

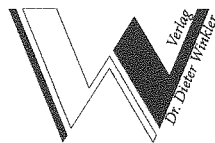
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# Transcending Words

The Language of Religious Contact Between Buddhists,  
Christians, Jews, and Muslims in Premodern Times

## Offprint

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## Conversion to Christianity and Anti-Talmudic Criticism from Petrus Alfonsi to Nicolas Donin and Pablo Christiani

PIERO CAPELLI, Venezia / Baltimore

### 1

Christian anti-Jewish polemics of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries witnessed the emergence of a new line of argumentation against Judaism and on behalf of conversion to Christianity. This line of argumentation was new in two ways: it was inaugurated and prevalently argued by converts from Judaism who before converting had been well versed in the Oral Law; and it engaged in critiques of the Talmud and the midrashic *aggadot* both for their content and for their status within Judaism. In this essay I will survey some of the best documented polemics, from the twelfth through the fifteenth century, in search of the motives for which medieval Jewish intellectuals converted to Christianity – first in Iberia, Provence and northern France, then in other areas of what today we call Europe. My hypothesis is, first, that the converts documented in these cases shared an inclination towards philosophical rationalism; second, that in some cases they harbored these rationalistic inclinations before they converted to Christianity; and, finally, that their conversion and polemics against Talmudic lore and rabbinic leadership ought to be regarded as evidence of internal dissent within Judaism. Finally, I will argue that all three points are related, that is, that rationalism, criticism of Talmudic tradition, and conversion to Christianity were related phenomena that can be better understood if considered together.

### 2

Petrus Alfonsi's *Dialogi adversus Iudaeos*, composed in Aragon around 1109, was one of the most widely read anti-Jewish texts of the Middle Ages. It ran contrary to previous Christian philosophy, which had claimed that the Jews were blindly practicing the Old Law, and argued instead that they followed not the Old Law but a new and heretical law, that of the Talmud. In the *Dialogi* Alfonsi defends his mastery of Jewish religious texts: while still a Jew, he had preached in the synagogues on their proper interpretation precisely to prevent Jews from apostatizing; now, starting from the Talmudic passage in *bBerakhot* 3a where God is depicted wearing phylacteries, Alfonsi argued that this law was full of nonsensical and ridiculous anthropomorphic representations of the deity:<sup>1</sup>

PETER: [...] I see that they attend to the surface [meaning] and the letter of the law alone, and do not explicate it spiritually but rather carnally, this is why they are especially beguiled by error. [...] Are you not mindful of your teachers who wrote your teaching, on which your entire laws relies, according to you, how they claim that God has a form and a body, and they attribute such things to his ineffable majesty as it is wicked to believe and absurd to hear, seeing that they are not based on reason (nec ulla constant ratione)? And that they advanced such opinions concerning him [God] which appear to be nothing other than the words of little boys making jokes in school, or women telling old wives' tales in the streets. [...] If you want to know where it is written [that God wears phylacteries]: [it is] in the first part of your teaching, whose name is Benedictions. Then, if you want to know how: they have said that God has a

<sup>1</sup> Sources are quoted in existing English translations, which I have checked against the critical editions or manuscripts that I quote in the footnotes.

head and arms and wears a little box tied by a band on the hair; that the knot of the same band is made fast from the rear part of the head under the skull; that within the box there are four parchments that contain praises of the Jews; that on the upper part of the left arm, moreover, he wears another box bound in a similar fashion by a band, and that there is a parchment there that contains all the praises which are said to be written in the four previously mentioned.<sup>2</sup>

The anti-anthropomorphic argument was not new in anti-Jewish or anti-Talmudic argumentation, dating back to early ninth century with Agobard of Lyon and the tenth century with the Qaraite authors Ya'qūb al-Qirqisānī and Salmon ben Yeroḥam.<sup>3</sup> Alfonsi's critique of *aggadic* literature in Jewish post-biblical texts echoes the Qaraite critique in some ways, as well as the complaints of Muslim scholars like the Spanish polemicist Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064); but in the twelfth century, as Meir Bar-Ilan has pointed out, European rabbinic thought still mainly adhered to an anthropomorphic conception of the deity.<sup>4</sup> Alfonsi, by contrast, inaugurated a new line of thought in anti-Jewish polemic by stressing that the literal Jewish interpretation of Scripture (of the Prophets above all), as opposed to the Christian allegorical interpretation, made one deviate from the path of reason. His rationalist tendencies had been evident beginning in the 1110s; during a sojourn in England, where Alfonsi served as a physician to King Henry I, he may have been exposed to the rationalist teachings of Anselm of Canterbury or of his followers; he sent some Christian scholars in France – whom he called *perypatetici*, that is, "Aristotelians" – a letter demonstrating that he understood himself to be not merely a Christian, but an Aristotelian belonging to an international intellectual *koine* that transcended political and chronological – if not religious – boundaries:

To all those, everywhere, of the Holy Mother Church, that is to the Peripatetics and others nourished with this philosophical milk, those in all parts of France most diligently engaged in the teaching of knowledge: Petrus Alfonsi, servant of Jesus Christ, your brother and your fellow student, greets you and wishes you the blessing of Him Who confers all salvation and blessing. Since it is proper that all those who have drunk of any philosophical nectar love each other, and that anyone who might have anything rare, precious, and useful which is unknown to others should impart it generously to others, so that in this way everyone's knowledge may both grow and be extended in time: We then, wishing to observe this law, have been zealous to investigate diligently if we had anything of this sort, which we might present to you, who test through experience, as something sweet and delicious.<sup>5</sup>

Alfonsi's rationalist beliefs pervade and inform his polemic against the Jews. He condemns the Jewish belief in corporeal resurrection, arguing that the Talmudic teaching on the subject is philo-

2 Critical edition by Klaus-Peter Mieth (1982), reprinted in Pedro Alfonso de Huesca, *Diálogo contra los Judíos*, ed. by K.-P. Mieth and Esperanza Ducay, Huesca 1996, 11–12; transl. by Irven M. Resnick in Petrus Alfonsi, *Dialogue against the Jews*, ed. by I. M. Resnick, Washington 2006, 46–49. On the reprint of 1996 see the cautions expressed by Resnick in *ibid.*, 35–36.

3 See Daniel J. Lasker, "Karaism and the Jewish-Christian Debate", in: Barry Walfish (ed.), *The Frank Talmage Memorial Volume*, Haifa 1993, 323–332, here 325.

4 Meir Bar-Ilan, "The Hand of God: A Chapter in Rabbinic Anthropomorphism", in: Gabrielle Sed-Rajna (ed.), *Rashi 1040–1090. Hommage à Ephraïm E. Urbach*, Paris 1993, 321–35 (accessed online at <<http://faculty.biu.ac.il/~barilm/handofgd.html>> on Jan. 8, 2014); cp. Alfonsi, *Dialogue*, ed. Resnick, 30–32 and n. 96.

