Menahem ben Helbo

Father and founder of the exegetes of *Piyut*, liturgical poetry, in France, and the first to teach the *Peshat* plain sense 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 a commentary in the name of R. Judah, son of R. Moshe *HaDarshan* of Provence, is cited in his name: “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 reasonable to assume that he was a teacher of Scriptures, 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), and the appellation ‘Kara’ [biblical exegete] that was given to him supports this assumption. The range of commentaries that he wrote is unclear. His commentaries to Scriptures did not survive and reached us primarily by way of the commentaries of R. Joseph Kara, but additional single quotations appear also 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 explicated the Books of *Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Twelve Prophets, Job, Ruth, Lamentations,* and *Chronicles*. It is therefore reasonable to assume that he explicated most of *Prophets* and *Writings*, but apparently did not write a commentary to the *Pentateuch*. He also compiled commentaries to liturgical poems, a small number of which survived in later citations (Urbach, pp. 2-3; Grossman, pp. 51-522).

Most of his commentaries that reached us are unequivocally *Peshat* plain sense explanations. In many cases, he was satisfied with explaining difficult words. However, he sometimes also explicated content and sometimes attempted to reveal the contextual connection in bordering verses. Together with that, he sometimes also mentions Midrashic explanations whose source is in Rabbinic literature.

He was quite familiar with the Aramaic translations of the Bible and used them. It is likely that he was also acquainted with the ‘*Mahberet’* of Menahem ben Sarouk. He sometimes is aided by the Arabic language, and similarly made great use of foreign words in his commentaries, most of them French and a minority of them in German. According to Grossman, he was among the first exegetes whose commentaries were influenced by the Jewish-Christian polemic (Grossman, pp. 344-345).