

Ryan Szpiech. *Conversion and Narrative. Reading and Religious Authority in Medieval Polemic*. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. 266 pp. + bibliography, index.

The title of this book is not entirely accurate; it is neither (all) medieval nor is it (all) polemic; rather, it is a careful analysis of conversion accounts in Christian, Muslim and Jewish works from the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries. The focus is primarily on Christian accounts, but the author's modest claim that he uses "a few parallel examples" from Jewish and Muslim accounts is a serious understatement. Indeed, aside from a very innovative and extensive analysis of Ramon Lull (Lull), the most substantial section of the book deals, actually in various places, with an impressive analysis not just of the "conversion narrative" but of all the polemical writings of Alfonso de Valladolid (the former Abner of Burgos). The book follows no chronological order, beginning in fact with the conversion of a fifteenth-century Muslim to Christianity, Juan Andrés de Játiva ("Xàtiva" is the Valencian spelling). The account continues with the conversion to Christianity of Solomon ha-Levy of Burgos, as Pablo de Santa María. The author quite rightly notes that the "account" of his conversion, in the introduction to his glosses on Nicholas of Lyra has been "almost completely ignored in modern scholarship" (I confess to also having been guilty of this). It is, however, not really an "account" of his conversion, completely lacking, for example, in giving his reasons for conversion, as requested by his student Joshua al-Lorqui (who soon also converted, taking the name Jerónimo de Santa Fe)².

Chapter 2 is devoted primarily to medieval Christian polemics in general, but does briefly mention Petrus Alfonsus (not Alfonsi), who in fact is met with again in passing in various places in the book. Chapter 3 details conversion accounts of both Christians and Muslims to Judaism. In the first category is Bodo, who fled to northern Spain and as "Eleazar" engaged in a series of polemical exchanges with Paul Alvarus, bishop of Córdoba. If there is nothing new here it is because the focus of this book is on accounts of conversion, and not on polemics as such. Given this, it is something of a surprise to find Judah ha-Levy's *Kuzari* included; the justification is that it is an "example of how legends of conversion [that of the king and the Khazar people] to Judaism preserved in Genizah documents" are transformed as the basis for polemics (pp.106-07). Yet this ignores the fact that ha-Levy had no knowledge of the documents found in the Genizah, but did have information about the actual presence of Khazars in al-Andalus, from whom he undoubtedly learned the story³.

Hitherto, anti-Jewish polemic had been a conflict of what constituted "authority" in texts appealed to by conflicting sides. Szpiech convincingly argues that in the thirteenth century this shifted in the writings of Dominicans such as Ramón Martí and Paul Christiani (to use his correct name; he was not Spanish) to the acknowledgement of non-Christian sources as authoritative, valid texts. While this is a valuable insight, more questionable is the claim of a "general scarcity of hard data" on sustained missionary activity of Dominicans (p.126), perhaps too strongly influenced by the argument of one author but ignoring (even in the footnotes) contrary evidence⁴.

² See on this my *Conversos, Inquisition, and the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain* (Madison, Wisc., 2002, revised ed., pp. 139-42).

³ See, for example, my *Jews, Visigoths & Muslims in Medieval Spain* (Leiden, 1994), pp. 85-86, and on the item of the *Kuzari* itself, pp. 214-15.

⁴ E.g., Peter Browe, *Die Judenmission im Mittelalter und die Päpste* (Rome, 1942 and subsequently); Jeremy Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982, on which see my review in *Jewish Quarterly Review* 74 [1985]: 321-26; Susan E Myers; Steven J McMichael, eds., *Friars and Jews in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Boston, Leiden, 2004).

Considerable attention is given to Abner of Burgos (ca. 1270-1347), who after his conversion took the name Alfonso de Valladolid. Szpiech states (p. 146) that very little information is available about his life, yet I have already shown that prior to his conversion he was a scribe and bookbinder for the *infanta* Blanca, granddaughter of Alfonso X, that he was not a physician as sometimes claimed, and that he was in all probability the "Rabbi Abner" found in Valladolid when the renowned scholar and philosopher Moses Narboni visited there⁵. Alfonso de Valladolid's "primary goal" was less the sublime one of encouraging others to explore their faith or "seek truth from all corners" (p. 151) than that of "separating the Jew from his tradition" (p. 152); in other words, to convert Jews to Christianity. In fact, Alfonso was to this point the single most dangerous apostate, since unlike most of his predecessors he did not write in Latin, which could be understood by only a few learned people, but in Hebrew and Spanish which could be read by his intended victims. However, "reasonable" his argument appears, as Szpiech notes he at the same time denounced the Jewish prayer allegedly cursing the Christians, as a result of which Alfonso XI (one of the kings least favorable towards the Jews) to ban the recitation of the prayer.

This book is a carefully reasoned novel interpretation of the use of narrative in conversion accounts, Christian and Jewish and to a lesser extent Muslim, and is particularly enlightening concerning the evolving Christian attitudes towards the citations of "authoritative" sources in polemical literature. The bibliography, while not exhaustive (several works are notably missing), is comprehensive and the notes are erudite without being pedantic. Specialists as well as general readers will benefit greatly from this book.

Norman Roth

⁵ For this and other information not in Szpiech, including the manuscript of his "*Maldiciones de los judíos*", see my *Conversos*, pp.190-92.