

## **Mary and the Jews: The Virgin in the Christian-Jewish Debate**

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A thirteenth-century text, written in French, describes a fictional disputation between a Jew and a Christian. The text begins with the Christian citing a Latin hymn about the Virgin:

The nation of all believers  
Rejoices,  
Our redemption,  
A child is born,  
He puts on flesh  
In a virgin's womb,  
And is clothed with flesh,  
Glory of the God-head.

The Jew says he does not understand, and the Christian explains:

I speak of the son of God who was born here on earth; —  
He was born of the virgin like a rose on its thorn bush.  
He emerged from her womb through its closed door:  
He entered and emerged from the belly of the woman,  
In such a way that the lady never lost her virginity,  
Nor was defiled before or after.  
During conception, during the birth, and afterward she remained whole.  
In the same way the sun can pass through glass  
Without damaging or shattering it,  
In similar way, but even more adeptly,  
God entered into the virgin and afterward came out again.<sup>1)</sup>

The Jew says he is no fool. How could a virgin give birth? How could God, so great that the whole world cannot contain him, be enclosed in the belly of a woman? The Christian interprets the prophecy of Isaiah for the Jew: “And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding” (Isaiah 11:1-2). The branch, says the Christian, is the virgin, and the flower is He who came down for us in the virgin. This biblical exegesis finally convinces the Jew and he decides to get baptized and become a Christian, a typical ending to Christian texts of this sort.

I deliberately chose a poem as my starting point, so as to show the variety of ways the inter-religious debate expresses itself. Besides the famous disputations—treatises that were written to refute another religion’s claims and to strengthen one’s own—we find other cultural expressions, both literary and visual, some of which will be demonstrated in this paper. The text also demonstrates the centrality of the dogma of the Virgin birth and of Marian beliefs in general within Christian theology, as well as their centrality to the debate between the two religions.<sup>2)</sup>

The Gospels are rather laconic in relation to Mary. The story of the Annunciation, so prominent in Christian piety and imagination, is told only in Luke (1:26-38). Matthew mentions, very briefly, that Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but “before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit” (1:18). Mark and John entirely ignore the subject. The Nativity stories are told in detail in Matthew (chapters 1 and 2) and Luke (chapters 1 and 2), but are not mentioned by Mark and John. In addition to the stories of the Annunciation and Nativity, John refers briefly to Mary in two further scenes, once in the wedding at Cana (2:3–5; 12) and again during the Crucifixion (19:25–27). She also figures in the account of the origins of the early church in Acts (1:14). It is important to note that Paul makes no mention of Mary at all.

The evangelists left in dark Mary’s childhood and youth, her life after her son’s crucifixion, and other details concerning her. Yet, quite early in the history of Christianity, perhaps as early as the second century, Mary began to loom bright in Christian faith and ritual, and stories about her life circulated among Christians. These apocryphal stories centered on Mary’s life before the birth of Jesus and after his death. Mary’s birth, childhood and youth were recounted in the texts known as *The Protevangelium of James*, and her death (Dormition), burial and Assumption were described in works entitled *Transitus Mariae*.<sup>3)</sup> These traditions spread rapidly through the Christian world in a variety of languages and versions. They were gradually accepted by Christian orthodoxy and formed the basis for Marian theology. Marian doctrine and ritual were considerably encouraged by the Council of Ephesus (431), which officially bestowed upon her the title of *Theotokos* (“Mother of God” or “bearer of God”). Mary’s rise to prominence in Christian theology was expressed in liturgy, with several festivals dedicated to her, and in geography, as more and more holy places related to her were marked on the map of the Holy Land, in Nazareth, Sephoris, Bethlehem, and in and around Jerusalem.<sup>4)</sup>

According to all sources, canonical and apocryphal, Mary lived and died as a good Jewess. The Jews, however, resented her and her theology. It would even seem that they choose to fight Jesus through his mother. In *Nizzahon Vetus*, a Jewish anti-Christian book written in Germany around the year 1300, we read:

Consequently, how could this man be God, for he entered a woman with a stomach full of feces who frequently sat him down in the privy during the nine months, and when he was born he came out dirty and filthy, wrapped in a placenta and defiled by the blood of childbirth and impure issue. The Torah, on the other hand, warns against approaching a menstruate woman, a woman who has had an impure issue, and one who has just given birth, as it is written, "...she shall touch no hallowed thing... until the day of her purification be fulfilled" (Lev. 12:4). Hence he was not worthy of association with anything sacred.<sup>5)</sup>

