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**Book Review Essay**

# **Unstable as water**

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Jean-Claude Schmitt

*The Conversion of Herman the Jew: Autobiography, History, and Fiction in the Twelfth Century*, trans. Alex J. Novikoff. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010, 320pp., \$59.95. ISBN: 978-0812242546

Ryan Szpiech

*Conversion and Narrative: Reading and Religious Authority in Medieval Polemic*. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013, 328pp., \$59.95, ISBN: 978-0812244717

In 1096, crusaders on their way to the Holy Land took a detour to attack the Jews in the Rhineland communities of Mainz, Cologne, Worms, Regensburg and Speyer, among others. According to the crusader-monk Ekkehard of Aura, Count Emicho of Flonheim, one of the leaders, set out with an army to ‘utterly destroy’ the Jews or ‘force them into the bosom of the Church’ (Peters, 1998, 112). The events of 1096 were recorded in the mid-twelfth century in three Jewish texts known as the *Chronicle of Solomon bar Simson*, the *Mainz Anonymous* and the *Chronicle of Eliezer bar Nathan*. Solomon presents the Christians’ motives as: ‘let us exterminate them from the nations so that the name of Israel will no longer be remembered or let them adopt our faith’ (Eidelberg, 1996, 22). The Jewish chronicles, which represent a new kind of medieval historical consciousness, are driven above all by an imperative to remember. Most crucial are the deeds of the martyrs, those who chose to kill themselves and their families to sanctify the Name of God rather than be baptized ‘in profane waters’ (Eidelberg, 1996, 23). A story often singled out by of these texts’ interpreters to exemplify the Jews’



ideology of martyrdom is that of Isaac, the *parnas* or ‘community leader’ of Mainz. Having allowed himself to be ‘defiled’ by baptism in order to spare his children from being taken away and raised by Christians, he atoned with a spectacular sacrifice after most of the crusaders had left. He killed not only himself and his willing children, but also his unwilling wounded mother; he then burned down both his house and the synagogue. Despite what may seem to current readers – including almost all the ones to whom I’ve taught this text – like desperate mayhem, Solomon bar Simson assures his readers that Isaac’s soul is with the righteous in the Garden of Eden. Even the possibility of his children’s conversion and his own momentary proximity to the Christian religion required an extreme reaction.

After the Holocaust, these horrifying and triumphant accounts became for some Jewish historians, including Yitzak Baer and Haim Ben-Sasson, ‘vital and therapeutic monuments of a collective Jewish memory,’ in David Nirenberg’s words, and ‘focal points for a historiography that asserts continuity in the experience of catastrophe’ (Nirenberg, 2008, 303, 307).<sup>1</sup> The 1096 chronicles shaped a violent memory and so they continue inevitably to remember violence. Current scholars for the most part interpret the texts as fact mixed with much fiction, deeply engaged with medieval Christianity and produced by new representations of a range of emotions. For Jeremy Cohen, for example, the chronicles reflect a deep survivors’ guilt and doubt in the generation following the martyrs’ deaths; for Israel Yuval, they express the formation of a vengeful messianism that would combat the messianic expectations of the crusaders.

And then there are the converts. Most of the attention in the chronicles themselves and in modern scholarship is devoted to the heroic violence of the martyrs who refused the filthy waters by killing themselves and others. The specter of religious conversion as a possibility is, however, omnipresent in the chronicles. Cohen characterizes the texts as the products of ‘those who opted for life in Christendom over death in ... paradise’ and ultimately realized that their temporary conversions had been the means of survival for Ashkenazic Jewry itself (Cohen, 2004, 59–60). The chronicles describe the converts in generous terms: they had been baptized only by force and had returned to their faith as soon as the crusaders were gone; moreover, as Solomon bar Simson emphasizes, they did all they could to adhere to rabbinic law and ‘rarely attended church.’ The Christians indeed knew they had not converted ‘out of conviction’ and ‘did not believe in the object of their reverence’ (Eidelberg, 1996, 68). Insofar as the chronicles speculate on the converts’ interior crises of faith, it is to deny that there were any. There are no experiences of Christian belief, only men and women unconvincingly pretending to ‘be Christian.’ This is one kind of paradigmatic account of conversion within medieval Jewish writing, echoed by polemics and poetry during the crusades: an act in which no beliefs change and that no one on either side accepts. For Solomon, the role of the converts was to preserve the memory that the Christians had tried to erase: ‘they heard with their own ears and

