

*The Christian Polemic
against the Jews
in the Middle Ages*

GILBERT DAHAN

Translated by
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The History of the Polemic

As paradoxical as it may seem, one could say that the Judo-Christian controversy predates Christianity. The first discussions actually took place before the break between Christianity and its mother religion. In them, Jesus is set in opposition to the Jews, and to various traditions and milieus. And the gospels echo the debates taking place, again, *within* Judaism, even as the Talmud retains traces of many discussions, both sides very much in accord with the custom of that time (as much a custom in the East as in Athens or in Rome) of discussing philosophy or religion. It is also apparent how often the methods were the same, typically having recourse to familiar apologies, and readily introducing a "king of flesh and blood." For our purposes, let us recall here the discussions between Jesus and the Pharisees, reported in chapter 19 and chapter 22 of Matthew's Gospel, and again in chapter 3 of John's Gospel.

It is likely that these discussions multiplied as soon as Christianity became an independent religion. It was necessary to demonstrate the originality of the Christian message to the pagans and to locate this message within the prophetic tradition for the Jews. Discussions were both

written and oral. The basic genres of polemic literature against the Jews were established as early as the second century. The most important is the collection of *testimonia*, or "testimonies." Originally, the collections of *testimonia* were compilations of thematic files, consisting of citations from the Old Testament and intended to show that the different phases of Jesus' life, as well as the essential dogmas of Christian faith, were clearly foretold in the Hebrew Bible.¹ The best known was compiled by Cyprian (middle of the third century). Obviously, the genre best adapted to controversy is the dialogue. We will see that many works take the form of a dialogue in the Middle Ages. The earliest of these (second century) were written in Greek. They opposed the Christian Justin (who would die a martyr) to the Jewish Tryphon (the name of Tarfon appears frequently in Talmudic literature).² The third genre is the treatise: it completes the *testimonia* through proofs and development. The seminal work is Tertullian's *Adversus Iudeos* (early third century). Throughout the Middle Ages, treatises against the Jews (and sometimes dialogues as well) would bear this title, or that of *Contra Iudeos*, both meaning "Against the Jews." In the following chapter, we will examine the polemic literature. Here, we will concentrate on the testimonies of actual discussions.

Spontaneous Discussions

Oral discussions between Christians and Jews took place continually. There are many accounts of them, in the widest variety of works, even aside from the written dialogues which were supposed to serve as reports of such debates. Thus, one of the great historical accounts of the

high Middle Ages, Gregory of Tours' *History of the Franks*, includes a discussion between King Chilperic and one of his purveyors, the Jew Priscus. The story takes place in Nogenet, and here is how it begins:

Then King Chilperic, who was still residing in the aforesaid villa, ordered his carriages to be readied and all to prepare to go to Paris. Just as I was approaching him to say farewell, a certain Jew named Priscus arrived whom he knew well because he brought goods from him. After gently running his hand through the man's hair, the king turned to me and said, "Come, Bishop of God, and lay your hand upon him." As the man refused, the king cried, "Oh, hard-hearted intelligence and forever unbelieving race, who does not admit the Son of God promised to you by the voices of the Prophets, who does not admit that the mysteries of the Church were not already prefigured in your own sacrifices." At these words, the Jew cried, "God has not entered into marriage, he has not been charged with posterity, and he does not suffer anyone to share his realm."³

One can easily imagine that the author, who was the bishop of Tours, considerably embellished the discussion which then ensued, in which he participates on the king's side, and which ends with neither party convincing the other one. What's more, the unfortunate Priscus will later be assassinated by a convert named Placit, who will himself be killed by the parents of Priscus—it was indeed a very violent time!

The tradition of such discussions taking place in the presence of kings continues through the first part of the Middle Ages. One example can be cited in which a king provokes the debate. This takes place in England in the

eleventh century, England is then conquered by the Normans, and in their wake the Jews (many of whom were originally from Normandy) become established there. William Rufus (William II) is a sovereign disliked by the clergy, who reproach him for, among other things, his sympathy for the Jews (it is a recurring theme that good kings are severe toward Jews, while bad kings treat them well). According to the testimony of a later chronicler, William of Malmesbury, this king decides one day to organize a debate between his bishops and some Jewish scholars, promising that he will follow the faith of the winners. This decision greatly troubles the Christians: the bishops are afraid of losing! The chronicler fails to give us an account of the debate but notes that "the Jews got nothing out of it but confusion, although they prided themselves in having been defended for political motives and not by reason [*non ratione sed astutia*]"; "—a perfectly reasonable charge, given the difficulties the conversion of a Christian king to Judaism would have entailed."

