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Converting the Queen: gender and polemic in the *Book of ʿAḥiṭub and Ṣalmon*

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The fifteenth-century *Book of ʿAḥiṭub and Ṣalmon* (*Sefer Aḥiṭub ve-Ṣalmon*), a Hebrew anti-Christian prose narrative from Iberia written in the wake of the 1413–14 Disputation of Tortosa, tells the story of a just queen who ruled an island without any worldly religion. After deciding to seek the true religion by sending out three wise men, who later return as a Jew, a Muslim, and a Christian, respectively, the queen holds a debate between the Christian and the Jew. When the Muslim, who arbitrates the debate, adjudicates in favor of the Jew, the whole island joins the queen in converting to Judaism while the Christian hangs himself in disgrace. This study focuses on the role of the queen as a narratological device and as a polemical tool. It argues that the queen is presented as a symbol of both reason and wisdom —a sort of Lady Wisdom—and as a counterpoint to the Virgin Mary. In this way, the figure of the queen constitutes a Jewish response to Christian arguments according to both rational proofs and religious authority.

Keywords: *Book of ʿAḥiṭub and Ṣalmon*; *Sefer Aḥiṭub ve-Ṣalmon*; Jewish-Christian polemic; conversion; queenship; gender; medieval Iberia; Tortosa

There was once a queen who ruled a strange and distant island. She was a good and just queen, but had not heard of any worldly religion. Her people, while upright by nature, lived without laws. One night, as she lay awake in her bed thinking with confusion on the true path, she was resolved to call together her wisest men. The next morning, after telling her concerns to a group of her advisors and dignitaries of her court, one wise man proposed sending out emissaries to look for the true religion, and so three of the best men, Ṣalmon, ʿEqer, and ʿAḥiṭub, were sent on the journey. Ṣalmon found himself in Muslim lands and converted to Islam. ʿEqer ended up in Constantinople and converted to Christianity. ʿAḥiṭub came to know a wise old prophet who taught him the ways of the Jews, eventually leading to his conversion to Judaism. Seven years later, all three returned to the island, each as a representative of one of the three Abrahamic religions. When ʿAḥiṭub the Jew and ʿEqer the Christian began to argue about their differences, the queen authorized a debate between them to determine the one true religion, and for two days each put forth arguments concerning the themes of repair in Jewish–Christian disputation. When Ṣalmon the Muslim intervened to support the arguments of ʿAḥiṭub, he and all the others on the island finally professed the truth of ʿAḥiṭub's religion and converted to Judaism, while ʿEqer refused conversion and hanged himself in disgrace. ʿAḥiṭub then spent many days teaching the queen the intricacies of Jewish belief.

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Such is the story told in the fifteenth-century polemical fiction known as the *Book of ʿAḥiṭub and Ṣalmon* (*Sefer Aḥiṭub ve-Ṣalmon*). The text, written in rhymed Hebrew prose with poetry interspersed, is of uncertain authorship but is attributed to one "Mattityahu," possibly Mattityahu ha-Yiṣhari, one of the Jewish spokesmen at the Jewish–Christian Dispute of Tortosa of 1413–14. While the authorship of the text is uncertain, there is no doubt that the text was written sometime in the first half of the fifteenth century in Iberia, very possibly in the 1420s in the wake of the Tortosa debate but certainly before 1453.[1] The work is anti-Christian and contains strident Jewish arguments on numerous common points of polemical debate, including the trials of Israel in the diaspora, the Incarnation, the Trinity, the Virgin Birth, the Messiah, and the Christian notion of the supersession of the Israelite covenant by the New Israel of the Christians.

Given the historical significance of its content and the unconventional and fascinating plot through which the anti-Christian polemical content is dramatized—as well as the fact that it is one of the last few texts in rhymed Hebrew prose to survive from medieval Sepharad—it is striking how little critical attention this work has received. Although mentioned repeatedly in studies of polemics since it was brought to critical attention in the nineteenth century, the text lay in relative obscurity—except for a very short selection published by Hayyim Schirmann in 1956—until 1998, when a single exhaustive edition and translation made the work available to a wider scholarly public.[2] Because the text has been so little studied, there remain many potentially fruitful ways to approach it: in terms of its response to arguments made at the Disputation of Tortosa; in comparison with other Hebrew polemical texts and/or with other Hebrew rhymed prose texts; in comparison with other works attributed to Mattityahu ha-Yiṣhari such as the *Begidat ha-Zeman* (The perfidy of time), a moralistic work in rhymed prose about a man who abandoned a life of family and piety in pursuit of a younger woman; in terms of its manuscript history (it survives in ten manuscripts); or its influence on later writers such as one Mordekhai Ha-Sofer, who wrote an altered version of the story in which ʿAḥiṭub marries the queen and becomes king, among other possible perspectives.[3]

My approach here is a less obvious and more modest one, but one that I think can underscore the literary value of the text above and beyond the wealth of useful scholarly information that can be generated about it. The aim of this essay is to examine the role of queenship in the text both as a narratological device and as a key part of the polemical arguments of the author. Therefore, I deliberately leave aside the many pending questions about authorship, date, and manuscript history in an effort to focus on the *story* within the text. Too often the plot of polemical and disputational texts is treated as little more than a vehicle for the argument, and not enough credit is accorded to the narratological design of the story or to its readerly impact. While it is sometimes inappropriate to apply modern narratological insights to premodern examples, in the case of *ʿAḥiṭub and Ṣalmon* one must confront the fact of the elaborate narrative frame in examining the polemical content and historical context reflected in the text. As Eleazar Gutwirth has

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[1]The question of authorship is complicated by the question of dating. The Mattityahu identified as the author of the *Begidat ha-Zeman* (The perfidy of time) has been understood to be the same as the author of the *Sefer ʿAḥiṭub*, although this has not been proved. Recently, Zvi Malachi, "Life of Matityah ben Mosheh," 456, has argued that the author of the *Begidah* wrote the work in 1450 at the age of 50, thus making it impossible that this same Mattityahu was the person known to have participated at the Disputation of Tortosa—he would have been only thirteen or fourteen years old. In any case, it is only probable, not certain, that the same person wrote the *Sefer ʿAḥiṭub* and the *Begidah* and the question of the author of the *Sefer ʿAḥiṭub* remains open.

