

MONTSE LEYRA CURIÁ, *IN HEBREO: THE VICTORINE EXEGESIS OF THE BIBLE IN THE LIGHT OF ITS NORTHERN FRENCH JEWISH SOURCES*, BREPOLS, TURNHOUT 2017 (BIBLIOTHECA VICTORINA, 26), 408 PP., ISBN 9782503575421\*

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Since the days of the great historian Salo Baron, scholars have argued about his phrase « the lachrymose tradition of Jewish historiography ». When describing day-to-day life, should historians describe the Jewish experience in medieval Christendom as precarious and often dangerous, a tragic series of expulsions, acts of discrimination, and false accusations (blood libels and claims of host desecration)? Or should they emphasize that the Jews were generally the only tolerated non-Christian minority, and that they were often granted a surprisingly large measure of self-governance? The same dispute surrounds Jewish intellectual life. Should historians emphasize the restrictions, the burning of the Talmud, the often-rigged public disputations where Jews were required to defend Judaism but told that saying anything that Christians might consider blasphemy was not allowed? Should Jewish-Christian polemics, which were often vituperative, be emphasized? Or should scholars search out the stories of intellectual cooperation between Jews and Christians in the medieval world?

These tensions are particularly strong in the field of the academic study of medieval Bible commentaries, both Jewish and Christian. Some medieval commentaries polemicize, at times explicitly, against the other religion. When the polemical motives are not made explicit, scholars often disagree about whether to impute hidden ones to them. David Berger sums up the problem: « in matters of exegetical detail, polemical motives are occasionally obvious, occasionally likely, and occasionally asserted implausibly ».<sup>1</sup> All too often, modern scholars impute implausible polemical motivations to individual comments of a medieval exegete.

Yet in the past century, scholars have also taken a different approach to the relationship between Jewish and Christian Bible commentaries, often paying special attention to the eleventh and twelfth centuries, a productive time for commentators from both religions. The works of the Jewish commentators Rashi

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\* A shorter version of this review appeared in the *Canadian Jewish News* of 11 October 2018.

<sup>1</sup> DAVID BERGER, *Persecution, Polemic and Dialogue: Essays in Jewish-Christian Relations*, Academic Studies Press, Boston 2010 (Judaism and Jewish Life), p. 46.

(1040–1105), his student, Rabbi Joseph Qara (1065–1135), Rashi's grandson Rabbi Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam, c. 1080–c. 1160), and Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra (1089–1167) are classics still studied by Jews all over the world. Rashi is in a category by himself in Jewish consciousness, unrivalled by any commentator before or since.

The Christian world also produced crucial and innovative Bible commentaries in the very same years and in the very same country, France. (Rashi, Qara, and Rashbam were born and lived in France; ibn Ezra moved there later in life, writing many Bible commentaries there.) Christians affiliated with the Abbey of St. Victor, a kind of monastery-university on the outskirts of Paris, produced path-breaking Bible commentaries. The most famous of these commentators were Hugh of St. Victor (c. 1096–1141) and Andrew of St. Victor (d. 1175).

Beryl Smalley, in the middle of the twentieth century, was the first scholar to pay attention to the similarities between the Hebrew Bible commentaries of Rashi, Qara, Rashbam and ibn Ezra, on the one hand, and the Latin Bible commentaries of the Victorines, on the other. All took an approach that was new for the time – the plain, contextual meaning of the biblical text, what the Jews called *peshat*. At times such interpretations even went against commentaries written by their venerated predecessors. Many explanations, none totally satisfying, have been offered for this expression of the spirit of what has been called the Twelfth-Century Renaissance.

In a carefully researched scholarly book, *In Hebreo: The Victorine Exegesis of the Bible in the Light of its Northern French Jewish Sources*, Montse Leyra Curiá has advanced our understanding of the relationship between these Jewish and Christian works. Leyra Curiá is an accomplished scholar of Latin texts who spent many years in Israel mastering the Hebrew language and studying Jewish Bible commentators. This has enabled her to make meticulous comparisons between the Latin commentaries of the Victorines and the Hebrew commentaries of Rashi and others.

