

Judaism and Medieval Interreligious Polemics

Rationalism in Jewish Polemic
and Christian attitudes to
Rabbinic Literature

26/04/2023



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.⁷

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*],⁸ so that the reader may find whatever he desires in them more quickly.



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

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 law⁹ 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.

Babylonian Talmud, tractate Berakhot fol. 7a

וּמִי אֵיכָא רְתִיחָא קַמֵּיהּ 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, דְּתַנִּיא: "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 זַעֲמוּ? – 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.^N 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

וְאֵימָת רְתַח? אָמַר אַבְיִי: בַּהֲנֵךְ תִּלָּת שָׁעֵי
קִמְיִיתָ, 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^b 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 שׁוּרְיֵיקֵי סוּמְקֵי,
בְּהֵיא שַׁעֲתָא - לֵית בֵּיה שׁוּרְיֵיקֵי 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.

Babylonian Talmud, tractate Berakhot fol. 7a

תָּנָא מִשְׁמִיּהּ דְּרַבִּי מֵאִיר: בְּשַׁעַת שֶׁהַחֶמֶה
זוֹרְחָת, וְכָל מַלְכֵי מִזְרַח וּמַעֲרָב מְנִיחִים
בְּתַרְיָהֶם בְּרֵאשִׁיָּהֶם וּמִשְׁתַּחֲוִים לַחֶמֶה,
מִיָּד כּוֹעֵם הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא.

Explaining the cause of God's anger, it is taught in the name of Rabbi Meir: When the sun rises and the kings of the East and the West place their crowns on their heads and bow down to the sun, the Holy One, Blessed be He, immediately grows angry. Since this occurs in the early hours every day, God becomes angry at His world at that moment every day.

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."⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ 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.⁴² 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.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ But with this claim you contradict your own words since, on the one hand Moses calls him a soothsayer,⁴⁵ 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,⁴⁶ and they assert that these tears are that brightness [*fulgur*] that seems to fall from the stars at night.⁴⁷ 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).

17457

יעקב בן ראובן מלחמות השם

יוצא לאור בפעם הראשונה
על-פי כתבייד בתוספות מבוא והערות
על-ידי
ד"ר יהודה רוזנטאל



הוצאת מוסד הרב קוק • ירושלים תשכ"ג

Jacob ben Reuben: Wars of the Lord

- ed. J. Rosenthal (Jerusalem 1962/63)
- composed 1170
- Gascony (Mourède) or Huesca?



Jacob ben Reuben: *Wars of the Lord*

„I shall explain in the light of what happened to me while I was in exile in **מורד גשיקוייא**. It was my fate to dwell there among gentiles. There, where I lived, a certain Christian took a liking to me. [He was] one of the leading citizens of the town and one of the learned of the generation. He was a priest expert in logic and sophisticated in esoteric wisdom. To be sure, our Creator, may his Name be blessed, obscured his eyes from seeing and his heart from understanding. Thus, his soul clung to his idolatry, and his will and his mind continued to serve his “sticks and stones.” While I was regularly with him to learn from him wisdom and knowledge, he asked me and said: “How long will you waver on the threshold, not allowing your heart to understand and your eyes to see and your ears to hear. [This is true for] you and all your brethren who are known by the name of Jacob. You become poorer and lower and weaker in obvious ways; your numbers decline daily, both yesterday and tomorrow. However, we become greater; our horn is ascendant. Our enemies are trampled under our feet, while our friends are as resplendent as the sun as it goes forth. Now, if there is sin in your hand, remove it; but if there is truth on your lips, declare it. Speak freely, and fear not. I shall ask you, and you will inform me.”

