FASHIONING JEWISH IDENTITY IN MEDIEVAL WESTERN CHRISTENDOM

During the course of the twelfth century, increasing numbers of Jews migrated into dynamically developing western Christendom from Islamic lands. The vitality that attracted them also presented a challenge: Christianity – from early in its history – had proclaimed itself heir to a failed Jewish community, and thus the vitality of western Christendom was both appealing and threatening to the Jewish immigrants. Indeed, western Christendom was entering a phase of intense missionizing activity, some of which was directed at the long-term Jewish residents of Europe and the Jewish newcomers.

Jewish religious and intellectual leaders bore responsibility for providing guidance to Jews who were subjected to Christian pressures. The writings of five such twelfth- and thirteenth-century leaders from southern France and northern Spain constitute the first evidence of Jewish anti-Christian polemics from within western Christendom. These leaders were fully cognizant of the core Christian thrusts, described them in detail for their co-religionists, and rebutted them carefully. This study recreates some of the clarification and rebuttal. It also examines the techniques of persuasion adopted by the Jewish polemicists in order to reassure their Jewish readers of the truth of Judaism and the error of Christianity. At the very deepest level, these Jewish authors sketched out for their fellow Jews a comparative portrait of Christian and Jewish societies – the former powerful but irrational and morally debased, the latter weak but reasonable and morally elevated – urging that the obvious and sensible choice was Judaism.

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Foreword

Pre-modern Christians and Jews – as we shall see – utilized every available intellectual tool to formulate and argue the truth of their faiths. Both majority Christians and minority Jews were utterly convinced of the truth claims of the tradition to which they belonged. Only in the rarest cases did individual thinkers, particularly those with a philosophic bent, allow themselves to view religious faiths in a more distanced manner, to compare and contrast faiths, and to attempt the analysis of religious belief and behavior in functional terms. Such thinkers constituted the smallest of sub-groups on the pre-modern scene.

Within the modern academy, the study of religion has been one of the slowest disciplines to emerge. The academic study of religion began with intense focus on the Western monotheisms, which were taken to reflect the "highest" level of religious thinking and practice. It was widely presumed that religious studies should focus on belief systems, with the implication of normative judgment, implicit evaluation, and subtle effort to win over others. On these grounds, many American universities, particularly public universities, have refused to include religious studies in their curricula. To be sure, with the passage of time further foci of study and new modalities of analysis have emerged. An increasingly broad range of religious systems, both historic and contemporary, has been subjected to scrutiny. The new modalities of study include the effort to identify the common roots of religions, an effort that often masked an unspoken commitment to one or another faith community. More genuinely dispassionate has been the growing influence of anthropology. Anthropological study has tended to focus on the functions that religious faiths play within societies. This has led away from the earlier judgmental posture and toward an appreciation of the diverse objectives of religious systems, with their relative successes and failures.

The present study is very much a part of this newer anthropological thrust in religious studies. This book deals with medieval Jewish perceptions of

Christian truth claims, Jewish rebuttals of these perceived Christian truth claims, and Jewish counter-attacks against Christianity. Thus, this work focuses directly on divergent Christian and Jewish perceptions of religious truth. While there is in such an undertaking considerable danger of the author projecting himself or herself into the medieval debate by valorizing the claims of one side or the other, I in fact wish to make no judgments as to where truth lies, as to who was actually correct. I have tried to signal this stance – to the extent possible – by overuse of words like "alleged," "ostensible," and "purported" in depicting Christian assessments of Judaism and Jewish assessments of Christianity. Where these words are missing (excessive repetition can become tedious for author and reader), I would ask the reader to insert them, for they are surely intended.

If I am not interested in identifying right and wrong parties to the medieval Christian–Jewish religious dispute, what then am I interested in doing? What is the point of a study like this, if it does not aim to portray conflicting claims and adjudicate among them? There is indeed an alternative. I have chosen to do this book out of my ongoing interest in the challenges medieval Jews faced and the ways in which they responded to those challenges – whether the challenges were physical, economic, intellectual, or spiritual.

I shall try to show that, at the onset of the period examined, that is the middle decades of the twelfth century, the Christian majority in southern France and northern Spain began to challenge intellectually and spiritually its Jewish minority in ever more aggressive ways. The challenge was deeply threatening to the Jewish minority, and Jewish leaders in this important area responded by offering their followers valuable information on the Christian challenge and guidelines for response. This study is intended to clarify twelfth- and thirteenth-century Jewish perceptions of the Christian challenge and projection of effective lines of rebuttal. Put differently, I am not concerned with issues of correct and incorrect, of right and wrong. I have set out to investigate – hopefully with a kind of anthropological detachment – a pattern of challenge and response. I am not interested in ascertaining who won the medieval Christian–Jewish debate detailed herein; I am interested rather in the dynamics of the debate itself.