One of the most famous debates in the presence of a king is the one recounted to us by Jeanville in his *Histoire de Saint Louis*. This remark, attributed to the good king, seems very far removed from the idea of Christian charity:

No one, unless he is a very good cleric, should dispute with them [the Jews]; but the layman, when he hears Christian law maligned, should not defend Christian law, except by the sword, which he must drive into their stomachs as far as it will go.³

Dialogue had been progressing, peacefully; it seems, at Cluny between monks and Jews until the untimely intervention of a knight led to some "strong" arguments, which

won the approval of the king and provoked this astonishing remark from him.

In 1269, the king of Aragon, James I the Conqueror, witnessed the famous controversy of Barcelona. He even intervened in it to present an argument which, despite his respect for the king, Nahmanide contested. Clearly the theme of debate in the presence of a king is not exclusive to the Judeo-Christian controversy. Latin and Hebrew literatures also make frequent use of it in the Middle Ages.

Certain debates call other famous figures to the stage. Such is the case with the famous philosopher, Peter Abelard, whom Gérard de Galles makes the hero of a singular discussion with a Jew in his *Univiersité cambrivie*:

Thus one remembers the famous response made by Peter Abelard to a Jew in the presence of King Philip, when the Jew was presenting various objections to Christian religion. "It is true," he said, "that lightning descending from the heights where it dwells often directs itself toward those places it finds to be higher than all others on earth and which seem more consistent with its own nature. Through the charge and by the malice of demons, when colliding clouds send lightning through the air toward the ground, it can strike those things of which we have just been speaking [churches] or even human beings. . . . But it never hits your synagogues; moreover, no one has ever seen lightning strike a synagogue."⁴

Although Abelard's dialectical skills are well known, we must ask ourselves if he would have demonstrated them in this manner and this time, the presence of the king seems implausible. To be evenhanded regarding the ways in which this type of argument is put to use, I will cite a passage by a Jewish author of the thirteenth century, Joseph

ben Nathan Official, from his *Sifre Moshe ha-magen* ("Book of Joseph the Zealot"), which mentions a whole series of discussions, most of them taking place between high prelates and Jewish scholars. The following anecdote is told of one of the greatest Jewish exegeses of northern France, Joseph Qara:

A monk asked Rabbi Joseph Qara: "Why don't you have any bells?" He answered: "Come with me." They went together to the market, and there they heard the fish-mongers who were selling herring hawking their wares. From there, they went to the quarter where expensive fish were sold, and not a single merchant was calling out. Rabbi Joseph Qara then asked the monk: "Why do they act this way?" "The good merchandise speaks for itself and does not have to be extolled," was the reply. "Ah yes! And that is why we do not have bells!"⁷

Another great thinker of the twelfth century was Gilbert de la Porrée. One work from the end of this century summarizes the debate between him and a Jew as follows:

Master Gilbert convinced the Jews, and they converted. He said to them: "What law is better and more preferable to follow? The one which is without mercy, which orders a man who gathers wood on the Sabbath to be stoned, or the one which is merciful, which pardons *not only seven times, but seventy times* (Matt. 23) and says, *Go, henceforth sin no more* (John 11)."⁸

Nevertheless, the stories and polemics usually bring less distinguished figures face-to-face. First of all, the authors of these works were nearly always clergy and held more or less elevated positions in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. One

notices that the Latin texts generally leave the identity or personality of the Jewish participants obscured. But this is not the case with the dialogue of Gilbert Crispin, bishop of Westminster, reporting on the discussions that he supposedly had with a Jewish merchant originally from Mayence. Here is the beginning of his prologue, which follows the dedication:

I am sending you this book, which I have just completed, putting down in writing what a Jew, who used to discuss such things with me, affirmed about his law as opposed to our religion, and what I answered to his objections in support of our faith. I do not know where he was born, but, having completed his studies in Mayence, he was very knowledgeable about his law as well as our literature, and his mind was trained in the Scriptures and the polemic against us. A frequent visitor, he often came to my house as much for business matters as to visit with me, since I was important to him in these two ways. Together, we had amicable discussions about the Scriptures and our religion.⁹

The atmosphere in which the dialogue recorded by Gilbert Crispin takes place is actually serene, embodying fully the amicability expressed in the prologue.

