

Book Reviews

With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

*Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry D. Walfish,
and Joseph W. Goering, eds.*
USA: Oxford University Press, 2003. 488 pages.

This ground-breaking work is a collection of papers originally given at an academic conference on the interpretation of scripture in medieval Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, which was held at the University of Toronto in 1997. Of equal interest to scholars and students of medieval Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, particularly those concerned with the place of the scriptures in these religious traditions, it demonstrates both the diversity within these three faiths' exegetical traditions as well as their many cross-cultural similarities.

Following a short preface, which briefly outlines the work's purposes and scope, the book is divided into three sections, each of which contains the chapters related to each faith tradition. Each section begins with its own introduction to the history and methods of the medieval exegesis of the relevant faith tradition, which provides the non-specialist reader with a historical context in which to place the individual chapters. The introductions also draw the reader's attention to some parallel developments and possible interfaith influences among these exegetical traditions, while at the same time promoting a nuanced understanding in order to avoid facile comparisons. The book contains both a general subject index and an index to citations from the Bible, Rabbinic literature, and the Qur'an.

Part 1, which contains 10 chapters on medieval Jewish exegesis, is arguably the most vibrant portion of this book. It conveys a sense of the depth and breadth of this exegetical tradition, as well as the variety of approaches that are being used to study it, and the potential such studies have for shedding light on a variety of historical issues.

In “The Search for Truth in Sacred Scripture: Jews, Christians, and the Authority to Interpret,” Stephen Benin discusses the challenge faced by both Jewish and Christian medieval exegetes: how to show respect for the exegesis of ancient authorities while departing from their interpretations. Other contributions discuss, among other topics, Hispano-Jewish Biblical interpretation, and asceticism and eroticism in medieval Jewish exegesis.

The literal and spiritual interpretation of the Bible and the distinction between a scholarly and performative reading are discussed in “Beryl Smalley, Thomas of Cantimpré, and the Performative Reading of Scripture,” by Robert Sweetman. John Boyle calls attention to the use of the division of the text as an interpretive tool in his “The Theological Character of the Scholastic ‘Division of the Text’ with Particular Reference to the Commentaries of Saint Thomas Aquinas.” Edouard Jeuneau’s article, “Thomas of Ireland and his *De tribus sensibus sacrae scripturae*,” discusses the three spiritual senses – allegorical, tropological and anagogical – in which scripture can be read. Interestingly, Thomas of Ireland quotes al-Farghani (on astronomy) and Avicenna in his commentary. A. J. Minnis’ “Material Swords and Literal Lights: The Status of Allegory in William of Ockham’s *Breviloquium on Papal Power*” examines the interpretation of the two swords mentioned in Luke 22:38 as referring to the church and the state.

The 9 chapters found in Part 3 give the reader an overview of several issues of current interest in Qur’anic and *tafsir* studies. No serious student of either field would want to overlook them. The first two chapters contribute to the ongoing debate about the authenticity of surviving exegetical material that is conventionally traced back to the formative period (i.e., 632-950). Fred Leemhuis’ “Discussion and Debate in Early Commentaries of the Qur’an” examines the question of whether *ahadith* that present debates taking place among the Prophet’s Companions likely record actual historical debates or later debates projected backward in time. Herbert Berg’s “Weaknesses in the Arguments for the Early Dating of Qur’anic Commentary” gives a critical review of the works of Georg Stauth and Heribert Horst, and argues that the *tafsir* attributed to Mujahid ibn Jabr (d. 722) is not an early work.

Sufi exegesis is the subject of the next two chapters. Gerhard Böwering, in “The Scriptural ‘Senses’ in Medieval Sufi Qur’an Exegesis,” discusses the contention of Sufi exegetes that the Qur’an could be interpreted in four ways: according to its outer (*zahir*) and inner meanings

(*batin*), and in its moral and anagogical senses. In “Are There Allegories in Sufi Qur’an Interpretation?” Hava Lazarus-Yafeh suggests that the rarity of full-fledged allegories in classical Sufi exegesis may be related to the traditional Islamic ban on images.

The next three chapters draw attention to the differences between the traditional interpretations of some Qur’anic verses found in exegetical works and what can be deduced about their meanings by referring to the Qur’anic text itself. In her “From the Sacred Mosque to the Remote Temple: Surat al-Isra’ between Text and Commentary,” Angelika Neuwirth asserts that Qur’an 17:1 is not unrelated to the rest of the *surah*; rather, the *surah* expands upon and interprets it. Gerald Hawting, in “Qur’anic Exegesis and History,” argues that Qur’anic references to *shirk* have been interpreted as referring to pre-Islamic Arabian polytheism in order to emphasize that the Qur’an originated in west-central Arabia. In “The Self-Referentiality of the Qur’an: Sura 3:7 as an Exegetical Challenge,” Stefan Wild examines the variant readings of this verse, the key terms used in it, and how it has been traditionally interpreted.

The last two chapters discuss two aspects of the definition of Qur’anic exegesis. Andrew Rippin, in “The Designation of ‘Foreign’ Languages in the Exegesis of the Qur’an,” examines al-Suyuti’s (d. 1505) lists of words found in the Qur’anic text that some classical exegetes regarded as non-Arabic, and argues that classifying a word as “foreign” was often related to interpretive rather than philological concerns. In “The Genre Boundaries of Qur’anic Commentary,” Jane McAuliffe points out that while *tafsir* is a distinct literary genre and should be studied as such, medieval Qur’anic interpretation took place in other literary genres as well.

All of the chapters in part 3 are thought-provoking and likely to stimulate further research. However, the reader arguably learns more about why classical Qur’anic exegetical works may be seen as falling short by some moderns (who naturally bring different questions and concerns to these texts than medieval Muslims) than about what exactly the medieval Qur’anic interpreters were trying to achieve and how they went about doing so.

For those interested in comparing the exegetical traditions of the three faiths, the book’s usefulness would have been enhanced by including more papers that complemented one another. For example, a chapter or two on *tafsir* in Muslim Spain would have offered an interesting counterpoint to the chapters by Wolfson and Walfish on Hispano-Jewish exegesis. Similarly, a chapter on an aspect of the relationship between social history and Qur’anic exegesis would have complemented the chapters by Cooper

and Minnis. Hopefully, the publication of this work will encourage further research in these and other directions.

Aisha Geissinger
Ph.D. Candidate, Centre for the Study of Religion
University of Toronto
Toronto, Ontario, Canada