Ryan Szpiech begins his compelling study of medieval conversion narratives and interreligious polemic with a narrative. Abner of Burgos (d. ca. 1347), a Castilian Jew who in many ways seems to stand at the center of the study, tells the story of a Jew (himself? a construct?) who dreams a challenge to his Jewish identity and converts to Christianity. Under his new name, Alfonso of Valladolid, Abner/Alfonso\(^1\) subsequently writes a work of anti-Jewish polemic in Hebrew, opening with the story of his conversion. Beginning as he does with this conversion narrative allows Szpiech to simultaneously introduce us to the genre at hand and also to make the case for a literary study of Christian-Jewish-Muslim encounter. He points out early and often that he is interested in conversion narratives as literature (“things made” rather than “things felt,” using Karl Morrison’s terminology), and he demonstrates convincingly that by reading them as literature, we stand to learn a great deal about how medieval Christians, Jews, and Muslims understood themselves in relation to religious others.

Szpiech lays out three goals for himself in the book. First, he seeks to understand how personal narratives of conversion functioned in medieval Christian apology and polemic. He asks why authors of polemical treatises included such stories in their writing, and what connection they found between their own stories and their polemic. Second, he intends to explain why these conversion narratives proliferate in the twelfth century specifically. Here he focuses on the transformation of intellectual culture and attending challenges to traditional notions of *auctoritas* that arose at that time. Finally, he plans to explore the distinctive nature of Christian narratives by comparing them with parallel Jewish and Muslim stories of conversion. While conversion narratives do make their way into polemical treatises in each of these traditions over the course of the Middle Ages, Szpiech finds that they play a far more central role in Christian writing than in Muslim or Jewish texts because the individual convert’s journey toward Christianity (real or stylized) follows a Christian arc of salvation history. The analysis that follows has important ramifications not only for how we think about medieval conversion, but also for the way we read

\(^1\) I follow throughout Szpiech’s convention of including both pre- and post-conversion names for his authors.
and understand religious rhetoric much more broadly, especially around problems of “historicity” in narrated accounts of interreligious engagement.

As one would hope, Szpiech includes a substantive discussion of theoretical and methodological issues in his introduction. Szpiech handles complicated questions of definition very well, differentiating between meanings of conversion for medieval people and for scholars in a variety of contexts today. The discussion is well crafted and will be tremendously useful to anyone interested in the theoretical issues at stake in writing about religious “conversion” in any time or place. Szpiech is less interested in conversion itself than in the formal narration of conversion. He takes issue with Karl Morrison and others who assume that behind conversion stories lies some lost interior experience. Szpiech instead views conversion narratives as “primarily intellectual, not affective, constructs” (25). By embracing a textual approach to his subject, we avoid the need to know what “really happened” in the lives of converts. Instead, what matters is the way they utilized their stories of conversion. Bringing a literary perspective to the study of conversion texts, Szpiech gives us fresh insight into medieval conversions.

In Chapter 1, Solomon Halevi/Pablo de Santa Maria (Archbishop Paul of Burgos), a Jewish convert to Christianity, and Juan Andrés, a purported Muslim convert to Christianity, form a late medieval endpoint for Szpiech’s exploration of conversion narratives. The two fifteenth-century texts he explores here work well together, in spite of the fact that one narrative comes from the pen of a well-known historical figure (Solomon Halevi/Pablo de Santa Maria) and the historicity of the other has not been established. Szpiech raises but chooses to ignore the problem of “Juan’s” identity because he believes “that the function of a conversion story in a polemical treatise is not biographical but rhetorical, serving as a device to establish the authority of the voice of the author as an authentic witness to the tradition it aims to reject.” Szpiech attempts a great deal in this chapter, surveying the historical development of Christian conversion narratives in antiquity, establishing Pauline and Augustinian modes of understanding conversion, and then analyzing the fifteenth-century texts in view of those two models. It sometimes feels like too much to hold together, but by the end, Szpiech successfully demonstrates a distinction between Pauline and Augustinian models of conversion, the durability of those models through the Middle Ages, the utility of the Augustinian model particularly to address the problem of Jewish continuity, and the presence of newer elements introduced over the course of the Middle Ages, traceable to the twelfth century.

Chapter 2 focuses on the twelfth-century changes introduced in the preceding chapter. Once again pairing two substantially different texts, Szpiech presents the narratives of Judah/Herman of Cologne and Moses/Petrus Alfonsi