Not all Jewish anti-Christian polemical works resorted to such picturesque language, but in fact the author of that work simply summarized in vulgar terms what Jews had been saying for hundreds of years. The references to Mary reflect misogynous discourse, primarily the outrage felt by Jewish men at the idea of physical contact between a woman and the deity, that is contact between impurity and sanctity. The very idea of virgin birth was for the Jews unbearable, as well as illogical, and side by side with the Trinity and the resurrection from the dead, proof of the impossible nature of Christianity as a whole. One way to challenge the very possibility of virgin birth was to suggest explanations for the fact that Mary gave birth to a child that was not her husband's. The Talmud and the Midrash already offer derogatory remarks about Mary's dubious personality,<sup>6)</sup> and there is a caustic narrative summary of the Jewish perception of Mary in *Sefer Toledot Yeshu* ("The History of Jesus"), a kind of Jewish biography of Jesus, whose composition date is debated.<sup>7)</sup> Amos Funkenstein has termed this book "counter history," which he aptly defines as a genre of historiography with polemical aims, which systematically exploits the other party's most reliable sources, contrary to their intention and spirit. "The aim of counter history," writes Funkenstein, "is to distort the other's self-image and identity by destroying his collective memory."<sup>8)</sup> This is precisely what *Sefer Toledot Yeshu* tries to do. It takes the tales of the Gospels and distorts their entire content, thus producing an alternative biography of Jesus, portraying him in caricature.

*Sefer Toledot Yeshu* is not concerned with Mary's biography as a whole, since its main subject is her son's life. Nevertheless, she does star in the work and the story of her pregnancy is treated at particular length. According to this book, Mary was a young Jewess, the daughter of a widow living in Bethlehem, who was betrothed to a humble, god-fearing youth named Johanan. One Saturday evening, her neighbor Joseph Pandera, an evil, disreputable man and a war hero, of the tribe of Judah, raped her in her home during her menstrual period, doing so twice that night. On both occasions, Mary thought that the rapist was her fiancé Johanan, and she complained to him and warned him, but to no avail. Upon hearing that Mary had become pregnant, Johanan, fearing that he would be held responsible, fled to Babylonia. Mary in time gave birth to a son, whom she

named Joshua (Jesus). When the circumstances of Jesus' birth came to light, he was proclaimed a "*mamzer* (bastard) son of a menstruating woman," and he therefore fled to Galilee, living there for a few years until he returned to Jerusalem.

The figure of Mary as portrayed in this Jewish history of Jesus shifts from the tragic to the comical: an unfortunate naïve girl, victim of sexual abuse, who was raped and gave birth. The story indeed stresses that Mary objected to Joseph's advances, and that he forced himself upon her. At the same time, while she is an unwilling and innocent victim, it is difficult not to hold her in contempt and to ridicule her as a woman who could not tell the difference in the dark between her humble fiancé Johanan and her coarse, adulterous neighbor Joseph Pandera; a woman who sat in her doorway so that her vile neighbor could see her and have his way with her. Perhaps Mary was not to blame for her fate, but she is surely contemptible.

The Jews' attitude toward Mary did not go unnoticed by the Christians. Their contempt for her and the stories about her were surely known and caused Christians no little distress. Their concern was particularly acute because the Jewish criticism touched a raw nerve—fragile points of Christian theology, which were controversial and not readily explainable in a logical manner. These related to two basic tenets of Christian dogma that incensed the Jews: the idea that the divine messiah had been born to a mortal woman, and the doctrine of the virgin birth. Here, as in other contexts, what Christians quoted as having been said by Jews could also represent suppressed Christian disapproval, or a guilty conscience for heretical thoughts and doubts.

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How did Christians react to the Jewish criticism of Mary and their contempt for her?<sup>9)</sup> What role did they assign the Jews in the emergence of Marian theology? I shall try to answer these questions through several early Christian stories about Mary and the Jews. These ancient tales place the Jews at a sensitive juncture, a meeting place between the evolving theology of Mary, the veneration of her relics and also the beginnings of icon worship. When listening to these tales we should be aware of the two underlying facts that I have already mentioned: (1) The Jews resented the Christian beliefs connected with Mary; (2) This resentment worried the Christians, especially because of their own doubts and questions relating to her. The stories depict in bright colors the ways Christians mobilized Jewish criticism and hostility to reinforce Christian beliefs. What happens in the stories is that precisely because of their awareness of Jewish criticism, Christians assigned to the Jews the role of confirming Mary's sanctity. These are then apologetic

stories. They reflect the perception of the Jew in Christian thought and even the complex web of relationships between Jews and Christians in general.

