
Deborah Goodwin’s study of Herbert of Bosham’s Psalms commentary (ca. 1190) is an ambitious book in that she studies a single manuscript of a single text that has already been the object of studies by Beryl Smalley and Raphael Loewe. Yet her analysis of Bosham’s encounter with Jewish exegetical scholarship goes far beyond her predecessors. It is a meaty, satisfying and thought-provoking study. By analyzing the book in light of Herbert’s education and his political career and his connections with the political and ecclesiastical elites in both England and France, Goodwin provides a comprehensible context within which to read this text.

Goodwin devotes the first three chapters of her book to a biography of Herbert of Bosham, and to an analysis of his Psalms commentary within the history of Christian Psalms interpretation from Jerome to his own day. The balance of the book is devoted to an interpretation of Herbert’s commentary as a piece of Hebrew scholarship and as a kind of theological “conversation” with his Jewish contemporaries or near contemporaries, represented above all by Rashi. In the fourth chapter Goodwin provocatively adopts the lens of “post-colonialism” for interpreting how Herbert selectively used Jewish scholarship to help “manage Christian anxiety” about the Jews in general and their continuing existence in particular (pp. 120-3). In the fifth chapter she considers how Herbert might have acquired the knowledge to read Rashi and the Hebrew Bible by himself, no mean accomplishment in the absence of Hebrew grammar textbooks. Goodwin’s speculation concerning the existence of Old French-Hebrew glossaries as a possible tool to aid Herbert and others with similar education (she stresses that there were other twelfth-century Anglo-Norman Hebraists, even if not so accomplished as Herbert, p. 147) is a plausible one, though as yet unproven (pp. 158-9). That Herbert was able in the face of great difficulties to master Hebrew sufficiently to read Rashi so carefully can only evoke greater admiration for his intellectual gifts and determination.

In the final two chapters Goodwin focuses on Herbert’s “Hermeneutic of the Literal Sense” (ch. 6) and upon his “Exegetical Method” (ch. 7). In her analysis, Goodwin focuses upon “messianic Psalms,” both those that traditional Christian exegesis recognized as such, including Psalms 2, 22, 110, and also several Psalms that Rashi considered messianic. Rashi’s narrative strategy in his Psalms commentary involved not only elucidation of individual verses, but also a conscious eschatological reinterpretation of the book to encourage his Jewish readers to hope for their future redemption. In so doing, he also sought to undermine Christian exegesis of the Psalms. To a surprising degree Herbert was willing to treat Rashi’s understanding of the Psalms very seriously, speculating whether Rashi and his Jewish readers were indeed expecting the same messiah that Christians were
(p. 183). He even appeared in places to legitimize the Judaism of his own day in that he asserted that Psalm 80 (79 in Catholic Bibles) was prayed by Jews “now in their worst captivity.” (p. 195). Since in Herbert’s view both Jewish and Christian redemption were “incomplete” until Christ’s second coming, Goodwin argues that he had in effect extended the “exegetical horizon” of theologically significant history to his own day, and incorporated Jewish experience within it (p. 201).

Herbert also took Rashi as an exegetical guide in that he trusted him to understand not only the literal sense of a passage but also “metaphorical multiple meanings […] which allowed the literal sense to have an extra-historical import” (p. 208). In Psalm 74 (73 in Catholic Bibles) Herbert apparently followed Rashi’s lead and interpreted the text as messianic, allowing him to include a discussion of Christian prophecy. In this same passage Herbert also neglected to include traditional Christian criticisms of Jews as being too blind to see that the Savior of the World has already come and gone (pp. 218-9), though Herbert leveled such charges readily enough in other passages (pp. 175, 223).

Goodwin’s most controversial claims concern Herbert’s understanding of his Jewish contemporaries and the ultimate role of the Jews and Judaism within Christian eschatology. She understands the “silences” of Herbert’s commentary as being evidence of an unevenness of interpretation or even of Herbert’s doubts about his own faith. Arguments from silence are notoriously slippery, especially when Goodwin allows that Herbert’s comments are not all equally lengthy and also that he was willing to use the traditional terms of abuse for Jews and Judaism (pp. 175, 233) where it presumably mattered most to him, the most important messianic Psalms (such as 2, 22, 110). She asserts that Herbert was willing to ascribe the “faithful Synagogue” trope to his Jewish contemporaries, though arguably the only example she provides to back this up is Herbert’s interpretation of Psalm 74 (73 in Catholic Bibles), where a biblical figure “Asaph speaks in the person of the faithful synagogue” while “prophesying the last captivity” (p. 218). The only post-Old Testament examples that she provides concern the Maccabees (pp. 211-2) and the destruction of the Second Temple (pp. 194-5), but not to later Jews. Goodwin’s concern for finding a “useable theological past,” one less triumphalistic and open to interreligious dialogue (cf. p. 234) may have led her to construct Herbert into a more “modern” figure than he in fact was. Even his speculation that both Jews and Christians anticipated the same messiah was still a part of a Christian eschatology in that he fully expected Jews to meet “our King Messiah,” Jesus Christ, at the End of Days (p. 197).

Whether or not one accepts every nuance of Goodwin’s interpretation of Herbert’s view of Jews and Judaism, she has written a landmark book on medieval Christian Hebraism. Her mastery of text and context, placing Herbert’s Psalms commentary within the context of Herbert’s life, the Christian history of Psalms interpretation and of the exegetical work of Herbert’s teachers and contemporaries