[2]Schirmann, *Ha-Shirah ha-ʿIvrit*, 2: 650–58. The entire text has been edited and translated into Castilian in a critical edition by Juan Carlos Lara Olmo, "Edición crítica."

[3]Malachi, "Life of Matityah," 1: 457.

argued, we must not read polemical arguments as "disembodied theological ideas carried out in a vacuum" because "polemics are related to other phenomena such as humor, class, sex and age differences and tensions."[4] The generally unrecognized complexity of the characters, voices, scenes, and plots of polemical texts can provide a rich source for critical analysis beyond the simple summary and analysis of the theological arguments these elements convey.

Breaking away from the generic constraints of a strictly scholarly historical methodology and approaching it instead from a literary-critical perspective, we can highlight the value of the text as a key source among texts of late-medieval Hebrew prose literature. It is my contention that the queen —considered *as a character* and not merely a mouthpiece for the author's words—represents the central protagonist of the story. She is at once the prime mover of the entire plot and the most important symbolic expression of the polemical intent of the text. It is through her faith and devotion that the three wise men seek and find the true religion, and it is with her private instruction about the nature of sacrifice and the hereafter that the narrative concludes. The queen constitutes a direct riposte to Christian arguments, playing a double role as both an evocation of Lady Wisdom and, even more importantly, as a fictional counterpoint to the Virgin Mary. By analyzing the role of the queen in the dialogue according to this symbolism, it is possible to show how consideration of gender could directly affect the form and content of late-medieval Jewish–Christian polemics.

This approach and argument might first seem strange because the importance of the queen in the text is not immediately apparent on reading the text. In fact, male voices and characters dominate the *Book of ʿAḥiṭub* from beginning to end. The opening frame of the text begins in the imperative voice of the male author: "Hear me, my brothers and my people (*aḥi ve-ʿami*)."[5] This call from male author to male reader is reinforced immediately in the confessional tone of the author himself, identifying himself by name and lamenting that, "I have seen the humiliation of our diaspora."[6] In the opening poem that follows, he continues his peremptory call to beware of Christian power. He commands of his readers, "Awaken, uncircumcised of heart, before those who pull (*moshekhei*) your prepuces!" The author's declared didactic intent both to delight through witty, jocular allusion (*derekh halaṣah*) and to instruct and upbraid through allegory (*derekh mashal*) is an approach taken by male writers in addressing male readers, a tradition of skilled orators with a serious intent. The author states that he intends to guide readers toward correct study and behavior, offering his book as a tale of wisdom written, "so that men give up books of vanity (*sifrei ha-havalim*)."[7] In all of these details, the text seems overwhelmingly directed at male readers.

The characters too—Ṣalmon, ʿEqer, ʿAḥiṭub, the old sage who teaches ʿAḥiṭub, and the unnamed advisors and men of the kingdom—are all male. Not only is the queen the only female character in the entire narrative, she participates in a relatively small percentage of the action, appearing, by my rough estimate, in no more than 20% of the text. The majority of the text is taken up by three larger sections (unmarked in the text itself) in which the queen is entirely absent. In the first, the three male protagonists, Ṣalmon (who becomes Muslim), ʿEqer (who becomes Christian), and ʿAḥiṭub (who becomes Jewish), journey off the island of their birth in search of truth. In the second, each presents his respective findings upon returning to the island. In the third and longest section, ʿEqer and ʿAḥiṭub debate various points of their faiths, drawing from common topics of Jewish–Christian polemical tradition. Even though each of these longer sections is mediated by a few brief pages of action or dialogue by the queen, the

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[4]Gutwirth, "Gender, History, and the Judeo-Christian Polemic," 260.
[5]Lara Olmo, "Edición crítica," 1. All English translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
[6]Lara Olmo, "Edición crítica," 1, 3.
[7]Lara Olmo, "Edición crítica," 2–3.

queen herself appears in only a slim portion of the text overall; only in the final section of the text, which constitutes just under 10% of the text, does the queen—who in this section receives private instruction after her conversion from 'Aḥiṭub about certain questions of Jewish belief—appear and speak with consistent regularity. Although she is seemingly a secondary character, this is clearly not the case, as I will show later in this essay.

The dominance of male characters is in keeping with the nature of the work as a theological disputation and polemic. Unlike the polemical discourse found in most desecration accounts, Marian legends, or the majority of saints' lives, polemic and disputation themselves are exclusive and learned modes of discourse that derive ultimately from male religious and theological categories. In earlier works of the same form, such as the *Dialogue of a Philosopher with a Jew and a Christian* of Peter Abelard (1079–1142), or in the *Book of the Gentile and the Three Sages* by Catalan polymath Ramon Llull (1232–1315), or—most directly relevant here—in the *Kuzari* of the twelfth-century Iberian Jewish poet/philosopher Judah Halevi (*c*. 1075–1141), in which a Jew, Muslim, and Christian all present their religions to the king of the Khazars, the characters are all male.[8] The lack of important female characters, besides the queen, in the *Book of 'Aḥiṭub and Ṣalmon* is underscored by the fact that the key transition in the text—the conversion of 'Aḥiṭub to Judaism—occurs after 'Aḥiṭub's lengthy apprenticeship to a wise old (male) sage, a common trope found in numerous earlier texts of the genre.

