

# Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations

---

---

A peer-reviewed e-journal of the Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations

Published by the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College

## *The Jewish Critique of Christianity: In Search of a New Narrative<sup>1</sup>*

Daniel J. Lasker

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

Volume 6 (2011)

<http://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/scjr>

---

<sup>1</sup> This article was first presented at the 2011 Boston College Corcoran Chair Conference *Are Jews and Christians Living in a Post-Polemical World? Toward a Comparison of Medieval and Modern Christian-Jewish Encounters*.

The old narrative of the Jewish critique of Christianity was simple: Jews criticized Christianity as a reaction to the Christian mission to the Jews; if Christians had not attempted to convince Jews to convert to Christianity, there would have been no reason for Jews to say anything negative about the majority religion. Judaism is a religion of tolerance, at least towards members of other religions if not towards dissident members of its own religion, and, therefore, it was not a Jewish concern how Gentiles worshipped. Since the pious of the nations have a place in the world to come, as long as a Christian is a good person (and did not persecute Jews), he or she would be “saved” (to use a Christian term). But as medieval Christians tried more and more to convince Jews to convert, Jewish thinkers answered this challenge by developing arguments to be used against Christian doctrines. The proliferation of Jewish anti-Christian polemical treatises, with their sharp attacks on Christian doctrines and mores, and their often vituperative language, was solely a defense mechanism against Christian attacks. In fact, the stronger the Christian pressure on Jews, the nastier and more acerbic was their response. Left alone to themselves, Jews would not have had any need to criticize Christianity. As David Berger once put it: “Jews had no internal motivation for writing polemics against Christians; in times or places where Christianity is not a threat, we cannot expect Jews to be concerned with the refutation of its claims.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> David Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 1979), 7 (reprinted in idem, *Persecution, Polemic, and Dialogue: Essays in Jewish-Christian Relations*, Boston, 2010, 79). The bibliography of medieval Jewish-Christian polemics and the Jewish critique of Christianity is extensive, but an overall synthesis is still a desideratum. See, in the meanwhile, Samuel Krauss and William Horbury, *The Jewish-Christian Controversy I* (Tübingen, 1995); Heinz Schreckenberg, *Die christlichen Adversus-Iudaeos-Texte und ihr literarisches und historisches Umfeld*, Vol. I (1-11 Jht), Frankfurt a.M., 1982, Vol. II (11-13 Jht), Frankfurt a.M., 1991, Vol. III (13-20 Jht.), Frankfurt a.M., 1994; Daniel J. Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics Against Christianity in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1977), second ed., Oxford, 2007; Robert Chazan, *Daggers of Faith* (Berkeley, 1989); *ibid.*, *Fashioning Jewish Identity in Medieval Western Christendom*, (Cambridge, 2004).

The traditional narrative can be seen, for instance, in the works of another contemporary expert on the medieval Jewish-Christian debate, Jeremy Cohen, in an article entitled: “Towards a Functional Classification of Jewish anti-Christian Polemic in the High Middle Ages.”<sup>3</sup> Describing the early Middle Ages in Christian Europe, Cohen explains why there were no Jewish anti-Christian treatises before 1170: “Prior to the Crusades churchmen took little initiative in engaging the Jews in actual debate.” Therefore, Jews “had little need of a literature of anti-Christian polemic per se—i.e., texts composed expressly for the purpose of religious disputation—and they therefore produced none.” Instead, Jews were satisfied with the traditional genres of exegesis, poetry and chronicles to express any anti-Christian sentiments they may have held. By the 12th century, however, Christian-Jewish polemical encounters were more immediate and more direct. Thus, “Jewish respondents to Christian invective required more than running commentaries on entire biblical books.” Referring to the first Jewish anti-Christian polemics, those of Jacob ben Reuben and Joseph Kimhi in 1170, Cohen states:

“No longer did running commentary on Scripture or did other existing textual genres suffice, although protecting the faith of Jews—and not the denigration of Christianity per se—remained the goal of the new treatises, even as their agenda now followed the lead of their Christian opponents (emphasis in the original).”

