

# Judaism and Medieval Interreligious Polemics

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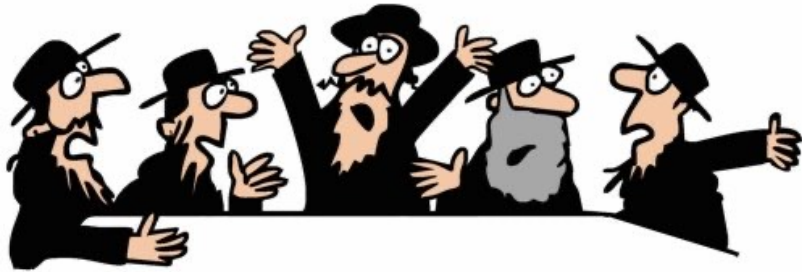
Judaism in Patristic  
Literature, Christianity in  
Rabbinic Literature

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# What we are going to talk about

- explore medieval approaches to the principal points of contention between Judaism and Christianity
- how medieval reflections on difference and tension between Judaism and Christianity affected co-existence of Jews and Christians in medieval Europe
- how polemical arguments and theological ideas developed in time
- how polemical motifs spread within different genres



# Questions



1. What are the main differences in belief between Judaism and Christianity?
2. What are the main differences in practice between Judaism and Christianity?
3. What, from the Jewish perspective, are the most problematic traits of Christianity?
4. What, from the Christian perspective, are the most problematic traits of Judaism?

# Key points

## 1. The Messiah

1. Did he come?
2. The nature of redemption (Why would he come?)
  1. Jewish conceptions of the Messianic age
    1. political liberation
    2. supernatural, but this-worldly salvation
  2. Christian conception of redemption
    1. other-worldly salvation, spiritual liberation from the enslavement of sin and death

## 2. The Law

1. Validity of Mosaic law after the coming of Christ; Christianity as the fulfilment of the Law

## 3. Biblical interpretation

1. method of biblical interpretation: literal (carnal) x allegorical/typological (spiritual)

## 4. Verus Israel (“replacement theology”/ “supersessionism”)

1. Position of the Jews as the chosen people, true people of God (see Romans 11)
2. carnal Israel vs spiritual Israel

## 5. Theology

1. Trinity
2. Incarnation, Virgin birth
3. original sin

# “Adversus Iudaeos” Literature

- Justin Martyr: *Dialogue with Trypho* (ca 165 AD)
- Tertullian: *Against the Jews (Adversus Iudaeos)* (ca 200 AD)
- Hippolytus: *Demonstration Against the Jews* (ca 230 AD)
- John Chrysostom: *Homilies against the Jews* (387–389 AD)



Jean-Paul Laurens, *St John Chrysostom preaching before the Empress Eudoxia* (1893)

# John Chrysostom: Homilies against the Jews

- But now that the Jewish festivals are close by and at the very door, if I should fail to cure those who are sick with the Judaizing disease. I am afraid that, because of their ill-suited association and deep ignorance, some Christians may partake in the Jews' transgressions; once they have done so, I fear my homilies on these transgressions will be in vain. For if they hear no word from me today, they will then join the Jews in their fasts; once they have committed this sin it will be useless for me to apply the remedy.

# John Chrysostom: Homilies against the Jews

- But do not be surprised that I called the Jews pitiable. They really are pitiable and miserable. When so many blessings from heaven came into their hands, they thrust them aside and were at great pains to reject them. The morning Sun of Justice arose for them, but they thrust aside its rays and still sit in darkness. We, who were nurtured by darkness, drew the light to ourselves and were freed from the gloom of their error. They were the branches of that holy root, but those branches were broken. We had no share in the root, but we did reap the fruit of godliness. From their childhood they read the prophets, but they crucified him whom the prophets had foretold. We did not hear the divine prophecies but we did worship him of whom they prophesied. And so they are pitiful because they rejected the blessings which were sent to them, while others seized hold of these blessing and drew them to themselves.



# John Chrysostom: Homilies against the Jews

- Nothing is more miserable than those people who never failed to attack their own salvation. When there was need to observe the Law, they trampled it under foot. Now that the Law has ceased to bind, they obstinately strive to observe it. What could be more pitiable than those who provoke God not only by transgressing the Law but also by keeping it?