5 Critical edition by John V. Tolan in Id., *Petrus Alfonsi and His Medieval Readers*, Gainesville 1993, 163–81, here 164–165; transl. by Tolan, *ibid.*, 172–3. On Alfonsi's Aristotelian internationalism see Jeremy Cohen, "The Mentality of the Medieval Jewish Apostate: Peter Alfonsi, Hermann of Cologne, and Pablo Christiani", in Todd M. Endelman (ed.), *Jewish Apostasy in the Modern World*, New York; London 1987, 20–47, here 27.

sophically unsustainable. The accusation that the Christian character in the dialogue, Petrus, most frequently lodges against his Jewish interlocutor, Moses, is that he reasons in an erroneous fashion because he follows rabbinic tradition rather than reason:

PETRUS: Since Moses himself left behind no record [...], nor did any of the prophets after him produce one, how did he reveal the mystery of such a secret thing [i. e. that God wears phylacteries] to your sages?

MOSES: Through the tradition (per successiones) of the ancients, it came finally to the attention of our sages.

PETRUS: Your argument wanders to the refuge of an irrational (irrationabilis) conclusion, since you will be able to ground every falsehood on the tradition of the ancients.<sup>6</sup>

Given that the characters in the dialogue represent Alfonsi's former Jewish and current Christian selves, one should not necessarily assume that his rationalism preceded his conversion to Christianity. But it is suggestive that it was shared by another convert, Herman of Cologne, who wrote around 1150 in praise of the sermons of bishop Egbert of Münster and their non-literal, allegorical (therefore *rational*) exegesis of Scripture:

The other commandments – such as 'You shall not plow with an ox and an ass together' (Deut. 22:10) and 'You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk' (Exod. 23:19; 34:26; Deut. 14:21) – he declared utterly vain when understood according to the letter, and he translated them into allegorical meanings with the most elegant way of reasoning (pulcherrima ... ratione). As an example of this distinction he used the following: the Jews, like undomesticated beasts of burden, are satisfied in these matters with the literal meaning alone, as if it were straw, whereas the Christians, like men using reason (ratione), refresh themselves with spiritual understanding, as if it were the sweetest and richest part of that straw.<sup>7</sup>

Rationalism led both Alfonsi and Herman to polemicize against rabbinical literature and tradition. They are therefore the first example of the rationalist tendency among Jewish converts to Christianity in the Middle Ages.<sup>8</sup>

### 3

After Alfonsi, the first Christian author who engaged in anti-Islamic, anti-Jewish and specifically anti-Talmudic polemics was Peter the Venerable, the Benedictine abbot of Cluny. In his tractate *Against the inveterate stubbornness of the Jews*, written between 1144 and 1147,<sup>9</sup> he resorted to extremely vituperative arguments against the Talmud (which he is the first Christian author to call by its title, since Alfonsi consistently used the translation *doctrina*). He writes:

I shall put forward against you your book, O Jew, O beast – that book, I say, that Talmud of yours, that excellent doctrine of yours to be preferred to the books of the Prophets and to all the authentic sentences.<sup>10</sup>

6 Ed. by Mieth in Pedro Alfonso de Huesca, *Diálogo* (see note 2), 14; transl. by I. M. Resnick in Alfonsi, *Dialogue*, ed. Resnick, 51.

7 Hermannus quondam Judaeus, *Opusculum de conversione sua*, ed. by Gerlinde Niemeyer, Weimar 1963, 74 (transl. mine; quotations from the Bible are given according to the RSV).

8 See Jeremy Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law. Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity*, Berkeley et al. 1999, 213–218.

9 *Petri Venerabilis Adversus Iudeorum inveteratam duritiem*, ed. by Yvonne Friedman, Turnhout 1985, lxiii–lxx. (All the following translations from Peter the Venerable are my own.)

10 *Petri Venerabilis*, Friedman (ed.), 125–126 (5:32–35).

Peter the Venerable's attitude against the Talmud is based only on *aggadic* material: he shows neither knowledge of nor interest in Talmudic legal doctrine, not even relating to Christians. It is not unlikely that his work was influenced by Alfonsi's, as he composed it after a long sojourn in Spain (1142–1143).<sup>11</sup> Still, of the twenty-one *aggadot* quoted by Peter the Venerable, not even as many as half also appeared in Alfonsi's *Dialogi*. Thus, as suggested by Yvonne Friedman, it is more likely – though it cannot be demonstrated with certainty – that Peter the Venerable was relying on a circumscribed corpus of selected *aggadot*, transmitted either orally or as a written anthology. Such anthologies are a well-attested literary genre in medieval Christendom, but only from the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and for Friedman's theory to be demonstrated, they would have to have existed a century earlier. It is worth recalling that some of Peter's *aggadot* do not even appear in the Talmud as we know it but are taken from other compilations (mainly the *Alfa Beta de-Ben Sira*).<sup>12</sup> Again following Yvonne Friedman's detailed analysis of Peter's tract, Peter's view of Judaism still keeps to the traditional Augustinian definition of the Jews as witnesses of the *Hebraica veritas* of Scripture and therefore of the truth of Christian doctrine as embedded in the prophetic parts of the Hebrew Bible itself. Peter's main points against the Talmud are that the tales (*fabulae*) it contains are “utterly ridiculous and foolish stories” (the title of his fifth chapter) and that its authoritativeness as a second Scripture prevents the Jews from understanding the true Christological meaning of the first.

In Alfonsi's *Dialogi* polemical use of rationalist scientific arguments is no less frequent than recourse to exegetical arguments taken from Scripture or from the Talmud. In some parts of the work, anti-Jewish or anti-Islamic polemics seem almost subordinate to the aim of delineating a *summa* of Aristotelian knowledge. Conversely, in Peter the Venerable's works on Judaism and Islam, the polemical and missionizing purpose is absolutely predominant.<sup>13</sup>

## 4

Peter the Venerable's anti-Talmudic program originated in the areas of France already controlled by the growing Capetian dynasty and its cadet branches – the same geo-cultural and institutional context where, one century later (1240), the Paris Talmud trial would take place at the behest of Pope Gregory IX, prompted by the convert Nicolas Donin. With Donin, as compared to Alfonsi, the evidence is much clearer that he opposed rabbinic Judaism even while still Jewish. Although biographical evidence about Donin is scanty, the accusations lodged against him in the Hebrew account of the Paris trial (the *Wikkuah Rabbenu Yehiel*) by Rabbi Yehiel of Paris, the Jewish defendant in the trial, say that he was expelled or separated himself from the Jewish community in 1225.<sup>14</sup> Yet, the prologue to the Christian list of the charges he leveled against the Talmud informs

11 Chen Merchavia, *Ha-Talmud bi-re'i ha-našrut. Ha-yaḥas le-sifrut Yiśra'el še-le-aḥar ha-Miqra' ba-'ōlam ha-nošri bi-yeme-ha-benayyim (500–1248)*, Jerusalem 1971, 128–131; Amos Funkenstein, “Basic Types of Christian Anti-Jewish Polemics in the Middle Ages,” in *Viator* 2 (1971), 373–382, here 379–380.