Finally, despite the fact that there are no female characters besides the queen, gender *is* a central concern of the characters throughout the story. The tacit presence of gendered images from Jewish–Christian polemic within the text of the *'Aḥiṭub* heightens the significance of the stark gender lines between the characters. As Alexandra Cuffel has recently shown in detail, both Jewish and Christian polemicists regularly made use of imagery of female corporality as polemical weapons, and this discourse of disgust about the body—especially the female body—only reinforced the association between theological truth and masculine identity. Just as Christian writers such as Jacques of Vitry or Rupert of Deutz (*c*. 1075–1129) could criticize Judaism by feminizing Jewish men and even linking them with menstruation, so Jewish polemicists could attack Christian belief in the divinity of Jesus by describing Mary's womb with revulsion.[9] The text of *'Aḥiṭub* makes certain use of this tradition in various parts of the narrative. When 'Aḥiṭub himself is learning the principles of Jewish faith from the old sage, he is taught that "God is not a body or a corporal force, and is not, as in the words of the Christians, 'ignorant of Spirit' *sekhlei ha-ruaḥ*, namely, by being incarnated) … nor will you see in him material or form or change or mutation."[10] Before he meets the old Jewish teacher, 'Aḥiṭub has already decided against following Christian belief because he believes that "it lacks foundation that the Divinity should be born from a woman and come out of a place of filth and fetidness (*ṭinofet u-vashah*)."[11] The presence of these arguments and others like them reinforces the gendered subtext underlying the entire narrative. The polemical genre of the text is founded on a male theological discourse in which women and women's bodies are shared tools of attack and insult.

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[8]For a basic introduction to the *Kuzari*, see the recent edition of the Hebrew translation with a new English translation by N. Daniel Korobkin; see Judah Halevi, *Kuzari*, 1–17. For a more scholarly overview of the reception and shaping of the text in the Middle Ages, see Adam Shear, *Kuzari and the Shaping of Jewish Identity*, 1–93.

[9]Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust*, 166–68; see 117–24 for a general discussion. See also Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics*, 153–59. For a comparison with a northern European Jewish treatment of this issue, see David Berger, *Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages*, Hebrew, 5–6, English 44, 350–54.

[10]Lara Olmo, "Edición crítica," 35.

[11]Lara Olmo, "Edición crítica," 22 and the discussion at 247–55.

Moreover, the discourse of misogyny in polemical writing participates in a more general dis-
course of misogyny in religious and secular writing in Iberia by writers of all faiths.[12]

Given this overwhelmingly unified perspective constituted by a male authorial voice, a pre-
dominance of male characters, and a distinctly male discourse of theological polemic, the impor-
tance of the queen is not immediately apparent. Yet a close examination of the places where the
queen does appear shows that each of these sections constitutes a key interval around which the
larger plot hinges. In fact, it is precisely because the text is, on the surface, part of a standard dis-
course of theological polemic that the ongoing presence of the queen at key moments throughout
the text can be appreciated as even more decisive within the work's overall argument. The actions
of the male protagonists depend on the queen's actions and decisions and the value of the argu-
ments proffered by the male characters is determined finally by the queen's own assessment. Her
critical importance is belied by her fleeting presence, while in reality the plot could not function
without her constant intervention through both action and contemplation.

A hint as to the queen's centrality to the plot lies in the fact that she is the *first* individual char-
acter to appear in the text. On the island, "there reigned an important woman, the *glorious daugh-
ter of a king*, descendant of the Queen of Sheba. She had vassals, magistrates, and dignitaries, and
she judged her people with justice and rectitude. She possessed riches and glory and power and
inclined her people to the good. She spoke in peace to all her kind and her people." In contrast to
the queen, who is described in terms of her individual characteristics and actions, the men on the
island are only described as a group. They are "her people" who "were just but without manners or
laws (*bli nimusim ve-ḥokim*)."[13] The other characters, described in general as "dignitaries and
magistrates … sages … great men," receive no individual treatment and do not speak until
long after the queen has dominated the opening of the story with her thoughts and words. At
the same time, although the queen is described as a "daughter of a king," her power does not
depend on any other male character. Nuria Silleras-Fernández has shown in her examination of
queenship in fifteenth-century Christian Iberia that the authority of most medieval queens was
recognized and undisputed only "when it was based, whether explicitly or implicitly, on the
higher authority of a male figure."[14] By contrast, this "daughter of a king" rules alone in the
text and it is nowhere implied that her authority is subject to a higher male authority elsewhere.
The treatment of the queen as an individual singles her out from the very opening of the text.

One concrete possibility suggested by this depiction is to see the figure of the queen as a
veiled allusion to the Aragonese queen, María de Castilla (1401–58). As wife of King Alfons
the Magnanimous of Aragon (r. 1416–58), who spent most of his rule abroad in his pursuit of
the crown of Naples, she served as lieutenant of the Crown of Aragon in his absence. Her inde-
pendent regency spans the period when the *Book of ʿAḥiṭub* may have been composed, thus
making her a meaningful figure with whom to compare the character of the queen in the text.
The two queens do resemble each other in some aspects: although both inherit their power
from a man, both ruled alone and without his oversight.[15] Like the queen in the text, María dis-
played some evenhandedness in working with non-Christian faiths, and although her treatment of
Jews was not universally positive, some of her later actions earned her a reputation for being a

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[12]The most important treatment of misogyny in Jewish sources is Tova Rosen, *Unveiling Eve*. For an intro-
duction to Christian misogynist discourse in Iberia, especially in connection with contemporary medical dis-
courses, see Michael Solomon, *Literature of Misogyny*, 1–16 in particular. For a more general discussion of
medieval misogyny in literature, see R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western
Romantic Love*.
[13]Lara Olmo, "Edición crítica," 7–8.
[14]Silleras-Fernández, *Power, Piety, and Patronage*, 5.
[15]On María's independent rule, see the recent study by Theresa Earenfight, *King's Other Body*.

