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Avraham Grossman

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Avraham Grossman : Rashi (The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Rashi (The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization):

0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy Zerbibperfect5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Very readable, accessible and fascinating biography of one of the greatest medieval Jewish scholarsBy Ben RothkeWhen it comes to personal biographical facts, there is not really a lot known about Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, better known as Rashi. Perhaps the best way to truly understand someone who was perhaps the greatest medieval

Jewish scholar is to focus on his oeuvre. In the appropriately titled *Rashi* (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization ISBN 978-1906764616), Avraham Grossman, Professor Emeritus of Jewish History at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem and 2003 Israel Prize winner, has written an amazing volume that gives the reader a thorough understanding of who Rashi was through his many writings. The two key questions Grossman attempts to answer in the book are: did Rashi have a fully developed conceptual intellectual doctrine, and was he a revolutionary or conservative. Grossman notes that these questions can't be answered without first reviewing the course of Rashi's life, his defining character traits, his ties to the non-Jewish world and his multi-faceted literary work. To which the book successfully answers these questions. The reality is that casting Rashi as either a revolutionary or conservative requires the reader to select one of two extremes. Grossman notes that in reality, Rashi operated in the space between innovation and conservatism. Given that there have been many books written about Rashi, combined with that we don't know much about his personal life, one can question why another book about him is needed. Rather than simply rehash previous research; Grossman demonstrates the greatness of Rashi, and why his timeless works have significant relevance until today. The great scholar that he is, Grossman has written a book that while well-received by scholars, is also quite accessible to the layman. Note though that the book does not have a glossary and some readers may run into terms they are not familiar with. The book's 10 chapters cover nearly every aspect of Rashi's life, writings and worldview. From the outset, Grossman notes that Rashi's childhood and youth are shrouded in mystery. Such that we don't know the exact year of his birth, given that authors and copyists of the time tended to round numbers. Grossman notes that to truly understand Rashi, one must understand the cultural and social context in which he lived. Based in Troyes, which is about 100 miles southeast of Paris, Rashi lived at a time when the region was going through significant change. Rashi lived during the transition from the Carolingian dynasty to the beginning of the renaissance. As to the importance of Rashi, his influence is like no other. Professor Haym Soloveitchik has written that Rashi democratized the Talmud to such a degree that his commentary is an indispensable resource for learning Talmud. Rashi's monumental Talmud commentary is so unique, that it has never been equaled, not has anyone else even attempted to mimic it. While Rashi's *pe' de rishit* are his commentaries on the Bible and Talmud, the book also goes into other areas where he had significant written works. Namely in the areas of halakhic monographs, *responsa* and liturgical poems. Grossman writes that of Rashi's myriad talents, it was his great curiosity that stood out. Combined with his unquenchable thirst for truth, Rashi never ceased to be interested in the heritage and writings of Jewish cultures outside of his own Ashkenazi center. He was especially interested in those of Provence, Spain and Byzantium. With his many students, Rashi also learned of various halachic traditions. Chapter 4 on Rashi's commentary on the Torah is particularly interesting. I had long thought the commentary was for the most part a single edition. Yet Grossman writes that is far from certain, and in fact no other work by a Jewish sage of the Middle Ages is subject to so much uncertainty and dispute over its proper version. Grossman provides fascinating insights into Rashi's view on the status of women and their place in society and family. In fact, the book notes that Rashi devoted considerably more attention to protecting the honor and rights of women, likely more than any other Jewish medieval sage. Grossman's book is an impressive one. Even after completing the book, Rashi as a person is still as elusive as ever. What Grossman has done though is show how remarkable Rashi was, how broad and impactful his written works are. Rashi is a very readable, accessible and fascinating biography of his life, writings and worldview.

