

## CHAPTER Z: SEQUENTIAL ORDER IN BIBLICAL TEXTS

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**Z.1 – Introduction.** This chapter reviews one of the most famous controversies about biblical interpretation: *To what extent do biblical narratives follow sequential order?* A famous Talmudic statement (Pesachim 6b) adapted by Rashi states

There is neither *before* nor *after* in the Torah

The statement simply means that if passage A comes *before* passage B in the Torah, then you cannot infer that A is *before* B and B is *after* B. Instead of using the catchy terms of *before* and *after* this chapter uses the term sequentiality. Fancier terms do exist; some scholars speak not about sequential order but chronological order. The question then becomes whether narrative order is chronological.

The Talmud's proof of lack of sequentiality is based on the following verses (Pesachim 6b)

Nu 1:1 God spoke to Moses in Year 2, Month 2, day 1....

Nu 9:1 God spoke to Moses in Year 2, Month 1

This proves that the Chapter 1 passage spoken in year 2, month 2, happened after the Chapter 9 passage written in Year 2, month 1.

Already, Ramban, a famous biblical exegete who lived after Rashi and frequently commented on him, disagrees, or at least appears to disagree.

The Talmudic principle should be reinterpreted as follows: We generally assume that narrational order is chronological (sequential) unless the text cues us that it is not.

We will use this topic, chronological or sequential order, to illustrate our attitude and approach to interpretive controversy. The typical approach is to classify each commenter's opinion, to summarize statistics, and perhaps to relate approaches to schools of thought or differences on the extent to which one believes that Midrash, or exhortative points, are intrinsic to, versus read into, the text.

**Z.2 – Some Classical and Modern Literature:** As mentioned in the previous section, both Rashi and Ramban address this issue. Other early commenters that discuss chronological order are Ibn Ezra and Abarbanel. An example of a modern study of the subject is Melamed's work. He gathered all the instances in which Rashi used this principle (It is beyond the scope of this essay to fully justify each case). Elman, another scholar, attempts to tie the issue of Biblical chronology to more general issues such as the significance of every Torah detail and the desire to infer exhortative moralistic ideas from the Torah.

But the thrust of Rashiyomi is that all biblical issues revolve around four central exegetical pillars, grammar, parallelism, symbolism and meaning. The next section shows a simple grammatical approach to sequentiality (chronological order) which has been overlooked. This will be followed by other examples. These examples expose readers of biblical texts to alternate approaches

### Z.3 – A Grammatical Principle: Rashi held that

- The past conjugation means past perfect, something that had been done
- The future conjugation with a conversive *vav* prefix means the simple past.

**Z.4 Examples:** Here are some simple examples of this principle. In each case the translation reflects the past perfect, something that had been done. Not all cited interpretations come from Rashi, but they do illustrate the principle. We also, as usual, bring explicit Rashi statement of his principles.

Example 1: Gen 1:1 For the sake of the good potential in man, God *had already created* the physical and spiritual world. But the physical world was formless and void, darkness...

Midrash: This (*had already created*) proves that God had created worlds prior to this one

#### Example 2:

Gen 2:25 Adam and Eve were flirting with each other (literally naked, exposed) without any embarrassments

Gen 3:1 The snake.... [He encouraged Eve to sin and eat from the forbidden tree] And God expelled man from Paradise [as punishment for eating the forbidden fruit]

Gen 4:1 Adam *had known* his wife: She became pregnant and gave birth to a boy and they called his name Kayin.

Rashi: *Had known* his wife prior to the incidents of [the previous chapter] Gen 3:1. For if the text indicated intimacy with a future conjugation and a conversive *vav* (*Vayaydah*) it would indicate sequentiality, that Adam and Eve had the children after they was expelled.

Rashi: Why was Gen 3:1 stated after Gen 2:25? So, show a linkage between the flirting of Adam and Eve and the snake's enticement. Since he saw them flirting, he wanted to be intimate with them.

Discussion: Rashi makes abundantly clear that the use of the past conjugation indicates a past perfect, something that had already been done, while a future conjugation with a conversive *vav* indicates a simple past. Rashi utilizes this cue to see Gen 3:1 as being out of sequence and then explains that the snake was motivated to entice Adam by virtue of witnessing their flirtations.

It is interesting here, that Rashi is following the principle laid down by Ramban that order is presumed to be sequential unless the text cues otherwise. It appears that Ramban was unaware of this grammatical principle and therefore raised issues of why Rashi was deviating from the text. This in turn gave rise to unjustified philosophical explanations. The grammatical explanation given here is straightforward and easy to comprehend.

Example 3: Gen 21:1: God *had already remembered* Sarah as he said, and she had child

Rashi: The verse says *had already remembered* indicating that Gen 21:1 occurred prior to the events of Chapter 20. [The implication is that Gen 21:1 should have been stated possibly in Gen 19 right or after Gen 20, right after the announcement that Sarah would give birth.] The sequential listing of chapters was broken to link Abraham's praying for Avimelech's barren woman with his own release from barrenness. It presents the exhortative moralistic principle that praying for others facilitates being answered oneself.

Discussion: Here again Rashi emphasizes that the past conjugation indicates a past perfect.