The new Jewish polemical treatises of the 12th and 13th centuries “attest to the rising frequency of the new Christian challenge to the Jewish community and to the concomitant Jewish need for guidance in responding.” Cohen’s article proceeds in the same fashion, finding an external cause for every

<sup>3</sup> In Bernard Lewis and Friedrich Niewöhner, eds., *Religionsgespräche in Mittelalter* (Wiesbaden, 1992) 93-114. The citations are on pp. 96-97, 100-102.

change he perceives in the medieval Jewish polemical literature. In another article, on the Jewish criticism of Christianity, Cohen outlines the sad history of European Jewry and states that "these developments obviously fueled the hatred of the Jews for the Christian population in whose midst they lived." Furthermore, he states:

"When removed from real contact with Christians and its concomitant dangers, Jews did not have much reason to polemicize against Christianity. Medieval Jewish anti-Christian polemic developed almost completely in response [emphasis in original] to Christian anti-Judaism."<sup>4</sup>

Two other experts of the medieval debate, Ora Limor and Israel Jacob Yuval, summarize the traditional narrative in this manner: "Throughout the history of the polemic between the two religions the Christians have been the initiators while the Jews have felt themselves obliged to respond."<sup>5</sup>

I, myself, have had recourse to the traditional narrative. When I started writing about medieval polemics over 35 years ago, I also assumed that the Jewish critique of Christianity was defensive in nature. For instance I explained on the first page of my first book that polemical writings were a function of the fact that many Jews did not remain passive in the face of the Christian challenge to their religion. On the second page, I mentioned Jewish polemics against Christianity in Islamic countries when Jews were not under compulsion to convert to

<sup>4</sup> Jeremy Cohen, "Medieval Jews on Christianity: Polemical Strategies and Theological Defense" in Eugene J. Fisher, *Interwoven Destinies: Jews and Christians through the Ages* (New York, 1993), 77-89; the citations are on pp. 78, 80.

<sup>5</sup> "Skepticism and Conversion: Jews, Christians, and Doubters in *Sefer ha-Nizzahon*," in Allison P. Coudert and Jeffrey S. Shoulson, eds., *Hebraica Veritas? Christian Hebraists and the Study of Judaism in Early Modern Europe* (Philadelphia, 2004), 159-180; the citation is on p. 160.

Christianity, but I quickly jumped to Western Europe where, I wrote, "the defense of Judaism, with its concomitant attack on Christianity, reached its fullest development." Referring to the twelfth century, I wrote that "as the Christian pressure intensified in that century, Jews felt a need to compose books that would help them meet the challenge of the dominant religion."<sup>6</sup>

Fifteen years later I wrote that:

"it is generally recognized that Jewish anti-Christian polemical compositions written in Christian countries were primarily intended for internal use in the war against missionary activity. When that activity was either limited or fairly nonexistent, i.e., until the end of the twelfth century, there were no Jewish literary works devoted to combating the arguments of Christians in those countries."<sup>7</sup>

These words were written in an article about the Jewish critique of Christianity in Islamic countries, so even though I understood that those latter works had nothing to do with a Christian mission, I still propounded the old narrative concerning Jewish polemics written in Christian countries.

Soon afterwards, in Sarah Stroumsa's and my edition of the Judaeo-Arabic *Qissat Mujadilat al-Usquf* (*The Account of the Disputation of the Priest*) and its Hebrew translation, *Sefer Nestor ha-Komer* (*The Book of Nestor the Priest*), we wrote concerning the Hebrew version of the polemic:

"*Nestor* represents the transition from the use of anti-Christian argumentation in an environment in which Christianity was not the majority religion, to the use of

<sup>6</sup> Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics*, 1-2.

<sup>7</sup> Idem, "The Jewish Critique of Christianity Under Islam," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 57 (1991): 121.

the same argumentation under Christian rule where the threat of conversion was more explicit. As a result, the language of the *Disputation* becomes more violent...While *Qissa* has no qualms with regard to vulgarity of expression, certain sections of the Arabic definitely pale in comparison with their Hebrew equivalents."<sup>8</sup>

In sum, the accepted wisdom has been to the effect that the Jewish critique of Christianity was written in response to Christian missionary pressure and that the level of its vituperativeness is a function of Christian antagonism to Jews and Judaism.

