

The Medieval Review

[The Medieval Review](#) 17.06.03

Szpiech, Ryan, ed. *Medieval Exegesis and Religious Difference: Commentary, Conflict, and Community in the Premodern Mediterranean*. Bordering Religions: Concepts, Conflicts, and Conversations. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015. pp. xiii, 329. \$55.00 (hardback). ISBN: 978-0-8232-6462-9 (hardback).

Reviewed by:

Alex J. Novikoff
Fordham University
anovikoff@fordham.edu

Scholars are saying much these days about religious difference and interfaith encounters within the multicultural world of the medieval Mediterranean—the term “premodern” apparently now a synonym for the Middle Ages. As this subfield of scholarship becomes more crowded, and the topics of investigation more fissiparous, it is therefore refreshing to pick up a volume that is at once admirably focused and provocatively original. The thirteen essays that comprise this handsomely edited collection focus on interfaith scriptural exegesis, or on how Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars engaged with the sacred texts of their neighboring communities. As the essays amply demonstrate, such a program of study could be both doctrinally conservative and intellectually creative at the same time. Above all, these case studies challenge us to rethink some basic categories and boundaries involved in the study of medieval religious identities. Revisionist historiography (in its most productive sense) is in fact a recurring theme and constitutes one of the more exciting aspects of the collection as a whole.

The volume opens with a detailed introduction by the editor, Ryan Szpiech, who offers rich methodological considerations about how the exegetical strategies of these three monotheistic faiths might profitably be compared and evaluated. Among his many thoughtful observations, Szpiech points out that the term “polemic” is one of those “rigid postmedieval categories” that should be used with caution since it only gains frequency in the sixteenth century (8–9). Of course it might also be noted that none of the “distinct communities of faith” discussed in the volume thought of themselves as “premodern” or especially belonging to the “Mediterranean” either. Szpiech insists that “it is critical to approach this writing though the medieval forms in

which it appeared—the *disputatio*, the *refutatio*, the *dialogus*,” as well as the *tractatus* and the exegetical commentary (9). From this list, only the *disputatio* and the commentary receive extensive treatment in the chapters that follow, but they form the backbone for several important contributions. In the end Szpiech settles on the notion of a “polemical community,” a framework that builds on the insights of Brian Stock and Benedict Anderson, but which he employs to “mean a group bound by a common, although not usually collaborative, practice of textual interpretation and a shared set of assumptions about the nature of those texts” (12). This definition sits comfortably alongside David Nirenberg’s recent discussion of “coproduction” in the Iberian Peninsula and should be read in connection with the forthcoming volume on “polemical encounters” edited by Mercedes García-Arenal and Gerard Wiegers. [1]

The essays are grouped into four relatively balanced sections. The first, “Strategies of Reading on the Borders of Islam,” begins with Sarah Stroumsa’s comparison of the figure of Abraham in the writings of the Muslim Neoplatonist philosopher Ibn Massarra (d. 931) and the celebrated Jewish Aristotelian Maimonides (d. 1204), both natives of Cordoba. Stroumsa points to parallels in their representations of the patriarch Abraham as a model of contemplation, but she also discerns Jewish influence on the Muslim philosopher and Islamic influence on the Jewish philosopher. Her insistence that Christian scholars were largely absent from the so-called “three cultures” of al-Andalus (they were active in the North) leads her to doubt the utility of the harmonious phrase “Abrahamic religions,” and she concludes with the possibility of eventually identifying a distinct Andalusi exegetical tradition. Turning to the other end of the Mediterranean, Sidney Griffith performs a similar analysis of the fourteenth century Syrian exegete Ibn al-Mahrumah (d. c. 1354). He unpacks how this “Jacobite” Christian scholar engaged with the work of a thirteenth-century Baghdadi Jew, Ibn Kammunah, who was himself apparently responding to an anti-Jewish polemic by the twelfth-century Jewish convert to Islam, Samaw’al al-Maghribi. Al-Mahrumah’s glosses are shown to borrow the Islamic notion of abrogation in order to defend the Christian claims of supersession over Mosaic Law, making for an entangled but entirely persuasive example of the interfaith web of exegetical commentary. Walid Saleh concludes the section with a judicious comparison of Christian and Islamic Hebraism in the fifteenth century. He notes that the comparative lack of interest in the Hebrew bible among Muslim scholars proved to be a “blessing” for the Jews of Arab lands, since they would suffer less vilification than their coreligionists in Christian territories.

