

Jews could not be identified simply by appearance. Resnick, who does not endorse any suggestion of real difference, nonetheless finds it necessary to demonstrate this truism by mobilizing stories where such an identification could not be made (254, 256). The need for the Jewish badge, as he recognizes, is further evidence of this self-evident reality.

I have complained about the repeated cases of excessive discussion of material that could—and in my view should—have been drastically condensed. The conclusion, however, elicits the opposite reaction. It is sketchy and does not underscore the key assertions of this study in a focused fashion. One has to search the volume for the author's most important formulations of the genuinely fascinating tensions between his "marks of distinction" and empirical realities. Still, those formulations are present, and the points they make are intriguing.

I wish that this book had been shortened and sharpened. But despite the obstacles that it places before the reader, it is a valuable study that will have a material impact on scholarly discourse regarding a topic of great significance.

David Berger
Yeshiva University
New York, NY



Ryan Szpiech. *Conversion and Narrative: Reading and Religious Authority in Medieval Polemic*. The Middle Ages Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. 328 pp.
doi:10.1017/S0364009413000354

It is a difficult task to draw broad historical conclusions about a phenomenon as deeply personal and complex as religious conversion. Contingencies of historical time and place, not to mention the fluidity of vocabularies of devotion and theology, and the aesthetics of faith, make conversion a fairly elusive subject. In *Conversion and Narrative*, Ryan Szpiech has managed to circumvent many conceptual and theoretical perils of the topic by focusing on the aesthetic, narratological, and cultural valances of his sources. His impressive and richly researched book sets aside the pursuit of the convert's experience and focuses instead on the cultural and literary resonance of conversion accounts, which are treated as formulations of religious ideology and as statements about the boundaries and limits of medieval religious communities.

The central argument of this book is that medieval conversion narratives were produced to present authentic and authoritative political, cultural, and polemical testaments to an ideal of faith. Medieval conversion accounts, Szpiech argues, also laid claim to a body of authoritative proof texts and arguments that demonstrated the truth of the author's new faith and projected an ideal of future redemption or punishment. *Conversion and Narrative* is organized both chronologically and thematically. On the chronological axis, Szpiech traces the formalization and

development of narrative tropes of conversion stories from the time of Saul/Paul through the later Middle Ages. On the thematic axis, Szpiech draws attention to historical, intellectual, and cultural forces that shaped the aesthetics of representing conversion as an allegory for redemption or justice. The author commits one substantial chapter each to Jewish and Muslim conversion accounts. Szpiech's analysis of this material is both compelling and astute. Yet Christianity remains the center of gravity throughout the book; Szpiech's treatment of Jewish and Muslim conceptions of conversion feels almost ancillary, in the face of strong evidence that the drive to narrate conversion was largely a Christian endeavor.

To demonstrate that the dominant themes and forms of conversion narratives developed along a historical trajectory, Szpiech establishes a pedigree for the central tropes of medieval Christian conversion accounts. Common themes, such as a call to serve God or a fresh discovery of or return to previously concealed truth, were initially delineated in the New Testament, then honed and reinforced by Augustine, and finally adopted and adapted in medieval conversion narratives. The foundational accounts of Saul/Paul's acceptance of Jesus as messiah conceptualized conversion as a renewal or reinvention of the self, and as a means of meeting a previously unfulfilled potential. Establishing a dialectic between the foundational paradigms established by Saul/Paul's epiphany, on the one hand, and two late medieval Iberian conversion accounts, on the other (the first by Juan Andrés, who converted from Islam, and the second by Solomon Halevi/Pablo de Santa Maria, who converted from Judaism), Szpiech historicizes the rhetoric of conversion. He shows how these two later medieval authors appropriated varied and changing paradigms of Christian conversion as they crafted personal narratives, grounding their own apostasy in specific historical and social circumstances.

