

Malbim's Approach to the Sins of Biblical Personages

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1. INTRODUCTION

Meir Loeb ben Jehiel Michel Malbim (1809-1879) was an Orthodox rabbi with a strongly conservative bent.¹ We would therefore expect that in his Bible commentary, he would attempt to justify problematic actions performed by biblical characters, especially those in the book of Genesis, to the greatest extent possible so as to absolve them of any wrongdoing.² And scholars do indeed de-

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¹ On Malbim's life, see S. Z. Schaechter, "The Malbim, His Literary Work and Thought" (Ph.D. diss.; Hebrew University, 1983), 4–32 (Hebrew); M. M. Yashar, *The Gaon Malbim: His Life, Teachings, Struggles, and Works* (Jerusalem: Hod, 1976) (Hebrew); N. H. Rosenbloom, *Malbim: Exegesis, Philosophy, Science and Mysticism in the Writings of Rabbi Meir Lebusch Malbim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1988), 1–87 (Hebrew); A. Sorski, *In Storm and in Tempest: Chapters in the Stormy Life of the Renowned Gaon Rabbi Meir Lebusch Malbim* (Bnei Brak: Zivtanim, 1999) (Hebrew); H. Eshkoli, "Synonymy in Biblical Hebrew according to the Method of Malbim: A Critical Examination of His Semantic Method in the Field of Synonymy" (Ph.D. diss.; Bar-Ilan University, 2009), 7–19 (Hebrew).

² On the attitude to the sins of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs and other biblical personages found in the early translations, the Rabbinic literature, and the traditional Jewish commentary, see, e.g., E. Margalijot, *Those Liable in the Bible and Exonerated in the Talmud and Midrashim* (London: Ararat, 1949 [Hebrew]); Y. Komlosh, *The Bible in the Light of the Aramaic Translations* (Ramat Gan/Tel Aviv: Bar-Ilan University Press/Dvir, 1973), 208–16 (Hebrew); E. Z. Melamed, *Bible Commentators* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1975), vol. 1, 174–79, 292–93 (Hebrew); A. Shinan, *The Embroidered Targum: The Aggadab in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan of the Pentateuch* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1975), 152–56 (Hebrew); D. Berger, "On the Morality of the Patriarchs in Jewish Polemic and Exegesis," in C. Thoma and M. Wyschogrod (eds.), *Understanding Scripture: Explorations of Jewish and Christian Traditions of Interpretation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 49–62; E. Levine, *The Aramaic Version of the Bible: Contents and Context* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988), 99–111; A. Grossman, *The Early Sages of France: Their Lives, Leadership and*

scribe his approach in this way. Noah Rosenbloom, for example, writes in his comprehensive book on Malbim:

Like most of the commentators who preceded him, Malbim seeks to exonerate the heroes of the Bible from any smudge on their character. And like them, he makes efforts in every way to preserve their honor and explain their deeds, that at times seem to exceed the bounds of law and morality. Here, as well, his approach is eclectic, and is taken from the commentaries of his predecessors, whom he does not always attribute.³

Rosenbloom supports this reading with seven examples: “You are my sister” (Gen 12:13); Isaac’s blessing to Jacob, the rods in the troughs (Gen 30:38, 41); the killing of the people of Shechem (Gen 34); Reuben and Bilhah, Aaron and the Golden Calf; David and Bathsheba.

Zvi Schaechter writes in a similar vein in his PhD dissertation on Malbim. He begins his very short discussion (about a single page) on Malbim’s attitude to biblical figures by stating: “As was already mentioned above, Malbim deemed it necessary to defend David, Solomon, and Jeremiah against the complaints of Don Isaac Abrabanel.”⁴ (Schaechter here refers to what he wrote in his discussion of Malbim’s attitude to Abrabanel, namely, that Malbim disagrees with Abrabanel’s suggestion that Jeremiah’s knowledge of

Works (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1995), 488–92 (Hebrew); A. Frisch, “Rabbi S. R. Hirsch’s Method in the Issue of the ‘Ancestors’ Sins,” in M. Ahrend and S. Feuerstein (eds.), *Biblical Studies and Teaching* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1997), 181–97 (Hebrew); A. Frisch, “R. Jacob Zvi Meklenburg’s Method in the Issue of the Patriarchs’ Sins,” *JJS* 53 (2002), 107–19; G. Sasson, “Visiting the Iniquity of the Fathers: The Sages’ Criticism of the Patriarchs’ Sins” (Ma thesis; Bar-Ilan University, 2002) (Hebrew); Y. Medan, “‘Anyone Who Says that Reuven Sinned . . .,’” *Alai Etzion* 14 (2006), 95–126; J. A. Diamond, “King David of the Sages: Rabbinic Rehabilitation or Ironic Parody?,” *Prooftexts* 27 (2007), 373–426; M. Ophir, “A Preface to Studies in Hazal’s Attitude to the Sexual Sins of the Biblical Heroes: Reuben and Bilhah, Judah and Tamar: A Proposal and a Paradigmatic Chapter” (Ma thesis; Bar-Ilan University, 2007) (Hebrew); M. Rachimi, “Exonerating Unconventional Behavior of the Patriarchs in the Commentary of R. Obadiah Sforno to the Pentateuch,” in S. Vargon, A. Frisch, and M. Rachimi (eds.), *Studies in Bible and Exegesis* 8 (E. Touitou Jubilee Volume; Ramat Gan/Elkana: Bar-Ilan University Press/Orot Israel College Press, 2008), 607–22 (Hebrew); N. Elyakim, “The *Netziv*’s Approach to Explaining Unconventional Behavior by the Patriarchs and Matriarchs,” in *Studies in Bible and Exegesis* 8, 637–53; A. Grossman, *He Shall Rule Over You? Medieval Jewish Sages on Women* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2011), 220–22, 511–16 (Hebrew). For an article that discusses the attitude of traditional commentary to this issue, see A. Frisch, “The Sins of the Patriarchs as Viewed by Traditional Jewish Exegesis,” *JSQ* 10 (2003), 258–73.

³ Rosenbloom, *Malbim*, 150.

⁴ Schaechter, “The Malbim,” 117.

Hebrew was faulty and that David sinned in the Bathsheba episode.) Shaechter adds an additional figure to the discussion, stating that “Malbim defends Joseph, as well.”