# Augustine of Hippo (Aurelius Augustinus) (354–430 AD)

- 354: born in Thagaste, North Africa (today Souk Ahras in Algeria), to a pagan father Patricius and a Christian mother Monica
- 370s: studied rhetoric in Carthage, became an adherent of Manicheism (gnostic religious system), had a son with his lover
- 383: became a professor of rhetoric in Milan, met bishop Ambrose
- 386: conversion
- 395: bishop of Hippo, writing against Manicheans and Donatists
- 397–401: writes *Confessions*
- 410: controversies with Pelagians
- 413–426: writes *City of God* in the wake of Alaric's sack of Rome



Bartolomé Bermejo,  
Saint Augustine (1477-1485)



Philippe de Champaigne,  
Saint Augustine (1650)

46 Of the birth of our Saviour, in Whom the Word was made flesh;<sup>139</sup> and of the scattering of the Jews among all the nations, as had been prophesied

When Herod reigned in Judea, and when, the condition of the commonwealth having now changed, Caesar Augustus had become emperor, and had brought peace to the whole world, Christ was born in Bethlehem of Judah, in accordance with the prophecy given long before.<sup>140</sup> He was first revealed to us as a man, born of a human virgin, and His godhood, from God the Father, was concealed; for this is what the prophet foretold: 'Behold, a virgin shall conceive in the womb, and bring forth a Son, and they shall call His name Emmanuel, which, being interpreted, is God with us.'<sup>141</sup> Then, in order to show us that He is indeed God, He performed many miracles, of which the Gospel Scriptures contain as many as seemed enough to proclaim Him. The first of these is the great miracle of his birth; the last, his ascension into heaven with a body raised again from the dead. But the Jews who slew Him and would not believe

in Him, who would not believe that it behoved Him to die and rise again, suffered a more unhappy destruction at the hands of the Romans and were utterly rooted out from their kingdom, where they had already been under the dominion of foreigners. They were scattered throughout the whole world (for there is certainly nowhere in the world where they are not present); and so, by their own Scriptures, they bear witness for us that we have not invented the prophecies concerning Christ. Indeed, many of the Jews, reflecting upon those prophecies both before His passion and, especially, after His resurrection, have themselves believed in Him; and it is of these Jews that it was foretold, 'For though Thy people Israel be as the sand of the sea, yet a remnant of them shall return.'<sup>142</sup> The rest of them, however, were made blind; and of them it was foretold, 'Let

<sup>139</sup> John 1,14.

<sup>140</sup> Mic. 5,2.

<sup>141</sup> Is. 7,14.

<sup>142</sup> Is. 10,20.

their table become a snare before them: and that which should have been for their welfare, let it become a trap. Let their eyes be darkened, that they see not; and make their loins continually to shake.<sup>'143</sup> Thus, when the Jews do not believe in our Scriptures, their own Scriptures are fulfilled in them, while they read them with darkened eyes. It may be, of course, that someone will say that the Christians have invented the prophecies of Christ which are published under the name of the Sibyl, or any prophecies, if there are such, which are attributed to others, and do not arise within the Jewish people. To us, however, those prophecies which are produced from the books of our adversaries themselves are enough; for we recognise that it is for the sake of such testimony, with which, even against their will, they furnish us by having and preserving those books, that they themselves are scattered throughout all the nations, wherever the Christian Church spreads.

Indeed, a prophecy concerning this scattering was given long ago in the Book of Psalms, which they also read, where it is written: 'My God, His mercy shall go before me. My God hath shown me

concerning mine enemies, that Thou shalt not slay them, lest they should at last forget Thy Law: disperse them in Thy might.’<sup>144</sup> God has therefore shown to the Church the grace of His mercy in her enemies the Jews; for, as the apostle says, ‘their offence is the salvation of the Gentiles’.<sup>145</sup> And this is why He did not slay them – why, that is, even though they have been conquered and oppressed by the Romans, the Jews have not entirely perished: lest they should forget the Law of God and so fail to bear witness of the kind of which we are here speaking. Thus it was not enough for the psalmist to say, ‘Thou shalt not slay them, lest they should at last forget Thy Law’, without adding, ‘disperse them’. For if that testimony of the Scriptures existed only in the Jews’ own land, and not everywhere, then, clearly, the Church, which is everywhere, would not have it to bear witness in all nations to the prophecies which were given long ago concerning Christ.

