

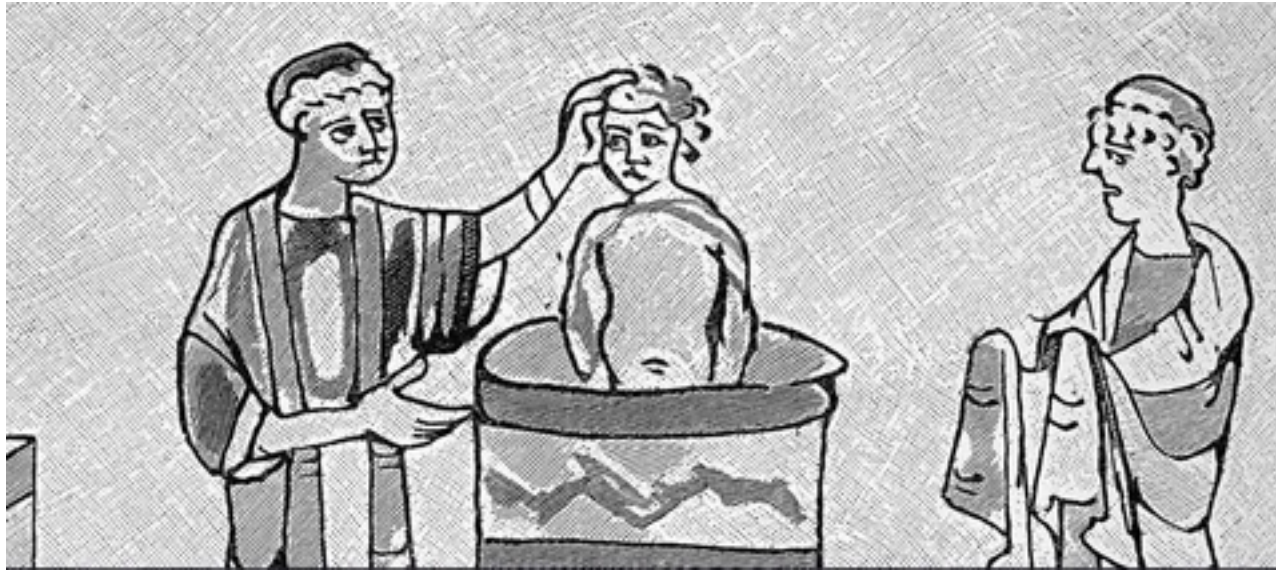
# Judaism and Medieval Interreligious Polemics

---

Converts and Their Role in  
Medieval Polemic

12/05/2021





- Who is a convert?
- How could converts participate in Jewish-Christian polemic?
- How can we learn about their motivations?
- What else can we learn from their activities?

# Conversion in Medieval Society

- interreligious debates rooted in social realities
- growing concern with instability of religious identity in Christian society
- attitudes to conversion: martyrdom x acculturation (Ashkenaz x Sefarad)
- types of conversion (distinctions often blurred!)
  - forced x voluntary conversion
  - ideological x venal conversion
  - conversion as a problem-solving strategy (often not successful)
- converts problematize inter-religious boundaries

# Nicholas Donin

What did you find against us, that you brought us here to defend our lives and fight for our Torah against that sinner, *who already fifteen years ago ceased to believe in the words of the sages*—according to whom the Talmud is one thousand five hundred years old—and believed only in what is written in the Torah of Moses without interpretation? You know that every word needs commentary. This is why *we separated him from ourselves and excommunicated him*. And since that moment, he has conspired to harm us in order to destroy everything; but in vain.<sup>12</sup>

From the day *you separated yourself from us, fifteen years ago*, you have been looking for a pretext against us in order to attack [us] with false and unjust accusations, but you will not succeed!<sup>13</sup>

# Nicholas Donin

Do you not know, or have you not heard, what happened to *Donin the apostate, who became a convert from the laws of God and his Torah, and did not even believe in the Roman religion?* The saintly Rabbi Yehiel, moved by the honor of the God of Heaven, pushed him aside with both hands, and separated him for evil to the sound of the *shofar* [ram's horn] and the *teru'ab* [blast of war] because there was no truth in his mouth, faith had been cut out of his heart, and he became a root productive of gall and wormwood. *This apostate went before the king superior to all kings in name and honor, and spoke lies and made false accusations that on Passover nights we slaughter young boys still accustomed to their mothers' breasts, and that the Jews had adopted this custom, and that the bands of merciful women cook the children and we eat their flesh and drink their blood. . . .*