1 Nirenberg also briefly discusses the problematic Zionist invocations of the 1096 martyrdoms in secular guises as well as recent Israeli critics of the ideology of ‘sacrificial violence.’



saw with their own eyes the actions of these saints and their utterances at the time of their slaughter and murder' (Eidelberg, 1996, 49). For this task they did have to perform a kind of 'conversion' to the religious and psychological position of the Crusaders who saw how the martyrs defeated them and their false messiah Jesus, 'a putrid corpse' (Eidelberg, 1996, 48). Like the crusaders, they were the audience for God's absolute defeat of Christianity, and their role was to generate a new kind of written memory that, like the works of Classical historians and medieval Christian chroniclers, prized eyewitnesses. At worst, these false converts were necessary go-betweens who negotiated with the Christians in order to write about the martyrs who live beyond history 'in the realm of the saints – Rabbi Akiva and his companions' (Eidelberg, 1996, 31). The seeing and hearing body of the convert-historian complements the sacrificed body of the martyr: neither has been truly touched or changed by the crusaders' profane water.

If the Jewish chronicles' converts are like the ones forced into the baptismal font by Charlemagne in the *Song of Roland*, then there is the Saracen Queen Bramimonde whom the king takes away to become a convert 'out of love.' Two recent books on conversion wrestle with a version of this theme: what does it mean to convert out of 'love' or conviction, and how could someone be persuaded to make this radical change? Sometime in the mid-twelfth century, a text was produced at the Premonstratensian abbey of Cappenberg called *A Short Work on his Conversion* (or *Opusculum*, as it is commonly called), attributed to a young man, Herman *quondam* Judaeus: Herman who used to be a Jew. Probably written around the same time as the First Crusade chronicles, Judah/Herman's story takes place in some of the Jewish communities worst struck by the Crusaders' attacks: Cologne, Mainz and Worms. This text, penned by one of the canons, deals at length with the protagonist's interior world; his long process of his conversion to Christianity concludes with a spectacular scene of baptism that captures his doubts to the end.

The *Opusculum* has as its bookends a dream that Judah/Herman misinterpreted 'carnally' as a Jew at 13 and then later understands 'spiritually' as a Christian: The king gives him a white horse, a golden belt and a silk purse with seven coins. He promises Judah/Herman the entire inheritance of a dead prince, and they go off to a banquet at which the boy and the king eat vegetables from the same dish. A relative, Isaac, tells him that the dream betokens a beautiful wife, riches and great honor among the Jews. A much longer interpretation that the narrator himself provides after his conversion explains that the king is God, and among his spiritual gifts are chastity (the belt), the grace of baptism (the horse) and the heavenly banquet of the Eucharist. Only a brief summary of the rest of the text is possible here. Judah/Herman, through his travels for business, is able to spend a great deal of time with Christian clergy, taking in their biblical readings. He debates with the famous theologian Rupert of Deutz, particularly about idolatry and the status of images. He encounters various obstacles to conversion, including a marriage, after the Jews threaten to exclude him from the community.