protector of the Jews of the kingdom. María began her lieutenancy in 1420, six years after the Disputation of Tortosa, and in 1422 she wrote to the Dominican friar, Pere Cerdà, urging him —according to her own words, not for the first time—to desist from his harassment of Jews, and threatened to punish any friars who would not comply.[16] Also, in 1438, she permitted Jews of Cervera to have doors that opened both to the Christian and to the Jewish quarters, allowing them more freedom of movement.[17]

Such facts make it tempting to speculate that the representation of the queen in the *Book of 'Aḥiṭub* might offer a veiled reference to María, but despite the parallels between the two queens, the differences are abundant. Because she was only a lieutenant regent ruling in place of her living husband, María, like many queens of Aragon, was never crowned. The queen in the text, by contrast, is specifically described as "crowned" and sitting on a "throne."[18] In addition, the queen in the *Book of 'Aḥiṭub*, who does not marry (except in the later version of the text by Mordekhai Ha-Sofer),[19] seems to inherit her crown from her father, whereas María only came to rule through marriage after her father, Enrique III of Castile, left the crown of Castile to her younger brother Juan II upon his death in 1406. Most importantly, unlike the queen in the text, María never organized or oversaw a polemical debate between Christians and other faiths and obviously never converted. Such differences make it hard to see the fictive queen as a direct allusion to María. The uncertain dating of the text, moreover, leaves open the possibility that it may have been composed between 1414 and 1420, before her lieutenancy even began. Nevertheless, although no certain connection can be made between the two queens without a more firm dating of the text and a clearer understanding of the context of its composition, the possibility that the rule of María de Castilla may have informed how the author understood and chose to represent queenship cannot be discarded either.

The importance and independence of the queen in the *Book of 'Aḥiṭub* is not only evident in the opening description of her character, but is emphasized repeatedly in details throughout the text. One detail indicative of the queen's role is the fact that not only is she the first character to appear; she is also the first to speak, and the other individual characters who do speak do so *in response* to her speech to them. It is only after the queen calls her people together and bemoans the lack of religion and direction among her subjects that another character speaks, and even he goes unnamed. After she finishes her speech, "one of the men, who was an honorable chief (lit. 'head of fifty'), arose" and spoke, proposing to send emissaries off the island.[20] Although this unnamed character first suggests the idea that guides the rest of the plot, he does so in response to the queen's own words and actions, and does so only with her approval. In fact, all that occurs in the text is a consequence of the queen's own agency, which can be traced back to a key moment in the opening of the text. Reflecting on how best to worship God, an idea came to her that would drive the rest of the plot of the text:

> It happened that time passed and the queen stayed in bed. Sleep had gone from her eyes and rest was not sweet to her in her bed, on account of the great confusion in her mind and the diversity of opinions. Then there came to her mind a profound plan (*'eṣah 'amuqah*): to find a way to order her people so there would not be different opinions. In the morning, she sent for her dignitaries …[21]

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[16]Archive of the Crown of Aragon, Cancillería Real, Registros, #3110, printed partly in Carreras i Candi, *L'aljama de juhéus*, 56–57.

[17]Hernández-León de Sánchez, *Doña María de Castilla*, 104; Roth, *Conversos*, 52.

[18]Lara Olmo, "Edición crítica," 83, 103.

[19]Malachi, "Life of Matityah," 1: 457.

[20]Lara Olmo, "Edición crítica," 9.

[21]Lara Olmo, "Edición crítica," 8.

This revelatory moment is the spark that ignites the rest of the plot. Without it, none of the other male characters would be moved to action or contemplation.

We can appreciate the centrality of this opening scene by recognizing its similarity to other revelatory scenes that serve to drive the unfolding of the plot in other texts. In the *Kuzari*, for example, we read that the King of the Khazars was a convert to the religion of the Jews: "to [the king] came a dream (*in takarrara 'alayhi ru'yā*), and (it appeared) as if an angel addressed him, saying: 'Your way of thinking is indeed pleasing (*marḍī*) to the Creator, but your way of acting is not pleasing.'"[22] After repeated dreams, the king called together three sages, a Christian, a Jew, and a Muslim, eventually choosing Judaism as the true religion. Similar scenes of an imperious nocturnal visitor exhorting action and change appear in numerous medieval Hebrew texts in the later Middle Ages. In the autograph "memoirs" of the convert to Judaism, Johannes (Giuàn) of Oppido (converted 1102, called Obadiah the Proselyte [*ha-ger*] after his conversion to Judaism) —a text preserved in fragments from the Cairo Genizah—Johannes "had a dream: he was officiating at the main church of Oppido … and beheld a man standing to his right opposite the altar. He [said] to him, 'Johannes!'"[23] Similarly, in the conversion narrative found in the Hebrew anti-Jewish polemic *Moreh Ṣedek* (Teacher of righteousness, now preserved in Castilian translation) by Abner of Burgos (*c.* 1270–*c.* 1347, known after his conversion to Christianity as Alfonso of Valladolid), the author tells us that, "in the great anxiety that I had in my heart and from the toil I had taken upon myself I grew tired and fell asleep. And I saw in a dream vision a great man who said to me: 'Why are you asleep? Understand the words I am speaking to you, and straighten up.'"[24] After waking from this and similar repeated dreams urging him to change his faith, he converted to Christianity.