3 of 4 people found the following review helpful. A brilliant study of a famous Bible and Talmud commentator. By Israel Drazin. Very little is known about the personal life of the great beloved Bible and Talmud commentator Rashi. What is known is only a few minor facts, his writings, and legends about him, legends that many people mistakenly think are true. I once heard a rabbi deliver as a sermon *The Life of Rashi* without realizing that all he said, all he taught to educate his congregants, were untrue legends. Avraham Grossman, one of the world's foremost scholars of medieval Judaism, Professor of Jewish History at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, winner of the 2003 Israel Prize, tells us the truth in this easy to read, information-filled book. There is much in this 327-page book, including two key questions which are answered in his book: Did Rashi have a fully developed conceptual intellectual doctrine? Was he a revolutionary or conservative? As will be seen below, the answer to the first is no and the second both. Rabbi Shelomoh Yitzhaki, later known as Rashi, based on the initials of his name, was born, lived, worked, died, and was buried in Troyes, France, a city with probably less than one hundred Jewish families. He was born in either 1040 or 1041 and died in 1105. We know nothing about Rashi's childhood other than the names of his father and uncle, not the name of his mother, or the names of siblings, if he had any. The first confirmed information we have of him is that he attended the *beit midrash* (school) in Mainz, Germany when he was 20-years-old. He most likely began his studies in Germany at age 18. We also know that he continued his studies in Worms, Germany, where he lived for ten years before returning to Troyes. His studies in Germany had an important influence on his way of life and his thought. He generally followed the views of his German teachers, but not always, because he was more lenient than them. We do not know the name of his wife. He had three daughters, perhaps also a fourth who died in childbirth. Two married scholars. A third married a man and divorced after a brief while. Two of his grandsons, Rashbam and Rabbenu Tam, were great scholars. Many people think that in Troyes, after years of study in Germany, Rashi made his living from viticulture; however, this is unlikely; agricultural conditions where Rashi lived were not suited to growing grapes. All we know is that he had students whom he taught, and who quoted him on

occasions in their writings. Grossman describes five qualities that stand out in his writings and his behavior: humility and natural simplicity [which are most pronounced in his writings and acts], pursuit of truth, concern for human dignity, great confidence in his own abilities, and a sense of mission as a community leader. He wrote that in making religious decisions for his community, my heart has been inclined to follow those who rule leniently. For example, against others of his time and even today, Rashi ruled that Jews may drink wine produced by non-Jews. He also ruled that a Jew who converted to Christianity can return to Judaism and should be accepted by all Jews as if he never converted. In his Bible commentaries, Rashi frequently inserted imaginative midrashim to explain individual words, many of which describe unnatural events, rather than focusing on the context where the word appears, and do not address the problems that the sections raise. As a result, only some 25 percent of his commentary, dealing primarily with linguistic matters, is original. For example, in Genesis 22:12, after Abraham shows that he is willing to obey God's command and sacrifice his son Isaac, God says, Now I know that you fear God, Rashi focused on Now I know and imagines that God said, Now I can reply to Satan and to the nations of the world who wonder why I have affection for you. Rashi does not address questions such as Didn't God know Abraham's thoughts before the test? Why was there a need for the test? Rashi's grandson Rashbam argued strongly against his grandfather's method of inserting such midrashim and insisted that the proper way to understand scripture is by seeking the plain meaning of conversations and events. He wrote in his commentary to Genesis 49:16-18, for example, that to say, as Rashi did, that the patriarch Jacob was referring to the judge Samson when he was speaking about his son Dan, is patently wrong; there is nothing in the text to suggest this. Rashbam adds that his grandfather agreed with him. Grossman states that Rashi had two goals for his commentary to educate Jews and to fortify them and equip them for the difficult confrontation with Christian supersessionist propaganda. This prompted him to use sermon-like midrashim. In his commentaries, Rashi ignores history and philosophy, like other French and German Bible and Talmud commentators of the time, but not as Spanish Jews such as Ibn Ezra and Maimonides did. He emphasizes humility and his views of the uniqueness of the Jewish people, the election of Israel, the importance of the Land of Israel (which he inserted into his very first commentary to the Bible, even though a plain reading of the text about creation does not say so), his belief in miracles, the meaning of exile and redemption, changes in human nature in the messianic period, love of Torah, the need to study Torah, devotion to God, how other nations relate to Jewry, and his hatred of Christianity. Grossman explains Rashi's view on all these subjects. He suggests that Rashi's animosity against Christianity was the result of the diabolical Christian pressure upon Jews to convert; we must keep in mind that Rashi lived during and saw the horrendous results of the first Crusade. Thus, for instance, while the Bible does not say that Jacob's brother Esau was bad, Rashi constantly interprets all of Esau's actions in a negative fashion because when Rashi lived Jews thought that Esau homiletically represented Christianity. Rashi, like Maimonides after him, insisted that rabbis should teach without getting paid for the teaching, a view ignored today by rabbis. However, unlike Maimonides, he believed, for example, (1) in the existence of angels and demons, for example: he wrote that Jacob sent actual angels with a message to his brother Esau, and Noah saved demons from dying during the flood; (2) the prayers of a righteous person can cause God to change a divine decree; (3) a righteous person can produce a kind of mystical merit, called *zechut avot* in Hebrew, and that the merit of a righteous person can be used by a non-righteous person even centuries after the death of the righteous person to save him. (4) He generally treated women well in his commentaries, but felt that men should have dominion during sex and women must comply with their wishes, and like other men of his age, (5) he felt that women have frivolous minds. What predominates in Rashi's commentaries is his simple and engaging writing style and the stories from midrashim rewritten with such skill that they can be enjoyed by children and adults, both being captivated, indeed enchanted, by what they read, so much so that once read, many of his comments and rewritten midrashim are accepted as part of the Bible, despite their not being so, such as the tale that Abraham chopped up his father's idols. I even heard a chief rabbi of Israel mistakenly saying this tale is in the Bible.