12 *Petri Venerabilis*, Friedman (ed.), xiv–xviii.

13 On Peter the Venerable's anti-Judaism see Cohen, *Living Letters* (see note 8), 245–270.

14 The text of the *Wikkuah* according ms. Hébr. 712 of the Bibliothèque de France has in one place that the Jews “expelled and sentenced” Donin (*hivdaluḥu we-nadimuhu*) due to his refusal of any exegesis of the Torah (f. 44b), whereas in another place Donin is said “to have separated” from them fifteen years before the trial (*nifradta mim-mennu zeh ʿw šanah*) (f. 46a). In Ya'aqov ben Eliyyah's letter to Pablo Christiani (see further), we read that “Donin the apostate [...] became a convert from the laws of God and his Torah, and did not even believe in the Roman Religion [...]. The saintly Rabbi Yechiel, moved by the honor of the God of Heaven, pushed him aside with both hands, and separated him for evil to the sound of the *shofar* and the *teruah*” (transl. by Solomon Grayzel, *The Church and*

us that he was baptised by Pope Gregory IX only eleven years later, in 1236.<sup>15</sup> This demonstrates that Donin's criticisms of Judaism preceded his conversion to Christianity.

In 1236, when Donin was baptized by the Pope, he submitted to him a list of charges against the Talmud and its authority within Judaism that triggered the public trial held at the royal court of Paris on June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1240, and the consequent burning at the stake of some twenty cartloads of Talmudic manuscripts sometime between 1241 and 1244. Donin's thirty-five charges against the Talmud<sup>16</sup> are all based on and argued from quotations from the Talmud itself and from Rashi's commentary to it. His main points are, first, that the Talmud is a much less ancient text than it is claimed to be, dating back only to the mid-ninth century; and, second, that it contains hostile statements towards Christians and blasphemies against God, Jesus, Mary and Christianity. Its blasphemies, according to Donin, include anthropomorphic representations of God and other failures to conform to standards of rationality. In his accusations of irrationality and anthropomorphism Donin might have been at least partly influenced by Alfonsi and Peter the Venerable. Donin's agenda against the Talmud is nonetheless pretty different from his predecessors', and his main concerns are entirely beyond their perspective.

Donin also argues against the rabbinic claim to Jewish leadership. In modern secondary literature his anti-rabbinism has often been oversimplified as “Qaraism”, meaning here intellectual opposition to rabbinic Judaism rather than adherence to any specific Qaraite community or group.<sup>17</sup> In the *Wikkuah* Yehiel defines him as “one who ceased to believe in the words of the Sages” (*kofer divre ḥakhamim*), i. e., in rabbinic tradition. But given the lack of evidence for the presence of Qaraite in thirteenth-century France, there is no reason to presume that Donin had any Qaraite connections at all; his anti-rabbinism can equally be seen in the context of debate and dissent within the rabbinic Jewish community.

Further evidence on this point comes in the discussion between Donin and Yehiel on the dating of the Talmud and Donin's insistence that it was a mid-ninth century text:

YEHIEL: *Why do you want to dispute me? And about what are you planning to interrogate me?*  
DONIN: *I will interrogate you about an ancient question: in this respect, you cannot deny that the Talmud dates from four hundred years ago.*

*the Jews in the XIIIth Century: A Study of Their Relations during the Years 1198–1254*, Philadelphia 1933, 339, from *Iggeret [wikkuah] R. Ya'aqov mi-Weneš'ah*, ed. by Joseph Kobak, in: *Jeschurun* 8 [1868], 1–34, here 29–30.

15 Ms. Lat. 16558 of the Bibliothèque de France, f. 211a (*anno enim ab incarnatione domini m° cc° xxxvi° circiter*).

16 The list of Donin's charges is published in Isidore Loeb, “La controverse de 1240 sur le Talmud”, in: *Revue des études juives* 1–2–3 (1880–1881), 247–61, 48–70, 39–57. On the date of the burning of the mss. see Paul L. Rose, “When Was the Talmud Burnt at Paris? A Critical Examination of the Christian and Jewish Sources and a New Dating: June 1241”, in: *Journal of Jewish Studies* 62 (2011), 324–39.

17 Cf. Grayzel, *The Church and the Jews* (see note 14), 340; Judah M. Rosenthal, “Donin, Nicholas”, in: *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. VI, Jerusalem 1971, cols. 167–8, here 167; Bernhard Blumenkranz, “Jüdische und christliche Konvertiten im jüdisch-christlichen Religionsgespräche des Mittelalters”, in: Paul Wilpert and Willehad Paul Eckert (eds.), *Judentum im Mittelalter. Beiträge zum Christlich-Jüdischen Gespräch*, Berlin 1966, 264–82, here 279–80; Simon Schwarzfuchs, *Les Juifs de France*, Paris 1975, 80; Shlomo Simonsohn, *The Apostolic See and the Jews: History*, Toronto 1991, 279; Fausto Parente, “La Chiesa e il ‘Talmud’. L'atteggiamento della Chiesa e del mondo cristiano nei confronti del ‘Talmud’ e degli altri scritti rabbinici, con particolare riguardo all'Italia fra XV e XVI secolo”, in: Corrado Vivanti (ed.), *Gli ebrei in Italia. I. Dall'alto Medioevo all'età dei ghetti*, Torino 1996, 521–643, here 549 and n. 47; Anna Sapir Abulafia, *Christians and Jews in Dispute: Disputational Literature and the Rise of Anti-Judaism in the West (c. 1000–1150)*, Aldershot et al. 1998, 80; Görgo K. Hasselhoff, *Dicit Rabbi Moyses. Studien zum Bild von Moses Maimonides im lateinischen Westen vom 13. bis zum 15. Jahrhundert*, Würzburg 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2005, 124.

YEHI'EL: From more than one thousand five hundred years ago! (Then, turning to the Queen) I pray you, my Lady, do not force me to respond to his words, since he himself admitted that the Talmud is extremely ancient. And until now, no one has found anything to say against it. Indeed, Saint Jerome the priest was acquainted with our entire Torah, that is, the Talmud, as any cleric knows: had there been anything blameworthy in it, they would not have let it alone before now. Furthermore, haven't there existed before now other priests and apostates as important as these here? [Yet] for one thousand five hundred years, not a sentence or even a single word has been heard [against the Talmud].<sup>18</sup> What did you find against us, that you brought us here to defend our lives and fight for our Torah against that sinner, who already fifteen years ago ceased to believe in the words of the sages – according to whom the Talmud is one thousand five hundred years old – and believed only in what is written in the Torah of Moses without interpretation? You know that every word needs commentary. This is why we separated him from us and excommunicated him.