He is saved through the prayers of two anchoresses, Bertha and Glismut. He continues pretending to be a Jew and even ‘disputes’ – allegedly as an instructor – with the Jews of Worms from a Christian perspective. He is finally baptized in Cologne in a scene that epitomizes his spiritual struggle and paranoia as well as signifies the central importance of the doctrine of the Trinity: not realizing that he should be submerged in water three times, he is immobilized with cold after the first immersion but is persuaded to return to the font. He then resists the third freezing immersion because he thinks that the yelling clerics are making fun of him, but finally overcomes the ‘diabolical traps’ of doubt. At the end of the text, he is a canon of Cappenberg and has also learned Latin very quickly and become a priest.

### The Conversion of Herman the Jew

Jean-Claude Schmitt’s richly detailed study *The Conversion of Herman the Jew: Autobiography, History, and Fiction*, published in France in 2003 and newly translated into English, includes the full text as an appendix together with a passage from the *Vita* of Godfried, Count of Cappenberg, that briefly mentions the converted Jewish canon and his story. Schmitt organizes his interpretation of the *Opusculum* through chapters that concern its main themes of autobiography, dreams, images and baptism. He opens his book with a meditation on historiography that considers some of the very issues raised by the Jewish crusade chronicles in terms of the ‘truth’ and ‘fiction’ of medieval texts. Schmitt sets out to engage the still-raging debate among critics over whether Judah/Herman is a ‘real’ person or a monastic invention – he could have just as easily said a Jew or a ‘hermeneutic Jew,’ the Augustinian abstract figure who carries the Christians’ books and witnesses Christian supersession. He also considers a larger debate about fiction and the role of the historian. The ‘crisis of history’ that pits the epistemological claims of positivism against the ‘linguistic turn’ and puts pressure on the historian’s production of discourses of ‘knowledge’ is, however, ultimately a set of issues that allows Schmitt to oppose medieval and modern. Medieval historians and even more so autobiographers, he emphasizes, work according to different principles than modern authors, celebrating ‘truth’ while writing in rhetorical constructs that can only be called ‘fictional.’ Chronicles are essentially as much ‘fiction’ and ‘truth’ as the genres of hagiographies and romances. These are not new contrasts, but in the end, they enable Schmitt to characterize the *Opusculum* as ‘a game of masks’ in which the ‘visible’ face is Herman’s covering the hidden Judah (Schmitt, 2010, 43). While it may seem surprising, Schmitt’s polemic represents a breakthrough by sweeping away all questions of the narrator’s actual identity. While Schmitt doesn’t make this point, the passionate positions staked out by earlier Israeli and American historians duplicate some of the

responses to the crusade chronicles. To find a real Jew, even a convert, speaks to the desire to preserve another survivor, a memory of the Rhineland towns after 1096.

The remainder of Schmitt's book on Judah/Herman, disappointingly, does not peer under its subject's layers of masks so much as describe in great depth the aspects of monastic culture that contributed to the *Opusculum*. Although Schmitt's impeccably learned account of how various monastic discourses shape the 'autobiographical' text of Judah/Herman, he largely ignores the Jewish culture that the convert himself describes even as he denigrates it. Schmitt is impatient with readers who '[isolate] a possible evocation of a Jewish custom, or a particular phrase that supposedly refers to the Torah or the Talmud ... in order to demonstrate the [work's] "authenticity"' (Schmitt, 2010, 194). Unfortunately, to regard these traces as irrelevant also risks reproducing the text's own evident limits on Judaism, what it can and cannot say about the Jews. Even if the 'Jew' in the story is a mask rather than a 'real' person, it seems worthwhile to interrogate the local, Ashkenazic aspect of the convert 'persona,' to use Schmitt's term. Given that the conversion narrative takes place in the Rhineland, it is vexing that Schmitt gives the pogroms of the First Crusade so little consideration. The forced converts of 1096 were a source of anxiety to Christians and Jews alike precisely because of their instability and unknowability – it was difficult to tell what they really believed in terms of law or doctrine. Judah/Herman's narrative attempts to describe a conversion 'out of love,' an inner struggle far from the Crusaders' violence. The violence nevertheless seems very close even if he never alludes to the damage suffered by his community; this is especially the case at his baptism, where shouting clerics surround him and the water itself repels him with cold. While he blames diabolical forces for his own hesitation, the scene inevitably recalls the forced 'defilements' of 1096. The text necessarily records the memories generated by the forced converts even as it tries to counter them. Schmitt cautiously advances the idea that the *Opusculum* was composed by a canon of Cappenberg based on the oral testimony of a Jewish convert. Even at this distance, it seems likely that the Jewish command to remember would emerge to play a crucial role, and to refuse stubbornly to assimilate itself into the narrative.

