

REVIEW

Devorah Schoenfeld

***Isaac on Jewish & Christian Altars: Polemic
and Exegesis in Rashi and the Glossa Ordinaria***

(New York: Fordham University Press, 2013),
hardcover, ix + 229.

Irven M. Resnick, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Devorah Schoenfeld's brief book treats twelfth-century Jewish and Christian exegesis of a single biblical text, Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son Isaac in Genesis 22. For Jewish interpretation of the text, she turns to Rashi (d. 1106), the most influential medieval Jewish Bible exegete, whose commentaries shaped both later Jewish and Christian exegesis, including the work of the Christian Hebraists Herbert of Bosham, Andrew of St. Victor, and Nicholas of Lyra. The second representative text Schoenfeld selects, in order to explore twelfth-century Christian biblical interpretation, is the *Glossa ordinaria*, which includes both marginal and interlinear glosses on the biblical text. Compiled by Anselm of Laon, Ralph of Laon, and Gilbert of Auxerre, and based largely on earlier exegesis, the *Glossa* continued to develop during the twelfth century; about the middle of the twelfth century, Peter Lombard framed his biblical exegesis as a continuation of the *Glossa*.

Although Rashi lived in a Christian culture in northern France and was aware of some Christian doctrines, Schoenfeld acknowledges that "there is no evidence that Rashi read Latin or read Christian biblical exegesis" (p. 4). Similarly, the compilers of the *Glossa* seem to have had no knowledge of Hebrew and no direct access to Jewish doctrines apart from those transmitted by patristic authors, such as Jerome. Consequently, Schoenfeld does not attempt to demonstrate any direct influence between the two, but rather argues that "the similarities between them are based on their shared biblical

(and late antique) heritage and their common presuppositions about how to interpret scripture” (p. 4). She does strive to show, however, that these common presuppositions generated both literal and non-literal interpretations of Genesis 22, grounded in medieval assumptions of “the unity of scripture and the multivocality of the divine word” (p. 7). Despite their common exegetical methods, however, Schoenfeld argues that each text reveals a polemical emphasis that surpasses its sources in order to defend the primacy of its own interpretation.

For Rashi, the near-sacrifice of Isaac is intended to reveal the greatness of Abraham and Isaac to a non-Jewish audience, namely to Ishmael, Satan, and the nations of the world. To do so, God sent Abraham to the place of the future Jerusalem Temple, and Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac (and his actual sacrifice of a ram) anticipates both the Temple sacrifices and post-Temple Jewish prayer and rituals that substitute for those sacrifices. In sum, “For Rashi, the purpose of the near-sacrifice of Isaac was to refute the claims of ‘others’ (including Christians) to divine election, and to justify the election of Israel” (p. 91).

For the *Glossa*, the near-sacrifice of Isaac demonstrates the obedience of Abraham, who understood its Christological meaning, and the blindness of the Jews, who did not. It foreshadows the atoning sacrifice in which Jesus offers himself in the heavenly temple, and anticipates the Eucharistic sacrifice presented daily on Christian altars.

Schoenfeld concludes that despite heavy reliance on older exegetical sources, both Rashi and the *Glossa* manipulate and transform their sources based on exegetical trends specific to twelfth-century France. The *Glossa* generates an anti-Jewish polemical reading, while Rashi, although he never mentions Christianity, develops a polemical interpretation that is intended to undermine Christian exegesis. His interpretation of Genesis 22 seemingly reacts to the more violent atmosphere surrounding the First Crusade, just as the (later) Hebrew

Crusade chroniclers will appeal to Isaac's near-sacrifice in order to justify contemporary Jews who sacrificed themselves and their children (in an act of *Kiddush Ha-Shem*) as proof that they are as worthy of God's love as was Abraham.

The reader may question Schoenfeld's understanding of the term polemical, however. Is Rashi's exegesis, which never explicitly identifies Christians as its object, polemical simply because it proposes an interpretation of Genesis 22 that defends the election of Israel? In tone, Rashi's commentary is clearly different from the Hebrew chronicles of the First Crusade which employ extraordinarily harsh language against the Christian crusaders, calling them the "uncircumcised," followers of a dead god, and the enemies of the Jews and the God of Israel. Is it enough that Rashi understands the audience for Genesis 22 to be "outside" Israel, namely Ishmael, Satan, and the nations? Schoenfeld might have clarified for her audience her understanding of polemic.

Another concern stems from the number of typographical errors in the text. In most cases, the reader can easily supply corrections. For example, on page 26, "polemical" is misspelled as "polemical." On page 30, Schoenfeld twice omits the definite article: "and given school of Laon's own authorship of polemical literature..." and "these two commentaries do in fact interpret near-sacrifice of Isaac polemically..." On page 117, she doubles the verb: "Rashi gives both are equal space and their tests equal weight." In other instances, errors appear in her transcriptions or translations that may prove puzzling. For example, on page 28 her translation of the *Glossa* reads: "it must be feared that not you may receive not him, but another" whereas the Latin text states: "it must be feared that you may receive not him, but another" (*sed timendum est...ut non ipsum sed alium suscipiatis*). Similarly, one finds an occasional error in the Latin transcription: for example, *explicatio spiritalis* for *explicatio spiritualis* (p. 71). And, finally, sometimes her translation of the *Glossa* appears to paraphrase rather than translate closely the Latin (see pp. 83, 101, and 104).

Despite these shortcomings, Schoenfeld's study deserves attention. Scholars will very much appreciate the two appendices to the study: appendix A (pp. 124-63), which establishes a critical edition of the *Glossa ordinaria* on Genesis 22, and appendix B (pp. 164-73), which presents a Hebrew edition that documents major manuscript variants in Rashi's commentary on Genesis 22.