

# Judaism and Medieval Interreligious Polemics

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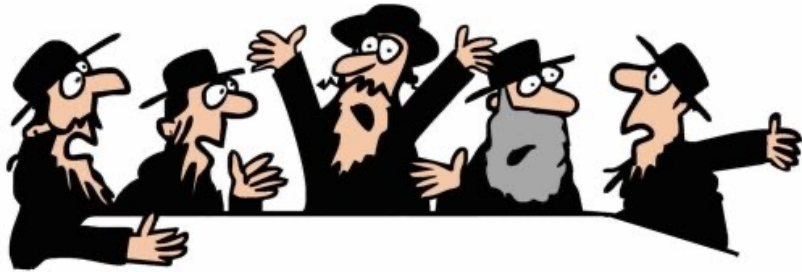
Jewish-Christian Polemic in  
the 12th Century and the  
Role of Reason

19/04/2023



# What we are going to talk about

- transformation of Christian culture in the twelfth century
- changes in patterns of Christian anti-Jewish polemic
- the role of reason in Christian polemic
- Jewish response: rationalism in Jewish anti-Christian polemic

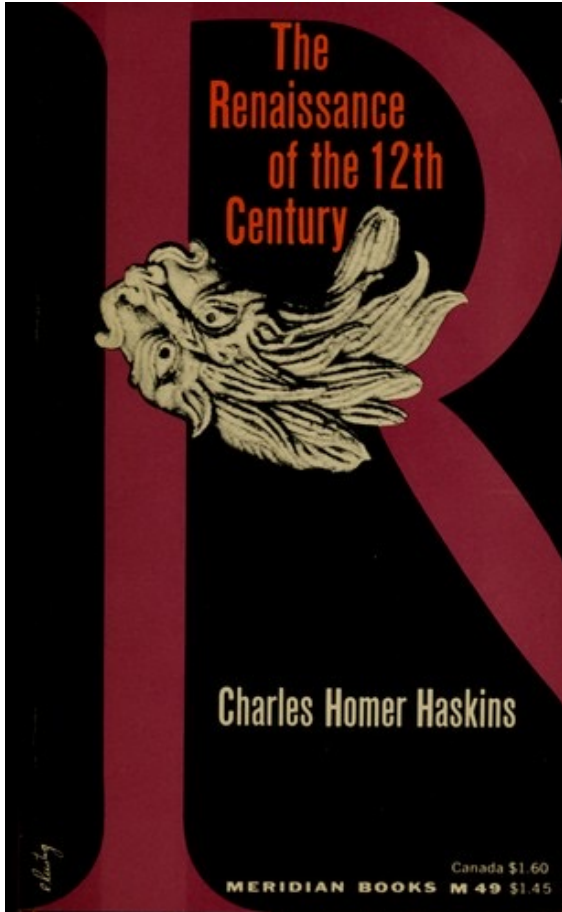


# Questions

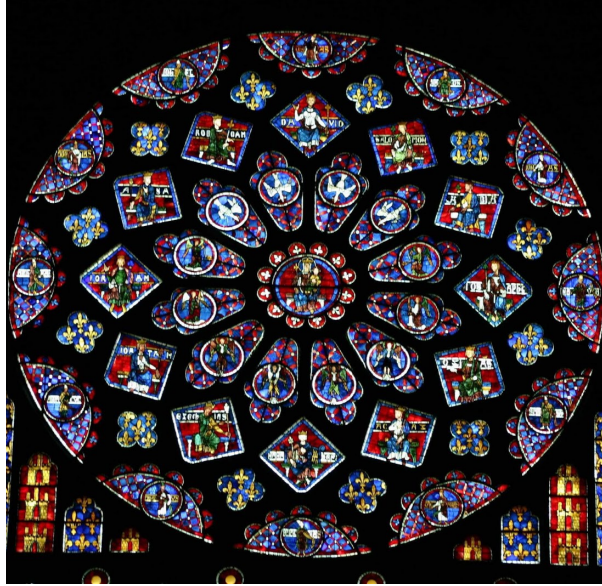


1. What comes to your mind when you hear “the 12<sup>th</sup> century”?
2. What do you know about the position of the Jews in Christian Europe at this time?