The question of dating is clearly related to that of the Talmud's real or proclaimed authoritative-ness. Donin's revision of the traditional date for the Talmud might also indicate that he opposed one particular aspect of early Ashkenazi rabbinic culture, namely, what Talya Fishman calls the *textualization in written form* of Talmudic lore, which Donin and maybe others perceived as a betrayal of its *oral* origin and transmission throughout late antiquity and the Gaonic era.<sup>19</sup> The accusations against the Talmud thus would attest not only to the Church's recent awareness of the authoritative-ness of the Talmud in Jewish life, but perhaps also to a new form and role the text had taken among Jews themselves.

The wider context of anti-rationalism in thirteenth-century France also had a bearing on the events in Paris: Aristotle's works on natural science, metaphysics and physics were prohibited more than once by the Sorbonne between 1210 and 1231 (in 1277 the prohibition was even extended to the "errors" contained in the writings of Aquinas); and William of Auvergne, bishop of Paris and a member of the jury in the trial of 1240, wrote in the first chapter of his *De legibus* that Aristotelian philosophy had led the Jews to heresy (whereas in his earlier *De universo* he thought that what had led them astray were rabbinic tales).<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, the relevance of the inner-Jewish context of the events of 1240 and their aftermath cannot be overestimated.

It is well known that the sentence declared at Paris, consigning the Talmud to the flames, was rigorously implemented, if only after some time,<sup>21</sup> and restated by the new Pope Innocent IV in his bull *Impia Iudeorum perfidia*. But in 1247 the Jews of Paris appealed to the Pope, an expert in canon law, requesting that their manuscripts be returned to them, lest they be precluded from the correct understanding of Scripture and law. The Pope prompted his legate in France, Odo of Châteauroux, to undertake a new examination of the Talmud in order to decide whether to return it to the Jews after censoring it. In 1248 Odo convened a committee of prelates, theologians and experts in canon law who decided that the Talmud was a blasphemous work and should not be restituted to the Jews. Eventually, the legate convinced the Pope (in a fairly blunt manner) that returning the Talmud to the Jews would mark an inadmissible contradiction of the recently estab-

18 Ms. Hébr. 712 of the Bibliothèque de France, ff. 44a-b (transl. mine).

19 Talya Fishman, *Becoming the People of the Talmud: Oral Torah as Written Tradition in Medieval Jewish Cultures*, Philadelphia 2011.

20 See Luca Bianchi, *Censure et liberté intellectuelle à l'Université de Paris (XIIIe-XIVe siècles)*, Paris 1999, 89–162; Jeremy Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews: The Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism*, Ithaca, NY 1982, 62 n. 20; Johannes M. M. H. Thijssen, *Censure and Heresy at the University of Paris, 1200–1400*, Philadelphia 1998, 40–56.

21 Rose, "When Was the Talmud Burnt?" (see note 16).

lished doctrine of the Church on the matter. Though other confiscations and burnings took place in other places in northern and southern France during the 1250s, the exchange between Innocent IV and Odo foreshadowed a gradual shift in Church policy toward the Talmud from persecution to censorship.

## 5

It was the Maimonidean controversy that provided the context for the last case I will examine, that of Sha'ul of Montpellier, who was trained under Eli'ezer ben 'Immanu'el of Tarascon and possibly Ya'aqov ben Eliyyah, and in the early 1230s, as a result of the wave of preaching by Raymond of Peñafort in Provence, converted to Christianity and became a Dominican friar, taking the name Pablo Christiani. He became a renowned itinerant preacher in Aragon and Provence and participated in public disputations against Nahmanides at Barcelona in 1263 and against one Rabbi Abraham ben Shemu'el of Rouen at Paris in 1269.

In his disputation against Nahmanides, Christiani attempted to show that the *aggadah* revealed the truth of Christianity. He also demonstrated competence on rabbinic *auctoritates*, notwithstanding Nahmanides' attempts to downplay Christiani's knowledge as incorrect or unoriginal. For Christiani, Jews held *aggadah* and *halakhah* to be equal as sources of authority; Nahmanides replied by asserting that the 613 *mišvot* were binding, and the Talmud was a necessary commentary on them, but the Midrash was not. Christiani's line of attack, and the rabbi's line of defense, would be exactly the same in the Paris disputation of 1269. But differently from the disputation at Paris in 1240, in Barcelona in 1263 the Talmud was not the object of contention itself, but the source on the basis of which to demonstrate, on Jewish grounds, the truth of the Christian *kérygma* of Jesus as the Messiah. The Latin Christian account of the Barcelona disputation says that Nahmanides was "defeated by irrefutable proofs and authorities" because the truth of Christianity "was proved to him clearly by both the authority of the Law and the Prophets and by the Talmud."<sup>22</sup> In this respect, the question of the dating of the Talmud remained of core importance, and it was raised by Nahmanides in Barcelona from a perspective opposed to Yehi'el's: Yehi'el defended the Talmud's antiquity and dated it to 1500 years earlier (possibly referring to the period of the "men of the great assembly", i.e., the beginning of the chain of rabbinic tradition according to tractate *Abot* 1:1);<sup>23</sup> whereas Nahmanides countered Christiani's usage of Talmudic materials to prove that Jesus was the messiah by ascribing the redaction of the Talmud to Rav Ashi, thus dating it to "around five hundred years after Jesus";<sup>24</sup> and arguing that the interpretation of the Talmud that Christiani maintained as valid had evidently not been considered as such by the rabbis of the Talmud itself, since otherwise they would have converted to Christianity. In the second disputation held in Paris (1269), although Christiani resorted to the same arguments he had made in Barcelona, his opponent Rabbi Abraham retorted – quite inconsequentially – with

22 Critical edition by Yitzhak Baer, "Le-biqqoret ha-wikku'him šel R. Yehi'el mi-Paris we-šel R. Mošeh ben Naḥman", in: *Tarbiz* 2 (1930–31), 172–87, here 186 (transl. mine).