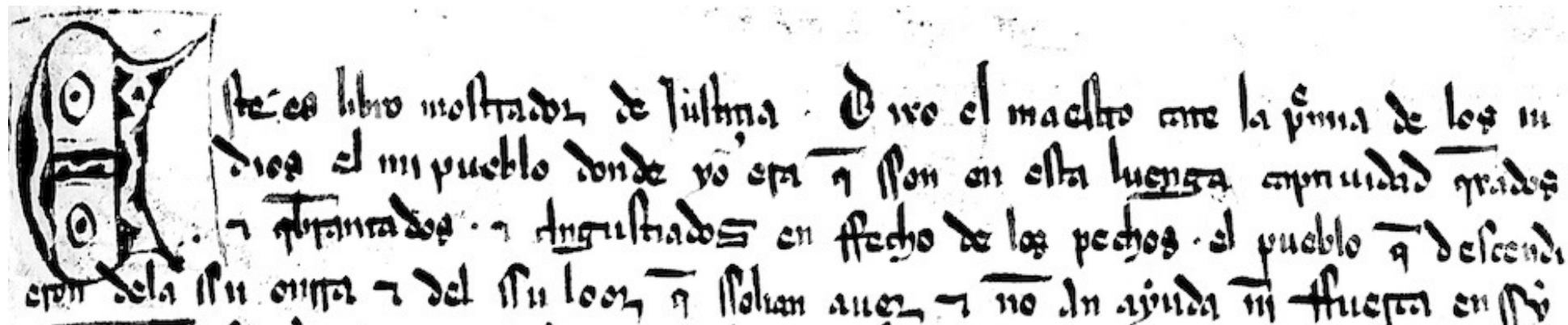
This wicked man sought to destroy us, and gave a sword in the hands of the king to kill us. He lied to him. But God returned his iniquity to him twofold. . . . The honored king, in his piety and cleanness of hands, did not believe his words, and paid no heed to him, knowing that they are folly and nonsense and vanity. Nor did all the kings of the world and the inhabitants of earth believe that anything other than a learned wild-man was speaking. . . . *And our God sent one of his bears [Elisha and the two bears, 2 Kings 2], and he returned his reward upon his head because he had rebelled . . . , and the day of misfortune came upon him because he had sent forth his tongue against the wise men. He was struck and he died and there was none to avenge. . . . So may perish all Thine enemies, Lord; and His lovers [be] like the going forth of the Sun in its strength.<sup>16</sup>*



# Abner of Burgos/Alfonso of Valladolid

- born ca 1260 in Burgos, Castile
- leader of a *yeshiva*; influenced by the philosophy of Maimonides and Averroes; probably also a physician
- biographical information mostly from his main polemical work *The Righteous Teacher* (*More tzedek = Mostrador de justicia*)
- 1295: a miracle in Ávila (rainfall of crosses that stuck to the clothes of Jews) → years of doubt and anguish
- around 1317: a dream in the synagogue

# Abner of Burgos/Alfonso of Valladolid



One day when I had meditated much on the [long exile of the Jews], I went to the synagogue weeping sorely and sad at heart. After the great anxieties of my heart and all the toil I had taken upon myself, I rested and fell asleep. And in a dream, I saw the figure of a tall man who said to me, “Why do you slumber? Hearken unto these words that I say unto you and prepare yourself against the appointed season; for I say unto you, that the Jews have remained so long in captivity for their folly and wickedness and because they have no teacher of righteousness through whom they may recognize the truth.”



# Abner of Burgos/Alfonso of Valladolid

- three years of study: another vision (crosses) → conversion at the age of 60 in 1320/21: sacristan of the collegiate church in Valladolid
- wrote his polemical works for the Jews, in Hebrew; many Jewish writers addressed his arguments (former student Isaac Polgar)
  - avoided Christian sources
  - a debate between a master (Christian) and a rebel (Jew)
  - philosophical and Talmudic basis for Christian dogma
- conversion to Christianity presented as the greatest form of Jewish piety (Jews should explore their own doubts because they are responsible for their co-religionists and for their own children)

# Abner of Burgos/Alfonso of Valladolid

- philosophical background of his polemic: Neoplatonic philosophy
- unorthodox understanding of Trinity and Incarnation:
  - “superior Son” is a “transformer” channelling the divine force into the world
  - “inferior Son” represents divine essence in all world, is united to thee highest degree with human matter in Jesus
- determinism
  - things are only possible in relation to themselves, everything is predetermined in relation to the world and its causality