### **Mary's robe**

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I shall begin with a pleasant story about Mary's robe, a story that takes place in the Galilee, where Mary lived. Its origins are probably in the fifth century. At that time, the Galilee was an important Jewish center, and most of the population was Jewish, but Christian communities were gradually being established, and the Christian identity of the Galilee began to take shape, mainly in places mentioned in the Gospels in connection with Jesus. In Nazareth, Capernaum, Sephoris and elsewhere, churches were built, commemorating biblical scenes. An anonymous traveler from Italy, who journeyed to the Holy Land in the second half of 6<sup>th</sup> century, writes:

We traveled on to the city of Nazareth, where many miracles take place.... The house of Saint Mary is now a basilica, and her clothes are the cause of frequent miracles.

The Hebrew women of that city are better-looking than any other Hebrew women in the whole country. They declare that this is Saint Mary's gift to them, for they also say that she was a relation of theirs. Though there is no love lost between Hebrews and Christians these women are full of kindness...<sup>10)</sup>

As can be seen from this short description, many of the traditions of the Christian Galilee revolve around Mary. Only naturally, they were feminine traditions. According to our pilgrim's story, Jewish women (whom he calls *Hebraeas*—Hebrew women) were proud of their lineage and their familial relationship with Mary—a Galilean Jewess like themselves—and of their unique qualities due to that relationship.<sup>11)</sup> It was because of Mary that they were particularly good-looking and kind—beautiful in a corporeal and a spiritual sense. The pilgrim notes that Galilean Jews were not generally sympathetic to Christians, and for that reason he marvels at the behavior of the Jewish women. His account may hint at some local Marian rituals observed around sites and objects associated with Mary, with the participation of both Christian and Jewish women.<sup>12)</sup> In other periods and places, there were ecumenical rituals devoted to veneration of saints, rituals that cut across religious barriers, among them, rituals associated with Mary.<sup>13)</sup> Several Christian holy places connected with Mary were also frequented by Muslims, and in rare cases, we also have evidence of Jewish participation in such rituals.<sup>14)</sup> While our pilgrim does not refer to Jewish women actually worshiping Mary, his account alludes to their veneration for her, and an admission that she was the source of their beauty and good qualities. He also refers to miracles

performed in Nazareth by virtue of the relics kept there—Mary’s clothing: “her clothes are the cause of frequent miracles,” he writes.

Indeed, the most important holy relic in Byzantine Constantinople, documented as early as the seventh century, was Mary’s robe. It was credited with many miracles, some associated with the defense of the city. There were various versions of the origins of the robe, one of which placed its origin in Galilee. This version survived in the hagiographical literature of the Greek Church and goes back to the fifth century.<sup>15)</sup>

Two noble brothers, Galbius and Candidus, resident in Constantinople at the time of the emperor Leo the Great (457–474), decided to go on a pilgrimage to the holy places. They made their way to Jerusalem through the Galilee, in order to visit the holy places there. As night overtook them, they found lodging in the home of an old Jewess who offered them her hospitality. Upon entering the house, the brothers saw a room full of invalids—men, women and children, which astonished them. Curious to learn the reason, they invited the woman to dine with them. At first she refused, saying that as a Jewess, she could not dine with Christians. However, she agreed to their suggestion that she bring along her own food. During the meal, the brothers plied her with wine, and then asked her why so many invalids were crowded in the inner room. Whether because of the wine or by Divine Providence, the woman told them her secret: In a chest in the next room, the woman said, she kept Mary’s sacred robe. Mary had entrusted it to a female acquaintance, a member of the old lady’s family. That woman had enjoined her family to guard the robe well and respect it, and the robe had thus been handed down from one generation to the next, from one virgin of that family to another. The chest was now in the inner room, and it was the robe within it that was working the miracles.