When examining the traditional narrative, we see it has one great advantage—it is very comfortable for Jews. Jews, especially in the modern period, like to present themselves as tolerant of other religions. They also like to be seen as the victims in interreligious exchanges, always the subject of persecution, discrimination and hostility and never the purveyors of these activities. The lachrymose conception of Jewish history, a locution coined by the Jewish historian Salo Wittmayer Baron, is quite conducive to the traditional Jewish self-image.<sup>9</sup> When 19th-century German-Jewish historians reviewed the Jewish past, they did so in an atmosphere of denial of Jewish rights; they were not about to reveal to their readers the historical Jewish antagonism to non-Jews in general and to Christians in particular. Thus, a Jewish critique of Christianity in the absence of a Christian missionary threat might mean that Jews were taking the initiative and were trying, unprovoked, to convince Christians of the falseness of their religion. If, on the medieval playing field, Jews were playing offense as well as

<sup>8</sup> Idem and Sarah Stroumsa, *The Polemic of Nestor the Priest*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1996), 30.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Salo W. Baron, *History and Jewish Historians*, eds. Arthur Hertzberg and Leon A. Feldman (Philadelphia, 1964), 64, 88, 96.

defense, this would be an uncomfortable fact for modern Jewish apologists. Today, however, Jews and Christians can attempt to write our joint history with fewer vested interests and with greater honesty as Israel Yuval states.<sup>10</sup> Thus, when it comes to the Jewish critique of Christianity, we may now begin questioning the traditional narrative and looking for a more historically accurate account of this enterprise.<sup>11</sup>

Why is the traditional Jewish narrative concerning Jewish-Christian polemics no longer tenable? One may begin with the Jewish critique of Christianity in Islamic countries. For the first 800 years or so of Christianity, Jewish reactions to the new religion were rather muted. Without getting into a discussion of the exact relationship between that which became Christianity and that which became Rabbinic Judaism, a narrative clash in its own right,<sup>12</sup> it is clear that there were many Christians in these centuries who wrote treatises in the genre of *Adversus Judaeos*, and not one Jew who wrote an *Adversus Christianos*.<sup>13</sup> Anti-Christian material in Rabbinic writings is often allusive and elusive, rarely mentioning Christians and Christianity by name.<sup>14</sup> The Jewish parody of the New Testament,

<sup>10</sup> Israel Jacob Yuval, *Two Nations in your Womb* (Berkeley, 2006), 20-21.

<sup>11</sup> The search for a new narrative for the Jewish critique of Christianity is somewhat parallel to the emerging new narrative concerning medieval Jewish-Christian relations in general; see Daniel J. Lasker, "From Victim to Murderer: The Jewish-Christian Encounter in the Middle Ages—Historiography in the Wake of the Establishment of a Jewish State," *Remembering and Forgetting. Israeli Historians Look at the Jewish Past* (= *Zion*, 74) (2008), 95-108 (Hebrew).

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia, 2004); idem, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford, 1999); and cf. Stuart S. Miller, "Roman Imperialism, Jewish Self-Definition and Rabbinic Society: Belayche's *Judaea-Palaestina*, Schwartz's *Imperialism and Jewish Society*, and Boyarin's *Border Lines* Reconsidered," *AJS Review* 312 (2007): 329-362.

<sup>13</sup> See Schreckenberg, *Die christlichen Adversus-Judaeos-Texte*, vol. 1.

<sup>14</sup> See R. Travers Herford, *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash*, different editions; Peter Schaefer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton, 2007).

*Toledot Yeshu (The History of Jesus)*, is intended to ridicule the Gospels but not to provide arguments against Christian doctrines.<sup>15</sup> Thus, even in areas where Jews were a minority vis-à-vis a Christian majority, such as in the Byzantine Empire, including in the Land of Israel from the fourth to seventh centuries, there is not one Jewish polemical treatise. This all changes under Islam.