23 Thus Grayzel, *The Church and the Jews* (see note 14), 340.

24 *Wikku'ah RaMBa'N*, § 96 (ed. by Chaim D. Chavel, *Kitve Rabbenu Mošeh ben Naḥman*, Jerusalem 1963, I, 301–20, reproducing the text of the edition by Moritz Steinschneider, *Sefer wikku'ah ha-RaMBa'N*, Berlin 1860) (transl. mine). Nahmanides' dating is based on the Talmudic statement that "Rav Ashi and Rabina represent the end of the oral teaching of law" (*Rav Aši we-Ravina sof hora'a, bBaba Meši'a* 86a), and that they were therefore responsible for committing the Gemara to writing. The chronology according to the ge'onim already maintained that Rabina had died about four hundred years after the destruction of the second Temple.

the same arguments and dating of the Talmud that Yehi'el had used thirty years earlier. He thus blamed the court for "speaking with arrogance against our law [the Talmud]" even though it was "more than twelve centuries old", and even though no one had ever questioned it until Donin.<sup>25</sup>

Christiani's pro-Christian usage of the Talmud, especially of its *aggadah*, is precisely what his adversaries found most irritating: another adversary of his in a dispute subsequent to that of Barcelona accused Christiani of "destroying (*pokher*) the *aggadot* of our Talmud";<sup>26</sup> similarly, Ya'aqov ben Eliyyah devotes the first third of his letter to Christiani to defending, against Christiani's allegations, Jewish interpretations of difficult rabbinic homilies, objecting that Talmudic *aggadot* are the kind of easily accessible material that every religion must commit to writing for the purposes of preaching to the unsophisticated masses who are incapable of understanding higher religious truths in their purer intellectual form. Either way, Christiani demonstrated not only an expertise in rabbinic materials, but also a willingness to use sources other than reason in order to polemicize against Judaism. In effect, he did not deny the authoritative nature of the Talmud at all, but merely used it to Christian ends.

In his epistle, Ya'aqov ben Eliyyah explicitly relates Christiani's conversion to the conflict between rationalists and anti-rationalists that had taken place in Provence. Speaking of the purported burning of Maimonides' books in Montpellier in 1232 – which he assumed had actually taken place – he blames it on a spirit of heresy that led the "slanderers" (*rekhilim*), i. e. the anti-rationalists, to destroy Jewish communal structures by denouncing the Maimonideans to the Christian authorities and thus facilitating Sha'ul / Pablo's conversion to Christianity.<sup>27</sup> In his letter, an older Ya'aqov repents of the anti-Maimonidean heterodoxy to which he adhered in his youth (he would later even write a commentary to Maimonides' *Guide*):

*Because of the sin we committed when we were young boys, of the guilt of our youth<sup>28</sup> [...], strife started fires and 'fire was flashing'<sup>29</sup> [...]. The slanderers were 'a brood of sinful men';<sup>30</sup> they were the ones that 'led out and brought'<sup>31</sup> and caused division between brothers. They 'have seen false and deceptive visions';<sup>32</sup> they kindled 'unholy fire'<sup>33</sup> and 'he that kindled the fire shall make full restitution'.<sup>34</sup> The young 'answer roughly'<sup>35</sup> to the hoary [...]. I, too, was among them*

25 Critical edition by Joseph Shatzmiller, *La deuxième controverse de Paris. Un chapitre dans la polémique entre chrétiens et juifs au Moyen Age*, Paris/Louvain 1994, 45 (transl. mine).

26 The purported "Rabbi Menaḥem" of ms. Or. 53 of the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale of Rome; see J. M. Rosenthal, "Wikkuah dati ben ḥakam be-šem Menaḥem u-ven ha-mumar we-ha-nazir ha-dominiquani Pablo Christiani", in: Menahem Zohori et al. (eds.), *Hagut Ivrit ba'America: Studies on Jewish Themes by Contemporary American Scholars*, vol. III, Tel-Aviv 1974, 61–74, and David Berger's observations in Id., *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages: A Critical Edition of the Nizzahon Vetus with an Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*, Philadelphia 1979, 36 n. 104.

27 Cohen, *The Mentality* (see note 5), 39.

28 Cf. Job 13:26.

29 From Exodus 9:24.

30 From Numbers 32:14.

31 That is, they took the leadership in Israel: in 1 Chronicles 11:2 the two verbs are read as referring to David's military command over Israel still under Saul's kingship (Cohen, *The Mentality* [see note 5], 47 n. 60).

32 From Lamentations 2:14.

33 From Leviticus 10:1, where the expression is understood to refer to the improper sacrifice offered by Nadab and Abihu.

34 From Exodus 22:5.

35 From Proverbs 18:23.

*at that moment, exactly the same as them; 'therefore my words have been rash',<sup>36</sup> and 'I was ashamed, and I was confounded, because I bore the disgrace of my youth'.<sup>37</sup>*

What remains unclear, though, is whether before converting, Christiani had adhered to the camp of the rationalists or the anti-rationalists. In his anti-Jewish polemics (especially according to the *Wikkuah RaMBaḥ*, the Hebrew account of the Barcelona disputation written by Nahmanides), he shows an inclination toward literal hermeneutics, both of Scripture<sup>38</sup> and of rabbinic *aggadot*. His interpretation of midrashic *aggadot* about the messiah had a particular tendency toward Christological interpretation.<sup>39</sup> Jeremy Cohen put forward the hypothesis that such tendencies were shared by several representatives of the anti-Maimonidean camp at Montpellier, in which Ya'aqov and Sha'ul / Pablo had been comrades;<sup>40</sup> these tendencies, along with the communal crisis caused by the Maimonidean controversy, pushed several anti-Maimonideans to convert to Christianity; on the verge of conversion, though, Ya'aqov recanted, whereas Sha'ul took his choice to its logical conclusion.<sup>41</sup>

True, as we saw, Herman / Judah had identified rationality itself with spiritual exegesis already one century before Christiani, but one has to wonder whether the opposite identification of literalist exegesis with irrationalism should be taken for granted. There are actually also hints in the opposite direction, opening the possibility that before converting Christiani had been a rationalist, much as Donin was. Ursula Ragacs has noticed that Christiani's anti-Talmudic criticism by and large corresponds to Donin's;<sup>42</sup> I also think that Christiani, when stating that Maimonides "had no equal" among Jewish sages "in the last four hundred years", was reproducing Donin's dating of the Talmud in Paris.<sup>43</sup> Another possibly revealing hint is the high esteem with which Christiani quoted Maimonides as an *auktoritas* to make his own point about the mortality of the messiah.<sup>44</sup> And last, differently from Donin's preaching, Christiani's was strongly aimed at missionizing and converting; yet, both Donin and Christiani (the latter in the Paris disputation of 1269 at least) liken Jews to heretics, thus threatening them with persecution and death.<sup>45</sup>

On the other hand, these possible hints at Christiani having been a rationalist are also susceptible of different interpretations. His esteem for Maimonides might simply have been a rhetorical *escamotage* aimed at persuading the Jews by using an *auktoritas* of theirs the same way he used rabbinic *aggadah*. Also his threatening identification of Jews with heretics, like Donin's,

36 From Job 6:3.

37 From Jeremiah 31:19. The passage is taken from *Iggeret*, ed. by Kobak, 21 (transl. mine; quotations from the Bible are given according to the RSV).

