

# Christian Readings of Rabbinic Sources in Medieval Polemic

Edited by  
ALEXANDER FIDORA and  
MATTHIAS LUTZ-BACHMANN

*Religiöse Dynamiken  
in Geschichte und Gegenwart*

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**Mohr Siebeck**

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Alexander Fidora and Matthias Lutz-Bachmann

Mohr Siebeck

*Alexander Fidora*, born 1975; ICREA Research Professor at the Institute of Ancient and Medieval Studies at the Autonomous University of Barcelona.  
orcid.org/0000-0001-5163-0369

*Matthias Lutz-Bachmann*, born 1952; director of the “Forschungskolleg Humanwissenschaften” at Goethe-University in Frankfurt am Main.  
orcid.org/0009-0006-4006-8773

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## Christian Readings of Rabbinic Sources: Preliminary Considerations

*Alexander Fidora / Matthias Lutz-Bachmann*

Half a century ago, Amos Funkenstein outlined a typology of Christian anti-Jewish polemic in a study which was widely received and which still deserves attention.<sup>1</sup> He proposed to distinguish four patterns in the development of anti-Jewish controversy during the Middle Ages. The first drew primarily on Biblical exegesis, that is, the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament; this traditional approach was followed during the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries by a distinctive rational engagement with Judaism, when Christian theologians tried to establish their claims by means of philosophical arguments. Next to these two types of polemic, which reflect the dialectic between authority and reason, Funkenstein identified two specific patterns of Christian-Jewish controversy with the Talmud at their centre: Christians accusing the Talmud of blasphemy, and Christians using it in order to prove their own religion.

While Funkenstein did not explore the relationship between these four categories, his classification suggests links between the rational approach and the different attitudes towards the Talmud in anti-Jewish polemic.<sup>2</sup> In the case of criticism of the Talmud, this link is rather obvious, since from the 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards Christian arguments against the Talmud were very much focused on its purportedly irrational character, e.g. its anthropomorphic descriptions of God (Funkenstein points particularly to Peter Alfonsi and Peter the Venerable in this context). Less evident is the connection between the rational approach in anti-Jewish polemic and the affirmative Christian use of Talmudic passages for the sake of proving Jesus's Messiahship and other Christian claims. Yet, looking

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<sup>1</sup> See Amos Funkenstein, "Changes in the Pattern of Anti-Jewish Polemics in the Twelfth Century", *Zion. Quarterly for Research in Jewish History* 33/3–4 (1968), 124–144 (Hebrew); an abridged English version of the article appeared as "Basic Types of Christian Anti-Jewish Polemics in the Later Middle Ages", *Viator* 2 (1971), 373–382.

<sup>2</sup> For a critical appraisal of Funkenstein's contribution, see Jeremy Cohen, "Towards a Functional Classification of Jewish Anti-Christian Polemic in the High Middle Ages", in: Bernard Lewis/Friedrich Niewöhner (eds.), *Religionsgespräche im Mittelalter*, Wiesbaden 1992, 93–114; David Berger, "How, When, and to What Degree Was the Jewish-Christian Debate Transformed in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries?", in: Elisheva Baumgarten/Judah D. Galinsky (eds.), *Jews and Christians in Thirteenth-Century France*, New York 2015, 123–137.



at Ramon Martí, who is certainly the most outstanding representative of the latter group, one might venture a hypothesis.

Ramon Martí did not dismiss rational arguments in theological discussions with Jews (and Muslims); on the contrary, he used such arguments abundantly throughout Book I of his famous *Pugio fidei*, exhibiting a high degree of familiarity with the philosophical tradition of his day.<sup>3</sup> Siding, however, with Thomas Aquinas, Ramon Martí was convinced that the scope of such arguments is limited: they can serve to refute the Jewish (and Muslim) religion and to rebut counter-arguments directed against the Christian faith, but they are by no means suitable for proving the specific truth claims of Christian religion itself, i. e. regarding the Incarnation, the Trinity, etc. Hence, if one were to offer further proofs of the Christian claims vis-à-vis the Jews, one must look somewhere else to find them. So should one return from reason – which had become aware of its epistemic limits *in divinis* – to Biblical authority, the first category in Funkenstein's typology? Yes and no: Martí certainly used Biblical authority, but he avoided discussions concerning the appropriate hermeneutic approach to it. Rather, he drew primarily on the authority of the Talmud and the rabbinic tradition, even – and in particular – for the interpretation of the Bible.