The first Jewish polemics were written in Judaeo-Arabic in the ninth century, some by an identifiable Jewish thinker, Dawud al-Muqammas,<sup>16</sup> the first medieval Jewish philosopher, and some in another work, the aforementioned *Account of the Disputation of the Priest*, by an anonymous author.<sup>17</sup> In the tenth century, anti-Christian arguments can be seen at length in the works of the Rabbanite Rav Saadia Gaon and of the Karaites Yaqub al-Qirqisani and Yefet ben Eli. In the 11th and 12th centuries, Karaite and Rabbanite authors continued to provide arguments against Christianity, even if new polemical treatises were not composed. A major center of anti-Christian literary activity was in Andalusia. It is true that there was a relatively large Christian presence in Islamic countries, but there was certainly no organized Christian mission to the Jews which, if the old narrative were to be believed, would be necessary to form the occasion for Jewish anti-Christian polemics.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> In the absence of a good edition of the text, Samuel Krauss, *Das Leben Jesu nach juedischem Quellen* (Berlin, 1902) is still useful. On the nature of this work, see David Biale, "Counter-History and Jewish Polemics Against Christianity: The *Sefer toldot yeshu* and the *Sefer zerubavel*," *Jewish Social Studies* 6:1 (1999): 130-145.

<sup>16</sup> See Sarah Stroumsa, *Dawud ibn Marwan al-Muqammas's Twenty Chapters (Ishrun Maqala)* (Leiden, 1989). Prof. Stroumsa now believes the name should be pronounced al-Muqammas.

<sup>17</sup> See Lasker and Stroumsa, *Nestor*.

<sup>18</sup> For an overview of the Jewish critique of Christianity in Muslim countries, see Lasker, "Jewish Critique of Christianity under Islam."

The Jewish critique of Christianity in Muslim countries is not the only indication of such a critique in the absence of Christian conversionary pressure on Jews. Interestingly enough, 17th- and 18th-century Italy was also the home of much Jewish anti-Christian literature, both in Hebrew and in the vernacular. During this period, there was no organized Christian missionary campaign, although Italian Jews, confined mostly to ghettos, were made to see themselves as outsiders in Christian society. An upswing in the number of Jewish conversions to Christianity in Italy may have motivated some anti-Christian authors, but the proliferation of polemical treatises does not appear to be a reaction to any particular Christian assault on Judaism, demonstrating once again that Jews do not necessarily need an active Christian mission to compose anti-Christian treatises.<sup>19</sup>

If we look at the other side of the coin, namely, what was transpiring in medieval Christendom, there are more and more reasons to assume that Christians were not as active in their anti-Jewish campaigns as was once thought. David Berger has argued that in the 12th century the proliferation of Christian anti-Jewish treatises was a reaction to Jewish challenges to Christianity and not part of an organized Christian attempt to convert Jews. Berger detects a certain reluctance on the part of 12th-century Christian writers to compose their anti-Jewish treatises, most of whom claim, at least outwardly, that they were forced to address these issues because of Jewish challenges.<sup>20</sup> And when we look at the iconic 13th century, the

<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., David J. Malkiel, *Ha-pulmus ha-yehudi-nozri erev ha-et ha-hadashah: Yehoshua Segri mi-Skandi'ano ve-hiburo "Asham Talui"* (Jerusalem, 2004); Daniel J. Lasker, "Anti-Christian Polemics in Eighteenth-Century Italy," in *Proceedings of the Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Division B, Vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1994), 185-192 (Hebrew); idem, "'Sefer Herev Pifiyyot' of Saul ben Joseph Merari (?). An Italian Jewish Anti-Christian Polemic of the Eighteenth Century," *Italia* 12 (1996): 7-35 (Hebrew section).

