

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Avraham Grossman. *Rashi*. Joel A. Linsider, trans. Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012. 344 pp. \$64.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-904113-89-8.

Reviewed by Martin Lockshin (York University)

Published on H-Judaic (March, 2013)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman



Rashi: Exegete or Educator?

Avraham Grossman, one of the world's foremost scholars of medieval Judaica, has published a new English-language book on Rashi (1040-1105), the preeminent medieval Ashkenazic rabbi. The volume is Joel Linsider's translation of a 2006 book by Grossman, written in Hebrew. Translating a book like this is no mean feat, as it is filled with quotations from biblical, rabbinic, and medieval Hebrew—some of them very difficult to understand—and the force of Grossman's arguments is often dependent on a close reading of these texts. Linsider has done a very capable job; his recent passing is an occasion for sadness in the world of Judaica publishing.

Before I began this book I wondered whether Grossman would have anything new of value to say about Rashi. More books and articles have been written about Rashi than about any other premodern Jew, with the possible exception of Moses Maimonides. Yet serious gaps exist in our knowledge of Rashi's life. For example, we do not know in what order Rashi wrote many of his books and which of them, if any, he wrote (or rewrote) after the First Crusade in 1096, an event that changed forever the lives and outlook of the Jews of Ashkenaz. Grossman has not discovered any treasure trove of documents about Rashi from an ancient archive. Instead, he reads some famous texts very closely in an attempt to make Rashi come to life for twenty-first-century readers.

Basing a character sketch on someone's writings is iffy. And when the major works of the author are works

of exegesis as opposed to independent scholarship, the task is even more difficult. While Rashi was a prolific writer in many genres, the two largest and most significant works we have are his commentaries on the Bible and the Babylonian Talmud. So in an exegetical work, when Rashi waxed eloquent in praise of, for example, humility, does that mean that Rashi was promoting humility or that he was explaining that the Bible or Talmud did? This problem is even more difficult because so much of the prose in Rashi's Torah commentary (I would estimate at least 80 percent) is not his, but is composed of direct quotations or light reworkings of the words of the Talmud and midrash collections that he drew upon. From Grossman's book, I learned that even Rashi's Talmud commentary is probably dependent on written Talmud notes of some of his predecessors and teachers, most of whose works are now lost, making it impossible to know how much of the language is original to Rashi.

To legitimate using Rashi's Torah commentary to reconstruct Rashi's worldview, Grossman also had to counter the position of Nechama Leibowitz (1905-97), the grande dame of the modern study of classical Jewish Bible commentaries. Leibowitz taught generations of students that Rashi was an exegete and not an educator and that the proper focus when studying Rashi's commentary is not on the man, Rashi, but on the biblical text. Grossman gently, respectfully, and effectively refutes Leibowitz's approach, proving that Rashi was also a pedagogue who pursued various educational agendas beyond solving difficulties in the biblical text. For exam-

ple, four times in his commentary to Deuteronomy (6:6, 11:13, 26:16, and 27:9), Rashi made the same point—that the words of the Torah should be new in your eyes every day, as if you were only receiving the Torah today. In none of these four passages does the text demand such an explanation and in none does any insurmountable textual difficulty “require” Rashi to resort to midrash. Grossman concludes, “Because of his powerful desire to teach people and to instill a particular idea into their hearts, Rashi repeated the same idea four times in one book. This is not exegesis so much as preaching” (p. 213). In another example, in his exegesis of the verse “A lover of money never has his fill of money” (Eccl 5:9), Rashi quoted a midrash in praise of the study of Gemara. Grossman concludes, “The verse presents no difficulty warranting use of this *midrash*.... It was Rashi’s pedagogical agenda that moved him” (p. 216).

Grossman has painstakingly combed through Rashi’s exegetical and other works (e.g., responsa) and extracted points that, he argues, are not truly exegesis but rather reflect Rashi’s character and worldview. He paints a vivid picture of a humble yet self-confident man with a sense of mission, a man with a fierce dedication to and love for the land of Israel and a strong antipathy to non-Jewish nations. He was fiercely committed to study and to his students. He encouraged them to write their own works even while they were still students.

Grossman’s research is impressive and most of his conclusions are compelling. By the very nature of a book like this, some arguments are stronger than others. In two areas, I am not totally convinced.