The brothers thanked the woman and begged her permission to sleep in the room containing the robe. During the night, they measured the chest precisely. In the morning, they set off for Jerusalem. Arriving there they found a carpenter, from whom they ordered an exact replica of the chest, made of the very same wood. On their way home, they again passed through the woman’s village, dined with her, and asked to sleep in the room with the robe. At night, after assuring that all the sick people sleeping in the room were indeed asleep, the brothers prayed to Mary, asking her agreement, and then switched the boxes. In the morning, they took their leave of the old Jewess and went on their way, taking the sacred treasure with them. They brought the original chest and the robe to their city, Constantinople, where an imperial church was erected in honor of the Holy Virgin and her robe was placed there in a gold and silver chest in the church. As for the old woman, when she discovered the theft, she died of grief.

The Virgin's robe became one of Constantinople's most important relics. An annual festival of the robe was celebrated in Constantinople on June 2. The robe was credited with having Galilean origins, in fact, Jewish-Galilean origins. Mary herself entrusted it to a woman known to her, and it was passed down from one generation to the next, until the old Galilean woman disclosed the secret to the two brothers. This is then a story of *furta sacra*- "sacred theft,"<sup>16)</sup> as well as a story of *translatio*—transfer of the sacred robe from the Galilee, the Virgin's homeland, to Constantinople, but even more important, from Jews to Christians. If any person had doubts as to the authenticity of the robe kept in the church at Constantinople and its miracle-working qualities, the Jewish woman from Galilee was recruited to bear witness to them and through them, to the eternal virginity of Mary.<sup>17)</sup>

On an allegorical level, one might read the story as a homily, a sermon on Jewish-Christian relations: Judaism is likened to an old woman, preserving an inherited ancient truth that she herself does not fully comprehend. She is the *Synagoga*, the Synagogue. When the time comes, she passes this truth on to the young, victorious, Christianity, the open-eyed heir to the truth, the *Ecclesia*, the Church.

### **Mary's funeral**

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We now turn to other stories, much less favorable towards the Jews. An early story, probably of Syro-Palestinian or Egyptian origin, tells of Mary's Dormition (*dormitio*—falling asleep). It is traditionally attributed to the evangelist John. This story is also known in different versions beginning in the fifth and sixth centuries, but is presumably even older.

The story relates how an angel (in some versions, Jesus himself) informed Mary that she would be taken up into heaven (the Assumption). Miraculously, all the apostles gather from their countries of mission, to bid her farewell and accompany her on her final journey. When the funeral procession makes its way from Mount Zion, where Mary lived after the Crucifixion and where she sank into sleep, to Gethsemane, where she was to be buried, it attracts the attention of the leaders of the Jews in Jerusalem, who plot to seize the body and burn it, lest the site of her tomb cause miracles to occur like that of Jesus her son. This implies that the Jews are aware of Mary's marvelous power, but they deny it. As they prepare to leave the city gate to seize the body, the Jews are struck blind, with one exception, a Jew named Zephaniah, who runs to Mary's bier and catches hold of it, intending to damage it. Thereupon, an angel appears, a fiery sword in his hand, and cuts off Zephaniah's hands, leaving him writhing in agony while his hands

remain stuck to the bier. When Zephaniah begs the apostles to save him, they answer that only the Virgin can help him and advise him to pray to her. After doing so he is healed and converts to Christianity. The apostles then send him back to the city to heal the other Jews of their blindness. Many of them become Christians, and recover their sight.<sup>18)</sup>

This episode presents the Jews' hostility toward Mary and their criticism of the beliefs associated with her in a literary garment. They wish to harm the body, in order to defile and ultimately burn it, thus refuting the Christian belief that Mary's body is sacred, as it never sinned. According to Christian belief, every human being is bound to die because of the original sin imprinted in his flesh. But because Mary's body was immaculate, she was physically taken into heaven, entirely untouched by death. The Jews' designs to prevent this are brutally frustrated, and what happens is the very opposite of their original intention: the Jew is unable to defile the pure body; on the contrary, it is his own sinful body that suffers injury. Only through prayer to Mary is he healed. After Mary has miraculously cured him, he becomes a Christian and converts other Jews, after which their sight is restored. The Jews' blindness is theological in nature—it is their characteristic quality, as stated by Paul in the Second Epistle to the Corinthians: “the God of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God.” (2 Cor. 4:4). Their blindness is at one and the same time the crime and the punishment: unwillingness and inability to perceive the Christian truth. Only admission of the Christian truth can remove this blindness. Thus, contrary to his original design, the Jew bears the ultimate testimony to Mary's sanctity and, though he wanted to cause her terrible injury, she forgives him and heals him. This is the beginning of Mary's long career as a healer. Throughout history, places connected with her and objects associated with her caused innumerable miracles to occur, east and west.