# Augustine's doctrine of Jewish witness

1. The survival of the Jews in exile testifies to their punishment for rejecting Jesus.
2. Jewish blindness and disbelief also fulfils biblical predictions.
3. Preserving the books of the Old Testament, the Jews offer proof that Christians have not forged Biblical prophecies that speak about Christ: they serve as guardians (*custodes*) of their books, librarians (*librarii*), desks (*scriniaria*) and servants who carry the books of their master's children to school (*capsarii*) but must wait outside class. They are like milestones along the route, they "inform the traveller, while themselves remaining senseless and immobile".
4. Their compliance with biblical law is also part of their testimony, their refusal to give up their religious identity beneath Gentile oppression is admirable.
5. Ps 59:12 – it is forbidden to kill them or prevent them to practice their religion
6. The refutation of Judaism contributes to the vindication of Christianity: the Jews will eventually convert, just as Paul predicted they would



# Biblical figures

- Jews are prefigured by:
  - Cain: killed his brother and was punished by eternal exile (Gn 4)
  - Ham: middle son of Noah who uncovered his father's nakedness (Gn 9)
    - The middle son – that is, the people of the Jews [...] – saw the nakedness of his father, since he consented to the death of Christ and related it to his brothers outside. Through its agency, that which was hidden in prophecy was made evident and publicized; and therefore it has been made the servant of its brethren. For what else is that nation today but the desks [*scrinaria*] of the Christians, bearing the law and the prophets as testimony to the tenets of the church, so that we honor through the sacrament what it announces through the letter? (*Contra Faustum* 12.23, cit. Cohen, 1999, p. 29)

# Jewish “Biographies” of Jesus

- rabbinic literature, esp. Babylonian Talmud
  - final redaction ca. 600-700 AD
  - isolated passages, no coherent narrative
  - polemical counter-narratives that parody New Testament stories or motifs taken from the Gospels
  - more prominent in Babylonian than in Palestinian material: reflects religious freedom enjoyed by the Jews living in Sasanian Persia
- *Toledot Yeshu* (“The Life Story of Jesus”)
  - folk narrative surviving in numerous recensions
    - two manuscript groups: “Pilate group”, “Helen-group”
  - origins in Babylonia (Aramaic), mid-first millennium AD (?) or in Islamic Babylonia (8<sup>th</sup> c. AD)
  - first attested as written source by Agobard of Lyons (*De judaicis superstitionibus*, 826)

# Jesus in the Talmud

- illegitimate child; Ben Stada/Ben Pandera (bShab 104b, bSan 67a)
  - motif known to early Christian authors:
    - Tertullian: Jesus was born to a carpenter and a harlot
    - [Celsus] represents [the Jew] disputing with Jesus, and confuting Him, as he thinks, on many points; and in the first place, he accuses Him of having “invented his birth from a virgin,” and upbraids Him with being “born in a certain Jewish village, of a poor woman of the country, who gained her subsistence by spinning, and who was turned out of doors by her husband, a carpenter by trade, because she was convicted of adultery; that after being driven away by her husband, and wandering about for a time, she disgracefully gave birth to Jesus, an illegitimate child, who having hired himself out as a servant in Egypt on account of his poverty, and having there acquired some miraculous powers, on which the Egyptians greatly pride themselves, returned to his own country, highly elated on account of them, and by means of these proclaimed himself a God.” Origen (c. 185–253), *Contra Celsum*, I:28, transl. Frederick Crombie.