# Context



- **“Twelfth-Century Renaissance”**
  - political and economic expansion (urbanization, Crusades)
  - institutional consolidation (ecclesiastical and secular)
  - new intellectual centres (urban schools, universities)
  - revival of classical Latin literature
  - revival of science
    - translations from Hebrew, Greek, Arabic
  - heightened concern with “otherness”



# How did the polemical literature change?

## Changes

- new audiences
- new arguments

## Four categories of anti-Jewish polemic in the 12th and 13th c. according to Amos Funkenstein:

1. older pattern of scriptural proofs (*testimonia*)
2. rationalistic polemics attempting to prove Christian dogma on the basis of reason ALONE (*sola ratione*)
3. accusations against the Talmud and post-biblical literature
4. attempts to prove from the post-biblical literature itself the recognition of Christ's messianity and the truth of Christian religion

# Anselm of Canterbury

- 1033/34–1109
- Benedictine monk of monastery Bec in Normandy, later archbishop in Canterbury
- *Cur Deus homo?* (*Why did God become man?*)
- dialogue with Boso, against *infideles* = “who do not accept the Christian faith because they think it repugnant to reason”
- very little quotation of the Bible



Bodleian Library, MS. Auct. D. 2. 6, folio 156r, Top. Opening of Anselm's 'Prayers and Meditations'. Photo: © Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

# Anselm of Canterbury

"I have been often and most earnestly requested by many, both personally and by letter, that I would hand down in writing the proofs of a certain doctrine of our faith, which I am accustomed to give to inquirers; for they say that these proofs gratify them, and are considered sufficient. This they ask, **not for the sake of attaining to faith by means of reason, but that they may be gladdened by understanding and meditating on those things which they believe**; and that, as far as possible, **they may be always ready to convince any one who demands of them a reason of that hope which is in us**. And this question, both **infidels** are accustomed to bring up against us, ridiculing Christian simplicity as absurd; and many **believers** ponder it in their hearts; for what cause or necessity, in sooth, God became man, and by his own death, as we believe and affirm, restored life to the world; when he might have done this, by means of some other being, angelic or human, or merely by his will. Not only the learned, but also many unlearned persons interest themselves in this inquiry and seek for its solution. Therefore, since **many desire to consider this subject, and, though it seem very difficult in the investigation, it is yet plain to all in the solution, and attractive for the value and beauty of the reasoning**; although what ought to be sufficient has been said by the holy fathers and their successors, yet I will take pains to disclose to inquirers what God has seen fit to lay open to me. And since investigations, which are carried on by question and answer, are thus made more plain to many, and especially to less quick minds, and on that account are more gratifying, I will take to argue with me one of those persons who agitate this subject; one, who among the rest impels me more earnestly to it, so that in this way Boso may question and Anselm reply." (*Cur Deus homo*, I:I)



# Anselm of Canterbury

“For you prove that God became man out of necessity in such a way that, even if the few things which you have taken from our books were removed (such as what you said about the three persons of God and about Adam) you could satisfy not only the Jews but also the pagans **with reason alone**. And because the same God-man himself establishes the New Testament and confirms the Old, thus just as it is necessary to acknowledge that he himself is true, so no one can deny that there is nothing in the Scriptures that is not true.” (*Cur Deus homo*, II:22)

Humanity had to compensate God for the original sin with a proper compensation, therefore the saviour had to be human. However, after the fall, humans are unable to fulfil God’s will, therefore the saviour had to be divine. The necessity of incarnation does not infringe on God’s omnipotence, rather it is a consequence of the world’s order chosen by God.

# Rationalism in Christian anti-Jewish debate

- Gilbert Crispin (c. 1046–1117)
  - *Disputatio cum Gentili*
  - *Disputatio Iudei et Christiani*
    - “To the Rev. Father and Lord Anselm, Archbishop of the holy Church of Canterbury, his servant and son, Brother Gilbert [Crispin], proctor and servant of Westminster Abbey, wisheth prosperous continuance in this life and a blissful eternity in the future one. I send you a little work to be submitted to your fatherly prudence. I wrote it recently putting to paper what a Jew said when formerly disputing with me against our faith in defence of his own law, and what I replied in favour of the faith against his objections. I know not where he was born, but he was educated at Mayence; he was well versed even in our law and literature, and had a mind practised in the Scriptures and in disputes against us. He often used to come to me as a friend both for business and to see me, since in certain things I was very necessary to him, and as often as we came together we would soon get talking in a friendly spirit about the Scriptures and our faith. Now on a certain day, God granted both him and me greater leisure than usual, and soon we began questioning as usual. And as his objections were consequent and logical, and as he explained with equal consequence his former objections, while our reply met his objections foot to foot and by his own confession seemed equally supported by the testimony of the Scriptures, some of the bystanders requested me to preserve our disputes as likely to be of use to others in future. . . . Yet [poor as my work is] one of the Jews who were then in London, the mercy of God helping, was converted to the Christian faith at Westminster; professing before all the faith of Christ he asked for baptism and received it, and being baptized vowed him to the service of God, and becoming a monk has remained with us.”