Mary's physical assumption into heaven indicates her special relationship with Jesus through her body.<sup>19)</sup> Not only did she carry him in her womb and suckle him at her breast, she also shares his immaculate nature, his freedom from any taint of sin. Her Assumption, a triumph over body and bodily death, was also a triumph over the physical, corporeal and verbal perception of Judaism and a sign of hope for all believers who will also be resurrected at the end of time.

The funeral story was known throughout the Christian world. Christian preachers used it in their sermons, and it was also disseminated and perpetuated through the medium of art.<sup>20)</sup> In addition, pilgrims to Jerusalem were shown the place, just outside the Old City walls, where the Jews tried to seize Mary's body. They could thus see the place with their own eyes and imagine the event that it was supposed to commemorate.<sup>21)</sup>

## Mary's Icon

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Jews were frequently described in Christian literature as plotting to damage Christian holy objects. An early example is the story of Mary's icon, as told by Adomnán of Iona, a famous Irish abbot, who heard it from a pilgrim who traveled to the East in the 670s. After visiting Jerusalem and other holy places, he ended his journey in the city of Constantinople, from where he brought the following story:

[—] On a wall of a house in the metropolitan city... a picture of the blessed Mary used to hang, painted on a short wooden tablet. A stupid and hardhearted man asked whose picture it was, and was told by someone that it was a likeness of the holy Mary ever virgin. When he heard this that Jewish unbeliever became very angry and, at the instigation of the devil, seized the picture from the wall and ran to a building nearby, where it is customary to dispose of the soil from the human bodies by means of openings in long planks whereon people sit. There, in order to dishonor Christ, who was born of Mary, he cast the picture of His mother through the opening on the human excrements lying beneath. Then in his stupid folly he sat above himself and evacuated through the opening, pouring the excrements of his own person on the icon of the holy Mary... After the scoundrel had gone, one of the Christian communities came upon the scene, a fortunate man, zealous for the things of the Lord. Knowing what had happened, he searched for the picture of the holy Mary, found it hidden in the refuse and took it up. He wiped it carefully and cleaned it by washing it in the clearest water, and then set it up in honor by him in his house. Wonderful to relate, there is always an issue of genuine oil from the tablet with the picture of the blessed Mary... This wondrous oil proclaims the honor of Mary, the mother of the Lord Jesus of whom the Father says: "With my oil I have anointed him" (Ps. 88:21)...<sup>22)</sup>

The story attests to the flourishing cult of Mary in Constantinople and also to the development of icon worship in the Christian world. It is also an example of the role Christians assigned to the Jew as a confirmed opponent of that worship. Christians knew that the Jews objected to any kind of icon worship, following the second commandment: "You shall not make for yourself any graven image, or any likeness..." (Exodus 20:4). But opposition to icon worship is found not only among the Jews. The iconoclastic controversy (the famous Christian controversy concerning the worship of images) broke out only in the eighth century, but criticism of the increasingly popular cult of images was already common before then, among Muslims and Jews, but also among Christians.<sup>23)</sup> The advocates of icon worship, who were aware of the Jewish views, labeled any criticism of icons as Jewish. Christian imagination shortened the distance between verbal violence—name-calling and offensive references (as in the passage quoted above from *Nizzahon Vetus*) and violent actions, such as throwing Mary's image into refuse and filth.

The story of the icon is an early example of a powerful and dangerous image of the Jew as the enemy of Mary and of Christian icons, who defiles Christian holy objects by throwing them into the sewage, an unsurpassable act of contempt and degradation.<sup>24)</sup> This image of the Jew was common in the Middle Ages. For example, the story of the Lincoln blood libel (1255) reports that the Jews killed a Christian child and threw his body in a cesspool.<sup>25)</sup> The “Prioress’s Tale” in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, relates a story about a seven year old boy, who used to go to school through the Jewish neighborhood, and while walking he constantly sang a hymn to Mary. The Jews, who couldn’t bear to hear it, hunted the boy, cut his throat and threw him into the pit “where the Jews purged their entrails.”<sup>26)</sup> But the boy went on singing loudly through his cut throat, and thus the Jews’ crime was discovered. In such stories, the most sublime sanctity is defiled in the most sordid, disgusting place. But that is never the end of the tale. As a result of the Jews’ crime, miracles occur: The dead child sings, the icon exudes pure oil. Thus, the very act by which the Jews thought to debase Mary turned against them and instead of insulting her bore witness to her glory.