<sup>20</sup> David Berger, "Mission to the Jews and Jewish-Christian Contacts in the Polemical Literature of the High Middle Ages," *The American Historical Re-*

century of public disputations and the so-called assault of the friars upon the Jews,<sup>21</sup> here, too, new and innovative research has called into question the extent of the Christian missionary campaign. Robin Vose's book on 13th-century Dominicans in Iberia presents Dominican archival records which indicate that in general the Preaching Order gave conversion of the Jews very low priority among its various goals.<sup>22</sup> Other recent works concerning Christian polemical literature question its missionary intent, such as Irven M. Resnick's introduction to his translation of Peter Alfonsi's *Dialogue against the Jews*,<sup>23</sup> and Alexandra Cuffel's *Gendering Disgust in Medieval Religious Polemic* which discusses the uses made of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim polemics for self-perception and for boundary-marking without their having been necessarily part of a missionary or anti-missionary campaign.<sup>24</sup>

There is yet another factor. As part of the traditional narrative, it was assumed that Jewish invective against Christianity is a function of Christian pressure upon Jews. Attempts have been made at gauging the extent of Christian pressure upon Jews by measuring the acerbity of Jewish polemics.<sup>25</sup> Yet, here again, the facts do not always fit the theory. Some of the nastiest Jewish polemics were composed when there was little or no Christian mission to the Jews, starting out with the *Judaeo-Arabic Account of the Disputation of the Priest*. Jacob ben

---

view 91:3 (June, 1986): 576-591 (reprinted in idem, *Persecution, Polemic, and Dialogue*, 177-198).

<sup>21</sup> Jeremy Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews* (Ithaca, 1982).

<sup>22</sup> Robin J. E. Vose, *Dominicans, Muslims and Jews in the Medieval Crown of Aragon* (Cambridge, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> Peter Alfonsi, *Dialogue Against the Jew*, transl. by Irven M. Resnick (Washington, DC, 2006), 13-17.

<sup>24</sup> Alexandra Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust in Medieval Religious Polemic*, (Notre Dame, IN, 2007).

<sup>25</sup> Hanne Trautner-Kromann, *Shield and Sword: Jewish Polemics against Christianity and the Christians in France and Spain* (Tübingen, 1993).

Reuben's *Wars of the Lord* from 1170 includes nasty passages such as the Jewish author's telling his Christian interlocutor that the latter would accept the Jewish arguments if he had a brain in his skull.<sup>26</sup> Two-hundred years later, in a period where Christian conversionary pressure was much more acute than in Jacob's day, Shem Tov ibn Shaprut in Navarre wrote his own polemic based on Jacob's *Wars of the Lord*, stating that one of his goals was to tone down the vituperativeness of the earlier work since it was inappropriate in his own time.<sup>27</sup> And if we look at Hasdai Crescas's *Refutation of the Christian Principles*,<sup>28</sup> written in 1398 in the wake of his son's murder in the riots of 1391, it would be harder to find a more restrained, sober polemical work.<sup>29</sup> True, the late 13th-century *Nizzahon Yashan*, composed at a time of great Christian pressure is full of invective, but at the end of the next century, Yom Tov Lipmann Mühlhausen's *Nizzahon*, composed in the wake of the execution of Prague Jews on the basis of the accusations of a Jewish convert to Christianity, is much more restrained.<sup>30</sup> In light of these examples, it would seem that one cannot learn anything about the context of a polemic by the tone or argumentation of the author since the styles were often dictated by the author's personal predilections or the needs of the audience.<sup>31</sup> In addition, one should remember that Jewish invective against Christianity also appears in non-polemical contexts, such as in

---

<sup>26</sup> Jacob ben Reuben and *Sefer Milhamot Ha-Shem*, ed. by Judah Rosenthal, (Jerusalem, 1963), 13.

<sup>27</sup> Shem Tov believed that Joseph Kimhi was the author of *Wars of the Lord*; see José-Vicente Nicolás, *Sem Tob Ibn Saprut. "La Piedra de Toque" (Eben Bohan). Una Obra de Controversia Judeo-Cristiana* (Madrid, 1997), 7.

<sup>28</sup> Daniel J. Lasker, *The Refutation of the Christian Principles by Hasdai Crescas* (Albany, 1992).

<sup>29</sup> Heinrich Graetz attributed Crescas's restrained tone to the fact that the intended readership was Christian, but that theory is very unlikely; see *ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Limor and Yuval, "Skepticism and Conversion," pp. 168-169.