Likewise, such scenes can be found in Romance literature of the same polemical genre. The beginning of the *Book of 'Aḥiṭub* bears a curious resemblance to that of Llull's *Book of the Gentile*, in which we read:

> In a certain land there lived a Gentile very learned in philosophy, who … had no knowledge of God, nor did he believe in the Resurrection … whenever the Gentile thought about these things, his eyes filled with tears and weeping and his heart with sighs and sadness and pain … while in the midst of these thoughts and tribulations, the Gentile conceived in his heart the idea of leaving his land and going to a foreign land, to see if he could find a remedy for his sadness.[25]

Llull himself, as he is represented in his autobiographical *Vita Coetanea* (Contemporary life), himself is "called" to a life of missionizing and religious dispute when "one night [as] he was sitting beside his bed," he had the first of a series of visions of Jesus that eventually moved him "to turn over in his mind what service would be most pleasing to God."[26] Such nocturnal callings even turn up in non-religious courtly romances such as *Erec and Enide* of Chrétien de Troyes (*c.* 1135–*c.* 1185), in which the protagonist, while in bed, is made to realize that he has wrongly turned away from a life of chivalry.[27] In such texts, both polemical and non-polemical, the bed is a common symbol of a crossroads at which a decisive change or conversion to a new life may begin, a place from which one can be "called" from slumber to a heightened state of attention

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[22]Judah Halevi, *Kitāb al-radd*, 3.

[23]Golb, "Autograph Memoirs," [Hebrew] 96; "Autograph Memoirs," 3.

[24]Abner of Burgos, *Mostrador*, 1:13.

[25]Ramon Llull, *Doctor*, 86.

[26]Lara Olmo, "Edición crítica," 11–12.

[27]In one pivotal moment when Enide tells Erec that his knightly reputation has declined from spending too much time in bed with her, Erec realizes his error and returns to a life of tournaments (Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec*, 208–12).

or awareness. Scenes of nocturnal revelation evoke the liminal state of sleep and dreams as a door to a deeper consciousness of prophetic understanding. The fact that in *The Book of ʿAḥiṭub and Ṣalmon* the queen is the *only* character with such a revelatory scene further emphasizes the importance of her character as a prime mover of the story. Her desire to find a "way to order her people so there would not be different opinions" is not a mere polemical formula, but is essential to her development as the text's central character.

Accepting this point leads to further questions about the message and structure of the text. How does the text make use of this characterization? Within the context of this predominantly male discourse of religious apologetic, why is the queen highlighted as the key character around which the rest of the plot revolves? The answer to these questions, I believe, lies in the queen's role not only as a plot device but also as an expression of the overarching *polemical* argument of the text. In particular, I propose, she is characterized in two distinct ways, both of which contribute to the disputational, anti-Christian aspect of the text. First, she is evocative of Lady Wisdom, *Sophia*, or philosophy, who guides and judges the actions of men with wisdom. Secondly, though no less importantly, she plays the role of a virtuous, anti-Mary, holy figure whom God singles out as a vehicle for salvation but who remains a thoroughly human, female character untouched by any miraculous annunciation.

These two aspects correspond to the two primary methods by which theological polemics between Jews and Christians were waged in the later Middle Ages. As Amos Funkenstein has pointed out, most Christian polemic before the twelfth century was predominantly an exercise in citation of biblical authorities as proof texts, *auctoritates*. The twelfth century saw an important expansion of the traditional foundation of polemical argument to include not only biblical proofs but also rational argument (*ratio*) as a parallel foundation of argument.[28] Following the apologetic work of writers such as Anselm of Canterbury (*c*. 1033–1109), who provides one of the first rational apologies for Christian belief in his *Cur Deus Homo* (Why did God become man?) from 1098, writers such as Gilbert Crispin (*c*. 1055–1117), Petrus Alfonsi (conv. 1106), and Odo of Tournai (1050–1113) began to rearticulate traditional polemical arguments on the basis of rational proofs. In response to this new methodology, a new dyad, *ratio et auctoritas*, emerges in the twelfth century as the enlarged foundation of arguments that had previously been supported only by biblical authorities. Daniel Lasker has also noted that this timing coincides with the emergence of the first "treatises totally dedicated to defending the Jewish position and contending against the Christian one." Jewish anti-Christian writing, especially after this period, is similarly "replete with philosophical arguments."[29] The induction of reason and philosophy into religious disputation after the eleventh century made the field of polemical contest larger and more difficult to control for both Jewish and Christian writers.[30] In a work as explicitly polemical as the *Book of ʿAḥiṭub and Ṣalmon*, this need was felt all the more acutely.

It is thus not surprising that the representation of the queen as a rationalistic *Sophia*, the embodiment of *ḥokhmah*, Wisdom, occurs repeatedly in the text. She is repeatedly described as "intelligent" (*mashkilah*)[31] and as one "adorned with the crown of intelligence" (*ba-nezer ha-sekel nesukhah*).[32] She leads her people to good, and when she speaks, her mouth is filled with wisdom (*ḥokhmah*).[33] Correspondingly, her manner of action and thought is determined

[28]Funkenstein, *Perceptions*, 178–80.
[29]Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics*, 2, 11.
[30]For an overview of the use of reason in polemical writing, see Gilbert Dahan, *Les intellectuels chrétiens*, 423–40; and Jeremy Cohen, *Living Letters*, 167–218.
[31]Lara Olmo, "Edición crítica," 8, 199.
[32]Lara Olmo, "Edición crítica," 73, 81.
[33]Lara Olmo, "Edición crítica," 7.

constantly by wisdom and logic. When faced with various conflicting ideas from the three male protagonists, she pleads, "Come, let us take wise council in order to found the religions on their base."[34] Even after 'Aḥiṭub wins his argument with 'Eqer and teaches the queen in private, she demands that he explain his arguments about sacrifices with a "logical explanation" (*sebara'*),[35] a term opposed in rabbinic writings to "traditional" authorities and interpretation (*gemara*).[36] Through these allusions, the queen repeatedly is said to embody wisdom and it is no surprise that she is converted through logic and rational argument.