To this day, the commentaries on the Bible and Talmud written by the 11th-century scholar known as Rashi remain unsurpassed. Rashi's influence on Jewish thinking was, and still is, significant. His commentary on the Pentateuch was the first Hebrew book to be printed, giving rise to hundreds of supercommentaries. Christian scholars, too, have relied heavily on his explanations of biblical texts. In this volume - now available in paperback - author Avraham Grossman presents a masterly survey of the social and cultural background to Rashi's work and pulls together the strands of information available on Rashi's life, his personality, his reputation during his lifetime, and his influence as a teacher. Grossman discusses each of Rashi's main commentaries in turn, including such aspects as his sources, his interpretative method, his innovations, and his style and language. Attention is also given to Rashi's halakhic monographs, responsa, and liturgical poems. Despite Rashi's importance as a scholar and the vast literature published about him, two central questions remain essentially unanswered: what was Rashi's worldview, and was he a conservative or a revolutionary? Professor Grossman considers these points at length, and his in-depth analysis of Rashi's worldview - particularly Rashi's understanding of Jewish uniqueness, Jewish values, and Jewish society - leads to conclusions that are likely to stimulate much debate.

`An amazing volume that gives the reader a thorough understanding of who Rashi was through his many writings . . . Grossman's book is an impressive one . . . very readable, accessible, and fascinating.' Ben Rothke, Times of Israel

`The current volume is largely based on Grossman's earlier and very extensive work, but he has succeeded not only in abbreviating it for present purposes but also in updating various aspects of his impressive scholarship. The result is a volume that will undoubtedly become the standard work in English, for use as much (perhaps, in truth, even more) by scholars as by non-specialists. There is little here that Grossman has not covered . . . his contribution to the topic goes far beyond the thorough and well-sourced provision of sound data and careful assessment. He is also able to offer fresh insights into Rashi the man, the scholar, the rabbi, and the teacher . . . splendid.' Stefan C. Reif, Journal of Jewish Studies

`Arguably the most learned scholar today writing about the life and works of Rashi . . . admirable book . . . the scholarly achievements of Avraham Grossman, to which this book attests on every page.' Ivan G. Marcus, Jewish of Books

`Avraham Grossman, one of the world's foremost scholars of medieval Judaica . . . reads some famous texts very closely in an attempt to make Rashi come to life for twenty-first century readers . . . a tour de force . . . Grossman's book, just like the works of Rashi, can be read with profit and enjoyment by both scholars and amateurs.' Martin Lockshin, H-Judaic

`The leading authority of his generation in this field.' Marc Saperstein, European Judaism

`Grossman draws heavily from the current Israeli scholarship on Rashi, including his own scholarly works, to present a well-rounded picture of Rashi. It is a work of synthesis; explicating clearly more arcane studies. Gross is a very good teacher, making his arguments clearly and using examples which clarify his own even further. He is especially helpful to explain Rashi's relationship with the midrashic literature whether in the commentary of the Torah or elsewhere. Recommended for libraries with comprehensive undergraduate programmes and any synagogue library.' Roger S. Kohn, Association for Jewish Libraries

sAbout the Author Avraham Grossman is a Professor of Jewish History at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and a member of the Israeli Academy of Sciences. He was awarded the Bialik Prize in 1997 and the Israel Prize in 2003. His research interests focus on the Jewish rabbis and scholars of the early Middle Ages in Ashkenaz and France, Jewish family, and Jewish society.