38 See e.g. *Wikkuah RaMBaḥ*, ed. by Chavel, §§ 64–65 and 94. Conversely, Nahmanides stresses the Christian jury's predilection for rationalism (§ 39) and criticizes the Christian myth as irrational (§ 47). I thank Heather Stein for calling my attention to this.

39 Thus Cohen, *The Mentality* (see note 5), 40; cf. Simonsohn, *The Apostolic See* (see note 17), 279.

40 Cohen, *The Mentality* (see note 5), 40 and n. 67 (based on *Iggeret*, ed. by Kobak, 31).

41 Cohen, *The Mentality* (see note 5), 40.

42 Ursula Ragacs, *Die zweite Talmuddisputation von Paris 1269*, Frankfurt a.M. et al. 2001, 59.

43 *Wikkuah RaMBaḥ*, ed. by Chavel, § 72 (transl. mine).

44 Ibid. Here Christiani states that he is quoting from the *Mishneh Torah*, book of *Shofetim*, but cannot find the passage in the book. It is actually to be found in Maimonides' *Treatise on the Resurrection of the Dead* and in his introduction to *Pereq Heleq* in his commentary on the Mishnah (Hyam Maccoby, *Judaism on Trial. Jewish-Christian Disputations in the Middle Ages*, Oxford, Portland, Or., 1982, repr. 2006, 131). Quite differently, during the Paris Talmud trial (if we are to believe the Hebrew account), Donin quotes Rashi while being sarcastic about the latter's prestige among the Jews.

45 Thus Ragacs, *Die zweite Talmuddisputation* (see note 42), 62–64.

might have been somewhat enhanced by the Jewish redactors of both the *Wikkuhim* with the aim of showing both Donin and Christiani in the worst possible light as dangerous enemies of the Jews. A thorough reconsideration of all the ambiguous evidence available is therefore necessary in order to decide whether Christiani was or had been a rationalist or an anti-rationalist.

In any case, Ya'aqov ben Eliyyah's discussion of Christiani's conversion reveals how the rationalist vs. anti-rationalist debate was as central to inner-Jewish debate as it was to inner-Christian debate and to Christian-Jewish polemic.

Christiani's approach to classical rabbinic literature was also used by his contemporary and fellow Dominican Ramon Martí, also an anti-Jewish and anti-Islamic polemicist, author of the *Capistrum Iudaeorum* (*The Harness of the Jews*, 1267) and of the *Pugio Fidei* (*Dagger of Faith*, 1278). It was also used some seventy years later by the Iberian convert Alfonso of Valladolid, known before his conversion as Abner of Burgos, in his *Mostrador de Justicia*, in which he brings Jewish texts – many taken from the Talmud – to demonstrate the truth of Christianity; but just as Jewish texts could be read by both Jews and Christians, so, too, was rationalism a possibility open to both groups.

## 6

Beyond the obvious explanation provided by persecutions, two different reasons have been suggested to make sense of the great number of conversions to Christianity among Spanish Jews in the Middle Ages: in Yitzhak Baer's view, it was Averroistic tendencies, and in Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson's, it was mysticism.<sup>46</sup> Both tendencies shared hostility to the established rabbinic leadership. Eleazar Gutwirth has observed that both Baer's and Ben-Sasson's models lend themselves to the same criticism: there is no evidence of converts from Judaism to Christianity who had previously been Averroists or displayed mystical or ascetic inclinations comparable to those at work in contemporary Spanish Christendom.<sup>47</sup> Gutwirth therefore suggested that a rationalist, anti-rabbinic, and especially anti-Talmudic tendency was operative for a long time in what he called the "Hispano-Jewish mentality," particularly among intellectuals, a tendency similar to the contemporary anti-ecclesiastical feelings that came to pervade the Christian majority.<sup>48</sup> In several cases it coincided with an interest in non-Jewish philosophy and with adhesion to rationalism of the Maimonidean type. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century this kind of rationalism was defended by 'Azaryah ben Yosef ibn Abba Mari of Perpignan, who, in his introduction to his Hebrew translation of Boethius' *De consolazione philosophiae* (1423), wrote in his own defence against the criticism he expected for having translated a Christian Aristotelian author:

*I therefore surmise that the stolid crowd of the rabbis will mock me and put me to shame due to this translation. Surely if these ignoramuses – who think of themselves as the only pious Jews, but what meaningless piety! – read the works of the Righteous Teacher<sup>49</sup> (may peace be upon*

*him), who translated many works of Gentile sages – Galen in particular among them – [...], they would apologize to me [...] and would accept truth from those who uttered it.<sup>50</sup>*

Along the same lines, some sixty years later, the Aragonese philosopher Abraham Bibago, in his *Derekh emunah* (*The Path of Faith*, ca. 1480),<sup>51</sup> criticized the Talmudists for their anti-Maimonideanism, which he blamed on their being accustomed to rejecting any non-literal interpretation of the Torah and the Talmud. Bibago – who personally suffered opposition because of his radical Aristotelianism – maintained that the Talmudists' attachment to rabbinic tradition, and especially their interpretive literalism, made them blind to the deeper meaning of Talmudic wisdom itself. He therefore defined *them* as the real sinners and those who endanger communal cohesion, not the philosophers whom they called heretics and unbelievers:

*Fear of God is the kind of knowledge of the Godhead by which those who have it become real God-fearers: whereas the pseudo-sages of our people, deprived of any imagination or certainty, think that divine wisdom diverts man from true happiness. And this is a blatant falsehood, since divine wisdom actually completes the intellect and brings man undoubtedly to happiness, because through divine wisdom man becomes similar to God. [...] And if they say: "Sages can be found among my people!", then they dissociate themselves from the community (yaš'u min ha-kelal). It is they who are the evil, the sinners, the turncoats! We will reply to this as is becoming for a sage: that we too see others who are utterly incapable of perceiving, or have no demonstrative knowledge whatsoever, yet are called sages because they delved in Talmudic wisdom according to its literal meaning (ki-khtavah), while they have not understood the inner meaning of the particular propositions that constitute the real knowledge of the Godhead. These are evil sinners that dissociate themselves from the community; even more so, thus are those who do not declare nor repeat this all.<sup>52</sup>*

## 7

Any analysis of the phenomenon represented by conversions cannot be based only on their circumstantial or instrumental causes. One must also consider the whole context of interaction between the convert's 'before' and his/her 'after' – the "social and cultural intimacy"<sup>53</sup> between the religious society from which s/he came and the one to which s/he moved.