# Rationalism in Christian anti-Jewish debate

- **Guibert of Nogent (c. 1064– c. 1125)**

- Benedictine monk at the monastery of Saint-Germer-de-Fly
- *Tractatus de incarnatione contra Iudaeos* (1111)
- target: Christians who inclined toward ideas of the Jews and doubt the birth of Christ from a Virgin
- argument: human nature has no impurity in itself - it is sin which renders humans unseemly to God, but Jesus had no sin
- on Mary's genitals: "those members, which then devoted themselves to that divine offspring, were more dignified than are those foulest of mouths, which fill themselves daily with deceit and luxury and deride the life-giving sacraments." (*Tractatus*, I.6)
- "Desist, you stubborn ones; let your verbosity come to an end, since every argument is of no avail. You who devote your hearts to theft and usury, how can you perceive the reasons for the sacraments of God and the mysteries of those reasons...? Vainly do I contend with your obstinacy, since unless you believe in him whom we believe to be Christ, you will never be able to be free of this dispute with us, nor will you who abhor the son have the proper sentiments concerning his mother." (*Ibid.*, II.5)

# Rationalism in Christian anti-Jewish debate

- **Peter Venerable (c. 1064– c. 1125)**

- abbot of the Benedictine monastery in Cluny
- *Adversus Iudaeorum inveteratam duritiem* (
- “I do not know whether I am speaking to a man. I know not whether a Jew is a man because he does not cede to human reason, nor does he acquiesce to the divine authorities which are his own.”

It seems to me, O Jew, that with so many prooftexts and with rational argumentation so extensive I have satisfied any human being, I think, concerning those matters which had been called into question. And if any human being, then you too, if you are in fact human. Lest I lie, I dare not profess that you are human, because I understand that the rational faculty which distinguishes the human being from other animals and beasts and renders him superior to them has been obliterated or suppressed in you. . . . Why are you not called a brute animal, why not a beast, why not a beast of burden? Consider the cow or, if you prefer, the ass—no beast is more stupid—and together with it listen to whatever things those beasts can hear. What will the ass reply? What will distinguish between its hearing and yours? The ass hears but does not understand; the Jew hears but does not understand.<sup>115</sup>

# Petrus Alfonsi

- former Jew, baptized 1106 in Huesca
- *Dialogus*
- 12 chapters (*tituli*)
- rational arguments against Jewish faith (the faith of the Jews is “inane and defective [...] in every respect”, their prayer “illogical and displeasing to God”)
- anthropomorphism ↔ incarnation

And when it became known to the Jews who had known me previously, and had considered me well-trained in the books of the prophets and the sayings of the sages, and to have even a portion, although not great, of all the liberal arts, that I had accepted the law and faith of the Christians and was one of them, some of them thought that I only did this because I had abandoned all sense of shame, to such an extent that I had condemned both God and the law. Others, besides, claimed that I had done this because I had not understood the words of the prophets and the law appropriately. Still others accused me of vainglory and falsely claimed that I had done this for worldly honor, because I perceived that the Christians' nation [*gens*] dominated all others.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore I have composed this little book so that all may know my intention and hear my argument, in which I set forth the destruction of the belief of all the other nations, after which I concluded that the Christian law is superior to all others. Moreover, last, I have set down all the objections of any adversary of the Christian law and, having set them down, have destroyed them with reason and authority according to my understanding.

I have arranged the entire book as a dialogue, so that the reader's mind may more quickly achieve an understanding. To defend the arguments of the Christians, I have used the name that I now have as a Christian, whereas in the arguments of the adversary refuting them, I have used the name Moses, which I had before baptism. I have divided the book into twelve headings [*tituli*],<sup>8</sup> so that the reader may find whatever he desires in them more quickly.

