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

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

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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 Judaeos, 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 Etlik about the God is depicted wearing phylacteries, Alfonsi argued that this law was full of nonsensical and ridiculous anthropomorphic representations of the deity:1

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 law 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 (nece nulla 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

1 Sources are quoted in existing English translations, which I have checked against the critical editions or manuscripts that I quote in the footnotes.
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Sophocally 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.8

Given that the characters in the dialogue represent Alfonso'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 Eibert of Münster and their non-literal, allegoric (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... rationes). 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 (rationes), refresh themselves with spiritual understanding, as if it were the sweetest and richest part of that straw.9

Rationalism led both Alfonso 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.8

3

After Alfonso, 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 inventare stubborness of the Jews, written between 1144 and 1147,7 he resorted to extremely vituperative arguments against the Talmud (which he is the first Christian author to call by its title, since Alfonso consistently used the translation doctrine). 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.10

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

7 Hermannus Quaduons Jodocus, Opusculum de conversione sae. ed. by Gerlinde Niemeyer, Weimar 1963, 74 (transl. moves; quotations from the Bible are given according to the RV).


9 Peter Venerabilis, Adversus Judaeorum inventarum disputatio, ed. by Yvonne Friedman, Turnhout 1985, 101–102. (All the following translations from Peter the Venerable are my own.)

Peter the Venerable’s attitude against the Talmud is based on only agadic material: he shows neither knowledge of nor interest in Talmudic legal doctrine, nor even relating to Christians. It is not unlikely that his work was influenced by Alfonso’s, as he composed it after a long sojourn in Spain (1142–1143). Still, of the twenty-one agداد quoted by Peter the Venerable, not even as many as half also appeared in Alfonso’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 agداد, 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 13th 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 agداد do not even appear in the Talmud as we know it but are taken from other compilations (mainly the Alfa leta de Ben Sirat). Again following Yvonne Friedman’s detailed analysis of Peter’s tract, Peter’s view of Judaism is still to keep 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 prophetical 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 Alfonso’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.

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 Alfonso, 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 Wickahau Radbenhu Yehël) 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. Yet, the prologue to the Christian list of the charges he leveled against the Talmud informs us that he was baptised by Pope Gregory IX only eleven years later, in 1236. This demonstrates that Donin’s criticisms of Judaism preceded his conversion to Christianity.

In 1236, when Donin was baptised 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 23rd, 1240, and the consequent burning at the stake of some twenty carioloins of Talmudic manuscripts sometime between 1241 and 1244. Donin’s thirty-five charge against the Talmud are all based on and argued from quotations from the Talmud itself and from Rashi’s commentary on 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-nineteenth 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 Alfonso 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 “Quarism,” meaning here intellectual opposition to rabbinic Judaism rather than adherence to any specific Qaraite community or group. In the Wickahau Yehël he defines himself as “one who ceased to believe in the words of the Sages” (Haefer dive hajammin), i.e., in rabbinic tradition. But given the lack of evidence for the presence of Qaraites 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.

YEHEI: 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.

YEHEIEL: 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? [Ye] for one thousand five hundred years, not a sentence or even a single word has been heard against the Talmud? 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 authoritarianism. Doherty restricts the tradition for the Talmud might also indicate that he opposed one particular aspect of early Ashkenazi rabbinic culture, namely, what Talia 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. The accusations against the Talmud thus would attest not only to the Church's recent awareness of the authoritarianism 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). On the other hand, the relevance of the inter-Jewish context of the trial of 1248 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, and restated by the new Pope Innocent IV in his bull Impia ludocrum perfidiae. 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 Châtelaourse, 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 convoked a committee of prelates, theologians and experts in canon law that 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 established 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 Eliezer ben 'Immanuel of Tarascon and possibly Ya'akov ben Eliyah, and in the early 1230s, as a result of the wave of preaching by Raymond of Peisafer 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 Shemuel 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 seforim, notwithstanding Nahmanides' attempts to downplay Christiani's knowledge as incorrect or unoriginal. For Christians, Jewish handled aggadah and halakhah to be equal as sources of authority; Nahmanides replied by asserting that the 613 mishpatim 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 kerygma 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." 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 Ye'hiel's: Ye'hiel 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, 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," 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 inconsequently — with critical edition by Yitzhak Baer, "Le bissiqtet ha-wikkuqim shel R. Ye'hiel mi-Paris we-iel R. Meir ben Nalman", in: Tarih 5 (1990—11), 172—87, here 186 (transl. mine).