From this perspective, the various historical patterns of Christian anti-Jewish polemic can be considered as intrinsically related, and the use of the Talmud in such controversies can perhaps be best understood as a creative attempt to fill a void that remained alongside traditional argumentative strategies based on Biblical authority and strictly philosophical reasoning.

\* \* \*

Although Rabbinic Judaism evolved in the same period and context as early Christianity, the Church fathers referred only in passing to what they called the *deuterosis* of the Jews: that is, their second teaching. Jerome of Stridonium (347–420) and Augustine of Hippo (354–430) used the term to designate the unwritten extra-biblical Jewish traditions, among them the Talmud, which they considered a collection of tales and fables.<sup>4</sup> Over the course of the Middle Ages, the first references among Christians which target the Talmud in a more specific manner can be identified in the works of the ninth-century Carolingian bishop Agobard of Lyon. Several passages from Talmudic tractates feature in a letter

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<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Ann Giletti, “Early Witness: Thomas Aquinas, Albert the Great and Peter of Tarentaise in Ramon Martí's *Pugio fidei* (c. 1278)”, in: Görgo K. Hasselhoff/Alexander Fidora (eds.), *Ramon Martí's Pugio fidei: Studies and Texts*, Santa Coloma de Queralt 2017, 121–156.

<sup>4</sup> See Carlos del Valle Rodríguez, “Los primeros contactos de la Iglesia con el Talmud. El significado de deuterosis”, in: Mauro Perani (ed.), *The Words of a Wise Man's Mouth Are Gracious (Qoh 10, 12). Festschrift for Günter Stemberger on the Occasion of His 65<sup>th</sup> Birthday*, Berlin 2005, 299–308.

which the bishop addressed to Louis the Pious, complaining about the Jews of his empire.<sup>5</sup>

A more thorough engagement of the Christian world with the Talmud started during the 12<sup>th</sup> century, when the Talmud had been definitively canonized among the Jewish communities of Europe as both a prominent pedagogical text and a normative source for applied law.<sup>6</sup> Thus, in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century, explicit quotations from the Talmud (*vestra doctrina*) first appeared in the *Dialogus* of the Jewish convert Peter Alfonsi (fl. 1106–1126).<sup>7</sup> A few decades later, Peter Alfonsi's invectives against the Talmud were resumed and expanded by Peter the Venerable (c. 1092–1156). The influential Abbot of Cluny not only commissioned the first Latin translation of the Qur'an, but was also the first Christian author to refer to the Talmud by its proper name, that is as "Thalmuth."<sup>8</sup> In his *Adversus iudaeorum inveteratam duritiem* (Against the Inveterate Obduracy of the Jews), Peter the Venerable leveled accusations against rabbinic literature and its disturbing authority among the Jews; in particular, he complained that the Jews apparently preferred this "monstrous beast", that is, the Talmud, to the prophetic books and their authentic teachings.<sup>9</sup>

This accusation expresses one of the main Christian concerns regarding the Talmud: to wit, its authority. It became particularly relevant during the systematic Christian engagement with the Talmud of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, when the Jewish convert Nicholas Donin submitted a Latin anthology of allegedly blasphemous Talmudic fragments to Pope Gregory IX in 1238/39.<sup>10</sup> Nicholas's translation, known as the Thirty-Five Articles against the Talmud, was to have an enormous impact on the Christian attitude towards – and critique of – Rabbinic Judaism. In 1239 the pope wrote to kings and bishops across Europe urging them to seize and examine the manuscripts of the Talmud – the Jewish "alia lex" – and, as a result, a trial against the Talmud was staged in Paris in 1240. Though the Tal-

<sup>5</sup> See Agobard of Lyon, *Opera omnia*, ed. Lieven van Acker, Turnhout 1981, 205–206.

<sup>6</sup> See Talya Fishman, *Becoming the People of the Talmud. Oral Torah as Written Tradition in Medieval Jewish Cultures*, Philadelphia 2011, 167–171.

<sup>7</sup> See the recent critical edition Petrus Alfonsi, *Dialogus*, vol. I, ed. Carmen Cardelle de Hartmann/Darko Senekovic/Thomas Ziegler, German trans. Peter Stotz, Florence 2018, e.g. on page 20.

<sup>8</sup> See Irvn M. Resnick, "Peter de Venerable on the Talmud, the Jews, and Islam", *Medieval Encounters* 24 (2018), 510–529.

<sup>9</sup> Petrus Venerabilis, *Adversus iudaeorum inveteratam duritiem*, ed. Yvonne Friedman, Turnhout 1985, 125–126.