7. Indeed, some eleventh-century Jews in Muslim states did convert to Islam to advance their political careers, as John Tolan points out. See his *Petrus Alfonsi and his Medieval Readers* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1993), 6. The same certainly occurred in Christendom.

8. *Titulus*, which we have translated as "heading," is an unusual term with multiple meanings. By the early twelfth century, it is used to designate a division or section of a written work. Charles Burnett points out that although it is rarely used in scientific works, it does appear in a tenth-century work on the astrolabe, *Horologium regis Ptolomei*, probably by Lupitus of Barcelona, which he believes may have served as Alfonsi's model. See his "The Works of Petrus Alfonsi: Questions of Authenticity," 43.

The first heading shows that the Jews understand the words of the prophets according to the flesh and explain them falsely.

The second leads to knowledge of the cause of the present captivity of the Jews, and how long it has to last.

The third is for refuting the silly belief of the Jews over the resurrection of their dead, whom they believe both will be resurrected and will inhabit the earth again.

The fourth is to demonstrate that the Jews observe but a little bit of the entire law of Moses, and that this little bit is not pleasing to God.

The fifth is for the purpose of destroying the law<sup>9</sup> of the Saracens and refuting the stupidity of their opinions.

The sixth is on the Trinity.

The seventh concerns how the Virgin Mary, conceiving by the Holy Spirit, gave birth without intercourse with [her] husband.

The eighth, how the Word of God was incarnate in the body of Christ and how Christ was God and man at one and the same time.

The ninth, that Christ came in that time when it was predicted by the prophets that he would come, and that whatever they predicted concerning him was revealed in him and his works.

The tenth, that Christ was crucified and killed by the Jews by their free will.

The eleventh, concerning the Resurrection and ascent of Christ to heaven, and his Second Coming.

The twelfth, that the law of Christians is not contrary to the Mosaic law.

I beseech those who are about to read this little book, that if they find that it contains some imperfect or superfluous statement, they forgive this venial error, since no one is without fault [*vitium*].

HERE ENDS THE PROLOGUE. THE BOOK BEGINS.

From the tender age of youth a certain one, a most perfect friend, named Moses, stuck by me, who had been my companion and fellow student from the very earliest age. When word

9. "Law": *lex*, but a term that can also refer to customary religious practice.

# Petrus Alfonsi

- former Jew, born before 1075, baptized 1106 in Huesca
- astronomer, perhaps personal physician of King Alfonso I of Aragon
- 1110–1120 in England and France
- *Dialogi contra Judaeos* (*Dialogues against the Jews*)
  - very popular: over 60 extant mss.
- *Disciplina clericalis*
  - anthology of Mediterranean folktales





# *Dialogues against the Jews*

- 12 chapters (*tituli*)
- explains why he left Judaism and why he embraced Christianity
- uses rabbinic literature both to prove the irrational and mistaken nature of Judaism and to advocate for the truth of Christianity
- condemnation of the Talmudic *aggadah*
  - contradicts the principles of Aristotelian science (especially astronomy)
  - reversal of Jewish critique of Incarnation
  - Jews have erred in their interpretation of the Law; interpretation of Biblical authorities and prophecies should not “stray ... from the path of reason”
- condemnation of the rabbis
  - Jesus’ Jewish contemporaries killed Jesus out of hatred and envy, but they did not know his true identity, later Jewish scribes were “deceitful”

And when it became known to the Jews who had known me previously, and had considered me well-trained in the books of the prophets and the sayings of the sages, and to have even a portion, although not great, of all the liberal arts, that I had accepted the law and faith of the Christians and was one of them, some of them thought that I only did this because I had abandoned all sense of shame, to such an extent that I had condemned both God and the law. Others, besides, claimed that I had done this because I had not understood the words of the prophets and the law appropriately. Still others accused me of vainglory and falsely claimed that I had done this for worldly honor, because I perceived that the Christians' nation [*gens*] dominated all others.<sup>7</sup>

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# Dialogues against the Jews

1. Jewish biblical interpretation is incorrect
2. the cause of Jewish exile
3. the nature of resurrection
4. Jews do not observe the Law of God
5. against Islam
6. Trinity
7. Virgin Birth
8. Incarnation
9. Christ is the fulfilment of prophecies
10. Christ was killed by the Jews by their free will
11. Christ resurrection, ascension to heaven and second coming
12. law of Christians is not contrary to Mosaic law

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# Babylonian Talmud, tractate Berakhot fol. 7a

וּמִי אֵיכָּא רְתִיחָא קַמִּיהּ דְּקוּדְשָׁא בְּרִיךְ  
הוּא?