<sup>31</sup> See Daniel J. Lasker, "Popular Polemics and Philosophical Truth in the Medieval Jewish Critique of Christianity," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 8:2 (1999): 243-259.

the malediction of the *minim* where, in certain versions in Muslim countries, Christians are mentioned specifically.<sup>32</sup> Thus, one can hardly say that Jewish acerbity vis-à-vis Christianity in the polemics is purely a function of negative Christian behavior towards Jews.<sup>33</sup>

If the old narrative is no longer viable, is there a new narrative? Although some of the conclusions here are tentative, they may point towards the construction of a new narrative. First of all, the old narrative is not entirely wrong. Certainly there were times and places where we can see a clear correlation between Christian pressures and Jewish responses. Two good examples are in 13th-century Northern Europe and late 14th- and early 15th-century Iberia. In 1240 and in the early 1270s there were two public disputations in Paris. The earlier and more famous of these led to the burning of the Talmud;<sup>34</sup> the later one was a reprise of the Disputation of Barcelona in 1263 apparently with the same Christian protagonist, Pablo Christiani.<sup>35</sup> The 13th century was a time of blood libels and host desecration accusations.<sup>36</sup> There also seem to have been a relatively large number of Jewish conversions to Christianity. It is during this period that the first Northern European, or Ashkenazic, polemical treatises were composed and there seems to be a direct link between these new works and Christian

<sup>32</sup> Uri Ehrlich and Ruth Langer, "The Earliest Texts of the *Birkat Haminin*," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 76 (2005): 63-112.

<sup>33</sup> See also the material accumulated by Yuval in his *Two Nations in your Womb*.

<sup>34</sup> The literature on this disputation is extensive; see recently Saadia R. Eisenberg, "Reading Medieval Religious Disputation: The 1240 'Debate' between Rabbi Yehiel of Paris and Friar Nicholas Donin," diss., University of Michigan, 2008. A paraphrastic translation is provided by Hyam Maccoby, *Judaism on Trial* (Rutherford, 1982), 153-162.

<sup>35</sup> Joseph Shatzmiller, *La deuxième controverse de Paris* (Paris-Louvain, 1994).

<sup>36</sup> See Miri Rubin, *Gentile Tales: The Narrative Assault on Late Medieval Jews* (Philadelphia, 2004).

pressure upon Jews. The older Ashkenazic tradition of reacting towards Christianity through biblical exegesis, chronicles, or poetry was, indeed, no longer sufficient.

The last quarter of the 14th century and the first half of the 15th century were particularly difficult for Iberian Jewry. In 1391 there were anti-Jewish riots throughout Iberia which left many Jews dead and others forcibly baptized. In 1413-1414 there was the last major public disputation in Tortosa, noteworthy not so much for the arguments adduced but by the length of time in which the prominent rabbis of Spain were forced away from their communities to give the Christian missionaries free reign to try to convert the leaderless Jews.<sup>37</sup> And, indeed, from 1375 to 1440 or so, there are quite a number of Iberian Jewish anti-Christian polemics, many of them marked by a new type of philosophical argument and by innovative genres (for instance, the satirical letter).<sup>38</sup> In this case as well, there is a relation between the historical events of the day and the proliferation of Jewish polemical activity.

The point, nevertheless, is that this relationship is not necessary. As noted, Jews wrote polemical treatises in the absence of a Christian conversionary mission, indicating that they did not need a so-called Christian threat to refute Christian doctrines. Why? Among other reasons, because Christianity arrogates to itself what Jews see as their patrimony—the name Israel, the God of Israel, the patriarchs, the Hebrew scriptures, the promises to Israel, the concept of messiah—as well as presenting theological challenges concerning the nature of God (triune or internally simple), humanity (sinful in need of redemption or not intrinsically sinful), the validity of the commandments

<sup>37</sup> On Tortosa, see Yitzhaq Baer, *A History of the Jews of Christian Spain*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia, 1966), 170-243.

<sup>38</sup> These works includes Crescas, *Refutation*; Profiat Duran's *Kelimmat ha-goyyim* and *Iggeret al tehi ka-avotekha*; Shem Tov Ibn Shaprut's *Even Bohan*, and the polemical chapters of Joseph Albo's *Book of Principles*.

