

to explain away the absence of the *Politics* from the Syriac Aramaic linguistic environment”) and al-Baghdādī’s statement of ca. 1200 that the Syrian “Nestorian” monk and translator at-Tayyib (d. 1043) “commented upon *all* [italics mine] the books of the (great) sage (i.e., Aristotle).” This is all highly speculative, and Joosse continues this speculative line of argument to the presence of material from the *Politics*, via the proposed Syriac translation, in the Persian scholar al-Tūsī’s *Nasirean Ethics* (late twelfth century) and the Syrian Christian Barhebraeus’s (d. 1286) *Butyrum sapientiae*. In his conclusion Joosse returns to firmer ground in arguing that “Barhebraeus’s Aristotle is by far not the original one, but the Aristotle observed in the works of al-Fārābī, . . . that is to say, a profoundly Neoplatonized Aristotle.”

In the volume’s only essay on the *Politics* in Byzantium, Anthony Kaldellis gives an eminently sensible explanation for why this text never gained much traction in the empire, even though it was available. The Byzantines thought, rightly, of themselves as Romans and thus drew their political ideas from a rich tradition of Roman law, history, and political philosophy. For them, then, Aristotle’s description and analysis of different forms of constitution were largely otiose. But this does not mean that they ignored the *Politics* entirely, and Kaldellis examines several instances, ranging from the emperor Julian in the fourth century to the philosopher-statesman Theodoros Metochites in the fourteenth, where Byzantine writers drew on their knowledge of the work “to clarify their own political thinking” with “all of them arriv[ing] at different conclusions.”

The final two essays look at Aristotle’s fortunes in the political thought of Jews living in the West. Abraham Melamed shows how the influence of Neoplatonizing Muslim political thought, especially by way of al-Fārābī and Averroes, and then Maimonides, virtually blinded Jewish thinkers to the existence of the *Politics*, even decades after it had been translated into Latin and commented upon by several Christian Scholastics. He finds only two examples of Jewish scholars directly consulting the *Politics*, Joseph Albo in the fifteenth century and Simone Luzzatto in the seventeenth. Both used it to critique Plato’s ideas on communal property in the *Republic*. Normally, as Jean-Pierre Rothschild demonstrates, Jewish political thinkers in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Spain drew on the *Ethics* and, to a lesser extent, the *Rhetoric*, as well as, in the case of Isaac Abravanel, Thomas Aquinas’s *De regno*, to help them formulate their ideas about how individuals and communities should adhere to the teachings of the Torah while living in the world.

I hope that this volume will succeed in its first goal. It certainly should be read by scholars who focus on political thought and the reception of classical texts in medieval and Renaissance Europe. As for its second goal, judging from the essays presented here, the answer seems to be “not really and yes.”

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RYAN SZPIECH, *Conversion and Narrative: Reading and Religious Authority in Medieval Polemic*. (Middle Ages Series.) Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. Pp. 328. \$59.95. ISBN: 9780812244717. doi:10.1017/S0038713413002704

In current discussions of multiconfessional Europe both past and present there is a lot of talk about conversion from one monotheistic religion to another. Historians and literary critics of medieval Iberian cultures in particular spend a good deal of time thinking about converts to and from Christianity, Judaism, and Islam: who converted when, why, and why their conversions were significant. What is often lost from view are the ways in which converts represent their conversion experiences and what importance these representations have for larger issues related to religious polemic and apology in the Middle Ages. In this book Ryan Szpiech has brought us a cogently argued, rigorously researched, and

thoughtfully constructed theory of conversion narrative in the Middle Ages. His overall argument is compellingly simple: individual narratives of conversion are as much about the histories of religions as they are about the histories of individuals. That is, personal conversion narratives are more than simply thumbnail biographies or testimonials of religious experience; they are allegories of broad historical narratives that support the legitimacy of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam vis-à-vis one another. Szpiech demonstrates this thesis in a series of rigorous, close readings of conversion narratives written by Jews, Christians, and Muslims in an impressive range of languages (Latin, Hebrew, Arabic, Castilian, Catalan) and locations (Iberia, North Africa, France, Italy, Germany).

In the introduction Szpiech surveys modern theories of conversion and explains that they are often at odds with the nature and function of the medieval conversion narratives he brings into focus. He clearly sets out the goals of his study and justifies the selection of the texts he chooses to analyze. In chapter 1, “From Peripety to Prose: Tracing the Pauline and Augustinian Paradigms” (30–58), Szpiech gives an overview of the two most foundational conversion narratives in the Christian tradition, those of Saul of Tarsus/Paul and of St. Augustine of Hippo. Laying the groundwork for further discussion of the theological and historical importance of personal conversion narratives, Szpiech demonstrates how medieval authors make use of the Pauline and Augustine models in their own conversion narratives. In the chapters that follow he explains how a series of medieval authors transformed these narratives, developing new ways to authorize their texts that responded to the intellectual climate and theological imperatives of their respective times and communities of faith.

In chapter 2, “Alterity and *Auctoritas*: Reason and the Twelfth-Century Expansion of Authority” (59–91), Szpiech explains the influence of Scholastic and Maimonidean Aristotelianism on the construction of authority in conversion narratives. During this period, rational argumentation enabled authors to draw not only on traditional authorities but also on their own personal narratives as well as texts outside of their own tradition. This move authorized the personal narrative as an authentic source for theological polemic and led many authors to place their own conversion stories in the service of broader arguments and narratives about salvation and human history.