In 1982 Maaravi Perez wrote an article on Malbim's commentary to the Jacob and Esau narrative in which he asserted—relating solely to this narrative—that

[Malbim's] way is that of maximal justification of the deeds of Isaac, Rebekah, and Jacob, and the absolute indictment of Esau's actions.⁵

This “maximal justification” stands in contrast to the interpretation of the Rabbis, who voiced sometimes trenchant criticism of Isaac, Rebekah, and Jacob. Michal Dell presents a similar view to Perez in her Ph.D. dissertation, but does, however, mention in its summation (which covers less than three pages) the following exception:

Malbim generally defends the Patriarchs and seeks a way to justify their actions and mitigate their sins. We found only two places in which he voices criticism: against Rachel, who did not pray and therefore was not blessed with offspring; and against Jacob, who tarried in fulfilling his vow, and was accordingly punished by the episode with Dinah. [. . .] In both instances, the criticism is of educational value for his readers (how not to behave). An additional shared element is that Jacob and Rachel were punished (Dinah, barrenness), and presenting their actions as negative explains the tragedy that befell them.⁶

My initial premise is that these descriptions do not fully reflect the complexity of Malbim's commentary. We shall therefore submit his commentary on this topic to a fundamental and thorough examination, to present a more complete description of his approach to the sins of the progenitors of the Jewish people.

2. MALBIM'S DEFENSE OF THE PROGENITORS OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE

As mentioned above, Malbim goes to some lengths to defend the ancestors of the Jewish people. We will examine a simple yet repre-

⁵ M. Perez, “The Episode of Jacob and Esau according to the Commentary of Malbim,” *Bisdeh Hemed* 25 (1982), 102–97 (Hebrew).

⁶ M. Dell, “Orthodox Biblical Exegesis in an Age of Change: Polemics in the Torah Commentaries of R. J. Z. Meklenburg and Malbim” (Ph.D. diss.; Bar-Ilan University, 2008), 200 (Hebrew). Dell reconstructs the criticism of Rachel by combining Malbim's explanations to three passages in Genesis 30: the comparison he draws between the actions of Leah and those of Rachel in v. 14; the critique he puts in Leah's mouth in v. 15; his explanation for the remembrance of Rachel in v. 22: “For now she prayed.” Malbim is explicitly critical of Jacob in his commentary to Gen 33:18, 20.

sentative example followed by two more complex instances, in a bid to understand not only *what* Malbim asserts, but also the *method* he uses to defend his reading.

MALBIM ON GENESIS 12

Gen 12:10: “There was a famine in the land”—this, too, was a trial, as the Rabbis said, if he would [questioningly] think about the Lord’s word, when He promised him, “And I will bless you [. . .] and you shall be a blessing” [Gen 12:2], and was faced [instead] with a curse and the fever of famine. But Abraham did not have such thoughts; he was too small in his own eyes to think that the Lord would change nature on his behalf. Consequently, nor did he expect to be miraculously sustained during the famine, all he asked was natural aid. He therefore went down to Egypt, not to establish a permanent home, but only to sojourn there temporarily, “for the famine was severe in the land,” and to return when the famine would have passed. Accordingly, it was considered as if he still dwelled in the Land, since he meant to return.⁷

Did Abraham act properly when he went down to Egypt during the famine in the land of Israel, or should he have remained in the land?⁸ Throughout the entire passage above, Malbim seeks to justify Abraham’s conduct. His explanation is divided into three parts, and he raises three considerations in his bid to vindicate Abraham:

(1) The famine was a trial to test Abraham: How would he react when, despite God’s promise to bless him, he was in distress because of the famine in the land to which the Lord had led him? Interestingly, Malbim adopts a concept already found in the Rabbinic literature⁹ (and in the light of his formulation, I think that his reference here is based mainly on Rashi), which he integrates into his commentary on this episode.¹⁰

⁷ Hebrew source: *Hamishab Humshei Torah with the Ha-Torah ve-ha-Mitzvah Commentary by the Rabbi Meir Leibush Malbim*, vol. 1: *Genesis* (Jerusalem: Horev, 2008). The Hebrew source for the citations from Malbim’s commentary to Samuel and Kings: *Sefer Mikra’ei Kodesh Prophets and Writings by the Rabbi Meir Leibush Malbim*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Horev, 2010). The passages from his commentary were translated for this article.

⁸ For a presentation and analysis of the views found in the early translations, the Rabbis, and medieval commentary, see A. Shinan and Y. Zakovitch, *Abram and Sarai in Egypt: Gen. 10: 10-20 in the Bible, the Old Versions and the Ancient Jewish Literature* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1983), esp. 6–21 (Hebrew).

⁹ For instance: *Gen. Rab.* 40:2; *Pirqei R. El.*, chapter 26.

¹⁰ Unlike Rashi’s focused interpretation, Malbim begins his commentary by connecting the verse with its context: “This, *too*, was a trial.” He thereby links the topic of this verse with the preceding verses in the chapter (12), which Malbim presented as a trial: v. 1 (“for this was part of the

(2) Abraham reacts in a natural, rational manner, and does not rely on miracles. While Malbim does not explicitly mention the Rabbis, unlike in the preceding section, he probably based his interpretation upon them, since they derived a halakhic conclusion from Abraham's conduct in this narrative: "Our masters taught: When there is a famine in the city, remove your feet [i.e., leave], as it is said: 'There was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there [לגור שם]' [Gen 12:10]" (*b. B. Qam.* 60b).

(3) Malbim engages in a close reading of "לגור שם" and insists that it does not indicate taking up permanent residence, but moving to Egypt only temporarily.¹¹ Malbim's interpretation of this phrase is composed of two elements: (a) first, he argues that the very appearance of this wording reveals the purpose of the action ("went down"), since a similar description does not appear in the parallel depiction of Isaac's response to the famine in his time: "and Isaac went to Abimelech, king of the Philistines, in Gerar" (Gen 26:1); (b) second, he resorts to his interpretive method of assigning a separate, distinct meaning to each verb.¹²

MALBIM ON GENESIS 37

Any commentator who seeks to defend a biblical figure faces a challenge that is by no means simple to overcome: namely, in instances of conflict between the characters, any defense of one of the protagonists inevitably results in the incrimination of another. What did Malbim do in such instances? We will discuss two stages in Joseph's interactions with his brothers, firstly, Joseph's speaking ill of his brothers to their father; and then, the brothers' negative attitude to Joseph, culminating in their plan to kill him.

(i) Gen 37:2: "And Joseph brought bad reports of them to their father." Rashi, who is fundamentally apologetic regarding the acts of the Israelite patriarchs,¹³ identifies in this verse criticism of

trial [...] for if He had revealed this to him immediately, it would not have constituted a trial") and v. 6 ("all this was part of the trial").

¹¹ Malbim draws this same distinction from a close reading of the verb לגור in additional verses: Gen 47:3; Exod 1:10; Num 20:15; Ruth 1:1.

¹² Malbim's consistency regarding this distinction (cf. above, n. 11) is evident in his commentary to "גור בארץ הזאת" (Gen 26:3), in which, too, he interprets the verb to mean a temporary stay. He thereby differs from Sforno, whose interpretation of "גור" in 26:3 diverges from his understanding of the same verb in the current verse.

