
Book Review: *Medieval Exegesis and Religious Difference*

Ryan Szpiech, ed. *Medieval Exegesis and Religious Difference: Commentary, Conflict, and Community in the Premodern Mediterranean*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2015. Pp. 329. \$55; ISBN 978-0-8232-6462-9.

Ryan Szpiech's volume contains thirteen essays on different aspects of medieval exegesis in the context of religious disputation, polemic, and co-existence. Some essays focus on the points of intersection between exegetical traditions, others on specific polemics, and still others on individual authors' strategies in negotiating conversion, disputation, or coexistence. The essays are grouped into four thematic sections.

The first section, "Strategies of Reading on the Borders of Islam," contains essays on individual Jewish, Christian, and Muslim authors writing in the Islamic world and how they negotiate the relationship between the three exegetical traditions. Sarah Stroumsa, in "The Father of Many Nations: Abraham in al-Andalus" (29-39), presents two Andalusí views of Abraham as a paragon of the scientist. Both draw on material from outside the religious tradition of the author; the Muslim Ibn Masarra uses ideas from Jewish mysticism of Abraham as a bearer of special knowledge, while the Jew Maimonides borrows Islamic historiographical traditions of Abraham as a man of science.

Sidney Griffith's "Ibn al-Mahrumah's Notes in Ibn Kammunah's *Examination of the Three Religions: The Issue of the Abrogation of Mosaic Law*" (40-57) is a fascinating study of a polemic study of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam authored by a Christian exegete and glossed by a Jewish scholar. They provide two different views (Jewish and Christian) on the question of the abrogation of Mosaic law as a basis for Christian theology.

In "Al-Biq'a'i seen through Reuchlin: Reflections on the Islamic relationship with the Bible" (58-70), Walid Saleh explores the paradoxical position of the Hebrew Bible in Islamic thought. On the one hand, Islam presented itself as the fulfillment of Judaism and Christianity; on the other, Muslims were effectively prohibited from studying the Hebrew Bible itself, though clearly some did so. Saleh studies this problem through the modern lens of interreligious studies that is conditioned both by a history of Christian anti-Judaism and by Enlightenment ideals of liberal critical inquiry that underlie modern multiculturalism.

The second section, titled "Dominicans and Their Disputations," features three essays on the exegetical and polemic activity of 13th-century Dominican friars in France and the Iberian Peninsula. Thomas E. Burman, in "Two Dominicans, a Lost Manuscript, and Medieval Christian Thought on Islam" (71-86), compares the Latin Quranic translations

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of medieval Christian polemicists Ramon Martí and Riccoldo de Monte di Croce. He finds that Martí's translation draws on a wide range of Islamic exegesis and presents Islam as a rigorous intellectual culture, while Riccoldo's translation is based almost exclusively on the Qur'an in an attempt to denigrate Islam as a superstitious and ultimately false religion.

Antoni Bosca i Bas' essay, titled "The Anti-Muslim Discourse of Alfonso Buenhombre" (87-100), shows that Buenhombre, unlike earlier Dominican polemicists such as Ramon Martí, no longer sought to use legitimate Muslim sources in building his arguments against Islam but rather relied on forgeries and fabrications found in earlier Christian texts. Bosca i Bas concludes that this strategy is characteristic of "the beginning of [the] inevitable failure" (100) of Dominican anti-Muslim polemics.

Ursula Ragacs' "Reconstructing Medieval Jewish-Christian Disputations" (101-114) argues that a close reading of Ramon Martí's *Capistrum* can help to fill in the gaps between the Latin and Hebrew accounts of the 1262 Disputation of Barcelona. In so doing, she writes, we are able to paint another picture of what happened in the Disputation, one that "has to be at least as plausible [as the Latin and Hebrew versions] but hopefully also true" (112).