Much more caustic, even unpleasant, toward the Jews, Gautier de Châtillon records many conversations with his Jewish neighbors. Thus he reports that "having nothing to do on Sunday," he went "*according to his habit*, to the home of a certain Hebrew," so as to hear something extraordinary."¹⁰

Similarly, a Hebrew work, the *Sifre milhamot ha-shem* ("Book of the Wars of the Lord") relates frequent discussions

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between the author, Jacob ben Reuben* (twelfth century? Southern France?), and a Christian cleric, "one of the greatest scholars of his generation."¹¹

Except for the kungs, it is men of the Church, "specialist" of a sort, well educated in theology, whom we witness discussing religious matters. On the Jewish side, there are no clergy, strictly speaking, but religious knowledge is widespread, and we find all sorts of people involved in these debates. Even among Christians, the busy discuss religion as well, and it seems that any occasion serves as an opportunity for launching into free and spontaneous dialogue in which each party says what it thinks. There is a very beautiful testimony of this type in the work of an author who introduces himself as a Genoese merchant and stresses the fact that he is neither a cleric nor a theologian but, indeed, a simple tradesman. He recounts many debates which he has in 1286 with the Jews of Majorca. The text, originally written in Italian, comes down to us in two Latin translations, but its pleasant and familiar tone is not lost, as we can see even in these first lines:

One day, a Jew, whom everyone called Rabbi and who held much authority among the Jews, approached the Genoese Lodge and said: "You have the fortune, oh Christian, to do as you please and to act as you wish during your religious holidays! We other Jews, we dare not do anything, because we observe the commandments of the Law of Moses which you, Christians, you transgress. And that, most particularly, in your diet, since, in contempt of

* In the Middle Ages there are as many Jewish writers as Christian ones. The author of *Book of the Wars of the Lord*, the most well known being that of the Jewish philosopher Gersonides (fourteenth century),

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the Law you eat meat of the pig and other kinds of flesh which the Law of the Lord forbids to be consumed.

Many Genoese answered him: "Oh Rabbi, you are here and you talk about your Law because you are here. Inghetto is not here. But if he were present you would not make these remarks. Many times we have watched you debate with him without being able to respond to him or change his mind."

The Jew answered: "Good grief! Inghetto knows a lot about business, but he is ignorant when it comes to religion."

As they were speaking, the very Inghetto in question arrived at the Lodge. Immediately, he was hailed by the other merchants, who said to him: "In the name of God, Inghetto, defend us against this Rabbi who talks so much!"¹²

Another occasion for discussion is furnished by those relationships which develop between Christians who are ill and Jewish doctors. Even though numerous councils entered the ban against Christians seeking medical treatment from Jews, it was standard practice at the time. Thus, in 1161, Archbishop Bruno (1102-24) discusses the Scriptures with his Jewish doctor, Joshua. Thus Guibert of Nogent rages against the friendship binding a sick monk to the Jew who treats him; this friendship allows them to "reveal their secrets to each other," that is, to further discuss religion.¹³

The Church's Warning

Nevertheless, the anxiety of religious authorities would bring debates of this kind to an end. Their ancient fear, expressed more and more frequently beginning in the

twelfth century was this: that the Jews, who knew the Old Testament so well, and who were considered subtle and skilled dialecticians, were able to easily seduce "simple Christians, ignorant and ill-prepared for such oratorical matches. This was a reason often put forward in the commentaries on canon law to justify measures isolating the Jews or banning Christians from sharing meals with them. This is clearly stated in a canon of the Council of Bourges (1276) which aimed at banishing Jews from small towns:

With regard to the Jews, whose diabolical craft tricks simple Christians fraudulently, leading them with false and error, we have found it advisable with this council's approval, to rule that they live in the cities, fortified towns, or other well-known places.