¹³ See: L. Hacoheh, "Educational and Moral Issues in the Patriarchs' Deeds according to Jewish Medieval Commentators: Rashi, Nahmanides and Ibn Caspi" (Ma thesis; Bar-Ilan University, 1995) (Hebrew); A. Grossman, "A Religious Controversy and Educational Aim in Rashi's Commentary to the Torah," in M. Ahrend, R. Ben-Meir and G.H. Cohn (eds.), *Pirkei Nechama: Prof. Nechama Leibowitz Memorial Volume* (Jerusalem: Jewish Agency for Israel, Dept. for Jewish Zionist Education, 2001), 192–93 (Hebrew); A. Mondschein, "'Was He Then Named Jacob that He Might Supplant Me' (Gen. 27:36): On the Methodology of Rashi and Ibn Ezra in

the brothers of Joseph who were the sons of Leah, as well as criticism of Joseph himself. Rashi ascribes three transgressions to Joseph's brothers: they were contemptuous of the children of the handmaidens, they ate flesh from living animals, and "they were suspected of illicit sexual behavior." Meanwhile, Joseph is criticized for engaging in childish behavior as well as slander against his brothers, for which he received three punishments that corresponded to the contents of his slanderous remarks. Malbim, in contrast, sets out to justify Joseph on all accounts. According to him, Joseph told his father "so that their father would rebuke them, he would make peace among them, and he would admonish them." Malbim writes:

As regards Joseph, all this attests to his righteousness and good traits. He told this to his father out of his love for them, and from the attribute of truth and peace that had taken root in his soul, so that their father would rebuke them, and lead to peace between them.

Malbim cannot, however, entirely exonerate Joseph's brothers, since he had already declared in the questions that precede his interpretation that **את דבתם** [...] **ויבא** (as opposed to the more usual wording **הוציא דבה**) is a true statement. In other words, the language of the credible narrator suggests that Joseph's criticism of his brothers is based on reality. Accordingly, there must be some evil that the brothers committed, as he asserts:

Since the sons of Jacob from the Matriarchs thought the sons of the handmaidens as slaves from their mothers' side, they spoke ill of them, calling them slaves; and the sons of the handmaidens also spoke ill of the sons of the Matriarchs.

Notwithstanding this, the extent to which Malbim limited the wrongdoing of the brothers is noteworthy. Rashi explains the "speaking ill" as Joseph's reporting of every ill of theirs that he saw, and ascribing to them sins that could be regarded as severe. For Malbim, in contrast, this refers solely to the brothers' flawed *speaking* to each other (and in this context, he expands the numbers of sinners to include the sons of the handmaidens who also spoke against the sons of the Matriarchs).

(ii) Gen 37:4 ff.: "And his brothers saw . . ."—Malbim lays out his interpretation of the brothers' plan for Joseph in a programmatic section at the beginning of the narrative (37:2):

This is the reason why the tribes, the tribes of the Lord, agreed to sell their brother, and initially wanted to murder him, for

Their Attitude to Jacob's Act of Supplanting," *Talpiyot* 12 (2001–2), 50–61 (Hebrew); A. Grossman, *Rashi* (trans. J. Linsider; Oxford: Littman Library, 2012), 105–6; cf. D. Rappel, *Rashi: His Jewish Worldview* (Jerusalem: Ministry of Education and Sport, Religious Education Administration, 1995), 16–17 (Hebrew).

they had to presume him to be wicked and corrupt, to the extent that they thought it obligatory to remove him from the world. It is inconceivable that for a minor jealousy over the coat of many colors that his father had made for him these righteous ones, the pillars of the earth, became a band of murderers and wild animals. These scriptures will explain this to us, to exonerate the tribes, on the one hand, since their intent was for Heaven's sake. Accordingly, we did not find that they were punished for this, since in this they were "like a nation that does what is right, that has not abandoned the laws of its God" [Isa 58:2]. Nonetheless, Joseph's righteousness, on the other hand, will also be revealed, for "archers bitterly assailed him" [Gen 49:23] without reason, therefore "yet his bow stayed taut" [Gen 49:24].

There is much to be gleaned from this passage. Malbim asserts: "These scriptures will explain this to us, to exonerate the tribes, on the one hand, since their intent was for Heaven's sake," and he characterizes the brothers as "these righteous ones." At the same time, though, he insists "Joseph's righteousness, on the other hand, will also be revealed." Malbim presents Joseph as righteous, and the brothers not as wicked, but as having incorrectly interpreted Joseph's behavior and Jacob's intentions. They had wrongly thought that the following generation would only see a single son chosen as successor, namely Joseph, and that they would not all continue the "divine influence." For example, see Malbim's commentary to v. 4: "Accordingly, they thought to remove a painful thorn from the vineyard *for the general good*, not because of anyone's jealousy of another. Rather, so that the holy princes would not be profaned, and Jacob abandoned to proscription and Israel to mockery."

In these two instances, where both sides could emerge tarnished, Malbim defends Joseph and completely exonerates him. He also, at the same time, advocates on behalf of the brothers, but without leaving them entirely blameless.

Attention should be paid to the formulaic wording "relates the righteousness of X" used by Malbim to develop his explanations detailing the good and proper conduct of a certain individual. (I found nine such instances in his commentary to the Torah, an additional two in his commentary to the book of Ruth, and yet another in his commentary to the book of Esther.) In two cases, this wording appears in the context of Malbim's attempt to transform a problematic action of the character into a positive depiction (Gen 21:14—the expulsion of Ishmael; Gen 41:52—the names of the sons of Joseph, which could sound like an attempt to expunge the family history). And again, in similar language: "Joseph's righteousness, too, will be revealed" (Gen 37:2).¹⁴

¹⁴ Along with the formulation: "relates [מספר] the righteousness of X," Malbim also employs variant wordings: "tells [מגיד]," "informs

3. MALBIM'S CRITICISM OF THE BIBLICAL PROGENITORS

In addition to these examples of Malbim's defense of the biblical forefathers—as well as the two examples of Malbim's leveling a degree of criticism towards them cited in Michal Dell's dissertation (namely, Rachel's failure to pray as well as Jacob's tarrying in the fulfillment of his vow)—I could list a further seven cases in Genesis of his limited critique of individuals, attribution of sin, or disparagement:

(i) Gen 32:8-9: Malbim finds fault with Jacob's fear of Esau, especially in light of the assurance of God's aid. He reads the dual language: “then Jacob was greatly afraid and was distressed,” not as complement or addition but as consequence: “After Jacob saw that he was afraid, he therefore was distressed; this itself distressed him, for he deduced from this that he was not worthy of miracles, since his trust [in God] was not perfect.”¹⁵

(ii) Gen 35:16: Malbim explains Rachel's death after giving birth to Benjamin as a divine response to “the flaw of his [Jacob's] possessing the two sisters.” He observes that before the Torah was given it had been permitted to marry two sisters, but

after the blessing that God had given him to be under divine Providence, since then the divine influence shone for them as it was after the Giving of the Torah. Since then there had been the [perception as a] flaw of his possessing the two sisters, especially once she had given birth to Benjamin and the tribes had been born.