<sup>10</sup> Edited by Piero Capelli, "De articulis litterarum Papae: A Critical Edition", in: Alexander Fidora/Görge Hasselhoff (eds.), *The Talmud in Dispute during the High Middle Ages*, Bellaterra 2019, 29–57. On Donin, see Alexander Fidora/Ulisse Cecini, "Nicholas Donin's Thirty-Five Articles Against the Talmud: A Case of Collaborative Translation in Jewish-Christian Polemic", in: Charles Burnett/Pedro Mantas-España (eds.), *Ex Oriente Lux. Translating Words, Scripts and Styles in Medieval Mediterranean Society. Selected Papers*, Córdoba/London 2016, 187–199.

mud went up in flames at the Place de Grève in 1241/42<sup>11</sup>, the controversy continued. Immediately after the so-called Paris Disputation and the ensuing burning of rabbinic books, an extensive Latin translation of the Talmud was prepared, the *Extractiones de Talmud* (1245), which formed the basis for a second sentence against the Talmud in the year 1248.<sup>12</sup>

The Paris trial was followed by the Disputation of Barcelona between Pau Cristià and rabbi Moses ben Nahman (1263). This disputation is considered a momentous turning point in the history of Christian-Jewish religious polemics, as it clearly champions Funkenstein's second type of Christian approaches to the Talmud.<sup>13</sup> Between July 20 and 27, 1263, four public sessions were held under the direction of the Catalan-Aragonese king James I, during which the Jewish convert Pau Cristià O.P. argued with the prestigious rabbi from Girona Moses ben Nahman (c. 1194–1270) about the arrival of the Messiah. Throughout their discussion, Pau Cristià systematically used rabbinic sources to prove Christian claims – a strategy which was further developed by Ramon Martí in his monumental anti-Jewish polemic *Pugio fidei* (c. 1280)<sup>14</sup>, which influenced 14<sup>th</sup>-century authors up until the Disputation of Tortosa, convened by Benedict XIII in 1412/1413–14.<sup>15</sup>

\* \* \*

This book starts with two chapters dedicated to the Paris trial against the Talmud. Ursula Ragacs (Vienna) focuses on the description of Jesus's trial as pre-

<sup>11</sup> On the burning of the Talmud, see Paul Lawrence Rose, "When Was the Talmud Burnt in Paris? A Critical Examination of the Christian and Jewish Sources and a New Dating. June 1241", *Journal of Jewish Studies* 62 (2011), 324–339.

<sup>12</sup> The two versions of the *Extractiones de Talmud* – the first of which follows the sequence of the Talmudic tractates, while the second one rearranges the translated materials according to topics of controversy – have been edited in: Anonymous, *Extractiones de Talmud per ordinem sequentialem*, ed. Ulisse Cecini/Oscar de la Cruz Palma, Turnhout 2018, and Anonymous, *Extractiones de Talmud per ordinem thematicum*, ed. Ulisse Cecini/Oscar de la Cruz Palma/Alexander Fidora/Isaac Lampurlanés Farré, Turnhout 2021.

<sup>13</sup> See Ryan Szpiech, "La disputa de Barcelona como punto de inflexión", *Studia lulliana* 54 (2014), 3–32; Alexander Fidora, "Die christlich-jüdische Disputation von Barcelona aus dem Jahr 1263: Wende- oder Höhepunkt?", in: Mariano Delgado/Gregor Emmenegger/Volker Lepin (eds.), *Apologie, Polemik, Dialog. Religionsgespräche in der Christentumsgeschichte*, Basel 2021, 191–206.

<sup>14</sup> See the recent annotated editions from Martí's autograph: Raimundus Martini, *Texte zur Gotteslehre. Pugio fidei I–III, 1–6. Lateinisch – Hebräisch/Aramäisch – Deutsch*, ed. and German trans. Görg K. Hasselhoff, Freiburg i. Br. 2014, and Raimundus Martini, *Texte zur Gotteslehre II. Pugio fidei I–III, 7–11. Lateinisch – Hebräisch/Aramäisch/Arabisch – Deutsch*, ed. and German trans. Görg K. Hasselhoff, Freiburg i. Br. 2022.