Many authors will appeal to a law in the Code of Justinian, one of the great collections of civil law, which fell into obscurity during the high Middle Age, but reemerged at the beginning of the twelfth century. This law, which dates back to 452, forbids anyone, "cleric or soldier [of Christ] or holding any other position," to treat the subject of Christian faith in public, before crowds assembled and ready to listen.¹⁴ Actually, this law was not concerned with discussion involving Jews at all. It was enacted shortly after the Council of Chalcedon (451), which, in formulating many Christological definitions, opposed certain positions heretofore considered heretical, and it was aimed at debates between Christians. However, at the end of the twelfth century, Peter of Blois referred to it ("Justinian," he says,¹⁵ "has ordered that no one dispute the Holy Trinity or

the Catholic faith") at the beginning of his treatise *Against the Disturbance of the Jews*.¹⁶

In the thirteenth century, many councils formulated measures of this kind. The synodical statutes of Paris (1237) forbade lay to "dispute with Jews over the articles of Christian faith." The Council of Trier (1227) ordered that "illiterate priests must not debate with Jews before the laity." This very interesting text reminds us that among the lower clergy ignorance (including illiteracy) was not rare. Moreover, we find here once again the fear that the laity will be persuaded by Jewish arguments, this time because incompetent defenders of the Christian faith would be no match for the clever Jews. A similar ban was proclaimed at the Council of Tarragon (1233):

Making irrevocable decisions, we decree and resolutely forbid that any lay person be allowed to discuss in public or in private the Catholic religion.

This text is probably directed toward discussions with Jews or Muslims.

These bans are reiterated during other councils and, significantly, by Pope Gregory IX in 1233, in an address to German prelates. But the bans are not absolute, since they apply only to specific dioceses or regions. On the other hand, by incorporating a bull of Alexander IV on this matter, canon law (Decr. V, 2, 2) extended them to all of Western Christianity. The principal phrase repeats nearly verbatim the Tarragon text: "We forbid any lay person permission to discuss the Catholic religion in public or in private."

In his *Summa Theologiae*, Saint Thomas Aquinas poses

this problem succinctly (IIa, IIae, q.10, a.7): "Should one have public discussion with nonbelievers?" According to his usual method, the great theologian presents the negative and positive arguments and then gives his opinion. The negative arguments are three in number: one verse from the New Testament (2 Tim. 2:14: "It is necessary to avoid verbal quarrels, good only for losing those who listen to them"), the law of the Justinian Code mentioned above (but he cites another excerpt), and, finally, one logical argument (religion is a thing of great certainty; debate, by its very nature, puts it into doubt). The only positive argument relies on a citation from the New Testament (Acts 9:22 and 29): "Saul [later known as Paul] continued to gain strength and confounded the Jews. . . . He addressed the Hellenists and disputed with them." Saint Thomas' own opinion is prudent and full of good sense:

In religious discussion, two things must be considered: one is the point of view of those participating in the discussion, and the other is the point of view of those listening. As for the point of view of the participants, it is necessary to take intention into account. If one actually calls his faith into doubt in the discussion and is not set upon affirming the truth of the religion . . . he surely sins. . . . But if one debates in order to refute errors or even to gain practices in doing this, that is worthy of praise. As for the listener's point of view, it is necessary to consider if those hearing the debate are well educated and strong in their faith or if it is a matter of simple folk, unsteady in their faith. Before persons solidly educated in their faith, discussions on religion pose no dangers. But for simple folk, a distinction must be made: either they are provoked or pushed by the disbelievers, for example the Jews, heretics, or pagans, who try their best to corrupt their faith, or else

they are not provoked, as in the areas where there are no disbelievers. In the first case, it is necessary to discuss religion in public, provided that the faith in question is capable of it and who can refute the errors. In this way, the simple folk will be affirmed in their faith and the possibility of fooling them will be denied the disbelievers. In the second case, it is dangerous to discuss religion in public in the presence of simple folk.

These free and spontaneous discussions, of which we have given some examples, became rare. All the same, they did not die out completely. We have seen that in Mallorca such debates were still possible as late as 1286. In fact, this tradition lasted until the end of the thirteenth century in southern France and Germany, and even longer in Spain (fourteenth century) and Italy (until the fifteenth century). But from then on, formal debates began to develop, initially alongside and, later, in place of these more amicable meetings, debates totally controlled by the ecclesiastical authorities.

