Menahem ben Helbo

Founder of *Piyut* exegesis in France, and the first there to employ the *Peshat* approach in biblical exegesis. Very little is known about his life. He lived in the eleventh-century, roughly between the years 1015–1085 (Grossman, pp. 340-341). His brother was R. Simon and his nephew was R. Joseph Kara, who cites him many times with great respect. It is likely that he spent some time in Provence, as attested to by his quotation of an interpretation of R. Judah son of R. Moshe *HaDarshan* of Provence: “And so explained my father’s brother, R. Menahem son of R. Helbo, in the name of R. Judah, son of R. Moshe *HaDarshan* of blessed memory,” (Urbach, p. 4).

It is ;likely that he was a teacher of Scripture, based on the testimony of R. Joseph Kara, who wrote, “And on this pericope, R. Menahem son of R. Helbo, my father’s brother, would warn *all who stood before him and listened to his words* . . .” (*Commentary* of Kara to *Judges* 2:17); his appellation ‘Kara’ [biblical exegete] supports this assumption. The extent of his exegetical writings is unclear. His commentaries to Scripture have not survived and have reached us primarily through the commentaries of R. Joseph Kara, in addition to isolated quotations appearing in the commentaries of Rashi (who heard them from R. Joseph Kara), Rashi’s student R. Shma`yah, the Commentary to Chronicles attributed to Rashi, and others. From these citations, it emerges that he wrote commentaries on Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Twelve Prophets, Job, Ruth, Lamentations, and Chronicles; that is, most of Prophets and Writings, but apparently not the Pentateuch. He also composed commentaries on *piyyutim*, a small number of which have been preserved in later citations (Urbach, pp. 2-3; Grossman, pp. 51-522).

Most of his extant interpretations clearly belong to the method of *Peshat*. In many cases, he simply explains difficult scriptural words. However, sometimes he offers interpretations of scriptural content, occasionally attempting to reveal the connection between neighboring verses. Moreover, he sometimes also mentions midrashic explanations deriving from the literature of the Sages.

He was quite familiar with the Aramaic targumim of the Bible, making use of them in his interpretation. It is likely that he was also acquainted with the ‘*Mahberet’* of Menahem ben Sarouk. He sometimes references Arabic, and similarly made extensive use of European words in his commentaries, most of them French and a minority of them in German. According to Grossman, he was one of the first exegetes to be influenced by the Jewish-Christian polemic (Grossman, pp. 344-345).