At a number of points in the following analysis, I will exhibit considerable enthusiasm for one or another of the Jewish polemicists upon whom this book focuses. I am clearly impressed with the commitment of Jacob ben Reuben to presenting the Christian case with fullness and am likewise impressed with the down-to-earth good sense of Rabbi Meir bar Simon of Narbonne (his disorganization and tediousness notwithstanding). It should

be fairly obvious that my admiration for Rabbi Moses ben Nahman is unbounded. I marvel at his exegetical sensitivity and at his superb writing skills. I have, in an earlier work, argued that Rabbi Moses ben Nahman's account of the Barcelona disputation is a masterpiece of medieval Jewish narrative and polemical writing. I will devote considerable attention in this study to his *Sefer ha-Ge'ulah*, which I likewise find brilliant. To admire the work of these polemicists is not to endorse their conclusions, however; it is to highlight the thoughtfulness and power of their response to the difficult challenges upon which this book is focused.

Clarification of these issues leads me to an important apology. As is the case for much of what I write, I am keenly aware of a dual audience (indeed of an audience yet more complex than simply two groupings – but that is for another time). This double audience consists in large measure of readers who approach the matters analyzed herein from their interest in the Jewish past and present. This group tends to be quite well informed with respect to medieval Jewish history, as well as to prior and subsequent developments in the Jewish past.

The second group – smaller, but perhaps by not all that much – comes to these issues from its concern with the Christian past and present. Christian interest in the Jewish experience has burgeoned over the past half century, spawning an enormous scholarly and popular literature. While much of this interest is focused on the classical period of the Christian–Jewish relationship – the period of the birth and spread of Christianity, there is much curiosity with regard to medieval and modern developments as well. This second group comes to a book like this quite well informed on the Christian past and present.

Because I am aware of addressing both audiences simultaneously, I have felt an obligation to supply requisite information to whoever might need it. Thus, readers with rich knowledge of Judaism and Jewish history must forgive me for information I supply that to them seems utterly superfluous. In the same way, readers with extensive knowledge of Christianity and Christian history will likewise have to be understanding of information I supply that to them seems obvious. My apologies in advance to both camps. Since the material in Chapters 1 through 3 is intended quite consciously to convey requisite background material, on both the Christian side and the Jewish side, some readers may prefer to skip or skim these chapters and proceed to the heart of the study, which begins with Chapter 4.

I have now been writing and teaching in the Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies at New York University for more than a decade and a half and have benefited enormously from the stimulation of colleagues

and students. Over the past few years, I have twice taught a seminar in medieval Jewish polemics that focused on the five authors discussed in this study. I would like to thank the students who have read and discussed these authors with me: Flora Cassen, Julie Stern Joseph, Joshua Levy, Brian Ogren, Robert Sagerman, Wendy Schor-Haim, Bruce Smith, and Katya Vehlow. Their active engagement with these authors, their writings, and their thinking has much expanded my understanding and appreciation of the Jewish polemical enterprise of the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

As has been true for all my books of the past decade and a half, my colleagues on the faculty of the Skirball Department have offered invaluable assistance. I suspect that, at one time or another, I have pestered almost all of them with questions related to this project. I thank them all for their assistance. Two of my colleagues and friends deserve special mention, since their work focuses on the intellectual and spiritual life of medieval Jews. Alfred Ivry is master of the medieval Jewish (and indeed Islamic) philosophic corpus. He has patiently answered my questions about the philosophic issues involved in the Jewish writings upon which this study draws. Elliot Wolfson commands a vast body of materials in Jewish spiritual history. Both southern France and northern Spain fall well within the purview of his wide-ranging interests, and he has shared freely of his encyclopedic knowledge and his methodological sophistication.

Four colleagues and friends have read versions of the manuscript in its entirety and have offered me the benefit of their erudition. Anna Sapir Abulafia has published extensively on both Christian and Jewish religious argumentation during the twelfth century. Her comprehensive study, *Christians and Jews in the Twelfth-Century Renaissance*, plays a special role in the concluding chapter of this book. David Berger commands the entire range of Christian and Jewish polemics and has written copiously on many aspects of this historic encounter. Daniel Lasker has published widely on the Jewish polemical stances that developed in the medieval Muslim world. More than anyone else, he has drawn attention to the importance of twelfth-century southern-French thinkers in the emergence of medieval Jewish polemics. James Robinson has been a Dorot Post-Doctoral Fellow in the Skirball Department for the past few years. His path-breaking work on Samuel ibn Tibbon of twelfth- and thirteenth-century southern France will soon be widely available and widely appreciated. To all these four colleagues and friends I offer my deepest thanks. They have saved me from many errors and have enriched various aspects of my presentation. They, of course, bear no responsibility for the weaknesses that remain, for which I alone am culpable.

As always, these expressions of appreciation must end with acknowledgment of family support, especially the support of my wife. We continue to respect each other's careers deeply and to share the satisfaction that our work brings to each of us. She has recently completed a book of her own. Absorption in her writing has in no way detracted from her longstanding support of mine. Many years ago, I dedicated a book to our then young children. It is now time to dedicate a book to our adult children – each one highly accomplished – and their wonderful spouses.

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