3 Thos Grayzel, The Church and the Jews (see note 14), 540.

4 Wissak, RaMakN, § 96 (ed. by Chaim D. Chavel, Kone RaBkenu Moleh ben Nalman, Jerusalem 1963), 1, 301—20, reproducing the text of the edition by Moritz Steinschneider, Sefer wikkuqot ha-RaMakN, Berlin 1860 (transl. mine). Nahmanides' dating is based on the Talmudic statement that 'Rav Ashi and Rabba represent the end of the oral teaching of law' (Bava Ai 41a 41b se-farha, Maimonides 8b), and that they were therefore responsible for committing the Gemara to writing. The chronology according to the ge'onim already maintained that Rabbi had died about four hundred years after the destruction of the Second Temple.

18 Ms. Hébr. 712 of the Bibliotheque de France, ff. 44a-b (transl. mine).
19 Talia Fishman, Becoming the People of the Talmud: Oral Torah as Written Tradition in Medieval Jewish Cultures, Philadelphia 2011.
21 Rose, "When Was the Talmud Burned?" (see note 16).
the same arguments and dating of the Talmud that Yeḥiel 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.25

Chrisitian's pro-Chrestian 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 Christians of "destroying (pokher) the aggadot of our Talmud."26 Similarly, Ya'akov ben Eliahy devotes the first third of his letter to Christians to defending, against Christian'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 teaching to the unsophisticated masses who are incapable of understanding higher religious truths in their purer intellectual form. Either way, Christians 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 authoritarianism of the Talmud at all, but merely used it to Christian ends.

In his epistle, Ya'akov ben Eliahy explicitly relates Christians' 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" (rekulim), i.e., the anti-rationalists, to destroy Jewish communal structures by denouncing the Maimonideans to the Christian authorities and thus facilitating Shalul / Pablo's conversion to Christianity.27 In his letter, an elder Ya'akov 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 youth28 [...]. stripe started fires and fire was flashing [...]. The slanderers were 'a band of sinful men';29 they were the ones that 'led out and brought'30 and caused division between brothers. They have seen false and deceptive visions;31 they kindled 'unwont fire'32 and 'he that kindled the fire shall make full restitution.'33 The young 'answer roughly'34 to the hoary [...]. I, too, was among them.


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


29 From Exodus 9:24.

30 From Numbers 32:14.

31 That is, they took the leadership in Jerusalem in 1 Chronicles 11:2; the two verbs are used as referring to David's military command over Israel still under Saul's kingship (Cohen, The Mentality [see note 5], 67 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.

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

What remains unclear, though, is whether before converting, Christians had adhered to the camp of the rationalists or the anti-rationalists. In his anti-Jewish polemics (especially according to the Wikkusah RaMban, the Hebrew account of the Barcelona disputation written by Nahmanides), he shows an inclination toward liberal hermeneutics, both of Scripture38 and of rabbinic aggadot. His interpretation of midrashic aggadot about the messiah had a particular tendency toward Christological interpretation.39 Jeremy Cohen put forward the hypothesis that such tendencies were shared by several representatives of the anti-Maimonidean camp at Montpellier, in which Ya'akov and Shalul / Pablo had been comrades;40 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, however, Ya'akov recanted, whereas Shalul took his choice to its logical conclusion.41

