The title of this outstanding monograph evokes both the convert’s liminal status and the contest between Christianity and Judaism that played out over converts and conversion in the Crown of Aragon. Tartakoff argues convincingly that the lives of Jewish converts to Christianity “lay bare the intensity of mutual hostility between Christians and Jews across a period whose first decades in particular have been celebrated as a time of interreligious harmony” (1). Her study is extensively researched and draws on diverse sources in Latin and Catalan (royal, ecclesiastical, inquisitorial, and papal) and in Hebrew (responsa, halakot, and moral treatises). It incorporates the experiences of nearly two hundred converts and seventy denunciations of Jews to the Inquisition between 1250 and 1391. The fate of converts during this time period certainly deserves attention. Tartakoff reveals that the presence of converts and the dangers they posed to Jewish life were simmering threats that could boil over when the Inquisition intervened. Furthermore, she documents the Christian community’s unwillingness to accept and integrate converts, which was a problem previously thought to pertain more to the period after the massive forced conversions in the wake of the massacres of 1391.

Tartakoff’s book has an elegant and readable structure, making it amenable to teaching in graduate or advanced undergraduate seminars. The study is organized around a close reading of the extensive inquisitorial trials of the convert Alatzar/Pere of Calatayud and the putative Jewish abettors of his return to Judaism: Jucef de Quatorze and Janto and Jamila Almuli. It seems that in 1341, Alatzar/Pere sought redemption for the sin of apostasy through suffering death as a Jew at the hands of the Christian authorities; however, inquisitors arrived at the scene and had him pulled from the flames for questioning. Seven years earlier, another Jewish apostate, Abadia, had been executed by the Justiciar of Calatayud for publicly renouncing his conversion to Christianity. The testimonies of the accused and other Jews imprisoned by the Inquisition focused on the influence of several prominent local
Jews on the two converts’ actions, resulting in a death sentence for Jucef de Quatorze and life imprisonment for Alatzar/Pere and the Almulis. Tartakoff studied the proceedings in an unedited, archival manuscript and, with her painstaking reconstruction of the local situation, the testimonies truly reveal “unprecedented insight . . . into daily interactions between Jews, converts and inquisitors” (3).

In part 1, “Before the Tribunal,” Tartakoff explores the ideological and financial motivations of the inquisitors in the Crown of Aragon and the strategies Jews adopted to survive their attacks. The medieval Inquisition was founded to extirpate Christian heresy; historians do not consider Jews to have been its primary focus. However, if Jews were accused of blaspheming Christianity or encouraging converts to continue celebrating Jewish rites or to return to Judaism—all of which were likely reactions to apostasy—the Inquisition would use its power to destroy the individuals involved and heavily penalize their communities. Converts who returned to Judaism were viewed as a threat to the established Christian order. Sometimes the prominence of certain Jews offered relief and at other times it contributed to their being targeted. The Inquisition’s conviction of Jews suspected of aiding converts also satisfied a material need. Inquisitors were to be supported by the king, but they were often not paid; they funded their enterprise with confiscations. The Almulis’ assets, for example, were used to build an inquisitorial prison in Calatayud. Although the dream of conversion that swept thirteenth-century Christendom embraced both Muslims and Jews, the conversion and punishment of Jews consumed more inquisitorial energy than did that of Muslims. There is growing scholarly consensus that friars did not regularly preach to Muslims as they did to Jews, and Tartakoff finds “barely a trace” of inquisitorial proceedings against backsliding converts from Islam (30).

Part 2, “At the Font of New Life,” reveals just how crucial archival research is to the subject of conversion, which is often handled through more literary sources. Tartakoff explains the varied motivations of converts, the circumstances of their baptisms, their societal positions as abject beggars and incendiary preachers, and the mostly negative responses of the dominant Christian community to their efforts to enter it. Encouraged by churchmen who saw in their conversions a palpable triumph for Christianity, Jews converted in the hope of bettering their lots; however, the “realities of converts’ lives” were often “grim” (62). Punishments were lessened or forgiven for convicts who opted for baptism, and these concessions were attractive to Jews who were facing terrifying capital penalties such as slow death by hanging by one’s feet, hanging while ferocious dogs tore one’s flesh, or stoning. Some converts fled unhappy marriages or sought to marry people prohibited to them as Jews; others wanted to escape poverty. The Jewish communities of medieval Iberia were socially stratified, and poverty increasingly afflicted