

## Medieval Exegesis and Religious Difference: Commentary, Conflict, and Community in the Premodern Mediterranean

Ed. by Ryan Szpiech. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015.  
<<https://www.fordhampress.com/9780823264629/medieval-exegesis-and-religious-difference/>>

► *Medieval Exegesis and Religious Difference* is a collection of thirteen articles that explores the nature of exegesis (among Jews, Christians, and Muslims) during the High and especially Late Middle Ages as a discourse of cross-cultural and interreligious conflict, paying particular attention to the commentaries of scholars in the western and southern Mediterranean from Iberia and Italy to Morocco and Egypt. It is not only about how medieval writers from the three religious traditions engaged in exegesis of religious texts, but also about their own eisegesis, as the editor of the volume explains: "... the subject of these essays might be said to be how *exegesis*, commentary on sacred text, was regularly a form of *eisegesis*, a manner of reading that inserts one's own assumptions and bias into the process of interpretation. Medieval polemical writers practiced exegesis *aisegetically* by 'reading into' the text their own theological and historical assumptions" (10).

The book is divided up into four interconnecting parts. The first part is entitled "Strategies of Reading on the Borders of Islam," which contains three articles that focus on such issues as Abraham as the model of contemplation (individual and communal), abrogation of previous scriptural legislation, and the differences between Christian and Muslim approaches to the Hebrew Bible. The second part, "Dominicans and Their Disputation," deals with the role Dominicans played in medieval exegesis, hermeneutics, public disputations, and polemical literature, highlighting the roles of prominent Friar Preachers such as Riccoldo da Monte Croce, Ramon Martí, and Alfonso Buenhombre. The third part, "Authority and Scripture between Jewish and Christian Readers," treats later developments of Dominican engagement with the Talmud, biblical commentaries (especially by the Franciscan Nicholas of Lyra), and biblical glosses to the Hebrew Bible. The fourth part, "Exegesis and Gender: Vocabularies of Difference," "reprises the historical and theological foci

of the previous parts and takes them up in turn by addressing the theme of gender imagery in exegetical commentaries, polemical and otherwise” (24). The last part of the book highlights the presentation of Jesus in medieval Jewish and Muslim use of the text *Toledot Yeshu*, the interpretation of Genesis 6: 1-4 and the various interpretations of “sons of God” in these verses, the interpretation of the “strange women” in Proverbs, and the biblical commentary on John 8:1-11 of the thirteenth-century Jewish convert Guillaume de Bourges.

The introduction to this volume presents an excellent challenge to common assumptions many students of medieval interreligious relations often make. It challenges the reader to hold a “hermeneutic of suspicion” (in David Tracy’s terminology) toward the way that we speak of the relationship between medieval Jews, Christians, and Muslims in terms of “the three cultures,” “Abraham religions,” and “religions of the book, but also what the terms scripture, textual community, and polemic mean in their medieval context.

The major focus of the articles in this volume is how certain medieval writers reflected upon their own self-identity while at the same time were engaged with reading texts of the other religious traditions. Exegesis, therefore, was the act of reading texts not only from one’s own tradition, but also from one or more other religious traditions. As the editor of the volume explains: “in the later Middle Ages, Jews, Christians, and Muslims did engage with each other’s books and arguments, drawing from one another’s traditions and expertise almost as often as they engaged in controversy and disputations; that exegesis, as a common practice, became the main medium by which writers of each group came in contact with each other’s ideas and debated scripture, prophecy, sacred history, and truth; and that scriptural commentary itself provided a common and recurrent means by which these writers defined and defended their similarities and differences, and thus functioned as the foundation for a communal sense of textual understanding” (14). This volume essentially gives the reader a significant glimpse into the world of exegesis as it served both an apologetic agenda and a polemical one.

The main geographical focus of this collection of articles is the western and southern Mediterranean areas of the medieval world. There is an attempt to balance writers and texts from the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. The editor proclaims that the focus of the articles is to also show how these authors from these three religious traditions were engaged in scripture commentary, apologetics, and translation of these traditions in order not only to defend their own religious tradition

but also to show how the use of exegesis by writers of each tradition marked and clarified the boundaries of communal identity. Exegesis was thereby the “vehicle for both theological apology and social polemic” (4).

One of the most valuable contributions to *Medieval Exegesis and Religious Difference* is its focus on individual authors, or small clusters of authors, in the medieval Jewish-Christian-Muslim textual tradition. Its value cannot be overestimated in its contribution to situate these authors and texts in their medieval exegetical, hermeneutical, and polemical context. Each of these thirteen authors are to be commended for bringing to light many of the texts that are so important for a comprehensive understanding of medieval Jewish, Christian, and Muslim exegesis and hermeneutics. These articles not only focus on how medieval authors engaged themselves in their exegesis of respective biblical and non-biblical texts but also how they were responding to traditions outside of their own. These articles could be considered the trailblazers of future research concerning medieval apologetical and polemical literature.

Another significant contribution of the volume is its challenge to the scholarly work of the past that has been too quick to offer a summary of interreligious relations in the middle ages. The articles show how complex and complicated the relationship was between the three religious traditions. Further research needs to be done on individual medieval writers and texts in order to continue the work reflected in this volume.

A third contribution is the volume’s challenge for contemporary Jewish-Christian-Islamic dialogue. For many good-natured persons in contemporary dialogue among Jews, Christians, and Muslim there is a tendency to look back at the Middle Ages as a time of much strife among these religions but also, in a smaller but more significant way, a time in which there were periods of relative peace and mutual tolerance. It has been common in interreligious dialogue to speak of this age of a time of “the three cultures” (especially in Spain) in which the members of the three “Abraham religions” or the “religions of the book” found a certain harmony in the midst of the crusades, pogroms, disputation, and other forms of religious intolerance. This vision of a harmonious relationship of the three religions has been the result of scholarly work that lacked the nuancing that comes, as reflected in this volume, from researching and writing on particular persons/texts and their respective textual communities. More studies like these will give the world of medieval scholarship a more solid foundation for doing general survey work on interreligious engagement in the Middle Ages. *Medieval*

*Exegesis and Religious Difference* is an exemplary attempt to provide a significant step in the direction of a more nuanced and balanced view of medieval Jewish, Christian, and Muslim relations.

Steven J. McMichael  
*University of Saint Thomas*