Section two includes a trio of essays on “Dominicans and their Disputations.” Thomas Burman continues his prolific output in this field by looking at how two notable Dominicans of the thirteenth century, Riccoldo da Monte de Croce and Ramon Martí, approached a collection of medieval anti-Islamic works now preserved in a sixteenth-century manuscript in Paris. According to Burman, the Catalan Martí made more extensive use of Islamic sources, but it was the Italian Riccoldo who had the greatest impact on later Christian readers, despite his more limited access to the Islamic exegetical traditions. His more narrow and literal understanding of the Qur’an was in fact filtered through Mark of Toledo’s twelfth-century translation, which is one of the texts preserved in the Paris manuscript. Antoni Biosca i Bas searches for signs of anti-Muslim attitudes in the writings of the fourteenth-century Dominican Alfonso Buenhombre, most notably his *Disputatio Abutalid*, a “forged” translation that purports to be an exchange of letters between an Islamic jurist and a rabbi from Toledo. Biosca i Bas persuasively shows that Buenhombre’s source of information about Islam is in fact drawn from earlier Latin writings, not

the Arabic sources he claims, although it is somewhat puzzling that we should be told that this represents a “loss of confidence in the original strategy of the Dominicans” and a herald of its “inevitable failure” (100). Surely the fact that Dominicans continued to shape opinion about Judaism and Islam for many years to come should not be minimized; their diminishing desire to achieve fluency in Hebrew and Arabic could be seen as a sign of over-confidence in their own intellectual mettle. Lastly, Ursula Ragacs compares the arguments from the Hebrew and Latin accounts of the Barcelona disputation of 1263 with Ramon Martí’s *Capistrum Iudaeorum* of 1267. Focusing on two very precise issues, a passage of the Talmud (Sanhedrin 43a) and the question of what day the Messiah was born, Ragacs makes the intriguing suggestion that certain elisions in the Latin and Hebrew reports might be overcome by making recourse to Martí’s contemporaneous text, although she freely concedes that such a “reconstruction” from silence is fraught with challenges (108, 112).

The third section, “Authority and Scripture between Jewish and Christian Readers,” begins with an incisive comparison of the Paris Disputation of 1240 and the Barcelona Disputation of 1263 by Harvey Hames, who has done much in recent years to reinvigorate the study of interfaith conversion. [2] The essay’s placement in the third (rather than the second) section is fully justified since Hames goes beyond the well-rehearsed events of these encounters themselves and argues (like Ragacs) for broadening the discussion by considering an outside text, in this case an anonymous Hebrew account of Friar Paul’s polemic against the Jews of Paris around 1270. Close contextual analysis leads Hames to suggest (inconclusively, but reasonably) that the official Hebrew account of the events of 1240 was a much later effort intended to shore up Jewish identity and was in fact modeled on the texts circulated in the aftermath of what transpired in Barcelona in 1263. Yosi Yisraeli takes up the “hermeneutical theories” (128) of Bishop Pablo de Santa María (d. 1435), perhaps the most famous *converso* to emerge from the anti-Jewish riots of 1391. In an original and welcome analysis of his supplements to Nicholas de Lyra’s commentary on Rashi, Yisraeli reveals how Pablo’s extensive rabbinical training allowed him to surpass and indeed critique his Franciscan predecessor by pointing out the contested nature of Lyra’s Hebrew and midrashic sources. The analysis is especially intriguing for demonstrating the continued impact of Jewish debates over *derash* (homiletic) versus *peshat* (plain or literal) exegesis on the conversionary and therefore Christian reading of the Hebrew Bible. The late Ángel Sáenz-Badillos concludes this section with a close inspection of Rabbi Moses Arragel of Guadalajara’s Castilian translation of the Hebrew Bible. This illustrated bible, which fittingly graces the dust jacket of the book, was evidently intended to provide an impartial presentation of Jewish and Christian exegetical views. But as Sáenz-Badillos also demonstrates, subsequent users of his text were less committed to any such religious pluralism and even attempted to correct his readings, “in many ways changing the meaning of Arragel’s work” (151).