**Example 4:** Ex 24:1 And to Moses God *had said*: Come up to me on the mountain....

Rashi: This chapter was said prior to the giving of the 10 commandments (listed in Ex 19 and Ex 20).

Discussion: Rashi does not further elaborate on *why* he holds this, but it should be clear that he relies on his explicit grammatical explanations provided in Genesis. Furthermore, if Ex24:1 was stated prior to the giving of the ten commandments, it is very possible that Ex 25 the Desert Temple construction which follows Ex24:1 was spoken prior to the 10 commandments also though it would take too long (here in this short chapter) to analyze the entire Rashi-Ramban controversy on this., Suffice it to point out, that the contribution of this section, is that the controversy revolves about a grammatical principle. The controversy has nothing to do with philosophical approaches or with opinions about the simple meaning of the text and homiletic, moral, exhortative meaning. This is consistent with the Rashiyomi approach that interpretation is based on grammar, parallelism, symbolism, and meaning.

**Z.5 – Other examples:** Both Ramban and Rashi lay down the principle that the Bible may complete a narrative theme laying out characters or themes, and then speak about events that did not necessarily start after those characters or themes, but possibly during. Here are two examples

**Example 5:**

Biblical texts: Gn5 This chapter lists the 10 generations from Adam to Noah

Gn6-1:3 describes the evil of prophets stealing women and God's announcement that he will give mankind 120 years and (if they don't repent) He will then bring a flood.

Rashi (paraphrased): By making calculations of the times of events by analyzing the age of people and when they gave birth, we know that Noah, first listed in Gen 5 was born 20 years after the decree in Gn 6:3. However, the Torah completed the list of generations and then explained events connected with the people in those generations such as the evil of the sons of prophets and how Noah nevertheless found favor in God's eyes.

Discussion: The cue here (for asequentiality) comes from a computation (Similar to the Talmud's inference from explicit listing of years, that order need not be sequential).

### Example 6: Gen. 18-01:03

- God appeared to Abraham
- Abraham had a vision of 3 people standing before him
- Abraham had a vision of his running to serve the 3 people
- And Abraham said: God, please wait for me, until I serve these people

Rashi: The request to God obviously happened prior to his serving them [but the bible listed all three visions together]. [Rashi continues] This organizational approach [here listing a common theme, visions prior to what they were connected with] is common in the Bible as I (Rashi) indicated in my comments on Gn6-1:3

Discussion: Rashi here enunciates a principle of paragraph organization, a topic in grammar. Rashi sees it as perfectly reasonable to create a thematic list and then resume with a narrative and story even if the last member of the list may have happened after the story was begun. In passing, such organizational principles of narratives are common in English also.

Throughout these discussions we don't see any deep philosophical controversy. We rather see literary style and grammar. As to the statement "There is neither before nor after in the Torah", the most reasonable way to interpret this is as follows, consistent with the unified Rashi-Ramban approach.

Before and after (sequentiality) is one of many principles governing narrative order. Other principles include thematic completions as well as explicit grammatical cues pointing us to Author intended linkings of chapter themes.

### Example 7:

Lv. 1:1 God spoke to Moses in the Desert Temple

Lv. 4:1, Lv. 6:1, Lv. 12:1 etc. God indicates many laws relating to purity and Temple offerings

Lv. 25:1 God spoke to Moses *concerning* Mount Sinai

Rashi (Paraphrased): The actual biblical text could be translated as

God spoke to Moses *at* Mount Sinai

However, the prefix used can equally mean *at* or *concerning*. Considering the context of this book of Leviticus, all of whose other chapters were spoken at the Temple, this chapter Lv 25 was clearly also spoken at the Temple (there is no lack of sequentiality). Why then does it mention Mount Sinai? To teach that the Torah was not given in three stages (Sinai, Temple, Moses' Fairwell speech in Deuteronomy) but rather its basic principles were given at Sinai and elaborated on in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. One proof of this is the 7<sup>th</sup> year laws which are simultaneously mentioned in Ex, Lev., and Deut. albeit with diverse levels of detail [Deut. 15, Lv. 25, Ex. 23].

It is interesting that scholars like Elman see this Rashi statement as a controversy on sequentiality. Not so. A simple translation places Lv25:1 in its proper sequence. The Rashiyomi approach sees all Rashi comments as emanating from Grammar, Parallelism, Symbolism, Meaning. In this case the understanding and motivation for the Rashi comment is a simple parallelism.

God spoke to Moses

God spoke to Moses

God spoke to Moses

God spoke to Moses concerning Mount Sinai

God spoke to Moses

The parallelism is very blatant in indicating that the usual *God spoke to Moses* is being nuanced with an Author intended extra phrase: *concerning Mount Sinai*. From this vantage point, the Rashi comment is obvious, clear and punchy. It is not necessary to inject philosophical issues into the discussion nor connect it with something abstract like sequentiality. In fact, Rashi explicitly says that *this chapter discussing Sinai was discussed both at Sinai, the Temple and the wilderness* implying that sequentiality is preserved, it was discussed at the Temple! Rashi is therefore only explaining the parallelism.

Z.6 – Conclusion: We believe the treatment of examples in this Chapter exposes serious students of biblical exegesis to original approaches in the treatment of interpretation. Such exposure should lead to heightened appreciation of both the text and its nuances.