The queen's embodiment of wisdom is reflected in her depiction as a Solomonic figure, one who arbitrates fairly in the disputation between 'Eqer and 'Aḥiṭub. In listening to the disputation, she "sits on her throne" and is not quick to judge. Even after the first day of presentation, she enjoins her people to "withhold judgment for now" and to not draw conclusions before all the evidence be presented.[37] Her association with Solomon as the female embodiment of Wisdom is also evident in the text's use of scriptural verses from Proverbs, where wisdom (*hokhmah*, translated as *sophia* in the Septuagint) is depicted as a woman. At one point on the second day of debate when the queen agrees with 'Aḥiṭub's argument about the lack of prophetic references to the Virgin Mary, she uses the words of Proverbs to affirm to him that "you destroy the objections of 'Eqer … *the answer of your tongue* (Proverbs 16:1) has shot forth your strength."[38] When she then inquires to whom the prophets were referring when they mentioned a "young woman with child" (Isaiah 7:14), 'Aḥiṭub answers by using the words of Wisdom herself, speaking "*with righteousness* [*in*] *all that I say*" (Proverbs 8:8). Such statements echo the author's own statement in the introduction to the work that he wrote this story in order to inspire men to "give up books of vanity" (*sifrei ha-havalim*), a pronouncement reminiscent of the condemnation in Ecclesiastes 1:2 (believed in the Middle Ages to have been articulated by Solomon himself) of the world as "vanity of vanities" (*havel havalim*). In keeping with these evocations, we are also told in the very opening of the text that the queen is also a "descendant of the Queen of Sheba,"[39] a woman who, in 1 Kings 10:1–13, heard of Solomon's alleged wisdom and "came to test him with hard questions," after which "Solomon gave [her] … every desire she expressed." Given that numerous rabbinic and later medieval texts associated the legend with a sexual encounter between Solomon and the queen,[40] the association of our queen with the Queen of Sheba carries a veiled suggestion that she might likewise literally be a descendant of Solomon himself.

The queen's role as a sort of Lady Wisdom figure has important polemical consequences in the anti-Christian message of the text. In her final discourse on the corporality of God, the queen's squire says to 'Aḥiṭub that "logical explanation (*sebara'*) proves it and my opinion is in agreement that God, blessed be he, is not a body and is not endowed with material, and any who believes in the materiality [of God] is a heretic and a traitor."[41] This judgment given on the basis of rational explanation, to which the queen agrees, is a direct rejection of the Incarnation, showing the queen's wisdom to be a natural opponent to Christianity. Although, like Solomon, she is depicted as a fair judge who withholds her judgment until a full debate is held, she cannot help but find the words of the Christian 'Eqer to be foolish. When he presented his summary of Christianity, the queen "scoffed within her and despised 'Eqer's words in her

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[34]Lara Olmo, "Edición crítica," 80.
[35]Lara Olmo, "Edición crítica," 206.
[36]Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction*, 165.
[37]Lara Olmo, "Edición crítica," 103.
[38]Lara Olmo, "Edición crítica," 126.
[39]Lara Olmo, "Edición crítica," 7.
[40]Lassner, *Demonizing*, 24–25.
[41]Lara Olmo, "Edición crítica," 208.

heart."[42] When she calls Ṣalmon to offer his perspective on the debate and he rejects 'Eqer's faith in favor of 'Aḥiṭub's, his judgment "seemed good in the eyes of the queen."[43] As an embodiment of reason—one of the foundations of proof in the Christian–Jewish debates of the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries—her "wisdom" emerges within the text as part of the author's carefully constructed anti-Christian message.

The queen's wisdom, however, is only one part of her character. She is at the same time deeply religious, and her piety constitutes the second means by which her character is an essential part of the polemical project at work in the story. Following what Gilbert Dahan has called the "enlargement" of authority in polemical writing after the introduction of both reason and post-biblical sources, reason and authority come to function in tandem as dual poles of polemical proof.[44] The importance of this dual foundation of truth as a necessary strategy for argumentation by the author of the text is evident in the concluding remarks of 'Aḥiṭub in his religious instruction of the queen. When she asks for understanding about the use and nature of sacrifices, 'Aḥiṭub introduces and contrasts the teachings of both Maimonides (1138–1204) and Naḥmanides (1194–1270), figures who embody the teachings of reason and of religious and mystical authority, respectively, in Jewish tradition.[45] This double response to the menace of Christian argumentation is further represented by the queen herself, who not only embodies wisdom and the rational grounds on which Christian belief could be refuted and overturned by Judaism, but also represents religious authority in the text, providing at the same time a scriptural rejection of Christianity. Equally, the queen, in her role as Lady Wisdom, can be interpreted as a sort of anti-Virgin Mary, a religious authority (*auctoritas*) opposed to Christian views in her reasons and in her faith.

Although the queen is actually described explicitly as an "authority" when 'Eqer "asks permission (*reshut*) from the queen and authority (*rashut*)," the most developed aspect of the depiction of the queen as a religious authority is her longstanding, natural piety.[46] We are told in the very first description of the queen that, "She got up early and stayed up nights in order to pray, and twice daily she raised her hands to the God of the Heavens."[47] When she sends her three emissaries off the island to find truth, she directs them on their mission by evoking God ('*El Shaddai*) "who had created them" along with heaven and earth and the holy hosts.[48] This devotion to truth and naturally pious devotion to God continues throughout the text and manifests itself again in the concluding section in which 'Aḥiṭub teaches the queen about Judaism after her conversion. The sincerity of her devotion is dramatized when "a day arrived in which the sovereign was praying in the morning and her soul awaited her creator. She sighed for her devotion and was overcome with awe (*yir'ah*)."[49] The queen's natural faith motivates the search for truth in the opening of the text and refines and deepens the understanding of truth at the end of the text.

