מפרשים

Classical Commentaries

RAMBAN

Why the Torah dwells on small details of the patriarchs' travels

Genesis 12:6

Ramban reads Abram's journey to Shechem as establishing the principle "ma'aseh avot siman le-vanim" (the deeds of the fathers are a sign for the children): Abraham's symbolic possession of the land, his fear of the Canaanite before G-d's promise, and his building of an altar only afterward all foreshadow Israel's later conquest, beginning precisely at Shechem. Ibn Ezra, by contrast, offers a more peshat (plain-sense)-oriented, philological reading, explaining the place-names (Shechem, Moreh, elon) as later terminology and raising the straightforward historical possibility that the Canaanites had displaced an earlier people—while cautioning that the phrase "the Canaanite was then in the land" may also conceal a sod (hidden/secret meaning) he declines to state openly. Thus Ramban finds in the verse a typological key to Israel's history, while Ibn Ezra focuses on linguistic and historical clarification, only hinting at a deeper layer. AI SUMMARY

“Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, at the terebinth of Moreh. The Canaanites were then in the land.”

AND ABRAM PASSED THROUGH THE LAND. I — will tell you a principle by which you will understand all the coming portions of Scripture concerning Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is indeed a great matter which our Rabbis mentioned briefly, saying: “Whatever has happened to the patriarchs is a sign to the children.” It is for this reason that the verses narrate at great length the account of the journeys of the patriarchs, the digging of the wells, and other events. Now someone may consider them unnecessary and of no useful purpose, but in truth they all serve as a lesson for the future: when an event happens to any one of the three patriarchs, that which is decreed to happen to his children can be understood. Concerning all decisions of “the guardians [angels],” know that when they proceed from a potential decree to a symbolic act, the decree will in any case be effected.

It is for this reason that the prophets often perform some act in conjunction with the prophecies, just as Jeremiah commanded Baruch his disciple, And it shall be, when thou hast made an end of reading this book, that thou shalt bind a stone to it, and cast it into the midst of the Euphrates, and thou shalt say: Thus shall Babylon sink. Likewise is the matter of Elisha when he put his arm on the bow [held by Joash, King of Israel]: And Elisha said, Shoot. And he shot. And he said, The Eternal’s arrow of victory, even the arrow of victory against Aram. And it is further stated there, And the man of G-d was wroth with him, and said, Thou shouldst have smitten five or six times; then hadst thou smitten Aram till thou hadst consumed it whereas now thou shalt smite Aram but thrice. It is for this reason that the Holy One, blessed be He, caused Abraham to take possession of the Land and symbolically did to him all that was destined to happen in the future to his children. Understand this principle.

Now, with the help of G-d, I will begin to explain in detail the subject matter of the verses. And Abram passed through the land unto the place of Shechem. This is the city of Shechem for such was the name of this place, and Shechem the son of Hamor was called by the name of his city. Now Rashi wrote, "He entered it unto the place of Shechem in order to pray on behalf of Jacob's sons when they would come grieved from the field." This is correct.

And I add that Abraham took possession of this place at the very beginning, even before the land was given to him. It was thus hinted to him that his children would first conquer this place before they would merit it and before the guilt of the dwellers of the land was full to warrant their exile therefrom. It is for this reason that the verse here states, And the Canaanite was then in the land. And when the Holy One, blessed be He, gave him the land by His Word, Abraham journeyed from there and pitched his tent between Beth-el and Ai for this was the place that Joshua captured first.

It is possible that Scripture mentions, And the Canaanite was then in the land, to teach us concerning the substance of this chapter, i.e., to state that Abram came into the land of Canaan, but G-d did not show him the land He had promised him. He passed to the place of Shechem while the Canaanite, that bitter and impetuous nation, was yet in the land, and Abram feared him. Therefore he did not build an altar to G-d. But when he came to the vicinity of Shechem at the oak of Moreh, G-d appeared to him and gave him the land, and as a result his fear departed from him for he was already assured in the land that I will show thee, and then he built an altar to G-d in order to worship Him openly.

Now eilon Moreh (the oak of Moreh) is in the vicinity of Shechem and is also called eilonei Moreh, as it is written over against Gilgal, beside 'eilonei Moreh.' There in Shechem, near the Jordan, are Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal, where the Israelites arrived at the beginning of their entrance into the land. Eilonei Mamre, however, is a place in the land of Hebron, far from the Jordan.

Know that wherever Scripture states, eilonei Mamre, the name Mamre is on account of an Amorite by that name to whom the place belonged, just as it says, And he dwelt at the oaks of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshkol and brother of Aner, and wherever it says, eilon moreh or eilonei moreh, the places were so called on account of a man by the name of Moreh, but he was a Canaanite from the land of the Canaanites, who abide in the plains. When Scripture mentions Mamre alone, it means the name of a city, just as it is said: And Jacob came unto Isaac his father unto Mamre, the city of Arba, which is Hebron; Before Mamre which is Hebron. The man to whom the oaks belonged was called after the name of the city. A similar case is that of Shechem the son of Hamor, who was called Shechem after the name of the city Shechem.

In Bereshith Rabbah it is said, "In the opinion of Rabbi Yehudah, Mamre is the name of a place, and in the opinion of Rabbi Nechemyah, it is the name of a person."

IBN EZRA, WHO READS IT DIFFERENTLY

[SHECHEM.] — Shechem was the name used by Moses because it was the name by which the city was known in his time. Shechem was not yet born in Abraham's day.

TEREBINTH. — Elon (terebinth) has the same meaning as elah (terebinth). They are trees. Others say that elon means a field, as in unto El paran (Gen. 14:6).

MOREH. — Some identify him with Mamre, the confederate of Abraham. However, it is possible they are not to be so identified and Elon Moreh is the name of a place.

AND THE CANAANITE WAS THEN IN THE LAND. — It is possible that the Canaanites seized the land of Canaan from some other tribe at that time. Should this interpretation be incorrect, then there is a secret meaning to the text. Let the one who understands it remain silent.