(*Milhamot ha-Shem*, pp. 4–5, transl. R. Chazan [adapted])

Jacob ben Reuben: *Wars of the Lord*

- central topic: God's Unity (against Trinity and Incarnation)
- dialogue between a Monotheist (*meyahed*) and a Denier [of God's unity] (*mekhahed*)
- Jacob ben Reuben used his knowledge of Latin and of Christian Gospels (first systematic critique of Gospels in Hebrew literature)
- 12 chapters
 - Ch. 1: Rational arguments against Christian dogma
 - Ch. 2: whether the coming of Jesus has annulled the validity of the Law
 - Ch. 3-10: against Christological interpretation of the Scriptures
 - Ch. 11: inconsistencies and contradictions in the Gospels (Matthew)
 - Ch. 12: proofs that the Messiah has not come – philosophical proofs

Jacob ben Reuben: *Wars of the Lord*

Next you said that He is the Creator of everything *ex nihilo*, and was Himself created for the redemption of his creations [*yešurav*, i.e., the (human) beings He created] at the time that He so willed. [You said that He] became incarnate at the appointed time, and you called the Creator, may He be blessed, [both] creator and created. But all the philosophers and those wise in reason mock you and ask about this point: If the Creator, may He be blessed, was [Himself] created, tell me if He was created before He existed or after He existed? If [you say] before His existence, you have contradicted your assertion that He is the Beginning of all beginnings and the First without beginning. And if you say [that] after He existed He became incarnate at the time that He so willed, then he was lacking the flesh and the bones and the sinews that he received at the time of which you spoke, and this is not correct.⁵²

Joseph Kimḥi: *Book of the Covenant*

- scholarly family, father of David Kimhi and Moses Kimhi
- born in Spain but fled to Provence in 1148, settled in Narbonne
- wrote works on grammar, Biblical commentaries
- *Sefer ha-berit* (Book of the Covenant)
 - textbook for one of his students, written against arguments of converted Jews!
 - preserved in a 1710 collection *Milhemet hovah*, with later interpolations
 - dialogue between a Believer (*ma'amin*) and a Heretic (*min*)
 - rational critique of Christian dogma (Trinity, original sin)
 - strong criticism of Christian immorality
 - rebuttal of Christian claims based on Biblical prooftexts
 - a lost section involving Christian claims regarding Christian and Jewish fate

Joseph Kimḥi: *Book of the Covenant*

THE BOOK OF THE COVENANT COMPOSED BY
THE SAGE R. JOSEPH KIMḤI
OF BLESSED MEMORY.

Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart: "Be strong, fear not." Your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God He will come and save you. (Isa. 35:3f.) But you, [19a] take courage, and do not let your hands be weak, for your work shall be rewarded. (II Chron. 15:7.) Be strong and let your heart take courage, all you that wait for the Lord. (Ps. 31:25.) The spirit of the Lord speaks through me; His word is upon my tongue (II Sam. 23:2).

I have observed that the children of the impudent among our people¹ have audaciously proclaimed all manner of falsehood and nonsense. Their foolishness and stupidity have completely misled them and their ignorance has enticed them into misinterpreting the words of the living God, the words of the prophets, and to apply them in an improper fashion to the matter of Jesus the Nazarene. They have explained them senselessly and have turned from the way of truth.

One of my students has requested me to assemble and collect all the visions and prophecies in the Torah, Prophets,

¹ The phrase "the children of the impudent among our people", taken from Dan. 11:14, was traditionally applied to Jesus and his disciples. See S. Krauss, *Das Leben Jesu nach Jüdischen Quellen* (Berlin, 1902), pp. 76, 80, 121, *et passim*; Rashi, *a.l.*; *Josippon*, ed. Mantua, ch. 63; J. Rosenthal (ed.), *Sefer Yosef ha-Megane* (Jerusalem, 1970), p. 15; G. Cohen, *The Book of Tradition of Abraham ibn Daud* (New York, 1968), p. xxxix, n. 114; M. Maimonides, *Epistle to Yemen*, ed. A.S. Halkin (New York, 1951), p. iv; J. Rosenthal, *Mehqarim* (Jerusalem, 1967), I, 115.

and Writings, in which there are [contained] refutations against the heretics and deniers (*'epiqorsin*) who polemize against our faith. I have seen fit to fulfil his request. In this there will be found much benefit, in that it will add [to the glory of] the faith of the God of Israel. The wise man will grow stronger and *those who are wise* shall understand and *shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and those who turn many to righteousness are like the stars for ever and ever* (Dan. 12:3). I shall begin by the grace of God to search and investigate by the paths of reason and to answer with understanding and knowledge.

