

The Bible and Natural Philosophy in Renaissance Italy: Jewish and Christian Physicians in Search of Truth. Andrew D. Berns.

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This is a fascinating book for all who are working on the intellectual cultures of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Italy, especially for scholars doing research on biblical studies, medical doctors, their multifarious collaborations with natural historians and collectors, and their overlapping fields of interest: botany, mineralogy, zoology, and dietary regimes. By drawing mostly on hitherto unexamined and very rare texts, Berns unearths amazing new evidence for a vivid interconfessional exchange between Jewish and Christian doctors in Northern Italy, which took place between 1545 and 1622, leading to a peculiar fusion of biblical and medical studies: “For a fleeting moment at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century, medical doctors had the knowledge, desire and the professional flexibility to study both nature and scripture” (34). As Berns argues time and again, the Bible becomes a text that is being analyzed from a natural-philosophical perspective, which helped also “to elucidate the Bible” (2). Ulisse Aldrovandi, David de’ Pomi, and Abraham Portaleone are the individuals who are better known, but the book under review also encompasses the work of Amatus Lusitanus, Melchior Guilandinus, Andrea Bacci, Abraham Yagel, Alessandro Magno, and Giovan Battista Cavallara.

It has long been known that the professors (such as Pietro Pomponazzi) at medical schools were trying to eclipse theological strife by encouraging a naturalist approach toward the human body. Berns duly focuses on Padua and Mantua, yet he provides new evidence that this education did not necessarily entail a complete disinterest in matters of the Bible: quite the contrary, Berns emphasizes that on the authority of Maimonides and other important Jewish teachers, medical practice was not only in accordance with an orthodox Jewish life, the study of natural philosophy was also perceived as promoting

piety. Together with some of their Christian colleagues, such as Ulisse Aldrovandi (who followed Augustine and the advice of some powerful clerics), the above-mentioned doctors turned to the Bible not only for spiritual or moral advice. They also searched the Bible as text that could supply them with information on medicines they had found elsewhere, for instance in Pliny.

Chapter 3 thus focuses on de' Pomi: in response to the old and new epidemic diseases that plagued sixteenth-century Europe, de' Pomi sought to identify *tarshish* — a gemstone mentioned in Exodus 28 that was believed to possess enormous curative powers — as *diacinto* or *hyacinthus*. Not quite surprisingly, in his discussion of the prodigious properties of the *diacinto* de' Pomi draws on his vast knowledge of Hebrew and classical sources, but, as Berns shows, he is tacitly indebted to Albertus Magnus's *De mineralibus* and other, more contemporary Christian sources, such as Marsilio Ficino. In a similar vein, chapter 2 shows how Guilandinus came to realize that the Vulgate translation erred or was at least sometimes unreliable when it referred to natural phenomena — for instance, of paper/papyrus. As Aldrovandi was to find out in his dealings with the Roman Inquisition, such results of lofty philological inquiry were not necessarily welcome in post-Tridentine Italy. Chapter 4 focuses on interconfessional dialogue between Portaleone and Christian scholars in matters of embryology, while the final chapter covers Portaleone's hunt for the recipe of biblical incense, which he believed to be a powerful drug against the contagious air of the plague. (Portions of chapters 4 and 5 have been previously published.)

Berns's study is thus situated at the intersection between a history of material culture and a textual analysis, which springs from the desire of these historical authors “not only to control the language of scripture but to handle the physical objects that language described” (22). In order to trace these largely unexplored paths of early modern culture, Berns displays an impressive erudition in his command of vernacular Italian, Latin, and Hebrew sources, many of which have remained in manuscript. Following duly renowned scholars in the field of humanism, medical studies, and Jewish studies, such as Anthony Grafton, Nancy Siraisi, or David Ruderman, Berns also demonstrates an enviable knowledge of the relevant scholarly literature. His willingness to engage in close readings is highly praiseworthy, yet it sometimes tends to collapse the argument under the burden of evidence. This book is thus not easy to read, and one is grateful both for the extensive bibliography and the index.

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