Schmitt's magisterial achievement is to situate Judah/Hermann's story in the vibrant spiritual and intellectual world of the Christian twelfth century. In a chapter on 'Medieval Autobiography,' he discusses the renewed interest in Augustine's *Confessions* at the time, as evidenced by Guibert de Nogent's *Monodiae*. Schmitt, however, is never convinced by the *Opusculum*'s contrived first-person voice. Here, autobiography is more a mark of authority than a confession. In subsequent chapters on 'The Dream and its Interpretation' and 'Conversion to Images,' Schmitt accords Rupert of Deutz, the eminent cleric with whom Judah/Herman has a public disputation, central importance. Rupert was not only a prolific author of biblical exegesis but also wrote an anti-Jewish treatise, the *Anulus*. For Schmitt, the most important aspect of Rupert's writing is that he frequently refers to his spiritually transformative dreams and visions.



For example, Rupert dreamed that he should call his *Song of Songs* commentary *On the Incarnation of the Lord* in honor of the Virgin Mary; in his exegesis of the *Song* itself he then describes the erotic/spiritual dreams of a young girl who is also his own soul. In Judah/Herman's much less sophisticated narrative and experience of Christian exegesis, the protagonist's conversion from Jewish 'carnality' to Christian 'spirituality,' from Old Testament to New Testament, is likewise mediated by dreams.

In the end Schmitt writes that his book is about 'a more general paradigm of Christian culture for this period. The conversion of this Jew to Christianity becomes a metaphor for all the other types of *conversio*' (Schmitt, 2010, 196). *The Opusculum*, in other words, is less about the Jews than about twelfth-century monastic enthusiasm for the reform and renovation of the Church. The most important figure is Norbert of Xanten, the founder of the Premonstratensian order. In the two *Vitae* of Norbert, his conversion from worldly cleric to ascetic reformer is figured as a close imitation of Saul/Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus in Acts 9:3–9. The *Opusculum*'s author, Schmitt suggests, would have drawn on this idea, making Judah/Herman a 'true carbon copy of the Jewish convert Saul/Paul' (Schmitt, 2010, 173). His 'authentic' Jewishness, that is, would complement Norbert's own life. In his way, the Jew helpfully oscillates between 'hermeneutic Jew' and Jewish canon. Ultimately, though, Judah/Herman's Latin conversion narrative is about his order itself, not disputing with or converting local Jews. The 'Jew' is in fact a convenient 'mask' for the ideal of conversion in the reforming spirituality of the Premonstratensians.

## Conversion and Narrative

In *Conversion and Narrative: Reading and Religious Authority in Medieval Polemic*, Ryan Szpiech limits the scope of his work, like Schmitt, to texts. He provides a useful corrective to Schmitt, however, with a sharp focus on Judaism. The book sets out a new program for reading medieval conversion narratives, particularly those found within disputational texts and therefore part of larger apologetic and polemical discourses. Szpiech's concern, as he explains in a methodological introduction, is to situate conversion itself within a study of mostly – but not exclusively – Christian texts. Even to define 'conversion,' as Szpiech demonstrates, is extraordinarily difficult; the concept has been understood by thinkers on either side as either primarily an interior, affective experience or as a matter of social and cultural forces. Szpiech deftly avoids these polarizing paradigms by reconfiguring conversion as 'a collective representation that can be used for convenience but whose full range of significance is perpetually deferred and never definitely grasped' (Szpiech, 2013, 17). For his purposes, the term 'conversion,' as represented in texts, is best understood at its

most basic signification as a change, a division between two religions, times and cultures as well as an old and new self. As Szpiech puts it, to read conversion as a narrative ‘dismantles the hierarchy’ that assumes the priority of a ‘real’ experience to the text: ‘the conversion narrative literally is the convert’ (Szpiech, 2013, 23).