Over the years, Grossman has been keenly interested in how medieval Jewish thinkers felt about women. In this book, he argues that Rashi upheld the honor, rights, and dignity of women. He begins with the commentary on Genesis 2, where Rashi could have drawn on any one of three interpretive traditions to explain the creation of Eve from Adam’s *tsela* (Gen 2:21-22): either she was made from Adam’s rib or from Adam’s side, or the primordial human being first consisted of two fully developed creatures who were attached together; the splitting of this creature into two “created” Adam and Eve as separate units. Rashi opted for the last explanation, Grossman argues, because it has a more egalitarian attitude toward women. But perhaps Rashi was attracted to this midrash because of his exegetical approach, since this one more effectively harmonizes the apparent contradiction between the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2 and the statement in Genesis 1: “God created man in

His image ... male and female He created them.”

But Grossman does build a relatively strong case that Rashi had more sympathy for women than other medieval rabbis, based in large part on proof from Rashi’s responsa and Talmud commentary. Then, careful scholar that he is, Grossman notes exceptions to the rule. For example, although Rashi’s teachers held that a woman was allowed to recite a blessing when performing a ritual activity that she was not obligated to perform, Rashi disagreed, forbidding such a blessing. In another example, many medieval scholars (e.g., Maimonides) permitted the search for leaven before the holiday of Passover to be conducted by a woman. Rashi, though, did not. Grossman here claims that when Rashi took these stringent positions concerning women, he was just following his understanding of the Talmud. In other words, the stringent texts reflect Rashi’s exegesis, not his ideology. The relatively liberal statements, though, reflect not his exegesis but his woman-friendly worldview. Readers may form their own opinion of this distinction.

At many points in the book, Grossman also attempts to prove that anti-Christian polemic was a crucial underlying theme in Rashi’s writing. Scholars debate this widely. Some minimalists argue that in Rashi’s most famous work, his Torah commentary, there is no anti-Christian comment (with the possible exception of his comment on Gen 4:1) and that, in general, Rashi shows virtually no understanding of or grappling with Christian dogma or practice. Grossman is a maximalist on this issue. The threshold for proof of polemic is unclear. As David Berger wrote in a recent book, “In matters of exegetical detail, polemical motives are occasionally obvious, occasionally likely, and occasionally asserted implausibly.”[1]

Grossman argues that the portrayal of Esau as totally evil in Rashi’s commentary on Genesis—far beyond what exegesis requires—is anti-Christian, as Esau was commonly identified with Christianity by medieval Jews. Yet, as Grossman himself notes, other biblical “non-Jews,” like Lot and Ishmael, are also treated harshly in Rashi’s Torah commentary, though they were not identified with Christianity. It seems more likely that Rashi’s fierce Jewish pride and antipathy to all gentiles, well documented by Grossman and others, is what animated the anti-Lot/Ishmael/Esau exegesis.

Grossman also sees anti-Christian polemic in Rashi’s comment on Deuteronomy 32:43, where Rashi writes, “[God] will wreak vengeance on His foes’ for theft and lawlessness” (p. 192). Grossman contends that the refer-

ence to theft and lawlessness is not supported by the biblical text and should be seen as Rashi's allusion to the way that his contemporary coreligionists were mistreated and swindled by Christians in Europe. One cannot prove that Grossman is wrong, but here again an exegetical explanation seems plausible. A fuller citation of the verse reads "He [God] will avenge the blood of His servants and wreak vengeance on His foes." Rashi explained that the first phrase, "avenge the blood of His servants," refers to avenging murders ("blood") committed by unnamed enemies. Following on Rashi's standard exegetical assumption that scripture does not repeat itself without reason, Rashi then had to explain what was added by the second apparently redundant phrase, "wreak vengeance on His

foes." So he wrote that God would take vengeance even for crimes that fell short of murder, like theft and lawlessness.

These quibbles notwithstanding, Grossman's book is a tour de force. He proves well that Rashi was a great, dedicated pedagogue, whose "commentaries contain consolation and encouragement no less than they contain exegesis" (p. 173). Grossman's book, just like the works of Rashi, can be read with profit and enjoyment by both scholars and amateurs.

Note

[1]. David Berger, *Persecution, Polemic, and Dialogue* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2010), 46.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

Citation: Martin Lockshin. Review of Grossman, Avraham, *Rashi*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. March, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37358>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.