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Conversion and Narrative

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Reading and Religious Authority in Medieval Polemic

Ryan Szpiech

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E come quei che con lena affannata,
uscito fuor del pelago a la riva
si volge a l'acqua perigliosa e guata,
così l'animo mio, ch'ancor fuggiva,
si volse a retro a rimirar lo passo
che non lasciò già mai persona viva.

[And just as he, who with labored breathing has escaped from the deep onto the shore, turns to the perilous waters and gazes, so my mind, which was still in flight, turned back to look again at the pass that no living person ever left.]

—DANTE, *Inferno* I, 22–27

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Introduction

Conversion and History

The past is never dead. It is not even past.

—WILLIAM FAULKNER, *Requiem for a Nun*

THE DREAM OF RABBI ABNER

There was once a Jew who, well into his adult life, began to think deeply about the trials of his people. One day, he entered a synagogue and, with lamentation and bitterness in his heart, began to pray, "Lord God, I beg you, have mercy on our trials. What is the cause of your anger and fury against your people, the sheep of your pasture? Why will the nations say, 'Where is their God?' Lord, hear now my prayer and my cries, and illuminate your desolate sanctuary. Have mercy on your people Israel." And with great heaviness of heart, exhausted from the burden he had taken upon himself, this Jew grew tired, fell asleep in the synagogue, and began to dream. In his dream he met a great man who said to him, "Why do you sleep? Understand my words, and pay attention: The Jews are in such long exile because of their insanity and their ignorance, and because they lack a righteous teacher in whom they may know the truth." When he awoke from his dream, he began to scour the Bible and books of religion and philosophy for explanations to his questions, but he only grew more doubtful and confused, and vowed to remain steadfast in the faith of his forefathers and not to pay heed to the doubts in his heart. Yet his tribulations and doubts persisted, and his dreams did not stop. A few years later, after spending the day fasting, he had another dream in which the same man appeared and scolded him angrily. The man ordered the Jew "to arise from his sleep," telling him,

"You are responsible for the sins of all of the Jews and their children and future generations." Miraculously, as he said this, the great man made crosses appear all over his clothing. The Jew awoke, and after dreaming this same dream repeatedly over many nights, he finally vowed to convert to Christianity and to write a book in defense of his new faith.

Such is the story told by the Castilian Jew Abner of Burgos (ca. 1265/70–ca. 1347), known after his conversion as Alfonso of Valladolid or Master Alfonso (*Maestre Alfonso*), in the opening of his lengthy anti-Jewish polemic, *Teacher of Righteousness (Moreh Ẓedek),* composed in Hebrew in the early 1320s. The text, which survives only in a contemporary Castilian translation under the title *Mostrador de justicia*, is one of the longest anti-Jewish works written in the Middle Ages, comparable to the enormous *Dagger of Faith (Pugio fidei)* from 1278 by the Dominican Ramon Martí (Raimundus Martinus). Unlike Martí's *Dagger*, however, Abner/Alfonso's *Teacher* is written from a first-person perspective that begins with a narrative account of the author's conversion.

Who was this sorrowful Jew, dreaming of crosses in a synagogue? A variety of sources, including archival documents and polemical treatises written by Jews and Christians, confirm the existence of a real person named Abner of Burgos who did become a Christian around 1320, took the new name Alfonso of Valladolid, and wrote a series of anti-Jewish works in Hebrew, including the *Teacher.* Was Abner/Alfonso, the double-named author of this first-person account, the same man who in the text prayed and dreamed and converted? It seems obvious that the author was also the character in his first-person narrative, and at first blush there is no reason to doubt that this conversion account describes the author's experience. There is, however, virtually no information to be found about the real conversion of the author, Abner/Alfonso himself, beyond what can be gleaned from his autobiographical account. We must assume that it happened as he narrates it.