Let us consider the features that the cases I have described have in common. In the context of medieval polemics between Judaism and Christianity, some learned Jews, well versed in rabbinic lore, became critical of rabbinic leadership, its claims to authority, its arrogance and the unresolved

50 Boezio [Boethius], *De consolazione philosophiae*. Traduzione ebraica di 'Azaria ben R. Joseph ibn Abba Mari detto Bonafoux Bonfil Astruc, 5183–1423, ed. by Sergio J. Sierra, Torino/Jerusalem 1967, 28 (transl. mine). The passage is quoted by Gutwirth, "Conversions to Christianity" (see note 47), 110.

51 See Mauro Zonta, *Hebrew Scholasticism in the Fifteenth Century: A History and Source Book*, Dordrecht 2006, 39 and n. 28.

52 Abraham Bibago, *Derekh emunah*, Constantinople 1512, 45d. Gutwirth, "Conversion to Christianity" (see note 47), 119, thought that the expression *la-še't min ha-kelal* means that the Talmudists converted to Christianity. In my opinion the expression is not that specific and only alludes to the fact that the rabbis, by rejecting ideas that were rationally tenable and by then widespread among the Jews, were practically alienating themselves from the majority. See Yosef Hacker, "Meqomo šel R. Avraham Bivagoh be-mahaloqet 'al limmud ha-filosofiyah u-ma'amadah bi-Sfarad ba-me'ah ha-15", in: *Proceedings of the Fifth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Jerusalem 1972, II, 151–8. While taking upon myself all responsibility for any misunderstanding of the passage, I thank Silvia Di Donato for discussing Bibago's passage and stance with me.

53 I borrow the expression from David Malkiel, "Jews and Apostates in Medieval Europe – Boundaries Real and Imagined", in: *Past and Present* 194 (2007), 3–34, here 33.

46 Yitzhak Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, II (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1959), Engl. trans. Philadelphia 1961, chaps. IX and X; Hillel Haim Ben Sasson, "Dor gole Sefarad 'al 'ašmo", in: *Zion* 26 (1960–1961), 23–64.

47 Eleazar Gutwirth, "Conversions to Christianity amongst Fifteenth-Century Spanish Jews: An Alternative Explanation", in: *Shlomo Simonsohn Jubilee Volume: Studies on the History of the Jews in the Middle Ages and Renaissance Period*, Tel Aviv 1993, 97–121.

48 I owe to John Baldwin the suggestion of a parallel between Donin's anti-Talmudism and Peter the Chanter's anti-Patristicism.

49 Maimonides.

clash of opinions that characterized rabbinic legal debate. Some of these intellectuals inclined toward rationalistic philosophy and thought that reason should not be hierarchically submitted to tradition in establishing (or explaining) truth. They thus turned to criticism of the Talmud for a variety of reasons: the rabbis used it as the ground and justification for their doctrinal and communal leadership; it presented – and therefore justified – mostly unresolved divergences over *halakhic* questions, thereby making it difficult to manage communal life and promoting fragmentation of opinion; further, its *aggadic* parts were full of traditions and utterances that did not comply with reason. Such criticism was common even among intellectuals who remained Jewish. Yet, in France, Provence and Iberia in the Middle Ages, it seems to have been much more frequent – as I have tried to show – that Jewish intellectuals who eventually converted to Christianity were first critical of rabbinic-Talmudic tradition and leadership: some (like Nicolas Donin) in order to criticize even more harshly the tradition from which they came, others (like Abner of Burgos, Alfonsi, and maybe Christiani too) in order to share with their ex-coreligionists the truth they had acquired. In another region, they might have turned to Qaraism; in another era, they might have become full-fledged and socially independent freethinkers like Uriel d'Acosta, Spinoza or the *Wissenschaftler des Judentums*. But in a society “expressed almost entirely in religious terms” like medieval Western Europe, as Jacob Katz put it,<sup>54</sup> the choice of *apiqorsut*, free thinking, was not yet an option for learned Jews opposing rabbinic tradition and its claim to authority; nor was adherence to Qaraism, since there were no Qaraites in Western Europe at the time and Qaraite intellectual influence was minimal. Conversion to Christianity was the only feasible alternative to – or rather, consequence of – criticism from within the Jewish community, though it was no doubt a radical choice.

## 8

As we have seen, it is frequently difficult to define the relationship among the different authors of anti-Talmudic polemics in traditional *redaktionsgeschichtlich* terms of direct dependence on earlier written sources. Yet the fact remains that a corpus of Talmudic passages came into being and appears repeatedly in the medieval Christian tradition of anti-Talmudic polemics, first in Iberia, then in France too. To make this concrete, let me discuss the *aggadah* on Rabbi Yehoshua' ben Levi and the Angel of Death as an example of how one source could be contextualized in different ways in order to serve the different polemical agendas of the different authors.

The Talmudic *textus receptus* in *bKetubbot* 77b reads as follows:

*When [R. Yehoshua' ben Levi] was about to die, the Angel of Death was told: “Go and carry out his wish.” When he came to him and appeared to him, R. Yehoshua' told him said: “Show me my place [in Paradise].” “Certainly,” he replied. But R. Yehoshua' asked again: “Give me your knife, lest you frighten me on the way.” The angel gave it to him. On arriving there the angel lifted him [above the wall surrounding Paradise] and showed him [his place]. [Here several MSS add: He (Yehoshua') told him: “Lift me up a little more.”]<sup>55</sup> Then R. Yehoshua' jumped and dropped on the other side of the wall. The angel seized him by the corner of his cloak, but R. Yehoshua' exclaimed: “I swear that I will not come back.” Thereupon the Holy One, blessed be He, said: “If he ever requested that an oath of his be annulled, he must go back; but if not, he need not go back.” The angel said to R. Yehoshua': “Give me back my knife!” but the other would*

54 Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance*, Oxford 1961, 75.

55 Mss. Vat. Ebr. 113, f. 130 and 487.11 (see the *Online Treasury of Talmudic Manuscripts*, <<http://jnul.huji.ac.il/dl/talmud/bavly/selectbavly.asp>>).



not return it to him. A heavenly voice (bat qol) went forth and said to R. Yehoshua: "Give it back to him, for it is urgently required for the mortals."<sup>56</sup>

This tradition also appears in the *Alfa Beta de-Ben Sira*,<sup>57</sup> a collection of *aggadot* from the Geonic period (7<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> cent.). In this version, Yehoshua' is not on the verge of death; he is simply friends with the Angel, whom he begs to show him Paradise. There he takes the Angel's knife and keeps it for seven years; after that, God congratulates him for this feat, but has him return the knife. No mention is made of the oath taken by Yehoshua' – a point of *halakhic* relevance that lies beyond the interests of the compilation. It is not unlikely that this version of the legend, and the *Alfa Beta de-Ben Sira* as a whole, were already meant as a parody of rabbinic *aggadah* "from within" the rabbinic tradition itself – some sort of scholarly irony and self-mockery, much like similar contemporary works from Western Christendom, such as the *Coena Cypriani*.<sup>58</sup>