Malbim mentions a presumed Rabbinic dictum: “For this reason she died and was not buried in the Cave of Machpelah.”¹⁶

(iii) Gen 35:21-23: Concerning Reuben, Malbim agrees with the opinion of the Rabbis (the dictum of R. Samuel bar Nahmani in the name of R. Jonathan: “Whoever maintains that Reuben sinned is merely in error [. . .] this teaches that he transposed his father's couch”—*b. Sabb.* 55b), as well as with the Kabbalists¹⁷ (“the Kabbalists explained that Manasseh and Ephraim should have come

[מודיע],” and in this verse: “reveals [יגלה].”

¹⁵ This interpretation was already offered by the Tosafists; see: J. Gellis, ed., *Sefer Tosafot Hashalem: Commentary on the Bible*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem: Mifal Tosafot Hashalem, 1984), 214 n. 14 (Hebrew).

¹⁶ This explanation appears in Nahmanides' commentary to Lev 18:25, but I did not find it in the Rabbinic literature. A Rabbinic aggadic teaching has Jacob finding a flaw within himself: “. . . for I married two sisters in their lifetime, while the Torah will forbid them to me” (*b. Pesah.* 119b). This version, however, does not speak of a sin, nor does it relate to the death of Rachel.

¹⁷ For the inclusion of Kabbalistic conceptions in his commentary, see, e.g.: Rosenbloom, *Malbim*, 246–49, 373–75, 378, 380–81, and more; for the incorporation of Kabbalistic notions in his halakhic writings, in his *Arẓot ha-Hayyim* (on *Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim*), see Schachter, “The Malbim,” 38–46.

forth from Jacob that night that he changed the place of his father's couch. Due to this action they were not born, and it was accounted to Reuben as if he had lain with Bilhah").¹⁸ He even adds an embellishment of his own in a reading that is opposed to the simple meaning of the verse. According to Malbim's reading, the subject of the verb in "he lay with Bilhah, his father's concubine" is Jacob, and not Reuben; for Malbim, Reuben thought that Jacob should have been in the tent of his mother Leah, and not in that of Bilhah, Rachel's handmaiden. He therefore "transposed his father's couch," as a result of which the two sons who should have been born to Jacob from Bilhah were not born. Despite downplaying the intensity of the act, Malbim still uses the incriminating term "sin" (חט) that does not appear in the biblical text. Thus, he concludes "By these two sons being born to Joseph, the *sin* of the act with Bilhah would be rectified"; and also remarks in the body of his commentary: "so that the other tribes, who did not *sin*, would not be deprived." He goes on to state: "Even though he did this for his mother's honor, he was insolent to his father and his wife." Malbim's formulations express a critical view of Reuben's behavior. How are we to understand this, in light of Malbim's introductory statements which, as noted above, adopt the Rabbinic position that Reuben did not sin? He seems to maintain that Reuben did not commit a severe sin, contrary to what the language of the text implies, but still asserts that Reuben definitely sinned to some degree.

(iv) Regarding Gen 38:1, Malbim writes:

"Judah went down"—he was punished by descending from the level of his brothers by cleaving to Hirah. "And he saw" (b)—by taking a Canaanite woman, as it is written in 1 Chr 2:3, "Bath-shua [literally, the daughter of Shua] the Canaanite woman [bore to him]." Her name is not known, because she did not convert, rather he took her as she was. Consequently, he called the first two sons Er and Onan, because their end was bad, for they did not live; while the third he named Shelah, auguring for good, as the Rabbis said, for then he was in Chezib, for he had brought her out from her father's house and converted her.

Following the Rabbis and Rashi, Malbim sees "Judah went down" as not merely describing a physical action, but also serving as a moral judgment that expresses punishment: a descent from his

¹⁸ For a presentation and analysis of the assessment of Reuben's deed in the early translations, the apocryphal literature, the Rabbinic literature, and medieval commentary, see: A. Shinan and Y. Zakovitch, *The Story about Reuben and Bilhah: Gen 35: 21-26 in the Bible, the Old Versions and the Ancient Jewish Literature* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1983), esp. 12–55 (Hebrew).

moral standing.¹⁹ In direct continuation of this reasoning, Malbim's commentary on Judah's actions at the beginning of the narrative sounds as if he understands them as a *sin*, even if he does not explicitly state this. In other words, Malbim interprets the wording "Judah went down," not as a neutral statement, but as a report of moral significance: Judah descended from his high standing, as punishment. Malbim understands Judah's further actions, depicted in v. 2, to be the continuation of this negative perception of Judah. They portray Judah's sin, even though this word itself does not appear in the biblical text.

Nevertheless, Malbim's reading is unlike that of Rashi, who writes that his wife, the daughter of Shua, was the daughter of a כְּנַעֲנִי with the meaning of "merchant." Malbim (on the basis of 1 Chr 2:3) understands this to be an ethnic designation ("Canaanite"), and immediately adds the crucial detail that Judah did not convert his wife.²⁰ The bitter fate of the first two sons, which is symbolized in their names, is apparently also linked to their origin (as can be deduced from a close reading of what Malbim writes about the birth of Shelah, at the time of the conversion of Bathshua).

(v) Gen 42:21-22: When the viceroy of the Egyptian monarch imprisons one of Joseph's brothers and asks that they also bring their little brother, the brothers regret their previous actions and Reuben reminds them that they did not heed his warning. Malbim seeks meaning in every element of the text, and erects a sophisticated edifice of a legal disagreement between Reuben and his brothers, with the position of each side being built on three premises.

¹⁹ For the Rabbinic teachings, see, e.g. *Gen. Rab.* 65:2; *Exod. Rab.* 42:3; *Tanh.* (ed. Buber), *Vayeshev* 12; *b. Sotah* 13b. For an understanding of the locative verbs עָלָה and יָרַד (ascend and descend, respectively) appearing in the Bible in a metaphorical sense, see M. Garsiel, "Metaphorical and Metonymical Methods in the Biblical Story," *Criticism and Interpretation* 23 (1987), 16–19 (Hebrew); I. Rozenson, "Zorah-Timnah: A Study of the Interpretive Meaning of the Geographical Descriptions in the Samson Narratives," *Beit Mikra* 41 (1996), 135–52, esp. 146–48 (Hebrew). For the Rabbis' ascription of such meaning to these verbs, see N. Leibowitz, *Studies in Shemot (The Book of Exodus)* (trans. A. Newman; Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, Dept. for Torah Education and Culture in the Diaspora, 1976), 559–60.

²⁰ I mentioned Rashi because of the context of the discussion, but the apologetic interpretation of כְּנַעֲנִי as "merchant" (following Isa 23:8; Prov 31:24) also appears in Targum Onkelos and Pseudo-Jonathan, Rabbinic teachings (*b. Pesah.* 50a), and the leading traditional commentaries (e.g., R. David Kimhi, Nahmanides, Abrabanel). Nevertheless, Malbim could find support in Rabbinic sources (such as *Gen. Rab.* 85:1) that understood this term in its ethnic sense. For a presentation and discussion of the early Jewish exegetical sources on v. 2, see: A. Shinan and Y. Zakovitch, *The Story of Judah and Tamar: Genesis 38 in the Bible, the Old Versions and the Ancient Jewish Literature* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1992), 17–26 (Hebrew).