Or must we? Behind the composition of his book, we might imagine that there is the experience of the real author that led to the actual event of his conversion, which we know must have occurred shortly before the account of it was composed. Are we correct, therefore, in seeing the elements of this conversion narrative as representations, perhaps embellished but accurate nonetheless, of actual events as well? The great historian of Iberian Jewry, Yitzhak Baer, who maintained a lifelong interest in Abner/Alfonso, believed we are. After summarizing the same account given above, he remarks, "Abner wrestled in spirit for some twenty-five years until (shortly before the year 1321) he announced

his profession of the Christian faith."[1] Historians like Baer can date the public *announcement* of his new faith and consider it as a historical fact (although since we know of no one else who was there to hear such an announcement and tell of it, even this depends on Abner/Alfonso's own testimony to a good degree), but Abner/Alfonso's feelings before his conversion are more problematic. We only know that he "wrestled in spirit for some twenty-five years," as Baer says, because Abner/Alfonso himself tells us he did, and he constructed his story to be read as part of his attack on his former faith. Although one can verify through later evidence external to the text that Abner/Alfonso was a real person who did profess Christianity, the process of that conversion is available only through the account by the author himself written after the fact. Perhaps the author Abner/Alfonso did indeed "wrestle in spirit" (whatever this might mean) just as his character did, but his autobiographical testimony can only tell us about the struggles of his fictional counterpart. As Karl Morrison insists in his study of medieval conversion, one must distinguish between the experience of conversion, the "thing felt," and the document written about it, the "thing made."

This book studies the "thing made" to represent conversion in a variety of medieval works that discuss religious belief and identity, in particular polemical works directed against other religions. In exploring the contours of that "thing made," I consider not only its form and content but also its placement within, and in relation to, other texts. Although my focus is mainly on deliberately constructed accounts like Abner/Alfonso's, the study includes other sources, such as examples of religious polemic and disputation as well as historiography and exegesis. I focus on medieval Christian texts, principally from the twelfth century to the fifteenth, but also consider the late antique paradigms on which those texts were modeled, and I contextualize the developments in those stories by comparing them to contemporary narratives of conversion to Judaism and Islam as well. While this broad view includes material from across the Mediterranean, as well as from farther north and east, it focuses on the Western Mediterranean as a center around which there circulated competing and complementary currents of belief in the three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

The central question I aim to address is what place such first-person stories had in the discourse of religious apology and polemic. Although I focus heavily on Christian sources, I ask the same questions of treatises from all three Abrahamic religions: Why did polemical writers tell these stories? What connection did a writer like Abner/Alfonso see

between his story and his theological criticism of Judaism? How would a Jewish reader of this Hebrew text understand such a personal narrative? Most important, how did such stories convey meaning *as stories*? In pursuing these questions, this book attempts to provide a new, interdisciplinary perspective on medieval writing about religious dispute by viewing it through the lens of literary studies.

By including examples from such separate historical moments and places of origin, I do not at all mean to blur the essential differences that define them or to suggest an absolute homogeneity of either thought or purpose across languages, religions, or historical periods. I do, however, wish to signal a coherence of understanding and of written form that constituted the backbone of various overlapping or intersecting traditions of representation. Interpreting late medieval scenes such as those embedded within Abner/Alfonso's dreams through the lens of late antique and early medieval depictions of conversion will not only offer a wider historical scope in understanding conversion, but will, I hope, lead us to rethink what we (as postmedieval readers) mean by the term *religious conversion* and to redraw, or at least challenge, the generic boundaries between the archival, doctrinal, and narrative sources that represent it. As these boundaries change, so also the disciplinary boundaries between history, religious studies, and literary criticism might need to be adjusted in accord with new insights.

I have deliberately used Abner/Alfonso's story, a confession embedded within an anti-Jewish treatise, to raise theoretical and conceptual questions about the nature of individual identity and belief, not to provide definitive answers to them, but as a way to adumbrate the premises on which the arguments of this book are based: that there is a fundamental connection between conversion stories and medieval polemical writing, and that even though these stories are patterned on the model of Christian hagiography (saints' Lives), the analysis of conversion narratives found in disputational texts requires a different set of critical tools than conversion accounts in other forms of historical and devotional writing. As I will show, the connection between conversion and polemic is most evident in their shared arguments concerning individual and collective identity, arguments that, in turn, share a fundamentally *narrative* structure. By *narrative,* I mean not merely, in Gerald Prince's definition, "the representation of events or changes in states of affairs," but more specifically H. Porter Abbott's words: "the representation of events, consisting of *story* and *narrative discourse,*" in which "story is an *event* or sequence of events (the *action*); and narrative

discourse is those events as represented."[2] By *narrative structure,* I imply the sequence of events as represented in language according to a coherent but not necessarily chronological order and unity, one that unfolds from scene to action to effect and that is enhanced through repetition and retelling. Robert Alter calls this, in the context of biblical prose, the "narrative continuum," which he defines clearly as "a coherent unfolding story in which the meaning of earlier data is progressively, even systematically, revealed or enriched by the addition of subsequent data."[3]

