

Medieval Judaism and Interreligious Polemics (24th March 2021)

Jacob ben Nathanel, *Sippur Massa 'ot* (second half of the twelfth century)

When the Provençal knight saw Christians [*'arelim*, i.e., uncircumcised] light many lamps he said to them: Whose grave is it? They replied: “Of a righteous Jew who heals the sick and helps infertile women.” “Fools, how come you pay such respect to a Jew?” and he grabbed a stone and threw it to the ground. Then he took another and lifted his arm in order to throw it but because he was sitting on a horse, he immediately fell off it and died. Instantly the bishops and monks gathered [and said]: “This did not happen to him because of the Jew but because he sinned by offending Jesus’ teacher; that’s why he got angry at him and killed him; and they said all this before the country folk.”¹

Moses Basola (1521)

They say that once a Muslim woman climbed the tree on the grave in order to gather almonds, upon which the other women told her first to ask the *ḥasid*’s permission. But she showered them with curses. She fell out of the tree, breaking all her limbs. She then pledged the gold bracelets on her hands to the *ṣaddiq*, purchasing olive trees with them. Subsequently others made pledges as well, and at present he [the *ṣaddiq*] has four hundred olive trees.²

Rabbi ‘Obadiah of Bertinoro’s anonymous student (1495)

I saw and spoke with the Ishmaelite woman who fell down from the almond tree over the tomb of the aforementioned *ḥasid* or the pious man. That woman spoke ill of him [...] The woman told me how she saw with her eyes youths who pushed her and cast her forty cubits away from it and [how] the bones in her body broke. She also said that the *ḥasid* came to her in a night vision. Consequently she renounced her evil and lit candles over his tomb and was healed. Ishmaelites honor this place. Many [Muslims] light candles there.³

Petaḥyah’s story about a sultan who wanted to see the prophet Ezekiel in his tomb. The sultan was told by Rabbi Solomon:

You cannot see him, for he is holy, nor must you uncover his grave. The monarch replied that he would explore it. Then Rabbi Solomon and the elders said to him, My lord and king, Baruch, son of Neriah, his disciple, is buried near the enclosure of the prophet. If it be your will uncover his grave. If you can see his disciple then you may try to see his master. He then assembled all the princes, and commanded them to dig. But everyone that dug into the grave of Baruch, son of Neriah, fell down immediately and died. There was an old man there, an Ishmaelite, who said to the monarch: tell the Jews that they should dig. The Jews replied: we are afraid. But the king said: if you keep the law of Baruch, son of Neriah, he will not hurt you, for every Ishmaelite that dug fell down

1 Jacob ben Nathanel, *Sippur Massa 'ot*, 9.

2 Moshe Basola, *In Zion and Jerusalem*, Hebrew part, 65.

3 Adolf Neubauer (ed.), “Ein anonymen Reisebrief vom Jahre 1495,” *Jahrbuch für die Geschichte der Juden und des Judenthums* 3 (1863): 278; David (ed.), *Reflections on Jewish Jerusalem*, 156.

dead. Then Rabbi Solomon said: Give us time, three days, so that we may fast in order to obtain his pardon. After three days the Jews dug, and were not hurt.⁴

Petahyah of Ratisbon

The sultan assembled all his viziers and all the people and:

went to the city of [Mecca],⁵ to see his [Muhammad's] tomb; and behold, there was a decayed and putrefied corpse, from whose grave such a disagreeable smell arose that nobody could bear it. He then said to his people that there was no good either in [Muhammad] or his religion, for they knew that [the body of] Baruch, son of Neriah, was preserved, that his prayer scarf protruded from [or: was preserved in] his tomb, from which emanated fragrance, and he was [only] a disciple to a prophet. The Ishmaelites who dug up his grave perished, whilst the Jews who dug were not hurt; and that, therefore, it might be known that the Jews hold the law kept by Baruch, son of Neriah. He [the sultan] [wanted to convert and convert all his people and built a great structure over his tomb]; however, he had no time to become a convert before he died, and thus the resolution he had formed of converting all his people came to nought.⁶

No Jew is allowed to enter it, let alone any gentile. Once the gentiles wanted to remove stones and lime and to open the gate, but an earthquake made the whole land of Israel tremble and there was chaos in the city until they desisted. And there is a tradition among the Jews that the Divine Presence was exiled through this gate and through it would return.⁷

Petrus Alfonsi in his *Dialogi contra Iudaeos* (1110), closely following *Risālat al-Kindī*

Isaac Latif (1455)

“There are many houses on the Temple Mount (*miqdash*) that the uncircumcised and unclean (‘*arel ve-ṭame*’) [i.e., the Christians and the Muslims] cannot enter. The Muslims themselves said so.”⁸ And a few lines further on Isaac states that when “the Muslims (‘*Araviyim*’) tried to open [the Gate of Mercy], they died.”⁹

⁴ Petahyah, *Sibbuv*, 11.

⁵ Grünhut's edition omits the name of the town; David's reads והלך למק' לראותו בקברו (266).

⁶ Petahyah, *Sibbuv*, 27; David's edition, 266–267.

⁷ Petahyah, *Sibbuv*, 34–35.

⁸ David, ed. *Reflections on Jewish Jerusalem*, 96.

⁹ *Idem*. 97.