The Gemara asks: And is there anger before the Holy One, Blessed be He? Can we speak of God using terms like anger?

אֵין, דְּתַנַּיָא: "וַיֵּל זֹעֵם בְּכָל יוֹם".

The Gemara answers: Yes, as it was taught in a *baraita*, God becomes angry, as it is stated: "God vindicates the righteous, God is furious every day" (Psalms 7:12).

וּכְמָה זַעְמוֹ? – רַגַע. וּכְמָה רַגַע? – אֶחָד  
מִחֲמִשְׁת רַבּוּא וּשְׁמוֹנֵת אַלְפִים וּשְׁמֹנֶה  
מֵאוֹת וּשְׁמֹנִים וּשְׁמֹנֶה בְּשָׁעָה, וְזוֹ הִיא  
"רַגַע". וְאֵין כָּל בְּרִיָּה יְכוּלָה לְכוּיֵן  
אוֹתָהּ שָׁעָה, חוּץ מִבְּלָעַם הַרְשָׁע,  
דְּכִתִּיב בֵּיהּ: "וַיֹּדַע דַּעַת עֲלִיּוֹן".

How much time does His anger last? God's anger lasts a moment.<sup>N</sup> And how long is a moment? One fifty-eight thousand, eight hundred and eighty-eighth of an hour, that is a moment. The Gemara adds: And no creature can precisely determine that moment when God becomes angry, except for Balaam the wicked, about whom it is written: "He who knows the knowledge of the Most High" (Numbers 24:16).

# Babylonian Talmud, tractate Berakhot fol. 7a

וְאֵימַת רְתַח? אָמַר אַבְיִי: בְּהֶנֶךְ תֵּלֶת שָׁעֵי  
קִמְיִיתָא, כִּי חִיּוּרָא כְּרַבְלָתָא דְתַרְנַגּוּלָא וְקָאֵי  
אַחַד פְּרָעָא.

The Gemara asks: **When** is the Holy One, Blessed be He, angry? **Abaye** said: God's anger is revealed through animals. **During the first three hours of the day, when the sun whitens the crest of the rooster<sup>b</sup> and it stands on one leg.** When it appears that its life has left him and he suddenly turns white, that is when God is angry.

כָּל שַׁעֲתָא וְשַׁעֲתָא נִמְי קָאֵי הָכִי!

The Gemara asks: The rooster **also stands that way every hour.** What kind of sign is this?

כָּל שַׁעֲתָא - אֵית בֵּיה שׁוּרְיִיקֵי סוּמְקֵי,  
בְּהֵיא שַׁעֲתָא - לֵית בֵּיה שׁוּרְיִיקֵי סוּמְקֵי.

The Gemara answers: The difference is that **every other hour** when the rooster stands in that way, **there are red streaks** in his crest. But **when** God is angry, **there are no red streaks** in his crest.

MOSES: How do you say that we believe this?

PETRUS: Indeed, you say that every day, once a day, he grows angry, bringing forth the testimony of David, who says: "He is angry every day."<sup>40</sup> You affirm that he is angry at the first hour of the day, saying that the cause of his anger is that at that hour the kings of iniquity arose and placed the diadem on themselves and worshiped the sun.<sup>41</sup> Do you not see how absurd this remark is and how foolish they are who have uttered it, since they do not actually know the definition of anger; if they did know it, they would not think this about God.

MOSES: What do you think anger is, then?

PETRUS: Anger is, after some word that is unpleasant has been heard, when red choler [*cholera rubea*], that is, bile, boils over and is diffused over the liver and mixes with blood.<sup>42</sup> From this a man heats up and becomes pale in the face. This does not suit God in any way, unless he is composed of the four elements.<sup>43</sup> God, however, is not subject to such features.

MOSES: I am unable to contradict the truth.

