of the paradigm shift from figural to literal interpretation.

Martin Luther's analysis also catalyzes this shift by rejecting figural interpretation on the grounds of Scriptural authority. In his Lectures on Genesis, Luther discusses how "when we condemn allegories, we are speaking of those that are fabricated by one's own intellect and ingenuity, without the authority of Scripture."[16] Luther relates this concept to the Pope's desire for power, responding to the Pope's statement, "God made two large luminaries, the sun and the moon. The sun is the papal office, from which the imperial majesty derives its light, just as the moon does from the sun."[17] Luther argues that this allegory has no grounding in Scripture, and therefore cannot be considered legitimate. He even goes as far to say that "not only is the application silly and foolish, but even the basis is evil and wicked. Such allegories are thought out and devised, not by the Holy Spirit but by the devil, the spirit of lies."[18] By opposing allegorical interpretation on a moral level, Luther culminated the incremental shift towards

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[14] Rashi, *Genesis 3 and 28 with Rashi's Commentary*. 2.
[15] Rashi, 6.
[16] *Luther's Works*, vol. 2. Ed. Jaroslav Pelikan. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1960), 152.
[17] *Luther's Works*, 152.
[18] *Luther's Works*, 156.

literalism that originated with theologians like Rashi. Luther also used the immoralities of allegorical interpretation to oppose Thomas Muntzer's call for complete political form.

Even though Rashi and Luther are severely critical of allegorical interpretation, they both end up using it when it fits their agenda. Rashi incorporates the Midrashic tradition into his commentaries to answer questions with unsubstantial literal explanations or when the Midrash contributes to a literal explanation. In his commentary on the direction of the sun in Genesis 3:8, Rashi uses Genesis Rabbah 19:8 and Sanh. 38b to argue the direction is "that direction in which the sun sets, and this is the west, for toward evening, the sun is in the west, and they sinned in the tenth [hour]."[19] Rashi also creates his own symbolic explanations based on rational observations of the world. For example, in response to Adam and Eve's consciousness of nudity in Genesis 3:7, he proclaims, "Even a blind man knows when he is naked! What then is the meaning of 'and they knew that they were naked?' They had one commandment in their possession and they became denuded of it."[20] By incorporating the allegorical style used by Midrash into his literal interpretations, Rashi makes Midrash more accessible to the population and hence saves the age-old tradition from potential extinction. In doing so, Rashi facilitates the shift from addressing the literal within the framework of the figural to addressing figural within the framework of the literal.

Martin Luther also utilizes allegorical interpretation, but only when it contributes to understanding the moral lessons within the Scripture. In his Lectures on Genesis, Luther uses 1 Peter 3:21-22 as an example of a useful, appropriate allegory. In this passage, Peter uses the Flood as a metaphor for baptism, saying "baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you – not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the

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[19] Rashi, 3.
[20] Rashi, 2.

resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God." Luther argues that such allegories "not only agree nicely with the subject mater but also instruct hearts about faith and are profitable to the conscience."[21] These requirements are largely subjective, and further support Luther's theory of individualism in relation to Biblical interpretation. Hence, Martin Luther's use of figural interpretation only applies within the new literal, and personal paradigm of Biblical thought.

Rashi and Luther also focus on language as a mechanism to further their literalist goals. In his commentaries, Rashi "deftly [used] rules of grammar and syntax" to provide further insight into the meaning of Biblical verses, effectively creating a framework for literal analyses on which the figural interpretation could be mounted.[22] He also translated complex Hebrew vocabulary into French. In his interpretation of revolving sword in Genesis 3:24, Rashi discusses how "it had a blade to frighten him from re-entering the garden," then proceeds to translate the word blade into Old French.[23] By incorporating translation into his analyses, Rashi paved the way for Luther's complete translation of the Bible from Latin to German. In both, cases, using vernacular aided their respective goals of disseminating knowledge and challenging the religious order through individualism.