The third section, entitled "Authority and Scripture between Jewish and Christian Readers," overlaps somewhat with the previous section, and contains essays on both polemic and exegesis that focus on how readings of both types of texts in their specific socio-political contexts reveal the authors' strategies in negotiating power relationships between religious groups.

Harvey J. Hames, in his essay "Reconstructing Thirteenth-century Jewish-Christian Polemic: From Paris 1240 to Barcelona 1263 and Back Again" (115-127), reads the accounts of both disputations against each other in order to piece together a more complete picture of what was said in each. He concludes that later accounts of the Paris disputation include material from the Barcelona disputation, and so we must read the varying accounts of both disputations carefully, taking their specific contexts into consideration.

Yosi Yisraeli, in "A Christianized Sephardic critique of Rashi's *pesbat* in Pablo de Santamaría's *Additiones ad postillam Nicolai de Lyra*" (128-141), reveals that the *converso* Santamaría's critique of the bits of Rashi's *pesbat* (literal readings of Biblical passages) were not driven by anti-Semitism, but rather by the Sephardic preference for philologically informed *pesbat* such as those of Abraham ibn Ezra and Nahmanides.

Ángel Sáenz-Badillos, "Jewish and Christian Interpretations in Arragel's Biblical Glosses" (142-154), argues that Arragel's translation was more comparative than polemical, as he sought to give examples of both Christian and Jewish interpretations in order to characterize each tradition's understanding of the text. However, later revisors introduced Christian-only interpretations that lent the text a more polemical flavor.

The final section, "Exegesis and Gender: Vocabularies of Difference," is only secondarily focused on questions of gender, and it is really only Alfonso's essay in which gender is the primary concern; rather, the essays focus on questions of social importance more generally.

The first essay, Alexandra Cuffel's "Between Epic Entertainment and Polemical Exegesis: Jesus as Antihero in *Toledot Yesbu*" (155-170), situates the parody of the life of Jesus between popular epic and religious polemic, giving examples drawn from several different medieval Judeo-Arabic and Hebrew versions.

Nina Caputo, in "Sons of God, Daughters of Man, and the Formation of Human Society in Nahmanides' Exegesis" (171-186), explains Nahmanides' reading of Genesis 6: 1-4, which speaks both of "sons of God" and "sons of Man." She argues that Nahmanides' interpretation is groundbreaking in establishing God as progenitor of (at least some) humans, and places more blame on humans for the existence of evil than previous rabbinic and patristic interpretations.

Esperanza Alfonso, "Late Medieval readings of the Strange Woman in Proverbs" (187-199), shows how Sephardic exegetes metaphorically interpreted the *isha zarah* ("strange woman") mentioned several times in Proverbs as embodying threats to the Jewish community such as conversion to Christianity or the potentially dangerous pursuit of philosophy, seen as a "foreign" intellectual tradition hostile to traditional Judaism.

Steven F. Kruger, "Exegesis as Autobiography: The Case of Guillaume de Bourges" (200-216), argues that Guillaume's exegesis functions in part as a form of autobiography, just as other spiritual autobiographies of conversion (Petrus Alfonsi, Abner of Burgos/Alfonso of Valladolid, Pablo de Santamaría) rely heavily on exegesis. For Kruger the two genres are more interdependent than has been noted.

The essays are all of high quality, and several in particular are very well-written. Many break new ground, often on the basis of readings of unedited manuscripts. Some essays provide new insights into well-trodden topics (Burman, Caputo, Hames, Ragacs), others present new aspects of canonical authors and texts (Alfonso, Sáenz-Badillos, Stroumsa), while another group brings to light less well-known material (Bosca i Bas, Cuffel, Griffith, Kruger, Saleh, Yisraeli). All in all, this volume really is a feast for those interested in medieval Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. The essays open fascinating windows into medieval exegetical and polemical practice. At their best, they invite us into the minds of authors representing all three religions and show us how their exegetical and polemical praxis was shaped by the socio-political circumstances of the times.

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