PETRUS: Nor is it less abhorrent that they say that he grows angry over a thing for which he cannot avenge himself. That if he could, his anger would actually be calmed. Moreover, they

40. Ps 7.12.

41. A claim attributed to R. Meir. See B.T. *Ber.* 7a.

42. A person with a complexion dominated by red bile typically is understood to be prone to anger. See Bede, *De temporum ratione liber*, c. 35, ed. Ch. W. Jones and Th. Mommsen, CC SL 123B (Turnholt: Brepols, 1977), 392. Yet I have not found a source for this seemingly uncommon definition of anger. By contrast, Alfonsi's older contemporary, the Cassinese monk and physician Constantine the African, defines anger or wrath as a "bubbling" of the blood that is within the heart, and the sudden exit of natural heat: "Ira est ebullitio sanguinis in corde existentis, et motus caloris naturalis subito extra corpus vindicandum exeuntis"; *Constantini Africani de communibus medico cognitu necessariis locis*, 5, 37, in Constantine the African, *Theories* (Basel: Henri cum Petrum, 1536). Alfonsi takes up the definition of anger again in the tenth *titulus*, when discussing Adam's fall and subsequent loss of a balanced humoral complexion. See *infra*, p. 225.

43. The diverse humoral complexions derive from the mixture of the four elements of earth, air, fire, and water, which are the simplest components of any body. A choleric complexion is warm and dry, with more of fire and earth in its composition. See Constantine the African, *Pantegni*, 1, 6, in *L'Arte universale della medicina (Pantegni)*, trans. Marco T. Malato and Umberto de Martini (Rome: Istituto di storia della medicina dell'università di Roma, 1961); Michael Scot, *Liber phisionomiae*, cap. 33.

say that no one ever knew the minute of that hour when he becomes angry except Balaam, the son of Beor.<sup>44</sup> But with this claim you contradict your own words since, on the one hand Moses calls him a soothsayer,<sup>45</sup> whereas you call him wicked, [and] on the other hand you indicate that he has more foresight than Moses about God, because he knew the minute of the hour which was unknown to Moses. And although this may be said with great admiration, nevertheless it pales in comparison to an even greater foolishness, when you say that the rooster, an irrational animal, knows the minute of the exact hour each day. Do you concede that they have said all these things?

MOSES: Even should I wish to, I cannot deny it.

PETRUS: Nor is it enough for them to say this about God, but they also say that he cries once each day, every day, and they say that two tears coming from his eyes fall into the great sea,<sup>46</sup> and they assert that these tears are that brightness [*fulgur*] that seems to fall from the stars at night.<sup>47</sup> This argument, however, shows that God is composed of the four elements. For tears only occur from an abundance of moisture descending from the head. If, then, this is so, then the elements are the matter of God. For all matter is prior to and simpler than form. Therefore, these tears, too, are prior to and simpler than God, which is a wicked thing to believe. Therefore, if God is such as you say he is, since he enjoys neither food nor drink, and yet daily he emits tears from himself, then it is necessary that he suffer decrease, unless perhaps he continually imbibes of the waters

44. For this claim about Balaam, see B.T. *Ber.* 7a.

45. Nm 22.5.

46. Cf. B.T. *Ber.* 59a.

47. I have been unable to find a source that indicates that God's tears are the source of lightning or this heavenly brightness. Ginzberg records a tradition that lightning emanated from God's mouth. See Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, trans. Henrietta Szold, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1968), 95. Alfonsi may be referring to shooting stars, or perhaps to one ancient view of the origin of lightning, which holds that it is a reflection of the sun, moon, or stars from moisture-bearing clouds, or a kind of fire trapped in them. Cf. Aristotle, *Meteor.* 2.9 (369b12–16; 370a11 ff.). Aristotle's text was widely read in the Middle Ages, in Latin, Hebrew, and Arabic translations. For discussion and texts, see Pieter L. Schoonheim, *Aristotle's Meteorology in the Arabic-Latin Tradition: A Critical Edition of the Texts with Introduction and Indices* (Leiden, Boston, Cologne: Brill, 2000).

# Jewish anti-Christian Polemic

- Jacob ben Reuben: *Milhamot ha-Shem (The Wars of the Lord)* (1170)
- Joseph Kimhi: *Sefer ha-berit (The Book of the Covenant)*

# Further reading

- Sapir Abulafia, Anna. *Christians and Jews in the Twelfth Century Renaissance*. New York; London: Routledge, 1995.
- Freudenthal, Gad. 'Philosophy in Religious Polemics: The Case of Jacob Ben Reuben (Provence, 1170)'. *Medieval Encounters* 22, no. 1–3 (2016): 25–71.