<sup>15</sup> On the Disputation of Tortosa, see the recent comprehensive edition and study by Carlos del Valle Rodríguez, *La disputa judeocristiana de Tortosa. Edición crítica de las Actas en la versión latina y edición príncipe de la versión hispano-aragonesa, junto con los dos relatos hebreos contemporáneos*, 3 vols., Zaragoza 2021.

sented in Sanhedrin 43a. She offers a detailed comparison of the Hebrew (and Aramaic) account of the trial with the *Extractiones de Talmud*, which were commissioned by the Papal Legate in France, Odo of Châteauroux, as part of the Paris investigation of the Talmud. Based on her close-reading of the passage and its Latin translations – in the *Extractiones* as well as in later texts –, she suggests a new interpretation of Sanh 43a. In this interpretation, the passage should not be read as a mere counter-narrative to the Gospel's account of Jesus's trial; rather it reflects complex inner-rabbinic discussions on the halakhik principles of the procedure. Isaac Lampurlanés Farré (Vienna) edits and studies Odo of Châteauroux's correspondence with Pope Innocent IV. This correspondence, which is part of the so-called Talmud dossier – a collection of texts related to the Paris Talmud trial – provides important insights into the complex nature of the process, especially regarding the tensions between the local ecclesiastical authorities in Paris and the more lenient attitude of the papacy after Pope Gregory's death. In a letter from Odo to Innocent IV from c. 1247, the former quotes large portions of previous letters by Pope Gregory IX which are meant to justify the condemnation of the Talmud, even though, as he says echoing Augustine, there is no "doctrine which is so perverse that it does not contain some elements of truth". A recurrent topic among the accusations against the Talmud during the Paris trial was the anthropomorphic representation of God in many of its haggadic passages. This subject is addressed by Moisés Orfali (Ramat Gan) in a chapter which offers a comprehensive study of the evolution of Christian criticism of rabbinic anthropomorphism, from its first appearance in Agobard of Lyon, Peter Alfonsi and Peter the Venerable all the way to Nicholas Donin, Ramon Martí and Jerónimo de Santa Fe, i. e., to the Tortosa Disputation.

Harvey Hames (Beer Sheva) takes the reader through the momentous Barcelona Disputation of 1263 between rabbi Moses ben Nahman from Girona, also known as Nahmanides, and the Dominican friar Pau Cristià. His careful reconstruction of both the Latin and the Hebrew reports of the events shows how Pau construed his rabbinic sources in favour of Christian dogma and how Nahmanides, being well aware of his interlocutor's novel strategy and agenda, tried to undermine such use of post-biblical Jewish texts by his opponent. At the same time, Hames argues that the Barcelona disputation should not be read primarily in terms of conversion. Some twenty years after Paul's attempt to prove Christian doctrines by means of the Talmud, Ramon Martí completed in Barcelona his *chef d'œuvre*, the *Pugio fidei* or *Dagger of Faith*, which must be considered a landmark in the history of Christian scholarship on rabbinic literature. Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann (Berlin) introduces Ramon Martí and his *Pugio fidei*. Against the historical and intellectual background of Martí's life and works, he unfolds the complex structure of the *Dagger of Faith* by presenting its central topics and their doctrinal implications. Another three articles shed new light on

the methods, sources and influence of Ramon Martí and his *Pugio fidei*. Focusing on Martí's interpretation of Is. 48:16, Thomas E. Burman (Notre Dame) argues that the Catalan polemicist should not be seen only as a polemicist; rather, his interest in engaging polemically with rabbinic sources should be seen in the larger context of a growing relevance among Biblicists of the extended literal meaning of the Bible. From this vantage point, a continuous line leads from the *Pugio fidei* and its *modus operandi* to Nicholas of Lyra's *Postilla*. Gørgge K. Hasselhoff inquires into the controversial issue of Ramon Martí's rabbinic sources, quoted both in Aramaic/Hebrew and in Latin translation in the *Pugio fidei*. Many of these sources still need to be identified, as is the case of several texts attributed by Martí to Moshe ha-Darshan (Narbonne, 11<sup>th</sup> c.), fragments of whose works are only extant in Rashi's commentaries. Through a careful examination of Ramon Martí's autograph, Hasselhoff provides important specifications concerning Martí's Hebrew library. Diana Di Segni (Milan) tries to identify the mysterious Porchetus Salvaticus, who during the first decades of the 14<sup>th</sup> century wrote a widely read anti-Jewish treatise called *Victoria Porcheti adversos impios Hebraeos* which was published by the famous Dominican Agostino Giustiniani in 1520, that is, in the same year in which he printed the Latin translation of Moses Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed*. As Di Segni shows, this work drew strongly on Martí's *Pugio* and must be considered an important step in the reception of the latter's ideas up to the Renaissance.