# Jesus in the Talmud

- wicked son/disciple (bSan 103a/b, bBer 17b)
  - Rav Hisda said in the name of R. Yirmeya bar Abba: What is meant by the verse: *No evil (ra'ah) will befall you, no plague (nega') will approach your tent (Ps. 91:10)? No evil will befall you: that the evil inclination shall have no power over you! No plague will approach your tent: that you will not find your wife a [doubtful] niddah [i.e., in state of ritual impurity] when you return from a journey. Another interpretation: No evil will befall you: that bad dreams and bad thoughts will not frighten you. No plague will approach your tent: that you will not have a son or a disciple who publicly spoils his food/dish (maqdiah tavshilo) like Jesus the Nazarene (Yeshu ha-Notzri). (bSan 103a; transl. Schäfer 2007, 26)*
- frivolous/rebellious student (bSan 107b, bSot 47a)

# Jesus in the Talmud

- sorcerer who induced Israel to idolatry (bSan 43a-b)
  - On [Sabbath eve and] the eve of Passover Jesus the Nazarene was hanged. And a herald went forth before him forty days [heralding]: Jesus the Nazarene is going forth to be stoned because he practiced sorcery and instigated and seduced Israel [to idolatry]. Whoever knows anything in his defence, may come and state it. But since they did not find anything in his defence, they hanged him on [Sabbath eve and] the eve of Passover. Ulla said: Do you suppose that Jesus the Nazarene was one for whom a defence could be made? He was a mesit [i.e., someone who instigated Israel to idolatry], concerning whom the Merciful [God] says: Show him no compassion and do not shield him (Dt 13:9). [Hence, it was not necessary to look for witnesses!] With Jesus the Nazarene it was different, for he was close to the government. (bSan 43a-b; transl. Schäfer 2007, 64–65)

# Jesus in the Talmud

- mocked the words of the rabbis, punished in hell (bGit 57a)
  - Onqelos the son of Qaloniqos, the son of the sister of Titus, wanted to convert to Judaism. He went and brought up Titus out of his grave by necromancy and asked him: Who is important in that world [in the world of the dead]? He [Titus] answered: Israel! [...] [Onqelos asked:] What is your punishment [in the Netherworld]? [Titus:] What I decreed upon myself: Every day my ashes are collected, and they pass sentence on me, and I am burned, and my ashes are scattered [again] over the seven seas. He [Onqelos] went and brought up Balaam out of his grave by necromancy and asked him: Who is important in that world? He [Balaam] answered: Israel! [...] [Onqelos asked:] What is your punishment? [Balaam:] With boiling semen. He [Onqelos] went and brought up Jesus [the Nazarene]/the sinners of Israel out of his/their grave(s) by necromancy and asked him/them: Who is important in that world? He/they [Jesus/the sinners of Israel] answered: Israel! [...] [Onqelos:] What is your punishment? [Jesus/the sinners of Israel:] With boiling excrement. For the master has said: Whoever mocks the words of the Sages is punished with boiling excrement. Come and see the difference between the sinners of Israel and the prophets of the gentile nations! (bGit 57a, transl. Schäfer 2007, 84–85)

# *Toledot Yeshu*

- Yeshu conceived out of wedlock (mistaken identity), his mother is in state of ritual impurity (*niddah*)
- talented, but arrogant student who contradicts the rabbis – excommunicated
- obtains magical powers: learns it in Egypt or steals the Ineffable Divine Name and memorizes it (or sews it into his thigh)
- Queen Helen organizes a trial with Yeshu, he is challenged by Judas and they fight each other in air
- stoned to death and/or crucified on a cabbage stalk
- his body is washed away by a stream of water or hidden in Judas's garden

# Death of Jesus in *Toledot Yeshu*

- After they stoned him, they took him from the stoning house and hanged him on a tree, according to the law of the stoned ones. And every tree on which they wanted to hang him broke, since during his life, when he knew the Name, he put a spell on the trees, so that they would not hold him. He knew that his death would be by hanging, since he seduced and incited and practiced sorcery. His villains thought that the the trees did not hold him because of his great righteousness. What did the sages of Israel do? They brought a large cabbage stalk and hanged him on that cabbage stalk, since he did not cast a spell on it, and they left him there until sunset.”

(New York JTS 2221 - Ashkenazi B; transl. Meerson and Schäfer 2014, 199)



# Further reading

- Schäfer, Peter, Michael Meerson, and Yaacov Deutsch, eds. *Toledot Yeshu ('The Life Story of Jesus') Revisited: A Princeton Conference*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011.
- Krauss, Samuel. *Das Leben Jesu nach jüdischen Quellen*. Berlin: S. Calvary, 1902.