Szpiech’s project, these caveats in place, is to account for a new enthusiasm for conversion stories in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Christian disputational texts and to take up a larger consideration of why conversion is more central to Christian rather than Jewish or Muslim salvation history. Conversion stories, after all, are inherently part of Christian views of salvation, time and duality beginning with Saul/Paul. Other than Judah/Herman, Szpiech’s converts are all from the Mediterranean world and span the eleventh through the fifteenth centuries. They include the Iberian rabbi/bishop Solomon Halevi/Pablo de Santa Maria, the polymath Moses/Petrus Alfonsi (converted in Huesca in 1106), the Christian convert to Judaism Giuàn/Obadiah and Abner of Burgos/Alfonso of Valladolid. The final chapter of his book concerns accounts of conversions of Jews and Christians to Islam in thirteenth- to fifteenth-century Muslim polemics. Although Szpiech’s argument about how conversion narratives rely on types of authenticity and authority is deeply historical, the chapters are not always arranged historically but rather conceptually. His larger interest is in the rhetorical instability of conversion narratives, not their effectiveness. Szpiech brilliantly shows how texts that ostensibly are meant to overwhelm the reader with proofs of the Christian supersession of Judaism reveal the aporias at the heart of conversion itself.

Szpiech first establishes in Chapter 1 a foundation in the medieval and early modern reception of Pauline and Augustinian paradigms of conversion. To this end, he compares a Muslim convert to Christianity, Juan Andrés, the author of an anti-Muslim polemical treatise, and the Jewish convert Solomon HaLevi/Pablo de Santa Maria, the bishop of Burgos best known for his glosses of Nicholas of Lyra’s biblical commentaries. Szpiech is not concerned with the ‘truth-value’ of the two first-person narratives but rather how they reveal different approaches to the fundamental Christian vocabulary of conversion. In imitation of Saul/Paul, Juan describes his conversion happening suddenly, in response to a sermon at a church; his understanding was cleared by ‘shining rays of divine light.’ Transformed from Muslim legal expert to Christian preacher, he recapitulates Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles. In a close reading of Juan’s *Confusion or Confutation of the Muhammadan Sect and the Qur’an*, Szpiech shows Juan’s use of Paul’s epistles with their dichotomies of old/new together with images of returning and repenting taken from the Gospels. His narrative relies on an essentially Pauline paradigm: the Old Law is ended by the New and the Old Israel is relegated to the past. For Szpiech, the crucial aspect of Saul/Paul’s conversion is its narration three times in Acts (9, 22, 26), each in a different voice. This repetition is what creates the Pauline ‘double imagery of return and departure, fused into a single narrative thread of foreshadowing and memory’ (Szpiech, 2013, 40). What Szpiech here calls



‘narrativization’ in Acts is ‘the template for virtually all subsequent conversion narratives from that of Augustine of Hippo in the fourth century to that of Juan Andrés’ (Szpiech, 2013, 40). The strangeness of the Pauline narrative here is that in an anti-Muslim context, the author doesn’t have to confront the Church’s supersessionist hermeneutics, the role of Judaism in Christianity.

