

BOOK REVIEW

Medieval Exegesis and Religious Difference: Commentary, Conflict, and Community in the Premodern Mediterranean, edited by Ryan Szpiech, New York, Fordham University Press, 2015, 352 pp., \$55.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-8232-6462-9

The 13 essays in this book were originally presented at a conference held at the University of Michigan in October 2011. Ryan Szpiech has organized the essays into four sections and writes that they:

explore the double nature of scriptural commentary in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, considering exegesis in all three religions as both a praxis of communal faith and a tool for demarcating the boundaries between religious communities and their rivals and neighbors. (2)

As a whole, the essays ‘convey an exciting sense of the possibilities of new discoveries and insights that only a comparative dialogue can bring’ (3). In a helpful introduction, Szpiech underscores the ways in which authors used exegesis and commentary on texts to ‘mark out and clarify the boundaries of communal identity’ (3). In this sense, the essays generally consider how medieval exegeses of texts could involve border crossings and function as ‘theological apology and social polemic’ (4).

The first section, ‘Strategies of Reading on the Borders of Islam’, consists of three chapters focusing on Arabic-speaking milieus. Sarah Stroumsa examines the patriarch Abraham as an archetypal opponent of idolatry. She compares the work of Ibn Masarra (b. 883) and Maimonides (b. 1135) and demonstrates that readings of Abraham’s life can be an exegetical key to unlocking the boundary separating proselytes and traditional Jews. Sidney Griffith shows how Ibn al-Maḥrūma’s fourteenth-century *Ḥawāshī*, commentary on Ibn Kammūna’s *Tanqīh*, was used to advance the idea of the abrogation of Mosaic Law and, therefore, a rejection of Judaism’s claim to be the one true religion. Walid Saleh’s essay looks at al-Biqā’ī (d. 1480) and his study of the Torah. Saleh argues that knowledge of the Other – a kind of communal border crossing – could be used as a means to solidify one’s own identity, not necessarily to understand the Other. Such was the case for al-Biqā’ī, whose study of the Torah enabled him to experience ‘[the Jews’] salvation through Islamic terms’ (66).

The second section looks at ‘Dominicans and Their Disputations’. Thomas Burman’s chapter illustrates two approaches to exegesis: Ramon Martí’s and Riccoldo da Monte di Croce’s thirteenth-century readings of Islamic sources. According to Burman, Martí made use of both qur’anic text and Hadith literature in a way that reflected some of the intellectual and literary complexities of Muslim exegesis. Riccoldo’s work depended more heavily on the Qur’an alone. Antoni Biosca i Bas examines the anti-Muslim work of Alfonso Buenhombre (d. c. 1353) and shows how his *Disputatio Abutalib* appears to be a forgery, not a translation of an earlier Arabic text as he claims. The forgery functions, according to Biosca i Bas, as a means for rounding-out the failed goals (conversion of Muslims) of previous Dominican eras, for the result of Buenhombre’s contrived encounters was the victory of Christian truth (99–100). Ursula Ragacs’ chapter looks at the Barcelona disputation of 1263 between the Dominican Pau Cristià and the Jewish rabbi Nahmanides. She uses accounts of this disputation and compares them with Martí’s *Capistrum Judaeorum* from 1267 to reconstruct the original disputation and show how Martí’s text was informed by Nahmanides’ account.

The third section focuses on ‘Authority and Scripture between Jewish and Christian Readers’. Harvey Hames compares accounts of the Paris Disputation of 1240 between Rabbi Yehiel of Paris and the Christian Nicholas Donin. Hames concludes that the Paris Disputation, unlike other disputations with evidence that they actually took place, was only a literary event designed to give beleaguered Jews in northern France helpful ammunition for anti-Christian attacks. Yosi Israel looks at Pablo de Santa María (d. c. 1435), a Jewish convert to Christianity, and the supplements he wrote (*Additiones*) to Nicholas of Lyra’s (d. c. 1349) *Postilla litteralis*. Israel shows that de Santa María, in light of his Jewish background, was able to show the extent to which Lyra unwittingly drew from earlier rabbinic sources. Ángel Sáenz-Badillos considers the Bible translation completed by Rabbi Moses Arragel in the early-fifteenth century. Sáenz-Badillos shows that the final form of this manuscript contains materials that were likely not included by Arragel. Instead, it appears that later Christian revisers added glosses intended to ‘assert the “truth” of the Christian interpretations [of scripture] vis-à-vis that of the Jews’ (151), despite Arragal’s originally irenic intentions.

The final section considers ‘Exegesis and Gender’. Alexandra Cuffel looks at the figure of Jesus in the *Toledot Yeshu* traditions. She concludes that the portrayal of Jesus in these traditions functioned as ‘counterexegesis’ (161, 169) of Jesus’ life and ‘undermined not only Christian and Muslim claims about Jesus’s holiness, but portrayed him as the very epitome of holy masculinity gone wrong’ (156), because he was the victim of sexual violence and impurity. Nina Caputo examines Nahmanides’ exegesis of the ‘sons of God’ and ‘daughters of men’ in Genesis 6.1–4. In Nahmanides’ unique treatment, the passage works to counter ‘the Christian claim that Jesus was the sole human being in possession of divine parentage’ (172). As a result, this reading made possible to Jewish readers the notion of Jesus as the Christian Messiah and simultaneously threatened the Christian claims concerning the uniqueness of Christ. Esperanza Alfonso looks at exegeses of the ‘strange woman’ in Proverbs. The texts she examines reveal that interpretations could have ‘powerful social implications’ (199) since the ‘strange woman’ could become a ‘call for action in moral behavior’ that would be enacted on the borders distinguishing religious communities (199). Finally, Steven Kruger examines the thirteenth-century French Jewish convert to Christianity, Guillaume de Bourges, and attempts to show how readings of texts can reveal ‘autobiographical possibilities’ of their authors (201). Hence, some of de Bourges’ work is as much a defense of his conversion as it is a defense of Christianity. More importantly for Kruger, though, is the gendered language of convert-authors like de Bourges, and the ways they construct their tenuous identity as converts leave questions about how they ‘might ever truly occupy a properly Christian body and community’ (210).

Szpiech has done a masterful job presenting a coherent set of essays that contribute to how scholars view the use of texts. Scholars whose work normally focuses on texts within one particular tradition – Judaism, Christianity, or Islam – will appreciate the reflections on exegetical methods when they are seen in comparative perspective and researchers specializing in the contact of religious communities in geographical and literary frontier zones can benefit from the ways in which this book foregrounds the use of sacred texts in medieval encounters.

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