The final four essays of the book address “Exegesis and Gender: Vocabularies of Difference.” Alexandra Cuffel takes up the figure of “Jesus as Antihero” in the anti-Christian text known as the *Toledot Yeshu* (The Life Story of Jesus). Specifically, she widens the interpretative lens by comparing the later versions of the text with oral epics of the Muslim and Eastern Mediterranean world. Deploying the same comparative approach to medieval polemic that she used in her first book, Cuffel finds that the *Toledot Yeshu* engaged with aspects of all three traditions—Christian, Muslim, and Jewish—in formulating a gendered vision of Jesus as a disgusting and illegitimate

rebel. [3] Nina Caputo circles back to the Barcelona Disputation of 1263 by situating Nachmanides's gendered interpretation of Genesis 6:1–4 at the intersection of Jewish and Christian argumentation. This close reading of what is ultimately only a small section of the disputation shows how fraught with interpretative possibilities the exchanges between Nachmanides and Friar Paul must have been and supplies a learned postscript to her creatively accessible “graphic history” of this famous event. [4] In an erudite essay, Esperanza Alfonso examines an understudied group of late medieval Jewish biblical commentaries for how they addressed the recurring image in Proverbs of the *ishnah zarah*, or “strange woman,” who beguiles young men. The utility of commentating on this image of the “demonic feminine” (193), we learn, was for exegetes to counter “radical allegorists” and defend orthodoxy against the perceived threats to communal boundaries (198). Finally, Steven Kruger looks at three writings by the relatively unknown convert Guillaume of Bourges: his *Liber bellorum Domini*, his homily on Matthew 2:1–11, and his homily on John 8:1–11. Reprising themes of his earlier book on conversion and embodiment in medieval anti-Jewish writings, Kruger highlights Guillaume's attempt to affirm his new Christian identity through a combination of autobiography, the disputational format, exegesis, and queer (i.e. paradoxical) strategies of self-identification. [5]

This is overall one of the most productive and original volumes to appear in recent years on medieval interfaith relations. Collectively, the essays demonstrate that the exegetical commentary was often a palimpsest of interpretations, arguments, and counter-arguments that accrued over multiple generations and across diverse communities. The contributors, and the editor too, are to be commended for chiseling away at these bonded layers of textual commentaries and revealing to us the meandering streams of interfaith exchanges flowing beneath.

Notes:

1. See David Nirenberg, *Neighboring Faiths: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in the Middle Ages and Today* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 5; Mercedes García-Arenal and Gerard A. Wieggers (eds.), *Polemical Encounters: Polemics between Christians, Jews and Muslims in Iberia and Beyond*, forthcoming. In a similar vein, see also Elisheva Baumgarten, Ruth Mazo Karras, and Katelyn Mesler (eds.), *Entangled Histories: Knowledge, Authority, and Jewish Culture in the Thirteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).
 2. Professor Hames is the founding director of the Center for the Study of Conversion at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev: <http://in.bgu.ac.il/en/csoc/Pages/default.aspx>
 3. See Alexandra Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust in Medieval Religious Polemic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).
 4. Nina Caputo and Liz Clarke, *Debating Truth: The Barcelona Disputation of 1263. A Graphic History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
 5. See Steven F. Kruger, *The Spectral Jew: Conversion and Embodiment in Medieval Europe* (Minneapolis, The University of Minnesota Press, 2006).
-