The brothers think that they were punished not because of a fault in their judgment, since even now they maintain that Joseph deserved to die, but because they did not treat him beyond what strict law demanded. In his examination of v. 21, Malbim suggests three reasons why the brothers should have shown compassion to Joseph according to their own reasoning and beyond the strict law. Malbim numbers these reasons: (1) “on account of our brother”—because he was kin; (2) “because we looked on at his anguish”—out of pity for his situation; (3) “as he pleaded with us”—because of his entreaties. It was the brothers’ disregard for these reasons that led to their current punishment. Reuben, in contrast, argues that Joseph did not deserve to die, and in his speech Malbim finds an additional three reasons for why this brother dissented from the others: “Do no wrong to the boy”—he was a boy, and did not deserve punishment; “you paid no heed”—I warned, but you did not listen; “also his blood”—even according to your argument that he was liable punishment, he did not deserve to die (or to become a slave, which is like death). Now with the benefit of hindsight, the brothers themselves, and to an even greater extent Reuben, speak of the grave error of their actions that would have entailed the killing of their brother.

(vi) Gen 49:4-7: Malbim leaves the censuring nuance in Jacob’s blessing to Reuben, and then to Simeon and Levi, and makes no attempt to obscure it. As regards Reuben, Jacob succinctly presents his sin: “by your acting as hastily as running water, in your unbridled haste [. . .] and by the transposing of the couch, only twelve tribes remained” (v. 4). Regarding Simeon and Levi, he strongly asserts: “They, too, are not worthy of such high position, for they are brothers in the trait of anger and revenge [. . .] and conspiracies of violence found a permanent home and dwelling within their hearts. Their extermination of the city of Shechem and what they did to Joseph, too, was motivated by ire, anger, and vengeance” (v. 5). Later in his commentary he speaks of their “cruelty” (v. 6). Nonetheless, he interprets the punishment that Jacob metes out to Simeon and Levi (“I will divide them in Jacob, scatter them in Israel” [v. 7]) in a surprising way, removing the dimension of punishment. He does not understand the verbs as referring to the two sons, but to “their anger” and “their wrath,” arguing that the capacity for anger and inflicting punishment was concentrated within them, and that Jacob sought to diffuse this trait among all the tribes (a decision which Malbim considers necessary).

(vii) Gen 50:17: In the brothers’ request of Joseph after their father’s death: “Forgive, I urge you, the offense [פֶשַׁע] and guilt [וְחַטָּאתָם] of your brothers who treated you so harshly,” they unequivocally admit the crime against him. Malbim’s close reading of the verse significantly weakens the force of the sin reflected in their words by arguing that the wording חַטָּא indicates inadvertent action, and hence their behavior was both unintended as well as

willful: the sale was a **פּשַׁע** (i.e., willful), but since they thought that Joseph was persecuting them and wanted to evict them from their father's house, this made their behavior "inadvertent." "Who treated you so harshly" reflects their past reasoning: they thought that they were acting harshly in response to similar harsh conduct. Malbim presents a far-fetched reading of their self reference as "the servants of the God of your father," namely that it reflects their great advocative influence. He already attributes the divine realm of dual causality (of which Joseph will speak in the following verse) to the words of the brothers: they did not act out of free choice, but were agents in the realization of the divine plan.²¹

4. TWO EXAMPLES FROM THE FORMER PROPHETS

Before examining the findings, I wish to discuss two further significant examples from Malbim's commentary on the Former Prophets that will afford us a more complete picture of Malbim's interpretive method. The first example is from David's major sin, and the second, from the sin of Solomon.

THE EPISODE OF DAVID AND BATHSHEBA (2 SAM 11–12)

In his commentary to v. 3 of the narrative, Malbim presents the position of Abrabanel, a commentator to whom he frequently refers:

The prince R. Isaac Abrabanel greatly accused David, and explained that he sinned from five aspects: (a) In that he [David] sinned with a married woman, and he did not agree with the teaching of the Rabbis (*b. Sabb. 56a*) that she was divorced from Uriah, which is against the simple meaning of Scripture. (b) In that he [David] sought that Uriah would lay with his wife and the son who would be born would be thought to be his [i.e., Uriah's], and his name would be cut off from his father's house [i.e., from David]. This is besides the intermingling of families that would come forth from this, with a brother marrying his sister, of which it is said (*Lev. 19:29*), "and the land be filled with depravity." (c) In that he commanded that Uriah be placed in the front of the fierce fighting, so that he would be killed, for no evildoing on his part; it would have been better if he had been delayed and troubled until Bathsheba would

²¹ Such an explanation is already given by R. Jacob ben Asher (the author of the *Tur*) in his "Long Commentary" to the Torah, in the name of R. Joseph Kimhi. It is noteworthy that the far-fetched suggestion that "and he lay" in *Gen 35:22* refers to Jacob, and not Reuben, also appears in R. Jacob ben Asher's commentary, albeit in a form slightly different from that of Malbim (see above, the third example of "Malbim's Criticism"). R. Jacob ben Asher suggests Jacob wanted to lay with Bilhah. I do not expressly maintain that Malbim was familiar with the interpretation of R. Jacob ben Asher, but we should perhaps search for additional instances of similar explanations shared by them both.

give birth secretly, with the child being given to a wet nurse, with no one knowing. (d) In that he killed him by the Ammonites' sword, and many good Israelites were killed with him [i.e., with Uriah], when he [i.e., David] could have caused him to be killed by an Israelite in secret. (e) His immediately taking Bathsheba to his house, as if he were still pursued by his desire. It is his [= Abrabanel's] opinion that in truth he [= David] was greatly guilty, but by his repenting his sin was forgiven, he received punishment, and he was cleansed.

Malbim does not agree that David committed five sins in this narrative. Immediately following his presentation of Abrabanel's reading, Malbim states: "But with the correct viewpoint, the opinion of our Sages, of blessed memory, is necessary." According to Malbim, Abrabanel stands in opposition to the Rabbis, who in fact offer the correct reading. His reference is the well-known dictum of R. Samuel bar Nahmani in the name of R. Jonathan in *b. Sabb.* 56a: "Whoever maintains that David sinned is merely in error." What better way to respond to Abrabanel than with questions:

For if she were a married woman, how could he later marry her, since she would be forbidden to the one who engaged in relations with her [while she was still married]? And how could he have fasted and prayed for the life of the son to be born, who would be a *mamzer*? How could his repentance be accepted, with the woman who was forbidden to him by Torah law being in his house, which would be as immersing with a reptile in his hand? And how could the Lord have chosen from the offspring that came from this woman a tribe of rulers, "and he was named Jedidiah," and "the Lord favored him" [2 Sam 12:25, 24]? All this clearly teaches that Bathsheba was not forbidden to David.