The twelfth century saw a relative surge in the production and circulation of conversion stories, just as converts came to play an increasingly important role in Christian missionizing projects. The turn towards hermeneutical methods based in rational thinking that took hold by the twelfth century also contributed to a fresh view of polemic as an intellectually and theologically worthy pursuit. This shift also spurred a renewed interest in conversion narratives. And, as Szpiech shows, these texts were integrally linked with Christian polemical rhetoric and the discourse of redemption. Some tropes and proof texts reappear consistently in conversion narratives across time. However, certain aspects of this increasingly refined discourse— notions of authority, the markers of authentic experience or testimony, the role of polemic and rationalism in conversion accounts, and their presumed purpose and audience—were subject to significant change from the twelfth to the fifteenth century.

Szpiech situates his study in conversation with a selection of recent works – including Steven Kruger's *Spectral Jew* and Miri Rubin's *Gentile Tales*, among others – that have used the study of narratology to render accessible highly personal and emotional motives and acts of faith that seem to elude historical understanding. He also maps a distinct terrain for his analysis, one that transcends typical geographical, temporal, and cultural or religious boundaries. Each of the six chapters considers a work or selection of works that illustrate one of the broader arguments advanced by the author. A good number of these texts (Petrus Alfonsi's *Dialogue against the Jews*, the *Little Work* of Herman the Jew,

Nahmanides' Barcelona Disputation, Judah ha-Levi's *Kuzari*, and Abner of Burgos/Alfonso of Villadolid's *Teacher of Righeousness*, to name just a few) have previously received significant scholarly attention. Happily (and, I admit, surprisingly), Szpiech is able to shed fresh light on these sources, refraining from retracing well-trodden paths and limiting his engagement with these texts to questions related directly to narrative and authority.

Chapter 1, which deals with paradigms of conversion narratives, plots the development of central tropes from Saul/Paul and Augustine through the late Middle Ages. Chapter 2 examines Petrus Alfonsi's *Dialogue against the Jews* and Hermann the Jew's *Little Work* as texts that provided a medieval paradigm for casting the convert from Judaism as the authentic and authoritative voice of Christianity. The third chapter examines narratives of converts to Judaism, providing a common frame of reference for understanding the polemical and narrative voice Abner/Alfonso assumed in *Teacher*. The study of Raymond Llull and Raymond Martí in chapter 4 introduces two of the central figures in Spanish polemical literature as Abner/Alfonso's direct interlocutors. Chapter 5 is committed to the study of Abner/Alfonso's polemical dialogue, *Teacher of Righteousness*. This text, which was originally written in Hebrew for a Jewish audience (though it remains today only in a Spanish translation), gives voice to some of the tropes examined in *Conversion and Narrative*, but conspicuously eschews others. (For example, Abner/Alfonso touts his discovery of a truth that had previously been hidden from him and assumes an authentic and authoritative exegetical voice; yet he neglects to embrace the Augustinian supersessionist model of exegesis as the valid reading of scripture or history.) And chapter 6, which explores conversion to Islam, takes as its point of departure Abner/Alfonso's statement that the belief in Jesus's messianic character renders Muslims Christian. (Here Szpiech finds that a narrative pattern, distinct from but perhaps in conversation with those employed in Christianity, emerged in later medieval Muslim conversion accounts.)

In 2006 Szpiech completed an important and pioneering dissertation on Abner/Alfonso, little of which has been replicated in this volume. It should come as little surprise, then, that although the book has a much wider scope, the subject of Szpiech's earlier work seems to help shape the central questions throughout his effort to historicize understandings of conversion. Abner/Alfonso seems to sound as a muse for Szpiech throughout *Conversion and Narrative*, serving as an example of the polemical, rhetorical, and narrative typologies frequently employed throughout the genre. Moreover, because his writings can be fit into many of the paradigms examined this book, Abner/Alfonso's example provides a solid if unidentified mooring on which Szpiech is able to anchor the large and varied body of literature the book considers.

Nina Caputo
University of Florida
Gainesville, FL

