מפרשים

Classical Commentaries

RAMBAN

Did Avraham keep the Torah before it was given at Sinai?

Genesis 26:5

Ramban holds that Avraham observed the entire Torah, including its details and the reasons for its commandments, before it was given at Sinai, having learned it through Ruach Hakodesh, and that this observance applied only in the Land of Israel. He builds on the Midrash and on Rashi's reading of the verse's terms as including the Oral Law and the laws given to Moshe at Sinai, which he uses to explain how Yaakov and Amram could marry relatives outside the Land. Rashbam, by contrast, does not read the three terms as the whole Torah. He ties them to specific events in Avraham's life, such as the binding of Yitzchak and circumcision, and to the basic laws known to humanity before Sinai, which he says were renewed and elaborated at the giving of the Torah. AI SUMMARY

"inasmuch as Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge: My commandments, My laws, and My teachings.""

AND HE KEPT MY CHARGE. — Rashi comments: "As a reward that Abraham hearkened to My voice when I tested him. And he kept My charge — these are the precautionary decrees instituted by the Sages, which are intended to make us avoid the violation of Biblical laws, such as Second Degrees of forbidden marriages and certain prohibited acts on the Sabbath. My commandments — these are precepts which, had they not been written in the Torah, were requisite to have been written, such as robbery and murder. My statutes — these are matters against which the evil inclination and the heathen nations argue, such as the prohibitions against eating the swine and the wearing of garments woven of wool and linen, there being no apparent rationale for them except that they are decrees of the King imposed on His subjects. And My laws — the plural is intended to include, [besides the Written Law], the Oral Law as well as those rules given to Moses from Sinai." [Thus far the words of Rashi.

] Now if so, all this interpretation is posited on the opinion that Abraham fulfilled and observed the Torah before it was given on Sinai. This is indeed what the Sages of the Midrash said in connection with the verse, And Joseph gave them 'agaloth' (wagons), thereby indicating to his father that when he left him they were studying the section dealing with Eglah Arufah. Thus Joseph occupied himself with Torah just as his fathers did. Though the Torah had not yet been given, it is still written of Abraham, And he kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws. There the Sages also said that Abraham observed the details of the Torah, which he taught to his children, etc.

The question presents itself: If it be the case [that the laws of the Torah were observed by our ancestors before the Torah was given on Sinai], how did Jacob erect a pillar and marry two sisters in their lifetime, and, in the opinion of our Rabbis, four sisters. Also, Amram [Moses' father] married his aunt, and Moses our teacher erected twelve pillars. How then was it possible that they should be permissive in matters of Torah which Abraham their ancestor had prohibited on himself, and for

which G-d appointed him reward, when he [Abraham] was wont to command his children and his household after him to walk in His ways?

In the case of Jacob the Sages taught that he observed the Sabbath and established borders for Sabbath distances. In this matter of the Sabbath it is possible though that Jacob observed it because it is equal in importance to the entire Torah since it testifies to the act of Creation.

Perhaps then we should say that My charge refers to the Second Degree of marriages which were forbidden to the Sons of Noah; My commandments applies to robbery and murder; My statutes refers to the laws against eating a limb torn off from a live animal, as well as breeding mixed kinds of cattle or grafting together different species of trees; and My laws refer to civil statutes and the prohibitions against idol worship. The Sons of Noah were commanded concerning all of these matters, and Abraham observed and fulfilled the Will of his Creator, observing even the details and the strictures of their commandments, even as the Sages mentioned: "The tractate of idolatry of our father Abraham contained four hundred chapters."

They further expounded [on the verse referring to Isaac, which says], And he found in that year a hundredfold, that he measured the produce for the purpose of tithing, since the patriarchs were the generous ones of the peoples, giving tithes to the poor or the priests of G-d, such as Shem and Eber and their disciples, just as it is said, And he was a priest of the most high G-d.

Now it appears to me from a study of the opinions of our Rabbis that Abraham our father learned the entire Torah by Ruach Hakodesh and occupied himself with its study and the reason for its commandments and its secrets, and he observed it in its entirety as "one who is not commanded but nevertheless observes it."

Furthermore, his observance of the Torah applied only in the Land of Israel, whereas Jacob married two sisters only when outside the Land, and similarly with Amram who married his aunt. For the Commandments are the ordinance of the G-d of the land, even though we have been charged with personal duties in all places. Our Rabbis have already alluded to this secret, and I will yet call your attention to it with the help of G-d.

And the matter of the erection of the pillar [by Jacob and Moses referred to above] was a commandment that was innovated at a certain time, as the Sages expounded from the verse, "Neither shalt thou set up a pillar which the Eternal thy G-d hateth, He hated it although it was pleasing to Him in the days of the ancestors."

And with respect to Joseph concerning whom the Sages expounded that he observed the Sabbath even in Egypt, it was because it is equal in importance to all the commandments, constituting, as it does, a testimony to Creatio ex nihilo. Therefore Joseph would do so in order to teach his children faith in the Creation of the world, to remove from their hearts the false doctrine of idolatry and the opinion of the Egyptians. This then is the intent [of the Sages when speaking of the patriarchs and their children observing the Torah].

In accordance with the literal meaning of Scripture, you may say that My charge means faith in the Deity, implying that Abraham believed in the unique Divine Name and kept vigilant guard over it in his heart, differing thereby with the worshippers of idols, and calling by the name of the Eternal to bring many to His worship. My commandments refers to all that G-d commanded Abraham: Go out of thy land, the bringing of his son as a burnt-offering, and the expulsion of the maid-servant and her son. My statutes refers to walking in the paths of G-d by being gracious and merciful, doing righteousness and judgment, and commanding his children and his household concerning them. And My Laws refers to the circumcision of Abraham himself and his sons and his servants, as well as all Commandments of the Sons of Noah which constitute their Law.

RASHBAM, WHO READS IT DIFFERENTLY

בקולי — a reference to the binding of Yitzchok where the Torah had used the expression (22,18) עקב אשר שמעת בקולי, "as a consequence of your heeding My instructions.

וישמור משמרתי — a reference to the circumcision, where G'd had used this expression (את בריתי תשמור) describing the command in 17,9 to circumcise himself.

מצותי — the command to perform circumcision when the baby is eight days old; as in 21,4.

חוקותי ותורותי — basically these include all the laws known to mankind prior to the giving of the Torah, such as not murdering, not stealing, etc. They include virtues such as extending hospitality. At the time the Torah was revealed, these were renewed and elaborated on. At that time the covenant to keep these laws forever was concluded with the Jewish people.