As Malbim continues his commentary, he dismantles these difficulties one after the other, and explains why, in his opinion, David did not commit the sins that Abrabanel charges him with. Malbim's reasoning is based on the reading of an Amora, R. Samuel bar Nahmani in the name of R. Jonathan, that Uriah had divorced his wife before setting out to battle, and afterwards rebelled against the king and was therefore liable to the death penalty.²² I will not set forth all the details of Malbim's argument, but will provide an illustrative example found in his response to the fourth charge—that many in Israel died together with Uriah:

David was precise in his words, that he be placed where the fighting was the fiercest, for the fighting continued even with-

²² In accordance with the halakhic conception that a king is entitled to execute anyone defined as rebelling against him. See, e.g., *t. Ter.* (ed. Lieberman) 7:20; *b. Meg.* 14b; *b. Sanh.* 49b; cf. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hil. Melakhim* (Laws of Kings) 3:8.

out this. Even without this order, the valiant men would necessarily stand in the thick of the fighting, to turn back the battle at the gate. The order was to place Uriah there, he did not order that he be brought to a dangerous place for the purpose of Uriah being killed. Rather, they fought normally, and he ordered that Uriah be placed where the fighting was the fiercest among the valiant ones who risked their lives. This was so that the others who would be killed [would die] in the course of the war, since they fought there in the normal manner. Only, what is written: “then fall back” (11:15)—that they not save Uriah, thereby leading to his death, and he [Uriah] was liable the death penalty.

However, while it initially appears that Malbim defends David as a matter of principal, when we go back and examine his commentary to the beginning of the narrative we see that he ascribes a series of transgressions to David through his close reading of the biblical text:

“At the turn of the year”—this alludes that the king remained in his house and did not go forth himself to fight the war of the Lord, and therefore this episode could happen. So that you would not say that he was weary and weak from the previous war, Scripture says, “at the turn of the year.” So that you would not think that it was not a fitting time to go forth because of the cold and rain, it says, “when kings go out [to battle],” for this was in the [spring] month of Sivan, when all the kings of the world go forth to battle. So that you would not say that this was a minor war, and beneath the honor of the king to go forth by himself, it says, “he sent Joab,” the military commander, “with his officers,” who were all the military commanders and the valiant warriors, “and all Israel with him.” It was fitting that their king go before them. “And they devastated Ammon and besieged Rabbah,” which took much time; nonetheless, “David remained in Jerusalem,” and did not come “to the aid of the Lord among the warriors” (Judg 5:23).

Malbim therefore reads verse 1 in a manner that levels several criticisms at David (and he continues this critical reading in v. 2): (a) “At the turn of the year”—a year had passed since the last war, there was no excuse of weariness from the wars; (b) “when kings go out”—this is the season during which wars are usually fought, there was no excuse of inclement weather; (c) “he sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him”—this describes the total mobilization of all the men of fighting age, and it is only fitting that the king should take part in a war of this scope; (d) “And they devastated Ammon and besieged Rabbah”—this describes prolonged activity, but David did not come that entire time. It is noteworthy that Malbim’s interpretation preceded several contemporary scholars, who also were attentive to the suggestions of criticism in 2 Sam

11:1, including Meir Sternberg and Menahem Perry in their groundbreaking article published in Hebrew in the summer of 1968.²³

At this juncture we should take note of Malbim's literary sensitivity. Abrabanel was critical of David's actions in this narrative, but he did not engage in as close a reading as did Malbim, nor did he voice any criticism of David in v. 1. Malbim gave thought to the criticism intimated in the verse that begins the narrative, as did before him R. Samuel Laniado (16th century), the author of *Keli Yakar* on the Former Prophets. Both commentators exhibit great literary sensitivity and defend David's conduct in the main body of the narrative, but are also capable of complex reading.²⁴ We would expect that a commentator who defends David throughout the narrative, even when the king's sin is presented openly, would ignore any possible hints of criticism in v. 1. The attention, however, that Laniado and Malbim devote to each word in the verse (such as the second time reference: "when kings go out," that follows the first such reference: "At the turn of the year") led both to presume that the verse contains veiled criticism of David.

SOLOMON'S MARRIAGE TO PHARAOH'S DAUGHTER (1 KGS 3:1 AND 11:1)

Malbim responds to Solomon's marriage to Pharaoh's daughter in a similarly complex manner; in this case, however, he does so by reacting to the same episode differently in two places. In his commentary to chapter 3, he presents the marriage to Pharaoh's daughter in a positive light:

(v. 1) "Solomon married"—after he established the kingdom among his people, he established it against the kings of the lands around him. He did so by his having marital bonds with a great king, a great ruler in those days, and by this he would find help against his external troubles.

²³ M. Perry and M. Sternberg, "The King Through Ironic Eyes: The Narrator's Devices in the Biblical Story of David and Bathsheba and Two Excursuses on the Theory of the Narrative Text," *Hasifrut* 1 (1968), 267–68 (Hebrew); the later English version: M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 186–229; cf. A. B. Ehrlich, *Mikrā ki-Phesbutō*, vol. 2 (Berlin: Poppelauer's, 1900), 209; R. Polzin, *David and the Deuteronomist: 2 Samuel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 109–10. For the different view that this exposition is not critical of David, see M. Garsiel, *The Kingdom of David: Studies in History and Inquiries in Historiography* (Tel Aviv: Don and Israel Society for Biblical Research, 1975), 100–5 (Hebrew).

²⁴ This is an example of an exposition that does not merely offer a neutral presentation of the data, but is also judgmental (either expressly or implicitly). Additional examples of such expositions with an implicit judgment: 1 Sam 28:3b, 1 Kgs 21:1. On judgmental exposition, see: Y. Zohar, "The Exposition in the Biblical Narrative" (Ph.D. diss.; Bar-Ilan University, 2005), 38–47 (Hebrew).

(v. 2) “Only the people”—the word “only” means that the kingdom was established domestically and externally, only there was still one lack as regards their worship of God, that they offered sacrifices at the high places, that is, the Temple had not been built.

However, in his commentary to 11:1–2, Malbim discusses this marriage as an instance of Solomon’s marriages to foreign women, and so finds fault with the marriage to Pharaoh’s daughter. He cites Abrabanel (with whom he agrees):

[...] In that he took many wives, for the king is commanded not to have many wives, not even [wives as righteous] as Abigail. [...] *And Pharaoh’s daughter was the first with whom he began to be corrupted.* Even though he converted them, they were “from the nations of which the Lord had said” (v. 2), and it was forbidden to marry with them, “lest they turn your heart away to follow their gods.”