(abrogation or ongoing validity) and hopes for the future (no Jewish restoration or a renewed Jewish polity). A Jew reflecting on Jewish theology would naturally find Christianity offensive and worthy of refutation, even more so than Islam which did not practice the same sort of appropriation of Jewish sancta and whose theology contains doctrines more in line with Jewish ones.

Who were the Jews who first reflected on Jewish theology? They were not the rabbis of the first Christian centuries, and not the Jews of Christendom in the early Middle Ages, especially Ashkenazic Jews, for whom theological reflection was far from their intellectual outlook. The first authors of polemical treatises or arguments were philosopher-theologians: Dawud al-Muqammas, Saadia Gaon, and the Karaite Yaqub al-Qirqisani. They were also the first Jews to discuss God's unity in philosophical terms, including issues of divine attributes and what it means that God is one.<sup>39</sup> It would obviously make sense that these thinkers would take on, and refute, the Christian doctrine of a triune God just as they refuted Gnostic dualism and other unacceptable theological views. Living among members of other religions who denied the ongoing validity of Jewish law, it was natural for Jewish thinkers to refute Christian views of abrogation, just as they objected to the same Islamic doctrine. And living in what for them was an unredeemed world, they speculated on the meaning of the biblical promises for the salvation of Israel, criticizing those who believed that those

promises had already been fulfilled.<sup>40</sup> Thus, polemics against Christianity became an integral subset of Jewish philosophy, and most medieval Jewish philosophers, from al-Muqammas and Saadia at the beginning to Hasdai Crescas, Joseph Albo and Isaac Abravanel at the end, reacted negatively towards Christianity, without their having been necessarily a relationship to an active Christian mission. Some Jewish philosophers included anti-Christian comments in their philosophical works, while others were motivated to write full-fledged polemical treatises.<sup>41</sup> Just as Christians felt an internal need to react to Judaism in the *Adversus Judaeos* genre, medieval Jewish philosophers, in both Muslim and Christian countries, used their opposition to Christianity as a way of defining Jewish thought.

If we go from the Muslim Middle East where Jewish anti-Christian polemics began, to 11th- and 12th-century Andalusia, we see that the Jews of the peninsula, for whom rational speculation was an important part of their culture, contributed to the anti-Christian tradition. The Andalusians passed this tradition on to the Jews of Southern France (collectively called Provence in Jewish sources), where rational thought, and anti-Jewish polemics, were previously unknown. The Jewish rationalists of Provence also seemed to have had their own personal need to combat Christianity—they had become friends and colleagues with Christians and thus they were moved to make sure that the boundaries between the religions were not

<sup>39</sup> These discussions were motivated by parallel treatments of these subjects in the branch of Islamic theology called Kalam; see Harry A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge, MA, 1976); idem, *Repercussions of the Kalam in Jewish Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA, 1979). The polemical input into philosophical discussions of divine unity is analyzed by Daniel J. Lasker, "Definitions of 'One' and Divine Unity," in S.O. Heller-Wilenski and M. Idel, eds., *Studies in Jewish Thought* (Jerusalem, 1989), 51-61 (Hebrew). Undoubtedly, the existence of inter-religious polemic in contemporary Christian and Muslim philosophical works and the active Christian-Muslim debate served as models for Jewish philosophers as well.

<sup>40</sup> The relation between these issues and anti-Christian polemic are seen clearly in Saadia Gaon's *Book of Opinions and Doctrines*; see Daniel J. Lasker, "Saadya Gaon on Christianity and Islam," in Daniel Frank, ed., *The Jews of Medieval Islam: Community, Society, and Identity* (Leiden, 1995), 165-177.

<sup>41</sup> The most prominent medieval Jewish philosopher, Maimonides, did not write a polemic against Christianity, but has multiple negative references to them in his works; see idem, "Tradition and Innovation in Maimonides' Attitude toward Other Religions," in Jay M. Harris, ed., *Maimonides after 800 Years: Essays on Maimonides and His Influence*, (Cambridge, MA / London, 2007), 167-182.



blurred.<sup>42</sup> This pattern continued for the duration of Jewish life in Provence until Jews were expelled from there.

