

PARAGRAPH GRAMMAR:

WHAT IS PARAGRAPH GRAMMAR?

HOW DOES RASHI COMMENT ON PARAGRAPHS?

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Grammar refers to word *forms* that indicate *meaning*. A grammatical rule simply pairs a *form* with a *meaning*. There are two types of grammar: Grammar within an individual sentence and grammar within an individual paragraph. *Paragraph grammar* is usually the most challenging Rashi rule to explain because traditional education does not emphasize *paragraph grammar*; it is typically covered in more advanced courses. Quite simply, *paragraph grammar* refers to *forms, word and phrase forms, by which we indicate paragraph structure*. I will try and give some simple examples below.

Example 1 – The Theme: A paragraph is a unit of sentences with a common *theme*. That common theme actually informs the reading and interpretation of the paragraph. For example, Gn18-03:10 deal with the *hospitality* that Abraham gave to his three guests. Thus, the theme of the paragraph is *hospitality*. Gn18-07b mentions that Abraham gave some cattle he selected for his guest *to the lad*. Because it says *to the lad* instead of *a lad* Rashi infers it must be someone known, most likely, Ishmael, Abraham's son. But Rashi adds, *he gave it to him to train him in hospitality*. Rashi made this inference because the sentence *he gave to the lad* is inside a paragraph dealing with hospitality and *therefore* Rashi is justified in interpreting each sentence in the paragraph as reflecting a principle of hospitality (**Gn18-07b**).

Example 2 – The Development: Even in traditional schools we are taught that *paragraphs* have *themes* which are then *developed*. Thus, some sentences in the paragraph are *development* sentences and some are *theme* sentences. Rabbi Ishmael developed rules for the relationship between *theme* and *development* sentences: They are called the *Rabbi Ishmael rules*. One rule states that if *development sentences* are sandwiched between *two theme sentences*, then the biblical style requires we generalize these sentences. An example might be (Theme) *give the money towards anything you desire* (Development) *cattle, herd animals, wine, and beer*, (Theme) *anything your soul wants* (**Dt26-14a,b,c**). Rashi explicitly notes the *theme-development-theme* form of the verse and applies the Rabbi Ishmael rule of generalization: *You can use the money on anything: edible and which derives its growth from the ground*. So, for example, you cannot use the money to purchase *water, fish, salt* and similar things.

Example 3 – Bullets: In my article *Biblical Formatting*, (**Jewish Bible Quarterly**, 35(1), 2007, 17—27) I point out that whereas English uses *bullets* to indicate separate and distinct emphasis, Biblical Hebrew uses repeated keywords. An example occurs at **Ex03-11a,b** which we rewrite using both the biblical text and the English bullets:

Mose said who am I

- That I should go to Pharaoh and
- That I should take the Jews out of Egypt.

The repeated keyword *that* justifies treating each phrase like a bullet with distinct emphasis as shown in the Rashi comment: *Who am I that I should go to a powerful king like Pharaoh and deal with an obstinate people like the Jews*. As the article points out, without the repeated keyword the Rashi comment would not occur. An example of where a Rashi comment is *not* found is Gn41-32: *The dream was repeated to Pharaoh twice because this matter is settled before God and God will do it quickly*. Although there are two phrases here, the keyword is not repeated and hence there is no Rashi comment.

There are many other examples of Rashi *paragraph* comments. But the above will give you a taste of them.