What, then, is his position? Presumably, we could say that he presents two contradictory views, and unwittingly contradicted himself in his commentary to chapter 11. I think, however, that his commentary might express a more complex position, one that flows with the spirit of the text: In the beginning of chapter 3, where Solomon is presented in a positive light, Malbim concentrates on the political significance of the marriage, in accordance with the nature of the verse, which lacks any critical religious assessment and is followed by verses that express a positive view of Solomon.²⁵ However, in chapter 11, which consists of a survey of the king’s religious sin, and where the verse quoted levels itself explicit criticism of Solomon, Malbim also reveals the sin involved in the marriage to Pharaoh’s daughter. This marriage can be viewed as a political achievement and at the same time, a religious failure.

I suspect Malbim is not a commentator who would contradict himself in such a short range of chapters. This is supported not only by the above explanation, but also by Malbim’s complete avoidance in chapter 3 of any judgment of this marriage. His silence in chapter 3 speaks volumes, since he was well aware of Abrabanel’s lengthy discussion on this issue. Abrabanel presents a clear challenge: “Dichotomy is unavoidable here: either we say that Solomon sinned by his marital bond with Pharaoh king of Egypt, or this was no sin at all.” He presents a complex answer:

If I were drawn by plain logic to the simple meaning of Scripture, I would say that Solomon did not sin at all in this and that the marriage was not forbidden, and I would respond to the

²⁵ It should be stressed that Malbim’s commentary to 3:1 not only refrains from finding fault with Solomon for his marriage to Pharaoh’s daughter, but it also contains a definitely positive evaluation of the political significance of such a union.

five questions that I raised regarding this opinion as follows [. . .].

Then, however, he presents a decisive point:

But our Sages, of blessed memory, received [the tradition] that the true [interpretation] of the Torah commandments that I mentioned is different [. . .] Now, I have shown you the way of our Sages, of blessed memory, which is the received and true [tradition]. Accordingly, we should choose the path of the answers to the questions that I raised that corresponds to their tradition, because they did not raise these questions, and made no effort to resolve them.

Thus, in chapter 3 Abrabanel offers a literal advocative interpretation, which he rejects in favor of the critical interpretation of the Rabbis. Since this is connected to his interpretation of the commandments of the Torah, and not merely his understanding of the narrative, Abrabanel finds himself committed to the interpretation of the Rabbis, even though this is not the literal meaning.²⁶ Malbim, in contrast, divides his view between the biblical texts: with regard to chapter 3 he does not voice criticism but offers positive statements about Solomon in light of adjoining passages; whereas in chapter 11 he then expresses clear criticism. In my opinion, Malbim's interpretation is in keeping with the internal logic of the narrative of Solomon's reign, in which a clear distinction is drawn between the positive first part and the critical second part.²⁷

5. CHARACTERISTICS AND ASSESSMENTS

We turn now to an analysis of our findings. I wish to examine several characteristic features of Malbim's attitude to the progenitors of the Jewish people.

(i) The first characteristic: *the tendency for advocacy*. Despite some significant exceptions, I do not seek to contradict the basic attitude attributed to Malbim on this question. He is defensive of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs and other outstanding biblical characters.²⁸ This is not a simple process, though. In some instances, his tendency to defend these biblical characters softens the criticism but does not cancel it, and there are cases in which this apologetic incli-

²⁶ For a discussion of the Rabbis' mainly negative attitude to this marriage, see: G. Sasson, "A King and Layman—The Sages' Attitude towards King Solomon" (Ph.D. diss.; Bar-Ilan University, 2004), 142–65 (Hebrew).

²⁷ See: A. Frisch, "The Narrative of Solomon's Reign in the Book of Kings" (Ph.D. diss.; Bar-Ilan University, 1986), 52–63 (Hebrew); idem, "Structure and Its Significance: The Narrative of Solomon's Reign (1 Kings 1-12.24)," *JSOT* 51 (1991), 3–14, esp. 13–14.

²⁸ This characteristic is of course not unique to Malbim, but it is mentioned here as a basis for the whole construction of his attitude on this issue.

nation is not expressed (as in ascribing sin to Jacob for tarrying in fulfilling his vow). Regardless, this is not the sole characteristic of Malbim's approach, and several others should be noted:

(ii) The second characteristic: *consideration given to explicit judgment in the text*. When the text is expressly judgmental, and levels criticism at an important figure or at a certain action, Malbim is more inclined to adopt the criticism than in instances where the Bible does not contain any outright evaluation, and where criticism comes exclusively from the feelings of the readers who do not identify with the action. Criticism in the text can come from the narrator, the sinning figure who confesses his sin, or another character. An analogous instance is one in which the text speaks of punishment (or of tribulation that is perceived as punishment), and Malbim attempts to reveal the sin for which the punishment has been inflicted. Yet even when the narrator is decidedly judgmental, this does not mean that Malbim will accept this attitude at face value and in all its severity. He may allay it to a significant degree (as he did for the David-Bathsheba narrative, despite the explicit criticism found in 2 Sam 11:27).

(iii) The third characteristic: Malbim does not view the biblical text as it is, he also perceives it through the prism of the Rabbis. This additional lens is extremely important for him, and he reveals his *loyalty to the Rabbis* in different ways. A prime example is his disagreement with Abrabanel concerning the David-Bathsheba narrative, where he states: "But with the correct viewpoint, the opinion of our Sages, of blessed memory, is necessary." A second example is his explanation of Abraham's going down to Egypt, in which he openly mentions the Rabbis on one point (the trial), but also implicitly refers to them in the continuation ("he did not rely on miracles"). This is also the case in other instances, as, for example, regarding "Judah went down"—he was punished by descending from the level of his brothers." Notwithstanding this, he also permits himself on certain points not to follow the Rabbis, for example when he refrains from criticizing Solomon in chapter 3.²⁹

(iv) The fourth characteristic: a feature that has until now gone unnoticed, but in my opinion is original and significant. The second example from the Former Prophets is quite consistent with what we saw of Malbim's position in several instances in Genesis:

²⁹ That said, even in this instance he manifests a certain loyalty to the Rabbis by adding to his interpretation of 11:3: "And Pharaoh's daughter was the first with whom he began to be corrupted." Such a conclusion is not inevitable, since it could be argued that chapter 11, as well, does not voice criticism of Pharaoh's daughter, and that it mentions her apart from the other women ("King Solomon loved many foreign women in addition to Pharaoh's daughter"—11:1). A striking fact is the lack of any mention of Solomon's building a shrine for her, even though we could expect that, if Solomon built shrines for his wives from less dominant peoples (vv. 7–8), he certainly would have done so for Pharaoh's daughter, the foreign woman of such senior standing.

namely, the *two phases* of his evaluation. On occasion he is not critical in the first phase, when action that took place at the time of the narrated event is described, but he does find fault in a later, retrospective verse. In the three cases in Genesis—namely, the brothers' remorse and Reuben's accusation; Jacob's words regarding Simeon and Levi; the brother's request of Joseph after their father's death—different assessments are voiced by the *narrator* and by the *character* (the brothers and Reuben; Jacob; the brothers when they speak to Joseph). We actually have four instances here, since what Jacob says to Simeon and Levi relates not only to their attitude to Joseph, but also to their actions in Shechem. In contrast to the criticism voiced by Jacob himself in Gen 49 (which Malbim does not dismiss), Malbim consistently seeks to justify all that the brothers did in Shechem in his commentary on Gen 34. It seems that the portrayal of the event in real time as reported by the reliable narrator, the "member of enactment," in Sternberg's terminology,³⁰ is the most important place in the text, which leads Malbim to defend the honor of the biblical characters in it. The "member of report," the description of the event uttered by one of the characters, is not on the same temporal plane and also constitutes *subjective* retrospective thought, of which Malbim is more receptive to critical evaluation.