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It is important to stress again, that the Jewish attitude to Mary, as depicted in all these stories, reflects the Christian world, not the Jewish one. These stories were told for Christian needs, and their Jewish protagonists were enlisted in the service of Christian goals—confirmation of beliefs, relics and icons related to Mary. They formulate a complex, powerful, narrative answer to troubling questions, attesting to the intensity of Marian beliefs, which had become binding dogmas—Immaculate Conception; virgin birth; the body untouched by sin and by death; and the power of images. The Jewish voice in these stories is the voice of criticism—the Jew expresses doubt, and his persuasion or eradication is intended to remove this doubt or feelings of guilt and to provide a liberating catharsis.

The Jewish stories brought here propose several possible solutions to the Jewish question: A Jew who is saved by converting to Christianity, as in the funeral story; A Jewess who does not even have to convert because in her innermost being she is already a Christian, as in the story of the robe; and a Jew who disappears, leaving no trace, as in the story of the icon. The last, the disappearing Jew, who neither converts to Christianity nor is punished, but continues to live somewhere, wandering, and is likely to reappear at any moment—that is the most dangerous Jew.<sup>27)</sup> This was the Jew who reappeared in Christian imagination throughout the Middle Ages,

portrayed time and again as the Jewish arch-criminal, constantly plotting to harm Christianity. He would despoil icons and crosses, desecrate the Host and kill Christian children, and poison wells, all in the name of a Jewish world conspiracy to destroy Christianity. While the story of the Galilean woman, who willingly bears positive witness, was not known at all in the Christian West, the story of the funeral was well known, as was that of the icon.

Finally, the three stories also raise questions of gender. Mary's worst enemy in Christian imagination is the male Jew who profanes her innocence in words and touch. Jewish women are sometimes seen as possible allies. They are sometimes virgins like Mary (as in the Galilean tale), and sometimes mothers like her, as in another famous story, that of "The Jewish Boy," in which a Jewish woman converts to Christianity together with her son, who witnessed a miracle wrought by Mary, while the stiff-necked, cruel father is thrown into a fiery furnace.<sup>28)</sup> Another interesting story tells of a Jewish woman in the pangs of labor, already expecting to die, who hears a voice telling her to call upon Mary. She does so and proceeds to give birth painlessly.<sup>29)</sup> Through the Jewish mother, this story, too, corroborates the Christian belief that Mary gave birth without labor pangs, for she was untouched by sin and therefore also by punishment for sin.

I should also mention the fact that research in recent decades shows another kind of Jewish reaction towards Mary—either latent imitations of Marian beliefs and concepts (as, for example, the influence of the figure of Mary on the concept of the Shechina, the divine presence of God, grammatically feminine in the Hebrew language, or beliefs in the power of Miriam, the sister of Moses, who shares Mary's name). This is a very positive direction of research that might somewhat balance the negative, dark picture that emerges from most of our sources.<sup>30)</sup>

We began with a poem from the thirteenth century and went back in time, to look for the roots of the complex relationship between the Jews and Mary. Let us now turn again to the thirteenth century, to an episode from the Life of Saint Louis (Louis IX, King of France 1226-1270), told by his biographer, Joinville. It tells of a disputation held by clergymen and Jews:

King Louis also spoke to me of a great assembly of clergy and Jews which had taken place in the monastery of Cluny. There was a poor knight there at the time to whom the abbot had often given bread for the love of God. The knight ... rose to his feet, and leaning on his crutch, asked to have the most important and most learned rabbi among the Jews brought before him. As soon as the Jew had come, the knight asked him a question. "May I know, sir," he said, "if you believe that the Virgin Mary, who bore our Lord in her body... was a virgin at the time of His birth, and is in truth the Mother of God?" The Jew replied that he had no belief in any of those things. Thereupon the knight told the Jew that he had acted like a fool when—neither believing in the Virgin, nor loving her—he had set foot in that monastery which was her house. "And by heaven,"

exclaimed the knight, "I'll make you pay for it!" So he lifted his crutch and struck the Jew such a blow with it near the ear that he knocked him down. Then all the Jews took to flight, and carried their sorely wounded rabbi away with them. Thus the conference ended.<sup>31)</sup>

By the thirteenth century, and even before, Mary the mother, who in Christian tradition was a symbol of love, charity and grace, had become a strong opponent of the Jews, taking vengeance on them for their attitude toward her. Mary and the Jews were now enemies.