Chapter 3, “In the Shadow of the Khazars: Narrating Conversion to Judaism” (92–120), deals with narratives of conversion to Judaism, centering on the personal narrative of Giuàn/Obadiah and the fictionalized narrative of the king of Khazars by Judah Halevi. Szpiech notes that the structure of personal narratives was often influenced by the textual traditions of the convert’s original religion. To wit, the formerly Christian Giuàn/Obadiah’s narrative bears clear markings of Christian ideas of salvation, while Halevi’s account of the Khazar king’s conversion to Judaism “is less a question of faith and interpretation than of action and worship” (115).

In the fourth chapter, “A War of Words: Translating Authority in Thirteenth-Century Polemic” (121–42), Szpiech argues that the authorization of non-Christian works for purposes of pro-Christian polemics gave rise to a new focus on linguistic expertise (especially in Hebrew and Arabic) as a basis for textual authority. He demonstrates this argument in the writings of the Dominicans Ramon Martí and Fra Pau (who famously debated the legitimacy of Judaism with Nahmanides before Jaume I of Aragon in the Disputation of Barcelona in 1263). Later, in the writings of Ramon Llull, this focus on linguistic expertise came to complement and in some cases compete with the convert’s personal experience of conversion as a source of authority.

Chapter 5, “The Jargon of Authenticity: Abner of Burgos/Alfonso of Valladolid and the Paradox of Testimony” (143–73), centers on a study of the fourteenth-century convert to Christianity from Judaism whose work is a departure from the twelfth- and thirteenth-century trends Szpiech studies in chapters 1–4. Abner/Alfonso wrote in Hebrew

for an ostensibly Jewish audience and, according to Szpiech, was more concerned with establishing an “authentic voice” than an “authentic text” (165). His major innovation in polemic strategy, writes Szpiech, was to frame the discussion, not as one between Christians and Jews, but between “those who seek truth (such as himself) and those who merely follow tradition (such as most Jews)” (148). Szpiech also notes that Abner/Alfonso was more pragmatic and more proselytic than his predecessors: by writing in Hebrew and speaking directly to their experience, he engaged his target audience of Iberian Jews, rather than speaking to a Christian readership of fellow clerics reading in Latin.

In chapter 6, “The Supersessionist Imperative: Islam and the Historical Drama of Revelation” (174–213), Szpiech focuses on narratives of conversion to Islam by former Jews and Christians. He concludes that in general these narratives are less about salvation and more about a logical progression from error to truth. The broader narratives of Islam vis-à-vis Judaism and Christianity likewise stress “correction and clarification” (221) rather than salvation (as in Christianity) or purification (as in Judaism). The exception is the former Christian Anselm/Abd Allah, who employed narrative tropes of conversion from some of the Christian models discussed in previous chapters.

In the conclusion, “Polemic as Narrative” (215–26), Szpiech includes a short reflection on the early-fifteenth-century Hebrew narrative *Abitub and Salman* as a coda to his study. Of all the narratives Szpiech studies, *Abitub and Salman* is the only one to demonstrate a “full commitment to fiction” (216). For Szpiech, this is a reminder that all of the texts in question “make most sense when viewed as stories” (217) and not as primarily biographical or theological texts. As Szpiech reminds us, conversion narratives, whether autobiographical or fictional, are really about “rival fictions of sacred history” (219).

There is a lot to like about this book. Szpiech’s linguistic skills allow him to bring together incisive, close readings from a wide variety of primary texts written in Semitic and Romance languages. Very few scholars are able to do this. His analyses rest solidly on the primary texts, which he allows to speak for themselves. His arguments are well constructed, and the subarguments he makes in each chapter dovetail nicely. Szpiech marshals the mass of textual evidence effectively, summarizing previous arguments in order to clarify their importance for the current one. His overall thesis is clearly inflected in each of the chapters, the result being a very coherent argument throughout.

Out of deference to the conventions of the academic book review I will here pick a nit or two. In chapter 1, for example, Szpiech observes that Jewish conversion narratives were “not used to symbolize Jewish ideas of salvation history as often as [they were] in Christian texts” (101). What Szpiech does not mention is that Judaism has no proselytic mission, and therefore models of conversion are not a part of the traditional repertory of narrative tropes in Jewish tradition. Structurally, Szpiech’s study of *Abitub and Salman* might have served as an entire chapter unto itself focusing on the culmination of the narrative turn in conversion narrative and set against the broader literary history of the fifteenth-century Mediterranean. As regards the overall definition of the study, this reviewer would have liked to see more effort to link the development of conversion narratives themselves to the actual histories of conversion in Europe and the Mediterranean during the Middle Ages. These issues, however, are hardly substantial and are probably more a question of personal taste than of intellectual or editorial rigor, both of which Szpiech demonstrates quite clearly.

Conversion and Narrative is a fine book that makes a significant contribution to the study of conversion in the Middle Ages. Readers interested in medieval theology will benefit from Szpiech’s attention to the narrative dimension of religious polemics, and scholars of narrative will learn much about the genre’s theological and confessional importance. All will enjoy Szpiech’s many original insights and compelling argumentation.

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