

Devorah Schoenfeld. *Isaac on Jewish and Christian Altars: Polemic and Exegesis in Rashi and the Glossa Ordinaria.* Fordham Series in Medieval Studies. New York: Fordham University Press, 2013. ix + 229 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8232-4349-5.



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The relationship between Christianity and Judaism has been, and remains, both complex and contested. Christianity ultimately emerged from Judaism and bases its truth claims on its own particular understanding and interpretation of the Jewish scriptures. Anybody with even a superficial acquaintance with contemporary popular religious discourse will be familiar with the designation “Abrahamic Religions” used to denote Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The label, though enjoying wide currency, is all too infrequently interrogated, and its underlying and unstated (often theological) assumptions are taken for granted. One critique of the label “Abrahamic Religions” is that it suggests a false commonality between these three religious traditions: rather than denoting a meaningful category, it is nothing but an aspirational expression of interreligious wish-fulfillment. While the figure of Abraham certainly plays a key role in all three traditions--and the expansion of the older “Judeo-Christian” category to include Islam is to be welcomed--for much of the common history of Judaism and Christianity (to

say nothing here of Islam), the figure of Abraham has been anything but unifying. Rather, the interpretation of the significance of this figure has constituted a highly contested space.

In *Isaac on Jewish and Christian Altars*, Devorah Schoenfeld examines how two particular twelfth-century Jewish and Christian exegetical productions interpreted one especially significant narrative text in the shared component of their scriptures: chapter 22 of the book of Genesis--the near-sacrifice of Isaac or, as it is known in the Jewish tradition, the *Akedah* (the binding [of Isaac]). This text, in which Abraham plays a central role, has long been central to both Jewish and Christian self-definition. Schoenfeld notes how “Jews and Christians used their various re-tellings of this story to think through questions of chosenness, identity, sacrifice, history and continuity.” The period in question, the twelfth century, is also highly significant in that it marked a transformation--ultimately, a deterioration--of the nature of the relationship between Jews and Christians in western Europe. Christian massacres of Jews dur-

ing the Crusades were followed by a “new impulse to convert or expel the Jews” (p. 1).

Schoenfeld focuses her attention on the two most important and influential exegetical productions of medieval Judaism and Christianity: the Commentary on the Pentateuch of Rabbi Shlomo Yishaqi (better known as Rashi) of Troyes (d. 1106) and the *Glossa Ordinaria*. The latter, a product of the school of Laon, covered the whole Christian Bible. The compilation of the part of the *Glossa Ordinaria* that deals with the Pentateuch is attributed to Gilbert of Auxerre (d. 1135). Both of these texts played a central role in the educational systems of Judaism and Christianity for many centuries, and, as Schoenfeld demonstrates, despite their clear differences, the two texts also share a good deal in terms of their exegetical strategies and content.

Schoenfeld begins her study with a concise yet informative introduction that presents her thesis and provides an illuminating context for what follows. Her main focus here is on the nature of Rashi’s Commentary and the *Glossa Ordinaria*, the growing twelfth-century emphasis on the “literal” sense of scripture, and similarities between the exegetical texts in question and the question of possible mutual influence. The first chapter offers a survey of the development of Jewish-Christian polemic in the changing political and social environment of the late eleventh and twelfth centuries—the immediate context in which Rashi’s Commentary and the *Glossa Ordinaria* were produced. The second chapter turns its attention to Rashi’s Commentary, its sources, and his exegetical methodology. The third chapter analyzes the textual history of the *Glossa Ordinaria* and pays particular attention to the difference between its marginal and interlinear elements.

In the fourth chapter, the heart of the study, Schoenfeld’s focus shifts from the relationship between Rashi’s Commentary and the *Glossa Ordinaria* and their respective sources to a close reading and comparison of both exegetical texts. Here,

she demonstrates that though Rashi’s Commentary and the *Glossa Ordinaria* draw substantially on earlier sources, their exegesis differs markedly from these earlier sources. Both texts, Schoenfeld shows, are polemical, reading Genesis 22 “against the other’s religion” (p. 121), and are (in their final manuscript forms) reflective of the situation in northern France in the wake of the First Crusade. The facility and mastery with which she handles both texts is evident throughout the book, but in this chapter particularly one cannot fail to be impressed by it—see, for instance, the short discussion of the differing roles of Isaac in Rashi and the *Glossa Ordinaria* (pp. 117–120). Schoenfeld concludes this chapter by concisely listing five shared assumptions between the exegetes behind Rashi’s Commentary and the *Glossa Ordinaria* on Genesis 22: the “authority of earlier exegesis”; a “unified canon of earlier exegesis”; and the beliefs that “some sources are more authoritative than others,” “the biblical text can be read autonomously as a self-glossing text,” and “the Bible is a weapon in polemical battle” (pp. 122–123).

Isaac on Jewish and Christian Altars is to be highly recommended to readers from a range of academic disciplines. Schoenfeld displays a deep knowledge of the historical period that gave rise to the texts that she examines, and communicates that knowledge effortlessly. Her methodological standards are exemplary: her command of the primary sources is excellent—especially in view of the complex textual history of both. The critical edition of the *Glossa Ordinaria* on Genesis 22 that she has produced (appendix A) and the compilation of major manuscript variants in Rashi’s Commentary on Genesis 22 (appendix B) are valuable testimony to her abilities in this regard. Throughout, Schoenfeld provides texts in original languages (Hebrew and Latin) and in English translation. She is also thoroughly in command of the extensive and ever-expanding secondary literature on this complex period. Her work combines careful and meticulous textual work along with rigorous and attentive close reading. Schoenfeld’s close

reading is refreshing and creative; it never lapses into the arid dryness that this methodology can sometimes engender.

Comparative studies can sometimes be faulted in terms of authors overextending themselves and producing a somewhat uneven work, containing an excellent analysis of one text or field and a somewhat weaker one of the other. This is definitely not the case with *Isaac on Jewish and Christian Altars*. Schoenfeld is clearly adept in her knowledge of and engagement with both the Jewish and Christian sources. Her work skillfully demonstrates the vitality of these exegetical texts and the traditions that produced them, outlining the strategies employed by their authors (and/or compilers) in reading and rereading ancient texts in light of changing historical circumstances. *Isaac on Jewish and Christian Altars* is a valuable contribution to the study of this fascinating period, its literary productions, and its intellectual landscape. This is Schoenfeld's first book-length work, and one looks forward to reading further studies by this meticulous yet creative scholar.

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