In stressing their shared structure and form, I aim not only to signal the admittedly obvious connection between conversion stories and polemical argument (the very representation of conversion through narrative is, in the Middle Ages, a form of religious apologetic, an aggressive way to define and defend one's beliefs). Taking this connection as given, this book has three main goals, each tied to the core arguments I defend in the remainder of this introduction. The first goal is to consider the place of conversion narratives in religious dispute, to ask why and how the form of conversion stories serves to express their polemical intentions. In attempting to answer this question, I argue that narrative serves as a fitting vehicle for medieval Christian arguments because both the individual conversion story and the general polemical ideas are expressions of a shared understanding of Christian history.

My second goal is to explore the reasons for the renewed importance of stories of conversion in Christian arguments beginning in the twelfth century. In particular, I hope to show the place of conversion stories among the various aspects of Christian disputational writing that began to change in the twelfth century, aspects that also included an increasing use of philosophy, a new focus on non-Christian Scriptures, and a heightened interest in the original languages of those sources. I argue that conversion stories, as expressions of sacred history, also become a basis for authoritative proof offered in light of this evolving definition of Christian *auctoritas*.

Third, I aim to contextualize the changing importance of conversion accounts in Christian texts by comparing them to a few parallel examples from Jewish and Muslim traditions. In Christian writing, the natural conflation of conversion with apology points to the fundamental narrative structure underlying Christian conceptions of religious identity and difference within the framework of salvation history. The question emerges, in considering contemporary examples from Jewish and Muslim traditions, whether the same structure holds beyond

a Christian framework. In comparing Christian, Muslim, and Jewish texts, I argue that narratives of conversion play a more prominent role in Christian polemics than they do in Muslim and Jewish treatises because they more fittingly reflect Christian notions of revelation, salvation, and time.

REREADING MEDIEVAL CONVERSION

The close link between apologetic writing and conversion narrative develops in late antiquity in a unique way in Christianity. The development of antipagan and anti-Jewish texts from the earliest written documents in Christianity (the New Testament letters of Paul of Tarsus) becomes at the same time a development of the rhetoric of narrating conversion. Starting with this connection allows us to see conversion not, or not only, as a type of experience among believers but as a category of discourse alongside other basic categories of Christian expression such as polemic and, even more broadly, biblical exegesis. As it evolves, writing about conversion does not develop in isolation as an independent sort of "life writing" (or ego document) and even less as a subgenre of historiography. Instead, it constitutes part of the debate about a variety of theological and doctrinal problems in Christian thought, problems that, with few exceptions, give way to defensive and offensive rhetoric as well. Conversion narratives in medieval apologetic sources combine inward-looking apology and outward-looking polemic not through autobiography or historiography, but through what can be better described as a combination of hagiography and heresiography, an allegorization of the life of an individual believer combined with a defensive reflection on the boundaries of acceptable belief. The predominance of heresiological concerns is especially evident in early representations of conversion such as those of Christian apologist Justin Martyr (100–165), in which conversion is merely one concept in the construction of a nascent vocabulary of anti-Judaism. Similarly, as Nock has noted, the description by the ex-pagan convert Arnobius (d. ca. 330) of his "having been led into the paths of truth [*in vias veritatis inductus*]" is couched in a scathing vilification of pagan ideas.[4] Even the famous narration of the conversion of Augustine of Hippo (354–430) in his *Confessions,* hailed so often as a foundational moment of modern autobiography, can also be understood as part of his larger offensive against Manichaeism, a project evident in most of his key texts from the 390s and culminating a few years after the *Confessions* in his

monumental anti-Manichaean treatise *Against Faustus*. In most of the examples that follow, the narrating of conversion points less to individual experience than to community standards of belief.