As becomes clear, Juan Andrés really serves as Szpiech’s foil for Pablo de Santa Maria; the Jewish narrative shows what is fully at stake in the Pauline and Augustinian paradigms. Solomon/Pablo converts around the time of the 1391 pogroms in Castile and Aragon. Significantly, he situates his account at the opening of his exegetical glosses on Lyra. His language is of ‘scales [falling] from the eyes of my mind’ and reading for the ‘truth’ of scripture (Szpiech, 2013, 45). Before his baptism, he read ‘both Testaments’ as well as the Church doctors and learned from living teachers. Szpiech stresses that this was not a sudden revelation but a gradual transformation of understanding. By mentioning his reading of Old and New Testaments, Pablo signals that his conversion is to Christian exegesis – to understanding the true place of the Hebrew bible. Following his conversion narrative, he explains his and Lyra’s exegetical methods, based on the importance of the literal sense of the Old Testament, for understanding its Christian allegorical senses. He and the Biblical text are one and the same, converted from Jewish misreading to understanding the proper place of the Old Testament in Christianity. Szpiech then demonstrates how Pablo’s narrative follows an Augustinian model, the classic medieval framing of Paul’s conversion. Above all, Szpiech emphasizes the literary complexity of the *Confessions*, Augustine’s interweaving of perspectives and times. His conversion is enacted on several levels: through a series of narrations of his friends’ conversions, including Ponticianus’s conversion after reading in the life of Anthony about Anthony’s own conversion when he heard a verse from the Gospel of Matthew. It all leads up to Augustine’s scene in the garden in Book 8 when he hears a voice telling him to ‘take it and read’ and reads Romans 13:13. For Augustine, conversion is ‘reading, hearing, remembering and telling,’ that is, representation (Szpiech, 2013, 53). Augustine’s refinement of Paul ushered in a new view of history and salvation: the concept of Jewish scripture as prefiguration and Christian scripture as fulfillment. Solomon/Pablo’s conversion recapitulates the ‘dominant paradigm’ of the *Confessions*: the focus on the inner life and biblical exegesis.

Szpiech somewhat abruptly jumps back to the twelfth century in Chapter 2 to examine the origins of Pablo’s exegetical practices, which include citations of the Talmud as well as myriad Christian and Jewish authorities, in polemics that called on non-biblical texts and Aristotelian philosophy. For Szpiech, the twelfth century marks the beginning of a new kind of conversion narrative that emphasizes reason – *ratio* – and personal testimony, destabilizing some of the earlier Augustinian exegetical arguments about the ‘hermeneutic Jew.’ Szpiech considers Petrus Alfonsi and Judah/Herman here as authors of the best-known narratives. Following a standard (if overstated) history, Szpiech argues that



before the twelfth century the human author was unimportant and that conversion stories relied only on Augustinian appeals to understand supersession; in the twelfth century authority becomes linked to reason. Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo* marks the shift as a philosophical, rational Christian apologetic. In terms of conversion, the debate is not between scripture and reason but about whether reason could be used more effectively in argument. This expansion of *auctoritas* also led polemicists to include non-Christian texts, principally the Talmud and the Qur'ān. Finally, a process begins in the twelfth century that in the thirteenth blurs the boundary between Jewish disbelief of Christian authority and Jews' disbelief of their *own* authorities when they clearly prove Christian beliefs. Petrus Alfonsi's *Dialogue Against the Jews*, framed as a debate between the Jew 'Moses' and the convert 'Petrus,' immediately circulated widely. The text begins a new appeal to rabbinic texts and the Jewish sages, at once attacking them as ridiculous and using them to support Christian doctrine. Szpiech sees this as a profoundly destabilizing text that questions previous ideas of Christian authority. Moses and Petrus's former friendship has been destroyed by Petrus's conversion, but the two speakers are both aspects of Petrus Alfonsi and his authority as a convert and expert on Jewish texts. Moses is Petrus's 'fictive twin' in the sense that both are thoroughly Jewish and Christian at once (Szpiech, 2013, 81). The 'selves' coexist uneasily even in the Augustinian convert-author. Szpiech deals with Judah/Herman in a very different way than Schmitt, with a sharp focus on his anti-Jewish tropes regarding his family and community and 'transformation from "other" into "self"' (Szpiech, 2013, 85). This text as well undoes itself: Szpiech points to an extraordinary moment in the text when Herman, having converted, tells his Jewish friends that he's faking it in order to figure out how Jews can best prepare for debates with Christians. This ruse opens the possibility that his final persona is also not 'true,' a fiction produced by the genre of dispute itself. As with other Jewish converts following the 1096 pogroms, the text makes Herman unknowable.