Forced Debates

The first of these great debates took place in Paris in 1240. I have had the opportunity to describe this debate elsewhere, and I will limit myself here to tracing the broad outline of the event which marks a new stage, not only in the history of the controversy, but more generally in the relations between Christians and Jews in the West.¹⁶ This affair originates with a converted Jew by the name of Nicholas Donin, a less than sympathetic character whose conversion seems based more on hatred and spite than on sincere enthusiasm for the Christian faith. Nicolas Donin had, in fact,

been the object of a *lexem* (excommunication) on the part of rabbinical authorities in France. He gave himself over to Pope Gregory IX and described to him all the "horrors" contained in the rabbinical literature (the Talmud, Midrash, commentaries of Rashi). Not only "did it exceed the text of the Bible in volume," but more importantly "it contained a multitude of deceptions and shameful things repugnant to decent people and a cause for horror among those who hear them." The pope then sent a letter to the bishops and the various kings of the West in which he demanded that the books of the Jews be seized. We should note in this letter the pope's astonishment at discovering that the Jews did not content themselves with the Bible but had at their disposal a whole body of religious texts other than the Old Testament. The importance of this point will become clear. Gregory IX's demand is carried out only in France. On Saturday, March 3, 1240, the Jewish books are confiscated, and the authorities organize a formal debate, which has very justly been described as a trial against the Talmud. It took place June 3, 1240, presided over by the queen mother, Blanche of Castile. In the role of the prosecutor, we again find Nicolas Donin. The defendants are the four most eminent rabbinical authorities of northern France: Yehiel of Paris, Judah ben David of Meün, Samuel ben Salomon of Palaise, Moise ben Jacob of Concy. The judges are high-ranking ecclesiastics, among them the bishop of Paris, Guillaume d'Autvergne, the chancellor of the University, Budes de Châteaufort, the bishops of Sens and Sens. The debate is extremely tense. We have the depositions (in Latin) of the Jewish masters and a certain number of supplementary texts, as well as an account in Hebrew, attributed to Yehiel of Paris, *Yefneh*, "Disputation." Let me cite the passage in

the Hebrew text in which Yehiel proclaims his fervor and indignation:

Why do you reproach us so after gathering us here so you could contest our Law and set yourselves against our souls? It is because of this bundle [Nicolas Donin]... who has caused us our misfortune—but he is ridding his brains in vain, because we would die for it [the Torah]; whoever touches it, touches what we cherish most deeply. And if your finger flares up against us, and we are disappointed, we shall not weep, our Torah then be found in Babyl among the Medians, Greece, and throughout the seven nations? You hold our books here in your hands, but not our souls, and you can eliminate the Torah only within your own realm.

We do not know how this debate ended, but its principal themes are taken up in a list of thirty-five accusations against the rabbinical literature, using Gregory IX's letter as a starting point. Whatever the case, the outcome was that many rabbinical books were burned on Friday, June 6, 1242 (or 1244).

The successor to Gregory IX, Innocent IV, took his turn condemning the rabbinical texts, but seemed disposed to grant the request of some French Jews who proved to him that the Talmud was essential to them in understanding and practicing their religion. Budes de Châteaufort set himself in opposition to any overtures of this kind, and proclaimed the condemnation signed by forty-four ecclesiastical authorities, in May 1248, to be final.

The history of the Paris debate contains many lessons. Among those most applicable to the present work, I will note two. First, the Christian world's discovery of the Talmudic literature is going to give the controversy a new

shape: we will examine this again in the chapter on methods, but we should note here that the file compiled after the debate (preserved in the Latin manuscript 16598 of the Bibliothèque nationale) includes the Latin translation of numerous passages from the Talmud and the commentaries of Rashi, and will come to serve as the basis of a synopsis, the *Plurima Ludeorum*, which will supply Christians with an arsenal of citations. The second important point involves the accusations against the rabbinical literature. They can be divided into two kinds: first, this literature contains passages injurious to Christ, Mary, and Christians; and second—and this is the most important thing—they are teeming with blasphemies against God, which would constitute just as many deviators in *Judeum infidelis*. Moreover, it is on these grounds that Innocent IV, who was an accomplished lawyer, justifies his stance and that of his predecessor: the pope, the vicar of Christ, must intervene when pagans contravene the natural law, and when Jews deviate from the Old Testament. In the eyes of the Christians, the problem was, in effect, that Jews were frozen in an ancient religion incapable of evolving, whereas, in fact, Judaism had been continually evolving since biblical times up to the thirteenth century. The discovery of a Judaism other than biblical stunned the Christian world, which defined the Jews precisely as contemporaries of Christ, practicing the laws of the Old Testament.