The first example from the Former Prophets, that of David and Bathsheba, too, could reflect this characteristic, but with a certain change. Here, Malbim's critical eye appears in the first phase, and his positive assessment in the second. In this case, however, we are speaking of a single narrative, and not of an event and its report. The positive perception is reserved for the main unfolding of the events, while criticism is leveled at the actions, and mainly at the failure to take necessary action, in the beginning of the story line. These are of secondary importance in relation to the grave events at the center of the plot, namely, adultery and killing.

(v) The fifth characteristic: the *identity of the characters*. The earlier the time frame—the life of the Patriarchs (and Matriarchs) themselves—the greater, so it seems, Malbim's tendency for advocacy. Most of our examples of critical assessment relate to the sons of Jacob (five of nine) and to later individuals in the history of the Jewish people (an additional two examples). Interestingly, the four critical examples from the life of the Patriarchs are all from the third generation—Jacob and Rachel—which requires further thought and explanation.³¹

³⁰ On the "member of enactment" and the "member of report," see Sternberg, *Poetics*, 376.

³¹ We should take note of a similar phenomenon: Seforno's critical attitude regarding Joseph, which was indicated by Rachimi, "Exonerating Unconventional Behavior," 616–617. Rachimi sees this as the result of an anti-Christian polemic, given the Christian exegesis that viewed the narrative of Joseph and his brothers as a prefiguration of Jesus and his life. Mention should be made, however, of Abigail Rock's identification of the

I defined these findings as “characteristics,” and not as definitive rules, since our expectations are not met in each instance. Thus, for instance, as regards the episode of Reuben and Bilhah, I do not find any fundamental difference between Malbim’s interpretation at the time of the event and his commentary to Jacob’s later words relating to this episode.

So we see that Malbim has a complex and balanced perspective on this issue. I do not have at this stage—and perhaps will not later establish—a formula for which elements Malbim employs in each case and their relative weight. It seems, however, that in a comprehensive discussion of his methodology regarding this issue, as well as in attempts made to explain his motives in each specific case, attention should be given to these five characteristics. Malbim’s explanation of a specific instance might combine more than a single characteristic—as, for example, when four of the five characteristics come into play in his explanation of the deed of Reuben: He begins his commentary by agreeing with the positive opinion of the Rabbis (the third characteristic); he limits Reuben’s sin, leaning towards advocacy (the first characteristic), to the extent that he removes the literal meaning from the statement “he lay with Bilhah, his father’s concubine” and has it refer to Jacob. Malbim nevertheless ascribes some guilt to Reuben, and even introduces the word “sin” that does not appear in the biblical text. His basis for this can be found in Jacob’s judgmental attitude expressed in his blessing of Reuben (the second characteristic), while also taking account that this is the generation of the sons of Jacob (the fifth characteristic). The fourth characteristic (i.e., the two phases) is not expressed in this instance, since Malbim’s first-phase judgment, in chapter 35, is identical to his judgment in the second phase (49:4).

Acknowledging these five characteristics, together with the fact that they present some tension between them, might be a starting point for appreciating the complexity of Malbim’s personality. The conventional perception of Malbim tends to be one-dimensional, seeing him as a conservative Orthodox rabbi who zealously fought against Reform Judaism. But in my view, we should also take note of some of the innovative aspects of his life and activity, which were anything but one-dimensional.³²

opposite phenomenon in her Ph.D. dissertation, where she notes R. Joseph Ibn Caspi’s pronounced defense of Joseph; see: A. Rock, “R. Yosef Ibn Kaspi’s Biblical Exegesis: Exegetical Methodology and a Critical Annotated Edition of Mazref La-kesef on Genesis” (Ph.D. diss.; Bar-Ilan University, 2007), 104-11 (Hebrew).

³² This issue deserves a separate discussion, which I hope to conduct elsewhere. Here, I will briefly mention four aspects of Malbim’s writing that contradict the above-mentioned one-dimensional portrayal of him: 1) the incorporation of old and new that is characteristic of his life and goals: “Malbim’s entire commentary was a reaction to the developing world of *haskalah* and reform. It was the work of a man who wanted to fight these tendencies with their own tools” (D. Berger, “Malbim’s Secular

Two commentators, contemporaries of Malbim, are representative of the two different approaches to the subject of our inquiry. R. Jacob Zvi Meklenburg generally defends the forefathers of the Jewish nation, so that no sin may stain their names.³³ R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, in contrast,³⁴ wrote a few times of the importance of acknowledging Scripture's depictions of sin, with no attempt to sweep wrongdoing under the carpet.³⁵ The disparate approaches of these two commentators from Malbim's own time, who contended with the same challenges that he faced, teach us that in the search for a causal explanation we must also consider the commentator's personality. Malbim is not likely a person who issued declarations of principle on this question, but rather someone who preferred to interpret events on a case-by-case basis. An examination of his commentary places him in an interim position between these two commentators.

Knowledge and His Relationship to the Spirit of the Haskalah," *Yavneh Review* 5 [1966], 36). 2) Contrary to the traditional view, that—in Harris' succinct formulation—"The laws were traditions from Moses; the *derashot* were dismissed as *asmakbtot*, and nothing more" (J. M. Harris, *How Do We Know This?: Midrash and the Fragmentation of Modern Judaism* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995], 221), Malbim argued the complete opposite, namely, that the source of the *halakhot* is to be found in Rabbinic *exegesis*, that brings them into being directly from Scripture. 3) A certain degree of familiarity with modern philosophy and veiled references to it in his commentary (see Rosenbloom, *Malbim*, 165–206), alongside his drawing upon Kabbalistic sources (see above, n. 17). 4) Creative literary writing—the allegorical play *משל ומליצה* that he published in Paris at the age of fifty-eight.

³³ See, e.g., his explanations to the verses: Gen 15:2, 8; 16:5, 6; 21:10; 25:31; 27:19, 35; 30:16; 35:22; 37:2, 18.

³⁴ For a comparison of the two on this issue, see: Frisch, "Jacob Zvi Meklenburg's Method," 115–19.

³⁵ See especially his fundamental declarations in his commentary to Gen 12:10–13; 25:27; 27:1; and on this Frisch, "Hirsch's Method."