# Profayt Duran

- Isaac ben Moses ha-Levi, also known as En Profayt (Profiat) Duran (abbr. *Ephod*, *Ephodi* = a sleeveless garment worn by Jewish priests)
- born in Perpignan, mid-14th c., physician, astronomer, moneylending
- anti-Jewish riots in summer 1391
- baptized (possibly only in 1392), Honoratus de Bonafide
- 1392–1404: court astrologer of King John I
- 1398: *magister in medicina*
- references in his own work also suggest that he was baptized
- possibly attended the disputation in Tortosa (1413–1414)
- probably died as Christian in 1433

# Profayt Duran

- **Be Not Like Your Fathers (1393–1394)**
  - a letter to a friend, Bonet Bonjorn
  - “„,[Profiat Duran and Bonet Bonjorn] agreed to go to Palestine, there to return to Judaism. Master Profiat left first for the port, and waited several days for Bonet Bonjorn. Meanwhile, Master Pablo, formerly known as Don Solomon ha-Levi, came to Avignon to serve as bishop. There he found bonet Bonjorn, the Christian, and disputed with him and convinced him of the truth of his own beliefs. As a result of this, Bonet Bonjorn sent a letter to Master Profiat, which we have not seen... but from his reply we may conjecture some of what was written there.“ (Joseph ibn Shem Tov)

תקמיטם וכבוד וכסם וכל דברי טהרה חיים החמוטלים ויראה את כבודו ואת  
כעבו ארבעה דורות וימהלך ונזקק נשבע ימים



אגרת ששלח מאישטרי לבוניטחרו באמונות  
ושימה קניוד עכפיים אלה באבותך ומפניך הוא החסד בך יוסף צ"ש מוב  
כבר התפרסם השתדל עתה הקדמוטם וחכמו לזכונדט ופילוסופי יתר  
החוכמות בהבנת ההדחה על אמונת שרשי הדעת החלקות על שרשי  
לכוננת בנשה רבים ע"ה וכתאשר רבו הקבוצה ונסתעפו הדעות באופן כתי  
כוספים קצתם חלק קצתם וכתאשר כוהם דרכו האויבות ונתחלפו בהתחלפותם  
וכאשר חקרנו עליהם כוהם אלוהים על גרמם ששק"ה דרך הדי  
דרך כוהם ששק"ה הורה החלטה המוסכמה משל אלה

# Be Not Like Your Fathers

*Be not like unto thy fathers*, who were continuously engaged in sciences of all kinds, in mathematics, metaphysics and logic, and tried to penetrate to the foundations of truth. *Not so thou!* Far be it from thee to recognize the first fundamental rule of reasoning in logic. For this would entice thee to deny thy faith by saying: God is Father; the Son, too, is God truly: the Son is therefore the Father. Brother, stick to this belief! It will lead thee to eternal life, and God will be with thee. . . . Alas, thy fathers ate the bread of affliction, suffered thirst and hunger; thou, however, hast saved thy soul, thou eatest and becomest satisfied, thou rejoicest in the Lord and praisest the Holy One of Israel. . . .

# Profayt Duran

- Duran's approach in *Be Not Like Your Fathers* is similar to the methodology employed by Hasdai Crescas (1340–1410) in his **Refutation of Christian Principles**
  - written in Catalan 1397–1398
  - containing rationalistic critique of Christian dogma (original sin, Trinity, incarnation, virgin birth, transubstantiation etc.)
- **The Reproach (or: The Shame) of the Gentiles**
  - written 1395–1398
  - systematic discussion of the principles of Christianity in 12 chapters, criticism of the NT, errors of Christian Bible interpretation and translation
  - only arguing from Christian authoritative texts
  - knowledge of the NT, contemporary Christianity

# The Shame of the Gentiles

- **12 chapters**

1. That it was not the intention of Jesus or his disciples to claim that he was God
2. Trinity – Jesus and his disciples were „corrupt Kabbalists“
3. Incarnation
4. Jesus did not want to abrogate the Torah or change its commandments
5. Arguments of later theologians for the abrogation
6. Eucharist
7. Baptism
8. The authority of papacy
9. Mary
10. Jesus and his disciples did not know the Bible properly, they were “pious fools” – did not study the text of the Bible, only listen to sermons on Shabbat
11. The date of Jesus’ birth
12. Errors in Jerome’s Vulgate translation



# Further reading

- Szpiech, Ryan. *Conversion and Narrative: Reading and Religious Authority in Medieval Polemic*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013.
- Kozodoy, Maud. *The Secret Faith of Maestre Honoratus: Profayt Duran and Jewish Identity in Late Medieval Iberia*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015.