Outside of exegetical methodology, Rashi and Luther also carried similar philosophical views of God. They both believed in a transcendent God and a Platonic separation between Earth and the spiritual realm. In his commentary on Genesis 28:13, Rashi discussed how God does not consider even His holy ones as righteous until after their deaths, when they are no longer subject to the evil inclination.[24] This distinction between the evils of life and the righteousness of

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[21] *Luther's Works*, 152.
[22] Twersky.
[23] Rashi, 7.
[24] Rashi, 11.

afterlife illustrates the elements of Platonism present in Rashi's interpretations. Similarly, "Luther distinguishes between the hidden and the revealed God."[25] Within His revealed realm, God has established a spiritual government and a secular government. The spiritual government "helps men to achieve true Christian righteousness and therewith eternal life; it thus serves the redemption of the world…and brings the kingdom of God into being."[26] The secular, or earthly government preserves external righteousness, upholding "this physical, earthly, temporal life and thereby [preserving] the world."[27] This separation between the visible and hidden God, in addition to the separation between external secular righteousness and its spiritual interaction with humans, represents Luther's grounding in Platonic thought. Rashi and Luther's comparable beliefs in an omnipotent God and a separation between this world and God's realm illustrate their ties to traditional belief systems and solidify their status as transitional figures.

Although Rashi and Luther use similar interpretive techniques, they differ fundamentally in their theological goals. Rashi's primary intent was "to share the learning of the ages with the Jewish community of his time."[28] By placing Midrash within the context of literal analysis, Rashi facilitated the dispersion of Biblical knowledge to students and citizens. However, his methods of literal interpretation bordered on scientific. For example, in his commentary on the serpents curse in Genesis 3:14, he writes, "If he was cursed more than the cattle [whose gestation period is long], he was surely cursed more than the beasts [whose gestation period is comparatively shorter]. Our Rabbis established this Midrash in Tractate *Bechorot* (8a) to teach

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[25] Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther*. (Philidephia: Fortress Press, 1972), 45.
[26] Althaus, 45.
[27] Althaus, 45.
[28] Edward L. Greenstein, "Rashi: Commentator Extraordinaire." *Back to the Sources*. Ed. Barry Holtz, (New York: Summit Books, 1992). 10 May 2009 <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/texts/Bible/Torah/Commentaries/Rashi.shtml>.

that the gestation period of a serpent is seven years."[29] Rashi's painfully detailed interpretational style, combining observation, reason and analysis, helped set the stage for the eventual emergence of the scientific method.

On the other hand, Luther used Biblical interpretation as his moral basis for challenging the religious hierarchy and ideology of his era. He believed that the "primacy of the scriptures as the *norma Normans*, the criterion which determines right teaching, demanded the priority of Biblical studies over all other theological disciplines and over subjects such as dialectic or Aristotelian philosophy."[30] His interpretational methodology reflected this belief. By rejecting allegory except in cases of Scriptural support, Luther forced the figural ideology to submit to the new literal framework of religious thought. In addition, his translation of the Latin Bible into German vernacular undermined a key power source of the Catholic Church and catalyzed a new focus on individual spirituality. His theological goals were rooted in an intense moral imperative to reform the Papal hierarchy.

It is important to recognize that the differences between Rashi and Luther's theological goals stem from their chronological gap in existence. However, within the incremental shift from figuralism to literalism, the fundamental relationship between Rashi and Luther is visible. Rashi's commentary "had a significant influence on Christian Bible study from the 12th-century Victorines to the Franciscan scholar Nicholas of Lyra (c. 1270-1349), who, in turn, was a major source of Martin Luther's Bible work."[31] The indirect influence that Rashi had on Martin Luther illustrates the step-by-step process that eventually causes large-scale paradigm shifts.

In conclusion, Rashi and Martin Luther used similar exegetical mechanisms to accomplish fundamentally different goals. Both placed allegory in the context of literalism and translated

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[29] Rashi, 4.
[30] Lewis W. Spitz, *Luther and German Humanism*. (Norfolk: Variorum, 1996), 87.
[31] Twersky.

texts into the vernacular. In addition, Rashi and Luther's writings both carried elements of Platonic dualism and an elemental belief in God's omnipotence. However, despite these superficial similarities, Rashi and Luther differed in intent. While Rashi utilized literal interpretation to modernize the Midrash, effectively saving it from potential extinction at the hands of Christian Crusaders, Luther rejected the figural paradigm in his moral attack against the Papal order. In the end, however, the dissimilarities in theological intentions represent Rashi and Luther's different locations along the incremental path towards the Reformation.

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