Szpiech moves further back historically, in Chapter 3, to examine the few surviving sources that represent conversions to Judaism from Christianity. Since Szpiech regards conversion itself as 'a predominantly Christian theological category,' he has some difficulty fitting them into the book's trajectory (Szpiech, 2013, 92). In Judaism, conversion clearly cannot be used to express 'salvation history' the way Christianity does; there is no progressive historical concept of supersession. Szpiech reads both of the texts that he considers at length as essentially following a Christian model. *The Book of Nestor the Priest*, a twelfth-century Andalusī Hebrew expansion of an earlier Arabic text, draws a first-person connection between conversion and disputation in its attacks on Christian doctrine; Nestor was learned in 'error' and 'darkness' as are the Jews in anti-Jewish debates. The best-known conversion story, preserved in fragments from the Cairo Genizah, is the third-person narrative of Obadiah, born Giuàn in late eleventh-century Southern Italy. It has a complex narrative



structure, layered like the Augustinian model. Obadiah mentions the influence of Andreas the archbishop of Bari, who (supposedly) converted c.1070, moved to Egypt, and became famous throughout Europe. Like Judah/Herman, Obadiah also has a dream – in this case of a man calling to him while he is officiating in church. Szpiech provides a wonderful interpretation of this text and its layers of symbolism as thoroughly Christian in its rhetorical strategies. At one point, Obadiah cites Joel 2:31 in the Latin text but written in Hebrew letters; this extraordinary moment signals his transformation and division: the ability to read the Torah in translation is the proof of his conversion, yet his divided Christian self remains inscribed in the text. Szpiech uses Giuàn/Obadiah to commence a much larger discussion of attention to foreign languages as a new marker of authenticity.

The famous thirteenth-century Dominican polemicist Ramon Marti is at the center of Chapter 4, which focuses on the evolving knowledge of Jewish and Muslim texts among scholars defending Christian truth against unbelievers. Conversion at this point becomes associated with the knowledge of non-Christian books that are nevertheless not devoid of Christian authority, even though misread. Szpiech cites the convert Nicholas Donin's approach to the Talmud in his dispute with Rabbi Yehiel of Paris in 1240 (at the order of Louis IX): for the most part, he attacks its 'stupidities.' A shift occurs two decades later with Ramon Marti's attacks on the Qur'ān: in the monumental *Dagger of Faith* he uses the Qur'ān to support Christian doctrine, for example, 'things that Muhamad said in the Qur'ān that God said to him about the Virgin Mary' (Szpiech, 2013, 125). In the debate between Fra Paul and Nachmanides in 1263, Fra Paul in a similar vein seizes on how Nachmanides disavowed the authority of Midrash to prove aspects of Christian belief – that is, he rejected his own authorities. The even greater paradigm shift is Marti's evolving use of citations of Hebrew and Arabic texts. He moves from transliteration of Hebrew in his early work *The Muzzle of Jews* to Hebrew script in the *Dagger*, reflecting a desire for ever greater accuracy aimed at Jewish 'tricks' in debate (Szpiech, 2013, 132). Marti goes so far in the *Dagger* to claim that his ideal is to write in both Latin and Hebrew for someone who can pronounce the language aloud even if he doesn't understand it. This scheme, in Szpiech's interpretation, replaces the figure of the hermeneutic Jew with the Hebrew alphabet as a witness of Christianity; however, always dependent on the impossibility of perfect translation, this was an inherently unstable idea. A problematic aspect of the chapter is Szpiech's unsatisfactory discussion of the purpose of Marti's polemical texts. Contrary to many scholars, he doesn't believe that these texts were about missionizing and real conversion – they were just internal scholarly treatises about Judaism and Islam, extravagant textual exercises. Szpiech makes the provocative claim that Marti's Hebrew texts in the original alphabet stand in for the convert and that translation replaces conversion. While not wholly thought out, this is a profound insight into how Christians were starting to think about language and truth.



