Andrew Berns

_The Bible and Natural Philosophy in Renaissance Italy_ (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 309, $90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978 11 070 6554 3.

_The Bible and Natural Philosophy_ reconstructs a moment in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth century when a small group of Italian physicians – both Christian and Jewish – developed not only novel means to elucidate the meaning of the Bible, but also innovative ways to approach this text as a repository of historical and empirical information useful for the practice of natural philosophy. Berns sets out to describe the development of these interests and reconstruct the factors that produced such an “extraordinary symbiosis between two ostensibly alien branches of knowledge” (p. 3). The body of the book is arranged in five chapters, each presenting the story of one particular investigation. Through this series of case studies, Berns shows how these physicians applied the knowledge gained through their medical education to reading the Bible from fresh perspectives and with novel intentions. Each illuminates different facets of the broader movement that Berns describes.

The social identity of these physicians is central to Berns’s argument. Situating them in the context of the medical Renaissance of the sixteenth century, he demonstrates how their shared intellectual formation shaped the manner in which they approached the text of Scripture. From their training they acquired the skills and the sensibilities of a humanist: excellent linguistic and philological skills; and a reverence for ancient sources, albeit one tempered by a growing scepticism towards their value. They were also inspired by the increasingly empirical approach in Italian medicine, which privileged things over words, and valorised individual observation. These factors combined to inspire in these physicians a desire to gain detailed natural historical understanding of the world about them, and an openness towards the knowledge generated by artisans.

The first chapter deals with the theme of physicians developing knowledge of natural things in the world around them in order to cultivate an understanding of those mentioned in Scripture. For Ulisse Aldrovandi this was a task given to Christians by Augustine. The chapter traces how Aldrovandi and Amatus Lustianus used their linguistic and botanical knowledge to identify plants mentioned in the Bible. As Berns stresses later, although biblical exegesis was never the primary aim of individuals such as Aldrovandi, they were sometimes called upon to offer expert opinions on the most appropriate translation and interpretation of individual words and the identification of particular substances mentioned in the Bible. In some instances this led to criticism of the Vulgate. Aldrovandi’s studies were also motivated by a desire to experience
directly the objects described in the Bible, one which reflected the empirical character of late sixteenth-century natural philosophy. This yearning to see and touch the things described in the text was, Berns adds, a novelty in this period.

The second chapter shifts the focus of the analysis. It reconstructs disputes over the history of papyrus in order to examine how the Bible could be used to provide evidence useful to a natural philosopher. In his *Natural History* Pliny had claimed that papyrus was not cultivated until the fourth century B.C.E and was rarely used for writing until the middle of the following century. Aldrovani and Melchior Guilandinus sought to evaluate and investigate the claims made by this ancient authority; to do so, they mined the Bible for empirical information. Using it as a historical source, they proved that the cultivation and use of papyrus began earlier than Pliny had supposed. Berns noted that modern scholars had previously believed that such uses of Scripture began only in the eighteenth century.

The final three chapters focus on the work of two Jewish physicians, David de’ Pomi and Abraham Portaleone. The third and the final chapters continue the theme of attempts to identify or recreate natural objects recorded in the Bible. Describing de’ Pomi’s efforts to identify the stones on the breastplate of the high priest, Berns reconstructs the complex array of authorities, both Christian and Jewish, at de’ Pomi’s disposal. In the final chapter, he recounts Portaleone’s efforts to produce a recipe for Israelite incense, the production of which was proscribed by Jewish law. Identifying the ingredients led him to engage critically with Jewish traditions and gradually reject aspects of the scientific knowledge contained within Rabbinic teachings.

The focus of chapter 4 also moves away from the Bible, to lie on the significance of the Talmud. Although in some respects a digression from the stated aims of the book, this discussion of the uses of Jewish post-biblical literature opens a window onto the complex world of Jewish-Christian relations in late sixteenth-century Italy. Berns’s account of a correspondence over the issue of monstrous births provides a fascinating insight into the relationships between Jewish and Christian physicians in later Renaissance Italy. It demonstrates how knowledge could be freely exchanged across religious divides that were becoming increasingly sharply drawn in the late sixteenth century. It also indicates that despite ecclesiastical authorities’ efforts to restrict the circulation of the Talmud, Christians could have access to and might be prepared to read parts of this text in order to resolve physical questions with religious implications.

There is a great deal to admire in this work. It is thematically wide-ranging, and its arguments are supported by richly detailed case studies which are