They profess and believe in the Trinity-Father, Son, and Spirit – and claim that the Creator is the Father of all and that He created the entire world. At the beginning of the Book of Genesis, it states, *and the Spirit of the Lord hovered over the face of the waters* (Gen. 1:2). Hence: Father and Spirit.² We reply: I believe that wisdom corroborates them and reason is on their side. He is the Father of the world, having engendered it and brought it into being *ex nihilo*, and the [existence of] the Holy Spirit [may be seen in this verse also]. But who will constrain me to believe that he has a son [in the same way that] reason constrains me [to believe] in the Father and Spirit?³

The *min*⁴ said: You have judged wisely and spoken well by accepting belief in the Father and the Spirit, [both] from Scripture and from reason. I cannot prove [the existence of the Son] from reason, but in any event I can from Scripture.

Joseph Kimḥi: *Book of the Covenant*

COMPOSED BY THE SAGE R. JOSEPH KIMḤI

29

All the prophets spoke and prophesied concerning the Son.... [19b] I believe in the words of the prophets. Isaiah said, *A child is born to us, a son is given to us, and the principatus will be upon his shoulders; and his name will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace* (Isa. 9:5). It is not possible that these names refer to a human being. Therefore, [this] has constrained me to believe in the Son.

[*The ma'amin said:*] There is an error in the verse which you cited [which was introduced] by Jerome, you translator. The pointing does not indicate a reading of *he shall be called God*, but *the Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father shall call his name the prince of peace*.⁵ This is Hezekiah the righteous whom God called prince of peace. [This is so for the following reason:] Sects, wars, and dissensions had proliferated in the time of his father Ahaz, for Pekah the son of Remaliah and Rezin, king of Aram, warred against him, defeated him, and destroyed his land.⁶ The prophet Isaiah announced to him that a child had been born, upon whose shoulder would rest the dominion of the House of David. We have found it stated explicitly in Chronicles that Hezekiah had already been born.⁷ These names were mentioned according to the circumstances: *Wonderful*, for He wrought wonders with him; *Counsellor*, for He counselled him to walk in the ways of the Lord, for his father was wicked; *Mighty God*, for He caused him to grow mighty over his enemies; *Everlasting Father*, for He added fifteen years to his life,⁸ for He is the Master and

Father of eternity.⁹ Further, if, as you say, he spoke this verse in reference to the Son, he should have made this quite explicit, for in the case of a non-rational doctrine, the prophets would set it forth clearly in a plain statement. Who will believe that the Holy One blessed be He entered the womb of a woman and took on flesh? Is it not said concerning flesh: *He remembered that they were but flesh, a wind that passes and does not come again*, (Ps. 78:39). Who will believe that the Lord of the world was *born of woman, of few clays and full of trouble* (Job 14:1)? Thus I am not constrained to believe in the Son. Scripture says too: *My spirit shall not remain in man forever since he is flesh*, (Gen. 6:3). You have denied this text.

The *min* said: Do you not know and have you not heard that because Adam sinned, all his progeny go [20a] to Gehenna¹⁰ and are punished (for Adam's sin.) Therefore, He wanted to descend to earth and take on flesh in Mary's womb to save the world. In His great humility, He came to earth to take the righteous from Gehenna, because for the guilt of Adam, they went there upon their death, and for his crime, He cursed the earth, as it is said: *Cursed be the earth because of you* (Gen. 3:17).

The *ma'amin* said: How you have erred from the path of reason! *Does God pervert judgment? Does the Almighty pervert justice?* (Job 8:3), so as to bring the righteous to Gehenna for the sin of Adam? Does not Scripture say, *Parents shall not be put to death for children* (Deut. 24:16)?¹¹ I say further: You claim that Jesus saved the world from the day he came, but

Further reading

- Sapir Abulafia, Anna. *Christians and Jews in the Twelfth Century Renaissance*. New York; London: Routledge, 1995.
- Alfonsi, Petrus. *Dialogue against the Jews*. Translated by Irven Michael Resnick. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2006.
- Freudenthal, Gad. 'Philosophy in Religious Polemics: The Case of Jacob Ben Reuben (Provence, 1170)'. *Medieval Encounters* 22, no. 1–3 (2016): 25–71.