My reason for giving more attention to Christian narratives and discourse than Jewish and Muslim examples is that conversion and conversion stories become particularly important in Christian treatises after the twelfth century because Christian notions of argumentative authority and proof begin to change at this time. Most medieval conversion stories in Latin polemical texts before the twelfth century rehearse the same themes as earlier biblical and patristic models: the theological replacement of Israel by the Church, the prophetic fulfillment of the Old Testament in the New, and the obdurate rejection of Christ by the "stiff-necked" Jews. The dominant medieval model of such writing, at least up to the eleventh century, is Augustinian. It closely follows the insights and images of Augustine's intricate exegetical combination of the theological rhetoric of the Pauline Epistles with the narrative depiction of the *character* Saul/Paul in the New Testament book of the Acts of the Apostles. A need to elaborate a new image of textual authority in Christian writing emerges around the twelfth century following a shift in this Augustinian paradigm of conversion. This shift, I believe, resulted from the introduction of extrabiblical sources into traditional disputational and apologetic writing. While numerous scholars have made a similar claim about Christian, and especially anti-Jewish, policy and debate, I approach the same topic of the twelfth-century evolution of Augustinian ideas in terms of both polemical content and the presentation of that content through narratives of conversion. As the campaign against Jews and other non-Christians began, in the late eleventh century and the twelfth century, to blend Augustine's biblically based interpretations with new positions derived from philosophical reason, the representation of conversion shifted in tandem, blending imagery from Acts and Augustine with philosophical arguments derived from non-Scriptural sources. In these twelfth-century reformulations, converts themselves emerge as characters within their narratives, playing the role of mouthpieces for the elaboration and defense of a new, rational apologetic.

The influence of philosophy, however, went beyond the reasons adduced in dispute. Twelfth-century conversion texts do not simply repeat the theological formulas of old but mix philosophical language and reasons into the warp and weft of their changing discourse. Just as the very concept of what constituted an *auctor*—a venerated

and credible source cited in authorization of one's own discourse—expanded in the twelfth century to include not merely biblical *testimonia* (citations of well-known verses) but also philosophical authors such as Aristotle and his commentators, so too did other related concepts. Most important, the concept of *auctoritas*—the authority by which proofs were credible—expanded to include the ratiocination of contemporary authors alongside (although never quite equal to) biblical *auctores*. As the supplanting of the synagogue by the church began to be explained not only through exegesis but also through syllogism, conversion accounts began to include the personal testimony of their authors as a new source of *authoritative* proof.

Those conversion narratives appearing at the beginning of longer polemical treatises might thus be compared to the form of the standard medieval prologue. Frequently affixed to the beginning of common school texts from different branches of learning in the *trivium* and *quadrivium*, such prologues (called variously an *accessus* in the arts, *materia* in legal writing, and *introitus* or *ingressus* in some exegesis) came in a variety of evolving forms but often included some comment on the circumstances of the work's genesis (the life of the poet, the title, the intention, the contents and order, etc.).[5] The well-known conversion stories of the twelfth century such as those of Judah/Herman of Cologne and Moses/Petrus Alfonsi (which I consider in more detail below) vividly reflect the theological changes taking place within biblical and Augustinian paradigms, above all in their conception of authority. They also share important characteristics with the more recognizable examples of academic prologues, offering the circumstances under which the author came to acquire the authority to speak against his former religion.

Throughout this book, I use the terms *apology* and *apologetic* to refer to writing intended to defend one's ideas or the ideas of one's group, and I use *polemic* and *polemical* to refer to works intended to denounce the ideas of another individual or group. These terms are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, insofar as polemical discourse itself is inherently a form of apologetic, aimed at defining or reinforcing boundaries of group identity against a foil of heterodox difference—and apology always implies a comparative rejection of opposing views—the two terms form an almost indivisible pair. My use of each term in this book aims to highlight the primary mode of the text (offensive or defensive) but does not assume a firm distinction between them.

The transformation in what constituted authoritative proof in twelfth-century Christian polemical output, embodied so lucidly in the

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