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### Notes

- 1) Hiram Peri, "Poems of religious disputations in the Middle Ages (with a hitherto unknown text in Old French)" *Tarbiz* 2/4 (1931), pp. 443-76 (in Hebrew). See Kirsten A. Fudeman, *Vernacular Voices: Language and Identity in Medieval French Jewish Communities* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2010), pp. 17-20. The English translation is Fudeman's. This paper is based on two former articles of mine: "Mary and the Jews: Three Witness Stories" *Alpayim* 28 (2005), pp. 129-151 (in Hebrew); and "Mary and the Jews: Story, Controversy and Testimony" *Historein* 6 (2006), pp. 55-71.
- 2) Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (London: Allen Lane, 2009, especially pp. 169-173).
- 3) *The Protoevangelium of James*, in: Wilhelm Schneemelcher (ed.) *New Testament Apocrypha*, I, English translation by R. McL. Wilson (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1991), pp. 421-438; Stephen J. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition and Assumption* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2002).
- 4) Ora Limor, "Mary in Jerusalem: An Imaginary Map" (forthcoming).
- 5) David Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages: A Critical Edition of the Nizzahon Vetus, with an Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979), chap. 6, p. 44. See also Berger's appendix, "God in the Womb and the Problem of the Incarnation", *ibid.*, pp. 350-354.
- 6) Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in The Talmud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Jacob Z. Lauterbach, "Jesus in the Talmud", in: *Rabbinic Essays* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1951), pp. 473-570; William Horbury, "A Critical Examination of the Toledoth Jeshu", Ph.D. Thesis, Cambridge, 1971.
- 7) Johann Christoph Wagenseil, *Tela Ignea Satanae* (Altdorf, 1681); Samuel Krauss, *Das Leben Jesu nach jüdischen Quellen* (Berlin: S. Calvary, 1902); Peter Schäfer, Michael Meerson and Yaacov Deutsch (eds.), *Toledot Yeshu (The Life-Story of Jesus) Revisited* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011); Ora Limor, "The Opposed Image", *Jews and Christian in Western Europe: Encounter between Cultures in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, vol. 4, unit 8 (Tel Aviv: The Open University, 1997), [in Hebrew].
- 8) Amos Funkenstein, "History, Counter history and Narrative" *Alpayim* 4 (1991), p. 210 [in Hebrew].