Moreover, if we look closely at the imagery and language by which the queen's piety is described, we can see repeated allusions to Christian language describing the Virgin Mary. For example, at the end of the debate when the queen prepares to call Ṣalmon to offer his judgment, she is offered lavish praise. In words taken from a description of Solomon, the text states that "There the queen of the Shadow of Zion *sat on her throne*. Her face shone *like the moon*."[50]

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[42]Lara Olmo, "Edición crítica," 70.
[43]Lara Olmo, "Edición crítica," 196.
[44]Dahan, *Les intellectuels chrétiens*, 441.
[45]Lara Olmo, "Edición crítica," 209–13.
[46]Lara Olmo, "Edición crítica," 189.
[47]Lara Olmo, "Edición crítica," 8.
[48]Lara Olmo, "Edición crítica," 11.
[49]Lara Olmo, "Edición crítica," 199–200.
[50]Lara Olmo, "Edición crítica," 190.

Traditionally referred to by many Christian writers as the "star of the sea," or *stella maris*, Mary had come to be associated with the moon in Christian commentary from the twelfth century on. Bernard of Clairvaux, for example, interpreted the verse in Revelation 12 ("a woman clothed with the sun and the moon under her feet") as a description of the Virgin.[51] In the crucifixion scene in the thirteenth-century Psalter of Robert of Lindsey, abbot of Peterborough (?–1222), Mary is associated with the moon as a witness to her son's crucifixion along with John, who is associated with the sun.[52] By the fourteenth century, Mary was depicted as standing on a crescent with rays of light beaming from her hair.[53] The comparison of the queen's face to the moon may be taken as a tacit evocation of Mary.

This veiled image becomes even more obvious in light of the description that follows: the queen "blushed with splendor, exhaling a fragrance like a *lily among thorns*, like a queen *adorns herself with jewels*, a belt of grace extended over her." The Christian description of Mary, according to the verse from Song of Songs 2:2, as "a lily among thorns," is similarly common in medieval commentary appearing in writings by Peter Damian in the eleventh century and Alan of Lille in the thirteenth, among others.[54] Thirteenth-century French monk Helinand of Froidmont (*c.* 1160–after 1229) takes this description as a symbol not only of Mary's beauty but also of her chastity in a fallen world.[55] The queen's "belt of grace" is, in the same way, evocative of Mary's description as "highly favored" or "full of grace" (Luke 1:28). Such images recall the opening scene in which "a profound plan (*'eṣah 'amuqah*) came into her mind" and the queen first received her inspiration to send out her three truth seekers, a scene similarly reminiscent of the Annunciation. In the context of these evocative parallels, the very identity of the queen as a queen similarly could suggest the common description of Mary as *Regina caeli*, "queen of heaven," *Regina misericordiae*, "queen of mercy," or *Regina virginum*, "queen of virgins."[56] Even the association of the queen with the "queen of Sheba" could be taken as an evocation of Christian interpretations linking this figure to Mary.[57]

This depiction of the queen as a wise, anti-Virgin figure emerges from a particularly polemical context that centered on the Virgin Mary. Not only was Mary a lightning rod in the debate over the theological significance of the Incarnation of God in Jesus; she was also, in anti-Christian Jewish polemics, an embodiment of the corruption of the material world that was wholly incommensurate with God's exalted nature. Such attacks are made in the early Hebrew *Life of Jesus* (Toledot Yeshu), a scurrilous anti-Christian story in which Jesus is conceived when Mary is seduced into sex (or raped) by a Roman soldier.[58] Such themes became very common in later Jewish anti-Christian polemics. Among the clearest attacks within polemical literature on the Incarnation through the criticism of the womb and body of Mary is found in the ninth-century Arabic *Account of the Disputation of the Priest* (*Qiṣṣat Mujādalat al-Usquf*), translated by the twelfth century into Hebrew as *The Book of Nestor the Priest* (*Sefer Nestor Ha-Komer*). The text viciously attacks the notion that God "dwelt in the innards [of a woman] in the filth of menstrual blood and in the dark confinement of the womb."[59] Contemporary with this, Joseph Kimḥi's (1105–70) dialogue

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[51]*Patrologia Latina*, 183: 431–32, 438.
[52]Rubin, *Mother of God*, 245.
[53]Rubin, *Mother of God*, 277.
[54]For Peter Damian, see *Patrologia Latina*, 144: 753; for Alan of Lille, see 210: 65, 247.
[55]Rubin, *Mother of God*, 155.
[56]On these common descriptions of Mary, see Rubin, *Mother of God*, 175, 251, 288; and Gambero, *Mary in the Middle Ages*, 295.
[57]Gambero, *Mary in the Middle Ages*, 218–19; Rubin, *Mother of God*, 288.
[58]Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust*, 129; Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics*, 5.
[59]*Polemic of Nestor*, 1: 53; 2: 28; cf. Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust*, 77–80.

between believer and unbeliever in *The Book of the Covenant* (*Sefer ha-Berit*) sees the Jewish believer exclaiming, "How shall I believe that this great *Deus absconditus* needlessly entered the womb of a woman, the filthy, foul bowels of a female?"[60] In Christian writing, this same trope is reflected by the Jewish voice of Leo in the polemic of Odo of Tournai.[61] This trope of Mary's corruption is recapitulated repeatedly in later anti-Christian literature, especially after the twelfth century, and it participates in a more general discourse of the female body as a place of pollution and corruption.[62] In the fourteenth-century *Teacher of Righteousness* of Abner of Burgos/Alfonso of Valladolid, the Jewish "Rebel" exclaims that, "I am very surprised at this that you, the Christians, say that God entered into the womb of the woman, which is a dirty and contaminated place" (*es lugar suzio e enconado*).[63] Such arguments were repeated by Abner/Alfonso's polemical interlocutors such as Moses Ha-Kohen of Tordesillas (fl. late fourteenth century), who depicts similar incredulity about a "pure spiritual Creator … in the darkness of the womb and the dirt of the body."[64]