True, as we saw, Herman / Judah had identified rationality itself with spiritual exegesis already one century before Christianity, 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 Christianity had been a rationalist, much as Donin was. Ursula Raagas has noticed that Christianity's anti-Talmudic criticism by and large corresponds to Donin's.42 I also think that Christians, when stating that Maimonideans "had no equal" among Jewish sages "in the last four hundred years," was reproducing Donin's dat ing of the Talmud in Paris.43 Another possibly revealing hint is the high esteem with which Christians quoted Maimonideans as an eccentricity to make his own point about the mortality of the messiah.44 And last, differently from Donin's preaching, Christianity's was strongly aimed at missionizing and converting; yet, both Donin and Christians (the latter in the Paris disputation of 1269 at least) liken Jews to heretics, thus threatening them with persecution and death.45

On the other hand, these possible hints at Christianity 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 anticritics of theirs the same way he used rabbinic aggadot. Also his threatening identification of Jews with heretics, like Donin's,
might have been somewhat enhanced by the Jewish redactors of both the Wilkhachim 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 Marri, also an anti-Jewish and anti-Islamic polemicist, author of the Capistrum Iudaeorum (The Harness of the Jews, 1267) and of the Pugio Fidelis ( DAGGER OF FAITH, 1278). It was also used some seventy years later by the Berian convert Alfonso of Valladolid, known before his conversion as Abner of Burgos, in his Mostrado 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 Sassoon, it was mysticism.46 Both tendencies shared hostility to the established rabbinic leadership. Eleazar Gutwirth has observed that both Baer’s and Ben Sassoon’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.47 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.48 In several cases it coincided with an interest in non-Jewish philosophy and with adherence to rationalism of the Maimonidean type. In the 15th century this kind of rationalism was defended by Azaryah ben Josep Ibn Abba Mari of Perpignan, who, in his introduction to his Hebrew translation of Bohethus’ De consolatione 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 pieties!—read the works of the Righteous Teacher! (may peace be upon

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.

### 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/hers ‘after’—the ‘social and cultural intimacy’53 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

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49 Maimonides.

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52 Abraham Bibago, Dovkeh emunah, Constantinope 1512, 45d. Gutwirth, “Conversion to Christianity” (see note 47), 119, thought that the expression la-yet min ha-kela means that the Talmudists converted to Christianity. In my opinion the expression is not that specific and only alludes to the fact that the rabbinic, by rejecting ideas that were rationally impeccable and by then widespread among the Jews, were practically alienating themselves from the majority. See Yosef Hacker, “Meguress le R. Abraham Brahe” bi-mahalomot al ‘immud ha-flavofoth u-ma’amadath bi-Skar- aid ba-me’ul ha–15; in: Proceedings of the Fifth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem 1972, 1, 151–8. While taking upon myself all responsibility for any misunderstanding of the passage, I thank Silvia Di Donato for discussing Bibagio’s passage and stance with me.
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 rabbinc 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, Alfonso, 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, the choice of apiqorsut, free thinking, was not yet an option for learned Jews opposing rabbinc tradition and its claim to authority; nor was adhesion 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”. 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*

This tradition also appears in the *Alfa Beta de-Bein Sira*, a collection of *aggadot* from the Geonic period (7th–11th 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-Bein 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*.

In the first *titulus* of his *Dialogues*, Alfonso 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 condemned 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. At the very end of the *titulus* Alfonso recounts our *aggadah* apparently conflating its two sources (as we know them) 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. This time, Alfonso'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. 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. 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

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56 Transl. mine from the *textus receptus* of the Vilna edition.
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. *bBrito ha-Sanah* 16b).
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 aggadah 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 11th and 12th-century "renaissance" both in Christian and Jewish societies.64

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 proofs for his thirty-five accusations. It would be useful to verify whether it was also included in the Extrait de Talmud, 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. [...] YEHOSHUA': [...] 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).65

Donin brings only two points of the Talmudic narrative, both still present in our late texts receptors 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 Yehiel can only retort by quoting parables 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 polemics 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 Christianit, and also between the two.

64 See Yvonne Friedman, "Anti-Talmudic Inversione from Peter the Venerable to Nicolas Donin (1144–1244)?" in: Gilbert Dahan (ed.), Le brèvement du Talmud à Paris 1242–1244, Paris 1999, 171–189, here 185; Fishman, Becoming the People of the Talmud (see note 19).
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