In the first *titulus* of his *Dialogues*, Alfonsi lists and discusses some passages from the Talmud that he blames for being ridiculous and criticizes in detail. His usual critical perspective is a rationalist and scientific one: for instance, the statement in *bBaba Batra* 25a that God resides only in the west is not only blamed for its anthropomorphic representation of the Godhead, but also confuted through a very long-winded exposition of Aristotelian cosmology meant to show how the Rabbis of old did not understand the real form of the world.<sup>59</sup> At the very end of the *titulus* Alfonsi recounts our *aggadah* apparently conflating its two sources (as we know them),<sup>60</sup> and adding that, after Yehoshua swears "by God" (*per deum*) that he will not leave paradise, God asks the Angel to check in the book of Yehoshua's deeds whether he had ever sworn falsely – in which case, his last oath would be void too, but this is not the case.<sup>61</sup> This time, Alfonsi's criticism of the narrative is more theological than 'scientific': the passage is ridiculed because it sets limits to the omniscience and prescience of both the angel and God himself, who should have known beforehand Yehoshua's intentions and the reliability of his oaths.

Peter the Venerable, too, relates this narrative, criticizes it and broadens it quite a bit.<sup>62</sup> Due to the strong anti-Talmudic bias of the additions, it is likely that Peter took them not from a Jewish source but from an anthology made by Christians or converts and that he added them to serve his own polemical purposes.<sup>63</sup> The main differences from the Talmudic text are the following: (1) the Rabbi declares he is a scholar of the Talmud because he expects that such status will protect him from impending death; (2) he persuades the Angel of Death to take him on a tour of both otherworldly realms; seeing the Christians punished in hell, he asks the Angel why, and the Angel answers: "Because they believe in the son of Mary, they do not observe the law of Moses, and mostly, because they do not believe in the Talmud"; (3) Yehoshua' sees that in paradise some people are granted special honour; he asks the Angel why, and the Angel answers that they are "those who invented and composed the Talmud, along with their followers, who studied the

56 Transl. mine from the *textus receptus* of the Vilna edition.

57 *Alfabeto de-Ben Sira*, ed. by Moritz Steinschneider, Berlin 1858, 29a. The passage is translated in Mark J. Mirsky and David Stern (eds.), *Rabbinic Fantasies: Imaginative Narratives from Classical Hebrew Literature*, New Haven 1998, 194–5.

58 Cf. Norman Bronznick in *Rabbinic Fantasies*, ed. by Stern and Mirsky, 168.

59 Ed. by Mieth in Pedro Alfonso de Huesca, *Diálogo*, 15–23.

60 *Ibid.*, 49–50.

61 The motif of the heavenly book where the deeds of every human being are recorded is found, e.g., in *Abot* 1:1 (cf. *bRo's ha-Šanah* 16b).

62 *Petri Venerabilis* ed. by Friedman (see note 2), 163–166 (5:1338–1430).

63 See above, § 3.

Talmud"; (4) in the end, Yehoshua' swears his oath never to leave paradise by God *and by the Talmud itself*, and God grants him heavenly abode not only because no oath of Yehoshua's was ever void, but also precisely because he had been a scholar of the Talmud. Peter the Venerable strongly criticizes this story for its ridiculousness. His point in recounting and expanding it was to blame the Jews for believing that study of the Talmud was a requirement for achieving both bodily and otherworldly salvation – a requirement that of course Christians could not help falling short of achieving. If Peter's tract was not meant only as an aid for the training of missionizing preachers, but also as a direct tool for the evangelization of the Jews, then we must conclude that his French Jewish audience was still more accustomed to oral transmission of *aggadot* than it was to the Talmud as a book, at least in the form in which it has come down to us. This has a bearing on the recent argument that a shift from custom and oral culture to written textual transmission took place during the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>-century "renaissance" both in Christian and Jewish societies.<sup>64</sup>

The tradition about Yehoshua' and the angel is also mentioned in one of the sources of the Paris Talmud trial of 1240, even though it is not included among the passages that Donin submitted to the Pope as prooftexts for his thirty-five accusations. It would be useful to verify whether it was also included in the *Extractiones de Talmut*, a huge dossier of Talmudic excerpts (contained in ms. Lat. 16558 of the Bibliothèque de France) compiled at the time of the trial under the direction of the Dominican Thibaud de Sézanne, another convert from Judaism; this is the first Christian anthology of rabbinic literature translated into Latin to have come down to us, but it is still extant only in manuscript, and I have not yet been able to verify this point. The *aggadah* on Yehoshua' and the angel is nonetheless cursorily mentioned in the Hebrew account of the trial, among several other Talmudic traditions that Donin ridiculed for their absurdity:

DONIN: *Listen to my words and I will recount to you the absurd stories [used in the Talmud] to tell parables. It is written in your Torah [...] that Rabbi Yehoshua' ben Levi fooled the Angel of Death and is still living in the Garden of Eden. [...]*

YEHI'EL: *[...] Regarding Rabbi Yehoshua' ben Levi being alive in the Garden of Eden: isn't Elijah living in heaven? As it is written: 'and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven' (2 Kgs. 2:11).<sup>65</sup>*

Donin brings only two points of the Talmudic narrative, both still present in our late *textus receptus* of the Talmud: the facts that Yehoshua' tricks the angel and that he is eventually granted abode in paradise even without having died. Donin remarks the absurdity of such assertions, to which Yehi'el can only retort by quoting parallels in Scripture to one of them. The question remains open – and unsolvable – whether the passage actually figured among those discussed at the trial.

No mention of our tradition is made by either Pablo Christiani or Ramon Martí (at least not in the latter's *Pugio Fidei* according to the registers at the end of the Paris edition of 1651 and of the Leipzig edition of 1687). This is further evidence of how the anti-Talmudic agenda of Christian polemicists changed after the Paris trial and its aftermath. Conversion of Jewish intellectuals to Christianity had to do not only with the long-standing tradition of Christian anti-Judaism and mission towards the Jews, but also – and in some cases mainly – with inner-Jewish frictions about rabbinic authority and leadership and the growth of rationalism as a new paradigm of religious language and discourse, within Judaism, within Christianity, and also between the two.

64 See Yvonne Friedman, "Anti-Talmudic Invective from Peter the Venerable to Nicolas Donin (1144–1244)", in: Gilbert Dahan (ed.), *Le brûlement du Talmud à Paris 1242–1244*, Paris 1999, 171–189, here 183; Fishman, *Becoming the People of the Talmud* (see note 19).

65 Ms. Hébr. 712 of the Bibliothèque de France, ff. 53a–55a (transl. mine).

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