Ryan Szpiech (Ann Arbor) assesses the disputed relationship between Ramon Martí's *Pugio fidei* and Abner of Burgos, also known as Alfonso de Valladolid, whose *Mostrador de justicia* from c. 1322 is yet another milestone in the history of Christian interpretation of rabbinic lore. Comparing how both scholars drew on the references to Messiah ben Joseph and Messiah ben David in the Talmud for their apologetic arguments, Szpiech concludes that their works, close as they are in many respects, were independent of each other. Not only do they offer divergent interpretations of such central subjects as the two Messiahs, but their targeted public was also different since Abner wrote specifically for his former fellow Jews. Alexander Fidora (Barcelona) draws attention to the hitherto unnoticed use of rabbinic sources in Thomas Bradwardine, a leading figure of the celebrated fourteenth-century Oxford calculators. As Fidora shows, in his *De causa Dei* Bradwardine used not only Rambam's *Guide of the Perplexed*, which he quotes from the anonymous Latin translation of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, but also the Talmud and the Targum. Interestingly, passages from the latter two are taken from Ramon Martí's *Pugio fidei*. Some references even suggest direct contact with Jews, in particular the popular Jewish saying: "From Moses to Moses, none arose like Moses", which is not transmitted in any other Latin source from the Middle Ages. The chapter by Yosi Yisraeli revisits the Tortosa Disputation in which the famous dictum by *tana devei Eliyahu* on the duration of the world was exhaustively debated. It shows that the parties came

to focus on a question that was barely pursued in medieval polemics – the identity of Elijah: a question that entailed significant implications both for the Jewish reading of this passage and for the Christian approach towards the authenticity of rabbinic materials.

Mònica Colominas Aparicio's contribution (Groningen/Berlin) widens the perspective of the preceding chapters by offering important points for comparison and further reflection, as she describes the approach to rabbinic wisdom in Muslim authors, namely in Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya's *Hidāyat al-ḥayārā* (after 1328). In this work, rabbis are portrayed and discussed primarily as agents of knowledge, whose erudition may not only distort the sacred texts but even impose limits on God's revelation itself – an accusation that resonates with threads of criticism found in Christian polemicists about the purportedly human origin of the Oral Torah and its excessive authority among the Jews.

\* \* \*

Taken altogether, the chapters in this book display the wide range and the complexity of Christian attitudes towards the Talmud and Rabbinic Judaism: from rejection to interpretation and appropriation. Close examination of the various actors and their texts leaves no doubt that the reading of rabbinic sources during the Middle Ages was a systematically very meaningful step in the history of Christian-Jewish intellectual relations, with important consequences for both Christianity and Judaism. On the one hand, criticism of the Talmud played a crucial role in the *pars destruens* of the Christians' rational engagement with Judaism, i. e. when denouncing and debunking the alleged blasphemies of the Jews and their religion; this use of the Talmud has been considered to be at the origin of the topos of the "Talmudjude".<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, recourse to the Talmud, and to Rabbinic Judaism in general, was instrumental for the *pars construens* of Christian apologetics: that is, when philosophical arguments had to acknowledge their limits vis-à-vis the mysteries of faith and alternative evidence was required. This latter way of reading rabbinic sources, namely as proof texts of the Christian religion, paved the way for Christian Hebraism.<sup>17</sup>

The idea of this collection goes back to an interdisciplinary conference with the title "Epistemic Orders and Religious Dialogues between Jews, Christians and Muslims during the Middle Ages (I): Christian Readings of Rabbinic Sources in Polemic Contexts", held in Bellaterra (Barcelona) on December 12–13, 2022. The conference, which gathered together scholars from philology, history,

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<sup>16</sup> See Alexander Patschovsky, "Der 'Talmudjude'. Vom mittelalterlichen Ursprung eines neuzeitlichen Themas", *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung, Beiheft* 13 (1992), 14–27.

<sup>17</sup> See Bernhard Walde, *Christliche Hebraisten Deutschlands am Ausgang des Mittelalters*, Münster i. W. 1916.

philosophy, theology, Jewish studies and Islamic studies, was organized by Goethe-Universität Frankfurt and the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. Among the research centres and institutes of Goethe-Universität Frankfurt we wish to thank the following for their support: the Center for the Study of Religious and Interreligious Dynamics, Buber-Rosenzweig-Institut für jüdische Geistes- und Kulturgeschichte der Moderne und Gegenwart, Institut für Philosophie, and Verbund-Initiative “Dynamiken des Religiösen”. Likewise, we express our gratitude to the TALDOSSIER research project of the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (PID2020–112592GB-I00/AEI) as well as to the ISLAMOLATINA research group of the Catalan AGAUR (2017 SGR 01787), both at the Department of Ancient and Medieval Studies of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. We also acknowledge the support of the Institute of Medieval Studies of the Autonomous University of Barcelona.

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