Although Hugh and Andrew never mention any living Jewish writer by name in their Bible commentaries, they do frequently refer to what the *Iudei* (Jews) or the *Hebrei* (Hebrews) say about a biblical verse. At times, they reject or correct common Christian interpretations based on these Jewish sources.

Leyra Curiá considers how this information came to Hugh and Andrew. She concentrates her analysis on Victorine interpretations introduced by the expressions *in hebreo* (when they offer their own translation of the biblical text into Latin, and feel that it reflects a better understanding of the original Hebrew than the Vulgate) or *secundum hebreos/hebrei* (when they actually introduce Jewish interpretations of the text). She does not believe that the Victorines' Hebrew was good enough either for them to have their own independent understanding of the biblical Hebrew text, or for them to read and understand the Jewish Bible commentaries of their time. When Hugh and Andrew do

occasionally make original comments about Hebrew words, Leyra Curiá states that they frequently betray ignorance or inaccurate knowledge of the Hebrew text.

Did they learn what Jews said about the Bible by reading the works of other Christians? Sometimes. She states, for example, that the *Glossa Ordinaria* on Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and the First and Second Book of Samuel was a direct Latin source for some of Andrew of St Victor's *in hebreo* or *secundum hebreos/hebrei* translations and interpretations on those biblical Books. To prove this, she compares Hugh and Andrew's comments with the parallel passages in the Gloss in Rusch's 1480/1481 edition and in a number of manuscripts of the Gloss dating to the twelfth century. She also finds that the Victorines made use of the writings of Jerome and others to determine what the Hebrew of the Hebrew Bible really means. In other words, part of what the Victorines knew about the Hebrew text and about how the Jews interpreted that text was from the Victorines' study of Christian sources.

Interesting, though, are the many references to Jewish interpretations that first appear in Jewish works in the eleventh or twelfth centuries and appear also in the commentaries of the Victorines. Leyra Curiá concludes that Christians like Hugh and Andrew talked about the meaning of biblical verses with living Jews in Northern France. She considers it likely that the Victorines learned between a quarter and a third of their *in hebreo* or *secundum hebreos* interpretations from actual conversations with contemporary Jewish exegetes (or with these exegetes' disciples). Andrew and Hugh do not just cite Jewish interpretations; sometimes they correct earlier Latin commentaries based on a more accurate understanding of the Hebrew syntax (e.g., commentaries to Gen 2:5 and 1 Sam 13:1). She concludes that, if they were arriving at better understandings of the syntax of the Hebrew original, their meetings with Jews probably included some teaching and learning.

Which Jews were they studying with? Leyra Curiá carefully reviews the similarities between 'Jewish' interpretations that Hugh and Andrew quote on the one hand and the actual writings of their Jewish contemporaries on the other. She finds that Hugh and Andrew cite interpretations found in Rashbam's Torah commentary more often than any other Jewish Bible commentary. She concludes: « there is a high probability that Rashbam himself taught [...] interpretations to Hugh or to both Victorines » (p. 367). From his own writings, she adds, we know that Rashbam spent time in Paris. He also occasionally refers to conversations he had with Christians who, he claims, 'admitted' that what he said made sense. Interestingly, Rashbam used this same term when describing the conversations about Bible interpretation that he had with his grandfather, Rashi. According to Rashbam, Rashi 'admitted' to Rashbam that if he only had time, he would have

rewritten his Bible commentary, taking into account new insights into the meaning of the Bible (Rashbam's commentary to Gen 37:2).

In 400 pages of meticulous scholarship, Leyra Curiá builds a strong case that Rashbam, one of the leading rabbis of the twelfth century, met with Christian clergy to discuss the Bible in a non-polemical setting. Presumably he was not the only Jew to do so. We now know that even in the twelfth century, just after the horrible devastation inflicted by the First Crusade on Franco-German Jewry, some Jews and Christians were still able to meet and discuss the meaning of biblical verses, not in a disputation, but in a cooperative attempt to better understand God's words.