The culmination of Szpiech's reading of the instability of conversion narratives appears in Chapter 5. His subject is Abner of Burgos/Alfonso of Valladolid, active in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In his *Teacher of Righteousness*, he provides an account of his own conversion after a series of dreams in which a great man reveals the errors of the Jews and commands him to instruct them in Christianity. What sets Alfonso apart from the previous authors in the study is that he writes in Hebrew and so is engaged with Jewish readers directly. He cites from the Hebrew bible and an immense range of sources that Szpiech partially catalogs: not only rabbinic texts but also Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and the anti-Christian polemics of Joseph Kimḥi and others (Szpiech, 2013, 148). The text is framed as a debate between 'Teacher' and 'Rebel.' The Teacher encourages the Rebel to study the sages more closely in order to 'truly' follow them: the rabbinic sources are authoritative, but they ultimately all support the Christian truth that Jesus is the messiah. Like the Rebel, the implied reader is part of a Jewish tradition, and thus he has to follow the truth, the correct interpretation. For Alfonso, the conversion of Jews will actually preserve Judaism because conversion itself *is* Jewish authenticity. His strategy is to 'blur the boundaries between converter and converted, polemicized and polemicist' (Szpiech, 2013, 92). Alfonso presents himself as a prophet of God whom the Jews need for salvation, a convert who still accepts the authority of the Talmud. To this end he uses halakhic (legal) prooftexts but also defends, like his predecessors, the use of aggadic (narrative) texts as authorities. Because Alfonso appears to identify with both the Teacher and the doubting Rebel, he dramatizes his own struggle with doubts. His authority, Szpiech argues, is ultimately 'tainted' via this fiction with real doubt. From a rhetorical perspective, the danger of the strategy is that the entire work could be reversed, with the Rebel demonstrating how to use rabbinic texts to defeat Christians in arguments. Since the Rebel doesn't convert in the end, Alfonso's fiction undermines his authority. The representation of the Rebel's resistance cannot be separated from Alfonso's own conversion story. In short, Alfonso as a convert paradoxically ends up having an excess of authority and authenticity. The text's split authorial voice creates an irresolvable ambiguity.

Szpiech concludes with a chapter on Jewish and Christian narratives of conversion to Islam. I will mention its themes only briefly since it falls outside the general topic of my review on Jews and Christians. The focus is on the differences between Islamic and Christian ideas of salvation history and the ways in which conversion narratives express the Muslim abrogation of previous religions. The 'autobiographical' material is fascinating, and the chapter could easily begin an entirely new project on Islam. Like Schmitt's concentrated work on Judah/Herman, Szpiech's wide-ranging study addresses a new medieval sense of the Jewish convert created by Christian textual traditions and the demands of supersessionist history. The main flaw in Szpiech's otherwise excellent book is that he provides few concrete examples of the Jewish authorities cited by authors such as Ramon Marti and Abner/Alfonso. Since his main themes are authority



and authenticity, Szpiech could have helped to orient the reader by citing some of the halakhic sources, for example, that Alfonso uses. It seems crucial to clarify how halakhah enters the debate, and how it works in the *Teacher*. The most impressive aspect of Szpiech's work is in his critical insight into the texts' literary qualities. In his series of close readings, he shows that in almost all cases, conversion narratives fall apart under the weight of their subjects' inevitable doubleness. Szpiech aptly calls it the convert's 'tragic flaw': always haunted by 'his rejected former self,' forever a victim of dialectic (Szpiech, 2013, 217).

## About the Author

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