The suggested double signification of the queen in the *Book of ʿAḥiṭub* as both Lady Wisdom and an anti-Virgin Mary can thus be seen as more than a double-pronged response to Christian anti-Jewish arguments based on both reason and written authorities. It is also a logical product of traditional evocations of wisdom as female that simultaneously depicted the corruption of man through the sin brought by female corporality. As Emily Francomano explains, this pairing was particularly resonant in Iberia: "In the Hispanic context, feminine personification of intellective faculties and truths consistently come up against equally authoritative commonplaces that construct the female body as the site and vehicle of moral and intellectual corruption."[65] By hinting that the queen was an anti-Virgin Mary, resembling Mary in many aspects yet rejecting the Incarnation and corporality of God, her depiction as Lady Wisdom in the *Book of ʿAḥiṭub and Zelmon* is in this way given a sharper polemical edge as a condemnation of both rational and text-based (authoritative) arguments in favor of Christianity. The double valence of the queen's character is thus an implicit inversion and rejection of the Christian arguments of ʿEqer.

The centrality of the queen as an embodiment of both philosophical and devotional meaning is, moreover, reflective of the concrete historical context in which the text of the *Book of ʿAḥiṭub* appeared. Not only was Mary a figure of deep devotion among polemical writers such as Francesc Eiximenis (*c.* 1340–1409), whose *Vita Christi* was among the most popular Iberian treatments of Mary in the early fifteenth century, a text imitated by other writers such as Juan López de Salamanca (*c.* 1385–1479) in his fifteenth-century *Vida de la Virgin*.[66] Even more importantly, she was a central point of contention and debate in contemporary Jewish–Christian disputations, as can be seen in the surviving protocols of the Disputation of Tortosa in 1413–14 and also in contemporary anti-Christian works such as the *Refutation of Christian Principles* (*Biṭṭul Iqqarei Ha-Noṣerim*), written by Ḥasdai Crescas (*c.* 1340–1410/11) in the early fifteenth century.[67] At Tortosa, former

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[60]Joseph Kimḥi, *Book of the Covenant*, 36.

[61]Odo of Tournai, *On Original Sin*, 95, and Resnick, "Odo of Tournai," 473–75.

[62]Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust*, 77–83, 119–37, and see above, n. 9. On the trope of the female body as a site of corruption for the soul in other Hebrew sources, see Rosen, *Unveiling Eve*, 93–95.

[63]Abner of Burgos, *Mostrador*, 2: 7.

[64]Shamir, *Rabbi Moses*, 2: 99.

[65]Francomano, *Lady Wisdom*, 2.

[66]This text by Juan López de Salamanca is preserved in BNE MS 103. I am grateful to Cynthia Robinson for pointing this manuscript out to me. Robinson is currently tracing the influence of such works on later fifteenth-century representations such as the "Gozos de la Virgin" by the Marqués de Santillana, *Poesías completas*, 2: 200–1.

[67]See Ḥasdai Crescas, *Refutation*, 57–58, 72.

Jew Jerónimo de Santa Fe (d. 1419, born Yehoshua Halorki) argued against important Jewish intellectuals such as Yosef Albo (*c*. 1380–1444) about, among other important issues, the nature of the Virgin Birth and the use of rational argumentation in the defense of Christian principles, focusing one discussion on the perpetual virginity of Mary before, during, and after the birth of Jesus. Like Santa Fe, who also made such arguments in his own polemical writing, anti-Jewish writers such as Alonso de Spina (d. *c*. 1491) took and developed the same arguments later in the fifteenth century.[68] Although, as noted above, it is not certain if the author of the *Book of 'Aḥiṭub*, called "Mattityahu" in the text, was the same "Mattityahu ha-Yiṣhari" who actually participated in the Tortosa disputation, it cannot be doubted that the representation of the queen in the text in terms evocative of the Virgin Mary and of Lady Wisdom was informed by contemporary discussion of Mary in Jewish–Christian disputation.

When viewed together, the text's various overlapping images and themes in the *Book of 'Aḥiṭub* evince that the fictive queen is not only the central character whose development guides the entire narrative, but is also one of the primary vehicles for polemical argumentation in the text, a dramatic embodiment of the anti-Christian arguments offered by 'Aḥiṭub himself in his debate with 'Eqer. In her role as queen with the characteristics of both Lady Wisdom and the Virgin Mary, she is not merely a stock figure meant to hold together larger pieces of the plot, but is a carefully conceived epitome of the essence of the entire text. This reading— in addition to showing the inherent *literary* value in polemical texts like the *Book of 'Aḥiṭub*, texts often cited for their arguments but rarely "read" for their structure, characters, and language—also suggests more generally the importance of interpreting inter-confessional dialogue beyond the limited generic constraints that intellectual historians and medievalists too often impose upon their sources. In the confrontational context of fifteenth-century Iberia, this successful, explicitly gendered combination of argumentation based simultaneously on philosophical reason and devotional authority, *Sophia* and *Maria*, not only made the queen a compelling literary character. It also transformed her into a sharp polemical weapon and a powerful apologetic defense, one whose symbolic meaning would become increasingly resonant on the long road towards 1492.

Acknowledgements

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[68]At Tortosa, part of session 40 focused on the meaning of the verse in Isaiah 7:14, "Behold, a young woman will conceive," focusing on the term for "young woman," *'almah*, often translated as "virgin." Also under discussion was the mysterious writing of the Hebrew letter *mem* as "closed" (as it should appear at the end, not the middle of a word) in the word *marbah*, "increase," in Isaiah 9:6 (or 9:7), which was interpreted as a sign of Mary's inviolate womb. See *La Disputa de Tortosa*, 2: 323–24 and 1: 295–98; and Raimundus Martini, *Pugio fidei*, 738; McMichael, *Was Jesus of Nazareth the Messiah?*, 197–225. For Jerónimo de Santa Fe's later work, see *Errores y falsedades*, 154–55, and *Contra Iudaeorum*, 532b and 535b–536a.

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