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DID RASHI NOTICE A JANUS PARALLELISM IN EZEK 20:37?
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Ezekiel 20:1-37a speaks of how God chose Israel for himself, brought them out from Egypt where they polluted themselves with idols and God was angry with them and would have destroyed them. Yet, he gave them laws and festivals which they rebelled against and so he, in time, scattered them amongst the nations. Now he will bring them out, ruling over them with fury (20:33), from the lands of their captivity as he had before into a desert-like state. And he will (20:37) bring them once more under his rod and to his covenant, purifying them (20:38ff) of the rebels amongst them that they may thrive and return to their land.

Ezek 20:37 is the transition point that moves the narrative from Israel’s past failure and accompanying punishments into a vision of a restored covenant. God will thus repair the breaches that had occurred from the Exodus until the Exile.

I wonder if Rashi’s comments on Ezek 20:37 disclose an intuitive grasp of “Janus parallelism.” This term describes a feature in Scriptures that allows reading verses both in parallel and as progressions. It depends upon the author placing an ambiguous word-form with dual etymologies into the biblical passage. C. H. Gordon coined the term “Janus parallelism” to describe a literary phenomenon “that hinges on the use of a single word with two entirely different meanings: one meaning paralleling what precedes, and the other meaning what follows.”1 The argument that Rashi noted a Janus parallelism runs as follows.

Ezek 20:37: יָשָׁבְתָם אַחֲרֵיהֶם הָעָם וְהָעַמּות אַחֲרֵיהֶם בַּמִּסְפָּרִים הָבֵית׃
Rashi: יָשָׁבְתָם - שֵׁהֲיוּ כְּפָמִים לְיָהוֹ - בַּמִּסְפָּרִים הָבֵית - בְּרֵי שָׁמָרִים לְכִם

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Rashi’s understanding: I [have you pass] beneath the scepter [and I will bring you]: that you become subject to (a) me and to (b) my band(s) [מָסָר],”2 [I will bring you] by the masoret of the Covenant [commandments]: By the covenant [commandments] that I handed to you [but you ignored].

The scepter is the symbol of the king’s authority and his laws—so Rashi reads (comment on 37a) as if 37a and 37b are parallel—by making you kneel beneath the scepter you are now my subject and bound by my laws. So Rashi’s first comment reads קֶפֶּר as obligation (the extended meaning of fetter).3 Greenberg got this translation exactly right although he need not have justified it by seeing מָסָר מָסָר as when מָסָר (fetter, band) works more elegantly, with no need for hypothesizing a dropped נ.4

For all intents and purposes, they mean the same thing.5 For Rashi the entire verse describes a kind of knighting ceremony where the subject kneels beneath the ruler’s scepter—a ceremony of loyalty to God and his obligations. Rashi’s wording suggests he sees the preposition ב prefixed to קֶפֶּר as carrying a meaning often associated with the preposition ב (i.e., ≈ בּוֹרָא), namely identifying obligations as the object of one’s loyalty. In his comments to 37a Rashi paraphrases the entire verse.

But then Rashi reads the verse anew: 37b does not mirror back 37a but moves the action ahead: I will bring you [to full redemption] by means of the covenant that I have already delivered to you. Here ב signifies agency, “by the covenant.” The inheritance of the laws or of the covenant of land (I’m not sure which he has in mind) are not the just for the purpose of my choosing you to be my people but act also as the instrument by which I lead you forward. And you already have it—I gave it to you long ago. What makes this reading fortuitous is that it could serve as a subtle polemic to

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2 It is possible that Rashi’s מָסָר stands for מַסָר “my instruction,” but such a reading of Rashi would change very little in terms of my argument about the presence of a Janus parallelism.

3 Ancient sources note two senses here:


2. Another meaning found in an ancient OG version is “handed-down tradition” (παραδόσεις)—Theodotion. Rashi incorporates these two meanings in his comments and find both senses embedded in the verse.


5 See BDB 64a–b; under main heading מָסָר, subheading קֶפֶּר which notes this usage of “moser” מָסָר in Ezek 20:37.
undermine any notion that Ezekiel refers to a radically new covenant, as Christians may see it. Rather, he speaks of a renewed covenant, one which was given once and for all time at the occasion of the Exodus. For Rashi, מִסְרָה looks backward in the verse to the “scepter of authority” (חָפָן) and forward to the eternal “covenant” (בֵּית the next word after מִסְרָה) already in hand.