The second great formal debate of the thirteenth century took place in Barcelona in 1265, but the conditions and climate were completely different.¹⁷ It is true that we again find a converted Jew involved, probably originally from Montpellier, by the name of Paul Cartetien (his name

often appears in the barbarized form of Pablic Christiani, or Pau Christia). But this time we are dealing with an individual entirely unlike Nicolas Dorn in character. Even though contemporary Jewish authors' judgments of him were obviously unfavorable, here was a much more sincere man with good rabbinical training. Converted, Paul Cartetien enters the Dominican order. He goes to Spain, specifically to Gerona, where he has many discussions with an individual of considerable stature, who has been able to advise the king on various occasions and is a prominent author: Nahmanide (Moshe ben Natan), whose Catalan name is Benesarrug de Pona. Not satisfied with these discussions, Paul Cartetien asks the king of Aragon, James I (Jaime), "the Conqueror," for a formal debate to be organized in which he would be opposed to Nahmanide before an audience of key figures. The king consents. Let us quickly note—and this also explains the difference in atmosphere as compared to Paris in 1240—that, unlike Louis IX, James I was favorably disposed toward Jews. He often called upon their services and made them the beneficiaries of various privileges. The debate unfolded over four days, between Friday, July 20 and Friday, July 27, in the king's palace. The king made a speech on Saturday after synagogue. We have in our possession two versions of this disputation: a work in dialogue by Nahmanide, also entitled *Vilnaud*, "Disputation,"¹⁸ and a very short synopsis in Latin which begins as follows:

The year of our Lord 1265 . . . in the presence of His Majesty the king of Aragon and many other barons, prelates, religious figures, and knights in the palace of the king in Barcelona, as Moses called Marcer, Jew, had been summoned by the king at the request of the

pressing firm of Gerona and found himself in the company of many other Jews who accused the greatest Jew of the time, Nahmanide, of having been a proselyte, a Jew who had entered with the king and queen and their brothers and sisters into the Christian faith. He shared with the Jew, as something uncertain, faith in Our Saviour Jesus Christ, who, by the fact of his very character, cannot be subject to debate, but that the truth of this faith would be rendered manifest to destroy the errors of the Jew and to shake the confidence of many Jews who, not being able to defend their errors, said that the aforementioned Jewish master could answer well enough all the arguments, both general and particular. Brother Paul announced to the aforesaid Jewish master that, with the help of God, he would prove through the means of scriptures recognized by the Jew the following points:

1. that the Messiah, interpreted as "Christ," and for whom the Jews are waiting, has, without a doubt, come;
2. that the Messiah, just as it was prophesied, must be both God and man at the same time;
3. that he suffered and died to save the human race;
4. that legal and ceremonial preparations were discontinued and never resumed after the coming of the said Messiah.

When the aforementioned Moise was asked if he wished to respond to the aforesaid points, he answered and affirmed readily that yes, he did, and that, if it was necessary, he would stay in Barcelona to do that not just one day, one week, or one month, but an entire year.

Let us make note that the fourth theme was not discussed and that the facts are presented in a very biased way. For as far as we can judge by the Hebrew text, Nahmanide defended himself vigorously and effectively. James I himself ventured to produce an argument in favor of the

Trinity, based on a familiar comparison (others will be examined further on): in the same way as one can distinguish the color, the taste, and the bouquet with wine, and these three things correspond to a single reality, so the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are only one God. Nahmanide responded to him by showing that the comparison was faulty and that one could demonstrate a quaternity in exactly the same way: for some moments, the atmosphere relaxed, and James I and Nahmanide exchanged pleasantries. It seems, however, that these debates were never completed, the proceedings of the controversy giving way to riots. After the "disputation," Nahmanide is received by the king who declares to him, "I have never heard anyone defend a bad cause as well as you." He invites him to return to Gerona and offers him a sum of 300 dinars.

However, the other side imagines itself to be the victor. The Dominicans launch an offensive and urge the king to arrange a sermon for the Jews and to censor Jewish literature. The chaos which accompanies these sermons to the Jews obliges the king to relax his orders on the subject. For a certain time, the ecclesiastical authorities go after Nahmanide relentlessly. He ends his life in the Holy Land—perhaps to escape their harassment?