- 9) See Limor, "Mary and the Jews: Three Witness Stories" *Alpayim* 28 (2005), pp. 129-151 [in Hebrew]; id., "Mary and the Jews: Story, Controversy and Testimony" *Historein* 6 (2006), pp. 55-71.
- 10) Antoninus, *Itinerarium*, 5, ed. by P. Geyer, CCSL 175, (Turnhout: Brepols, 1965), pp. 130-131; English translation by John Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 2002<sup>2</sup>), p. 132 (with changes).
- 11) Simon Mimouni argued that these Hebrew women belonged to a community of Jewish-Christians that still lived in Galilee: Simon Mimouni, "Pour une définition nouvelle du judéo-christianisme ancien" *New Testament Studies* 38 (1992), pp. 171-182.
- 12) For another interpretations see Andrew S. Jacobs, *Remains of the Jews: The Holy Land and Christian Empire in Late Antiquity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 124-131.
- 13) Benjamin Z. Kedar, "Convergences of Oriental Christian, Muslim, and Frankish Worshipers: The Case of Saydnaya", in: Yitzhak Hen (ed.), *De Sion exhibit lex et verbum domini de Hierusalem. Essays on Medieval Law, Liturgy and Literature in Honour of Amnon Linder* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2001), pp. 59-69; Ora Limor, "Sharing Sacred Space: Holy Places in Jerusalem between Judaism, Christianity and Islam", in: Iris Shagrir, Ronnie Ellenblum, Jonathan Reilly-Smith (eds.), *In Laudem Hierosolymitani: Studies in Crusades and Medieval Culture in Honour of Benjamin Z. Kedar* (Ashgate: Aldershot 2007), pp. 119-131.
- 14) Amikam Elad, *Medieval Jerusalem and Islamic Worship: Holy Places, Ceremonies, Pilgrimage* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), pp. 138-141.
- 15) Antoine Wenger, *L'Assomption de la Vierge dans la tradition Byzantine du Ve au Xe siècle. Études et documents* (Paris: Institut Français d'Études Byzantines, 1955), pp. 110-139, 293-311; Norman Baynes, "The Finding of the Virgin's Robe", *Annuaire de l'Institut de Philologie et d'Histoire orientales et slaves* 9 (Mélanges Henry Grégoire, 1949), pp. 87-95.
- 16) Patrick J. Geary, *Furta Sacra: Theft of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1978.
- 17) Ora Limor, "Christian Sacred Space and the Jew", in: Jeremy Cohen (ed.), *From Witness to Witchcraft. Jews and Judaism in Medieval Christian Thought*, Wolfenbütteler Mittelalter-Studien, 11, (Wiesbaden, 1996), pp. 55-77.
- 18) Summary based on Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition and Assumption* (Oxford University Press 2006), pp. 789-790.
- 19) Denise L. Despres, "Immaculate Flesh and the Social Body: Mary and the Jews", *Jewish History* 12 (1998), pp. 47-69 (56-57).
- 20) Ludmila Wratislaw-Mitrovic and N. Okunev, "La Dormition de la Sainte Vierge dans la peinture medievale orthodoxe" *Byzantinoslavica* 3 (1931), pp. 134-180; Peter Schäfer, *Mirror of His Beauty: Feminine Images of God From the Bible to the Early Kabbalah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 179-191.
- 21) For example in the itinerary of Willibald of Eichstätt: *Vitae Willibaldi et Wynnebaldi auctore sanctimoniali Heidenheimensis*, ed. by O. Holder-Egger, MGH, SS, 15,1 (Hannover, 1887), pp.

97-98.

- 22) Adamnan's *De Locis Sanctis*, 3,5, ed. by Denis Meehan, *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae*, 3 (Dublin, 1958), pp. 118-119.
- 23) Ernst Kitzinger, "The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 8 (1954), pp. 83-150; Peter Brown, "A Dark Age Crisis: Aspects of the Iconoclastic Controversy", *English Historical Review* 88 (1973), pp. 1-34; Norman H. Baynes, "The Icons before Iconoclasm", *Harvard Theological Review*, 44 (1951), pp. 93-106.
- 24) Recall that the Talmud relates that Jesus was condemned to be tortured in hell in boiling feces (Bab. Talmud, Gittin 57a). See Israel J. Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2000), p. 210 (in Hebrew); The Christians were also familiar with the Jews' attitude to Mary. Jewish literature referred to Mary, "Maria" in Latin, by distorting her name to *haria*, meaning "feces. E.g., in *Nizzahon Vetus*, Chap. 88 (Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate*).
- 25) Gavin I. Langmuir, "The Knight's Tale of Young Hugh of Lincoln" *Speculum* 47 (1972), pp. 459-482.
- 26) Geoffrey Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, A. Kent Hieatt and Constance Hieatt (eds.), (New York: Bantam Books, 1964), p. 377.
- 27) The legend of the wandering Jew is later than the period discussed here but nevertheless worth mentioning in this context: Galit Hasan-Rokem and Alan Dundes (eds.), *The Wandering Jew: Essays in the Interpretation of a Christian Legend* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1986).
- 28) Miri Rubin, *Gentile Tales: The Narrative Assault on Late Medieval Jews* (New Haven: Yale University press, 1999), pp. 7-39.
- 29) Michele Tarayre, *La vierge et le miracle. Le Speculum historiale de Vincent de Beauvais* (Paris: H. Champion, 1999), pp. 91-94; Johannes Herlot, *Miracles of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, trans. by C. C. Swinton Bland, (London: Routledge, 1928), pp. 35-6; Despres, "Immaculate Flesh", p. 58.
- 30) Schäfer, *Mirror of His Beauty*.
- 31) Joinville, *The Life of Saint Louis*, in Joinville and Villehardouin, *Chronicles of the Crusades*, trans. by M.R.B. Shaw, (Baltimore: Penguin Press, 1963), p. 175