This is the picture, then, at least until the end of the 12th century before the beginning of serious Christian conversionary campaigns:<sup>43</sup> the Jewish critique of Christianity was a facet of Jewish philosophy with little relation to an actual Christian threat.<sup>44</sup> In the 13th-century, Christian pressure intensified and the old narrative is now relevant, so much so that even Jews in Ashkenaz who were not reflective theologians began composing polemical treatises. The 13th and 14th centuries were times of extreme Christian pressure on Jews. Even if we accept Robin Vose's conclusions that the Dominican archives show that conversion of the Jews was not a primary Christian concern, we should remember that contemporary Jews were not privy to those archives and from their own point of view, they were the center of unwanted Christian attention. Whatever the purpose of the Christian-initiated public debates or the Christian protocols which they produced, there is no doubt that certain Christians, such as the 13th-century Pablo Christiani or the 14th-century Abner of Burgos/Alfonso de Valladolid, were involved in vigorous missionary activities.<sup>45</sup> Those centuries were

<sup>42</sup> Idem, "Christianity, Philosophy and Polemic in Jewish Provence," *Zion* 68:3 (2003): 313-333 (Hebrew).

<sup>43</sup> See Chazan, *Daggers of Faith*.

<sup>44</sup> When Jacob ben Reuben and Joseph Kimhi were writing in approximately 1170, the situation was changing, and both authors indicate that they were reacting to anti-Jewish Christian pressure. But these were not the only factors which led to their composing polemical treatises; see *ibid.*, and idem, "Jewish-Christian Polemics in Transition: From the Lands of Ishmael to the Lands of Edom," in Benjamin Hary, et al., eds., *Judaism and Islam: Boundaries, Interaction, and Communication* (Leiden, 2000), 53-65; and idem, "Jewish-Christian Polemics at the Turning Point: Jewish Evidence from the Twelfth Century," *Harvard Theological Review* 89:2 (1996): 161-173.

<sup>45</sup> Nahmanides describes Pablo as having engaged him in debate about the Trinity in Gerona before the events of 1263 in Barcelona (*Judaism on Trial*, 144); and later he appeared in Paris initiating another public debate (Shatzmiller, *Deuxième controverse*). Abner of Burgos wrote treatises in He-

the heyday of the Jewish critique of Christianity, feeding nicely into the traditional narrative of Jewish polemics as a response to Christianity. The situation of Christian pressure and Jewish response continued in Iberia into the 15th-century, but seems to have abated in other areas of western Europe in light of the expulsions of Jews from these countries. If, however, we look at the entire course of the Middle Ages, Christian mission was not the only reason for a Jewish critique of Christianity.<sup>46</sup>

In response to the search for a new narrative of the medieval Jewish critique of Christianity, it would have been nice to find some sort of uniform field theory which covered all Jewish argumentation against Christianity, one overarching account of why Jews engaged in polemics, composing treatises devoted specifically to the defense of Judaism and the criticism of Christianity. But, as of now, there is no one unique explanation. In sum, a close look at the Jewish critique of Christianity indicates that some Jewish authors were responding directly to overt Christian missionary challenges, hoping that their arguments would convince their fellow Jews not to abandon the religion of their fathers. Others saw criticism of Christianity as part of their rational exposition of Judaism. Others may have understood it as part of Jewish self-definition and a marking of borders. One thing seems to be certain: medieval Jews did not offer refutations of Christianity solely as a reaction to a perceived Christian threat. The Jewish critique of Christianity is much more complex than that.

brew intended specifically for Jewish audiences; for a comprehensive review of Abner's life and works, see Ryan W. Szpiech, "From *Testimonia* to Testimony: Thirteenth-Century Anti-Jewish Polemic and the *Monstrador de justicia* of Abner of Burgos/Alfonso de Valladolid," diss., Yale University, 2006. Both Pablo and Abner were converts to Christianity from Judaism.

<sup>46</sup> The state of Jewish anti-Christian polemics in the early modern and modern periods, such as the proliferation of treatises in Italy and the relative dearth of such works in eastern Europe, should be studied in light of the conclusions expressed in this paper.