Much more dramatic and intense than the disputation of Paris, the Barcelona controversy also marks a new stage in the history of the debate between Christians and Jews, but in a way we could consider positive. While, in Paris, the rabbinical literature had been an object of repeated attacks, in Barcelona it was viewed more dispassionately, as useful for furnishing arguments to support the Christian thesis. Thus Paul Chretien produces many Talmudic and Midrashic texts. A more positive curiosity about Jewish

literature on the part of the Christian world ensues. At the same time and in the same region, another Dominican, Raymond Martin, begins studying Hebrew, and comes to master perfectly the rabbinical texts, which he cites continually in his two treatises against the Jews. When we study the methods of the polemic, we will see how the use of rabbinical literature revived the controversy.

The other formal debates of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries are less important. Meir ben Simeon of Nafbonne, in his Hebrew work, *Midbanet minim*, recounts a debate with the archbishop Guillaume de la Broe.¹⁹ In Valladolid, in 1336, a debate called by King Alphonse XI takes place, which had been initiated by a Jewish convert, Alphonse of Valladolid (formerly known as Abner de Burgos). The theme of the debate is "the benediction of heretics," *berakha ha-minim*, one of eighteen (nineteen) benedictions which make up the central text of the three daily services. This "benediction," which is, in fact, a virulent attack against heretical Jews (*minim*), has always been a bone of contention in the Judaeo-Christian debate. Does the term "minim" refer specifically to Christians? It is plausible that in the earliest times, when Christianity was perceived by the Jews as a heresy within Judaism, *minim* could have applied to Christians (among other heretics). Later, as the two religions broke away from each other, it doesn't seem that it would refer to Christians. Whatever the case, Alphonse XI ordered the incriminating passage to be suppressed in Jewish prayer books.²⁰

With the debate of Tortosa, in Spain,²¹ we again return to the tense atmosphere which characterized the disputation in Paris in 1240. Once again, a Jewish convert is be-

hind the affair: in 1412, as soon as he is baptized, Josué ha-Lorefi, who takes the name of Jérôme de Santa Fe, gets it into his head to introduce to the Christian faith its ancient fellow religion by means of a discussion. He presents his project to Pope Benedict XIII (actually, an antipope), whose physician he is. The pope demands that the commentators of Aragon and Catalonia send representatives to this debate. The meetings last for twenty months, from February 7, 1413, until November 12, 1414. There are no less than sixty-nine sessions, in which the most eminent spiritual leaders of Spanish Judaism participate, such as Joseph Albo (later the author of an important *Sifra ha-Yemina*, "Book of Principles [of Judaism]"), Zerachya ha-Levi and other scholars, coming from Saragossa, Calatayud, Huesca, Daroca, Manzana, etc. The discussions revolve primarily around the coming of the Messiah. As in Paris, Judaism is made the target of the accusations. The errors of the Talmud are condemned, but very many rabbinical texts are produced, discussed, and sometimes taken as evidence in favor of the Christian faith. After the events of 1391, this debate facilitates the decline of Spanish Judaism. Many conversions, forced and otherwise, follow, which leave the Jewish communities badly crippled. It is to help these troubled Jews that Joseph Albo writes his famous work.

This last debate leaves us with a bitter taste. However, the fifteenth century would see the tradition of free, less formal discussions continuing in Italy. They seem to correspond closely to the Judaeo-Christian dialogue of the Middle Ages, in which, finally, Paris (1240) and Tortosa (1413-14) constitute the exceptions among numerous

debates that were more open, more relaxed, and, thus, more sincere. But they are exceptions which testify, nonetheless, to the deteriorating situation of the Jews in northern Europe in the thirteenth century and, in the fifteenth century, in Spain.

3

The Written Works of the Controversy

Up until now, we have been focusing on the oral debate as it evolved during the Middle Ages. In this chapter, we will examine the written works which grew out of the doctrinal opposition between Judaism and Christianity. We have, of course, already mentioned a certain number of these works which served as the basis for actual discussions. Now it is the dispute's literary genre as a whole which we hope to analyze. Obviously, our aim here is not to do an inventory of this literature but to attempt to present it, providing a few excerpts here and there from the most important works, in such a way that we will already have an idea of what is contained there when we study the writings more closely in the chapters ahead.

The polemic against the Jews finds expression not only in the works which will be examined here. It can be found in religious poetry just as in the exegesis, in the theater just as in theological productions.¹ However, one whole set of works is specifically devoted to this polemic. They generally have titles such as *Contra Iudeos* ("Against the Jews"), or *Dialogus adversus Iudeos* ("Dialogue against the Jews"), etc. In examining the history of the genre, we can see that the principal forms it took were established in the early